

Coaching Strategies for AP: Building a Successful AP European History Program

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The October 2013 special issue of *Social Education* dealt with almost all AP social studies subjects, but omitted AP European History. This is one of the most fascinating AP subjects for students and teachers alike. I would like to share my experiences since I was given the responsibility of building our school's Advanced Placement European History program from scratch seven years ago. A nationwide trend of offering Advanced Placement courses was gaining momentum, and my high school, Glenbard West in suburban Chicago, was eager to meet the challenge. This proved to be an opportunity that would dramatically change my teaching career.

When I was asked to build the school's AP European History program, I was fortunate to have a full year to plan for this exciting but somewhat intimidating challenge. I took advantage of it by taking part in several College Board workshops. I also worked to develop professional relationships with local experts. Fortunately several of those experts were in my Social Studies Department at Glenbard West. Although none of them had taught AP European History, their guidance was very helpful. I also leaned on local expert Chris Freiler from nearby Hinsdale Central High School. Freiler's review book is part of the *AP Achiever* series frequently used by students to prepare for the exams. As a former head baseball coach, I understood the idea of owning something and being held responsible for its success. Drawing on my experiences as a coach would prove invaluable in the AP classroom.

Many parallels exist between quality coaches and quality classroom teachers—especially AP teachers, who often feel the pressure to produce positive test results. Having developed a series of techniques and strategies for building a team-oriented winning culture on the field, I adapted those methods to work in the AP classroom. Although there is no substitute for having the core fundamentals in place when teaching an AP class, the use of the strategies can help develop a positive team culture inside the classroom.

New Territory

I was very clear with the first group of AP students I worked with that we were involved in a groundbreaking experience. It was important for the students to feel that they were participating in the school's academic history. There was some opposition to the school's efforts

to develop more AP courses and encourage a larger portion of the student body to take them. Many suggested that AP courses were simply too difficult for high school sophomores to handle, so I used that opposition to strengthen the pioneering spirit of my students, who thrived under the challenge.

Set High Expectations

Clearly defined and enforced standards helped students buy into the class. I was straightforward with my students, telling them that taking a college-level class demanded a college-level investment. When I was a coach, I noticed that the more time and effort a team put forth, the more difficult it was for them to accept poor performance. That same idea held true in the classroom. By demanding a high level of work, I developed a group that would not easily give in when they encountered a roadblock.

I have found that a number of approaches and techniques must be used to teach the wide variety of learners I have in class. I like to think of my class as an opportunity to tell a "story" each day. To properly tell the story of European history in the modern era, students need to come to class prepared to join the conversation. Students are required



Glenbard West sophomores work on thesis statements about industrialization in their AP European History class, January 2014

(Photo by Jim Fornaciari).

to complete reading assignments in advance. These reading assignments are often enhanced by supplemental guided reading questions. Having completed these assignments, students are prepared to join our story-telling discussion. I lead these classroom discussions by using a variety of critical thinking questions. Examples of these questions include:

- If Luther had lived in France or Spain the reform movement would have spread at a more rapid pace. Discuss.
- Did the Catholic and Protestant churches retard or foster scientific investigation? Explain.
- Analyze the causes of the population explosion in the eighteenth century? What were some of the new social challenges posed by population growth?
- Discuss and compare the contributions made to the thought of the Enlightenment by (a) Montesquieu; (b) Voltaire; (c) Rousseau.
- Why did the Socialist movement not achieve its goals in Western Europe prior to World War I?

- Compare and contrast fascism in Italy with Nazism in Germany. What were the similarities and what were the differences between the two regimes?

These discussions are a far cry from the “teacher centered lecture” used in the past. Student thinking and interaction are a vital player in the successful classroom.

Although most of the topics covered in European history garner strong interest from students, I have found that several are consistent class favorites. Among these topics are the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, and the Cold War. What students enjoy most is applying lessons learned in earlier units to current topics of study. For example, understanding the use of reason applied by Newton and his associates will help a student better understand the thoughts and works of Montesquieu. Once students can grasp the lessons of Enlightenment philosophers such as Montesquieu, they can better understand the causes of the French Revolution. European history is a story that is best taught and studied by making

connections between important themes rather than isolating each unit with little or no connection to past or future study. Students who can quickly begin to make these important connections are often at an advantage as the course unfolds.

Despite my strongest efforts, some topics seem to be difficult for a large number of students. The more difficult topics include the study of nineteenth-century Romantics as well as the study of post-World War II decolonization. As a strategy for helping my students better understand Romantic writers, I like to introduce a series of British Punk Rock icons of the late 1970s. These punk rock bands were reacting violently to the conservative agenda of the Thatcher administration. The angry punk rock artist, despite living more than a century later, was very similar to the Romantic poet. Both groups were reacting with great emotion. The nineteenth-century poet embraced emotion rather than reason. The introduction of a band like the Clash seems to enable students to gain a better understanding of the thoughts of Victor Hugo. Making these types of con-

nections to the lives of our current students can help them better understand and appreciate very difficult topics.

One of the principal problems in studying the decolonization process is that students can get caught in a maze of information overload if they try to study each colony and its efforts to gain independence from its European power. Knowing the particular circumstances and dates of independence is less important for students than an understanding of the forces that helped encourage or discourage the decolonization process. One approach that can help achieve this is to compare different approaches by different European countries. Why, for example, were the French slower than the British in pursuing the decolonization process? Was it, as some historians suggest, because their national image had been damaged by their failures during World War II and their leaders believed that they should make every effort to maintain their colonies in order to remain important on the new post-war international stage? In this view, the British, having been more successful in their war effort, were more self-confident and willing to make the adjustments necessary to enter the post-colonial era. Another perspective would be that the French and British had followed different colonial policies that meant that France viewed its colonies as more integral to the destiny of France than Britain viewed its colonies as essential to its future international role. To investigate these analyses, students can engage in detailed studies comparing French policies in Vietnam and Algeria with British policies in India and African colonies where there were British settlers. This type of detailed analysis is more useful for students than an attempt to study every European nation and its colonies.

Throughout the year, students spend a great deal of their time studying, writing, and researching European history. They have developed a common bond while struggling through difficult exams and strenuous writing assignments. When students return from spring vacation

before the May exam, we begin a series of voluntary evening review sessions. The participation in those sessions has been outstanding, which is a testament to the commitment students had made to the course. By that point, students have invested far too much to lose sight of the goal.

During my coaching career, I wanted to attract the best possible players, but I understood that some gifted athletes might not come out for baseball because they weren't willing to make the required commitment. As the European history course developed, I wondered how a course with such high expectations could continue to attract enough students to maintain itself. Students had a lot of choices when it came to course selection, and many were simply not as rigorous as the European History AP course was shaping up to be. Knowing that, I tried to create a culture in which students felt they were important to the class. Creating that type of culture was just as valuable as my understanding of the content itself.

Developing Positive Relationships

As a coach, I worked hard to find out as much as possible about my players and their lives away from baseball. That kind of connection with a struggling player could help me help him be more comfortable on the field. Personal connections are even more important in the classroom. Students appreciate receiving congratulations for a recent victory in a golf match or recognition for excelling in a Model United Nations competition. Small connections take very little time but can pay tremendous dividends in developing a positive teacher-student relationship, which in turn fosters a positive classroom climate.

Teachers can continue positive relationship development by allowing students a glimpse of their lives outside the classroom. A simple mention of going to a game over the weekend or detailing an interesting travel experience helps students better understand and appreciate their teachers. When discussing my life

outside the classroom, I am willing to display a sense of humor. I have found that having the confidence to laugh at myself from time to time helps my students see me not simply as a teacher, but as a human being.

Celebrate Student Success

Another way to attract quality students to a rigorous AP class is by celebrating student success. Student recognition can come both formally and informally. After the first year, several students helped create a permanent classroom display titled "European History AP Hall of Fame." The plan was to formally recognize students who completed the course and sat for the national exam. Each year, a new set of students want their names added to that list.

Another form of recognition that inspires and encourages students is naming a "Student of the Unit." It is easy for even the strongest students to get a little discouraged in a fast-paced AP environment, and periodic recognition can go a long way.

Another form of student recognition can be accomplished through the creation of a course newsletter. This past fall several of my students from each class eagerly took on the project. The newsletter is designed to inform parents about important class events such as upcoming units and projects. It is also used to highlight and celebrate student success stories. Each quarter these newsletters are sent via e-mail to parents and interested followers. Because most of my parents can be considered "technology immigrants," they also appreciate a hard copy of the newsletter being sent home.

Involve Parents in the Process

When I was coaching, I found that parents could be tremendous assets. The most important contribution a parent can make to the success of an AP classroom is to provide the needed encouragement and support at home, but to do that, they must understand the nature and objectives of the course. Teachers must take advantage of the open house program at

the outset of the school year to inform parents about the value of taking an AP course—not only to stress the benefits of obtaining college credit but also to emphasize the tremendous benefits students receive by embracing the challenge of such a course.

During the open house, teachers should outline the important aspects of the course, such as the testing schedule, homework, and writing requirements. It is essential that teachers clearly discuss the time and effort required for students to be successful in the course. Failing to be up-front and honest with parents about the expectations will create potential issues during the school year, but enlisting parental support at the beginning of the year cultivates more investors in the course. Once parents are on board, they can offer valuable encouragement at home.

I have found it helpful to provide parents with a PowerPoint presentation detailing thoughts on how they can help their children succeed in AP European History. The presentation answers questions about the course and the school's AP program that were not addressed during open house. It also suggests ways that parents can better partner with their children for academic success.

Although open house meetings are typically short, the teacher must stress that any AP course will be a challenge and that at times parents might think that it is too much for their children. The teacher should let the parents know that this kind of reaction is not uncommon but, in the long run, is possibly not the most helpful. Just as a coach needs parents to speak positively at the dinner table after a difficult loss, it is even more important to the mission of the classroom teacher for parents to speak positively about the course. Any kind of negative talk about the course that is initiated by the parents can be counterproductive. Early in the school year, students are likely to struggle with the rigor of what in most cases is their first college-level course. Naturally, parents are surprised and want to protect them. For parents

to be an asset, the teacher must be clear about the course and its many benefits. Once a teacher has done that, parents usually will be supportive and encourage their children to work hard.

Another important way for teachers to develop the necessary support from parents is to stay in touch with them throughout the school year. If a student gets off to a poor start early in the school year, the teacher must call to discuss the issue. Although parents understandably do not enjoy such calls, in the long run, they will become more supportive of the course. Most parents will appreciate the teacher's efforts to include them in their children's education, and they will be eager to develop a plan for improvement.

Communicating with families is an important part of a teacher's professional responsibilities.¹ Teachers should not limit their phone conversations to the parents of struggling students. I have found great benefit in making positive phone calls to parents after observing a student success. By taking the time to contact parents and offer positive feedback, a teacher can develop important relationships that will pay great dividends. The parents will sense that they are dealing with an invested professional who genuinely cares about their children's well being. If those parents were not sold initially on the course and its rigor, they will be for the rest of the school year.

Parental communications also strengthen important relationships inside the classroom. Although high school students are years removed from elementary school, they still appreciate the positive recognition of a well-respected teacher. By taking a few minutes every week to call or e-mail parents, a teacher will develop a reputation in the school and around the community for praising academic success. What a great way for a teacher to get "buy in" from parents and students!

Developing Valuable Alumni Connections

This past spring, as students began preparing for the May examination, I worked

to develop a "mini" AP European History Alumni Association. I thought it might be possible to use former students as a source of both knowledge and motivation at a critical point in the journey of the current AP students. With a few simple steps, teachers can make use of this motivational tool.

In early March, I reached out to a large number of my former European history students who have gone on to college, graduate school and in some cases into their professional careers. In most cases, I was able to contact this group through e-mail, but teachers can also use a variety of social media to make contact with alums. Knowing the kind of graduate to whom I was reaching out, I understood that they were very busy and could not devote a great deal of time to my request. Taking that into consideration, I only asked for two simple things. First, I wanted them to reflect on the grind of the AP review process and offer one important piece of advice. I then asked them to consider the importance of taking a rigorous course load in high school and its impact on their college success. I was hoping for a few solid responses that perhaps could benefit my current students. I should have known better. Inside a week, my mailbox was overflowing with outstanding responses from our "mini AP European History Alumni Association."

I began to display one response per day as we worked through the final two months of the year. Even the talented group of kids that I have the pleasure to work with can question themselves as we begin to make that all-important stretch run toward the national exam. Just when a few of the students might have doubted their ability to overcome the challenges a difficult class can present, they were introduced to a group of students that went through those same challenges just a few years before. Although most of my current students had never met the alumni, they managed to connect with them in a very special way.

The first connection came through some sage advice on getting through the exam. I was pleased that the majority of

the alumni encouraged things such as;

- Attendance at review session
- Developing a study schedule for at home work
- Purchasing and using a review book
- Forming a study group

The vast majority of the alumni would conclude their first task with an encouraging comment. These kinds of comments meant a great deal to my current students.

I was even more pleased with the results and the mileage gained from the second request I gave our alumni. I was able to provide many inspirational stories shared by our alumni. My students were inspired by the great alumni success stories being shared on a daily basis. One of the letters might be written by a student busy preparing for the LSAT, while another took the time to write between job interviews. Many arrived from students studying abroad in Europe or Asia. The consistent message each of the alumni conveyed was that by taking challenging courses while in high school they were more prepared and eager for the fantastic opportunities that university life would offer. I was no longer the one telling them that by taking tough classes they would receive ben-

efits in the future. My students were now connecting with exciting young people who fought through this same experience just a few years before. Although I was pleased that the alums offered some valuable advice on how to conquer the exam, I was most impressed with their message that by taking a class like AP European History, students will gain great personal confidence and motivation moving forward in their lives.

As we celebrated the end of a great year, I had a chance to de-brief students and get their honest reaction to our strategies and methods. It was during this de-briefing process that I realized how powerful our alumni connections were to my students. Our AP European History Alumni Association will continue to grow. It will be a pleasure to continue sharing the stories of our first group of respondents and add additional stories over the next couple of years. I was also pleased to learn that many of my students reached out to alumni to set up college visits for the coming summer and fall. Establishing these kinds of alumni connections for your students can be a valuable tool for teachers of many subjects and age levels.

Our Results

When I became a head coach, I understood that scores and records would be

closely scrutinized. I welcomed that challenge. When I became an AP teacher, that same feeling of competitive pride helped drive me to create a unique team climate in my classroom. Students have “bought in” to that team concept, helping to produce some impressive results. From 2007-2008 through 2012-2013 (6 years of data), 327 students have sat for the exam. Of the 300 plus students that have taken the test, 47 percent have scored 5’s, while the group produced an average score of 4.22. Naturally, students leave the experience armed with great confidence and are ready for more AP options. Clearly, these results could not have been achieved in a cold environment. Teachers can develop their own unique classroom environments without having to sacrifice academic excellence. 🌟

Note

1. Charlotte Danielson, *Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1996).

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ANOTHER LOOK AT AP *from page 39*

8. The College Board makes this claim often, and in many places. For example, citing its own research, the College Board says, “a 2008 study found that AP students had better four-year graduation rates than those who did not take AP.” Cited in “AP and the Cost of College” (New York: The College Board, 2009), <http://professionals.collegeboard.com/profdownload/ap-exam-promo-flyer-2009.pdf>.
9. Chrys Dougherty, Lynn Mellor, and Shuling Jian, “The Relationship between Advanced Placement and College Graduation,” National Center for Educational Accountability.
10. Kristin Klopfenstein and M. Kathleen Thomas, “The Link Between Advanced Placement Experience and Early College Success,” *Southern Economic Journal* 75, no. 3 (January 2009): 873-891.
11. These conclusions are drawn from two studies: Dougherty, Mellor, and Jian, (2006), and Chrys Dougherty and Lynn Mellor, “Preparing Students for Advanced Placement: It’s a Prek-12 Issue” in

AP: A Critical Examination of the Advanced Placement Program, eds. P.M. Sadler, G. Sonnett, R.H. Tai, and Kristin Klopfenstein (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Education Press, 2010), 119–137.

12. It provides more income than all the College Board’s other income streams combined (SAT, etc.).
13. For documentation of the College Board’s (and specifically Trevor Packer, the College Board’s VP for AP) use of the term “New AP,” see Christopher Drew, “Rethinking Advanced Placement,” *The New York Times*, www.nytimes.com/2011/01/09/education/edlife/09ap-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.
14. National Center for Educational Achievement, “The Advanced Placement Exam Benefits Mainly Well-Prepared Students Who Pass AP Exams” (NCEA/ACT: Austin, Tex., 2010).
15. This data can be obtained from the 2012 data page on the College Board website: <http://research.collegeboard.org/programs/ap/data/archived/2012>.
16. Alexandra Tilsley, “Advanced Placement, not Credit,” *Inside Higher Ed*, www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/01/18/dartmouth-end-use-advanced-placement-scores-credit.
17. It is very hard to find information for this change

on the College Board website (which is why I used the word “quietly”) ... but on the AP World History exam, this lessening of choices has taken place. I got this information from several AP World History readers.

18. *9th Annual AP Report to the Nation*, <http://apreport.collegeboard.org/download-press-center>
19. Chrys Dougherty offers practical steps for districts to take in this direction. Chrys Dougherty, *Using the Right Data to Determine if High School Interventions are Working to Prepare Students for College and Careers* (Washington, D.C.: National High School Center, 2010).

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