

# AP Human Geography and Success on the AP Test

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We have taught AP Human Geography since 2004 with the belief that a project-based approach can supplement the teaching of that course. We visualize our course as an essential tool for students to truly understand how geography touches all elements of their daily lives as twenty-first century learners.



Teachers Nate Newhalfen (left) and John Roncone (right) discuss a student group poster project that examines two McDonald's franchises in a study of American culture and globalization for AP Human Geography, September 2013. (Photo by Joe Sanchez)

The course is a staple AP offering at our school, Barrington High School, located in an affluent suburb with a large number of college-bound students, northwest of Chicago. Its boundaries are inclusive of six communities, one of which contributes a small percentage of Hispanic students to the overall school population. A closer breakdown of the student population would show that the student population is approximately 85 percent Caucasian, 12 percent Hispanic, and 1 to 2 percent African American. A small percentage of Barrington students qualify for free and reduced services provided by the state, and the school curriculum includes a very comprehensive ELL program across all subject areas, including social studies.

Originally, the AP Human Geography course was popular mainly among seniors, but with its success, in recent years, it has become a great introductory course for sophomores who will pursue other AP courses later in high school. In its first year, we had four sections of AP Human Geography and 80 students. We now fluctuate between four and six sections each year with numbers ranging between 110 and 160 students.

When we attended the 2006 NCSS Conference in Washington, D.C., we were struck by the idea that we could use daily activities or even longer projects to enhance our curriculum. Upon our return, we began to plan for the next year. The project-based method has since become a staple of

our approach and our AP scores now consistently hover at or above 90 percent (with a score of 3 or above). Last year, our student average on the national exam was slightly higher than 4.0 cumulative. We do not offer that statistic to say that our approach is the only approach, but rather that a teacher can break away from the text to make real-world connections and still possess the time to cover the information necessary for a student to score well on the AP exam.

We believe that educators make the subject more interesting and relevant when students make real-world connections. In our case, projects have become a well-known and respected part of our course. We take projects related to ideas such as migration, religion, ethnicity, development, and urban patterns to provide students with a real chance to understand how geography directly connects to their lives. The famed educator John Dewey said that history and geography together represented a link between the natural and social sciences.<sup>1</sup> The project approach helps students “experience” geography while learning it.

From the beginning of the year, we use the projects to put the students in touch with the subject matter. We open the year with the McDonald’s Project, which is connected to our study of globalization. The students, who work in pairs or groups of three, must visit two or three McDonald’s franchises in the area to do a brief study of the architecture, the location (site and situation) and the menu offerings. Almost all of the students have visited a fast-food restaurant in their lives, and some of them have visited these restaurants outside of the United States. By visiting the individual restaurants, they get to see both how uniform and how locally-specific, such a restaurant can be. It reinforces the idea that they must think about the nature and perspective of human geography, which is a theme in our teaching of the course. It is possible that they will see a variance

in some capacity that might relate to the local demands of a particular area.

The students must then compile their information into a collaborative poster project that requires them to address the primary questions and put the responses onto the poster. This offers students the chance to be creative and informative at the same time. Also, each student is asked to write an individual essay about how McDonald’s gives them an insight into both American culture and globalization.

Our textbook, *Introduction to Human Geography*, 9th ed., by James Rubenstein, uses a theme of globalization and local diversity as a way for students to see the differences in how people around the world live. Rubenstein effectively presents the idea that students need to develop a way of “thinking geographically.”<sup>2</sup> This concept helps students shift from viewing everything as historians would and instead move toward a more geographical perspective. Students use that perspective to focus their learning throughout the year. After the AP test, we finish the year with a project that brings together all of the major themes of the year.

The text plays a major role in the day-to-day management of the course but we always use numerous outside readings from a variety of sources to keep the material both interesting and current. The Rubenstein text, which we supplement with numerous publications that are part of our school’s electronic network, including *The Economist* and *The World and I*, among others, has been a very effective resource over the years because it has provided a framework for the units of study and the focus of the course. It gives the students a sturdy background upon which we can bring in additional information. We give a chapter test on each of the 14 chapters in the Rubenstein text. The first six chapters are completed in the first semester and the remaining chapters in the second semester. There are three larger projects in the first semes-

ter with another three in the second semester. We like to believe that our students will “see the world differently” after completing their study of human geography. We believe that they do so based on the number of students who begin to notice the world around them (site, situation, location) in connection to people, places, religion, language, ethnicity, services, and variables such as rural/urban breakdown.

Both during the year and after completing the class, students regularly stop by and tell us how the course connects to their daily lives.

Many of our students, who travel both domestically and internationally, make the connection to local diversity by the food, dress, and accents they hear while traveling. Others note the location of churches in relation to the central business district; sometimes, it’s the location of businesses such as McDonald’s, Burger King, or Subway that connect them to globalization. Lastly, but very important in our view, they begin to really hone in on the actual location of their own high school in relation to the rest of the town. With that ability in hand, we think that students are better able to see their place in the world and to better understand the world around them. When that comprehension is combined with the discussions we have regarding contemporary geographic tools (Mapquest, iPhone, etc.), the result is a student who has really learned about the subject matter and one who can effectively combine that outside knowledge with curricular content on a national exam.

Our AP focus is aided by the fact that students are held to the readings through graded note-taking or even smaller written responses that assist them in preparation for an assessment but also keep students in touch with the class’s everyday curriculum. Additionally, our students build reading and writing skills (for both everyday and AP purposes) by identifying, analyzing, and explaining various pri-

mary sources or by careful analysis of tables, charts, and graphs that can be used to strengthen reading skills and written analysis. They can also reconnect students to our study by pinpointing the geographic significance of a particular location. It promotes a greater understanding and it also promotes a commitment to global learning that will result in the creation of global citizens upon graduation. We create enduring understandings by learning about where we live and why we live there.

In turn, we create a classroom environment that promotes active learning and also the skills needed to achieve success on the AP test each May. As the students put together a list of key vocabulary words from each chapter and also a list of major concepts from each chapter to remember, they are

building a study guide that will help them when they start to review for the test in the second semester. Also, we use previously released exam questions to show the students the structure and form of an AP-type question. Additionally, we inform students that they should look into purchasing a commercially produced AP review book to help them put together the most comprehensive review of each chapter. Such a review book will give them the extra information that may not have been covered in class or that is covered in greater depth by other prominent textbooks used around the country.

Over the past eight years, the project-based approach has enhanced our day-to-day teaching of this course and also helped students to become better students of geography, more adept

for learning situations they may see in the future, and better prepared for the writing and reasoning that will be a necessary requirement in May. 🌐

#### Notes

1. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1916): 255,
2. James M. Rubenstein, *The Cultural Landscape: An Introduction to Human Geography*, 9th ed. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2008): 2-6

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# KILLING KENNEDY



A global television event to premiere November 10th on the *National Geographic Channel* to mark the 50th anniversary of the Kennedy assassination. Starring:

Rob Lowe (John F. Kennedy),  
Will Rothhaar (Lee Harvey Oswald),  
with Michelle Trachtenberg (Marina Oswald),  
and Ginnifer Goodwin (Jackie Kennedy).

A series of free webinars on strategies and resources for teaching about this historic event and time will be available on the following dates:

**Tuesday, Oct. 29 | Monday, Nov. 4**  
**Wednesday, Nov. 13**



For more information visit [NatGeoEd.org/Kennedy-NCSS](http://NatGeoEd.org/Kennedy-NCSS).