

Using Action Plans to Encourage Student Growth and Increase Student Engagement

Beth McGibbon



Beth McGibbon, National Board Certified Teacher, has taught social studies at Shadle Park High School in Spokane since 1991. For the past four years, Beth has taught Advanced Placement World History to sophomores.

“Ten thousand years of history in thirty weeks” is the tag line I use to describe Advanced Placement (AP) World History. This rigorous and ambitious course is offered to high school sophomores at my school. Students may take AP World History or World History in order to complete a graduation requirement. In 2013, I had 60 AP World History students, while in prior years, I had 20 AP World History students because the class was an elective, not a graduation requirement.

In September, I presented my AP students with a detailed syllabus and a calendar with an extensive reading schedule and test dates. I told them what to study, when to study a certain topic and for how long. Students gaped at me with wide eyes in disbelief. For many, this was their first AP class. I made it perfectly clear that I expected them to read, write and study at the college level, a level of rigor they had not previously experienced. Many students quickly rushed to the counselor’s office to change their schedules, explaining they did not have time for such a class.

Despite the demands of the class, I knew that students would grow tremendously as a result of sticking with an AP class. Former students have returned to tell me how much they learned about history and boasted about their writing skills. They proudly declared how easy other classes were—either Running Start courses or other AP classes taught at my school. This year I wanted to capture their growth and I did this by creating a Student Growth Action Plan.

At the beginning of second semester I asked my students:

- How do you want to grow in this course?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- How can I, your teacher, take you to the next level?
- How can YOU take yourself to the next level?

Using these questions, my students created individualized Student Growth Action Plans, describing two growth goals to focus on for the next 30 days. The plans empowered my students to identify their strengths and weaknesses and create individualized action steps to meet their goals. This process allowed my students to take ownership of their learning and allowed me to differentiate my instruction. Ultimately, my intention was to increase student engagement and to have students use their assessments and peer reviews as a means to improve their critical thinking about history.

“Teachers open the door, but students must enter on their own.” *Chinese Proverb*

Persistence is this year’s theme at the comprehensive high school where I teach. Tenth graders must persist when studying 10,000 years of history in 30 weeks. During the first 18 weeks of the school year, I taught my AP World History students the skills to navigate the immense context of the course: how to take Cornell notes as a tool for improving reading comprehension, how to manage time, how to analyze historical evidence, how to logically write an essay using relevant historical facts, and, of course, how to persist.



I teach using a Gradual Release of Responsibility model, which begins with more responsibility on my part for student learning and moves to greater responsibility on the student. As we moved into the second semester, my AP students identified two areas of growth based on their review of a portfolio which contained all of their assessments and a tracking chart of their assessment scores from the first 18 weeks of the school year.

Four weeks later students completed a Student Growth Action Plan, in which they set two goals for the next unit of study. I asked, “What do you specifically need to improve upon in order to prepare for the AP World History exam in May?” Individual skill sets, background knowledge and attitudes are idiosyncratic to each student. Therefore, it is critical that students take ownership for their AP exam preparation. As their teacher, I recognized growth areas for each class and for individual students, yet I wanted my students to identify individual growth areas as a means to empower their learning and enhance their engagement.

The following are three case studies of my students based on their growth plans and the progress they made in AP World History over two and a half months.

From struggling to empowered

Morgan texted her dad to tell him she got a C on a recent AP World History quiz. She beamed with pride. For most of first semester, Morgan struggled with the multiple-choice questions on our weekly quizzes. Her average score for these quizzes was 55%. She attributed her lack of success to not reading the questions carefully and as she said, “I second guess myself.”

During second semester, Morgan wanted to do better at analyzing the point of view of primary source documents. She wrote, “I am not good at this. . . at all.” She set specific action steps for herself: 1. Ask for help. 2. Practice 3. Check and make sure it (my response) is right.

When asked when she would know that she had improved in this area, she stated “I will know when I can easily do it without second guessing myself.” When asked how I, her teacher, could help in this growth area, she wrote, “She can explain it to me in depth and help me practice.”

These comments and insights are golden nuggets of information because I can better help my students as I plan my lessons, assessments and assist students during class work time. Over the course of the next unit of study, I asked Morgan probing questions about an author’s point of view when she read a primary source document. I also strategically placed her in collaborative groups with students who were skilled with inferring the point of view of a document. At the end of first semester Morgan’s quiz score average was 55%. By the end of third quarter, her scores averaged 65%—a ten percent growth worthy of celebration.

Not only did this approach help Morgan, but all students benefitted from my more informed approach to teach students. For most students, their weekly assessment scores increased a minimum of 5% from first semester to second semester. I attribute this increase to focused instruction based on clear learning targets and student feedback on their growth goals.



Effort really does matter

Gunner is a history buff. He entered the class with a strong background knowledge since he and his father discuss history frequently. Unlike Morgan, Gunner typically scored the highest in the class on multiple-choice tests without reading a word of the chapters. Gunner also entered the class with terrible study habits since, for most of his education, learning came easily to him without much study on his own.

AP World History changed that. For most of first semester, Gunner's grade suffered because he refused to read the chapters and complete the weekly Cornell notes for each chapter. After multiple email exchanges with his parents and opportunities to make up work, Gunner began to complete his readings and notes. When describing a growth area, he wrote, "Well, I didn't take any notes until recently. By default, they are more thorough. And they really do help." Gunner identified his growth area as "compare and contrast different civilizations." He stated that his action steps would be to 1) do the notes, 2) attend the study sessions after school and 3) review his notes. By the end of third quarter, Gunner's quiz scores rose to 83%, an increase from 75% at the end of the semester.

Minimal persistence and minor growth

Mark intrigues me. He is not the "typical" AP student because he lacks self-discipline and is not motivated by grades. In fact, it became very clear to me in September that he was motivated to pass this class solely so that he would be eligible to play football. For the entire first semester, he did not have a history book and completed all of his notes via a website. Reading the book is essential for student success since the content is so enormous.

Mark's growth goals contrasted greatly with Morgan's goals, yet were somewhat similar to Gunner's. At the beginning of second semester, he stated his growth would be to "turn in all notes," which was a very valid goal. His action steps were to "read the chapters, do notes for two hours a week." Although these were habits I wanted students to have in September, not January, this was a starting place for Mark. When asked how I could help, he wrote, "She can't."

Unfortunately, Mark did not follow his action steps. Later when he reflected at the end of a unit of study, he still identified completing his notes as an action step. This time, however, he stated I could help with growth by "yell at me and remind me on Monday's maybe." Based on his grade, he made less progress in second semester than first semester. His third quarter grade was 35% while his semester grade was 60%. Mark completed only one set of notes for the entire quarter. Interestingly his test scores have improved, moving from 44% at the end of first semester to 54% at the end of third quarter. What I wonder is to what extent does this gain in Mark's test score truly measure his knowledge and skills of history.

The gift: Learning how to serve students

As educators, we all have students like Morgan, Gunner, and Mark in our classes. We have students who follow the rules, work hard and struggle with rigorous content and standards. We have students who decide that homework is not worth it because they typically do well on quizzes and tests or because they simply are not motivated.

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Measuring student growth is both an art and science. I carefully comb over student data and look for indicators of growth via test scores and homework completion. In the end, how reliable are these numbers and what do they really tell me about my students—their learning and their perception of their growth over time?

What I discovered using Student Growth Action Plans is that when I take time to have my students reflect upon their learning, set their own goals based on the learning targets for the course, and re-evaluate their growth on a regular basis, the numbers have a voice and face behind them and provide me the gift of knowing how to better serve all of my students—those that struggle and those that achieve without giving their full effort. Once again, I am reminded that the art of teaching requires me to listen deeply to my students and adjust my teaching based on their needs.

Watch Beth's video... <http://tpep-wa.org/student-growth-case-studies>

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