

The C3 Framework and the Long History of Inquiry in Social Studies Education

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Across the decades, inquiry-based reform efforts have either been situated within the context of *disciplinary inquiry*—teaching the concepts, generalizations, and modes of inquiry associated with the disciplines that make up the social studies—or *critical inquiry*—engaging students in reflective inquiry to analyze social problems and issues. Proponents of these pedagogical approaches have held up the promise to make social studies learning more authentic, meaningful, and robust. Recent research backs these claims suggesting that through inquiry-based approaches teachers can engage students in developing deep content knowledge about issues relevant beyond the classroom.¹

The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework continues the long tradition of inquiry-based learning in the social studies by merging disciplinary and critical inquiry approaches.² Using the Inquiry Design Model (IDM), an instructional design tool, teachers guide students through a series of formative tasks to address supporting questions. These supporting questions in turn support the completion of a summative performance task designed to address the overarching compelling question. In order to complete a C3 inquiry, students must move through four dimensions: (1) developing questions, (2) applying disciplinary concepts and tools (from civics, economics, geography, and history), (3) evaluating sources and using evidence, and (4) communicating and

taking informed action. Dimensions 2 and 3 reflect a disciplinary focus on inquiry, whereas dimensions 1 and 4 guide students towards critical inquiry about issues relevant to their lives and the world beyond school.

By looking back at the history of the field, we trace the significance of the C3 Framework in bringing together the two approaches to inquiry. We begin with the early history of social studies to describe the emergence of differing rationales for integrating inquiry into the classroom. Along the way, we point to similarities in pedagogical and philosophical rationales, while also tracing areas of relative traction and notable resistance. Teachers can draw purpose from this history and borrow strategies to navigate issues associated with integrating inquiry into practice.

Early History of the Field

The field of social studies began to develop in the late 1800s. The Committee of Ten (National Education Association 1894), organized by the National Educational Association (NEA), marked the first attempt to standardize and modernize American education.³ The Committee's recommendations, while largely focused on university-bound students, asserted that for all students, history is more valuable when they "learn to assemble material and, from it, to make generalizations."⁴ According to the Committee's report, the social studies also offered:

... the training of the judgment in selecting the grounds of an opinion, in putting things together, in generalizing upon facts, in estimating character, in applying the lessons of history to current events, and in accustoming children to state their conclusions in their own words....”⁵

This sentiment appeared to appeal to both disciplinary-based perspectives on inquiry and those who espoused a more critical outcome of inquiry work for students.

A later Committee of Seven (1899) and subsequent Committee of Five (1910) added more nuance to the recommendations for history curriculum. Organized by the American Historical Association (AHA), these committees maintained a fairly conservative, disciplinary approach to teaching history and stressed the goals of citizenship transmission. For example, there continued to be a strong focus on teaching history, citizenship, and “an intelligent, tolerant patriotism.”⁶ The Committee of Seven, however, renewed a call for inquiry-based, critical thinking, noting that “the chief object of every experienced teacher is to get pupils to think properly ... not an accumulation of information, but the habit of correct thinking.”⁷ Here, students were encouraged to learn to construct arguments with curricular knowledge and then to apply it to the world around them.

Influence of the Progressive Education Movement

Perhaps more than any other educational philosopher, John Dewey is most well known for his work focused on the importance of inquiry and experiential learning, arguing that the purpose of education was to produce critical thinkers who would be active participants in our democracy. He was interested in creating curriculum and school experiences that resulted in active, thoughtful citizens and not the memorization of facts.⁸ Dewey also argued that knowledge gained through education should be “created through inquiry” and used for the “progressive reform of society.”⁹ A leader of the American progressive education movement, Dewey’s work, along with that of his contemporaries, prompted an interest in integrating problem solving as a key purpose of the social

studies. He also moved the field away from traditional disciplinary approaches to inquiry, focusing on problems relevant to students’ lives.

Many educational historians mark the formation of the modern field of social studies in the early twentieth century with the founding of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) in 1921. NCSS was created “to bring some order to the field and to promote the vision of social studies created by the NEA Committee on Social Studies.”¹⁰ In line with progressive theories of the day, proponents called for inquiry in the social studies classroom; there seemed to be a general consensus that a purpose of social studies in K-12 education was to engage students in critical inquiry and problem solving. While it took time for the NCSS to gain its full footing, its creation and growth represented the development of the first professional and advocacy group for social studies teachers.

Also in the 1920s and 30s social studies textbook authors, including Harold Rugg and Paul Hanna, integrated inquiry-based methods to prepare students to think critically about the world and to prepare them for civic participation. For example, Rugg, a prominent leader in the field of education and curriculum reform, believed that the social studies curriculum could provide students with the tools necessary to critically investigate the world outside of school. He published a series of junior high school texts, *Man and His Changing Society*, to create an innovative, interdisciplinary curriculum that “emphasized the interrelations of citizens and incorporated a social action component.”¹¹ The curriculum prompted students to become critically aware of social injustices and to become active participants in social change. Hanna’s elementary level texts also encouraged critical inquiry in the social studies. He argued for a Deweyan model of democratic education that taught children how to participate civically in and with the world around them.

Social Studies Inquiry in a Changing World

In the jingoism of the 1940s, as the nation entered World War II, any course that focused on the problems of American democracy was viewed as tantamount to treason. History professors began advocating for a “back-to-basics” curriculum that

required didactic lectures and rote memorization.¹² After the Soviet Union launched Sputnik in 1957, an increased emphasis on rigor in American classrooms made inquiry pedagogies seem impracticable or harmful. Even NCSS appeared to abandon support for inquiry methods and focused efforts on using social studies in the secondary school classrooms to create “junior social scientists”—the best of whom would take their place as academic elites in the nation’s research universities.

Amidst the emphasis on social sciences, the 1960s and 1970s saw the return of disciplinary inquiry as part of what has come to be called the “New Social Studies.” During the Cold War, concerns that the American educational system was not producing well-trained scientists and technicians led to the passage of the National Defense Education Act (1958). Fueled by Cold War fears, federal grants flowed into colleges of educational institutions across the country, allowing for dozens of ambitious curricular reform projects to get underway. In the social studies, over 50 unique curricular projects were fully federally funded.

Perhaps the exemplar project was *Man: A Course of Study* (MACOS). The curriculum was aimed at elementary school students and used the disciplines of cultural anthropology and psychology to facilitate student investigation of what it meant to be human. This goal was accomplished, in part, through a detailed overview of the culture of the Netsilik Inuit peoples, who eked out a precarious existence in the harsh environment of the Canadian Arctic. The belief was that if students apply techniques of disciplinary inquiry to understand the ways in which the Netsilik dealt with universal human issues like government, crime, religion, and marriage, they would be able to better understand both the Netsilik people and, through comparison, the students’ own cultural practices.

At first a popular curriculum program, within a decade MACOS had all but vanished from the American educational ecosystem. Conservatives opposed the program for its perceived endorsement of cultural relativism, while liberals were uncomfortable with what they perceived to be the exploitation of the Netsilik in the creation of the curriculum. The disciplinary focus and the

effort to turn 10-year-olds into social scientists fell out of favor as schools began to focus more attention on values, civic education, minority student experiences, and societal problems. In this context, according to Edwin Fenten “Inquiry and the structure of disciplines seemed archaic.”¹³ MACOS also failed to find allies in the classroom. In the past, teachers had focused on the basics of history when they taught elementary-level social studies, but now those same teachers were being told to go far outside their curricular comfort zone and use higher-level theoretical concepts and inquiry-based pedagogies from the social sciences instead. This made MACOS unpopular with a significant proportion of the teachers.

Another illustrative example of the inquiry-based New Social Studies was a federally-funded curriculum high school level project based out of the Ohio State University, “Project Africa.” For this project, education professors, historians, sociologists and classroom teachers collaborated to create a course on the history of Africa. It was designed to refute stereotypes regarding sub-Saharan Africa and give students access to African primary sources, all done with a heavy emphasis on an inquiry pedagogy that let students “make and test hypotheses about various African peoples.”¹⁴ Despite the many resources (filmstrips, maps, audio recordings, language lessons) created, only a few teachers ended up implementing Project Africa with its inquiry pedagogy emerging as the most common reason. Inquiry was seen as being more difficult for the teacher because inquiry was student-centered, meaning the teacher needed to individualize instruction, requiring a large time commitment which became difficult to honor as class sizes increased.

Contemporary Social Studies

In the second half of the twentieth century, learning sciences research “fundamentally altered conceptions about the development of understanding and expertise and shaped current conceptions of what is required for effective disciplinary inquiry.”¹⁵ For example, research demonstrated a need for instructional strategies that provided developmentally appropriate support for students investigating authentic problems through disciplinary practices. Today it is generally

understood that inquiry-based education requires supportive learning environments that engage and motivate learners, ensure social mediation through guided practice, and scaffold student learning. Based on this work, social studies researchers have proposed criteria for teaching and assessing inquiry. For example, Newman and associates proposed the framework of “authentic intellectual work” (AIW) to include the construction of deep content knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and connections to the world beyond school.¹⁶

AIW was integrated into the national social studies standards through the Powerful and Authentic Social Studies (PASS) framework.¹⁷ According to John Saye this merger connected disciplinary inquiry to critical inquiry within the field, “PASS added to the AIW conception of intellectual work two elements that have been important to social education from the inception of the field: consideration of ethical reasoning and the need for integrative learning across disciplines to address the complexity of social problems.”¹⁸ The contemporary C3 Framework builds on this work to similarly merge disciplinary concepts with the study of complex social problems.

Drawing Lessons from the Past

The previous examples have illustrated the ways that inquiry and problem solving have been central to the purposes of social studies. Across reform movements, the aim has always been toward preparing students for civic life by encouraging them to develop critical thinking skills through reflective inquiry. While the focus may have shifted between teaching the tools of

the disciplines or being more critical and issue centered, proponents agreed that inquiry was the most effective approach.

We can draw lessons from these historical antecedents to navigate the complexities of contemporary curriculum reform. We know that despite the research evidence, inquiry-based instruction has not achieved wide scale adoption in the social studies classroom. Challenges include structural issues such as large class sizes and a lack of time and resources. There are also cognitive challenges associated with inquiry, such as a lack of teacher and student content knowledge background and low tolerance for ambiguity.

To help teachers navigate the instructional shifts associated with integrating the C3 Framework, we can build on lessons from the past. We need to engage teachers as co-developers of curriculum reform and ensure that our teacher education programs properly prepare students with the necessary content knowledge and skills to teach through inquiry. We also need to prepare teachers to navigate potentially controversial inquiry topics in the classroom by providing them with consistent practice in using the framework, alongside high-quality primary and secondary materials. Finally, there is a real opportunity to engage students in democratic education through Dimension 4 of the C3 Framework. Rather than allow this aspect of the Inquiry Arc to fall away, we must refine our approaches to engaging students in taking action based on their learning experiences. As the C3 Framework continues to be adopted into state curriculum standards, the momentum may finally be shifting towards realizing inquiry as a regular part of the social studies curriculum. ■

Notes

1. See for example, Walter Parker, Susan Mosborg, John Bransford, Nancy Vye, John Wilkerson, and Robert Abbott, “Rethinking Advanced High School Coursework: Tackling the Depth/ Breadth Tension in the AP U.S. Government and Politics Course,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 43, no. 4 (2011): 533–559.
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4. National Education Association (NEA), *Report of the Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies: With the Reports of the Conferences Arranged by the Committee* (New York: American Book Company, 1894), 169.
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6. American Historical Association (AHA), *The Study of*

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7. AHA, 18.
 8. John Dewey, "The Social Significance of Academic Freedom," *The Social Frontier*, no. 2 (March 1936): 165-166; Dewey, *Democracy in Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (1916; reis., Telegraph Books, 1986)
 9. Thomas Fallace, "The Intellectual History of the Social Studies," in *The Wiley Handbook of Social Studies Research*, eds. M. M. Manfra and C. M. Bolick (Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 42-67.
 10. Ellen Bosenberg and Karen Poland, "Struggle at the Frontier of Curriculum: The Rugg Textbook Controversy in Binghamton, NY," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 29, no. 4, (2001): 645.
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 15. John Saye, "Disciplined Inquiry in Social Studies Classrooms," in Meghan Manfra and Cheryl Bolick (eds), *The Wiley Handbook of Social Studies Research* (Malden, MA: 2017), 336-359.
 16. Fred Newmann and Associates, *Authentic Achievement: Restructuring Schools for Intellectual Quality* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1996).
 17. David Harris and Michael Yocum, *Powerful and Authentic Social Studies: A Professional Development Program for Teachers*, National Council for the Social Studies (Washington, DC: 2000).
 18. Saye, 2017, 342.



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