

A Roadmap to *E Pluribus Unum*: The Educating for American Democracy Project

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Since the time of Sputnik in 1957 and then *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, the educational landscape of the United States has shifted predominantly towards a focus on Science, Technology, Engineering, Math (STEM) and literacy education. From No Child Left Behind and the Common Core, to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), a myopic focus on STEM and literacy has rendered the social studies an afterthought in education reform.

While some efforts to strengthen the social studies have been laudable (most notably, the publication and dissemination of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework),¹ recent social unrest, mass protest, and the insurrection at the Capitol amidst a backdrop of villainizing polarization suggest that we, as a nation, have neglected social studies education for far too long. In this current landscape, our motto of *E Pluribus Unum* (out of many, one) seems lofty and increasingly untenable.² And yet, against the odds, the Educating for American Democracy (EAD) project hopes to revitalize that improbable aspiration. In this article, I present an overview of the project, how its Roadmap compares to the C3 Framework, some potential uses for the EAD Roadmap, and a few challenges of the overall EAD effort.

What is EAD?

Built as a national effort to promote excellence in history and civics for all

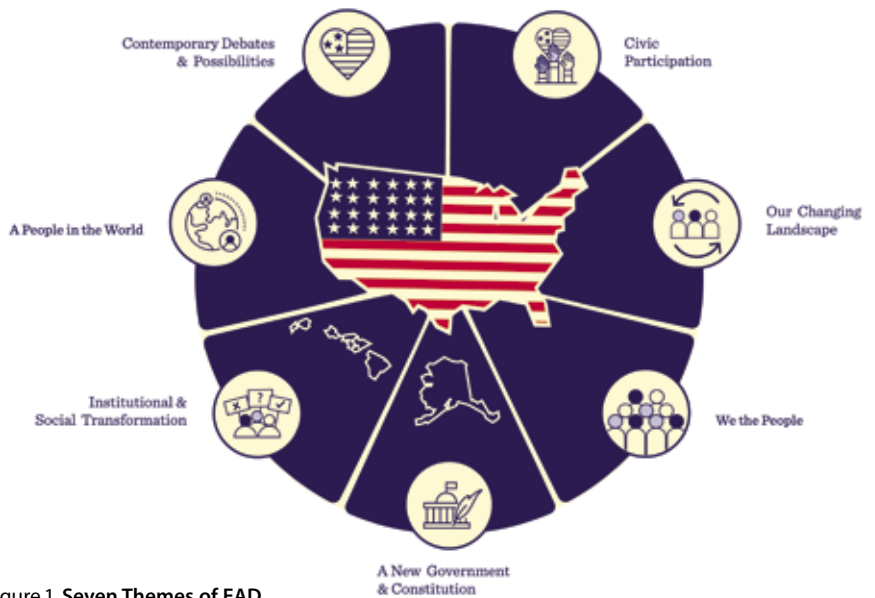


Figure 1. Seven Themes of EAD.

learners, EAD brought together content experts, civic education organizations, and school district leaders to identify and outline disciplinary concepts that are essential for robust civic education.³ The EAD steering committee sought to map out the disciplinary and conceptual terrain of what an individual needs to know and grapple with as a responsible member of our society. Members of the steering committee are quick to point out that EAD never meant to, and did not, create a set of national standards or curricula. Instead, the project produced a *roadmap* that aims to guide national, state, and local educators on essential themes and topics to incorporate when developing standards and curricula for social studies education.

Unlike typical standards and other frameworks that tend to include lists of content and skills, the EAD Roadmap consists of a series of conceptual guideposts (seven themes) that expand into complex, content-laden questions (Driving Questions and Sample Guiding Questions). Additionally, it asks educators to thoughtfully consider five design challenges when using the themes to plan out standards, curricula, and lessons.⁴ Instead of a set of standards or curricula, the Roadmap reads more like a schema—a conceptual guide—for standards and curriculum designers.

The Roadmap is organized into seven major themes that encompass our historic and civic narrative (see Figure 1). Each of the seven themes prompts

educators to help students grapple with pithy driving questions like “What is civil society?” and “How did past generations of Americans understand and answer calls to civic duty in civil society?” Guiding questions help to support the driving questions. Two examples are: “How have Americans in the past balanced their individual desires and rights with commitments to the larger group of family, kin, community, faith, and nation?” and “Why are civil disagreement and toleration of differing views important?” The idea is that answering questions like these helps students to prepare for a robust civic life.

If seen through an innovative lens, the themes can be read as a reimagining of how history and civics can be organized and taught in schools. Rather than plodding through a historical timeline, EAD challenges history educators to consider a thematic way of integrating civics concepts into U.S. History coursework. It also asks civics educators to incorporate various historic and current events into civic coursework meaningfully. On the other hand, through a more conventional lens, the themes can be read as a collection of important concepts and complex questions that history and civic courses should attend to at various points within a social studies sequence. While the Roadmap presents specific conceptual knowledge, it offers flexibility for how these concepts can be addressed. For example, even though Theme Four (A New Government and Constitution) broadly explores the institutional history of the United States as well as the theoretical underpinnings of constitutional design (which is typi-

cally included in most state standards), it also purposely asks individuals to evaluate changing relationships between the U.S. Constitution and Treaties with Indigenous Nations. In other words, it specifically calls out content and concepts to be addressed, while providing broad umbrellas of themes that may align with existing standards. This flexibly allows the EAD Roadmap to coexist with current content requirements as educators around the country work to create more robust history and civics standards and curricula.⁵

An Accompanying Document to the C3 Framework

At first glance, readers of the Roadmap may ask, “But doesn’t the C3 Framework already outline what robust social studies looks like at various grade levels within various disciplines? How is this EAD Roadmap any different?” Without recounting the entire C3 creation process, it helps to remember that the C3 Framework is built around an inquiry model.⁶ With an inquiry arc at the core of the framework, C3’s guile and strength lie in its content agnosticism. This allows the framework to methodically scaffold disciplinary skills that students need to successfully conduct inquiry in each of the social studies disciplines—all without getting bogged down in a tête-à-tête on what content ought to be addressed at each level.⁷ The Inquiry Design Model (IDM) is a great example of how the C3 Framework puts teachers at the center of decision making.⁸ By leveraging teachers as curricular decision makers, the C3 Framework allows them to make the final decision about what content to include

in well-developed inquiries.

By contrast, the EAD Roadmap is not content agnostic; on the contrary, myriad compromises were made across diverse perspectives to include as much essential content as possible. Hours of debate between various stakeholders and experts yielded lengthy documents that enumerate everything from key events in early U.S. history to definitions of equity and justice. The Roadmap encapsulates this content in the form of pithy questions (e.g., “How unified were the rebellious British colonies and the early United States?” and “How are equality, equity, and justice related?” respectively). Through these questions, EAD seeks to extend the work of the C3 by including expert-vetted content into the inquiry process.⁹

Even though they could be confusing for teachers since they are not framed as “compelling questions,” these weighty, inquiry-esque sample guiding questions are divided both by discipline (i.e., history and civics) and grade-bands (i.e., K-2; 3-5; 6-8; 9-12). Not meant to be exhaustive, the Roadmap’s sample guiding questions give readers an idea of how content is connected to each of the seven themes. As a caveat, the goal here is not for teachers or students to address every single question provided by the Roadmap; instead, the questions give designers of standards, curricula, and lessons a sense of the content, inquiry, and resources that are needed to adequately address each of the seven themes.

Using the EAD Roadmap

The full EAD report provides insights into how different stakeholders can utilize the Roadmap for their particular needs.¹⁰ Here, I outline three: (1) State Leaders; (2) District Leaders; and (3) Teachers. As previously mentioned, for state leaders, the EAD Roadmap can serve as a bold reimagining of what social studies can be from a standards perspective. Rather than a simple listing of terms, concepts, and skills, the EAD Roadmap pushes state leaders to consider what social studies education writ

The EAD Roadmap Initiative

The Educating for American Democracy (EAD) Roadmap initiative was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the U.S. Department of Education through a grant to iCivics in collaboration with Harvard University, Tufts University, CIRCLE, and Arizona State University. The initiative brought together a national network of more than 300 scholars, classroom educators from every grade level, practitioners, and students from a diversity of viewpoints, demographics, and roles.

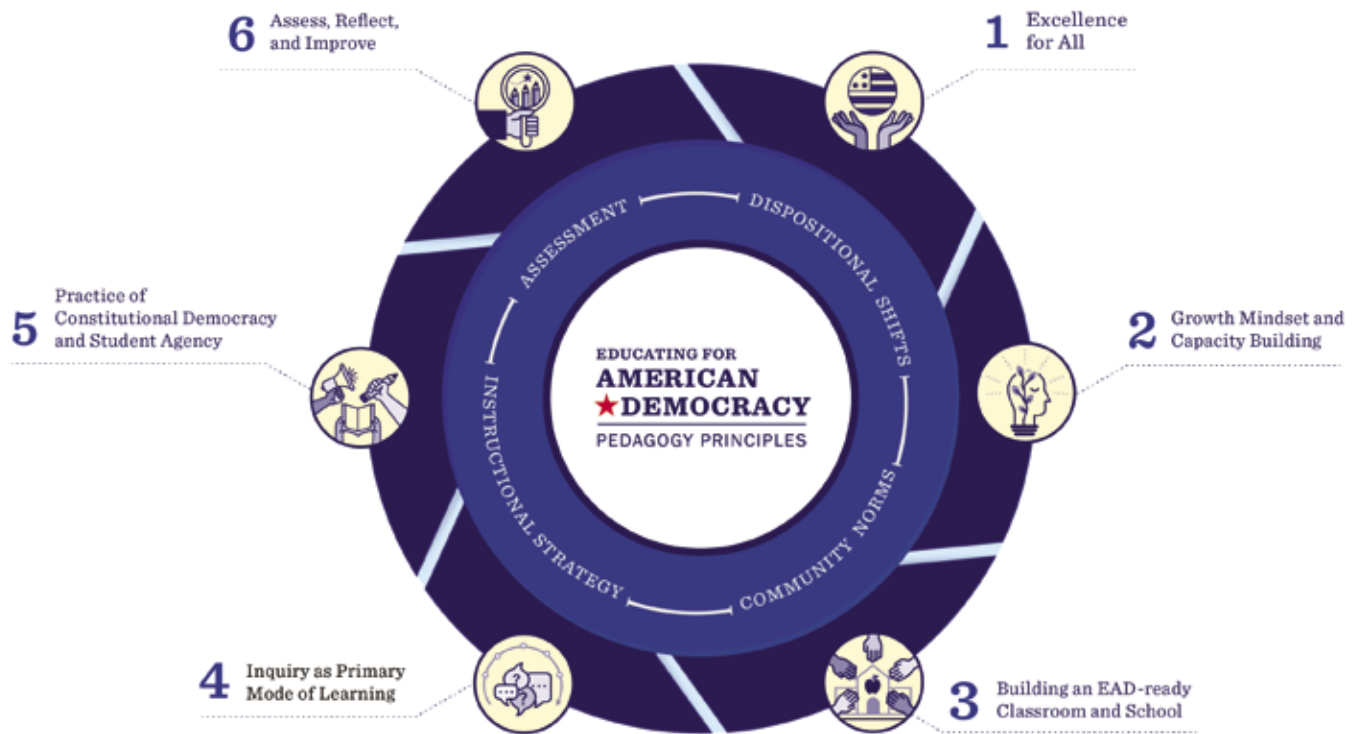


Figure 2. Pedagogy Principles of EAD.

large can look like if standards follow the seven major themes outlined by the Roadmap. Furthermore, the five design challenges give state leaders some parameters to consider should they decide to develop new state standards or legislation around robust social studies knowledge and skills.

While district leaders may not be in control of creating new standards or legislation, they can help connect existing standards to the EAD themes or create new district policy around the design challenges. As can be seen in the previous examples, the EAD Roadmap provides wiggle room for connections to be made between themes and content. A district social studies specialist can help ensure alignment between the seven themes and state standards by conducting an in-depth comparison between the Roadmap and existing standards. District leaders can also help teachers adopt more inquiry in their pedagogy to utilize the sample guiding questions provided by the Roadmap. Additionally, the EAD pedagogy companion document outlines the teacher practices and

classroom environments that will help support students' engagement with the seven themes (see Figure 2).¹¹

Lastly, the sample guiding questions and pedagogy companion document can give teachers ideas about what kinds of inquiry to use in their classrooms. Because having to learn a new guideline and layering it on top of existing requirements (e.g., C3, state standards, etc.) is time consuming, it is likely more useful for teachers to focus mostly on using sample guiding questions as potential inquiry-driving questions rather than to spend time fully unpacking the seven themes and five design challenges. The good news is that EAD is in the process of curating ready-made unit plan and lesson plan resources on its website for teachers to use, but the bad news is that these resources are lacking for K-5 settings and don't always come in the form of robust inquiries. In this way, much like the C3, teachers will need to draw on their own expertise to determine how to approach, adopt, or adapt the questions. While this peripheral engagement with the Roadmap may be dissatisfying for

teachers, it is helpful to remember that an intent of the broader EAD project is to shift how policymakers think about robust history and civic education. The hope, then, is for better standards and curriculum in the future that will fully align to the EAD Roadmap. In the meantime, teachers can use the sample guiding questions as potential inspiration for teaching/addressing existing standards.

Challenges and Limitations

As an endeavor that has the potential to redefine the social studies landscape, the EAD project is extremely ambitious. Akin to the scope of influence that the Next Generation Science Standards have garnered for science education, EAD hopes to systematically impact how the field of social studies and educational policymakers think about history and civics education in the twenty-first century. While its goal to support more social studies funding, legislation, curricula development, and general attention is admirable, whether the overall ambitions of the project will pan out is yet to be seen. The historic and present

examples of the “history wars” serve as a constant reminder that different states, regions, and communities have different ideas about what kind of history their students should learn. And even though EAD attempts to eschew partisan designation, it is too soon to know what kind of traction it will receive in various corners of our contentious political landscape. It is possible that in trying to be too many things to too many people, it could end up satisfying very few. There is little doubt that critics from both the left and the right are ready to denounce anything created at the hands of the other, so it is too early to say whether the intent and contents of the EAD project will endure as a beacon of the ever-tenuous middle ground.

Practical classroom use is perhaps the biggest immediate challenge of the EAD Roadmap. In the event that districts and states take up the Roadmap, with its seven themes and five challenges, as a new way to reimagine or reorganize history and civics learning, it is uncertain just how cumbersome the process of implementation would be for teachers and educators on the ground. Even with the pedagogy companion document, teachers may dismiss the ambiguous conceptual gymnastics that the Roadmap requires and continue to depend, instead, on the straightforward lists of contents and skills in state standards. No doubt a large amount of professional development will be needed to help teachers translate this work for classroom usage.

While a lot of teachers and social studies educators have lent support to the project, EAD is still ultimately the brainchild of content specialists and disciplinarians. It is unclear just how well these lofty themes, challenges, and questions can be practically and equitably implemented in the classroom. Perhaps only time will tell, and readers of this article might very well be the ultimate judges as more research on EAD and its implementation is conducted.

Conclusion

With the continued lack of funding and attention paid to the social studies in recent times, EAD (as a companion to C3) provides another step towards reclaiming social studies as an integral part of the educational landscape. The project is less than perfect because it is impossible to accommodate everything for everyone—so please don’t look to it as a panacea. However, it is the work of thoughtful deliberation, compromise, and concession—and in this time of political polarization, it is refreshing to know that a reasonable, albeit fragile, middle ground is still plausible within the social studies. Even with its imperfections, the project is a tangible exercise in *E Pluribus Unum*. 🌍

Notes

1. See NCSS, *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* (The National Council for the Social Studies, 2013).
2. It is no small wonder that “In God We Trust” was

officially adopted by Congress in 1956 as our motto, usurping the traditional motto.

3. See www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org and download the EAD Report for complete rationale and context of the EAD project.
4. See www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org to download the complete EAD Roadmap.
5. See www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org/take-action-for-preliminary-standards-crosswalk-for-various-state-standards.
6. See the September 2013 issue of *Social Education* for more information on the history and development of the C3 Framework.
7. See E. T. Linenthal and T. Engelhardt (eds.), *History Wars*, 1st edition (Holt Paperbacks, 1996) as an example of history wars of the past; and www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/12/historians-clash-1619-project/604093/ on current controversy over the 1619 project.
8. See S.G. Grant, K. Swan, and J. Lee, *Inquiry-based Practice in Social Studies Education: Understanding the Inquiry Design Model*, 1st edition (Routledge, 2017) for more information on the IDM model.
9. See www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/EAD-Statement-on-the-C3-Framework.pdf for more information on how the EAD Roadmap interacts with the C3 Framework.
10. See www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org/the-roadmap/ for more information on how to use the Roadmap.
11. See www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org/pedagogy-companion/ for more information on the Pedagogy companion document.



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