Social Education 77(5), pp 260–262, 265
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Ten Things to Consider When Teaching AP U.S. History

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When I made the transition from high school social studies teacher to social studies methods professor, colleagues asked me whether I missed my old position. I answered that I really loved teaching at all different grade levels, kindergarten through graduate school. And I meant it. But I would not be telling the whole truth unless I added that I also missed teaching Advanced Placement U.S. History. More than the content itself, I missed watching students discover that history is messy, as they grappled with complex ideas and competing explanations and determined that the black and white views they held might need to give way to shades of gray.

As one student said on a course evaluation,

> The biggest change is the fact that I am now able to be critical of history.... It made me realize that there are many different aspects to each historical event, that they are not just facts set in stone.... One change that will definitely stay with me is the complexity of most historical issues.... It made me question more.[1]

Having been fortunate both to teach AP U.S. History and to observe those who teach the course in several different districts, I think that I have been able to distill the ingredients that make for a successful course. Some of the most important aspects of creating a course that both students and teachers value must be addressed long before the first day of class.

1. Be on the committee that decides how students will be selected for AP.
One school where I taught was a suburban 9–12 school, whose student population was 82% white, 13% Latino, 3% Asian, 2% African American, and 1% multiracial, and where 1% of students were classified as Limited English Proficient, and 14% of the student population was eligible for free or reduced price lunch.[2] The criteria for determining eligibility for AP were teacher recommendation, grade, and essay. However, the district also allowed students and their parents to appeal to be in AP, even with lower grades than seemed advisable. The caveat was that the student and parents would have to come in for a conference that culminated in signing a contract where they acknowledged that the work would be demanding and relentless and that they would be comfortable with grades in the B or C range. This conference-contract combination resulted in the teachers, parents, and students knowing that the standards in an AP course would not be altered based on which students got into the course.

2. Maximize time and connections through blocks of time with an English colleague.
I was fortunate to teach in a school that had a three-period block of English, history, and a conference period shared by both disciplines. Thus, I taught two sections of AP U.S. History, while my English counterpart taught two sections of American Literature to the same two groups of students. The third period provided us the flexibility to conference with groups of students about their writing, their note taking, and their research papers. It also allowed us to show a movie in its entirety, do library research or run simulations, debates or presentations for three periods in a row. The conference period gave me the time to do the kinds of upper level activities that engage students and make them think. I would never return to teaching AP US without the conference period.

> "Even if the courses were not always chronologically in synch, the integration with English enhanced my understanding in the course," wrote a student.

3. Take an AP prep course.
The summer before I taught AP US for the first time, I took a one-week College Board course taught by Tim Miller, then social studies department chair in Bedford, New York. I was leery of doing so, as I thought I would be learning how to lecture and engage in test-prep. Nothing could have been further from the truth. I refined my skills of engaging students in document-based analysis, without bombarding students with sample DBQs. I was exposed to a variety of texts, authentic activities, ideas about writing instruction and research assignments that I then modified for use with my own classes.

4. When your budget allows you to purchase a new book, examine a lot of texts before selecting one.
The instructor of the AP prep course

brought in about six different texts for us to peruse. I chose a text with which I had previously been unfamiliar, *America Past and Present*, but one which my students and I liked very much, especially its emphases on controversial issues, demographic data and social history. As the preface indicates, "…we pay particular attention to the roles that women and minority groups have played in the development of American society and the American nation. These people appear throughout the text not as witnesses to the historical narrative, but as principals in its evolution."[3]

5. Select outside readings that address historiography and give students opportunities to explore competing explanations for historical phenomena.
My colleague and I shared copies of the two-volume anthology *Portrait of America*,[4] containing 62 essays, narratives, and biographical portraits by eminent, prize-winning historians, including Foner, Ulrich, Donald, Morris, LaFeber, Nash, and many others. I was also able to select one other outside paperback volume, *After the Fact*,[5] for its analysis of a variety of types of evidence in the service of constructing valid historical interpretations. Using both of these volumes, I assigned a series of one-page single-spaced papers throughout the year. Topics included:

- Were the Puritans Puritanical?
- What explanations and evidence do you find most compelling for the Salem Witch trials?
- How do you account for the switch from indentured servitude to slavery?
- Which question should we ask when analyzing Jefferson: Why did the author of the Declaration of Independence not free his slaves? Or how could someone from a slaveholding society come to hate slavery?
- What insights does an analysis of the content (and missing content), context (political, economic, social, and intellectual), intended audiences, and editing process of the Declaration of Independence provide you?
- Is the diary of midwife Martha Ballard too trivial to be of real interest to historians?
- To what extent is Turner's thesis an appropriate lens through which to view Jackson?
- Was the Civil War inevitable?
- Why did the North win and the South lose?
- Assess Reconstruction.
- Differing perspectives on the Gilded Age —What's your take?
- Was the Spanish-American War a just war?
- Assess Wilson's presidency (and illuminate the criteria by which you assess it).
- The Twenties: Name the decade and defend your choice.
- Evaluate the successes and failures of the New Deal (at the time and today).
- Should the U.S. have dropped the A-bombs?
- Was the Cold War inevitable? (How) would you assign blame?
- Watergate—did the system work?

"I would not have done all of the [Stephen] Oates and *After the Fact* readings without the paper assignments…. My writing definitely improved with all those one-page papers," a student wrote.

6. Assume that students need to acquire good reading, outlining, and note-taking skills and allot time throughout the course to address these needs.
Although students began the course insisting that, as eleventh graders, they most certainly did not need to learn how to take notes, either from a lecture or from a text, when I examined their first assignments involving note-taking on the text, I found that the majority of students wrote way too much, while a few wrote way too little. Nearly all did little or no thinking in the course of their note taking; they merely copied what they deemed to be important information from the text. Thus, I was grateful to borrow Tim Miller's double entry notebook instructions that encouraged students to interact with whatever text they were reading, and involved creating a two-columned page, with the left column taking up two-thirds of the page and containing notes, "anything you deem of significance that you want to remember, want to think about, what to question or argue." On the right side of the page, students made comments related to the notes. Tim Miller anticipated students' difficulties with this process and spelled out his expectations:

> You are probably wondering why one would have comments on information. But history is not a set of facts. It is an understanding of the past built on the interaction of the student with evidence. The key is interaction. For example, you could encounter the sentence: "Beginning in 1607, the English settled Virginia." Well it is true that Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement was founded in Virginia of that year. But there is still a lot to think about. If the English settled Virginia, what was it that the Native Americans were doing? Why do we not call their activity settlement? Why does English occupation begin in 1607? Why not earlier or later? Why is it the English who come to Virginia, and not the French or Dutch or Spanish? Why do the English decide to stay? What is it that happens here that we can call settlement? What happens that affects the subsequent generations of Americans?[6]

Once I made the decision to improve the quality of student note taking, it was incumbent upon me to model such note-taking; thus I took notes (and timed how long the process took) and shared my

notes and thinking with the students, and encouraged them to compare their notes to those of their classmates. In addition, I collected, read, commented on and graded students' notebooks. Because of the conference period, I also had the opportunity to discuss with students their notes and the thinking behind them twice during each quarter.

I followed a similar process for teaching students how to take notes from a lecture. I would either bring in a colleague to deliver a mini-lecture and, along with the students, I would take notes, or, I would take notes on my own mini-lecture. Either way, I would take the notes on a transparency so that, at the end of the talk, I could share what I had found to be important. Over time, I would cease to share my own note taking and have students compare their notes and their thinking.

7. Plan your course around essential questions[7]—upper level, over-arching questions, worthy of discussion.

Questions worthy of discussion guided the one-page papers (detailed above). Essential questions also guided class discussions, simulations, debates, and document investigations. For example, when examining Jefferson's presidency, some students brought articles of impeachment against him while others defended him for his embargo act and purchase of the Louisiana territory. This simulation addressed essential questions regarding the appropriate power of the federal government, whether states have the right to nullify federal law, how a country can avoid war, and whether territory that others live on can be purchased and settled.

In one assignment, groups of students used written documents (a speech by Joseph McCarthy on the communist threat, President Eisenhower's farewell address on the military industrial complex, Chief Justice Earl Warren's use of psychological evidence in *Brown v. Board of Education*, and Malvina Reynolds' song, "Little Boxes") and video excerpts from David Halberstam's *The Fifties* (pieces on Levittown, fear of atomic war, McCarthyism, television advertising, the CIA coup in Guatemala, the Kinsey report, *The Feminine Mystique*, the lynching of Emmett Till, The Beat Generation, fast food, the car and Ralph Nader) to create a thesis and outline that addressed these essential questions: To what extent did the 1950s contain the seeds of the 1960s? To what extent should the 1950s be summed up as a decade of conformity and consensus? To what extent did the Cold War inform United States behavior in foreign and domestic policy?

8. Make use of documentaries and feature-length movies.

As mentioned earlier, the conference period allowed me to show movies three periods in a row, providing momentum that sometimes dissipates when a film is spread over three days. On their final evaluations, almost every student commented on the value of the films, and they seemed to appreciate the documentaries as much as the feature films. As was the case with *The Fifties* (discussed above), many of the films were used as sources of data in the service of projects. Feature films, shown in their entirety, included: *Amistad, Norma Rae, Avalon, All the President's Men, Bob Roberts*, and *Bulworth*. Documentary excerpts included: *An Empire of Reason* (simulation of ratification of the Constitution in New York), *We Shall Remain* on Native Americans (made by Ric Burns), *New York* (also Ric Burns; excerpts on draft riots, building of the subways and skyscrapers), *A Century of Women* (excerpts on Margaret Sanger, suffragists, Lawrence Strike, Triangle Fire), *Wilson at Versailles, The Depression* (excerpt on the Bonus Army), *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter, Peter Jennings Reporting: Hiroshima - Why the Bomb was Dropped, Eyes on the Prize, Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam.*

One of the students' favorite assignments (modified from Craig Thurtell, a teacher in Westchester, N.Y.)[8] was one where they used clips from a movie whose period was the recent American past. Their 20-minute presentations included a brief summary of the movie with an emphasis on its historical context, an analysis of the movie's view of the historical period, a discussion of how the period in which the movie was made influenced its perspective on the past, and the use of a 5- to 7-minute excerpt to illustrate the analysis. Topics and movies included:

- Disaffected Youth of the 50s and 60s: *Rebel Without a Cause, The Graduate*
- McCarthyism: *The Front, Guilty by Suspicion, The Manchurian Candidate*
- Vietnam: *Apocalypse Now, The Deer Hunter, Coming Home, Platoon, Born on the Fourth of July, Full Metal Jacket*
- Race: *The Long Walk Home, Mississippi Burning, Malcolm X, Do the Right Thing*
- Changing Roles of Women and Men: *Kramer vs. Kramer, Tootsie*
- Space Race: *The Right Stuff, Apollo 13*
- Nuclear Issues: *Atomic Café, The China Syndrome, Silkwood*
- America Foreign Policy: *Missing*
- Immigration: *El Norte, Lone Star*
- Presidents: *JFK, Nixon, All the President's Men*
- Elections: *The Candidate, Bob Roberts, Bulworth*
- Lingering Consequences of 60s Radicalism: *Running On Empty*
- The Media: *Network, Wag the Dog*
- 1980s Class Issues: *Wall Street, Roger and Me*

9. Assign a process paper as part of the research paper experience.

Another idea from Tim Miller, the process paper (4 to 5 double-spaced pages, accompanied the 10- to 15-page research paper) asked students to discuss their research strategies, difficulties, epiphanies and reflections on doing original research. This paper reminded students that the point of the research paper was not merely to acquire data; rather, it was

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scheduled to ring, I interrupted the students, and we debriefed. I asked them about their experience and about their feelings throughout the negotiation process. After they expressed their exasperation with the process, I explained to them that this was precisely the aim of the exercise. The students gained a valuable lesson that day. They empathized with those who lived in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict zone. They empathized with those who sit at the peace negotiations and attempt to bring harmony to the region.

We live in an increasingly globalized society, where the ability to connect with someone far away is merely a mouse click, text message, instant message, Tweet, Facebook post, or Instagram away. One might hope that with the world seemingly shrinking that the human experience would foster a brotherhood/sisterhood of humanity. Unfortunately, those same tools that we have used to connect to each other have ferreted out the fact that intolerance still exists in the world. The news we access is full of conflicts, and intolerance is very evident in online exchanges of opinion. The study of world history offers a great opportunity to increase students' understanding of other perspectives.

Note

1. Breakdowns of the numbers of students taking AP subjects, including World History, at each of the high school grade levels are available at http://media.collegeboard.com/digitalServices/pdf/research/program_summary_report_2012.pdf

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to interact with the data and engage in metacognition about the nature of conducting research.

"The more I looked at the evidence—the discrepancies in the cables, that fact that Ethel wasn't arrested until a month after Julius, the fact that the government had the witnesses in extremely weak positions, the more I saw that justice wasn't served. As a result, I changed my thesis to incorporate this information, as well as the influence of the spirit of the times on the trial: 'With the events of the late 1940s and early 1950s lingering in the backs of people's minds, overshadowing the evidence in the Rosenberg trial, as well as the government's need to respond to McCarthy's accusations, the Rosenbergs were given a much harsher sentence than they deserved.'"[9] wrote a student.

10. Create engaging, varied assignments that put the onus on students to employ documents and content in the service of historical analysis.

From a moot court session on landmark cases to a Meeting of the Minds simulation on the eve of the Civil War (complete with characters and props), to the collection of immigration oral histories, to presentations on cultural and literary contributions of twentieth-century decades, to the designing of report cards to evaluate recent presidents, to teach-ins following the Tet Offensive, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Stokely Carmichael observation that "The position of women in SNCC is prone baby prone," students researched and presented a variety of primary sources from a variety of perspectives in every historical time period. And the students didn't even realize that they were, at the same time, preparing themselves for the AP test.

Of course, just about every one of the above recommendations should apply to a non-AP course as well. Engaging students with creative assignments, posing upper level questions, attending to students' skills, structuring reading and writing assignments so that students examine their own thinking—all of these are attributes of wise practice, where teachers bring creativity, higher-order thinking and meaningful learning activities into their classrooms.[10] Although I had no hierarchy when I first thought about these recommendations, as I revisited my AP U.S. History teaching, I came to the realization that the second recommendation of maximizing time through sharing a three-period block with an English colleague turned out to facilitate all of the others. Having more time to spend with my students made it possible for me to assign, and have conferences about, myriad upper-level assignments based on a variety of engaging primary sources. The extra time kept me from feeling that I was covering material; instead, my students were uncovering a range of perspectives throughout American history. Ultimately, we all had time to think.

Notes

1. All student comments come from anonymous course evaluations (Andrea S. Libresco's eleventh grade A.P. U.S. History class, 2001).
2. "Demographic Factors," The New York State Report Card, 2011–2012, New York State Education Department, https://reportcards.nysed.gov/files/2011-12/RC-2012-280211030010.pdf.
3. Robert A. Divine, T. H. Breen, George M. Frederickson and R. Hal Williams Divine, *America Past and Present* (New York: Longman, 1999), xviii.
4. Stephen B. Oates, ed., *Portrait of America* vols. 1 & II (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995).
5. James West Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle, *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection* (New York: McGraw Hill, Inc. 1992).
6. Tim Miller, "The Ways and Wonders of the Double Entry Notebook" (AP US Assignment, Fordham University, NY, 2000).
7. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998).
8. Craig Thurtell, "Past Imperfect" (AP US Assignment, Ardsley, NY, 2000).
9. Matthew Satriano, "Process Paper on the Rosenbergs" (Andrea S. Libresco's eleventh grade AP US History class, 2001).
10. Elizabeth A. Yeager, "Thoughts on Wise Practice in the Teaching of Social Studies," *Social Education* 64, no. 2 (2000): 352-53.

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