

# Questions to and answers from a Waldorf High School history teacher to a home schooler

Daniel Hindes

**1) Could you please explain to the families who are newer to Waldorf ed, the general idea that at this stage, teens begin 'a guided, but somewhat independent search for truth?' Is there any barometer for measuring the balance of guided vs independent?**

I've not heard that exact formulation before, but it does ring true. It's based on the principle that in childhood development the first seven years are dedicated to goodness, the next seven to beauty, and the third seven - the adolescent years - are dedicated to truth. This, of course, should be the beginning of your understanding, and not the extent of it.

One thing that really struck me in my first year of teaching was the vast difference between the 9th graders and 12th graders. I had kind of naïvely assumed without thinking about it - as I'm sure is true of most people - that, "high school is high school". Teachers just move through the curriculum material. What I observed, and it was a lot easier to notice it because I was teaching both 9th and 12th graders every day, is something that any high school teacher will immediately confirm: there is a tremendous difference between 9th graders and 12th graders! These critical four years from 14 to 18 encompass a tremendous amount of changes. These changes proceed at slightly different paces among various individuals, so that you'll have some 9th graders who are more like 11th graders, and

some 12th graders who are more like 10th graders. But a certain general average will be instantly noticeable in any school setting.

9<sup>th</sup> Graders, on the whole, are very concrete thinkers. By nature, they are very interested in the "what" of the world. They want to know "What is it?", "Where is it?" They want to know the concrete facts about all sorts of different things. And they are particularly interested in the world of the present, in current events. So it is a good time to cover basic geography and immediate historical background to current events. Also a very concrete understanding of how the U.S. Constitution is supposed to function is something appropriate to 9<sup>th</sup> Grade. What 9th graders to not handle very well are "compare and contrast" assignments where the relationships between things are examined. I made the mistake one day of assigning such an essay, and as a teacher I was very disappointed with the results. I discussed the situation with a master teacher, she explained to me why, and it made perfect sense. So I never asked to ninth grade to compare one thing to another in a written essay again. They do this much better in 11th and 12th grade.

As far as history goes, it is a good time to teach the US history. Of course, it's much more important how you do US history, then that you simply do it. For one thing, 9th graders like to be modern. So it is important not to get stuck in the colonial era, but move rapidly up past 2001. They should get the overview, the summary. It is all too easy in history to get stuck in the details, and this especially happens in US history. I've met a considerable number of people who in their life never got past the Civil War in any of their history classes, despite having taken history at every level from second grade to college. But for 9th

grade, the real goal is to see how the world that they live in today was shaped and formed by the past. Some teachers even start with phenomena of today and work backwards to an understanding of how they came about. If I have a particularly short amount of time to cover the material, I even start after the Civil War and go from the Gilded Age to the present, trusting that they had the Colonial Era in great detail on the lower school, which is usually the case. (We come back to it again in the 10th grade).

Given the concrete way in which 9th graders operate, a very good method is to set them the task of summarizing other people's writings. We call this a Précis. They read a chapter of a book, and then I ask them to write a one-page summary of the information contained therein. Their goal is to get all the important points and leave out the inessential. They are dealing with the concrete facts in the piece of their working with. They are not writing their opinion, giving commentary, or otherwise contrasting this with some other piece of writing. They are working with a single text, and are working to understand the facts as presented by that writer. This is a very good 9th grade activity.

10th graders are different from 9th graders. The 10th grader is interested above all in the complexity of the world. They are ready to start experiencing conflicting viewpoints (although not necessarily reconciling them). The 10th grade year is also a year in which a great love of detail and "particular-ness" is evident. If they are drawing maps, they will often go into the greatest and most careful detail.

The 10th grade curriculum focuses on ancient history, and also on US history. The original curriculum from 100 years ago in

Germany only called for ancient history. However, as 21st century Americans we have a certain responsibility to teach our own culture as well as basic civics. After much thought and discussion, many schools have found that the 10th grade year is the one into which US civics fits best. And so for that reason you have these two somewhat disparate subjects covered in history during the 10th grade.

Rudolf Steiner's original indications for the 10th grade call for covering history from the beginning through "the fall of free Greece". These guidelines are quite broad. A tremendous amount of information on ancient civilizations has been discovered since the 1920s. Further, there is a strong desire in our culture to learn about "non-Western" cultures. I tend to start at the very beginning in the period prior to agriculture. I then go very rapidly through the birth and development of agriculture and into the early civilizations, what a lot of emphasis on the archaeological record. What I then do is have the students focus on the similarities between five major ancient civilizations: ancient Egypt, ancient Mesopotamia, ancient China, the Mayans, and the Inca. This is sufficient to fill up an entire main lesson block. We then have a separate main lesson block on Ancient Greece. While covering these ancient civilizations, I'll place a lot of emphasis on the question of "How do we know any of these things that are being taught?" On what basis does our knowledge rest? What are the facts, and what are the interpretations of these facts.

US history is usually offered as a daily course, meaning that the students will have it several times a week for the entire year. (Some schools will limit it to a semester, and the number of times per week also varies widely).

This is your classical run-through, starting with the colonial and going up to the modern. It is extremely important to plan the overall sequence, and leave plenty of time at the end, in order to get all the way up through to the modern era. It is amazing how rapidly you have to move through the material when you really do want to get that far. Some teachers handle the course differently. They might spend a lot of time on the Native Americans before moving into the colonial period. Others might teach it thematically, rather than chronologically. This generally ensures that you get to the present, but runs the risk of confusing the students (I've been surprised how easily students are confused when the timeline is not strictly chronological). Ultimately, there is no single right way to do this, and conceivably, based on the composition of the class and the interests and talents of the individual students, you would teach it differently every year.

As far as assignments for the 10th grade, descriptive elaboration and fundamental exposition are very good exercises. That is, you give them the topic to research and you ask them to write about the subject in great detail. We still do not place too much emphasis on evaluating the subject matter, on forming opinions about it, nor are we encouraging them to contrast and resolve conflicts. But this is the year of the students particularly notice, or wake up to, the existence of multiple points of view on a given subject. At this stage, they are still living in the dichotomy. In conversation, you'll notice wild swings of opinion - always firmly held - concerning the truth of any given subject. It is the time to get them to go into detail to support their opinions and the subjects that they are studying.

The subject matter of the 11th grade history curriculum moves to Medieval History. Rudolf Steiner's indications were that 11th graders should study German medieval history, combined with literature, and specifically Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzifal*. Medieval history, in broad strokes, goes back into the late Roman period and then up into the 1400s. That's a span of over 1000 years, and a lot of material to focus on. So as usual with history, it is necessary to look around for certain representative trends, and focus on these rather than trying to cover everything superficially. Steiner's indications about combining history and literature offer some guidance. In the literature, you have the ideals of a certain segment of society. And you'll notice that in the adolescent a certain part of them really resonates with these ideals. Another thing to watch out for is a lot of "historical" fiction written in the modern era about the Middle Ages. This is not the literature Steiner was talking about. Medieval romances like Eschenbach's *Parsifal* were written during the Middle Ages, and in a way that really represents the medieval mindset. The book can be a little bit difficult to get into initially, but it is definitely something where perseverance pays off.

In my school we also cover the Renaissance and subsequent periods in the 11th grade. So in a separate main lesson block the students learn about early modern European history from the 1400s to the beginning of the 1800s. For literature, they study Shakespeare, and Dante's *Inferno* as well. So in two main lesson blocks the students cover the time period from about 150 A.D. up till 1800. But again, it's not the what, it's the how. 11th graders become intellectually more adventurous. I've noticed they like to look up

additional information on the things they're taught, to see if they can't catch their teacher making mistakes. (You'll see a little bit of this in the 10th grade as well). The 11th grader is starting to work towards a synthesis of contrasting viewpoints. They can look at two different historians, who describe the same event with two different interpretations, and they will find the differences interesting, and they will themselves feel impelled to take sides based on a rational analysis. This is different from the 10th grader who takes sides intuitively, and can change sides just as intuitively. "Compare & contrast" assignments are now appropriate, and you'll be surprised sometimes at the degree of original thought that the students now display in their essays.

The 12th grade has no defined area for the history curriculum. Rudolf Steiner's original indications were that the students should get a systematic overview of all world history, with an eye towards trends and patterns. That sounds more like a doctoral dissertation than a main lesson block, but you can do a lot with those indications. What a lot of different schools do is to schedule in all those subjects that various people feel ought to be covered but otherwise aren't, or those subjects that the teacher would like to teach even if they're not in the curriculum. In our school we have a course titled *Slavery, Civil War, Civil Rights* that my predecessor, who was a specialist in that area, inaugurated. I've noticed that it is quite popular among the students, and I've enjoyed teaching it myself. This is also the year the we have *19th and 20th Century History* as a main lesson block. It fits the chronology that has been built up since 10th grade, so that you essentially go from ancient to modern in three years.

By the 12th grade, most students are capable intellectually of college-level work. I assign research papers and other essays, and try to leave the students as much room as possible to excel. One teacher I know has characterized the theme of the senior year as "How do I fit into the world?" You can see this theme running through their approach to history. They're struggling to figure out their own relationship to the world they've inherited, the world that history has shaped for them.

Finally, to answer the second half of the original question, there isn't any quick and simple way to measure the balance between guided and independent. That is something that you as an educator will have to judge in the moment each time the issue comes up. That's why teaching is an art and not a science! But I hope that some of the indications I just given about the difference is the 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th graders will assist you in making that judgment. It really is a process of maturation of intellectual capabilities that the high school-aged student undergoes. And I think in general, not enough attention is paid to the process as a whole.

**2) Our teens are defining who they will become in a very different world from the one in which we were raised. Knowing our culture and seeing a variety of students, what recommendations do you have for the use of media - mainly computers - in high school education?**

Computers are fine. Ultimately, the computer is a tool and should be used as such. It is incredibly easy to become distracted and waste hundreds of hours on the computer, and this should be avoided. Certain temperaments are more susceptible to this than others, but all

high school-age students are bound to waste considerable amounts of time on their computers. One way to help in reestablishing the computer as a tool would be to disconnect it from the Internet for most of the time that it is on. The Internet is a great research tool, especially when buying things. But the Internet is not all that great for history. You can find a lot of superficial facts on all sorts of different subjects, but if you really want to understand a historical period, you're far better off getting a good book on the subject.

I wouldn't worry too much about the student being left behind because they were unable to use a computer in their teenage years. I hardly touched a computer till I was 19, yet I had no problem earning a living as a systems administrator in my 20s. (There are exceptions to every rule, and if your child is one of those people who lives, sleeps, and breathes technology and took apart the home PC at age 4 in order to make improvements, I would probably say leave them be to find their destiny; if, however, they are uninterested in how it works, but only want to play games and Instant Message their friends 24 hours a day, then you are probably better off intervening).

There are a couple principles from Rudolf Steiner that are probably applicable. In the context of sports. Rudolf Steiner said that Waldorf education should not make the child a stranger to her culture. (It's a Q&A section in *Kingdom of Childhood*). Transferred to computers, a healthy young child is going to be interested in the Internet and instant messaging and so forth, and should probably be allowed limited use simply so they can get to know the world in which they live. But another principle also comes in. Adolescents still do not have a fully incarnated ego, appearances to the contrary, and do need the support and guidance

of their parents. With computer's this means they may need some help not wasting all of their free time sitting in front of the computer doing nothing of any value, and the easiest way for a parent to help out with this is to simply unplug the computer from the Internet.

Recapturing the computer as a tool, as opposed to an entertainment medium, is important. High school-aged students should learn to fully exploit the value of Microsoft Excel, how to make a database with Access, perhaps some principles of programming and Web design. These are all mentally active exercises that involve the computer. Instant messaging your friends is really no different than talking on the telephone, and surfing the web for amusing web sites is only a tiny bit different from watching television; it's a passive, receptive exercise, even if your index finger gets a bit of a workout. I have worked with a few people on developing an integrated, four-year computer sciences curriculum along Waldorf outlines (and I know of at least four others that are in use), but since it has not been implemented yet and I cannot say how successful it might be.

**3) We see that you teach history in a Waldorf high school, what top three resources would you recommend for homeschoolers on that topic? As homeschoolers with ultimate flexibility over content, is there anything that you would recommend that we add or take away from the standard available Waldorf history curriculum?**

I'm not very familiar with the curriculum for homeschoolers. Lucie forwarded me two links.

<http://www.oakmeadow.com/school/courses.htm#Humanities>

<http://www.users.bigpond.com/goldenbeetlebooks/>

Oak Meadows's curriculum as described on the web site is very general. The other site references books, the contents of which I'm not familiar with. However, what I described above in the rather lengthy answer to question #1 should give you an idea about what I think works. To summarize briefly, a few things I might add would be: 10th grade-descriptive comparisons among the five major ancient civilizations 11th grade-stretching the medieval and covering 150A.D to 1800. Personally, I found the book *1421* by Gavin Menzies to be very interesting. It describes the journey of the Chinese treasure fleets sent out by the Emperor in 1420. Menzies believes to have uncovered evidence that the Chinese made it to the New World before the Europeans. His findings are contested, but there is a lot of interesting background material on imperial China and the book. 12th grade-racism and being a minority in the United States

So those are the things that I might suggest could be looked at as possible additions to the standard curriculum. The biggest problem with teaching history in high school is that there are only four years to cover everything. So much that is interesting and important must be left out. The real art is in selecting what to include, out of all the possible things that could work quite well.

Another general piece of advice is to go deep and narrow into subjects, rather than trying to cover as many different things as possible in a superficial manner. The broad and shallow approach is the one taken by most textbooks. After slogging through 600 pages, students are likely to remember very little, and this is an established fact about which there is

much handwringing in professional educational circles. In a Waldorf main lesson block the students will go into great depth on some narrow slice of history, and necessarily miss out on a large number of trivial factoids. The key is the careful selection of such narrow slices. The subject to be focused on must be representative of an entire period. If it is sufficiently representative, the students will have a sense for the whole era, even if they've studied only one figure from that time period. So, for example, students might learn of the life of Raphael of Urbino, but in such a way that they will understand the entire Renaissance. In my opinion this is far superior to learning the names and major works of 100 of the most important Renaissance artists. Whilst the students might be able to memorize that much material, they will retain virtually none of it a year later. Another example would be a study of Andrew Carnegie's biography as representative of the entire Gilded Age.

**4) There are advantages and disadvantages to homeschooling. In the area of drama, we usually must pool our efforts with other families (following various curricula) for formal plays and programs in a homeschool group.**

The productions usually are not linked to our immediate history studies. We know that drama is a major element in a Waldorf education, interweaving the humanities. Are there any smaller-scale activities that you would especially recommend to bring this element to our teens' history education in groups of 2 to 4?

One of the things that teachers try to do is keep the experience in the classroom lively and interesting. As such, various activities are

often a good idea. These activities could be implemented by a homeschooling group fairly easily. These would include such things as historical reenactments, group prediction exercises, and small games. In a historical reenactments, you might read about an event, such as the death of Socrates, and then ask the students to reenact the scene in the sort of improvisational manner. One can be Socrates, one can be the person holding the hemlock, and others can be Socrates' students. Based off of what they know, they would try to dramatize the scene. The group prediction exercise is when you tell half the story, and then ask a small group to work out their prediction of how the story ends. (The stories are actually history – Washington at Valley Forge, the Greeks at Marathon, and such.) This gets the students really working on and thinking about the material, and they are thereby far more likely to remember it. Small games take a little bit more creativity, which can also be quite interesting. You could have the group make their own Trivial Pursuit cards (this means developing the questions and answers themselves as a group) and then they can play the game using the cards that they have made.

**5) Do you have any insights or stories that you wish to share about helping students to choose a direction for their senior project?**

I don't really have any experience with senior projects. My school decided to discontinue them several years ago after being very unimpressed with the efforts and results that they were getting. I've talked to a number of teachers from other schools who have also experienced similar disappointments, and are also considering eliminating senior projects, or

have already done so. I know one school that only allows senior projects upon written application. The ideal of a senior project is that the students will spend it considerable amount of time on a topic that is of burning interest to them. It seems, however, that the burning interest is frequently not there. And so it seems that the wiser course is to not do something, if you can't do it well.

**6) We are with our teens for a lot more time each day than parents of schooled teens. On the other hand, where we teach one child daily, you might teach 30. In working with small groups, many of us will teach classes of teens for the first time. Are there any tips you might have about maintaining your focus, your self-confidence, and your optimism when working with teens on an ongoing basis? (Especially when greeted with lots of challenging questions!)**

The easiest way to deal with challenging questions is to be brutally honest, both with yourself and with the students. I know it's quite tempting to feel that you are an authority, and therefore must know everything better. But that particular attitude of soul is really setting you up for conflicts. I teach history because I'm very interested in the subject. I'm also very honest with myself that I don't know everything, and that in certain areas some of my students may know more than I do. So whenever I get a question that I don't know the answer to, I'll simply say, "I don't know, I'll have to look it up." And if it is a really important question, I might write myself a note on the spot, look it up after class, and then tell them the next day. I've been caught on the spot not knowing the answers to some very basic

questions, but there's no point in trying to hide the fact. So that's how I handle questions that are "challenging" in the sense that I don't know the answer. The other possibility is the student is challenging me as an authority. It's quite simple to deflect this challenge by saying something to the effect of, "I don't know everything, and never claimed to. I might know a little bit more than you in some areas, but that's only because I've been studying the subject longer." By being honest with myself and with the students, I can avoid the situation where I have my ego and my self image tied up in knowing everything better. That's a recipe for disaster.

It's been said that students learn much more from who you are than from what you say (or from what you consciously try to teach them). With this in mind, I try to be focused and prepared myself, and then the students will sense that I'm focused and prepared, and will respond to that. Being focused and prepared means that I've done a lot of work before the class starts, and more after the class is over, every day. By doing all this work preparing for class, I can maintain my self-confidence because I know that I've done the best I can. And then I try to remember that nobody's perfect.

Maintaining focus is a function of adequate preparation. If you've planned out the things you want to cover and you have a picture in your mind of what you're going to do

today, then you can allow a certain amount of digression, but you won't be in a situation where class is over and you've done nothing that you vaguely intended to. I try to write an outline before each class of what I intend to do and in what sequence. I also outline the entire course before I start. I bring a copy of my daily outline with me, in case I forget in the heat of the moment what I had originally intended to do next. Of course, it's important to stay open and flexible, and incorporate the ideas and interests of the students, even if that means discarding portions of the original outline. But it is generally not a good idea to let the students direct the entire course of the lesson every day. They are looking to you for structure, even as they test you to see it is possible to derail your plans.

If you're properly prepared and have an open an optimistic attitude, things should go fine. They may not go as you initially imagined, but if you bring the right attitude to begin with, then things won't go badly. It's important to reflect every day on how things turned out and why, and what you're going to do differently the next time. But the students will react your fundamental attitude more than anything else. If they sense an unnecessary and hostile rigidity, they will try to break you. But if you have enough flexibility, then they won't feel the need to try. It's a fine line between being structured and being flexible; it's a balance. That's why teaching is an art.