Increasing Access to and Success in Advanced Placement English in Pittsburgh Public Schools

It is September, and in Terry Monroe’s Advanced Placement (AP) English Language and Composition classroom at Brashear High School in Pittsburgh Public Schools, students are practicing writing an AP exam essay for the first time. The 25 eleventh graders, many of whom have never been in an “honors” or “gifted” class before, are deep in concentration as Terry walks around the room, reading over students’ shoulders and fielding questions. “Should we use ‘I, me, my?’” a student asks. “It depends on how you use them,” Terry responds, and writes this question, along with other questions and issues he has observed, on the whiteboard to later address after students are finished writing. As the last of the students puts down their pens, Terry tells the class, “OK, now I want us to make a list of challenges you faced doing this,” and students start sharing the aspects of the task they found most difficult: starting their body paragraphs, thinking of a good attention grabber, creating logical transitions, and writing a commentary “without sounding stupid.” Once the list has been generated and briefly discussed, Terry reassures the students, “It’s normal to have questions about this. That’s why we’re practicing.” He points at the list. “That’s a manageable list. We can fix those. And these are important questions, not just for the test, but for other classes, too.” Students nod. Terry promises the students that they will address all their questions in the weeks to come and moves on to the agenda for the second half of the block period—discussing Nathaniel Hawthorne’s use of literary techniques in The Scarlet Letter.

This beginning-of-the-year lesson demonstrates several facets of Terry’s approach to teaching AP English to students who have not historically been given equitable access to honors-level and gifted classes: regularly using formative assessment to guide instruction; teaching students to “go meta,” that is, to reflect honestly on their reading and writing processes and strengths and weaknesses as writers and readers; normalizing the challenges that students are facing; and connecting the reading and writing skills students are learning for the AP exam to skills they will use in other classes and areas of life.

In this article, Amanda, Terry, and Jackie describe how Pittsburgh Public Schools, an urban school district, strategically redesigned its AP English program and diversified student enrollment in AP English classes as part of its equity plan. We describe how Terry expanded his instructional strategies to meet the needs of more linguistically, culturally, and racially diverse learners in his AP classes, many of whom had never been enrolled in “honors” or “gifted” classes before.

Reframing “AP,” “Honors,” and “Gifted” in Pittsburgh Public Schools

In Pennsylvania, mentally gifted is defined as “students demonstrating outstanding intellectual and creative ability, the development of which requires specially designed programs or support services, or both, not ordinarily provided in the regular education program” (PA State Department of Education). The term mentally gifted includes a person who has...
an IQ of 130 or higher or who meets other multiple criteria including academic achievement a year or more above the norm for the student’s grade level, and a high rate of acquisition of new academic skills.

The push to open AP and “gifted” classes to more students in Pittsburgh Public Schools, particularly African American and low-income students, was a deliberate, carefully designed part of the district’s equity plan. As in most school districts across the country, African American and low-income students had been underrepresented in Pittsburgh Public Schools’ gifted and AP programs for decades. Although under Pennsylvania state law “gifted-ness” cannot be determined based solely on the results of IQ tests—tests that have been critiqued for being culturally biased toward white, middle-class students—underrepresentation of students of color remained. In response, the school district adjusted its approach to gifted and AP programs, emphasizing the identification and development of all students who have the potential to succeed and benefit from gifted and AP courses, particularly students of color and students living in poverty.

Pittsburgh Public School District enrolls approximately 27,000 students with 68 percent of students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch, and 56 percent identifying as African American, 34 percent as white, 2 percent as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2 percent as Latino/Latina. The AP program is a major component of the Pittsburgh Public School’s Pathways to College initiative, reflecting the district’s commitment to provide programs that promote aspirations of higher education, to ensure that students are eligible for Pittsburgh Promise postsecondary scholarships and are college ready after graduation.

Nationally, AP and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs serve as the main way that gifted and talented programs are addressed at the high school level (Hertberg-Davis and Callahan). In Pittsburgh, data show that Pittsburgh Public School students who graduate having taken two or more AP courses are twice as likely to persist in college compared to their peers who do not take AP courses. Therefore the district encourages all students who plan on going to college to take on the rigor of one or more AP classes so they are more prepared for postsecondary coursework once they graduate. Over the past five years, the number of students taking one or more AP courses has more than doubled, while the number of African American students taking one or more AP courses has more than tripled.

Brashear High School, where Terry teaches, enrolls approximately 1,380 students per year, with 77 percent qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch, and 15 percent designated as English language learners. The high school is one of the most diverse in the district, with at least 16 languages spoken, including Nepali, Somali, and Spanish. Thirty-seven percent of students identify as African American, 40 percent as white, 14 percent as Asian, 5 percent as multiracial, and 4 percent as Latino/Latina. Brashear is one of two Pittsburgh Public Schools that also participates in the National Math and Science Initiative’s (NMSI) College Readiness Program (https://www.nms.org), which aims to help historically underrepresented students succeed in AP math, science, and English courses. Funded by the Heinz Endowment, the NMSI program in Pittsburgh Public Schools is a three-year effort aimed at increasing AP teacher effectiveness and AP student achievement. Although the mission of NMSI is to focus on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) academic development, an important part of the program is to help students succeed in AP English, with the rationale that to succeed in college and in STEM careers, students also need to know how to write well. After the first year of the NMSI program implementation, the number of math, science, and English AP exams earning a qualifying score at Brashear doubled, increasing from 33 in 2013 to 66 in 2014.

**Equity and Access in AP English**

Increasing access to honors, gifted, and advanced English classes for students of color and low-income students is an essential aspect of increasing equity in public schools. However, successfully teaching advanced or AP English to students from diverse cultural, socioeconomic, racial, and linguistic backgrounds requires thoughtful and deliberate planning. This includes creating a welcoming and inclusive classroom environment, providing ongoing professional development for teachers, and adapting instruction to meet the needs of all students. The district’s equity plan is ongoing, with continuous assessment and adaptation to ensure that all students, including those from underrepresented groups, have access to AP English and other advanced courses. By addressing the specific needs of African American and low-income students, the district is working towards a more equitable and inclusive educational system.
Terry has learned to accept that no matter how hard he prepares and no matter how diligently the students study, in an open enrollment system, some students, perhaps many, may not score three or above on the AP exam—the score typically required to earn college credit. As a teacher, this reality forces Terry to make some tough decisions. Should he adjust the challenge level of the course? The pace? The structure of the class? All of these considerations and many more are factors when deciding how to make the course truly AP, yet still meet the needs of a diverse set of students of varying degrees of preparedness. There are those who wonder why schools bother opening AP courses if some students may not get qualifying scores on the exam. The answer, for Terry, is that he knows that an AP curriculum is going to prepare his students for college, career, military service, or any other path they choose more completely than the standard curriculum will. The rigor of the AP curriculum and the opportunity to learn with peers who have high educational aspirations are themselves invaluable experiences.

To meet the needs of his current students, over the past three years Terry has slowly revised his curriculum and teaching strategies, focusing more on current, nonfiction texts rather than canonical pieces. In addition to the traditional goals of AP Language and Composition classes (writing evidence-based analytical essays and analyzing rhetorical techniques in nonfiction), Terry also aims to help students critically read arguments and persuasion in the world around them, such as in advertisements; to understand the role of bias and point of view; and to build cultural awareness and social context. Although his eleventh-grade students are still expected to read and discuss some canonical pieces of American literature, such as Slaughterhouse 5, The Scarlet Letter, and The Great Gatsby, those readings are now assigned for independent reading and discussions of them focus on the rhetorical strategies and literary devices that students can use in their writing and analysis of texts. Below, we describe six teaching strategies that Terry has found to be successful in his diverse AP classes.

Teaching Strategies for Supporting Diverse Learners in AP Classes

Terry has been an English teacher at Pittsburgh Brashear High School for twelve years. He taught AP English Language and Composition for four years when it was only open to “gifted” students and has been teaching the course for three years since it became open to any student willing to accept the challenge. This year, Terry teaches 76 AP juniors in three sections. Twenty-eight students identify as African American, 45 as white, 1 as Asian, 1 as Latino, and 1 as Middle Eastern. The students’ previous academic experiences have had a profound impact on how Terry approaches the course. Now, some students are two or three grades below grade level in reading, and students who have not performed well in English in the past are welcome if they can get the recommendation of their former English teachers.
message to students about the challenges and demands of his AP English class by asking them to read and discuss an article from the *Baltimore Sun* about the push in Maryland to enroll more low-income students of color in AP classes to increase their access to and success in selective colleges (Bowie). The article problematizes this model by shadowing students who struggle to succeed in AP classes when they have never been exposed to rigorous classes before, and who sometimes question their own abilities when they do not get qualifying scores (3 or higher) on the AP exams. In response to the article, Terry asks students to think about why they are in his AP English class and to set their own goals. He encourages students to focus on the learning opportunities they have in his class rather than just on getting a particular score on the AP exam.

**Going Meta**

At the same time, Terry asks students to constantly self-monitor and self-regulate their learning, similar to what educational psychologists call “metacognitive awareness.” As the vignette at the beginning of this article describes, Terry asked students to think about and share the difficulties they face while reading and writing. When students practiced writing AP exam essays, Terry asked questions such as, “If you wrote nothing, what do you need?” Instead of chastising students who wrote nothing or assuming that they didn’t try, Terry’s questions invited students to consider what they needed as learners to succeed.

**Normalizing Challenges**

In Terry’s class, asking students to be honest and public about their struggles with reading and writing allows him to normalize challenges, that is, to present academic struggles as challenges that everyone, even high-achieving students, faces. He often responded to students’ struggles with statements such as “It’s normal to have these struggles” and then offered suggestions. In one case, when a student shared that he had great difficulty coming up with an attention-grabber for his introduction in his essay, Terry asked the class, “Everyone who had trouble with writing an attention-getter, raise your hand.” After students raised their hand, Terry continued, “OK, look around at everyone with hands raised. More than half the class had trouble and probably more.” Like Dave in Rex’s study, Terry helped students gain confidence as AP students by framing questions or struggles as a normal part of learning. He also encouraged the students to see themselves as a community of learners responsible for helping each other by listening to and responding to each other’s questions.

**Explicit Instruction on Academic Writing**

Strategies for academic writing that were generated in class discussions were documented and displayed throughout the classroom. Terry’s goal was for his students to view academic writing as an intentional craft rather than simply a transcription of ideas onto paper. The walls of Terry’s classroom were covered in pieces of butcher paper, each one offering detailed ideas about how to approach a particular writing task, such as brainstorming an argument or organizing an argumentative essay. Terry’s goal for these posters was not to teach a formula for writing, but rather to make explicit many of the implicit aspects and processes of academic writing that his students might not be aware of. For instance, given that many argumentative writing tasks ask students to take a strong position on an issue, Terry guided his students through a long discussion centered on the question, “What if you don’t have a strong opinion about the topic? What if you don’t care?” Through this discussion, Terry helped his students see how they could write strong argumentative essays even when they didn’t feel passionately about a topic, such as by deciding on a position to take by weighing evidence and refuting opposing claims.

These discussions not only demystified the academic writing processes that many high-achieving high school writers use unconsciously, but they helped students see how they could present themselves as confident academic writers even if they didn’t have strong opinions about specific topics or
didn’t always find it easy, as one student said, “to get my words from my head to the page.” Thus, explicit discussions about argument writing strategies contributed to the important identity work that Rex and Cone show is essential for students who are new to AP and honors classes and are still developing both their literacy skills and academic identities.

Connecting Reading to Students’ Writing
Over the past three years, Terry has noticed that despite being connected to the world full-time via cell phones and mobile Internet, his students are not well-informed about the world outside of their communities. This kind of knowledge is invaluable to students in an AP class for reasons far beyond the obvious social relevance. On the writing prompts for the AP Language and Composition exam, students are expected to write commentary about the global significance of arguments and provide evidence from all aspects of society to support claims.

To address this, Terry uses an idea from the NMSI partnership to help students build a broader social, cultural, and political context. Every other week, students are required to find an editorial in a major US media outlet and use it to study argument, purpose, and the use of various appeals in organizing an argument. Terry provides students with possible sources to search, and as they gain confidence in this assignment, he asks them to search for particular kinds of editorials, such as ones written by women or focused on popular culture. Students first read and annotate the text. After annotating, students apply a commonly used AP strategy for quickly analyzing a text called SOAPSTone; this strategy asks students to identify the Subject, Occasion, Audience, Purpose, Speaker, and Tone of the editorial. They then combine all of this information into a paragraph. This task helps students gain mastery in analyzing and writing about argumentation, but it also exposes them to current news and debates so that they can have a broader political, cultural, and historical frame of reference.

Terry then uses these collected editorials not only as critical reading tools but also as tools to improve writing. Students work collaboratively in small groups to identify the arguments in their collected editorials and summarize each in a sentence. Producing a clear statement of each argument helps students practice for the exam since this ability is essential to answering all three of the AP Language and Composition essay prompts. After making the list, each group chooses one argument to write about. By adding the statement “defend, challenge, or qualify this argument” to the students’ statements about each editorial, the students create their own AP practice prompt. Groups then work together to collect evidence from each of the following categories: science, technology, pop culture, sports, politics, history, and literature in response to the topic of the argument. As a group, students determine the quality of the evidence for and against the argument originally made by the writer. As a final step, each student writes an argument essay based on the prompt created by their
group. This assignment, like many others in Terry’s class, connects critical reading to academic writing in an explicit, scaffolded manner, while at the same time broadening students’ global, political, and cultural knowledge.

**Scaffolding through Engaging Content**

Finally, Terry provided what Rubin calls “multiple points of entry” into the AP curriculum by introducing rhetorical and argumentative concepts with familiar texts, such as TV commercials, before asking students to apply these concepts to more academic, less familiar texts (8). For instance, the AP essay prompt that Terry chose for students’ first practice AP essay, given to them shortly after the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, was focused on the topic of justice. As students discussed how they generated evidence for this topic, Terry noted, “Don’t make anything up. All of you have seen instances of injustice. You, a friend, a family member, on TV . . . . This prompt leads itself to many civil rights examples in the United States.” Similarly, since not all of his students were certain that they wanted to attend college, Terry used the more familiar cultural texts in his curriculum to make connections between academic reading, writing, and thinking and everyday goals, such as assessing the truthfulness of advertisements. Throughout his curriculum, Terry framed each new process or strategy, including students’ meta-cognitive reflections on their own learning, as a life skill that would benefit students no matter what their future goals or careers.

**The Challenge of Equity in AP English**

Each teaching strategy above supported the major goals of Terry’s class. Each of these instructional strategies also assisted the diverse learners in Terry’s class to engage in a rigorous curriculum whatever their academic histories, and become more aware of themselves as readers, writers, and learners.

Though it was challenging, Terry was able to address the needs of more diverse AP students by being more explicit about the processes of academic reading and writing and by helping students be more conscious of (and confident in) their abilities as readers and writers. In Pittsburgh Public Schools, the increase in access to and support of historically underrepresented students in AP classes has required both district-level program changes as well as changes in teachers’ teaching strategies. The results of these changes demonstrate that these efforts have led to greater educational equity for Terry’s students and for all students in the district. Similar to the 200 percent increase in the number of students of color taking AP courses districtwide since 2012, the number of students of color taking one or more AP class at Brashear High School has increased by 141 percent during that time. However, increases in passing scores on AP exams among students of color at Brashear High School have not been as dramatic as Terry or other teachers have hoped for. Although the number of African American students at Brashear High School who received scores of 3 or above on the AP exam has increased 60 percent since 2012, this represents an increase from five to eight African American students. Terry, other teachers at his school, and the school district leadership believe that they are laying the groundwork for a school culture in which all students will be prepared for AP exams and that will begin to show more dramatic results this year.

In the three years that Terry has taught AP Language and Composition in an open enrollment classroom, he’s learned that the needs of his more diverse AP students are not so different from the needs of his “gifted” AP students from the past and that the changes he has made to his teaching strategies have benefitted all students, those labeled “gifted” and “talented” as well as those who don’t come to his class with those labels. He has come to see that each of his students learns in a slightly different way and maybe at a different pace, but they can all meet the challenge of the AP Language and Composition curriculum. Terry is still continually developing new ways he can help his students succeed and continues to ask himself, “How do I scaffold, pace, and interact to get students to a better place?” Terry believes even more strongly now that every student who wants to challenge himself or herself with AP courses should have access to them because the challenge and the learning along the way are as valuable as test scores. 

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**Works Cited**


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**READWRTETHINK CONNECTION**

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

The article suggests using editorials as tools not only for reading but also for writing. The ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan “Modeling Academic Writing through Scholarly Article Presentations” invites students to prepare an already published scholarly article for presentation, with an emphasis on identification of the author’s thesis and argument structure. http://bit.ly/1C2HTPK

**Physics Test**

She bites her lip, then her nails. She twirls a pencil in her hand, finally catching the point in her damp calloused palm. She is tighter than the laces of her high-topped Cons, with a present darker than her mascara, and a future in opposition to the properties of light.

She equals something smaller than the squared speeding mass of her eggshell heart fretting upon this test. She glances at the wall, then winces at the clock, pondering the conservation of what matters versus speeding space and time.

—Lou Ventura

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