Abstract

This action research project seeks to uncover the relationship between reading and student success in an Advanced Placement U.S. History course. The textbook is not the only source of information in my AP class, but it is a vital source that helps students gather many facts and details about a topic quickly and efficiently. While I hesitate to rely too heavily on textbooks, I feel it is better to use class time for more analytical and interactive activities.

In order for this approach to be successful, however, students must complete and understand the assigned reading. Unfortunately, students did not seem to be getting the information they should have during the first quarter of the school year. This led me to conclude that they were either a) not doing the reading or b) doing the reading too quickly without fully understanding or remembering it. I consulted with students about how to address this problem.

The first solution was to reward those who did the reading and punish those who did not by quizzing students after assigned readings. This definitely seemed to improve basic knowledge, as most students wanted to do well in the course and soon realized that they needed to spend more time reading if they wanted to succeed. However, this did not solve all the problems. My second approach was to give students reading guides for each chapter. This helped some students, but it was also clear that for some students the quizzes and reading guides were not the problem. Students with low test and quiz scores tended to have the lowest grades overall. I would divide this group into 1) students who still did not spend enough time reading and 2) students who, despite spending a fair amount of time reading, were overwhelmed by the amount of information they needed to digest.

Through performance on quizzes and tests, as well as surveys and informal discussions with students, the results of this project show that while incentives/disincentives and reading guides help promote successful reading among some students, additional methods are necessary in order to reach low-achieving AP students.

Introduction

During the 2002–2003 school year I taught three sections of Advanced Placement (AP) US History (sixty-nine students in all) at Falls Church High School. Classes met every other day for ninety-minute blocks. Although I have been teaching social studies for three years, this was my first year at a public school. This presented both challenges and opportunities. I felt fortunate that I
had over two years of teaching experience at a private high school and a solid background in history. However, I did not feel that my academic training had prepared me well for teaching in the public school system. It is my belief that teaching is a skill that must be learned in the classroom. My first step was to learn about the backgrounds of my students.

Falls Church is a highly diverse school. The student body is approximately 25% Asian, 25% Hispanic, 10% black, and 40% white. In addition to the ethnic/cultural diversity at Falls Church, the socio-economic status of the students varies widely as well. Many of the students come from immigrant backgrounds and few have parents who went to college themselves. Since Falls Church, like all Fairfax County schools, maintains an open enrollment policy for Advanced Placement, AP classes tend to include students with a wide range of abilities. I had students who could compete with students from any school in the country. But these were the exceptions; I discovered that most students had a great deal of difficulty keeping up with the fast pace of the course. My ultimate goal in teaching Advanced Placement US History at Falls Church is to prepare my students for a successful college career. This paper details my first challenge.

Methodology

One of the first things I noticed when I started teaching at Falls Church High School was that students did not seem to be completing the reading assignments. This did not come as a complete surprise, but I was very concerned that my students were not going to be able to keep up with the course if they did not improve their reading habits. My teaching philosophy is that class time is best spent doing analytical work and more interactive projects. I do not think that lecturing is very effective for teaching history at the high-school level.

The first question I asked myself was “what would motivate me to do the reading?” The answer was grades. I needed to hold students accountable. Accordingly, I began to quiz students on the reading. While some students thought I was just “out to get them,” most realized that this was a necessary evil to cover the material in our limited timeframe. Reading quizzes forced my students to do the reading if they were interested in getting a good grade. Most of my AP students were used to achieving high grades, but many were struggling in AP US History (often because they were taking several other AP classes at the same time).

The second component of my plan to increase textbook reading was to provide guides. Many students really took advantage of the reading guides and did much better. For high-school students, reading about the past is not very exciting. Therefore, their retention is not very good either. Guides generally worked well for students who were willing to put in the effort but just could not seem to separate the important information from the unimportant. This was not a panacea for my dilemma though. Unfortunately, some students were still having trouble on quizzes and tests. This was mainly due to poor reading skills, not spending enough time reading, or a combination of the two.
I attempted to solve this problem by asking students to keep reading logs. Not all students did this, but the ones that did seemed to benefit from it. First, it prompted them to consider (or reconsider) the amount of time they actually spent on the reading assignment. I could tell them about how long it should take for reading, but until they actually checked their own time they really gave it very little thought. Reading logs also helped students keep track of their own progress compared to their classmates. This promoted a sense of community that did not exist early in the year.

Results

The ultimate indicator, of course, would be their performance on the AP Exam. However, unit tests during the year would also provide some insight into their progress. Before I discuss the actual quiz and test results, it should be understood that the tests were quite difficult and not representative of students' overall grades. Most students improved their grades by submitting high quality projects and doing well in class. During the first quarter I generally did not give reading quizzes. In the second quarter I began to quiz the students on a more consistent pattern. The results are as follows: first quarter (NA), second quarter (70), third quarter (74), fourth quarter (78). Test scores break down as follows: first quarter (69), second quarter (72), third quarter (73), fourth quarter (73). While this might not seem to be a substantial increase, it does represent progress that can be measured in ways other than testing. Talking to students both individually and in groups, I found that most felt more confident as the year progressed. Students found that they spent more time reading and studying by the fourth quarter than they did in the first quarter. Most important, students were more involved in class discussion by the end of the second quarter because they were better prepared for class. This made for a more lively class that encouraged student interaction.

Unfortunately, not all students improved their test-taking skills. Some students continued to be overwhelmed by the amount of information they needed to learn and the depth of analysis the course required. I attempted to alleviate this problem by working with a few students individually, with limited success. I am not sure how to address issue since many of the students just do not have the necessary skills when they enter the class. I have very little time to spend teaching students how to improve their reading skills. This is an area that I need to improve in the future so that more students can reach their potential.

Reflections

Promoting textbook reading in AP US History is extremely important. In order to have intelligent, interesting, and engaging classrooms discussions, students simply must have something to offer or they cannot participate. Therefore, increasing this onerous endeavor must be given a high priority. The goal of the College Board and the U.S. Department of Education, as well as Fairfax County, is to expand AP enrollment among minority and poor students. I
agree with and support this effort. This means getting students to do more work to achieve good grades. In fact, many students who might earn an “A” in a regular class might do more work in AP and only receive a “B.” So the first task is to get students to buy into the idea that they are benefiting just by taking an AP course.

Holding students accountable for reading assignments via quizzes helps promote overall success in AP US History. Used in combination with reading logs and reading guides, quizzes force students to take the material seriously while at the same time providing them with the resources to do it. The key is to get students to a) understand the connection between reading, learning, and grades; b) understand the amount of time it takes to complete a reading assignment (and remember it); c) use reading guides to understand what is – and what is not – important. Students need to be constantly reminded that reading is an essential part of their learning. Too many have “gotten by” in the past by simply studying right before a test. This does not work in an AP class. There is too much information to cram into a one-night study session. Students are much more likely to forget everything they learned using this method anyway. A consistent, sustained reading program, combined with classroom activities such as role-playing, debating, and primary source analysis, is the surest path to success in AP US History.

My plans for next year include stressing textbook reading and discussing reading strategies on the first day of class, as well as improving/modifying reading guides so that they are more user friendly. One of the most important things I learned this year is that students are very diverse and have widely varying needs. What works for some students will not necessarily work for others. However, in order to promote student-centered learning, textbook reading is a must. Otherwise I will simply end up lecturing all class, which would benefit neither my students nor myself.

Selected References

