The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era **14** (2015), 386–388
doi:10.1017/S1537781415000092

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781415000092 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Teaching Forum: Pedagogy and Controversy in The New Advanced Placement U.S. History Framework

Robert D. Johnston

INTRODUCTION TO *TEACHING FORUM*

There has been no greater controversy in the American historical world this year than the struggle over the new Advanced Placement curriculum. The authors in this forum lay out the controversy well, so I will not rehash the ongoing conflict here. As Andrew Hartman has smartly noted, the right-wing assault against the new AP fits well into the still ongoing culture wars of the 1990s—a companion to contests over profane art and gay rights as well as, especially, the battle over the National History Standards.[1]

Yet, even though as a political historian I hesitate to say this: there seems to be considerably more than politics to this controversy—at least in any traditional sense. Clearly, no version of teaching history is politics-neutral. Yet the recent transformation in K–12 classroom practices, which we might broadly capture as preparing students to move as much as possible toward thinking like scholarly historians and which is best reflected here in Lendol Calder's essay, is surprisingly trans-ideological. It is liberal and left-wing hubris to think that such skills as "critical thinking" and "historical thinking" belong to the progressive camp, just as it is supremely arrogant for conservatives to believe that they get to define all the foundational individuals and events of our patriotic past.[2]

The contributors to this forum do carefully address political matters, especially in relation to the recent tumult. The forum, however, also moves beyond the political to explore how the new AP exam reflects and builds upon recent developments in the scholarship and practice of historical teaching and learning and how it is likely to change the experience of students in high school classrooms.

Overall, the forum's participants evince a palpable sense of relief—even liberation—that the Advanced Placement curriculum releases teachers and students from seeing history as Fact-after-Fact-after-Fact. People of any political commitment should celebrate this new opportunity for our most advanced high school history students to dig into significant topics that reflect their intellectual love of a subject by much more deeply analyzing primary sources, doing archive-based research papers, and performing oral histories.

It is important to note that this forum is quite time-bound. Historical journals do not often take on subjects that are such moving targets. Yet since the forum participants wrapped up their essays, the College Board has been active in formulating what one might call a revised revised framework—to be released around the time that this issue of *JGAPE* appears in print—that promises to "resolve" "the concerns

© *Society for Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*

some have expressed this past year."[3] Whether this latest revision, which has substantial input from contributor Lawrence Charap and involves many other teachers and scholars, actually soothes the cultural inflammation caused by the original new 2014 framework should prove an intriguing issue that the journal may well revisit in coming years.

College- or university-based scholars may ask: what is in this forum for us? First off, I would hope that all historians, of any type and at any level, would care deeply about the fate of the American nation's past in its classroom. Beyond that, however, we might take out of this forum a provocation that Jonathan Zimmerman, in particular, points toward. That is: frankly, high school teachers are, collectively, better teachers than are those in postsecondary education. On the whole, K–12 teachers pay more attention to recent scholarship and thinking in the field, and they are more conversant with pedagogies that actually promise to work among a wide diversity of students. Given that well more than half of most scholars' professional careers are about teaching, perhaps scholars can use this opportunity to humbly learn a few tricks of the trade from talented teachers such as Mary Lopez, Brenda Santos, and Saul Straussman.

A final word about politics from the political historian. To my mind, the conservative critics of the Advanced Placement curriculum actually do have some genuine and important concerns. Jeremy Stern's contribution to the forum is particularly effective in pointing toward what many would consider some (limited) ideological excesses in the new AP materials. On the other hand, Stern is also quite convincing when he argues for the irresponsible nature of much of the conservative criticism. (Ben Carson's line about ISIS may induce snickers, but what does it say about our political culture that ISIS is even in the room?)

The lesson that many of my fellow leftish colleagues will draw from such craziness is, unfortunately, that we can't talk to Those People. They are too far beyond bounds: indeed, even too dangerous. Yet that seems like exactly the wrong moral for this story. For we cannot afford to abandon a collaborative effort to define our common history just because the argument is often painful and unproductive.

If we wish to spread the gospel of "historical thinking"—and I am a deeply committed evangelical—then the next step is to reach out to our right-wing brethren and seek, through vigorous and respectful dialogue, to convince them that teaching historical thinking, at its best, requires a disciplined eschewing of propagandizing to our students. Indeed, teaching historical thinking is about letting all students work hard, reflect, and decide for themselves the intellectual and political meanings of history. For sure, many conservatives will be afraid of this. But—and it is important that we own this—for every such conservative who is more interested in indoctrination than illumination, there is a Howard Zinn disciple committed, whether consciously or not, to shoving the view of "the people" down students' throats.

So, the lesson?

When struggling over the teaching of history, we are struggling about democracy.

Democracy, in turn, is of course all about struggle—often fiery, intemperate, painful struggle.

Yet, arguably, the best kind of struggle comes from a combination of commitment and … humility—a character trait that the study of the past should, we would hope, do much to inspire.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781415000092 Published online by Cambridge University Press

NOTES

[1]Andrew Hartman, "The Internationalization of the U.S. History Curriculum," *The American Historian* 3 (Feb. 2015): 39–42, http://tah.oah.org/february-2015/internationalization-of-us-history-curriculum/. For the most concrete link between the 1990s history wars and today, see Lynne V. Cheney, "The End of History, Part II," *Wall Street Journal*, April 1, 2015.

[2]For just two among many of the major contributions to this scholarship, see the foundational text by Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); and a classroom-friendly manifesto by Bruce Lesh, "*Why Won't You Just Tell Us the Answer?": Teaching Historical Thinking in Grades 7–12* (Portland, ME: Stenhouse, 2011).

[3]See College Board Senior Vice President Trevor Packer's letter to the editor of the *Wall Street Journal* on April 9, 2015.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781415000092 Published online by Cambridge University Press