

# F.A.Q.: Social Studies with Mr. Jones

---

July 2010

## Why don't you use and issue a regular textbook?

- 1) The textbooks do not match up to the state curriculum (the list of what I'm supposed to teach) perfectly well.
- 2) They also always have too much material to cover. When you try to teach kids too much, they remember little or nothing. Classes cannot complete a textbook in a year.
- 3) There is a range of reading proficiency among the students in my classes. The percentage of those who cannot read a Middle School Social Studies book independently can range from 20-30% depending on the year. (Students scoring below 3 on the NYS ELA test in 6<sup>th</sup> cannot typically read Middle School texts independently. In my own opinion, students scoring low 3 would have significant troubles reading at that level). Struggling readers can only develop as readers if they have materials they can actually read. Helping them work their way through something that's too hard to read will not help them read better. For this reason, I provide texts at a variety of reading levels.

The research on this invalidated my previous practice of issuing everyone the same textbook. Why give a kid a book he cannot read?

## So if you don't use a single particular textbook, how do you know what to teach?

New York State provides a core curriculum that outlines everything students of mine need to come away knowing. The state checks up on our work with statewide examinations like the Regents. At the most recent curriculum writing (2010), I examined the curriculum outline provided by the state and transformed these into sets of key questions for each topic. To arrive at a definition of "basic proficiency", I went a step further and examined ten state tests to see what was actually asked on each topic. This complete analysis is available online at the class web site, [www.JonesHistory.net](http://www.JonesHistory.net).

## Why is homework in your class rare?

- 1) Homework under age 15 has not proven itself in research to be useful in advancing student achievement. In elementary, there is little reason to give any homework at all.
- 2) Homework is not necessary to meet the state standards in Social Studies. (97% Students in the 8th grade in 2010 at SLCS passed the NYS Social Studies test, a test only passed by an average of 63% state-wide and 72% in local similar schools. These students had almost no homework ever.)
- 3) Homework grades are rarely legitimate measures of what students know/can do and so tend to just inflate the grade.

4) Written assignments such as answering questions or filling out forms have little educational value for all but a few students. They are like fast food: easy to digest, tasty to eat, no-hassle cleanup, but no long-term nutritional value and a detriment to your health. Try it yourself: give your child a fill-in-the-blank from a textbook, and then ask him a day later without warning to recite what he learned. Only around a third of students in my experience respond well to this traditional exercise.

5) If you could teach people what they needed to know without giving homework, wouldn't you do so?

In grade 9, I begin the gradual process of introducing homework as students mature to the level where homework will promote their achievement. These assignments are constructed carefully to be beneficial.

Though homework is intentionally rare, *it does occur from time to time*, but this is usually different from student to student.

## **How can so many different types of tasks be graded equally?**

The main rubrics have been designed and tested against ("correlated with") the standardized NYS Social Studies Test given in grade eight from 2001-2010.

## **Why is it that most of your tests in short answer format instead of multiple-choice?**

1) Short answer format increases long-term retention of material because students are organizing the information.

2) Short answer format promotes writing skills because students are composing information instead of recognizing it from a list.

Sometimes multiple-choice is a desirable measurement tool and is used from time to time.

## **Why do you emphasize traditional outlining as an information-processing method?**

1) Traditional outlining supports long-term memory because material is organized by the student for study.

2) Traditional outlining supports long-term memory also because material is "translated" by the student into his own words.

3) Traditional outlining supports developing reading comprehension because the student has to distinguish main ideas and supporting details, prioritize supporting details, and create connections between concepts.

4) Traditional outlining is supported by research as a strong study method.

## **Why do you permit taking quizzes on a flexible schedule and studying in class?**

1) Most students at this age (12-15) do not study effectively outside class. They do study effectively more often in conditions of supervised study. This, in turn, should help them develop the independent study skills needed for upper high school.

2) Performance on tests of long-term memory is much better for students who studied in class even if the test is a surprise.

## **Why do you have “basic proficiency”?**

Imagine the student’s brain like a coffee cup under a running kitchen faucet. The flowing water is information. Not all cups are the same size. It is commonly thought that, under a continuous flow of water, all cups of all sizes will simply hold whatever their capacity is. This view is demonstrably false.

In truth, the cups fall and crash under a constant flow of too much and lose their entire contents into the drain. People who are taught more than their capacity remember almost nothing. Teaching people less means they actually learn more.

## **What do you have for gifted and talented students?**

- 1) College-level information sources in a variety of formats (audio, text, and video)
- 2) Historic primary source documents
- 3) High level activities like debates, speeches, and research projects

## **What has changed in your courses now that NY State eliminated the eighth grade Social Studies Test?**

I am still called upon to bring kids to that standard. The program will continue mostly unchanged. I will continue to use the old tests as benchmarks to gauge my students’ performance and my own effectiveness. However, the final examination in grade eight will now only address material taught in the eighth grade course (the state test given at the end of eighth grade covered all material from grades seven and eight). In addition, there will no longer be a midterm and extended review in January of grade eight.

I support the idea of budget cutting and making government more lean. I regret the elimination of state testing because it holds teachers accountable and in my opinion teacher accountability is too weak overall.

## Bibliography

Allington, R. (2009). *What Really Matters in Response to Intervention*. Pearson.

Anderson, T. H., & Armbruster, B. B. (1984). Studying. In P. D. Pearson, *Handbook of Reading Research* (pp. 657-679). New York: Longman Inc.

Cooper, H. (1989, November). Synthesis of Research on Homework. *Educational Leadership* , pp. 85-91.

Cooper, H. (2007). *The Battle over Homework: Common Ground for Administrators, Teachers, and Parents*. Corwin Press.

Dempster, F. N. (1993). Exposing Our Students to Less Should Help Them Learn More. *Phi Delta Kappan* .

Fattig, M. L., & Taylor, M. T. (2008). *Co-Teaching in the Differentiated Classroom*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Jones, D. (2010, January). *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*. Retrieved May 31, 2010, from <http://joneshistory.net/bin/8thMidterm10.pdf>

Jones, D. (2010, May). *On a Public Speaking Assessment for Middle School Social Studies*. Retrieved June 9, 2010, from <http://joneshistory.net/bin/StudyofFiveMinutePresentations.pdf>

Jones, D. (2010, April 2010). *On Using Short Response Quizzes in a Fully Differentiated Environment*. Retrieved May 31, 2010, from <http://joneshistory.net/bin/On%20Using%20Short%20Response%20Quizzes%20in%20a%20Fully%20Differentiated%20Environment.pdf>

Jones, D. (2009, June). *Social Studies Class Analysis*. Retrieved May 31, 2010, from [http://joneshistory.net/bin/ss\\_analysis\\_2009.pdf](http://joneshistory.net/bin/ss_analysis_2009.pdf)

Jones, D. (2010, May). *The Basic Proficiency Model*. Retrieved May 31, 2010, from <http://joneshistory.net/bin/The%20Basic%20Proficiency%20Model.pdf>

Lee, C. D. (2010). *Reading in the Disciplines: The Challenges of Adolescent Literacy*. New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Subban, P. (2006). Differentiated instruction: A research basis. *International Education Journal* , 935-947.