

C3 Teachers Talk Inquiry with First-Year Teacher Deja Rivers

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Heading into your first year of teaching is always tough, but against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, recent political turmoil and social unrest, and increasing public rhetoric and policy aimed at curricular censorship, Deja Rivers's first year is sure to be filled with both expected and unexpected challenges. However, as a recent graduate of the University of Kentucky's School of Education, Deja knows a thing or two about implementing inquiry in the classroom. **C3 Teachers** sat down with Deja Rivers to discuss her experience working with inquiry, her expectations and plans for her first full year, and how she might navigate some of the recent curricular legislation on teaching history.

C3 T: You are starting your first year at Bryan Station Middle School in Lexington, Kentucky, where you will teach seventh grade World History. How do you plan to teach with inquiry?

DR: I incorporate inquiry into every step of my planning and teaching, from unit mapping to daily lessons. I begin each unit with a question about the meaning or significance of the content being studied, such as "How does conflict affect culture?" Then, I use supporting questions over several class periods. The advantages of teaching with [the Inquiry Design Model (IDM)] are that students can practice historians' actual processes and routines, which is an invaluable experience. By implementing inquiry into the classroom, students can practice historical thinking skills, such as contextualization, corroboration, and formatting evidence-based arguments. I think it is also a much more effective way of teaching. Using inquiry, teachers can step back and act as facilitators of knowledge rather than be the sole provider of knowledge every day. This way of teaching not only lessens my load, it helps me develop relationships with my students by leading their learning as they explore content.

C3 T: Earlier you said that inquiry helps you build relationships with your students. Can you talk more about how inquiry and building relationships might go hand-in-hand?



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DR: Using inquiry gives me more room to stop what I'm doing and check in with kids while they are working on tasks and going through sources in small groups. Inquiry has become a habit. Since doing inquiry means guiding your own learning, teachers aren't just standing in front of the classroom giving information, teachers are facilitating learning, not directing it. Inquiry requires that kids have roles, they have partners, they can ask their group a question before asking me. This gets students talking with each other and then most of the time, by the time I get there, they have worked through their questions.

ON THE COVER: Deja Rivers teaching middle school social studies in Lexington, Kentucky (Photographer: Amanda Nelson, University of Kentucky)

C3 T: What are your favorite inquiries to teach and why?

DR: I have found that for World History **Mesoamerica** and **East Asia** are the best liked Inquiries. Also, my students love learning about content they have only seen in Hollywood or have read about in books, such as Samurai warriors, the Mongol empire, or the Mayan calendar.

I try not to focus solely on victimization or the adverse events/interactions with Europeans. For my students, a culturally relevant unit is on the Mesoamerican empires. During this unit, I like to ask, “**What happens when civilizations collide?**” I expand the inquiry to include an exploration into the lives and practices of the Aztec, Maya, and Inca civilizations before and after the European conquest. Personally, I find **indigenous peoples and cultures** fascinating and my students love to study them. Many of my students were unaware of the indigenous ancestry of those with Mexican heritage. Once they make the connection between the Aztec and the Mexican flag, they become hooked. We also explore the geography of Mexico, including the previous indigenous names of current cities, such as Mexico City, which was known as Tenochtitlan. Not only this, but students of Mexican heritage have the opportunity to see their culture taught as a part of the curriculum. It’s a unit where everyone can learn more about each other and themselves.

C3 T: World history teachers enter the classroom with a lot of learning to do. You said that your favorite topic to teach is Mesoamerica. What drew you to that topic?

DR: I like that moment in history. The Maya, Aztec, and **Inca** civilizations can stand alone. These three civilizations are so distinct. Plus, I really like how our state standards focus on the good stuff, you know, before colonization, instead of just immediately telling victim stories. When we start with colonization some kids never hear their own heritage portrayed in a good light. And I’ve been there, where you know you’re learning about your heritage and history always on the back end. Since I really liked this part of the curriculum, it made me kind of dive deeper. I did a virtual Machu Picchu tour with my students—just seeing the aqueducts and how they designed it all, which was amazing.

C3 T: You just said that you try to move away from



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victimization stories, exclusively European perspectives, and European colonization and imperialization. And you mentioned how focusing on innovation and cultural resilience made your curriculum more relevant, responsive, and sustaining. In what ways do you think that inquiry and the IDM can help you support this type of teaching?

DR: I’m a little hesitant to frame things a certain way but, for example, I started off one class with students analyzing two primary source images. One was a depiction of [Hernán] Cortés as kind of an aggressor and the other of Cortés getting help from a little girl. That image looks like there is a peaceful cul-

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tural exchange happening. I just asked, “What is happening in these two pictures?” Of course, they depict two different perspectives. Then I asked, “Why do you think there are two different perspectives of Cortés?” We had a huge discussion about it. Eventually they arrived at how Europeans sometimes tried to make indigenous peoples look negative or ungodly. From there, they caught on quickly, and I was like, “Yes, you got it! You always have to question the motive behind whatever

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you're looking at. That's part of being a critical thinker." Then the students started to talk about how spreading that kind of false perspective is not right. It was a social justice moment. They wanted to make change. They were just so aware, it was amazing.

C3 T: How do you think inquiry will fit with some of the restrictive curricular bills being passed in states like Kentucky? Do you see inquiry and the IDM as a way to mediate or interrupt some of these concerns? And, how might questions like "How did Black genius help build American democracy?" allow teachers to integrate topics that are the target of censorship into their curriculums without taking

an overt stance that might cost them their job or make them a target of a lawsuit?

DR: Here in Kentucky, Senate Bill 138 was passed in February. This bill prohibits teachers from teaching current events or controversial topics that may place blame on others based on race. Thankfully, I am not nervous about teaching specific topics, as World History usually focuses on traditional "minority" history, which was not a part of the Kentucky state curriculum until now. If I were teaching U.S. History, however, I would have

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several concerns about specific topics, particularly content involving chattel slavery or federal/state legislation, such as the 3/5th compromise, Black Codes, or the *Dred Scott vs. Sandford* legal case. I do see inquiry and IDM as a way to interrupt these concerns. You can ask questions like, "What makes a movement



Photographer: Amanda Nelson, University of Kentucky

Deja Rivers's Top Five IDM Inquiries

What makes a movement successful?

What innovations can provide food and water for millions?

What happens when civilizations collide?

What makes a society complex?

What do the buried secrets tell us about Tenochtitlan?

successful?" and mention these movements and then kind of let the students figure it out. Maybe they will Google these topics in their free time and bring that to class. The only way we can dispel misconceptions and misunderstandings about the past is to investigate them thoroughly, which is what IDM does. I hope that IDM can be a helpful solution, for the sake of the teaching profession.

C3 T: Finally, what do you think would be different about American society if everyone had the skills to make evidence-based arguments?

DR: Oh, my goodness. Well, evidence-based arguments strengthen critical thinking skills, which helps people interrogate the sources they see. That's the first thing! What we learn in social studies is to question the motives of whoever creates sources. What I feel we have lost is critically looking

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at something and asking, "Is this a credible source?" I think if all social studies teachers adopted the Inquiry Design Model, then as a society we wouldn't have these issues of misinformation. Inquiry teachers are able to stop in our tracks and say, "Okay that doesn't sound right. Let me do some digging and investigating." Then come to find out, maybe it was a lie or a

stretch of the truth. Inquiry helps us take a step back and think about what we're seeing. 📌

**This interview, conducted over two sessions, has been edited and condensed.*

Teachers from around the world are using inquiry and the IDM in the classroom. Creating community through connecting teachers is one of C3 Teachers' primary goals. Through [inquiry development](#), [hubs](#), blogging, the C3 Teachers Institute, and the [Making Inquiry Possible Project](#), C3 Teachers strives to support teachers as they implement inquiry in the classroom. [Join us!](#) We want to hear from you.

This is the first in a series of interviews with practicing C3 Teachers from around the country. Visit us at www.c3teachers.org or contact us at info@c3teachers.org.



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*The C3 Teachers initiative is guided by **MARY BETH YERDON** (Syracuse University), **KATHY SWAN** (University of Kentucky), **JOHN LEE** (North Carolina State University), and **S. G. GRANT** (Binghamton University). Kathy, John, and SG have worked as leaders and writers in the C3 Framework project and know first-hand the critical role teachers play in the implementation and realization of the C3 goals and aspirations. Their work extends beyond the C3 into teacher education and preparing new teachers to tackle the challenges of teaching social studies in the 21st century. They look forward to learning from C3 Teachers and the ways in which they lead the effort!*