



Calibrating Your “Compelling Compass”: Teacher-Constructed Prompts to Assist Question Development

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Since the publication of *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework* in 2013, there has been growing interest in compelling questions and their impact on social studies instruction. But what exactly does “compelling” mean? How do teachers know when they have hit “the sweet spot between the qualities of being intellectually rigorous and relevant to students?”¹ As more and more states include similar language in their own standards,² it has become increasingly important to understand how classroom teachers conceive of compelling questions so we may learn from them and grow in our development and use of inquiry-based questions in social studies.

These curiosities led me to spend much of 2015 working with six high school civics teachers in Kentucky as they wrestled with the concept of compelling questions. In doing so, it became clear how challenging this process can be. Crafting a high-quality compelling question takes time, thought, and revision. Listening to teachers work through their own compelling questions suggested a series of prompts that teachers can consider to calibrate their “compelling compass.”

In this article, I discuss how the experience of developing their own compelling questions helped teachers refine their understandings of the construct and the six prompts that emerged from studying their efforts. When developing a compelling question, teachers may have a sense of where they are headed but become disoriented along the way. These prompts help teachers gauge a

compelling question’s rigor, relevance, and functionality within a social studies curriculum.

Working Toward a Definition

Over the course of the study, teachers regularly mentioned the concepts of rigor and relevance, but it was through their experience with question development that they determined that an effective compelling question balances these two traits. Asked to describe questions appropriate for inquiry, teachers’ initial responses focused on rigor. They stated that an inquiry question “can’t be a one-word answer,” requires “serious intentional research,” and demands the use of “multiple sources and multiple lenses.”

Asked later to consider the term *compelling question* specifically, teachers’ responses shifted to the relevance end of the spectrum. Teachers stated that a compelling question is “something people

care about” and “grabs your attention” to the degree that “you can’t help yourself, you really need to know more about it.”

By the end of the study, having spent considerable time developing their own compelling questions, teachers’ descriptions incorporated both traits. One teacher described a compelling question as “something that is really interesting and really complex.” A second teacher commented that a compelling question must be “big enough that [it] requires kids to really think about it and dig into it,” but it must also prompt “the need to answer it, to figure it out.” The importance of rigor and relevance became increasingly clear when teachers implemented their compelling questions. Watching inquiries unfold that neither engaged nor challenged students to the degree they envisioned, the teachers revised their compelling questions, often in real time, to better balance the two central traits.

The traits of rigor and relevance consistently expressed by teachers reflect elements that have long been associated with inquiry questions.³ However, teachers’ definitions of compelling questions also included a potentially trickier aspect—their emotional appeal. As one teacher noted, “You just have to *feel* that

it's compelling." Compelling questions are designed to elicit a reaction, and an early test of their quality is how people respond to them. The difficulty is not so much that compelling questions ideally provoke an emotional response, but that personal responses are inevitably inconsistent. A particular compelling question may resonate with some but not all. This conclusion was apparent when the teachers evaluated each other's compelling questions, none of which were deemed compelling by all participants. To address the challenge of subjectivity, teachers concluded that it was important to develop compelling questions in collaboration with colleagues and/or students in hopes of creating questions that successfully engage others.

Teacher Constructed Prompts

As I listened to teachers talk through their question-development process, I noticed that they employed similar prompts—simple questions that encouraged reflection and revision of their compelling questions. These prompts reflected teachers' consideration of rigor and relevance as well as functionality. When developing a compelling question, teachers think about inspiring their students, but they also consider the myriad factors that influence their decisions: content demands, time, available resources, student readiness, accountability, their own confidence. In other words, teachers thought about the compelling question within the broader context of the curriculum and their classroom.

Does it promote digging deeper?

For many teachers, an initial concern was whether or not their question pushed students beyond surface-level thinking. They viewed compelling questions as an invitation for students to delve into topics that often receive cursory treatment. One teacher framed her question to move beyond the factual requirements for presidential candidates to bigger issues of leadership and legacy: Are great men or women chosen to be president?

Teachers acknowledged that compelling questions launch inquiries and that effective inquiries are built around big ideas and enduring issues.

Is it debatable?

Teachers desired questions that would encourage students to uncover big ideas, but they were cautious about developing questions that would lead students, intentionally or otherwise, toward a "right" answer. Teachers considered whether or not the compelling question could be answered in multiple ways and if those answers could be arrived at through multiple means. Swan, Lee, and Grant describe this process as finding a content angle that reveals a useful tension that can propel inquiry.⁴ One teacher revised her question from one that would result in a single explanation of how the Constitution exemplifies a social contract to a debate about the competing responsibilities present within a social contract. Teachers acknowledged that inquiry, at least in secondary classrooms, leads to evidence-based arguments, so compelling questions must lend themselves to multiple, valid answers that can be supported with evidence.

Do I want to answer it?

Although teachers believed that relevance to students was important, for many it was easier to begin with their own interests. This prompt seemed particularly common among veteran teachers who were anxious for new angles and opportunities to investigate their own burning questions. A teacher with 16 years of experience drew from her interest in "alternative history" to craft a compelling question about the impact of excluding particular voices from the Constitutional Convention, something she has "always wanted to do with [her] kids." Teachers acknowledged that inquiries are more likely to succeed if they are also excited by the compelling question, so consideration of personal interest can be an early barometer for whether or not a compelling question is worth

investigating.

Would my students care about it?

Concern about student interest was the factor most frequently cited by teachers as they explained their question-development process. Although some teachers sought questions that would primarily reflect students' ideas, more often teachers hoped to craft questions that would blend students' interests with curricular demands. The question, "Does the Constitution protect people from the government?" was one teacher's attempt to bridge teenagers' natural interest in freedom with "the things that they don't really necessarily like but they need to know." Teachers acknowledged that although compelling questions should resonate with students, their responsibility to state curriculum and disciplinary integrity requires that compelling questions link students' interests to larger issues.

Is it too academic?

Coupled with their interest in constructing questions that appealed to students' interests, teachers thought about the phrasing of their questions. These teachers regularly used questions in class, but they believed that a compelling question *sounded* different than a typical question. They claimed that the compelling nature of a topic might be lost if not presented in student-friendly language. One teacher explained that the topic for her compelling question came pretty easily, but she spent significant time revising the wording to make sure it was "kid-friendly, straight forward, and not too complex for them to understand." She ultimately anchored a question about the Founders' intentions with the familiar phrase, "We the people." Teachers acknowledged that questions serve as an invitation to inquiry, and students are more likely to respond to invitations that "speak" to them.

Do I have the resources and time to get students there?

Although an essential element of inquiry,

a compelling question is only as good as the inquiry that follows. An effective compelling question is not developed in isolation but rather within the realistic bounds of the instructional day. For one teacher, this concern became clear as she implemented her compelling question. She found that, even though students were interested in the question, they did not possess the requisite knowledge and skills necessary to effectively engage in the inquiry. She realized that the compelling question needed to better align with students' readiness and the resources she could provide. Teachers acknowledged that the development of a compelling question is often the first *and* last step in the inquiry-design process, as the accompanying sources and tasks may necessitate revision of the question.

Does it lead to more questions?

Answering the compelling question may seem like the logical conclusion to an inquiry, but the C3 Framework describes the four dimensions as “interlocking and mutually supportive,”⁵ suggesting that the conclusion of an inquiry may actually serve as the beginning of a new inquiry. Teachers agreed, stating that a compelling question should foster the development of supporting questions *and* spark additional compelling questions. One teacher found that his compelling question about how the Bill of Rights shapes society and students' lives provoked questions from students about political systems around the world and how other countries address issues of individual liberty. Teachers acknowledged that effective inquiries are collaborations among teachers and students and that compelling questions have the potential to support students as they transition from question-answerers to question-askers.

Conclusion

Teachers ask questions all the time, but ubiquity does not mean that questions are easy to create. Compelling questions present a challenge because: (1) they are designed to anchor a disciplined inquiry

that will sustain students' interest, and (2) Dimension 1 of the C3 Framework asserts that ultimately students should have opportunities to pose these kinds of questions. Both of these challenges suggest that the more we know about the process of question development, the better we can support our students. The participants in this study found tremendous benefit to reflecting on their own approaches to compelling questions, resulting in prompts that are suitable for teachers and students.

Despite the core traits of rigor, relevance, and functionality, in some ways, “compelling” is a moving target because these qualities are not realized in the same way in every classroom. This subjectivity actually empowers ambitious teachers, whose instruction is informed by deep knowledge of content, students, and context.⁶ This study may not have revealed a single, fail-safe approach to compelling questions, but it did emphasize the importance of experience. As one teacher explained, “You have to do it. There's no getting around that.” The opportunity to play with compelling questions in a safe, collaborative environment left these teachers more confident in their grasp of the concept and more excited to use compelling questions in their classrooms. Moving forward, the task for teacher education programs, school districts, and professional learning communities is to find the space necessary for novice and veteran teachers alike to calibrate their own “compelling compasses.”


Notes

1. S. G. Grant, Kathy Swan, and John Lee, “Questions that Compel and Support,” *Social Education* 81, no. 4 (2017): 200.
2. As examples, see the Connecticut Elementary and Secondary Social Studies Framework (www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/board/ssframeworks.pdf) and the Illinois Social Science Standards (www.isbe.net/Documents/K-12-SS-Standards.pdf).
3. Robert D. Barr, James L. Barth, and S. Samuel Shermis, *Defining Social Studies* (Washington D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1977); Linda S. Levstik and Keith C. Barton, *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools*, 5th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015); John Alien Rossi and Christopher M. Pace, “Issues-Centered Instruction with Low Achieving

High School Students: The Dilemmas of Two Teachers,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 26, no. 3 (1998): 380–409.

4. Kathy Swan, John Lee, and S. G. Grant, in a manuscript, “Inquiry Design Model: Building Inquiries in Social Studies,” that will be published this year as a book by NCSS.
5. *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.: National Council for the Social Studies, 2013), 6.
6. S. G. Grant and Jill M. Gradwell, *Teaching History with Big Ideas: Cases of Ambitious Teachers* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).

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