

Teaching for Historical Understanding in the Advanced Placement Program: A Case Study

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IN THE UNITED STATES, there is very little consensus about what the teaching of history in K-12 classrooms should look like. Over the past two decades, many states and school districts have created content standards and standardized tests to guide and assess students' learning of history. These documents typically represent one view on the goal of history education—the memorization of facts about the past. In many cases, mandated history assessments advance a view of history intended to inspire patriotic commitment and a common national identity.¹

An alternative perspective on the purpose of history education—one promoted by the National Center for History in Schools—focuses on the importance of fostering students' historical understanding.² According to Peter Seixas, historical understanding has six key elements, each of which are worthy of attention in the classroom: 1) determining historical significance, 2) considering epistemology and evaluating evidence, 3) assessing continuity and change, 4) judging progress and decline, 5) displaying empathy and moral judgment, and 6) assigning historical agency.³ Young learners have the opportunity to develop and display historical understanding when they are given the chance to formulate their own questions about the past, to examine related historical evidence, and to create historical narratives and arguments of their own. Students should also be encouraged to analyze and evaluate historical narratives

created by others. Scholars contend that history education focused on the development of historical understanding can prepare students to engage effectively in democratic societies by providing the understanding and skills necessary to demonstrate tolerance, display empathy, and engage in deliberation.⁴

Despite the compelling nature of such claims, research suggests that teachers who promote historical understanding in their classrooms are exceptions rather than the norm. History education in K-12 classrooms most commonly takes the form of rote memorization of dates, events, and people.⁵ Concerns about content coverage and classroom control dominate history teachers' instructional decision making.⁶ Even teachers who possess a sophisticated understanding of the interpretive nature of history and a belief that the subject should be taught through inquiry exercises, problem solving activities, debate, discussion, and cooperative learning, often adopt a traditional style of direct instruction and portray history as a fixed body of knowledge.⁷ Data from the 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in U.S. History demonstrates that lecture remains the dominant form of instruction; eighty-three percent of 8th-grade students surveyed had teachers who lecture almost every day or once or twice a week. Textbooks continue to be the primary instructional tool used. Seventy-three percent of 8th-grade students and 72% of 12th-grade students reported reading material from a textbook almost every day or once or twice a week. Conversely, primary sources, such as letters, diaries, or essays by historical people, are used much less frequently—every day or once or twice a week by 17% of 8th and 12th grade students. A study conducted by David Hicks, Peter Doolittle, and John Lee found that even when primary sources are used by history teachers, they are often employed to teach isolated factual knowledge rather than to promote historical understanding.⁸

Less is known about the ways in which Advanced Placement (AP) history teachers respond to the unique demands of the AP program. According to Mary Beth Bruce, AP history teachers “are expected to teach twice as much content and skills” as their non-AP peers and typically have less time in which to do so when the AP exam is administered during the first week of May.⁹ Jonathan Chu suggests that because of these and other pressures, many AP teachers focus heavily on the test, drilling students with previous exam questions and imposing “on students what authorities believe to be the right answers.”¹⁰ Echoing this claim, Maxine Lurie argues that AP history students learn to answer particular questions rather than “to think historically, use primary source documents, and write coherently.”¹¹ Pamela Paek and her fellow researchers surveyed 1,219 AP U.S. History teachers and found that the participating teachers

most commonly chose lecture and teacher-led, whole-group discussions as instructional methods. These teachers also relied most heavily on multiple-choice and short-answer assessments and made frequent use of numerical or letter grades to give feedback to students. Some of the surveyed teachers expressed the belief that these practices are not reflective of current thinking on how students learn. However, most of the teachers claimed that the demands of preparing students for the AP exam forced them to rely on instructional strategies that allowed them to cover a great deal of material efficiently.¹²

At the same time, several anecdotal reports and case studies in exemplary history classrooms—both within and outside of the AP program—demonstrate that some teachers pursue meaningful goals for their students.¹³ S. G. Grant calls such teachers “ambitious.” He claims that ambitious teachers possess: a) strong subject matter knowledge and well-established beliefs about history’s “potential to enrich their students’ lives,” b) understanding of their students’ lives, concerns, ways of thinking, and capabilities, and c) the knowledge and skills to pursue their aims for students even in environments that may not reward their efforts.¹⁴ The small but growing collection of research on ambitious teaching in history classrooms offers valuable insight into the kind of teaching that is possible in schools under real or perceived constraints. However, as Jill Gradwell and S. G. Grant point out, more descriptive cases of ambitious teachers and teaching are needed in order to “provide a more nuanced understanding of what it means to teach history in schools today.”¹⁵ The study reported on here responds to this call by examining ambitious history teaching within the AP program, a context that has received insufficient research attention to date. Toward this end, the following research question was devised:

What instructional goals related to historical understanding does an AP European History teacher articulate and pursue?

Study Participant and Context

I purposefully selected Abigail Gable to be the subject of this case study for two main reasons: a) she has a reputation for engaging her students in primary source work and for organizing her instruction around powerful themes and b) 85% of her AP students typically score a three or higher on the AP exam—outperforming national averages. Gable is a white female in her late thirties with fifteen years of teaching experience. As an undergraduate, she majored in both history and art history. She then completed her Master of Arts in Teaching for Social Studies—a degree that required graduate work in both education and the social sciences. In the various teaching positions she has held, Gable has taught European

history, Asian history, U.S. government, ancient and modern world history, and study skills.

Gable teaches at Haverhill High School, a rural school in a large state on the eastern seaboard. At the time of this study, Haverhill's student population consisted of approximately 1,060 students—91% white, 3% black, 2% Hispanic, and 4% other minorities. While these students represent a range of social and economic backgrounds, a majority of the young people who attend Haverhill come from upper-middle-class homes with at least one, and usually both, parents having a college degree. When this project was conducted, four sections of AP European History—all taught by Gable—were offered at Haverhill. Gable was in her sixth year of teaching this AP course. As there were no entrance requirements for the course, the students in the various sections represented a range of academic ability. Over the course of five months, I conducted twenty-nine hours of observation in Gable's second period class, made up of ten female and nine male sophomores. During all observations, I took detailed, electronic field notes and obtained copies of all instructional materials distributed to students. I also conducted a total of four interviews with Gable throughout this period of observation.

Promoting Historical Understanding

A careful examination of Gable's goals for her students reveals that she is heavily focused on cultivating students' historical understanding. In this section, I will discuss how she articulates and pursues instructional goals that are related to six elements of historical understanding.

Determining Historical Significance

Concern with historical significance permeates Gable's instruction. One of her primary goals for students is that they learn to see "the relevance or importance" of European history. Toward this end, she regularly seeks to draw attention to apparent relationships between the historic content of her course and the present. In some cases, she does this by highlighting the historical roots of a present-day perspective, practice, or circumstance: "I like to see them say, 'Oh, that's why that is the way it is.' They start to see the foundations that history has created that we then reap the benefits of or the consequences of" (interview, 10 September 2009). When discussing Catholic reforms made in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, Gable provided examples of how these reforms might be seen in the modern-day Catholic Church. Later, she identified procedures followed by the House of Representatives that have their origin in the establishment of the English House of Commons. At the beginning of a unit on the Industrial

Revolution, she told her students, “Keep your eyes on the middle class as a significant force. . . . You are going to see a lot of what we still see people valuing, promoting, and hoping for in our society.” Through their study of the Industrial Revolution, Gable wants students to see the evolution of an idea that they are likely to encounter in the present:

They are going to start seeing. . . the idea of the middle class being the goal, that supporting the middle class is the key to strength within a society as opposed to the nobility. I mean you saw it so much in the rhetoric of the last election. Help the middle class. Grow the middle class. Support the middle class. It really begins with urbanization and the move to an industrial economy (interview, 14 January 2010).

In another lesson, Gable asked her students, “What is the job of a good government?” When students responded with claims about representation and protection, she explained to them that such expectations first became popular in Europe in the early 19th century, partially in response to some of the changes brought on by industrialization. “This is a new role for government that we are going to see emerge in the next hundred years,” she explained. With claims of this sort, Gable connects historical content to the present and thereby helps students assign importance to that content.

Another way that Gable draws relationships between the past and present is through analogy. She wants her students to see that “things that happen in the past often follow trends and patterns that you can see similarities to in the present” (interview, 11 March 2010). When discussing the desire for a balance of power at the Congress of Vienna, she drew a parallel to modern-day concerns about power relationships in light of the existence of a single super power. In a lecture on the commercial revolution, Gable pointed out that tariffs present many of the same advantages and disadvantages today as they did in the 16th century:

We are seeing a lot of emphasis now on tariffs, because our economy is so vulnerable. We just levied a tariff on glossy paper and rubber tires against China. And China is peeved, because our economic relationship with them is based on a volume of goods. We are trying to increase that volume and that is making them upset. We have such a staggeringly high unemployment rate that we are going back to a more active government involvement in those types of trading decisions.

Gable makes these types of analogies because she wants her students “to get that sense of the past, so they recognize opportunities [and] pitfalls” in the present (interview, 10 September 2009). At times, she prompts students to make the connections for themselves. During a whole-class discussion on Napoleon, she asked students, “Do you think that there are societies or places that are going through this type of debate, this type of

struggle? Napoleon vs. chaos? Is this a dilemma that still faces people today?” By regularly establishing relationships between the past and the present, Gable invites her students to consider the significance of different aspects of history.

Considering Epistemology and Evaluating Evidence

Throughout her course, Gable structures frequent opportunities for her students to consider the nature of historical knowledge. She does this, in part, by providing a wide variety of primary sources—drawings, engravings, paintings, cartoons, photos, essays, first-hand accounts, and statistical records—and challenging students to use these sources to make historical claims. Part of what motivates her to engage students in this type of primary source work is the AP exam they will take at the end of the year:

The [AP] test is very rich. The document-based question which asks you to act as a historian in a mini setting is key to that exam. . . . Knowing that they have to be able to deal with twelve documents they have never seen in a testing situation, gives us the *raison d'être* to use the documents (interview, 10 September 2009).

Gable claims that her purpose in asking students to examine primary source documents is “to help them understand historical context, perspective, bias,” and to develop “historical habits of mind” (interview, 10 September 2009). Such habits, to her understanding, include the ability to “think critically and evaluate and balance and look for corroboration as well as counter examples to give a balanced review” (interview, 10 September 2009). So when her students read several accounts of factory conditions in 18th-century England, she asked them to “describe the conflicting nature” of the sources and to “use point of view to analyze the reason for these differences.” With these sorts of prompts, Gable has students consider how historical evidence might reasonably be used to construct arguments about the past.

Gable further promotes her students’ understanding of the interpretive nature of history by requiring them to analyze historical claims made by others. On the first day of class, she handed out excerpts of two very different accounts of the Middle Ages. After modeling the process of evaluating the two accounts, she told students, “I love these sources because they stress two important divergent perspectives. And they point to the importance of sources.” In another class, she required her students to read and discuss two scholarly articles on Napoleon. These articles were purposefully chosen for students “to show them that two or three historians take a very different perspective” (interview, 10 September 2009). Gable challenges her students to critique these historical arguments with questions

such as “What is the thesis? What evidence is used to support it? Do you agree with the thesis? What other evidence would you use to support it?” (interview, 14 January 2010).

Even in her lectures, Gable finds ways to emphasize that history is interpretive. She uses phrases such as “some historians suggest” or draws attention to aspects of the past that historians debate—how widely read Machiavelli was in his time, why Protestant nations experienced economic success, etc. Such comments help students understand that historical knowledge is constructed and continually re-evaluated. Gable invests considerable time and effort to stay current on scholarship related to the content of her course. She claimed, “I am literally researching every night before class even though I have been teaching it for six years—articles, journals, books that pile up on the bookshelf” (interview, 10 September 2009). This research allows her to introduce her students to different historical interpretations and arguments on a regular basis.

Assessing Continuity and Change

The concepts of continuity and change receive a great deal of attention in Gable’s classroom. In teaching about the major events, movements, and trends of European history, she regularly seizes opportunities to expand students’ understanding of the nature of historical change. When asked about her goals for a unit on the Protestant Reformation, she responded:

I want them to begin to see the complexities of cause and effect—that you can’t just think theological conflict led to the Reformation and the splitting of Christendom—the idea that multiple factors cause an event and then an event has unexpected consequences. So politics leads into the Reformation and political and social changes come from it. Turning points and major periods of change have multiple causes and multiple effects (interview, 1 October 2009).

Similarly, she began her unit on the Industrial Revolution by saying, “The Industrial Revolution is an economic revolution...but the reason it is a true revolution is because it has incredible implications down the road for political and social change and for geopolitical relationships.” One of her primary objectives for students in this unit was “getting them very comfortable with recognizing and articulating social and economic change, because those are parts of history that they are less familiar with” (interview, 14 January 2010).

Gable also wants students to grasp “the idea that there is change going on, but it never affects everybody” (interview, 14 January 2010). In other words, she wants students to understand the limitations of historical change and to avoid thinking and writing about it in overly simplistic terms. In a lesson on the rise of European nation-states, she told students:

One of the things we have to get comfortable with is not talking in absolute extremes. We are not going from full-on feudalism to strong modern nation-states where rulers have absolute, total power! We are talking about a slow, subtle decline in feudalism, where nobles changed the kind of power and authority they have and kings amass more power. And people begin to see themselves as English and French, but also still from a particular province or area. So it is a slow transition.

One of the multiple-choice items on her midterm exam read, “The vast majority of people in 19th-century Europe were _____.” Gable explained that, having just finished studying the Industrial Revolution, it was tempting for students to complete the sentence by saying “urban workers.” However, in order to finish the statement correctly, students had to think about the varying levels of impact the Industrial Revolution had all over the continent.

It is Gable’s belief that through the study of history, students can gain a better understanding of the manner in which change is generated or prevented. This, for example, was how she justified the time she devotes to studying the revolutions of 1848: “Why are we spending three days on a year without permanent change? Because you need to understand that most revolutions are unsuccessful. While we tend to study the American Revolution and think that revolutions are great, really it is death and destruction with very little change” (interview, 10 September 2009). When introducing this topic to her students, she told them:

The big idea to keep in mind is just how difficult large-scale, systemic structural change is to make. As you follow international events over the next couple of months, be thinking about that when you look at efforts to rebuild stable states in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan....Even when people agree that something isn’t working, it is very difficult to create a new stable structure that allows for change.

As she detailed the events of several 19th-century revolutions, Gable pointed out key points in political movements when different factions disagreed on goals or methods and therefore failed to bring about change. Her attention to patterns of this sort seems aimed at helping students make sense of movements for change in the past and the present.

Judging Progress and Decline

Along with the repeated attention she gives to the complexity of historical cause and effect, Gable at times invites her students to evaluate the extent to which a historical event or trend represents progress or decline. She does this by highlighting the various ways in which different people and groups were affected by events and trends and asking students to weigh the outcomes. For example, through the use of lecture, film,

primary documents, and secondary sources, she made the argument that the Protestant Reformation in some ways led to increased individual freedom. However, she also asked students to consider how the religious changes of the Reformation impacted the status of women. After researching the subject, one group of students concluded:

The Reformation didn't end up increasing the status of women. It ended up leading to the rejection and banning of saints and nuns, and these roles were the ways that women had had involvement in the church. Because these roles did not exist anymore, their role in the church decreased a lot.

By inviting this type of judgment, Gable helps students consider both positive and negative outcomes of historical change.

When introducing the topic of the English Industrial Revolution, Gable told her students that one of their tasks would be to decide for themselves—“Do you think that the Industrial Revolution was on the whole a good thing or on the whole not worth the human price?” To support this type of thinking, she provided students with primary accounts given by young mine workers, a medical examiner, a factory worker, and a factory owner. Students were also assigned excerpted scholarly works, one of which was entitled, “Early Industrial Society: Progress or Decline?” These readings helped students consider the conditions in newly industrialized cities in light of the difficulties experienced by rural populations at the time. One article juxtaposed increased wage rates for workers with the psychological and social costs, while another examined how industrialization impacted the status of women in different ways depending on their social class.

One of the “enduring understandings” Gable identified as an emphasis in her course is that “economic, political, and social change for some often comes at the expense of others.”¹⁶ She purposefully raises controversial issues and provides conflicting sources and arguments to help students avoid an overreliance on a narrative of progress and instead understand the complexity of determining progress and decline in the past.

Displaying Empathy and Moral Judgment

As was described above, Gable makes an effort to highlight the historical roots of present-day perspectives, practices, or circumstances whenever possible. At the same time, she also wants her students to display historical empathy by recognizing that people in the past experienced and interpreted their world through very different belief systems. One way that she promotes historical empathy is simply by emphasizing how foreign or extreme a modern idea would have been in a previous era. For example, when discussing the Peace of Augsburg, she warned her students not to confuse its purpose with the modern-day concept of religious tolerance. She explained, “Religious tolerance is a really modern concept. In the

18th century, we will start playing with it. In the 19th and 20th centuries, we will still be fighting for it.” Later, when analyzing a midterm exam item about the political system of the Dutch Republic, she reminded her students that the notion of popular democracy was “a crazy radical idea at this time.” While discussing the Enlightenment, she advised students not to confuse the philosophes with democrats:

[The philosophes] weren’t people who were for adult suffrage. They wanted better rulers who were checked or limited by a legislature or the people or a judiciary. Democracy was a really radical idea. Even the middle class and parts of the lower class didn’t trust the rest of the lower class—the masses as they were always called...“We are used to kings. We are used to order and control.” It is going to take people a while to get comfortable with the idea of democracy. So don’t confuse the Enlightenment with “woohoo, everyone should have the vote and control!” Instead, you have popular sovereignty checking the authority you trust. It is a subtle change instead of a radical shift. They are going to get there, but it is going to take them a hundred years.

Here, she even talks in the first person in an effort to help students access an unfamiliar historical perspective.

Gable also promotes historical empathy by explaining how the meanings of words and terms in previous eras differ from the meanings those same words carry in the present.

That is one of the things we talk about often at the beginning of the year. We talk about the word “grace,” which in the 15th century was very much a religious term. Now when you talk about someone having grace, most people tend to think you mean poise and eloquence. We don’t think of it as “standing with God.” So it’s the idea that the terms change and so the context matters for language (interview, 11 March 2010).

When teaching about political upheaval in the 19th century, she emphasized that some of the political terms used two centuries ago are still used today, but with different meanings. “Please, please, please look at these ‘-isms’ in their 19th-century, original meanings,” she implored. “Do not think “Sarah Palin” and “Ted Kennedy” when you look at “conservatism” and “liberalism.” Even a Sarah Palin, a David Brooks, a George Bush would have been seen as incredibly liberal in the 19th century.” Such admonishments are part of her efforts to inspire historical empathy.

In addition to recognizing differences between the past and the present, Gable pushes her students toward a fuller comprehension of past perspectives and practices by considering the legitimacy of these in light of historical context. For instance, she wants students to understand how the practice of employing mercenaries was a logical practice in the feudal context of the late middle ages. She wants her students to have a sense

of how “emotional it would be” for peasants to hear someone like Luther preaching against the theological beliefs they had long held during the Protestant Reformation. She argued that Napoleon’s ideas about the value of a meritocracy “stemmed from his personal story” of lowly birth in Old Order France. She explained how the preoccupation with a balance of power at the Congress of Vienna could be best understood in light of the international conflict that preceded this meeting.

In each of these instances, Gable encouraged her students to contextualize historical perspectives and practices in order to better empathize with the distant and the unfamiliar. At the same time, she makes space for students to form their own judgments about historical beliefs and practices. In other words, in Gable’s classroom, historical empathy does not imply historical relativism. For example, as was previously discussed, she asked her students to examine primary sources in order to identify and contextualize the historical “justifications that were made for sending young children into the mines to work.” She wants students to be able to identify and explain past perspectives and actions in their historical context, but she does not require them to agree with or condone these perspectives and actions. Rather, she invites students to form their own opinion in response to questions such as, “To what extent should the Industrial Revolution be viewed as a positive event in western European history?”

Assigning Historical Agency

Whenever Gable discusses the actions of a historical person or group of people, she assigns historical agency. However, she is not often explicit about this process and, therefore, agency is an aspect of historical understanding that she gives only limited attention to. One example of such attention can be seen in some of her remarks on the Protestant Reformation. As has already been mentioned, she stressed to students that this movement was as much political as it was religious. When she had students view the film *Luther* in class, she made several remarks on how the movie tended to present the movement as primarily religious rather than political.¹⁷ At one point, she stopped the film to comment:

One thing that the movie doesn’t mention is that Frederick of Saxony had been in line to become Holy Roman Emperor, but he was passed over for his nephew, Charles V. So he wants to maintain his autonomy. The movie...does not emphasize that Frederick is trying to keep Saxony strong and independent of the Holy Roman Emperor and does not want to be the ploy of Rome for Charles V.

This type of critique signals to students that different accounts of a historical event or movement attribute agency to different players.

On several occasions, Gable gave her students opportunities to make their own claims regarding the agency of particular people or groups. One of her more lengthy assignments during the first nine weeks of the school year asked students to work in groups to research and outline a response to an essay prompt chosen from previous AP European History exams. One group was asked, “To what extent did political authorities influence the course of the Protestant Reformation?” Another group responded to the question, “To what extent and in what ways did women participate in the Renaissance?” As this latter group worked together over several class periods to complete the assignment, Gable encouraged the students to consider the role that women of different social classes played in the Renaissance.

Conclusions

Gable is an ambitious teacher. Her instruction stands in stark contrast to the type of teaching that research has shown is most commonly found in history classrooms across the country. She possesses the requisite knowledge, understanding, and skill to actively develop her students’ historical understanding through the study of European History. To be sure, the context within which Gable teaches is by no means typical. The school and class size—as well as the racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds of the students—at Haverhill High create a somewhat unique educational setting; therefore, the findings of this study are not generalizable. Yet Gable shares many of the same responsibilities and challenges that AP history teachers face every year. She feels the pressure from students, parents, and the administration at her school to prepare her students for success on the AP exam in May. Rather than ignoring this obligation, she finds ways to foster historical understanding even as she readies students for the AP exam. Gable’s pedagogical practice is worthy of the attention it receives here, because it illustrates the type of ambitious history instruction that is possible within the parameters of the AP program. She demonstrates how a wide variety of instructional resources and methods might be put to the purpose of promoting historical understanding.

By defying the norms established by numerous large-scale studies of history teaching, the instruction examined in this case study raises several key questions. First, can the attention Gable gives to promoting historical understanding be attributed to the fact that she teaches in the AP program? It is not possible to claim that the requirements, guidelines, and resources provided by the AP program lead teachers to actively promote historical understanding in their courses. In fact, research indicates the exact opposite. The demands of the AP exam lead AP history teachers

to rely on traditional methods of instruction and assessment in order to efficiently cover large amounts of content. That said, Gable never indicates that the AP exam presents any challenge to her efforts to promote historical understanding. In fact, she links some of her goals related to historical understanding to preparation for the exam. This can be seen most clearly in her explanation for why she repeatedly engages students in primary source work. Her efforts to help students understand the nature of historical knowledge appear directly linked to preparation for the exam, particularly the document-based question (DBQ) portion of it. Similarly, she explains how the well-designed free-response items on the test encourage her to guide students toward a more sophisticated understanding of historical change. Some of the attention she gives to the nature of historical change seems directed toward enhancing the quality of her students' essay writing. She wants students to highlight the gradual nature and multifarious effects of historical change in their essays to demonstrate more sophisticated historical understanding and, quite simply, to gain higher scores.

At the same time, some of the goals related to historical understanding that Gable articulates and pursues appear largely unconnected to the AP exam. For instance, she gives attention to the manner in which change is generated or prevented in order to help students make sense of current events and issues in their own lives. She consistently highlights relationships between the past and the present and invites students to formulate their own ideas about the importance of different aspects of history. She also provides opportunities for students to evaluate historical events or trends as indicators of progress or decline. She wants students to make meaningful connections between the past and the present and to consider the impact of events and trends on all parties involved, because she believes that these are ways that history might enhance students' lives. These exercises aimed at furthering historical understanding are neither explicitly inhibited nor rewarded by the AP exam.

How is Gable able to effectively promote historical understanding at the same time that she prepares students for the AP exam, while so many other AP history teachers do not? There is by no means a single or simple answer to this question, and the data collected for this project do not allow for a comprehensive explanation. However, the findings of this study suggest that the following factors played a key role in Gable's ability to promote historical understanding in the context of an AP history course: expertise in the field of history, well-developed beliefs about the purpose history can serve students, and familiarity with the AP European History exam. There are certainly other factors that influence Gable's teaching (e.g., knowledge of a wide range of pedagogical practices for the teaching of history), yet the three identified above arguably have the most explanatory power.

Part of what enables Gable to pursue historical understanding in her AP course is her strong disciplinary expertise in the field of history. She has undergraduate and graduate training in history from two well-respected universities. Additionally, she remains engaged in the field of history by regularly reading current scholarship related to the content of her course. Through these efforts, she has developed a strong understanding of the interpretive nature of history and the process by which history is created. She understands that historical significance and agency are assigned and debated and that the process of determining progress or decline in the past is to be a contested one. Yet her disciplinary expertise alone cannot explain her efforts to promote historical understanding. Other case studies have reported on teachers who possess a sophisticated understanding of the interpretive nature of history, but rely on traditional instructional methods that do not reflect this understanding.

Along with disciplinary expertise, Gable has well-developed personal beliefs about history's potential to enrich students' lives. She believes that history can be used to explain current ideas, practices, and problems. She argues that within the past can be found patterns and trends that can be used to explain present-day situations and inform decision making. In her opinion, students are capable of undertaking this type of thinking as adolescents, not just in their future lives. She believes that through history, students can learn to recognize perspectives that differ from their own. When given the opportunity to evaluate past beliefs and actions, students can formulate their own ideas about right and wrong. Motivated by these convictions, Gable designs opportunities for students to develop historical understanding, some of which do not directly relate to preparation for the AP exam.

While Gable's instruction for historical understanding is not always linked to exam preparation, she by no means ignores the exam. The fact that her students' exam scores consistently outpace the national average might be partly explained by her extensive familiarity with the AP European History exam. Gable is very knowledgeable about the format of this assessment and makes extensive use of previous exam questions and documents in her course. She teaches her students how to think through the multiple-choice questions, even those that she believes are poorly constructed. She guides her students through the process of responding to essay and DBQ prompts and evaluates their work using the AP rubric and scale. She collects data on her students over the course of the year to ensure that they are showing improvement in their ability to answer AP exam questions. She uses national data linked to particular questions to ensure that her students are outperforming national trends. Gable's familiarity with the AP exam does not lead her to emphasize preparation

for the exam above all other goals. Rather, this comfort level with the test enables her to promote historical understanding while still fulfilling her obligations within the AP program. Many of the learning opportunities she designs for students are carefully aimed at deliberately fostering one or more elements of historical understanding, while simultaneously increasing students' comfort level with the format of the exam or the type of sources it might include.

Gable's instruction is exemplary, but it is by no means unattainable for other history teachers. She models how a history teacher can pursue meaningful goals, even those that an exam might not reward, while still preparing students well for that test. By drawing on her disciplinary expertise, her personal beliefs about the worth of history, and her knowledge of the particular context in which she must operate, she is able to make wise instructional decisions. She sacrifices neither exam preparation nor instruction for historical understanding. In this way, her teaching practice presents a powerful challenge to history teachers working within and outside of the AP program.

Notes

1. Bruce A. VanSledright, *In Search of America's Past: Learning to Read History in Elementary School* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002), 10-12; detailed information about several state-mandated history or social studies exams can be found in S. G. Grant, ed., *Measuring History: Cases of High-Stakes Testing Across the U.S.* (Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2006).
2. National Center for History in Schools, "National History Standards" (Los Angeles, CA: National Center for History in Schools, 1996), <<http://www.nchs.ucla.edu/Standards/>>.
3. Peter Seixas, "Conceptualizing the Growth of Historical Understanding," in *Handbook of Education and Human Development*, ed. David R. Olson and Nancy Torrance (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996): 765-783.
4. Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 185-205; Walter C. Parker, *Social Studies in Elementary Education* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall, 2012), 6-7; Bruce A. VanSledright, "What Does It Mean to Think Historically... and How Do You Teach It?" *Social Education* 68, no. 3 (April 2004): 230-233; Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001), 3-27.
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