

# An Analysis Of If The Advanced Placement: World History Modern Reading Is Effective Teacher Professional Development

By Christina Cone, Ed.D.

## Abstract

This study explored if the Advanced Placement (AP) World History: Modern Reading is effective teacher professional development (PD). The researcher used a mixed methods explanatory sequential design. A survey was completed by 83 AP World History: Modern high school teachers who had attended the AP World History: Modern on-site Reading. The researcher then conducted a focus group discussion with eight participants to study teacher perceptions of the Reading experience. Quantitative and qualitative results were integrated in order to gain a deeper understanding.

The researcher found that attending the AP World History: Modern on-site Reading is beneficial teacher professional development. The structure of the in-person Reading allows for collaboration, engages participants and is relevant to the attendees' classroom practice.

## Introduction

The Advanced Placement World History: Modern (APWH) course focuses on a study of the world from 1200 CE to the present. High school students enrolled in this class learn content and specific skills, such as understanding historical context, analyzing primary and secondary sources, making connections, and developing and supporting arguments. Students must demonstrate their knowledge of both content and skills on an examination administered each May. Teachers of AP courses do not need a master's degree in the content area of the AP course, unlike the requirements for dual credit courses (Sadler et al., 2010). In 2002, College Board implemented an AP teacher survey to gauge information regarding AP teacher training and experience. From data collected from 32,109 AP teachers, Milewski and Gillie (2002) found that many AP teachers participated in some form of professional development before teaching the course. The most common were one-day workshops and Advanced Placement Summer Institutes (APSI) sponsored by the College Board. However, the percentage of teachers who attended those trainings was still low compared to other

forms of indicated PD, such as reviewing released exams and AP course materials. In addition, only a small percentage participated in the AP Reading.

According to the College Board, the AP Reading is purported to afford participants the opportunity to learn more about the exam and how to assess students (College Board, 2021). The College Board holds the AP Reading each June, with the disciplines allocated to one of four different reading locations. There are also options for Distributed Readers, who score components of the exams from their homes. The on-site Reading takes place over a seven-day period and Readers work for eight hours each day.

Due to her experience as a College Board consultant teaching APSIs, serving as a table leader at the Reading, as an administrator working with teachers, and from engaging in discourse with APWH teachers, this researcher believes that many teachers of this course need professional development. The researcher designed this study to evaluate if the AP World History: Modern Reading is effective teacher professional development.

## Literature Review

Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) defined effective teacher professional development as "structured professional learning that results in changes in teacher practices and improvements in student learning outcomes" (para. 3). Many researchers (Desimone et al., 2002, 2009; Fischer et al., 2019; Klein & Riordan, 2009; Small et al., 2020; Thomas-Brown et al., 2016) concluded that there were essential features of professional development that rendered it effective. Desimone's Core Conceptual Framework (2002) highlighted the importance of teacher professional development (TPD) that was content-related, allowed for collective participation, was of a sustained duration, allowed for active learning, and demonstrated coherence.

Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), Firestone et al. (2020), Hauge (2019), Kennedy (2016), O'Brien et al. (2008), Sims and Fletcher-Wood (2021), and Varga-Atkins et al. (2009) added to the list of characteristics of effective teacher professional development the importance of coaching or expert support, opportunities for teacher reflection and feedback, a focus on teacher input, teacher motivation, and the role of school district administration.

## Research Design and Methodology

This study used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design. In phase one of the study, the researcher used an online Likert style survey to collect quantitative data. The quantitative data analysis helped inform the researcher's decisions as to which participants to seek for the second phase of study, which consisted of a focus group discussion. The researcher then triangulated the data as she integrated the two strands for analysis and comparison.

A total of 83 AP World History: Modern teachers who had attended the on-site Reading responded to the teacher survey that was posted on a closed AP World History Teachers Facebook page of over 7,000 members, as well as on a Facebook AP World At-Home Nerdfest (2021) page which consisted of 531 readers.

The researcher first used quantitative analysis to investigate the research question. She performed descriptive statistics and conducted bivariate analysis to examine relationships between variables. The quantitative data analysis helped inform the researcher's decisions regarding where to seek elaboration and clarification of results. The researcher then conducted a focus group discussion with eight participants. The researcher conducted thematic analysis of the qualitative data and then linked the quantitative results from all participants with the qualitative findings from the focus group participants for the purpose of further explanation and increased understanding of the research question.

## Results, Conclusions and Discussion

The results and findings indicated that the AP World History: Modern Reading is beneficial professional development. No respondents disagreed with that statement, and the majority strongly agreed. While survey respondents were under no obligation to share additional comments, quite a few volunteered that the Reading was "Hands down the best PD I have experienced throughout my teaching career. I always recommend it to anyone capable of going," and "This is the best PD I do for my AP instructional practices."

The study investigated what might lead participants to that perception. The researcher utilized Desimone's Core Conceptual Framework (2009) as an evaluative tool. Desimone claimed that there were core critical features of effective teacher professional development: a focus on content, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation. The researcher also identified

additional characteristics from a review of other literature that posited the additional importance of the role of administration, the impact of trainers, teacher input, and teacher attitude toward PD. The researcher studied which factors correlated with participants indicating stronger agreements with the benefits of the Reading. Based on this study's findings, the on-site Reading structure reflected many of those elements.

## Content

Participants' perceptions about learning content from the Reading varied. According to the literature, researchers found that professional development that emphasized discipline-specific curriculum improved student learning because the focus on content correlated with the relevance of the PD for teacher participants (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Many participants strongly agreed (62.7%) or agreed (31.3%) that the Reading improved their content knowledge and spoke to how reading student work and speaking with colleagues, some of whom are college professors, helped improve their content knowledge. However, others disagreed (6%), and commented that "in-depth content learning isn't what I have gained."

The data showed that in the earlier years of the Reading there was more of an emphasis on providing content enrichment for participants. Survey and focus group participants discussed "evening speaker events" held in earlier years which increased their content knowledge.

## Teacher Engagement

Desimone (2009) referred to teacher engagement as "active learning." Studies of professional development programs found that lecture-based PD was less likely to translate into improved teacher knowledge (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Garet et al., 2001). At the Reading, participants score student free response questions (FRQs), which is an example of active learning.

The majority of participants strongly agreed (67.5%) or agreed (30.1%) that the Reading engaged them as a learner. One participant noted, "the in-person Read is by far better professional development and more engaging as both a learner and regarding collaboration with colleagues." In addition, after speaking with focus group participants, the researcher felt there was an overlap between engagement and relevance. For example, teachers spoke of the benefits of scoring student work and the direct connection the activity had on their classroom practice.

## Relevance

Desimone referred to relevance as 'coherence' in her Core Conceptual Framework. Relevance is the extent to which professional development aligns with a teachers' goals and a teachers' curriculum (Desimone et al., 2002; 2011). The statistical results of the Reading's relevance to the participants' classroom teaching of the course were very simi-

lar to the results for engagement. Based on the quantitative and qualitative data, the researcher summarized that the practice of scoring student work at the Reading is relevant to the classroom practices of AP World History: Modern teachers. Participants shared,

- "The grading itself is immensely useful for learning what College Board is looking for when scoring and has certainly shaped how I approach my course."
- "Seeing the trends of students from the previous year makes it better for my current students to avoid those pitfalls."
- "The AP Read has provided me with valuable insight into the scoring rubrics, as well as the writing structure of all FRQs."

### **Duration**

Similar to the findings in the literature review about the duration necessary for a PD opportunity to translate to meaningful learning, there was also not unanimity as to the appropriateness of the duration of the AP World History: Modern Reading. The on-site AP World History: Modern Reading takes place over seven days, and Readers work eight hours daily. Through the quantitative analysis, the researcher identified a direct relationship between duration and whether or not participants felt that the Reading was beneficial professional development. However, the researcher could not deduce from the quantitative data alone whether respondents felt the duration was too long, too short, or just right. Therefore, during the focus group, the researcher asked that specific question. Some participants expressed that three to four days was needed to learn and to be able to apply the rubric. Others spoke to the need for more breaks and the concern that when the duration was too long "it can cause people to get sloppy in their grading and...lead to inconsistency."

The researcher reports that there is the sense among some that the Reading "is more about a race to grade the exams rather than talk through things on the exams." One participant said, "they [College Board or ETS] are driving us, like, you know, there's pressure to get it done." The duration allocated is not necessarily what is best from a professional development standpoint, but rather more utilitarian surrounding the need to score all student responses.

### **Collaboration**

Much of the literature reviewed that related to collective participation espoused the importance of teacher collaboration in professional development. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) found PD that was collaborative aided in positive results as "teachers create a collective force for

improved instruction and serve as support groups for each other's work on their practice" (p. 10). The findings from this study indicated that teachers enthusiastically valued the collaborative nature of the Reading. All participants agreed that collaboration contributed to their learning, with 90.4% of respondents rating it a 4 (strongly agree).

At the on-site Reading, participants worked at a table with seven other Readers and a Table Leader. As a result, participants reported they shared ideas and made connections with fellow Readers and leaders. All focus group participants discussed the benefits of working with others and many opted to write about collaboration on the survey. In addition, many participants shared that they were the only teacher of the course at their school and felt this was one of the few opportunities to learn from peers and build a network of support. Some participant comments about the benefits of collaboration at the Reading were:

- "The ability to communicate with other teachers that are in the trenches with you is invaluable, especially when you're the only teacher of the subject in your school. No one understands as well as someone that has gone through it also. The exchange of techniques and lessons, the confirmation that you are doing it right, the comradery and the fellowship and friendships make the long hours reading worth it."
- "As the only teacher in my building that teaches AP World History, the ability to connect with other teachers that understand my content is invaluable. I have learned from fellow high school teachers as well as made connections with college professors that I would not have had the ability to do if not for the on-site Reading. The professional connections with these fellow educators have profoundly influenced my teaching."

### **Role of Administration**

Researchers found that it was difficult for teachers to engage in meaningful PD without the support of their administration (Fischer et al., 2020; Hauge, 2019; Klopfenstein, 2003; Kyndt et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2019; Varga-Atkins, 2009). However, this researcher did not find the role of administration to have an impact in this study. In quantitative analysis, the researcher did not identify a dependence between the support of administration and whether the Reading was seen as beneficial professional development. As a result, the researcher did not discuss the topic during the focus group discussion.

The researcher believes there are a couple of reasons why this factor did not prove meaningful. First, the Reading is held in June when many school districts are not in session. Therefore, many participants do not have to seek release time from school. In addition, the costs associated with attending are paid for by the College Board and not by the teacher or school district.

## Teacher Input and Attitudes

As mentioned, the Reading takes place in June. Therefore, high school is no longer in session in many parts of the country and teachers are on summer break. Based on the timing of the Reading, many participants voluntarily give up some of their summer holiday. Studies by Kennedy (2016) and Martin et al., (2019) found that when teachers are mandated to attend PD as opposed to choosing to attend, there is less success. Participants in this study reported an intrinsic desire to attend. The teacher questionnaire results showed that 98.7% of participants strongly agreed or agreed that the decision to attend was self-motivated.

Klein and Riordan (2008) determined that the teachers' level of excitement about the PD was a determining factor in how much implementation took place. In this case, the researcher also believed that the level of excitement played a role in how Readers recommended attending the Read to others. For example, a participant exclaimed, "I was highly encouraged to participate in the Reading by the previous APWH teacher in my building and I do the same to other AP teachers I meet." Further evidence to support this claim was that 70 of the 83 survey respondents had attended the Reading more than once.

## Role of Leaders

Much literature on teacher professional development discussed the trainer's or leader's impact on teacher learning. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) and Firestone et al. (2020) concluded that "expert input" provided a supportive role for teachers and was a determinant in whether the PD offering was effective. In this study, participants had mixed feelings about whether the Table Leader at the AP World History: Modern Reading was beneficial to aiding in their learning. This question received more disagree responses than any other (8.4%). The researcher investigated this further in the focus group discussion.

Many participants raved about their experiences with Table Leaders and expressed how the Table Leaders provided meaningful feedback. A survey participant supported a finding from Kennedy (2016) that individuals who led effective programs had experience working with teachers and truly understood their participants' problems and experiences. The respondent in this study shared that "The discussions were very beneficial, especially if the TL was a good high school teacher."

Participants also expressed their dissatisfaction with scoring in the absence of a Table Leader, as can happen in a virtual setting at times. The reoccurring comments about the structure of the virtual Read in relation to the role of the Table Leader substantiated the value that Readers placed on having good leadership.

However, both in the focus group and through the survey, participants shed light on problems with leadership. In the focus group discussion, a participant shared,

I'd say, let's say 90% of the leadership, the best leaders are the ones that are going to give that feedback and put their ego to the side if they're challenged. The only issue that I've seen is...when ego gets in the way.

That participant also discussed the power that some have to blacklist others from advancing. A survey participant similarly stated, "I disagree with the way that the leadership assigns roles. I feel that I had to know someone to get into my role."

## Summary

The results and findings indicated that the AP World History: Modern Reading is beneficial professional development and that the teachers' decision to attend was self-motivated. Participants indicated that actively scoring student work was engaging and relevant to their classroom practice. In addition, participants perceived that the ability to collaborate with others also contributed to their learning. While 56 hours of scoring students work was thought by some to be too lengthy, participants indicated that it was of a long enough duration for them to gain understanding and to support their learning. The perception of the role of the Table Leader and of the ability to learn content varied amongst participants. There was limited indication that the support of administration played a role in whether the Reading was seen as beneficial professional development.

## References

- College Board. (2021). *Become an AP reader - AP CENTRAL: College Board*. AP Central. <https://apcentral.collegeboard.org/professional-learning/become-an-ap-reader>.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M., & Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective teacher professional development*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED606743>
- Desimone, L. M. (2009). Improving impact studies of teachers' professional development: Toward better conceptualizations and measures. *Educational Researcher*, 38(3), 181-199. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x08331140>
- Desimone, L. M., Porter, A. C., Garet, M. S., Yoon, K. S., & Birman, B. F. (2002). Effects of professional development on teachers' instruction: Results from a three-year longitudinal study. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 24(2), 81-112. <https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737024002081>
- Desimone, L. M. (2011). A Primer on Effective Professional Development. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 92(6), 68-71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003172171109200616>

- Firestone, A. R., Cruz, R. A., & Rodl, J. E. (2020). Teacher study groups: An integrative literature synthesis. *Review of Educational Research*, 90(5), 675-709. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654320938128>
- Fischer, C., Fishman, B., & Schoenebeck, S. Y. (2019a). New Contexts for Professional Learning: Analyzing High School Science Teachers' engagement on Twitter. *AERA Open*, 5(4), 233285841989425. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858419894252>
- Fischer, C., Foster, B., McCoy, A., Lawrenz, F., Dede, C., Eisenkraft, A., Fishman, B. J., Fruman, K., & Levy, A. J. (2020, November 30). *Identifying levers related to student performance on high-stakes science exams: Examining school, teaching, teacher, and professional development characteristics*. Teachers College Record. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1268516>
- Garet, M. S., Porter, A. C., Desimone, L., Birman, B. F., & Yoon, K. S. (2001). What makes professional development effective? Results from a national sample of teachers. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38(4), 915-945. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312038004915>
- Hauge, K. (2019). Teachers' collective professional development in school: A review study. *Cogent Education*, 6(1), 1619223. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186x.2019.1619223>
- Kennedy, M. M. (n.d.). *How does professional development improve teaching? - Mary M. Kennedy, 2016*. SAGE Journals. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.3102/0034654315626800>.
- Klein, E. J., & Riordan, M. (2009, November 30). Putting professional development into practice: A framework for how teachers in expeditionary learning schools implement professional development. *Teacher Education Quarterly*. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ870215>.
- Klopfenstein, K. (2003). Recommendations for maintaining the quality of Advanced Placement programs. *American Secondary Education*; Fall 2003; 32, 1; Education Database.
- Kyndt, E., Gijbels, D., Grosemans, I., & Donche, V. (2016). Teachers' everyday professional development. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(4), 1111-1150. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654315627864>
- Martin, L. E., Kragler, S., Quatroche, D. J., & Bauserman, K. L. (1970, January 1). *Transforming schools: The power of teachers' input in professional development: Semantic scholar*. undefined. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Transforming-Schools%3A-The-Power-of-Teachers'-Input-Martin-Kragler/5888787dacb8ca7395d0010ad6f58555d79bbfce>
- Milewski, G. B., & Gillie, J.M. (2002). *What are the characteristics of AP® teachers? An examination of survey research. Research report no. 2002-10*. College Board. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED561050>
- O'Brien, M., Varga-Atkins, T., Burton, D., Campbell, A., & Qualter, A. (2008). How are the perceptions of learning networks shaped among school professionals and headteachers at an early stage in their introduction? *International Review of Education / Internationale Zeitschrift Für Erziehungswissenschaft / Revue Internationale de l'Education*, 54(2), 211-242. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27715456>
- Sadler, P. M., Sonnert, G., Tai, R. H., & Klopfenstein, K. (2010). *AP: A critical examination of the advanced placement program*. Harvard Education Press.
- Sims, S., & Fletcher-Wood, H. (2021). Identifying the characteristics of effective teacher professional development: A critical review. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 32(1), 47-63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2020.1772841>
- Small, R., Thessin, R. A., & Dardick, W. R. (2020, October 21). *Professional development for teachers of Advanced Placement courses*. Journal of Professional Capital and Community. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPC-02-2020-0007>.
- Thomas-Brown, K., Shaffer, L. S., & Werner, S. (2016). An analysis of how building a collaborative community of professional social studies teachers through targeted ambient professional development impacts social studies classroom practices. *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, 4(11). <https://doi.org/10.11114/jets.v4i11.1814>
- Varga-Atkins, T., O'Brien, M., Burton, D., Campbell, A., & Qualter, A. (2009). The importance of interplay between school-based and networked professional development: School professionals' experiences of inter-school collaborations in learning networks. *Journal of Educational Change*, 11(3), 241-272. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-009-9127-9>
- Christina Cone, Ed.D. is a District Social Studies Chairperson in the Bellmore-Merrick Central High School District in New York.