

# C3 Teachers: The Heart of the Inquiry

John Lee, Alicia McCollum, and Mary Beth Yerdon  
with testimonials from C3 Teachers

The publication of the *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* in 2013 opened a door for inquiry practice in social studies.<sup>1</sup> After a century of fits and starts with inquiry in social studies, the C3 Framework sought to put inquiry firmly at the forefront of social studies teaching and learning.<sup>2</sup> However, we knew that the C3 Framework was unlikely to gain traction as a standards innovation without the engagement and commitment of the teachers who would be asked to implement the inquiry innovations within. In the early years of the C3 Framework's publication, we learned that while the Framework resonated with teachers, they struggled with key aspects within—such as taking informed action in the classroom and using questions to initiate an inquiry.<sup>3</sup> Research and theory on teacher professional growth tells us that teacher networks focused on content, self-reflection, enthusiasm, and the application of innovative instructional approaches can enhance teaching and learning.<sup>4</sup> With this in mind, our collaborative launched the C3 Teachers network (<https://c3teachers.org>) in 2013 to support teachers' implementation of the C3 Framework.

## Building a C3 Teachers Network

The C3 Teachers network aims to empower teachers as they wrestle with the big ideas and instructional implications of the C3 Framework and the embedded Inquiry Arc. The vision of C3 Teachers is for the regular practice of social studies teaching and learning to be driven by questions that frame students' exploration of content, the expression of arguments in response to questions, and a realization for how student learning connects to their lives inside and outside of school.

C3 Teachers began as a small group of 15 teachers who joined together just after the publication of the C3 Framework in 2013 to reflect on the Framework and how the ideas within could activate students in their classrooms. We asked these teachers to see themselves in the C3 and kick the tires of the Inquiry Arc. That was 2013, and the voices of those 15 teachers struck a cord that still resonates today. Their stories launched a movement that has sustained and advanced the inquiry revolution in social studies.

With its simple start, the C3 Teachers network has grown into a platform for launching ideas and innovations aimed at bringing the C3 Framework to life. C3 Teachers provides access to hundreds of open-source inquiries designed by and for teachers using the Inquiry Design Model (IDM).<sup>5</sup> Today, C3 Teachers is over 16,000 strong and enables teachers to experience the innovations launched by the C3 Framework.

## Stories from the Heart of Inquiry

Teachers inspired by the C3 Framework are moving social studies forward and giving us visions of the possible. We've been watching and listening to C3 teachers and continue to be amazed by their energy and creativity. Their experiences run the gamut from personal introspection to institutional change. We have been sharing the perspectives of teachers on our C3 Teachers blog.<sup>6</sup> Here, we offer some of those stories from C3 teachers and their experience with the C3 Framework.

While the story of C3 Teachers began with those first 15 teachers reflecting on the C3 Framework back in 2013, it was the New York K-12 Social Studies Toolkit (<https://c3teachers.org/new-york-hub>) that pumped life into the heart of inquiry,



[ENGAGINGCONGRESS.ORG](http://ENGAGINGCONGRESS.ORG)



*Engaging Congress* is a free interactive learning tool that uses primary source documents to explore the basic tenets of representative government and the challenges they face in contemporary society.



[ACTIONCITIZEN.ORG](http://ACTIONCITIZEN.ORG)



*Action Citizen* is a learning tool that encourages students to evaluate expectations and relationships between the U.S. government and the American people through the critical analysis of primary sources and legislation. It provides content and an approach for participation in a representative democracy.



[FREEDOMSUMMER1964.ORG](http://FREEDOMSUMMER1964.ORG)



*Freedom Summer 1964* is a free digital learning tool that explores key events surrounding the early years of the Civil Rights Movement, the 1964 Mississippi voter registration drive, and the eventual passage of both the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.



# VOTES FOR WOMEN



**the heart of inquiry**  
C3 TEACHERS

**The INQUIRIES**  
C3 Teachers have developed hundreds of inquiries available at C3Teachers.org

**The C3 HUBS**  
C3 Hubs bring together educators who share an interest in the C3 Framework and who are working together in their schools or organizations.

**The C3 BLOGS**  
Teachers describing their experiences with the Inquiry and the C3 Framework.

**C3 Teachers PD**  
Over 20,000 teachers have participated in professional development activities related to the C3 Framework and IDM.

**C3 Teachers Reach**  
C3 Teachers is 16,000 strong, representing all 52 states and districts and dozens of countries.

enlivening the C3 Framework, and inspiring inquiry design.<sup>7</sup> The Toolkit project in 2014-2015 was the work of an inspired group of talented New York teachers. Joe Karb, the 2012 National Council for the Social Studies Outstanding Middle School Teacher, was part of a team who wrote what became the first major collection of C3 inspired inquiries. Joe brought his skills as a teacher to some of the earliest work on inquiry curriculum development. His reflection of those earlier years sets the stage for how the C3 Teachers network would bring new life to social studies:



*I was first introduced to the C3 Framework in 2013 at a social studies meeting hosted by the American Federation of Teachers. At that point, the C3 was in draft form and the Inquiry Design Model (IDM) was still being developed.*

*Needless to say, the Framework and IDM piqued my interest as a teacher. For many years prior there was an emphasis in New York on primary and secondary sources and DBQ writing. While DBQs have value, it seemed like they had become formulaic with the emphasis being on earning the most points on an exam as opposed to thoughtful claim-making using evidence. The C3 approach provided a different way to engage students using compelling questions, sources, and having students dig deeper by interacting with a curated collection of sources.*

*I was sold on the C3 approach and eventually had the opportunity to be an inquiry writer on the New York Toolkit project. As one of the middle school writers, I collaborated with the toolkit team to create 6 of the 84 inquiries that were eventually released in New York and nationally through C3 Teachers. In my seventh grade classroom, I taught these inquiries, and the differences in student learning were clear. Students were engaged and interested in doing challenging work with sources and claims. Instead of using sources as a supplement to lecture, our Toolkit inquiries put sources at the center of my teaching and encouraged my students to think for themselves and do a deep dive in the content they are learning.*

*The New York Toolkit project has inspired so many educators. I've been fortunate to take what we learned in the project and apply it to many other contexts including my work with the Korean War Legacy Project where we developed a collection of inquiries using IDM (<https://koreanwarlegacy.org/teaching-tools/korean-war-legacy>). I'm proud of what we were able to do in New York and how we put the C3 Framework into motion.*

Amber Makaiau was another early C3 teacher leader. Amber is an educator at the University of Hawaii, Manoa and director of the Hanahau'oli School Professional Development Center. Amber was part of a team who enabled a group of teachers in 2015-2016 to develop C3-inspired inquiries in the early years after the publication of the C3 Framework. The work led to the development of the Hawaii' C3 Hub (<https://c3teachers.org/hawaii-c3-hub>). Since then, C3 Teachers has supported educators in developing over 30 C3 Hubs (<https://c3teachers.org/c3-hubs>). Here, Amber reflects on how C3 teachers inspire their students:



*C3 teachers have a progressive philosophy of education, centered around the idea that schools can help to better society. They know that teaching is an "art," which requires balancing well-laid plans with the willingness to respond to the emergent and diverse needs of individuals, communities, and places. C3 teachers use the innovative structure of the C3 Inquiry Arc as a pathway for cultivating and nurturing student citizens who think for themselves, collaborate with others, and are committed to caring for the planet. C3 teachers are committed to making school meaningful. They provide opportunities and experiences for students to become, in the words of the C3 Framework, "aware of their changing cultural and physical environments; know the past; read, write, and think deeply; and act in ways that promote the common good."<sup>8</sup>*

*While inquiries designed by C3 teachers have core elements, which can be recognized across time and place, no one inquiry is alike*

*because individual learners are diverse and all school communities are unique. C3 teachers are dedicated to designing learning experiences grounded in what students need to thrive in today's rapidly changing world, and inspiring students to imagine and enact new realities and possible futures.*

Kēhau Glassco, another Hawaiian C3 teacher, is a school leader at Kapālama Campus of Kamehameha Schools, Hawaii. Here, Kēhau Glassco and two of her teacher colleagues, Ray Parker and Ehā Hiu, both social studies teachers at Kamehameha Middle School, describe what it means to be a C3 Teacher:



*Kēhau Glassco: A C3 teacher is not your traditional social studies teacher. Facts and timelines are not the focus. The C3 Framework allows students to be curious about history and how they can contribute to their communities given what they learned. The C3 shifts the student experience from being told about history to a personalized journey. My favorite thing about being a social studies educator is teaching the students to give back and participate in their communities. The C3 Framework empowers social studies teachers to have their students apply their knowledge and engage in civic activities that create positive change in their communities. In my 25 years as an educator, I've learned that students don't remember the facts, events or people, but they remember the inquiry projects we did that ended with civic engagement.*

*Ray Parker: Implementing the C3 standards has led to a noticeable change in how we educate our students. Instead of having them just learn facts, we now focus on helping them become active and engaged members of their community. This means they learn not only what's in the textbooks but also how to think critically, make informed decisions, and get involved in important community issues.*

*Ehā Hiu: For me, being a C3 Teacher means helping students learn content using a*

curriculum that allows them to learn about topics that are relevant to their lives and to make positive contributions to the world. It means providing students with a relevant, meaningful, and engaging curriculum that connects and ties them back to their families, their communities, and to their identities as *kanaka oiwi* [i.e., Native Hawaiian].

Janae Bell is a C3 teacher at Silverado High School in Las Vegas, Nevada. She also mentors both practicing and student teachers in Clark County, Nevada. Janae has been working for almost a decade to support the transition away from memorization-based teaching to instruction based on the C3 Framework. Since 2015, Janae has been an exemplar of pairing culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy with the implementation of inquiry in the classroom. Janae understands that it's one thing to know the C3 Framework and quite another to move to the beat of inquiry. Here's her story:



*There is no simple answer to the question "What does it mean to be a C3 teacher?" I learned about the C3 Framework in 2015 and fell into fully employing the model in the airport on my way home from the NCSS Conference that year! Since then, the influence of the C3 Framework is found throughout my classroom and in my pedagogy. It is reflected in the art that I choose to adorn my classroom. It is reflected in the topics that my students and I choose to deeply explore. It is most certainly reflected in the questions that we use to stimulate conversation surrounding historical situations.*

*For me, truly being a C3 teacher means that I continuously make space for inquiry. My classroom has become a safe space for questioning, where students are both challenged and encouraged to question the world around them. Students are motivated to find and explore the varying perspectives in relation to their questions. Taking this approach, I've learned to release the fear of challenging the dominant perspective and to actually make space for the future changemakers in the*

*world. Being a C3 teacher provides me with a framework in which I can guide my students to become those changemakers.*

The C3 movement has reached thousands of teachers like Joe, Amber, Kēhau, Ray, Ehā, and Janae. But, it's not just individual teachers and schools that have been activated by the C3 Framework and Inquiry Arc. We've seen entire school districts take on the challenge of implementing C3 Framework-inspired inquiry in the classroom. Dessie Olson is a Teacher Specialist for the Salt Lake City School District. Moved by the possibilities of the C3 Framework, Dessie recently led a group of teachers in her district to build a collection of inquiries. Their work is available on a Utah C3 Hub at <https://c3teachers.org/utah-c3-hub>. Dessie's comments reflect what we've heard from so many district leaders about how C3 Teachers enable curriculum reform:



*C3 Teachers believe in creating the ideal learning environment for students, where students are excited to engage in rigorous thinking and learning and where students feel safe and valued. A C3 Teacher is reflective, yet forward thinking. They strive to meet students where they are and find ways to engage students in active learning. C3 Teachers seek out collaboration and expertise from others, constantly looking for ways to improve their knowledge, skills, and abilities. A C3 Teacher is student focused and dedicated to helping students find relevance and meaning in what they learn. They continuously ponder ways to frame their instruction around inquiries that matter to students, while delving into the complex issues and unsettled arguments that define our world, regardless of space or time. A C3 Teacher strives to make learning authentic, nurturing students to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for their own success as well as for the success of our democracy.*

Institutions have also been instrumental in bringing the C3 Framework to life. Colleen Smith was an early leader in the C3 Teachers network. She is a C3 teacher with both classroom teaching

and content development experience who has developed a body of curriculum work alongside both museums and K-12 schools. In her previous work, with colleagues at the Smithsonian Institute, Colleen collaborated with Native communities and cultural experts to create Native Knowledge (NK) 360° (<https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360>). Today, the NK 360° project features one of the premier inquiry collections in our field. Currently, Colleen is an Educational Resources Specialist at the Library of Congress. Here, Colleen describes her vision for being a C3 teacher:



*Being a C3 teacher means being purpose driven. The purpose being, to support students in developing evidence-based arguments about meaningful topics, issues, and questions that are relevant to their lives. When I first discovered the C3 Framework and the Inquiry Design Model, I knew it would be important to be engaged with other teachers. Early on, I participated in an IDM Institute sponsored by NCSS and C3 Teachers. I was reminded that as a curriculum developer, I needed reality checks from innovative and engaged teachers. I've stayed plugged in and have learned much over the years as a C3 teacher. One of the best reality checks came in the form of learning about argument stems and creative ways to start inquiry design. My colleagues can attest to my obsession with drafting and always coming back to these argument stems.*

*I put what I learned from other C3 teachers into action in my work to support the Native Knowledge 360 project and the collection of inquiries that are a part of that work. One thing I know is that C3 teachers will push you to always know your purpose in building inquiry and help reveal where things might fall apart.*

Amy Bottomley is the director of Educational Initiatives at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center and is another institutional leader/innovator in the C3 movement. Amy and her team developed a collection of inquiries aimed at pursuing inclusive freedom by promoting social justice for all, available in a C3 Hub (<https://c3teachers.org>).

[org/national-underground-railroad-freedom-center](https://c3teachers.org/national-underground-railroad-freedom-center)).<sup>9</sup> Here, Amy describes her perspective on C3 teachers:



*C3 Teachers ask, "What will my students need when they are 30?" Thus, we teach the information, understandings, and skills necessary to become a productive member of civic society. The United States is a representative democracy, so we need citizens who value inquiry and will question our leaders and the status quo. In the age of the internet and social media, we need citizens who value facts and evidence and can distinguish credible from non-credible information. Because we are a vast and diverse country, we need citizens who value diversity and seek out multiple perspectives.*

*Since democracy is of the people, by the people, for the people, we need citizens who value communication and who discuss, debate, and deliberate with one another and then advocate for issues they believe in. Finally, because we are products of our history, we need citizens who understand the lessons of the past and will apply them in creating a better tomorrow for all Americans. The C3 framework and C3 teachers help accomplish this by maintaining emphasis on big concepts and skills that will aid students in adulthood, as opposed to the minutia they are likely to forget.*

We are also learning from teacher educators and researchers about how teachers activate the C3 Framework. Nada Wafa is an assistant teaching professor at North Carolina State University. She has investigated how teachers' personal perspectives and global context impact their inquiry planning and teaching. Nada also developed the C3 Teachers Global C3 Hub (<https://c3teachers.org/global-hub>) as a place for educators to access global inquiries and connect with others who share their passion for inquiry in global contexts. Here, she touches on her vision for expanding the work of C3 teachers:

*At the core of my work as an educator is inquiry, but not just any type of inquiry—it's how*



*inquiry comes to life in global contexts through the C3 Framework. For me, the power of the C3 Framework is how it bridges theory to practice and opens doors to exploring global perspectives. As a scholar, I recently investigated how a novice global education teacher developed a C3 Framework-infused global education curriculum. This inquiry-based curriculum focused on students developing global literacy skills, building their knowledge of global content, and acting on what they were learning. In my research, I found that the teacher's conceptual knowledge about inquiry related to how her students engage in the inquiry process. In other words, understanding the theory of the C3 Framework and the Inquiry Arc helped the teacher I worked with to better engage her students with inquiry.*

*While researching the connections between theory and practice, I also had the opportunity to take action on what I was learning. The Global C3 Hub provided a platform for another project that examined how C3 teachers from all around the world created, used, and implemented the C3 Framework using a global education lens. This project connected six C3 teachers from various parts of the world—Malaysia, South Korea, Austria, Lebanon, [and in the United States] Maine, and Wyoming—as they designed inquiries. Through this project, I found that when teachers infuse global content and perspectives into their inquiry design, students are able to follow their interests in ways that connect content to personal experiences.*

### **C3 Teachers Moving Forward**

The intuitions of C3 teachers and their passions for teaching and learning with inquiry are moving social studies in exciting directions. Rather than having students sit, listen, and parrot what they've heard, C3 teachers know students should learn how to think for themselves. Inquiry is a means to that end. From the earliest days, C3 Teachers has focused on building innovative inquiry resources to support teachers in their journey to actively engage students. As such, at the core of every C3 teacher's work is the Inquiry Design Model and the IDM Blueprint. These teachers have used IDM to produce hundreds

of inquiries. Today, C3 Teachers has become a dynamic network for innovation about inquiry. We believe that our work at C3 Teachers can help teachers to realize this vision, but in order to reach our goals teachers must be activated to apply their best instincts to inquiry instruction. If teachers trust the Inquiry Arc in the C3 Framework and their views are honored, the C3 Framework has a chance to continue bringing about real change. That's the power of the C3 Teachers network. It represents an opportunity to move teachers to the forefront of reform in social studies education. With teachers in the lead, we know that the heartbeat of inquiry will be strong for years to come. ■

### **Notes**

1. *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013).
2. Kathy Swan, "The Importance of the C3 Framework," *Social Education* 77, no. 4, (2013): 222–224.
3. Emma S. Thacker, John K. Lee, and Adam M. Friedman, "Teaching with the C3 Framework: Surveying Teachers' Beliefs and Practices," *The Journal of Social Studies Research* 41, no. 2 (2017): 89–100.
4. Roelande H. Hofman and Bernadette J. Dijkstra, "Effective Teacher Professionalization in Networks?" *Teaching and Teacher Education* 26, no. 4 (2010): 1031–1040.
5. S. G. Grant, Kathy Swan, and John Lee, "Bringing the C3 Framework to Life," *Social Education* 79, no. 6 (2015): 310–315.
6. Carly Muetterties, "C3 Teachers Blogging: Grappling with the Realities of Inquiry," *Social Education* 82, no. 5 (2018): 287–290.
7. S. G. Grant, Kathy Swan, and John Lee, *Inquiry-based Practice in Social Studies Education: Understanding the Inquiry Design Model* (Taylor & Francis, 2022).
8. John Lee, Kathy Swan, and S. G. Grant, "By Teachers, for Teachers: The NYS Toolkit and C3 Teachers," *Social Education* 79, no. 6 (2015): 325–328.
9. *The C3 Framework*, 5.



**John Lee** is Associate Dean for Faculty and Academic Affairs and a Professor in the Department of Teacher Education and Learning Sciences in the College of Education at North Carolina State University.



**Alicia McCollum** is a doctoral student in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Kentucky.



**MaryBeth Yerdon** is a professor of foundations and social advocacy at SUNY Cortland in upstate New York.