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A REFLECTION ON TEACHING A REDESIGNED APUSH CLASS

Teaching Advanced Placement courses is a significant challenge for teachers and students. This is not a bad thing, mind you. For this high school teacher, the biggest challenge is balancing the needs of a college-level course with the reality of teaching … well … high school students. In this era of "college and career readiness," I often remind myself that students in my AP United States History class are there to prepare themselves for college. They have embarked on an adventure, and the only thing they know for sure is that the course says "AP" in the title. Beyond this simple truth they do not know what to expect.

Teaching in a comprehensive high school in an urban school district (Pittsburgh), I have a good idea of what to expect from my students. Many of them have the drive to succeed in an AP class. But for most this is their first experience with an Advanced Placement course, and moving from general education classes to AP is a big leap. My AP class is an open enrollment course. That means any student who earned a grade of B or better in their tenth-grade World History course can decide to opt in to this class for their junior year. On average, about 20 percent of the junior class not already enrolled in the honors course sign up for the AP United States History (APUSH) course at my high school.

The two biggest challenges I face in this course are the skills my students bring to the classroom and their depth of historical knowledge. I spend a lot of time working on the latter and attempting to do justice to the survey aspects of the class given the fact that many of my students do not have a solid foundation in the basics of American history even though they had early American history in eighth grade. Additionally, many of my students do not make connections between what they are learning and what they have already learned. It takes substantial prodding to help them connect trends they learned in their world history course when discussing parallel developments in U.S. history. Part of this is the nature of teenagers—ask adolescents what they learned one or two years ago in any course and most likely the answer would be, "I don't remember." (I often say to students, "please, do not hit 'ctrl-all delete' in your brains yet.") The other challenge is the skills set students have at the start of their junior year. Students arrive in APUSH with widely varying degrees of skill in reading and interpreting documents, constructing and writing an essay, and having the discipline to do some level of independent work.

So despite the enthusiasm of some of my students for taking APUSH rather than the general education U.S. history course, this year has been more of a challenge due to the

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changes in the focus of APUSH on historical thinking skills within the context of what still needs to be, in part, a broad survey class.

With that in mind, the new focus on historical thinking skills is a positive step overall. One critique that my colleagues had about previously teaching APUSH was that at times it felt like we were skipping through American history. The risk was always that if we slowed down to investigate an idea in depth, we would fall behind in our pacing too much for students to be successful on the big exam in May. In his essay, Lawrence Charap noted a similar criticism from Sam Wineburg. Before this year, the focus was on factoids (names, dates, places) over context, depth, and connections to change over time. The inch-deep-and-mile-wide approach, while frustrating to teach, was, to be sure, straightforward enough to teach. And most students "got it." When I asked some former students why they did not take APUSH, their response often was simple: they were not good at memorizing dates and names.

Emphasizing historical thinking skills as outlined in the new framework has had its rewards and its frustrations, too, particularly keeping in mind that we are only halfway through the school year in the maiden voyage. I am sure some of this of this year's rockiness is due to the perennial challenges in my classroom, but surely some of it is due to the newness of teaching APUSH in the newfangled way.

So far this year, there have fortunately been quite a few rewards. The biggest one is the ability to spend extended time to investigate themes in American history. Working in an urban school district with a large minority population and a large proportion of students on free or reduced lunch, it is important to present history that reflects who they are in terms of income and demographics, as well as where their families come from. Additionally, being in Pittsburgh, a number of significant players lived and events happened in our backyard—quite literally. To that end, I have spent more time this year doing something I have always wanted to do but have simply not had the time, and that is looking at labor history.

As an example of the arc I have (and will) be taking through the course, our first look at labor issues was during the first Industrial Revolution of the early 1800s. Specifically we investigated the initial efforts of workingwomen in the textile mills of New England to organize unions. This exploration set up an extended look at labor and the role of capital during the Gilded Age. Andrew Carnegie, Henry Clay Frick, and Henry Phipps are names most of my students are familiar with. That is not because of what they did during the Gilded Age, though, but because of what they left behind: the Carnegie Museum of Art and Natural History, the Carnegie Library System of Pittsburgh, several Carnegie Halls, the Frick Museum, and the Phipps Conservatory, just to name a few institutions. Our exploration of the Gilded Age helps to make these institutions more relevant to the students by understanding their origins and the people behind them. Previously I may have mentioned these individuals in class. Yet without the opportunity to more systematically explore the actions and contributions of these individuals, we could not assess them in their time period, as I do now, using a variety of documents, both supportive and critical.[1]

Students are also familiar with the Homestead Works, the large sprawling steel mill owned by Carnegie Steel (US Steel). The town of Homestead is right across the river from our high school. Many of my students' grandparents worked in that mill until it closed in the 1970s. Although they have no memory of the steel mill operating, they know its location, they have seen some its structures (a few still stand), and they have

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an understanding of its gigantic size. In fact, a number of my students work at the site where the steel mill once stood, as it is now a sprawling shopping mall. So the students are well primed to explore what it was like for labor in one of Mr. Carnegie's steel mills using a variety of primary sources from the strike of 1892, including newspaper articles from the *Pittsburgh Press* and *Pittsburgh Gazette* (the latter is still published as the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*).

We finally return in a systematic way to the issue of labor during the Second World War through the experiences of women and African Americans on the home front.

The new framework has also provided my students time to focus on African American history, particularly during the post-Civil War period. We examine the impact of Reconstruction's implementation, as well as its end. But what is more interesting to my students is our comparison of three late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African American thinkers and the connection of the movements they were part of to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. In studying the writings and speeches of Henry McNeill Turner, Booker T. Washington, and W.E.B. Du Bois, students quickly make the connection to the strains of thought in the later period in the early writings of Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King. I use these three individuals as a bridge between the nineteenth century and the twentieth century, not only to place them in their own historical context but to foreground many of the ways that the struggle for equality in America would come to be fought. In previous years I simply did not have the time or opportunity to explore this material in depth, and the students thus lost out on one of the most important historical—as well as civic—lessons possible in an American history course.

With such opportunities to explore these specific ideas and concepts (and plenty more) in much greater depth, there are of course still tradeoffs in terms of breadth. American history textbooks are huge. Really huge. Often more than 1,000 muscle-straining pages huge.[2] While I don't have a problem reading more than 1,000 pages of history, many of my students are not proficient readers. Most read at or above grade level, but not necessarily quickly. The textbook is an awful lot to read, especially in addition to the extra primary and secondary sources we use to more deeply explore ideas. To accommodate such literacy challenges I have students read selected passages from the textbook to create a thematic understanding of American history.

To provide clarity, let's take a look at one thematic arc within time period 6—1865–1898. Within our first module, one essential question we explore is this: how did industrialization affect the political, social, and economic fabric of late nineteenth-century America? Within this module, students will do the following:

- Compare and contrast three secondary sources and their explanations of the impact of industrialization;
- Contrast two contemporary versions of the impact of industrialists;
- Analyze five primary sources that examine the impact of industrialization on wage laborers;
- Compare the origins and impact of two major labor unions;
- Analyze the causes and impact of the Homestead Works strike of 1892 using several primary sources;
- Read and deconstruct William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech and relate it to the predicament of farmers in the industrial era;
- And in addition to all of that, students will need to read about 30 pages of their textbook in three different chapters (or about one-third of the total number).

While this list of exercises helps build their skills and provides a richer experience in studying history, the textbook—in this instance—no longer provides an anchor. There are, to be sure, pedagogical challenges with this approach. Most textbook narratives, for example, are simply not set up for an analytical and inquiry-based style of teaching and learning. The history is told as a narrative from point A to point B, usually in chronological order. When I effectively dismantle chronology by cutting out parts of the textbook, I therefore need to figure out how to supplement my students' sense of the basic structure of a historical narrative.

This ties in with some of the less politically charged criticism of the new framework. Jonathan Burack highlights the possible problems of the new AP approach in a recent article in *Perspectives on History*. Avoiding the culture wars, he notes that "the AP history programs have always sought to balance detailed, content-rich coverage with a stress on discussion, interpretation, close reading of sources, and historical thinking skills." Noting how difficult it is "to do both at once, especially considering how little US history students get before they arrive in the AP class," Burack well understands how pressures in the survey "often crowd out historical thinking." "The new framework," to its credit, "tries to get around this by stressing broad, conceptual themes." Yet we need to acknowledge that such a de-emphasis on factual content could well lead students to neglect the development of "rich content background" in favor of interpretations that express "half-understood generalities."[3]

Despite my general support for the new framework, I actually do share some of this concern. At the same time, I know from teaching in a conceptual framework that students *can* make the leap from chronological, "just-the-facts" style of history if given the opportunity to cultivate the requisite disciplinary skills. My concern, then, has more to with having enough time to teach my students to master the skills of historical thinking, understand the dynamics of U.S. history, and make sure that they feel competent enough to be successful on the AP exam in early May. To do this in fewer than 150 teaching days is a tall order.

I will note that there have been other criticisms of the new AP framework as being "un-American." As someone who has taught APUSH for nine years, clearly these are words coming from uniformed individuals who have not taken the time to actually research what is being taught in an APUSH classroom—much less what should be taught. Most of all, these comments by critics of the new framework fail to acknowledge the multitude of experiences that made the American experience. These experiences ran the gamut from rags-to-riches stories that were popular in Horatio Alger novels as well as in the real-life experience of individuals such as Andrew Carnegie to the rags-to-rags experiences of the thousands of workers who came seeking a better life but were exploited in the steel mills owned by Mr. Carnegie. To not acknowledge all those realities is to ignore the full and complex history of United States and the sacrifices made by those who came to make a better life and helped build the nation.

My students do, in the end, come to appreciate the de-emphasis on the textbook. Another area that at least a good number my students are excited about is the style of the exam. In particular, they like the new format for the multiple-choice questions, especially if they took AP European History last year. When I have mixed the old and new formats of these questions, my students have done significantly better with the newer format. The new format of the multiple-choice questions requires the students to use

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the historical thinking skills we have been working on such as interpreting documents, rather than worrying about factoids such as what year the Federal Reserve was created. They also like the format of the short-answer questions, provided the topic is something they feel they know something about. In Lawrence Charap's example of a short-answer question about the 1883 Puck cartoon, my students would be able to answer parts b and c because of their reading and analysis of primary and secondary sources that were both critical of the "robber barons" and supportive of the "captains of industry." And as an instructor, I appreciate that students are now able, and encouraged, to make connections between time periods within an extended essay response.

The ability to teach a rigorous and challenging course to high school students who are intellectually curious, looking to pad their transcript, and/or are willing to stretch their skills is a great honor. The redesign of the APUSH framework allows me to create a course that speaks to my students' experiences and challenges their understanding of history. Ultimately, the new APUSH framework is a challenge, yet it offers great rewards for those of us who wish to explore history through several lenses and from different angles.

NOTES

[1]A few of the documents we analyze include excerpts from Burton J. Hedrick, *The Age of Big Business: A Chronicle of the Captains of Industry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1919); Henry D. Lloyd, "The Story of a Great Monopoly," *The Atlantic*, March 1, 1881, http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/188103/monopoly; "Andrew Carnegie: The Gospel of Wealth, 1889," http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/mod/1889carnegie.asp; and Henry George, "Of the Effect upon Individuals and Classes" from *Progress and Poverty: An Inquiry into the Cause of Industrial Depressions and of Increase of Want with Increase of Wealth: The Remedy* (1879; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page, 1926), 445–51, cited in Kevin J. Fernlund, ed., *Documents to Accompany America's History*, vol. 2. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin, 2008), 55–57.

[2]Pittsburgh Public Schools adopted *America's History*, 6th ed. by James Henretta, David Brody, and Lynn Dumenil (Boston; Bedford/St. Martin, 2008), which clocks in at 1,016 pages. And while I too note to my students that there are lots of pictures and graphics on most pages, I cannot help but notice that the average AP European history textbook has approximately 600 pages of text and covers 200 additional years of history.

[3]Jonathan Burack, "The AP US History Wars: Is a Peace Process Possible?" *Perspectives on History*, December 2014, http://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/december-2014/the-ap-us-history-wars.

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