

Introduction to the Special Section on AP Social Studies

Walter R. Herscher

The special section in the following pages examines the Advanced Placement program (AP) and AP Social Studies courses. The AP program initially was designed in 1956 to offer students an opportunity to obtain college credit while still in high school. If a student took an AP course and successfully passed the exam (with a minimum score of 3 out of 5), and the student's preferred college accepted his or her score, then the student would not need to take that same course in college. The student could then take an upper-level course sooner or use the credit granted in order to graduate early, thus saving on tuition and entering the job market earlier than college students who did not have the AP advantage.

Over time, more courses have been added to the AP repertoire of exams. More schools offer AP courses and more students are taking AP exams. Some critics contend that AP has become a marketing tool for the College Board to make money. Some colleges have begun questioning the validity of AP exams. In February 2013, Dartmouth College announced it would cease granting AP credit in 2014.¹

In response to such concerns, the College Board announced, in 2011, that it would be revamping the emphasis of AP exams. Instead of focusing extensively upon facts and the memorization of those facts, the "New AP" would decrease the breadth of facts covered in order to spend more time on developing critical thinking skills which are considered necessary for college courses and success in the job market.²

The College Board also underscores that its exams are designed, scored, and evaluated by over 5,800 college faculty and are accepted by over 3,300 colleges in the United States and by

about 600 colleges in 60 other countries.³

The AP program is still widely respected among schools and students.

Successful AP courses are taught by teachers who have additional content expertise, more experience, and more specialized professional development. Throwing a first-year teacher into an AP course could be a recipe for disaster. In the year(s) after AP teachers participated in AP professional development, their students tended to have higher AP scores and more passing AP scores than schools whose AP teachers had not engaged in AP professional development.

In 2012, 32.4% of public high school graduates had taken an AP exam, with 60.1% of those taking an exam achieving a passing grade of 3 or higher. Both these percentages marked an increase over 2011.⁴

The rigor of AP courses serves as a college preparatory stimulus for high school students. Students who take AP or International Baccalaureate courses have found such courses more difficult than other classes (83%), but believe that those more difficult classes were worth it (82%), and that they were also more interesting (73%).⁵

Outside the United States, over 60 countries recognize AP exam scores in the admission process and/or for academic credit.⁶ Social studies exams are an important component of the AP International Diploma (APID). In order to earn an APID, students must earn passing grades on at least five AP exams in four categories: one category is Global Perspectives, which can be satisfied by passing World History, Human Geography, or Comparative Government and Politics. There are 10 exams in history and social sciences that may be used for another category.⁷

The AP program offers exams covering 34 courses. Ten courses connected with the social studies are: Art History, Comparative Government and Politics, European History, Human Geography, Macroeconomics, Microeconomics, Psychology, U.S. Government and Politics, U.S. History, and World History.

A positive AP experience improves a student's chance for admission to selective colleges and universities, as 85% of them report that AP scores impact admissions decisions. Thirty-one percent of colleges and universities look at AP scores when making scholarship decisions.⁸

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Another recent development possibly affecting AP will be the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). AP can coexist with the CCSS, as the Common Core State Standards "do not define the nature of advanced work for students who meet the Standards prior to the end of high school. For those students, advanced work...should be available."¹⁰ Many social studies standards can be found in the segment of the Common Core Standards dealing with Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects. "It is important to note that the [grades] 6-12 literacy standards in history/social studies...are not meant to replace content standards in those areas but rather to supplement them."¹¹ Students are expected to be able to independently interpret and convey arguments, establish strong content knowledge, interpret documents, use evidence appropriately, know how to conduct research, and understand different cultures and time periods.¹²

The criteria for success in AP Social Studies courses match those of the Common Core Standards. The Common Core includes textual analysis, cause and effect, vocabulary, the

examination of important documents, gathering and interpreting information from various sources, determining the main ideas in a source document, recognizing point of view or bias, and writing arguments focused on discipline-specific content.¹³

A number of essays and articles are included in this issue to assist AP teachers and those interested in AP to learn more about the program. Robert Stevens discusses the origins of the AP program. He relates the difference in scores between different racial and socio-economic groups. After summarizing these points, he asks which will be more important in a time of budget constraints: Will school districts choose merit (Jefferson's meritocracy) or equity (the fulfillment of the American Dream) when making their decision about student participation in AP courses?

The focus of the next two articles in the special section is the most widely taken AP social studies exam, U.S. History. Jason Stacy and Stephen Heller discuss the redesigned AP exam, stressing the importance of students developing reading skills and four historical thinking skills in order to achieve better success. Andrea Libresco offers 10 tips for success in U.S. History. Her ideas can also be utilized in planning any AP social studies course.

Cristóbal Saldaña extols the possibility of increasing understanding of the rest of the world via the World History course. In an era when the Common Core stresses integration of literacy and social studies, he offers specific examples of the teaching of reading and writing skills.

Walter Herscher emphasizes the historical dimension of AP Art History. He argues that understanding the background of a time period through its prevailing beliefs, values, and philosophy will enable students to understand why artists created what they did.

Laurel Schoenbohm offers her experience as a student in AP Art History. She reveals what made her various AP

courses meaningful, interesting, and successful.

Brian Ladd and Heidi Stepp follow two different approaches to teaching AP U.S. Government. The first approach is to teach it in combination with AP Macroeconomics as one entity. In a yearlong course, they intersperse units from each course as topically appropriate to make it easier to understand the connections between government, economics, and social policy. The second approach is through a traditional government course, in which they employ the *We the People* curriculum.

John Roncone and Nate Newhalfen outline their method of teaching Human Geography. In a project-based approach, they focus upon globalization and local diversity together. Students discover why institutions such as retail stores and churches are located where they are.

Sally Meek and Amanda Ashmead describe their approach to teaching Microeconomics and Macroeconomics. Because few students have been exposed to prior economic training, these courses offer an excellent opportunity to present something new to students. Economic modeling and active learning are key aspects of the curriculum. Students must understand by learning the discipline's tools, and paying close attention to the wording of the questions.

Kristin Whitlock points out that AP Psychology is one of the fastest growing exams in terms of the number of students taking the test. She offers suggestions for course planning and tips for answering questions.

Finally, Amanda Ashmead and Sue Blanchette address a central challenge for AP programs: the importance of involving non-traditional students in the AP process. The largest group of non-traditional students consists of those who are confronted with economic difficulties at home. Non-traditional students may have non-English speaking backgrounds, and little family history of education; they may

also believe that they do not belong in an AP program, or have learning disabilities. The teacher must provide them with structure and predictability while providing supplementary instruction time to bring their skills up to expectations. Teachers of non-traditional students need to maintain high expectations for such students.

The various authors make several similar points across the social studies discipline. AP teachers must have a commanding knowledge of their content (not just factual knowledge but also the appropriate vocabulary), they must have a passion for their subject, and they must have adequate resources. 🌐

Notes

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4. Caralee Adams, "Student Performance on AP Exams Improves," *Education Week* (February 20, 2013), http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/college_bound/2013/02/student_performance_on_ap_exams_improve.html.
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7. College Board, "Advanced Placement International Diploma," www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/ap/exgrd_intl.html.
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9. Vytautas Laitusis, "An Analysis of the Relationship Between School-Level AP Professional Development Activity and Subsequent Student AP Performance," College Board Research Report 2012-8 (December 7, 2012): 3-4, <http://research.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/publications/2013/1/researchreport-2012-8-advanced-placement-professional-development-student-performance.pdf>.

10. National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* (Washington, D.C.: National Governors Association for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, June 2, 2010): 6, www.k12.wa.us/CoreStandards/ELASTandards/pubdocs/CCSS/ELA_Standards.pdf#3.
11. *Ibid.*, 3
12. *Ibid.*, 7
13. *Ibid.*, 35–66.

WALTER R. HERSCHER has served as executive director for Internal Affairs for the Wisconsin Council for the Social Studies and on the Board of Directors for the National Social Studies Supervisors Association. He has taught World History, Humanities (cultural world history), and AP Art History in high school and was an adjunct instructor at several colleges after retirement. He is currently teaching a course in Art History for Stetson College's Lifelong Learning program in Celebration, Florida.

Teaching Reading with the Social Studies Standards: Elementary Units that Integrate Great Books, Social Studies, and the Common Core Standards

Edited by Syd Golston and Peggy Altoff

NCSS Bulletin 112, 118 pp., 2012

This book has been designed for elementary teachers who want to meet the Common Core Standards for Reading Literature as they teach social studies.

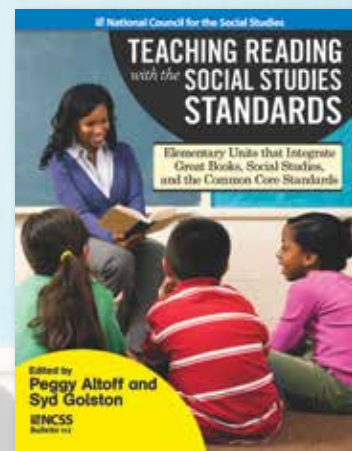
The class activities recommended in this book for each grade level allow teachers to accomplish the following objectives:

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2. Achieve specific objectives outlined in the Common Core Standards for Reading Literature (as well as selected other Common Core Standards)

This book's opening chapters lay the groundwork for the effective teaching of standards-based social studies through the use of literature. Most of the volume consists of reviews and

annotations of outstanding children's books for the elementary grades. The contributors examine seven outstanding children's books in depth (one for each grade from pre-K through 5) and recommend scores of other suitable books.

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