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Can Assessment Improve Learning? Thoughts on the C3 Framework

Bruce VanSledright

The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards charts a bold new path, which differs in a number of ways from standards and frameworks of the past. Its pivotal idea is that deep understanding of the sociocultural world—a key objective of a social studies learning experience in school—depends heavily on inviting children and adolescents to investigate, inquire into, and build knowledge about that world. Its design and message displace the old approach that turned on an image of learners holding passive acquisition roles in the face of other people's understandings. Instead, if pursued as developed, the C3 Framework asks learners to engage in actively participating in their own knowledge growth under the expert tutelage and guidance of social studies teachers.

The design and structure of the C3 Framework is deeply rooted in decades of research on how children and adolescents learn.[1] Those who have conducted empirical studies on that learning process have noted repeatedly that, if deep understanding is the goal, children and adolescents must ask questions about what they do not understand, embark on an investigative journey that begins to address those questions, explore resources for learning, develop evidence-based understandings, and be able to communicate them cogently and coherently. Because they are novices, children and adolescents need guides and facilitators in the form of teachers who assist and help to discipline and focus the process in order to insure success.

With some exceptions, this has not been what we typically do, nor is it what we do today. Rather, we ask learners to sit much more passively as we adults tell them how things are, how the sociocultural world works. We ask them to trust that we are telling them the right story. To see if they trust us, we ask them to repeat the story back to us, most famously on tests we give them periodically. Then a curious thing happens. Because we are so busy telling so many stories, telling learners what they need to know, we have no time to remedy learning difficulties, or misunderstandings, or lack of understandings, if we see them appear on tests. Instead, we march on. After all, educators are charged with following the pacing guide rooted in broad, complex social studies content standards and their indicators of learning.

To the extent that a state or a school district tests and evaluates social studies programs periodically or at the end of a year, learners need to be prepared for those tests—or so the argument goes. However, at this point the entire practice repeats itself because, even if those tests show misunderstandings or lack of knowledge, we seldom stop to remedy them, but simply press on because there is so much to tell.

My point here is to argue that this practice is a deeply flawed effort, uneducative at best and fundamentally irresponsible at worst, particularly if deep understanding is the goal. To understand, students need to learn how to question, to think, to investigate the sociocultural world, to do that in disciplined ways, and to communicate what they understand in defensible forms. They need to have substantial practice at this enterprise. That practice will take time. The C3 Framework recognizes this concern and is structured to provide guidance as a means of steering around it. What it does not speak to quite as clearly is that the remedy involves at least two major accompanying changes. One is a change in social studies state content standards and their indicators, refocusing them around rich questions and reducing their breadth at any given grade level. The second involves approaches to assessment. The latter change is the focus of my comments here.

New Framework, New Assessments

The approach to assessment that I suggest is based upon the need to move away from testing and toward assessment. It coheres closely with the design of the C3 Framework, and in fact, I would maintain that it is necessitated by that design. Broadly speaking, it involves shifting the conversation away from tests as a means of sorting and ranking students and towards embracing

assessment as a means of educating in social studies.[2] The approach I outline is a classroom-based, teaching and learning approach. Some refer to this as formative assessment. I will call it diagnostic performance assessment; as I proceed, I hope to make the meaning of that concept clear.

The suggestions I make, although geared toward classrooms and close to teaching and learning in those types of contexts, apply more broadly to the way states assess social studies learning. For example, the state of Maryland accomplished this feat for a decade prior to the inception of No Child Left Behind. The approach was called The Maryland State Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP).[3] It was designed to ask children and adolescents to show how well they understood what they had learned through experiences in which they performed them, individually and sometimes in small groups.

An Assessment Structure

The design and administration of diagnostic performance assessments for classroom use should be based on a structure that supports the dimensions and flow of the C3 Framework. My suggestion here follows principles outlined by a group of scholars commissioned by the National Research Council to generate advice about constructing assessments that produce the best evidence possible about what students know and what they could do with that knowledge.[4] The last clause is important. Knowledge by itself can be rather shallow. It matters most when we can put it into action and accomplish brilliant things with it. It represents an authentic measure of what we know. Traditional and typical testing approaches are flawed precisely because they miss this point. They test for bits of knowledge divorced from the powerful and rich ways in which knowledge enables us to think clearly, act, and critically and reflectively navigate our worlds. In many ways these tests tell us little more than whether or not learners can read and comprehend and memorize. They tell us precious little about a learner's capabilities. In contrast, the design of the C3 Framework is all about growing learners' capabilities. Assessment approaches and outcomes need to make sense of those capabilities if they are to be enhanced. Therefore, asking learners to demonstrate their sociocultural knowledge becomes a rich guide for understanding their current capabilities and how to stretch these capabilities farther. That is what much of a social education is about; it frames a good share of the work of social studies teachers.

The assessment structure has three interconnected parts: cognition, observation, and interpretation. They form the three pillars upon which strong assessments are built. Assessment begins with the cognition pillar. Cognition refers to the thinking learners need to do in order

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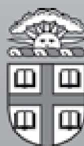
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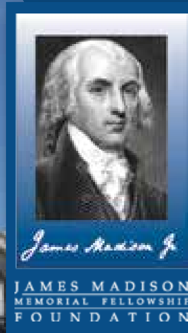
to understand and address a question being posed, such as the one presented in the C3 Framework: How bad was the recent Great Recession?[5] If we approach this question from a historical angle, say, in the context of an eighth-grade history course, then it would be important to know something about the kind of thinking of which eighth graders are capable in addressing this question. We also need to know about the kinds of resources necessary to assist these students in broaching the question, along with the sorts of concepts (e.g., change over time, evidence, historical significance, and context) they would need to understand and be able to apply to it. Fitting these pieces together would require a theory of how students would (a) pose the question and search out sources to address it; (b) read, think strategically, and use concepts to make sense; (c) draw evidence from the sources in order to make claims of understanding; and (d) communicate those understandings. The research literature on learning history is useful here as a source for drawing up a robust theory of cognition in history.[6] All of these portions of cognition and how they fit together, of course, would frame how this question would be investigated and taught.

Observation refers to the way in which diagnostic performance-assessment tasks would be designed to observe learning in action. We cannot see learning or cognition take place in the mind; all we can see at present are their proxies.



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Therefore, we need tasks that allow learners to display for us how they think and understand. If assessment is to give us diagnostic power, we must have tasks that require *both* displays of thinking and the understandings that derive from them. These tasks can take on myriad forms, from the DBQ-essay response, to constructing a small website that details the learning process and the evidence-based claims advanced to address a question, to an oral presentation in class, or a blog.[7]

Once observations are complete, we effectively hold evidence of student thinking and understanding (or its absence) that must be interpreted consistently, signaling the introduction of the interpretation pillar. Therefore, we need interpretive tools, often referred to as rubrics. Rubrics must be linked to the theory of cognition we began with. Rubrics must gauge thinking processes, and the concepts required to do so, as well as the understandings of the question (i.e., claims students make). They must be robust and reasonably sensitive to both the thinking processes and the goals of those processes. I cannot overstate how important it is to develop and use sharp, sensitive rubrics that are tied as closely as possible to the cognition pillar. The C3 Framework contains a number of indicators in the History section of the document (Tables 20-23) that could serve as the basis for designing rubrics.[8] The numerous tables in the C3 Framework used to cross-reference the indicators of the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies can also be useful.[9]

Table 1 contains a sample rubric for one of the indicators for high school history in the C3 Framework:

> *D2.His.11.9-12. Critique the usefulness of historical sources for a specific historical inquiry based on their maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose.*

This indicator requires identification of the document, the correct attribution of the document to its author, and the identification of the perspective of the author.

If rubrics are thorough, robust, and applied consistently, they generate evidence of student learning, and problems and impasses to that learning. They expose where little learning has taken place either in thinking capability, subsequent understanding, or both. Equipped with this evidence, we are then better able to diagnosis where the problems are, and why learning breaks down. This allows for opportunities to adjust teaching practices, reteach, and then reassess in an ongoing, cyclical effort to improve learner's capabilities to think and understand, in this case historically, but also in other social studies subjects.

The most apt analogy that comes to mind is from medicine. Serious physical maladies require treatment. Doctors assess patients to diagnose the problem largely because the problem's source is often invisible. The assessment data serve as evidence for a diagnosis and for prescribing a treatment. The treatment, tailored to the patient, arrests the malady. In my foregoing example, the same set of assessment-diagnosis-treatment-reassessment principles and cycles are at work, only in a classroom context. The cycles begin with a deep and strong grasp of what it means to learn social studies. The C3 Framework attempts to lay out

Table 1. **Sample Rubric for Indicator D2.His.11.9-12***

Identification: Identifying an Account	***Attribution: Attributing an Account to an Author***	***Perspective: Assessing Author's Perspective***
3 Clearly and correctly identifies the account, dates it, and speaks to its origins	**3** Attributes the account to the correct author and speaks to who the author is	**3** Clearly describes the author's perspective using context-embedded cues from the text (or painting, photo, etc.)
2 Correctly identifies the account, adds the date, but does not note the origin	**2** Only notes the correct author	**2** Describes the author's perspective, but without noting any context cues
1 Only correctly states the account's identification by name	**1** Notes an incorrect author	**1** Notes a perspective but misses details and/or appears to misinterpret the author
0 Does not identify the account or provides a mistaken identity	**0** Does not attribute the account	**0** Neglects to assess the author's perspective

* The indicator is in *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: State Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K–12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History*, 48. The C3 Framework is accessible online at www.socialstudies.org/c3. The rubric is adapted from Bruce A. VanSledright, *Assessing Historical Thinking and Understanding: Innovative Designs for New Standards* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 94.

clearly and concisely what that learning looks like and how to teach to it. It presents a powerful guide. We need powerful assessments to assist in bringing it all together.

Notes

1. For example, see the research reviews in *Handbook of Research in Social Studies Education*, eds. Linda S. Levstik and Cynthia A. Tyson (New York: Routledge, 2008).
2. It is entirely unclear what educative effect this sorting and ranking has. Policymakers have argued that it would drive better teaching practice. Legislation such as No Child Left Behind was built around testing as a means of driving improved practice, at least in rhetoric. However, policy analysts, for instance, who have carefully studied such tests-as-leverage approaches, remark on how little real influence they have on improving learning or teaching. Children are still left behind for many of the reasons I am describing here. For a cogent analysis of this, see David K. Cohen and Susan Moffitt, *The Ordeal of Equality: Did Federal Regulations Fix the Schools?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009).
3. For more on this program, see www.msde.state.md.us/mspap/mdassessment.html.
4. James W. Pellegrino, Naomi Chudowsky, and Robert Glaser, eds., *Knowing What Students Know: The Science and Design of Educational Assessment* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 2001).
5. National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: State Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K–12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, Md.: NCSS, 2013): 66-68, 72, 76, and 81. Accessible online at www.socialstudies.org/c3.
6. See, for example, reviews of this literature by Keith C. Barton, "Research On Students' Ideas About History," in *Handbook of Research in Social Studies Education*, 239–258; David Hicks, Stephanie van Hover, Peter Doolittle, and Phillip VanFossen, "Learning Social Studies: An Evidence-based Approach," in *APA Educational Psychology Handbook: Vol. 3, Application to Learning and Teaching*, eds. Karen Harris, Steve Graham, and Tim Urdan (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2012): 283-307; and especially the explanation of Peter Lee, "Putting Principles Into Practice: Understanding History," in *How Students Learn: History in the Classroom*, eds. M. Suzanne Donovan and John Bransford (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press): 31-78.
7. In history, examples of such tasks can be found at http://beyondthebubble.stanford.edu; http://historicalthinking.ca/resources/assessment; and in considerable detail in Bruce A. VanSledright, *Assessing Historical Thinking and Understanding: Innovative Designs for New Standards* (New York: Routledge, 2014). This latter volume integrates some of the indicators of the historical literacy strands of the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies.
8. *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: State Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K–12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History*, 46-49.
9. Sample rubrics can also be found at the sources cited in Note 7. For additional guidance, see also the work of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium at www.smarterbalanced.org/sample-items-and-performance-tasks/ and Chauncey Monte-Sano, "What Makes a Good History Essay? Assessing Historical Aspects of Argumentative Writing," *Social Education 76* (November/December, 2012), 294-298.

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