

Evolving Stances in Advanced Placement Summer Institute Teaching

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I have been involved in Advanced Placement institutes for over thirty years, not as a bright, hardworking teacher or as a brilliant Advanced Placement Summer Institute (APSI) consultant, but in the near-at-hand and deeply involved role as Director of one of College Board's long standing AP Summer Institutes at Wake Forest University.

We began this institute so that very able AP consultants could help bright young teachers understand what AP coursework and exams involved and what were the best ways to help them know how to teach bright students in schools across the region. This would equip their students to score in the 4 to 5 range on the College Board exams and place out of entry courses when they began their college careers. This is, of course, merely a rough version of our mission and more directly practical than most of our AP Teachers would be willing to articulate.

We began our institute with a small core of Teacher Consultants many of whom were AP teachers in our LEA, but year by year our reach into more distant school districts led us to work with an ever more widely recognized group of consultants who were earning ever more solid reputations in the world of AP consultants.

This brief slab of history brings us to a review of our consultants' pedagogical stances. I wanted to know how five of them sensed where they stood on the question of a shift in their teaching style to a more open pedagogy over the past five years. So I developed five questions about their pedagogy, their sense of how they might have changed over the past five years, their comparison of their change with that of AP colleagues, and the support for that change from school leaders.

The responses of five of them confirmed most of my expectations and made me realize that the pedagogy of the consultants had made a turn toward a more transformational or exploratory pedagogy over recent years.

Three of the consultants were males and two were females. Three were young teachers with less than twenty years of teaching while two were older with thirty plus years of teaching. Two were math or science teachers and three were humanities or social science teachers. They represented different numbers of years of teaching experience and different disciplines. We hoped to review each of the five consultants' responses to the five pedagogical questions to understand whether significant change occurred or if teaching methods have remained much the same over the past five years.

Question 1: In what ways do you think that your teaching of your APSI course has shifted in the last three to five years toward a different way to teach, a different pedagogy?

Consultant A. The response was that in the past change was almost wholly related to the exam AP students would be taking: "to accommodate ... to the AP ...exam." That response was updated by adding that AP exams are now asking for "...conceptual thinking" "not "just knowing definitions" and understanding "applications"... "not just the meaning of terms." Consultant A's shift here is a strong one but is in part due to the kind of exams AP is now developing. We have to give AP some credit for the move though it seems as much internalized, as requisitioned.

Consultant B. In the last three years I have "incorporated more activities and interactive visual aids into my APSI's classes as well as my own classroom." A clear source for some of these interactive activities was found in the AP Reading and the interactions with other AP teachers. These are "incorporated into my APSI's classes and my classes during the school year. The final impact is that this makes "my classroom better and more interactive." So the full merging of old into the new involves all of the teaching, not just the AP teaching. And the name it's given is "interactive."

Consultant C. The push for change here seems to be ascribed to access to AP coursework. "Instructors have moved away from erecting barriers to participation in AP Courses" This openness to a wider span of student achievement seems to emanate from "College Board's Access to Equity statement/philosophy." "AP Courses...are thus becoming more inclusive and less score conscious." Here the socio-political issue of greater access, more than pedagogy, seems central as a cause of change.

Consultant D. The approach to teaching is essential. It is not a matter of recent change but long-term practice. It is simply named a "flipped classroom" which means that everything is turned upside down and that is how it has been for more than five years. "I give my students resources, questions, assignments, and graphic organizers to complete." That is the consultant/teacher's sole role. The student's role is to do the work of thinking: they "are empowered to analyze and interpret primary source data."

Consultant E. The response for the final consultant is that "inquiry" in which "students infer, analyze, and synthesize" was the "dominant pedagogy." These "higher order thinking skills," however, are described as young teachers' need for instruction to have "more structure."

Question 2. Do the majority of your AP colleagues seem to be moving in the same direction as you, or have they tended to maintain much of the same kind of teaching style over these years?

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Consultant A. My sense is that "some" colleagues have "adapted their teaching styles" to this new approach and A attributes this particularly to "significant revisions to their AP courses." Consultant A reasons further that in the AP course, "there has not been a specific major revision" but there has been "a gradual move toward the application of concepts." This seems a strong statement about the move toward change as consultant-initiated rather than AP-promoted.

Consultant B. Some AP colleagues ... strive to improve their... quality of instruction" but "the majority ... are basically happy with how they are teaching." Added to this is the more negative assessment: "They are not constantly looking for ways to make the course better and more interactive." And more negatively in terms of numbers, "only a small group of consultants are working to improve their courses."

Consultant C. The response here is broadly socio-political: "Participation has increased in recent years, and teachers have adapted" many new pedagogies that have "opened the doors wider to a greater diversity of students." "AP teachers at my school are removing barriers...to accommodate to a greater number of students from all walks of life."

Consultant D. This consultant, who is fully a part of the change in AP pedagogy that is slowly occurring, offers a simple and emphatic "No" as the response to this question.

Consultant E. The response to this question about change among consultants rests solely on the lack of opportunity to have time together for exploring or "adjusting" to this new pedagogy.

Question 3. How do the majority of AP students and APSI teachers react to your different teaching stance?

Consultant A. In my early years my AP student evaluations led to the idea of changing to a more interactive, "hands on" teaching style that "applied the content" to "every day life experiences." This open, "outside the box," approach was appreciated by "most of my students and my colleagues" and resulted in my move from "90% down to 60%" lectures.

Consultant B. "Both APSI teachers and students respond positively to my teaching stance." To this the consultant adds "they appreciate the knowledge I give to them from the reading" and "they see how the knowledge they are gaining will be assessed on the AP exam" so that "both groups respond positively to the interactive... activities that I use." And "they appreciate the variety of ways I... get them involved." Those two phrases -- "the knowledge I give them" and "I get them involved" -- seem a pretty strong mix of both pedagogical worlds.

Consultant C. Much the same way of assessing the question of change in pedagogy is found in the response here as in the two earlier responses. The question of whether a student enrolled in an AP course is or is not "college material" seems to be their overriding perspective, rather than methods. The clear resolve seems implied in the statement "All students who are willing to engage in a rigorous AP curriculum can benefit."

Consultant D. Attending APSI teachers are "happily surprised" by seeing the new pedagogy: "I model all of my lessons to them." Their reaction though they basically use PowerPoint presentations is to be "thrilled to know that AP can be taught in an engaging style."

Consultant E. My impression is that my AP colleagues and students rate my method of teaching as "favorable." In fact, "they want even more change." This statement clearly endorses change, but the response may refer to a distinction, rather than to a real difference. It is a clear move toward the change that is variously understood by each of the consultants.

Question 4. Do your School Administrators and AP leaders endorse and support this teaching stance, and if so, how?

Consultant A. My school leaders are "mostly aligned with my style of teaching." The expectations of state requirements are based on structured approaches, so I am supported in my immediate setting but a bit out of step with guidelines established by the state. The reverse would be more difficult to negotiate.

Consultant B. The response is very brief but quite positive: "The administration...allows" us the flexibility to use the teaching stance that works best for each of us. Because my teaching has been demonstrated to be highly effective, school administrators give me freedom to teach using any pedagogy I choose.

Consultant C. Similar to an earlier response, Consultant C registers the administration's latitude of admission to AP by explaining that administrators "move students up to AP" rather than "track them from Day 1." This seems to be a strong position possibly articulated by the school administration itself more than a comment on its trust in pedagogy.

Consultant D. The response is quite clear: "My administrators have always embraced this pedagogy since it is coupled with clear positive results."

Consultant E. Here again, pedagogy is endorsed if it produces outstanding student performance: "they [school administrators] are watching scores" and "expect changes ... to increase scores."

Question 5. Do experienced AP teachers you work with at APSI each summer support your teaching pedagogy or do they have many questions about it?

Consultant A. New AP teachers are "receptive" to these new ideas while "veterans teachers... seem to prefer a traditional lecture style."

Consultant B. Both "experienced AP teachers" and "new ones" "appreciate my teaching pedagogy."

Consultant C. "They don't verbally disagree, but I can tell they are skeptical at times."

Consultant D. "When they see it in action... they see how they can implement it in their own classroom and find great student success."

Consultant E. "The experienced AP teachers that I have worked with appear on board with what I'm doing. It delights me that they are always so open to new materials and methods.

Looking at the response of these five fine consultants' from a variety of disciplines and having differing years of experience offers a range of different portraits of their views of pedagogy and their sense of where they each stand on such a continuum. The sense of style ranges from Teacher as Transmitter of Knowledge to Teacher as Liberator. The sense of what has propelled this shift ranges from AP exams to new concepts of knowledge, pedagogy, or epistemology. Concerns move from opening participation to all students because they can benefit from such challenges to maintaining AP's standards by strict admission standards.

This research study could not have been undertaken without the willing consent of the five College Board Consultants/APSI Teachers. Although the listed Consultants/Teachers appear in alphabetical order below, the designations used in the text itself were assigned randomly.

Jonathan Milner

Bill Pell

Lisa Putnam

Larry Stambough

Patricia Vandiver