

Differentiated Instruction in Mr. Jones' Social Studies Classes

A Tier 1 Intervention Plan

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Introduction

"Differentiated Instruction" refers to a teaching method that tries to maximize student achievement by creating a wide variety of different ways to learn and to demonstrate that learning. The reason that this will potentially maximize student achievement is that people are different and matching how people learn will most likely help them to learn better (Subban, 2006).

The "Traditional Approach" I would define as a "one size fits all" set of lessons that is some variation of the following procedure:

1. Teacher lecture
2. Reading from textbook
3. Read-write activity such as answering questions from the textbook and completing worksheets
4. Set of written homework consisting of activities like in step 3
5. Test

An informal look at the standardized test results of students taught this way at SLCS from 2001-2009 (Jones, Social Studies Class Analysis, 2009) reveals that this method only works for roughly half of the students – and by "works" I mean they can pass. A far smaller number of people can make great academic achievement when taught in this method. It remains popular in some quarters because this method worked well for the people who eventually became teachers and for those who went on to college. It is how most adults were taught, so they accept it and expect it unquestioningly from the schools.

When we who were educated in New York State were in school in the 70s and 80s, there were at least two tiers of difficulty: Regents and Local Diploma. Though most everyone was taught using some variation of the traditional approach, those in the track for local diploma were not expected to retain as much information as those seeking the Regents diploma. The teacher's grading system in local diploma classes was generally easier and so were the demands and students who, for the most part, passed.

In the late 1990s, this two-tiered system was eliminated. All students were expected to reach Regents level and schools became increasingly accountable for how students performed. If they only would work hard enough and get enough outside extra help, the thinking goes; everyone will reach the Regents standard.

Though I am not convinced personally that this change was the right thing to do (and at the time I was behind it 100%), it is there and it must be addressed. I accept my responsibility to bring my students to the standard set by the people who have the right to set those standards and who employ me to bring students to those standards. Students cannot all meet those standards using the traditional approach. However, I

conclude now that I can get an average of 90% to those standards if I differentiate my approach. Further, I submit that a differentiated approach will level out variation in student achievement on standardized tests over the years such that classes populated by lower performing students should perform almost as well as those more evenly mixed.

Step 1: Align My Grading System with the Standards

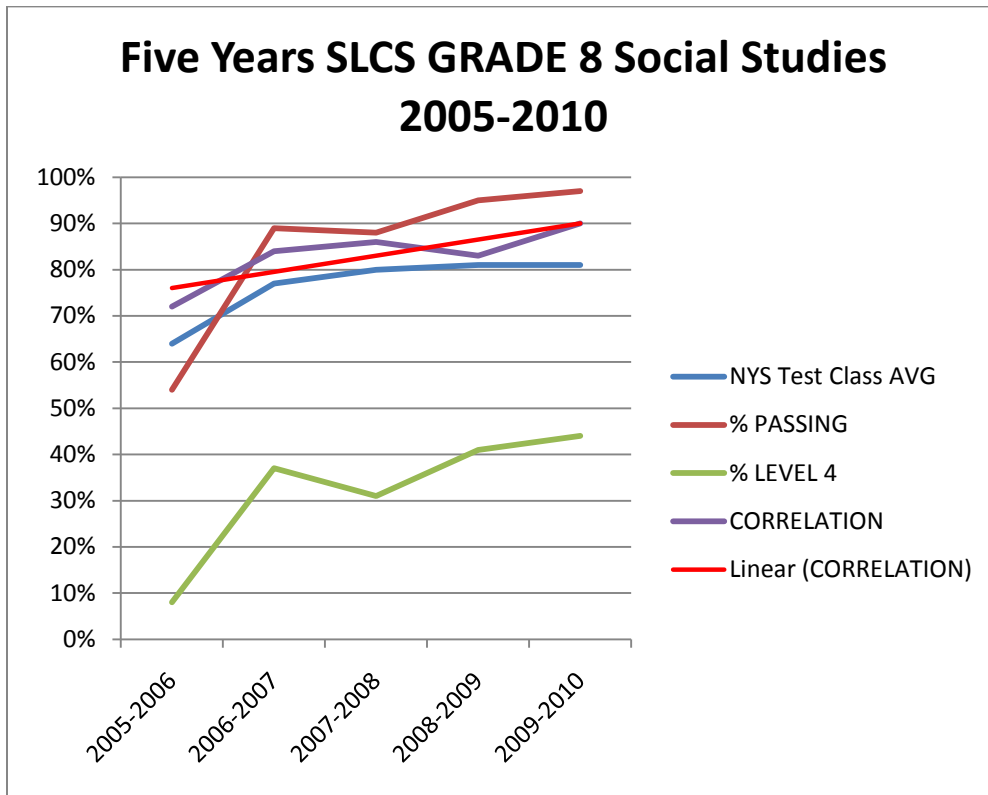
If everyone is to meet the standards, then my grading system has to measure it so I know when it is happening. I feel that many teacher grading systems inflate grades and include a lot of irrelevant data, which is evident by the discrepancy between what students achieve on standardized tests and what grades they earn in classes. My grading system must be highly predictive of how students will perform on the standardized test. This means that I use the same rubrics as the standardized test, that I include questions from old standardized tests in my own assessments, and that on the whole my grades reflect the knowledge students have actually acquired and the thinking they can actually do. This last bit is important: it means that grades cannot be reward-punishment (such as giving credit for having a sheet signed by parent) and that they must be almost always seen as some legitimate measure in much the same way as the scale at the doctor's office should reveal one's actual weight. Students should score on the state test about what they score overall in my class.

To test the validity of my measures, I test the correlation with performance on the standardized test for my course not only of the final marks but each individual rubric. One of the chief dangers of not having had my grading system aligned with the standards in my first year teaching this subject was that I could not accurately diagnose problems. The second issue was that the program looked ridiculous when students scoring A's in the course scored C's on the exam.

The current correlation coefficient between overall grades in my class and scores on the standardized test for the class is 0.836 (Jones, Analysis of the Grade Eight Midterm in January 2010, a Commentary on the Positive Role of Differentiated Instruction Method, and an Examination of the Improvement of a Uniquely Low-performing Cohort over Seven Months, 2010). This figure gives me confidence in the assessments. As an ongoing project, I regularly collect data on my rubrics and run correlation "exercises" to determine their validity. By June 2010, the correlation was 0.90. Since the state no longer offers that test, this will be the last year I can track this in quite the same way.

As illustrated by the following graph, a strong case may be made that a class grading system that is highly correlated with standardized testing could increase student achievement and increase the percentage of higher performing students. As the correlation between the state test and classroom average rose from 2005 to 2010,

so too did the percentage of passing students and the percentage of students scoring at level 4 (≥ 85).



Assessment in the Differentiated Classroom

The biggest error I see among some who present, lecture and write on differentiated instruction is that some have not maintained a strong assessment system. Some, for example, give equal credit to a model of a medieval fortress and an analytical essay on medieval siege strategy. These two tasks do not have equal value.

To Fattig and Taylor in their book *Co-Teaching in the Differentiated Classroom* (Fattig & Taylor, 2008, p. 44), "assessment is a means for determining what a student needs to learn next." The authors continue: "Think about it: if, classroom to classroom, grade to grade, teacher to teacher, we do not have a common philosophy about the purpose of grades and what they represent, why do we place so much importance on grades in our public school system? There is absolutely no consistency." (Fattig & Taylor, 2008, p. 98) The authors are arguing that because of a lack of consistency, no measurement is valid. I find this argument very weak indeed. It would be like saying because some builders use meters and some use feet and some use cubits and that some buildings are different sizes than others, measurement does not exist and is not a valid or reliable practice. In answer to the authors of this book, whom I feel to have seriously missed the boat on this issue, I would argue that we can indeed measure whether a person knows something or not and we can indeed identify whether

something like analysis or synthesis has taken place. What unit we use to measure it and what cutoff we assign may vary from place to place, of course. The existence of standardized tests composed of field tested questions applied to a large number of pupils gives us a very strong standard by which to judge.

Differentiated instruction is a method that successfully responds to the increasing diversity of our classrooms (Subban, 2006) and the increasing demands in the State of New York on these students. However, if students are in the same room and if the report card lists the same course for all students, then their work must all be judged by the same standard. In the section on modified curriculum later on, I explain my solution for addressing assessment.

Step 2: Develop a Variety of Inputs

The Range of Information Sources

Information sources are available in this class in the form of auditory and text media. Within each medium, there is a range of difficulty level defined by complexity, speed, and vocabulary.

The list and range of auditory media, in order of difficulty from most to least, is as follows: college level professors' commercially-recorded 30-minute lectures, commercially-produced video documentary (available for most topics), audio version of the middle school level textbook, the one or two weekly whole-class 25-minute teacher presentations and teacher-made video presentations.

The list and range of text media, in order of difficulty from most to least, is as follows: internet (most internet searching returns college level reading sources), high school textbook, middle school textbook, a "basic" textbook and the basic proficiency statements (see below for the basic proficiency modified curriculum model).

In addition to these, students have access to each others' notes, the teacher's PowerPoint presentations, and the middle school textbook publisher's guided notes and summaries. These represent partial information in outline form that are more involved in processing than acquiring information and generally are inadequate as complete sources in and of themselves.

What permits the course to welcome such a wide variety of sources is that the guiding principle of the course is not a textbook, but the New York State Social Studies Core Curriculum. The curriculum has been analyzed and transformed into a set of key questions, quizzes in short answer format, the answers to which students may seek in any legitimate source or group of sources.

About Reading and Textbooks

As an average over three recent years, around a third of our 6th graders scored a "low 3" on the New York State English Language Arts Test. Though by the state reckoning this indicates the students are reading on grade level, my practical experience is such that students scoring at this level or lower cannot independently read the typical middle school level textbook in Social Studies.

Besides skills like fluency, decoding, and knowing the meaning of words, the ability to understand text in subjects like Social Studies depends a great deal on prior knowledge (Lee, 2010). Put more simply, students have to already know a certain amount about the material they are reading in order to understand it and to remember it. This is why building a solid base of knowledge in our students is so important and why a focus on worksheets and similar information transfer tasks is so misguided. In short, to learn more history, my students need to know history.

If we want to see improvement in reading among our middle school students, they need not only to acquire knowledge, but they need to read a lot and that reading needs to be material they can read (Allington, 2009, p. 31).

The implications for the structure of my program are these:

1. There will be a focus on the acquisition of knowledge and application of higher order thinking. Students will have access to non-text sources of information (video lessons, recorded lectures, teacher whole-group lessons, cooperative learning groups). This is usually a time-efficient way for struggling readers to acquire knowledge. It has been my experience this year that struggling readers are much slowed down even by the "basic" text, however, and so providing non-text sources helps relieve the stress for them, permits them to keep up with the minimum pace of the course, and still supports their developing reading.
2. Students will have access to textbooks at their reading level (there are three levels of texts for my students from which they may choose: a "basic" text on a 4th-5th grade reading level, a standard middle school text, and a high school text for more advanced readers).

Research on differentiated instruction shows students make no significant gains in reading ability in differentiated classrooms as measured by standardized literacy tests (Subban, 2006). I believe I can offer an explanation for this: in a differentiated classroom, students gravitate toward information sources and processing methods that most suit them. The struggling reader will not use reading-writing most of the time, when he finds such greater success with oral-aural learning activities. I remain committed to helping the people in my classes grow as readers, especially those reading below grade level. However, content needs to be my priority. The two, reading growth and content knowledge acquisition, seem to be at times mutually exclusive because (1) it takes the struggling reader so much more time to learn from reading even using the

basic text and there is a minimum pace at which the class proceeds; (2) the amount of reading at grade level necessary to develop reading growth is significant (Allington, 2009) and perhaps beyond the time available.

It is my hope that the following elements of the course will continue to support the development of the struggling reader:

1. Requiring two “outline-compose” tasks for each topic for those selecting basic proficiency (explained below.)
2. Training in outlining
3. Availability of texts at an easier reading level
4. The focus on acquiring knowledge should help readers develop the background knowledge to understand texts in this discipline.

Step 3: Teach Everyone How to Sift Information from a Selected Source, Organize it, and learn it

Information Processing

For five years, I dedicated serious effort in the beginning of grade seven to training students in a variety of content area reading strategies. Experience, discussions with colleagues and reading research have convinced me that it is access to books students can read that counts. I was wrong in thinking that, with teacher help and training in strategies, students could push themselves through to learn from texts that were above their level (Allington, 2009, p. 31). Though I will continue to teach content reading strategies, I will narrow this training to what I consider to be the best information processing method and I will apply more training so that students learn to do this well. The method I have chosen is the outline. Outlines can be used to process both text and auditory information sources,

I consider outlining to be the most effective information processing tool I have to offer. Firstly, it is supported by research (Anderson & Armbruster, 1984, pp. 672-673). Students who are trained to outline (and this will require more training than some other strategies) have at their disposal an “effective attention-focusing and processing device” (Anderson & Armbruster, 1984). The traditional outline encourages remembering the material on a long term basis because we remember information better that is organized. It also supports reading comprehension because it calls upon the student to organize the information hierarchically, make selections about what is important and what is not, and differentiate between main ideas and supporting details. It is also likely to be a good indicator for me when evaluating the appropriateness of a text for a student. If he cannot outline it, he likely cannot really read it independently.

Outlining will be part of everyone's training at the start of seventh grade Social Studies. Students choosing the basic proficiency path (see below on modified curriculum) will have at least one outline-compose task for each topic. (An outline-compose task is to transform the outline into a composition).

Questioning and devising questions using Bloom's Taxonomy will continue to be a part of the seventh grader's training, since student-generated questions while studying have been shown in some studies to be moderately effective, especially for low- and middle-performing students (Anderson & Armbruster, 1984, p. 672). Outlining and questioning can be combined into the Cornell Note Taking Format.

Once a month in grades seven and eight, there will be a notebook inspection. The inspection consists of a conference with each student during which we compare the processing method to the quiz grade on the question set and discuss any need for improvement. Some important coaching about learning, source selection, and information processing happen during these meetings. Information processing is evaluated based on its completeness, accuracy, readiness for study (organized, in students own words, ready for rehearsal and elaboration).

About Homework

Homework is unimportant, bordering on counterproductive, in this context. For the age group, subject matter, and local culture in which I work, homework serves no important purpose and will be exceedingly rare for my students. This is the research and this is my experience. Middle school students derive little benefit from homework (Cooper, Synthesis of Research on Homework, 1989, p. 88). Elementary students (my incoming seventh graders are really still elementary students) do not benefit from homework and should instead have supervised study (Cooper, The Battle over Homework: Common Ground for Administrators, Teachers, and Parents, 2007, p. 23). High school students can greatly improve their achievement with homework, but that is only if they do it.

The only homework students in these courses can anticipate is to study before the monthly examination and monthly essay and in the event that one has fallen behind the minimum pace for the course. In 2010, a change was made from home study for quizzes to supervised in-class study for quizzes. In a report on the effects, I found that not only did the short-term-memory task (quiz) grades increase, but the class performance on the monthly examination, a long-term-memory task, also improved. Even study for quizzes, then, will occur in class on a supervised study basis. That 90% on average of students have passed the 8th grade NYS Social Studies test since 2007 (Jones, Social Studies Class Analysis, 2009) in an environment with little or no homework supports the idea that homework does not affect student achievement in this context.

Step 4: Develop a Variety of Outputs

Standard Assessments for Everyone

There are three standard assessments each month that are administered to all students regardless of other elements of the course or what proficiency level they have chosen (standard or basic): an examination in short-answer format, a thematic essay, and a listening task. The questions for the examination are distributed a week in advance, are reviewed in a whole-class review session the day before the exam, and are derived from the standard and basic proficiency quizzes students have been working on all along. The thematic essay topic is distributed a week in advance. The listening task is an analysis of a primary source students have listened to, usually a 7-10 minute selection read by me twice.

The quizzes are short-term memory tasks. Standard proficiency quizzes are derived from the NYS Social Studies Core curriculum. These are mostly short response in format and may be taken “on an installment basis” (one question at a time). Basic proficiency quizzes are multiple-choice questions from old NYS Intermediate Social Studies tests. These are based on a set of statements students memorize in their own words prior to taking the quiz.

Multiple-choice format may be used for the standard quizzes from time to time, such as when time constraints require covering a large amount of material in a short amount of time or when factual, conceptual, or procedural information is being assessed. The majority of quizzes will be in short answer format. These quizzes are assessed holistically using a rubric that permits a variety of full-credit responses and rewards higher order thinking. The questions are designed to elicit analytical thinking most of the time on the order of comparing-contrasting, identifying cause-effect relationships, and categorizing ideas.

The short response quiz has the following advantages over the multiple-choice quiz (Jones, On Using Short Response Quizzes in a Fully Differentiated Environment, 2010):

1. Students preparing for such assessments tend to learn more of the ideas of greater importance (Lee, 2010)
2. This scheme supports social science style writing by constantly having students compose their thoughts in purposefully analytical ways.

High Order Tasks

Students must choose a “high order task” in each topic. High order tasks represent those which most correlate with the NYS Social Studies learning standards. Gradually, all of the principle rubrics used for “high order tasks” will be validated by standardized z-score equivalency procedure aligned with the grade level state test.

The following chart lists the high order tasks currently available to students:

Task	Characteristics	Recommended For...	Validated Against state test using Standard z-score Equivalency
Historic Documents	Analysis of lengthier primary sources	Students with strong reading ability	
Book Report	Usually a work of historical fiction	Students with strong reading ability	
Document Based Question Essay	Essay question based on interpretation of mostly primary sources	Anyone – this skill is a must	√
Research Project	Research evidence to prove something	Students with strong reading ability	
Multiple-Choice Test	Covers all material in the topic	Anyone, though most score poorly on these tests.	
Thematic Essay	Topic given in advance, but taken as a test without notes	Anyone for whom writing poses no obstacle to expression.	√
Persuasive Essay	May be done using notes	Students skilled at written expression and persuasion.	√
Historical Fiction Work	5-6 pages high quality story	Anyone for whom writing poses no obstacle to expression, usually reserved for those who excel beyond the average in writing ability.	
Debate	Formal tournament rules	Students skilled at persuasion and public speaking. This is probably the most demanding task.	√
Interview Test	10 minute interview with teacher on entire topic	Anyone, though students for whom writing is an obstacle to expression are encouraged to select this task.	√
Five-Minute Presentation	Teaching assignment includes activity	Students skilled at public speaking and	√

	and/or visual aid	oral communication.	
Listening Task	Analysis of primary source document – may submit analysis in written or interview form	Students skilled at listening.	√
Video Essay	Instructional video or dramatization	Creative students who have a sense for visual communication and who are tech – savvy.	
Speech <i>*This task is currently under development.</i>	Formal, “old fashioned” speech, usually persuasive	Students skilled at public speaking and persuasion.	

For each task there is a rubric that has been tested and correlated with typical student performance on the NYS Intermediate Social Studies test during development. That is, these assessments in the aggregate yield scores that correlate highly to the cohort scores on the state test.

Step 5: Create Flexibility in Time

Time is a constant concern because there does not seem to ever be enough of it. One significant difference among learners is that they learn different amounts over a given period of time. My old philosophy, though by “old” I mean prior to 6 months ago, was that people who could not learn enough material in class to make the grade they sought simply had to do the work outside class. Though this is still a necessary evil I will accept from time to time, I have found a way this year to be flexible with time in a way that is not only fair, but improved student achievement.

1. Students proceed at their own pace, for the most part, though they must conform to a minimum pace within which flexibility is built. Some students this year remained two full topics ahead of the class. Others needed the extra time. The whole class is only at the same place on day one and on the last day of the course. There is no “down time”; no “I’m finished”. Sometimes this has been a challenge for me preparation-wise, but next year it will be easier since the materials will have been created.
2. Quizzes are not taken by everyone at the same time. Rather, I post a flexible calendar defining what quizzes students should probably have completed by certain days. Though I reserve the right to deduct late points after a certain date, I rarely have enforced that. During working periods, I “work the crowd” and help keep people on task. Some students

took a few months to get used to managing their own time in this way. Higher performing students stalled taking quizzes sometimes because they wanted to study until they knew absolutely everything. Weaker students lost track of time and did not realize they were behind. These were rare exceptions, though, and they learned over time how to manage. Improvement was seen not only in quiz scores, but in long-term memory tasks like the monthly exam.

3. Students may take short response quizzes one question at a time on what I term an “installment” basis. The short response quizzes are composed of one to three questions whose answers are lengthy, sometimes two paragraphs.
4. The basic proficiency option developed in the fourth quarter addresses time by decreasing the amount of information students learn (though also the maximum grade they can earn). Spending less time on quizzes, they spend more time on the more important high order tasks. Spending their energy on less material, only the essential, they retain more of it.

Step 6: Modify Curriculum for Those Who Struggle with the Amount of Material

Students who try to learn more than they can in a given amount of time do not retain some portion of it as I previously thought. The student who tries to take on too much ends up remembering almost nothing (Dempster, 1993). I am obliged by law to maintain the same standard for everyone (NYS Education Part 200 Regulations §200.1(vv)). However, the standards are expressed in a range. The basic proficiency is for the student who struggles with the pace of the class covering material. I have systematically analyzed the curriculum to devise the amount of content that would constitute just passing (a grade of 67, the bottom of the range), created a list of “basic statements” students memorize in their own words, and accompanying each topic a multiple-choice quiz composed of all of the questions asked on that topic on the NYS Intermediate Social Studies test for ten years. The maximum grade the student can earn is 67, but the standard quizzes remain always open to them.

Experiments using this system were very successful over the four months it was being developed (Jones, The Basic Proficiency Model, 2010). Students who chose this system were successful not only on their quizzes, but on larger tests I gave them on a surprise basis to check their long term memory. Despite the grade ceiling of 67 on the basic quizzes, these students experienced an increase in their course grade overall because of higher scores on the weighted high order tasks. They were also motivated by their success, approached their lessons more positively and with better effort, and were generally happier kids.

The NYS curriculum is ambitious enough and the typical textbook is often even more ambitious (Dempster, 1993). By using the curriculum as the guiding principle of the

course and the textbook as one of a set of resources, I have also effectively reduced the amount of material for everyone and I believe could prove that I was increasing everyone's retention thereby of what they do study. High School Social Studies is not intended to make historians, it's intended to provide a foundation for later learning and the basic competency for citizens of a republic. However, that does not mean they should not walk away actually knowing social science.

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