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Channeling Your Inner “Ken Burns”: Research, Films, & Student Voices

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I teach in the Northeast and a common question from my students is “what do we do after the A.P. exam?” I would not mind the question so much except for that it is often asked at the end of the first week of school.

The A.P. U.S. History exam traditionally falls in early to mid-May and my school year, depending upon how cruel the New England winter is, can last until late June. One might consider such a block of time perfect for a film festival, however that idea died in subcommittee long ago. My department requires the completion of some type of research project in the junior year. When I began teaching at this school, I did attempt a traditional research paper, both imbedded in the school year and in the time following the AP exam. Neither approach was terribly successful: either no one was able to manage the research process, or I found my students plagiarizing due to the short time span. A more creative solution was needed, and after extensive conversations with both the school librarian and technology specialist, this project emerged. My students watch several clips from Ken Burns’ various documentaries throughout the school year; why not channel Ken Burns’ spirit and have the students become documentarians themselves?

While having students create a research-themed film is not necessarily an original idea, it is what my students have to say about the project that has attracted my attention. When I am grading the projects, I, of course, hope for new insight to historical events, deep and original historical analysis, and a demonstration of content mastery. While I often see the third aspect, the first two are more elusive. This is frustrating for an A.P. teacher, for what have I been pushing my students towards all year but developing critical thinking skills. After some reflection, I realized that I am working on those higher-order skills, but within the confines of accepted history. For example, I want my students to be able to explain how both the 1860s and the 1940s were transformative decades in U.S. History; I want my students to note the reforms of the Progressive Era – the social issues addressed versus the ones that were ignored; I want my students to see the complexity of history and get them past “and then they went to Disneyland” type of conclusions in their essays. In other words, I want them to learn their history, but support their arguments within the accepted canon of knowledge. I have guided them through the narrative; in their assessments, it is up to them to show me what they know and understand. With this film project, it is now up to the students to develop their own thesis – their own voice – and support it. And what I have recently realized is that this is for many of them the first time they are developing a mature and original research question, finding the supporting evidence, and constructing their own argument



(and not the expected viewpoint). In other words, they have to find their history-voice and present it in a cogent manner.

The practical details to complete this project are as follows:

- Students can research a topic of interest from any time period from U.S. History and society
- Their final project should be a developed argument and not a narrative
- Students turn in a film (the software they often use is either Apple's IMovie or Windows Moviemaker), their script which includes all citations, a bibliography, and a written reflection on the whole process
- Students have from the AP exam until the end of the 4th quarter to complete this project; depending upon the school calendar, that can be as long as a month

I have done with this project with my students for five years, and it is a successful part of my school year. I enjoy how my role shifts from the person guiding the students through the AP curriculum to the person having conversations with the students about their work. In other words, they are in control of their planning and organizing – I just establish the due dates.

Students use the critical thinking skills we have practiced all year and with this project, they reinforce their research skills. Much like in their AP essays, this particular skill is met with varying levels of success. I have found that students have no problem finding information; where they struggle is synthesizing it. If anything, students are surprised by how much of their research they have to leave out in order to maintain a tight thesis.

Students are also often astounded to see that there is more history to learn than just what is on the AP exam (shocking, I know). At the same, students begin to understand why information on the internet needs to be verified and cross-checked. Students also like the control they have over their projects, as well as the creative aspect of their efforts.

I find it fascinating that students think this is an easy project. My technology specialist enjoys hearing “thank God, for Mrs. O’Brien!” for she has saved more than one project from implosion. I have yet to have a student complain about this project, no one has ever told me that they have disliked this project, and students are very proud of what they have created. When they do complain, it is about the technology, not the project. Our last class of the year is our “film festival” where students share their work with their peers. It is a chance for me to see the topics



that “stick” with the students after a year of work and the aspects of history they are personally interested in.

The project has evolved over the years. When it began, my students were in a computer lab working on PC desktops. Now, only a mere five years later, many of my students have laptops and use Macs. Also, I am not the technical advisor. I am fortunate to work with a teacher-friendly technology specialist who is more than happy to help students (and their teacher) when they hit speed bumps. Interestingly, my students prefer to go to one another for tech support. They seem to enjoy a project that centers on what they consider to be their area of expertise: computers and technology.

Below is a link to examples of student work. I have posted five examples of student-created films from June 2012. One was completed by a single student, two projects were completed in pairs, and two samples were from groups of three. The topics vary, along with how the students present their argument. I selected these projects for two reasons: (1) they are not perfect projects; they were created by seventeen year olds and show what “student work” really looks like; (2) while I may have helped flush out aspects of their argument, what you will see is truly the students’ voices speaking. Take the following steps to access the films:

- <https://tw.weston.org>
- Click on “History”
- Click on “AP US History Post-Exam Project”
- Log-in as a guest; your password is “post-exam”
- These steps should take you to the moodle page
- There are further instructions on the moodle page
- Log out is in the upper right hand corner

This project is in no way intended to be the one way a high school teacher can encourage his/her students to develop their historical voices. This project emerged out of necessity, and much like those last minute lesson plans teachers do not want to admit to creating, it worked. I had no idea “finding students’ voices” would be an objective to this task. But then again, like those lesson plans that really work, you, the teacher have those unintended objectives that can be meaningful, creative, and still get your students to learn what you want them to learn. In this case, using the world of technology, film, and original thought while arguing a student-driven historical point. In other words, a departmental requirement accidentally became a wonderful way to end my school year.