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ADAPTING TO THE REDESIGNED AP U.S. HISTORY COURSE

Since almost the beginning of my career, I have been happily steeped in Advanced Placement United States History. I began teaching the course in 2001, have served many times as a reader and table leader at the annual reading where exams are graded, and sat on the Test Development Committee from 2010 to 2013. I have been fortunate enough to be a member of multiple communities of APUSH teachers that have provided one of the most important elements of my own professional growth as a teacher and historian. Almost two years ago, I transitioned from a full-time teaching role at my small, urban Connecticut high school to an instructional leadership role. Now as an instructional leader, I coach teachers of both AP and college-prep level history courses individually and in professional development groups. Our school serves about 500 predominantly African American and Latino students who enter our school through the citywide public school lottery. We are unabashedly determined to make college graduation a reality for all of our students, approximately three-quarters of whom receive free or reduced lunch and almost all of whom will be the first in their families to graduate. We provide intense college-readiness instruction to students all four years they are with us, and we provide wraparound college success counseling to graduates and their families until they earn their bachelor's degrees. AP is an important piece of the college readiness equation at our school.

Like many veteran APUSH teachers, I admit that I at first approached the APUSH redesign with skepticism. I believed that the exam we already had tested knowledge that students of history should know, and that its writing tasks pushed teachers to center their courses on historical inquiry and the use of evidence. Having been both a student of history and a college-level history instructor, I could vouch for the alignment between these emphases and those of the college-level and professional historian. I believed that the exam helped students prepare for college. And, it is important to recognize, I had felt successful in and proud of my work with students using the old framework. Indeed, I did (and continue to) see AP in our school's curriculum as a major component of broadening college access and preparing first-generation college students for success. As a first-generation college graduate myself, this places AP at the center of my own motivations for the work I do. A new exam challenged me in myriad ways.

Despite my initial hesitation, in recent years I have become an ardent champion of the APUSH redesign.[1] In this piece, I hope to present what I see as the challenges and the

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chief strengths of the new framework, share some of the experiences of the teachers I work with as they've adjusted to the shifts, and comment on the ways in which the College Board and others are supporting and could further support the professional development required by the new framework's intervention. But first, I will speak to the change in my own thinking about the redesign. Interestingly, it is the same two historic problems of history education that Lawrence Charap cites as the starting point of the APUSH redesign that ultimately shifted my own mindset: students don't love history, and they don't excel in history courses.

In my first year as an instructional leader, I gathered the following two data points about history at the school where I lead: students gave lower survey ratings in response to the prompt "I enjoy coming to this class" for their history courses than for any other course; and students were more likely to fail history than to fail any other core academic course. This prompted me to conduct some research on student investment in our school. I compared my two data points to retention and attrition information. I looked to our alumni report to see how our graduates were doing in college. I surveyed teachers and students. And I took a small group of teachers on classroom observations. In the end, we conducted a "sense-making" meeting, and came to the following conclusions:

- Investment and achievement are inextricably linked. There is no such thing as an unwilling learner. To teach, you must invest.
- Teaching that builds student competence leads to the greatest investment *and* the greatest achievement.
- Students are invested and achieve when they are included in the learning process, especially through discussion with peers, and when they see their learning as relevant.

These conclusions prompted a professional development focus on student investment for humanities teachers. The changes that I challenged our teachers to make required some new technical skills such as writing higher-order thinking questions and facilitating student discussion, but I learned quickly that this was largely an adaptive challenge; it required of us, not merely some new skills, but more importantly a reevaluation of our beliefs, our goals, and our conception of our own role as teachers. I would argue that the APUSH redesign is also largely an adaptive challenge. There are certainly new skills to learn, and I know that history teachers are eagerly seeking out opportunities to learn them. But more important than new skills and practices themselves is the mindset shift that we are making as history teachers in order to embrace a framework that puts students' ability to do historical work front and center. We must fully commit to defining history as a way of thinking, not a static body of knowledge. We must relate to our students as developing historians, not as consumers of our own expertise. Change is always difficult because it always challenges who we think we are.

I see the political backlash the exam has faced in terms of adaptive change as well. Most critique expressed on the national stage takes issue with the content included in or left out of the framework, without acknowledging the intentional shift from "topics" to "concepts" and ignoring the new emphasis on historical thinking skills.[2] The reason the founders do not appear is not that they have been supplanted by other *figures* more pleasing to "revisionists." They do not appear because they have been supplanted by larger *concepts* related to the founding. At root here is a redefinition of history as a way of thinking and producing knowledge—not as a body of knowledge. Indeed,

"revisionist" is problematic as a term of critique as it sets historians who "revise" apart from the norm.[3] All students of history should be learning and practicing the skills of developing, critiquing, and revising historical interpretations. The new framework is difficult to accept if you see history as a single story. Naturally, you will want your own story told. Neither I nor the teachers I work with sees history as a single narrative, and therefore for me, at least, the political controversy does not seem particularly relevant to the classroom.

The teachers I work with found the resolve to make the changes necessary to reverse our investment and achievement data by reconnecting with their most ambitious motivations for doing such tough and rewarding work. They had all became history teachers to excite and empower kids. They knew this required a shift in how we teach. The most challenging aspect of this adaptive change for the teachers I work with is actually a very familiar one to most of us who teach high school history. Many still struggle to find the right balance in their classes between empowering students with the context—the facts—they need to approach deep history inquiry and prioritizing the historical thinking itself. While some of the teachers I work with believe that the new framework reduces the breadth problem of the former APUSH course, a few believe that the framework has in fact exacerbated it. At the core of *Understanding by Design* (*UbD*), a framework strongly respected and widely practiced across disciplines in K–12 instruction, is the concept that effective curriculum is planned backward from desired student learning outcomes.[4] In history, the desired outcome is typically that students can engage in historical inquiry, interpret evidence, and stake and defend claims. *UbD* also acknowledges the critical role of content and disciplinary knowledge. As teachers plan, they ask themselves what knowledge students must have to effectively engage in the inquiry and achieve the desired outcome.[5] History teachers, including me, struggle to maintain a balance in which knowledge building is for the sake of practicing historical thinking. My teachers, to varying degrees, still worry about skimming the surface in order to "get through" the course in time. As I write this piece in late February, in the midst of a terrible winter, we are finishing up our first five-day school week of the calendar year. In my classroom visits, I find myself often pushing teachers to use their precious class time on higher-level analytical work, not on content acquisition. For teachers whose students do not yet read well enough to acquire content independently, this is particularly challenging, and the new APUSH framework has spurred some resistance on this front. We've responded with support aimed at helping teachers select the most critical "empowering content" and teach that efficiently, as often as possible in ways that also build reading and historical thinking skills.

A related challenge of the transition from the old to the new framework has been that the shift in emphasis from chronological narrative to substantive concepts and historical thinking complicates already challenging course pacing. Within the course framework, there is no one scope and sequence a teacher could use to develop a course. This is especially challenging in teaching the Gilded Age and Progressive Era because in these periods, teachers are weaving together historical questions related to a wide range of overlapping historical trends and issues. Charap is correct when he notes that placing the "myriad events" of the period 1890–1945 "into a single unit might be the single most significant content change to most AP teachers' instruction caused by the resdesign." But the fact that these periods are complex does not negate the necessity to present them in a

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sensible way to students who are first encountering them. In short, to stop at saying that it is complex and overlapping puts the teacher in a tough spot. The value of breaking apart the long history of reform that the new framework unites in this unit is that it provides teachers with a structure—a scaffold—for introducing layers of complexity to students. While I understand the College Board's desire to emphasize connections over time and to maintain flexibility for teachers who need to adhere to various state curricula, one critique I would make against the new framework relates to its lack of a concrete or dominant structure. Despite its length (over 125 pages), the task of creating a course from this framework is nothing less than massive. Moreover, I have broader equity concerns about this given the wide range of skill and experience of AP teachers across the country and the general trend of relatively high teacher turnover in low-income, urban districts such as my own where these changes might have a disproportionately adverse effect on students for whom AP success and college access promise to be most life altering. My students are fortunate that their history teachers are experienced and exemplary teachers, willing and capable of strong course design, but this of course is far from the norm in many districts.

Like most APUSH teachers, the teachers I work with revised their course last spring and summer according to the new framework. Some aspects of our APUSH course remain much the same. For example, most of our instruction is organized into short instructional "loops" focused on single overarching questions. Students might consider, for example, the degree to which Progressive Era reformers were united in their vision for industrialized America or the ways in which the debate over women's suffrage illustrated broader ideological and political conflict in the early twentieth century. The loop begins with some context, which students might read or learn through direct instruction with the teacher. Then students analyze sources in preparation for seminar discussion. The women's suffrage prompt is one I used when I taught the APUSH course. In that loop, my students read and analyzed: a 1910 speech by Senator Robert Owen; a 1911 argument against women's suffrage by Chairman of the Democratic Caucus J. B. Sanford; a poster called "Why We Oppose Votes for Women," by the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage; the racially charged "Declaration of Principles of the Southern Women's League for the Rejection of the Proposed Susan B. Anthony Amendment to the Constitution of the Untied States"; a 1915 Rose O'Neill advertisement that pleads with readers to "Give Mother the Vote!"; a political cartoon by Lou Rogers published in the *New York Call* in 1912; and an 1895 *Life* magazine cartoon.[6] Seminar-style discussion is the main event of every loop, and each loop concludes with argumentative writing. We use this structure because it places inquiry, evidence, and argumentation at the center of our instructional units. We believe that such a method mirrors the work of the historian. Finally, it is grounded in the principles of *Understanding by Design*, especially the idea that the product of effective instruction is demonstrated student mastery of disciplinary concepts and skills.

The redesigned APUSH framework has improved upon our methods in a number of ways. First, in contrast to the old Course Description, the "key concepts" in the redesigned framework provide a detailed conceptual outline to the course. This has provided us with the clearest structure for organizing the week-to-week and day-to-day instruction in our school. As we've used the framework to design our own course, the key concepts have helped us to determine what to focus on so that we can lead our students in deeper historical inquiry and prepare them to write competently on these topics on the APUSH

exam using whichever examples they have learned in class. Second, in the redesigned framework, the themes come to life in the learning objectives. This has pushed us to design loops that tackle more substantive historical inquiries and transcend narrow time periods. The rubrics on the new exam require students to make thematic connections in their writing. We are now thinking about theme in our course design in a rigorous way, designing loops that, for example, compare the beliefs and strategies of reform movements before the Civil War to those of reform movements during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Finally, the redesigned APUSH framework has vastly expanded our thinking about the role of historical thinking skills in our course design and instruction. For me, this is the most fundamental of the shifts as it most significantly redefines the experience of the APUSH student.

The APUSH exam has changed in several ways that make it a stronger measure of student skill. For example, every multiple-choice question now requires students to engage with a primary source, a map, data, or an excerpt from a historian. Students must interpret evidence, compare positions, and evaluate cause and effect and change over time in the multiple choice questions, the new short-answer questions, the long essay, and the document-based question. We taught these skills before the redesign. Now they will be assessed more robustly. They will carry more weight on the exam, so they will carry more weight in our classes. Teachers I work with have devoted immense energy and collaboration this year to writing new instructional exercises and assessments that engage kids in source interpretation and critical analysis of historical arguments. More fundamentally, the redesign has prompted all history teachers at my school to teach their students that history is a way of thinking and that historical knowledge—like all knowledge—is produced through a method of inquiry, investigation, and argumentation.[7] The results over just the last few months are eye-opening. Students, at all levels, implicitly understand the difference between primary and secondary sources. They understand what historians write as argument, not fact. They critique historians' use of evidence. They assess the relevance and reliability of sources by analyzing their origins and their creators' interests before they employ them as evidence. Classroom discussion is deeper as students have a basis by which to weigh contradictory pieces of evidence against each other. Investment and achievement are both way up.

By far, the biggest adjustment we've made to our instructional approach lies in how we teach students to analyze evidence. Our traditional approach was to teach students to ask themselves: given the evidence provided in this document, what is the answer to the historical question I am being asked? It was largely a matter of getting the point of the document—quite literally in accurately identifying why the test developer put the document there—and then clearly connecting it to an argument in writing. In our "redesigned" loops, we are now first asking students to assess the relevance of each piece of evidence by analyzing the document's origins and the interests of its creator in order to determine its reliability, its relevance, and ultimately, its own bearing on their historical arguments. Now students view documents much more critically and have strong bases on which to present opposing analyses in seminar discussion and writing. Whereas students could only previously say that documents provided a complex or contradictory picture, having no criteria by which to weigh evidence, they can now make solid historical claims by valuing one source differently from another, as historians do. One of our

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APUSH teachers, a PhD who recently joined us this year after teaching college-level history for almost a decade, has commented that this new approach is much closer to how he understands his work as a historian.

The shifts we have made in response to the new APUSH framework have resulted in increased investment and student achievement in our history classes. This has reinvigorated our teachers as well. Late last spring and early this year, there was certainly anxiety as teachers examined the framework and restructured their courses. But the teachers I work with embraced the shifts more readily than I had in the early stages of the redesign. They were eager to teach in ways that more deeply engaged kids in historical work. Their frustration with racing through the curriculum was greater than their fear of the unknown, and in many ways they found the new framework exciting and invigorating. The teachers I work with were also eager to find resources to help them understand what would be expected of students on the new exam and learn how to teach in new ways that built students' conceptual understandings and historical thinking skills. We have found the resources developed by the College Board, including the practice exam, student work, and scoring materials posted on the secure course audit site, enormously helpful. On the College Board website, there are also four course planning and pacing guides that provide examples for restructuring your own course and a tool for teacher planning with the new APUSH framework.[8] Two other resources we have relied heavily upon in our planning are the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History's AP US History Study Guide and the Stanford History Education Group's "Beyond the Bubble" and "Reading like a Historian" sites.[9] The Gilder Lehrman Institute is compiling for each of the nine periods in the concept outline a timeline, primary source documents, videos, and essays by historians, all centered on the key concepts named in the APUSH framework for the period. The voices of historians in the videos and essays are particularly helpful as APUSH students engage more with historical arguments in the new framework. Teachers can use these resources to design learning experiences for their students. The Stanford History Education Group's sites provide some of the best instructional materials I have seen for teaching historical thinking skills.

As a veteran APUSH teacher and an instructional leader, I believe that the redesigned APUSH framework and exam will help teachers improve their craft by freeing them from the race through the textbook we all remember and empowering them to teach history as a way of thinking. I also believe that this will put student thinking front and center, resulting in greater student investment and achievement. We are seeing this already at my school. The days of thinking of high school history as the venue for "teaching content" so that the few could engage in historical thinking in college are over. It is exciting to imagine how we might claim a new place for history in every child's experience as these new ways of thinking, teaching, and learning in history reach our children earlier in their educations and shape the way they think and engage as scholars and as citizens. Across disciplines, students should apply a critical lens to evidence in order to understand their world and build the skills to have real power within it. As citizens, they must consume information with constant attention to the contexts and interests that shape it in order to come to precise, nuanced understandings of the complex issues in the United States and the world in history and today. The teachers I work with, themselves all passionate thinkers and citizens, want nothing more than to take part in a project aimed

at these lofty goals. Indeed, nothing aligns more beautifully with our collective sense of our mission as history teachers.

NOTES

[1]Brenda Santos, "Embracing the Challenge of the New AP US History Exam," *Perspectives on History* (Sept. 2014), http://historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/september-2014/embracing-the-challenge-of-the-new-ap-us-history-exam.

[2]Republican National Committee, "Resolution Concerning Advanced Placement U.S. History (APUSH)," https://cdn.gop.com/docs/RESOLUTION_CONCERNING_ADVANCED_PLACEMENT_US_HISTORY_APUSH.pdf; Cory Turner, "The Great U.S. History Battle," *NPR Ed*, aired Feb. 24, 2015, http://www.npr.org/blogs/ed/2015/02/24/388443955/the-great-u-s-history-battle.

[3]James McPherson, "Revisionist Historians," *Perspectives on History* (Sept. 2003), http://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/september-2003/revisionist-historians.

[4]Grant P. Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design* (Alexandria, VA : Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005).

[5]Other explicit connections between content knowledge and higher-order thinking skills include those made by the Common Core State Standards and David Conley. The Common Core State Standards are "based on rigorous content and application of knowledge through higher-order thinking skills," http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/; and David Conley notes that students must learn the "what" in order to build "deeper knowledge." David T. Conley, *Getting Ready for College, Careers, and the Common Core: What Every Educator Needs to Know* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013).

[6]Find these sources and others related to women's suffrage at the following sites: http://sfpl.org/pdf/libraries/main/sfhistory/suffrageagainst.pdf, http://ows.edb.utexas.edu/site/cks468edc370s/editorial-artifactscartoon, http://.tennessee.gov/tsla/exhibits/suffrage/struggle.htm.

[7]Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); Lendol Calder, "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey," *Journal of American History* 92 (Mar. 2006): 1358–70; Bruce Lesh, "Making Historical Thinking a Natural Act," *Historically Speaking* 12 (June 2011): 17–19.

[8]https://advancesinap.collegeboard.org/english-history-and-social-science/us-history.

[9]Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, "AP US History Study Guide," http://.gilderlehrman.org/programs-exhibitions/ap-us-history-exam-prep; Stanford History Education Group, http://sheg.stanford.edu/; "Beyond the Bubble," https://beyondthebubble.stanford.edu/new-home; "Reading like a Historian," http://sheg.stanford.edu/rlh.

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