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REVIVING THE EXCITEMENT IN ADVANCED PLACEMENT U.S. HISTORY

High school history teaching seldom tops the lists of exciting professions, so I'll take all the exciting professional moments that I can. The launch of the AP U.S. History curriculum redesign has certainly injected some excitement into the field. As Lawrence Charap so thoroughly points out, the process of redesign has been unfolding for several years within the world of AP U.S. History teachers, with yearly updates riling up the crowds at the AP Reading in Louisville, if likely nowhere else. For several years, I reveled in the contention surrounding the newest updates—expecting, though, that this process would ultimately end with a moderately updated, standard curriculum model.

Within our current politicized context of contested assessments, however, the new APUSH History curriculum framework has become embroiled in unexpected controversy. Instead of simply bemoaning this attack on the new framework, though, we should actually incorporate the excitement of the moment into our APUSH classrooms. While our discipline rarely appears in the news, this moment of contestation might pique the interest of our teenage students. If nothing else, the opportunity for history to move back into the center of dialogue regarding American education provides a welcome detour from the relentless focus on standardized testing (even if, of course, the two issues have become linked in this age of the many attacks, from both Right and Left, on the Common Core).

All the political controversy aside, the opportunities opened up to the classroom teacher by the new framework are indeed many. No longer must I ensure my students can parrot two dozen names with little connection to higher level thinking. No longer must I force march them through endless memorization. In particular, the Gilded Age and Progressive Era frameworks as presented in the course redesign open up many directions that a teacher may pursue to enrich and enliven the classroom.

I have attended the AP Reading for a dozen years and watched the process of curricular revision unfold through its multiple, contested incarnations. What emerged from the process initially struck me as a framework that significantly raised the expectations placed on students. While the previous structure privileged factual recall, this new design forced students in multiple ways to rise beyond rote memorization and integrate historical evidence into meaningful arguments. Such a great idea, indeed, but what an

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incredible challenge! As a classroom teacher, I compete with so many other demands on my students' time and intellectual muscle that this newly strenuous framework has forced me to reevaluate my course and seek new ways to challenge my students to rise to this new level. Additionally, the movement away from a framework seemingly built around proper nouns has opened up the opportunity to spend more time on topics that students find more interesting or in filling holes that students may have in their previous knowledge.

I might, though, gently disagree just slightly with Lawrence Charap's interpretation of the NAEP results as indicative of primarily the impact of history teaching. His statement that "Although attempts to revise history courses to engage students and better prepare them for success in the subject have been debated since the late nineteenth century, the pattern of low interest and proficiency in the discipline has remained stubbornly unchanged" may sting a bit, but I must truthfully confess that high school teachers may indeed themselves be at least partially culpable. That said, also guilty, of course, is the system itself—particularly the regimen of constant testing that has conditioned grade schools to prioritize the disciplines being tested (especially math and reading) to the exclusion of others. While at the start of my career I faced, with relish, questions about the politics of history and history education, my greater challenge in the last decade has been the sheer absence of history education due to the prevalence of standardized testing. The privileging of other disciplines has weakened the history instruction that students receive in elementary and middle school years. I have found it to be quite a thrill to finally reengage in the discussion of what should be taught in the classroom rather than a simple fight for recognition (or even survival).

I am arguably most excited about how the new framework has opened up a wonderful world of possibility in terms of teaching the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. The Gilded Age has always presented two distinctive problems. First, it comes on the heels of the Civil War unit and at a very difficult time in the school year. Students are typically in the tough time between Thanksgiving and winter break, and the unit follows one with which they are very familiar. Teenagers are not usually known for their motivation in the best of circumstances, and this dual challenge often forces even veteran teachers to shift into survival mode. The challenging strands of Gilded Age and Progressive Era history have rarely made it into the narrative that students have encountered in previous classes, and thus confusion often reigns.

With the flexibility accorded by the new curriculum framework, though, I see the opportunity to teach the Gilded Age wholly through a very attractive, as well as intellectually compelling, lens: Chicago history. As I teach in the northwest suburbs of Chicago, the city itself is both comfortably familiar and jarringly foreign to my students. They feel as though they are part of the metropolitan center, yet they remain woefully unaware of Chicago's contested history. The most significant strains of the Gilded Age—immigration, urbanization, political machines, economic contestation—are all highly visible in the history of the Windy City. While certainly Chicago presents a uniquely appropriate case study that has piqued the local interest of my students, this provides just one example of the impetus behind the redesign project. By freeing me as a teacher from the pressure to cover every example conceivably in an AP test question, the College Board has allowed me to drop my students deeper into any case study. Similar studies of many cities—Boston, San Francisco, Galveston—would undoubtedly yield similar results.

My students and I map the growth of Chicago and use that to branch into discussions of immigration, urbanization, and industrialization.[1] The traditional debate used by many teachers comparing "Captains of Industry" to "Robber Barons" becomes instead a more in-depth study of George Pullman, and the issues surrounding the Pullman Strike—including the role of the economic downturn, government intervention, and Pullman's use of the company town. By examining Pullman's use of diverse immigrant groups within his labor force, students are able to appreciate both the strengths and challenges of translating cultural practices as immigrants. As the discussion is further complicated by strands of nativist backlash, students often initially long for the easier days of "Old Immigrants" and "New Immigrants."[2] Many of my students are themselves immigrants or hail from families of recent immigration, and thus this topic may be dangerously personal to students striving to "feel American"—thus presenting a challenging but ultimately rewarding opportunity for students to connect very personally to one aspect of the challenges faced by a previous generation of immigrants.

A second challenge that has typically emerged from teaching the Gilded Age is the overall lack of easily identifiable narrative structure. Particularly when dependent on the textbook as the principal source for their historical narrative of information, students have grown conditioned to detect a narrative and follow it through to its conclusion, and many teachers approach history in exactly this fashion. With the pandemonium that is America in the Gilded Age, students are often lost wandering among one strand, desperately seeking the connections between the different areas of contestation in American life. Our textbook devotes one chapter each to the Civil War and World War II, but the Gilded Age is divided over four chapters. While historians certainly recognize and embrace the many contradictions of history and historical study, high school students need to first learn and then practice this difficult skill. They struggle, quite understandably, with the intellectual challenge of weaving these diverse strands into historical understanding.

Taken together, though, these challenges actually present an extraordinary opportunity for high school teachers to forge a bold new direction in teaching the Gilded Age. A quick examination of my previous syllabus reveals the exact problem that prompted the curriculum redesign. Here a brutal march through the outlines of the period is the best I can claim for my old approach. Three days on urbanization, three days on politics, three days on Industrialization, a glancing blow off immigration … and then a test to wrap it all up. With the utter lack of specificity of the previous AP framework, I was challenged to cover every proper noun that my students might possibly face on the exam. Even worse, the main essay question on the AP exam in May might be based on a topic that I had taught months previously, probably only for a day. I will defer to Charap's extensive explanation of the changes to the framework; however, the vague nature of the old framework necessitated that I cover every conceivable test question, consistently sacrificing depth. As I now have a much clearer picture as to what my students must be able to answer on the Advanced Placement exam, I am better able to prepare them to succeed on the test as well as push them further intellectually in terms of general historical thinking skills while not fearing the "gotcha" exam questions.

My unit plan now therefore reflects my efforts to push them to a higher level of dialogue:

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Unit 6: 1865–1898: The Long Gilded Age[3]

Readings:
America Past and Present, chapters 17, 18, 19, 20, 21.
Burton, *The Age of Lincoln*, 323–50.
Fink, Leon, *American Labor History*, 1–19.
Calloway, Colin, *First Peoples*, 290–316.
Takaki, Ronald, *A Different Mirror*, 228–45.
Higham, John, *Strangers in the Land*, 3–11.

In-Depth Project: Chicago in the Gilded Age—students will produce a documentary of Chicago in the long Gilded Age by focusing on the following issues: urban politics, immigration, rise of labor unions/labor struggles, geography, urban planning and design, major events/catastrophes, rise of Industrial magnates. (PEO–6)

Themes: Work, Exchange, and Technology; Peopling; Ideas, Belief, and Culture; Environment and Geography; Politics and Power; Identity; America in the World;

Thought Question: To what extent did the changes of the Gilded Age lead to both greater opportunities for and increased restrictions on immigrants, women, and American Indians?

Daily Lesson	Applicable Reading
Day 1: Intro Lecture—The Long Gilded Age—Industrialization, Expansion, Immigration, Urbanization, Migration	Text chapter 18
Day 2: Quiz/ Lecture—The Creation of Wealth in the Post-Civil War United States	
Day 3: Lecture/Discussion—Wealth in the Gilded Age—*American Heritage* Top 40 Wealthiest Americans – viewing online tour of Newport Mansions / Discussion of Burton *Age of Lincoln*	Burton, 323–50
Day 6: Quiz—Lecture: Politics of the Gilded Age:	Text chapter 20
Day 5: Reading/Discussion—*American Labor History* and Changes in Approaches to Work	
Day 7: Discussion—Ranking the Presidents of the Gilded Age	
Day 8: Lecture/Discussion—Immigration in the Gilded Age—Waves of Immigration	Higham, 3–11
Day 9: Quiz—Intro to Chicago development	Text chapter 19
Day 10: Mapping the Growth of Chicago Students will analyze the connections between Chicago and the greater history of America using maps found in the digital collections of the Newberry Library at http://dcc.newberry.org/collections/mapping-chicago-and-midwest (Primary sources—Maps)	
MC TEST—Gilded Age (chapters 18, 19, 20)	
Day 11: Quiz / Lect—Expanding Westward	Text chapter 17
Day 12: Lect/Disc—The taking of Indian Land : The Imagery of the "Noble Salvage"	Calloway, 290–316; Takaki, p. 228–45
Day 8: Primary Source Reading/Discussion: *Primary Sources:* excerpts from: *A Century of Dishonor,* two accounts of the Wounded Knee Massacre, Turner thesis, Rolvaag *Giants in the Earth*	
Test—MC and SA (chapter 17 for MC, chapters 17–20 for SA)	
DBQ	

Now a word about the Progressive Era. I have separated the Gilded Age from the Progressive Era in my teaching of the APUSH course. Previously this divide was

necessitated by the school calendar and the placement of final exams. In the new framework, however, I teach the Progressive Era in conjunction with a domestic policy unit that extends to the start of World War II. As the new framework emphasizes continuing themes, the continuities from the Gilded Age to the Progressive Era are many. For example, my students compare and contrast the 1912 Progressive Party platform with the 1892 Omaha platform. Our examination of women's Progressive reforms centers on the activity of Jane Addams and the community of reformers that she nurtured through Hull-House. While I recognize that in separating the two eras I am risking students overemphasizing the successes of one distinct group of reformers, I am willing to risk that to foster students' understanding of the New Deal as somewhat continuous from Progressive reforms.

Ultimately, much of the controversy surrounding the revised curriculum framework will likely remain outside of my school's walls. While a few of my students avidly follow the stories about the AP fracas, most are unmoved. Yet the tumult among the politicians and pundits nicely matches my own pedagogical style, where I try to nurture in my students a general skepticism of accepting the word of the teacher unquestioningly. In opening up debate and utilizing primary sources, the new framework delightfully does the same thing. Above all, it allows students across the political spectrum to form their own opinions rather than rely upon a preset narrative. Indeed, my students have always questioned the traditional framework (in the little time previously allowed in between memorizing), and by now incorporating higher level historical thinking, the College Board has allowed us to more fully engage my students within the main class activities rather than around the periphery.

Regardless of political affiliation, the teacher's job is to expose students in a college-level history course to the relevant debates within the field and provide them with the tools to evaluate the main arguments. In limiting their exposure to all sides, we do not properly prepare students to move on in the field, or to be thoughtful citizens even if their future contact with history is limited. Furthermore, in only exposing students to one viewpoint—as frequently was the case in the past—we perpetuate students' tendency to view the field of history as simply the recitation of facts rather than as an ongoing debate over contested ground. The new curriculum framework has therefore—I am happy to report from the trenches—clearly reignited the excitement in Advanced Placement U.S. History.

NOTES

[1]An excellent source is in the Newberry Library's digital collection at http://dcc.newberry.org/collections/mapping-chicago-and-midwest.

[2]I often use with students the preface from John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925*(New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002 [1955]).

[3]Unit Readings include Robert A. Divine et al., *America Past and Present,* 8th edition (New York: Pearson, 2007), chapters 17, 18, 19, 20, 21;Orville Vernon Burton, *The Age of Lincoln* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 323–50; Leon Fink, "American Labor History" in *The New American History*, rev. edition, ed. Eric Foner (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 333–52; Colin G. Colloway, *First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History* (Boston: Bedford St. Martin's, 2008), 290–316; Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1993), 228–45; and Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 3–11.

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