

From Inquiry Arc to Instructional Practice: The Potential of the C3 Framework

S. G. Grant

Students are clear: They do not like social studies.¹ What they dislike, however, is not the civic, economic, geographic, and historical ideas they encounter so much as the instructional practices they experience. And instructional experiences matter: Students who read more than textbooks, who write more than end-of-the-chapter questions, and who have more rather than fewer opportunities to discuss ideas outperform their peers in more traditional classroom settings.² Smith and Niemi argue that “if faced with a choice of only one ‘solution’ to raise history scores, it is clear that instructional changes have the most powerful relationship to student performance.”³

Although numerous attempts have been made to revitalize social studies, the bulk of them have focused on curricular reforms rather than on instruction.⁴ The Inquiry Arc featured in the C3 Framework is a form of guidance for social studies curriculum writers.⁵ It also represents an approach to instructional planning that moves away from traditional textbook coverage to a model that is more consistent with the research on ambitious social studies teaching.⁶

Overview of the Inquiry Arc

“We begin with the hypothesis,” asserts Jerome Bruner, “that any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development.”⁷

Bruner’s quote is not cited in the C3 Framework, but its spirit runs throughout the document in general and the Inquiry Arc in particular. Defined as a set of interlocking and mutually reinforcing elements, the four dimensions of the Inquiry Arc speak to

the intersection of ideas and learners. Those four dimensions are:

1. Developing questions and planning inquiries;
2. Applying disciplinary concepts and tools;
3. Evaluating sources and using evidence; and
4. Communicating conclusions and taking informed action.

Key to the Inquiry Arc is the use of questions. As noted in the Scholarly Rationale of the C3 Framework, “children and adolescents are naturally curious, and they are especially curious about the complex and multifaceted world they inhabit.”⁸ Curiosity drives interest and interest drives knowledge, understanding, and engagement. At heart, social studies is about understanding the things people do. Whether those things are brave, ambitious, and inventive or cowardly, naïve, and silly, social studies is about using questions to direct our investigations into the world

around us. Dimension 1, then, features the development of questions and the planning of inquiries.

If social studies is about understanding why people do the things they do, then Dimension 2—Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools—is a fundamental step in the Inquiry Arc. With a robust instructional question in mind, teachers and students determine the kind of content they need in order to create a plan to address their questions. This process is an artful balancing act; teachers must preload some disciplinary content when developing questions with their students. At the same time, teachers must provide students with enough content to propel their inquiries without quashing their curiosity or, worse yet, doing their work for them.

Children will naturally begin proposing solutions to instructional questions based on their lived experiences. Rich social studies teaching, however, offers students opportunities to answer those questions more thoroughly through disciplinary (civic, economic, geographical, and historical) and multi-disciplinary venues. Dimension 2 sets forth concepts from the disciplines, such as the historian’s habit of accounting for how perspectives of people in the present shape their interpretations of the past. This practice from history and the distinctive habits of thinking from other disciplines inform students’ investigations and contribute to an

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instructional framework for teaching social studies.

Instructional questions posed may demand content representing a single discipline. For example, a question like “Which will you buy—lunch or a new video game?” would have teachers and students draw primarily from the concepts of economics. A question that asks, “Has the definition of ‘Americans’ changed over time?” would feature concepts from civics/political science. Many questions, however, can best be explored through the use of multiple disciplines. For example, a contemporary environmental question such as “Should transcontinental pipelines be banned?” demands the use of economic, geographical, historical, and political lenses.

With a question in hand and a sense of the relevant concepts and ideas, the Inquiry Arc turns toward the matter of sources and evidence. Social studies, like science, is an evidence-based field.

The disciplinary concepts represented in Dimension 2 provide a solid base from which students can begin constructing answers to their questions. Equally important, however, is knowing how to fill in the gaps in their knowledge by learning how to work with sources and evidence in order to develop explanations and to make persuasive arguments in support of their conclusions.

Evidence can come in many forms, including historical and contemporary documents, data from direct observation in environments, graphics, economic statistics, and legislative actions and court rulings. Digital sources are now also more readily available than ever via the Internet. That said, not all sources are equal in value and use. Sources do not, by themselves, constitute evidence. Rather, evidence results from the choices made by teachers and students to appropriate information from sources in support of an explanation or argument. Helping students develop a capacity for gathering,

evaluating, and then using sources in responsible ways is a central feature of Dimension 3.

For example, a question like “Was the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s a success?” demands that students examine more than one or two sources. A wide range of perspectives is available in both primary and secondary form, and so having students gather, evaluate, and use a subset of those sources offers teachers opportunities to make key instructional points about the nature of evidence. Those activities also offer students opportunities to demonstrate their abilities to develop explanations and to make and support arguments in answer to their questions.

Breaking the power of the multiple-choice test, developing explanations and making and supporting arguments can take the form of individual essays, group projects, and other classroom-based written assessments, both formal and informal. But they need not be limited to those options for there are any number of ways that students can express the evolution of their ideas. Although there is no substitute for thoughtful and persuasive writing, Dimension 4 of the Inquiry Arc supports expanding the means by which students communicate their findings and conclusions. It also expands the venues in which students participate. Classroom and school sites are important arenas for students as they work through their ideas. But if students are to take informed action—the second aspect of Dimension 4—then they will need to be able to interact in other arenas as well—from cross town to across the globe. Defining questions, seeking the best knowledge available, examining and using source material, and constructing and communicating conclusions are the hallmark qualities of thoughtful and engaged students. Helping students prepare for civic life demands new means of expressing themselves and new settings in which to do so.

In one sense, Dimension 4 closes the Inquiry Arc. Every good teacher knows, however, that teaching and

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learning play off one another—new sources can lead to new disciplinary and multi-disciplinary concepts, new concepts can lead to new questions, and new questions can lead to new audiences. The Inquiry Arc, then, offers teachers multiple opportunities to involve students in powerful learning opportunities and to develop as thoughtful, engaged citizens.

The C3 Framework in general and the Inquiry Arc in particular were designed to help state and local curriculum writers retool their social studies standards. To that purpose, I would offer a second—the Inquiry Arc as an instructional arc, a lesson and unit planning approach that foregrounds the use of teacher- and student-developed questions.

Compelling Questions

Pushed into the classroom, the Inquiry Arc challenges some basic and long-held instructional practices. Perhaps the most challenging element, however, is designing lessons and units around questions.

Teachers have long used questions as part of their pedagogical repertoire. But there is a big difference between using questions to check for student understanding and using questions to frame a teaching and learning inquiry. Good questions can be difficult to create, but they can also help teachers and their students focus their inquiries and produce powerful learning outcomes.

Questions, as envisioned in the Inquiry Arc, are of two types—compelling and supporting. *Compelling questions* address “problems and issues found in and across the academic disciplines that make up social studies.”⁹ They “deal with curiosities about how things work; interpretations and applications of disciplinary concepts; and unresolved issues that require students to construct arguments in response.”¹⁰ In short, compelling questions are provocative, engaging, and worth spending time on.

Compelling questions must satisfy two conditions. First, they have to be intellectually meaty. That means that a compelling question needs to reflect an enduring issue, concern, or debate in social studies and it has to draw on multiple disciplines. For example, “Was the American Revolution revolutionary?” works as a compelling question because it signals a continuing argument about how to interpret the results of the Revolution. And, although it sounds like a history question, to address it fully demands that one must look at it through a range of disciplinary lenses—Did the Revolution yield dramatic political change? Economic? Social? All of the above?

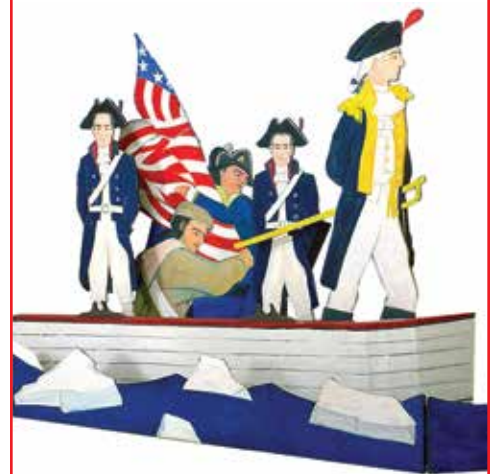
The second condition defining a compelling question is the need to be student-friendly. By student-friendly, I mean a question that reflects some quality or condition that teachers know students care about and that honors and respects students’ intellectual efforts. The American Revolution question above seems to fit these qualifications as well: It brings students into an authentic debate and it offers the possibility that adults may be confused—how could the American Revolution *not* be revolutionary? The latter is a condition that students tend to find especially fascinating.

Quiz time: Which of the following examples fit the criteria for a compelling question?

1. Why do we need rules?
2. What are the five largest sources of oil for U.S. markets?
3. Why is Albany the capital of New York?
4. Who are our community helpers?
5. Can Canada and the U.S. be friends forever?
6. Who won the Cold War?

I would argue that numbers 1, 3, 5, and 6 fit the bill as compelling questions. For example, “Can Canada and the U.S. be friends forever?”

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satisfies the student-friendly criteria in that it keys off the idea that young people find the notion of friendship intriguing. On the substantive side, the notion of U.S.-Canada relations can be explored on multiple disciplinary dimensions. Think about it: If the U.S. and Canada compete on an economic level, can they still maintain good relationships on the political and/or social level? Similarly, the question, “Who won the Cold War?” qualifies as a compelling question because it meets the intellectually meaty criteria of highlighting a genuine dispute and the student interest criteria because it presumes that students can offer a useful perspective on the question through the arguments they make.

By contrast, “What are the five largest sources of oil for U.S. markets?” and “Who are our community helpers” may be useful in developing a larger inquiry, but on their own, they do not carry the day either in terms of substantive or student interest engagement.

Supporting Questions

From an instructional perspective, if a compelling question helps frame a unit of study, supporting questions can provide the infrastructure for lesson planning.

Supporting questions are “intended to contribute knowledge and insights to the inquiry behind a compelling question.” Furthermore, they “focus on descriptions, definitions, and processes on which there is general agreement.”¹¹ In other words, supporting questions help scaffold students’ investigations into the ideas and issues behind a compelling question.

For the question about the revolutionary elements of the American Revolution, supporting questions could include the following: What were the regulations imposed on the colonists under the Stamp and Townshend Acts? How did colonists respond? What were the arguments for and against the Revolution? What were the political conditions in America before and after the Revolution? What were the economic conditions before and after the Revolution? What were

the social conditions before and after the Revolution? Supporting questions like these offer important pedagogical support, but typically lack either the intellectual heft or the student connections necessary to be considered a compelling question.

Returning to the list of questions in the preceding sections, I would argue that “What are the five largest sources of oil for U.S. markets?” and “Who are our community helpers” could work as supporting questions. For example, identifying the sources of oil would be helpful if students were tackling a compelling question like, “What path should a new transcontinental oil pipeline take?” In similar fashion, “Who are our community helpers” would aid an inquiry into a question such as “Should our community grow?”

Implications for Practice: Thinking about What Matters

The College, Career, and Civic (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards offers a different way of thinking about curriculum development. Instead of advocating for the creation of long lists of names, dates, and places, the C3 Framework pushes curriculum writers to think about how the meaningful concepts and skills of civics, economics, geography, and history play out across an inquiry arc. Equally important, however, may be the push the C3 Framework offers to teachers who are interested in employing an inquiry approach in their instructional practice.

Taking such an approach calls for a kind of mindfulness that echoes standard teacher practice, but pushes well beyond it. In teaching through inquiry, these six distinct, but inter-related elements matter:

1. *Questions matter.* Successful teaching and learning inquiries are built around powerful questions of two sorts—compelling and supporting. Most teachers and students have extensive experience working with supporting-style questions. Compelling questions,

however, can be a challenge for teachers to create, especially for those who work with younger students. But if the compelling questions offered meet the conditions outlined above, teachers will find that student effort and engagement will soar.

2. *Students’ questions matter.* The C3 Framework argues that questions—both compelling and supporting—can originate from teachers and/or students. It does not advocate turning over the question-developing responsibility to kindergartners, but it does promote the idea that students should play an increasingly prominent role in defining inquiry questions over the course of their school lives. Needless to say, teachers play a key role in helping students identify compelling questions that will work for instructional purposes.

3. *Language matters.* If we are going to take Bruner’s quote at the beginning of this article seriously, then we need to realize that one of the biggest challenges teachers and students will face is at the level of language. This issue has two dimensions. First, although students can grasp almost any social studies construct through their lived experience, they do not always have the language or vocabulary to participate fully in classroom discourse. (Imagine, for example, a student who misses the point of a discussion because he or she does not understand the difference between guerrilla and gorilla warfare.)

The second challenge lies more on the teacher’s side: One of the trickiest parts of being an inquiry-based teacher is learning how to “hear” the kernels of rich ideas in what seems like the fumbling, inarticulate, and confusing things that students of all ages say. Students can be useful partners in constructing compelling questions, but only if we can help them articulate their ideas.

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4. *Resources matter.* Again, if we are going to take Bruner's view seriously, we need to realize the challenges teachers and kids face at the resource level. Students bring considerable life experience to their understanding of social studies ideas. To help them grow beyond the limits of their own experiences requires a range of high-quality and accessible resources.

5. *Writing matters.* Whether it is in the form of an oral report, an essay, a debate, or a blog, good social studies teaching and learning demands the capacity to write well. Explanations and arguments are at the heart of the ways in which students present their ideas.

6. *Trust matters.* The Inquiry Arc reflects a level of trust between teachers and students that is not part of the traditional pattern of schooling. Good teachers know that students will blunder sometimes as they embrace the greater responsibilities an inquiry approach demands, but they also know that students will not become the kinds of life-long learners that we desire if they are not trusted to take an active role in their own education.

Conclusion

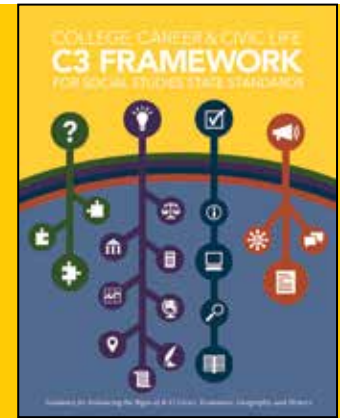
Teaching through an inquiry approach demands the skilled use of questions to frame units of study and to develop the necessary scaffolding so that even young children can examine issues of substance and interest. It is not a teaching approach for the faint hearted, but the research evidence gathered to date that supports the C3 Framework, suggests that students will embrace it.¹²

Notes

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3. J.B. Smith and R. Niemi, "Learning History in School: The Impact of Course Work and Instructional Practice on Achievement," *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 29 (2001), 38.
4. S.G. Grant, K. Swan, and J. Lee, "Lurching toward Coherence: An Episodic History of Curriculum and Standards Development in Social Studies." Featured presentation of the Research in Social Studies SIG at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, Vancouver, BC, April 2012.
5. National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, Md.: NCSS, 2013), 16-64.
6. S.G. Grant, *History Lessons: Teaching, Learning, and Testing in U.S. High School Classrooms* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006); eds. S.G. Grant and J.M. Gradwell, *Teaching History with Big Ideas: Cases of Ambitious Teachers* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).
7. J. Bruner, *The Process of Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 33.
8. *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History*, 83.
9. *Ibid.*, 97.
10. *Ibid.*, 23.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Grant, *History Lessons*; Grant and Gradwell, *Teaching History with Big Ideas*; S. Van Hover, "Teaching History in the Old Dominion: The Impact of Virginia's Accountability Reform on Seven Secondary Beginning History Teachers," in *Measuring History: Cases of State-Level Testing across the United States*, ed. S.G. Grant (Greenwich, Conn.: Information Age Publishing, 2010), 195-220; B. VanSledright, *In Search of America's Past: Learning to Read History in Elementary School* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002).

S.G. GRANT is founding dean of the Graduate School of Education at Binghamton University. He is the author of numerous books and articles on teaching history. Most of this article also appears in a chapter by the author, "From Inquiry Arc to Instructional Practice," published in *NCSS Bulletin* 113, Social Studies for the Next Generation: Purposes, Practices, and Implications of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards.



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- Social studies prepares the nation's young people for college, careers, and civic life.
- Inquiry is at the heart of social studies.
- Social studies involves interdisciplinary applications and welcomes integration of the arts and humanities.
- Social studies is composed of deep and enduring understandings, concepts, and skills from the disciplines. Social studies emphasizes skills and practices as preparation for democratic decision-making.
- Social studies education should have direct and explicit connections to the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies

The C3 Framework changes the conversation about literacy instruction in social studies by creating a context that is meaningful and purposeful. Reading, writing, speaking and listening and language skills are critically important for building disciplinary literacy and the skills needed for college, career, and civic life.

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