

Questions, Tasks, Sources: Focusing on the Essence of Inquiry

Kathy Swan, John Lee, and S.G. Grant

How many times should I do inquiry in a year? This is the number one question educators ask us about inquiry, and we understand why. One of the inescapable challenges to inquiry is its lack of efficiency in “covering” content. Inquiry necessarily takes longer than direct instruction and this can be problematic for teachers struggling to find time to cover the breadth of content outlined in most social studies courses. As a result, we often suggested that teachers begin with two to four inquiries a year, believing that a couple of meaningful inquiry experiences a year is better than none.

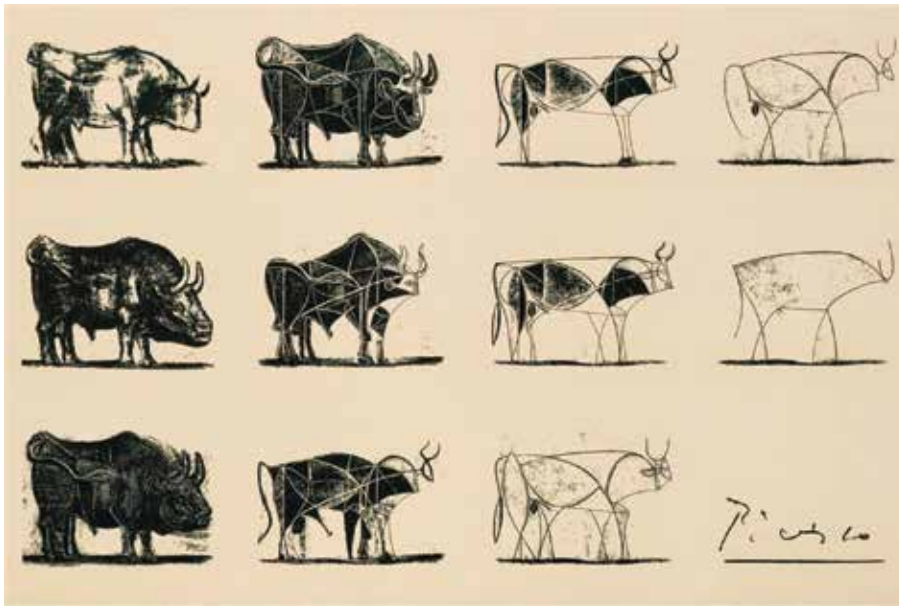


Figure 1: Picasso’s representations of a bull (Picasso, 1945–1946)

Impressed by C3 teachers who have embraced and tinkered with the Inquiry Design Model (IDM) blueprint,¹ we are now rethinking our original response. These innovative IDM practitioners have reached out to show us how they have played with the elements of inquiry so that they can weave inquiry into the fabric of their courses not twice a year, but as part of their daily instruction. That is, when they look at *doing*

inquiry, they have made a compelling question, an argumentative task, and a set of sources the centerpiece of every (or almost every) lesson or unit. As a result, we have developed a new answer to the persistent question: How many times should I do inquiry in a year?

To answer that question, we offer an analogy. We have been inspired recently by a set of 11 lithograph drawings by Pablo Picasso titled *Bull* (1945–1946).²

In this series, Picasso visually dissects the figure of a bull by moving from a representative drawing to increasingly more abstract drawings until he whittles the bull down to its essence. (Figure 1 presents a composite of these drawings.) Even as the drawings shed details such as the fur and muscles and begin to morph with Cubist and minimalist technique, they retain the core elements of a bull and can be recognized as such.

Not unlike Picasso, who investigated the figure and form of a bull, teachers experimenting with inquiry have sought to get to the essence of inquiry through its central elements.³ Those elements—questions-tasks-sources—represent the whittling down of a fully fleshed out IDM blueprint while retaining the essence of the original.

We have paid attention to these early adopters and started playing with an adaptation that we are calling a *focused* blueprint. In this article, we walk through the architecture of a focused blueprint on Pearl Harbor, demonstrating how the contraction of a blueprint can enable teachers to overcome the time constraints of protracted inquiry and to become increasingly artistic in their implementation of inquiry.

Focused Inquiry

The original IDM blueprint is structured so that students explore a compelling question through supporting questions, formative and summative performance tasks, and a range of dis-

disciplinary sources.⁴ The inquiry crescendos into an evidence-based argument, which can be broadened through an expressive extension and/or a civic experience. Teachers play an important role in this process by engaging students in the compelling question, scaffolding their source work, and ensuring they are mastering the content and developing skills through the successive formative performance tasks. Ultimately, we suggest that teaching the IDM blueprint will take between 4–7 days of instruction.

But teachers do not always have 4–7 days of instruction for any one topic. Many IDM-inspired teachers want more flexibility in its implementation, so they can target particular content and skills. These teachers have mined IDM for its essence—questions, tasks, and sources—and have treated the blueprint as a pedagogical accordion expanding and contracting based on the needs of their students as well as their curricular scope and sequence. Some have expanded outward, developed longer inquiry units, while others have condensed in ways represented by the focused inquiry concept.

In these new focused inquiries, there is still a compelling question to be answered by an evidenced-based argument, but the question is narrower in scope and the argumentative task is condensed to a single claim and counterclaim. Instead of 3–4 supporting questions with the attendant formative tasks and disciplinary sources, there are only 1–2. Staging the compelling question has always been a limited exercise, so it remains as is in a focused inquiry. The end of the blueprint, which can stretch out if desired, features either an extension or an action opportunity, but not both. Overall, the focused inquiry shrinks the instructional demands to one class period.

It is important to note that focused inquiries are still grounded in the core elements of the original blueprint—questions, tasks, and sources. Teachers tell us that having flexibility allows them to stitch together different kinds

of inquiry-based experiences, increase their frequency, and move their practice so that inquiry lives in—rather than simply visits—their classroom. When we asked C3 Teacher Ryan New how often he does inquiry, he promotes its everyday value:

Since IDM, I have made questions, tasks, and sources the soul of my instructional practice. I have found that if you only visit inquiry now and again, then students will never develop proficiency with the skills the inquiry process teaches—that is, to become discerning and engaged citizens. If students experience inquiry every day, they develop the habits of mind that makes these larger, nobler civic goals possible.

We agree with Ryan and teachers like him. In the section that follows, we walk through a focused inquiry and highlight its key elements noting, where appropriate, the differences between the focused and the standard blueprint.

Anatomy of a *Focused Inquiry*: Did the Attack on Pearl Harbor Unify America?

The Inquiry Design Model is rooted in the *blueprint*, a one-page representation of the common elements of inquiry-based practice—questions, tasks, and sources. Whether you are looking at the original or a focused adaptation, the blueprint offers a visual snapshot of an entire inquiry such that the individual components *and* the relationship among the components can all be seen at once. As such, the two blueprint forms have a similar structure: (1) compelling and supporting *questions* that frame and organize this inquiry; (2) formative and summative performance tasks that provide opportunities for students to demonstrate and apply their understandings; and (3) the disciplinary *sources* that allow students access to the relevant content as they practice disciplinary

thinking and reasoning (See Figure 2).

Questions

Questions are a foundational component of any form of inquiry. In the Inquiry Design Model, questions come in two forms—compelling and supporting. Compelling questions initiate an inquiry and supporting questions help to unpack important content and/or concepts embedded within the compelling question.

A good compelling question is both academically rigorous and personally relevant to students. For example, the compelling question “Did the attack on Pearl Harbor unify America?” is academically rigorous and calls on students to conduct an inquiry in the tradition of social history, where they examine the activities of people who are sometimes overlooked. The question of how everyday people responded to Pearl Harbor is not as simple as it may seem at first. Students quickly find that the men and women “on the street” were practically unanimous in support of a declaration of war. But other questions linger. How long did people expect the war to last? Why did people think Japan took such a risk in attacking the United States? Who was to blame for what was sure to be a bloody conflict? What was the larger meaning of the war? Why should Americans respond to injustice abroad when injustices at home linger on?

By examining the hidden voices in history through “man on the street” interviews, students are able to tap into unconventional or unexamined narratives from the past. Doing so satisfies the second criteria of a compelling question—the question must be interesting to students. Many students feel their voices often go unheard so examining similarly unrecognized voices helps them understand that everyday actors can still play important roles in history.

Focused inquiries retain the general substance of a compelling question, but tend to be narrower in the scope of content examined. Many IDM inquiries focus on broader topics or ideas (e.g.,

Figure 2: A focused inquiry on Pearl Harbor

Pearl Harbor Focused Inquiry

Did the attack on Pearl Harbor unify America?	
C3 Framework Indicator	D2.His.4.9-12. Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced perspectives of people during different historical eras.
Staging the Question	Listen to FDR’s “Day of Infamy” Speech and read the description of the Library of Congress collection, <i>After the Day of Infamy: “Man-on-the-Street” Interviews Following the Attack on Pearl Harbor</i> . Predict what people across the country said about going to war with Japan.
Supporting Question	
What did people say about American involvement at the beginning of the war?	
Formative Performance Task	
Create a graphic organizer that categorizes the different reactions that everyday Americans had to the attack on Pearl Harbor.	
Featured Sources	
Source A: “Man-on-the-Street,” New York, New York, December 8, 1941 Source B: “Dear Mr. President,” New York, New York, January or February 1942 Source C: “Man-on-the-Street,” Austin, Texas, December 9, 1941 Source D: “Man-on-the-Street,” Nashville, Tennessee, December 1941 Source E: “Dear Mr. President,” New York, New York, January or February 1942 Source F: “Dear Mr. President,” Minneapolis, Minnesota, January or February 1942	
Summative Performance Task	ARGUMENT Did the attack on Pearl Harbor unify America? Construct a claim and a counterclaim that address the compelling question using historical evidence.
	EXTENSION Examine the story of Pearl Harbor told by a history textbook and propose revisions based on the perspectives represented in the featured sources

voting rights, the French Revolution, or westward migration). Compelling questions in a focused inquiry typically explore a particular event, person, or concept. By design, these blueprints abbreviate the investigation with only 1–2 supporting questions. In the Pearl Harbor inquiry, the supporting question “What did people say about American involvement at the beginning of the war?” helps students see the historic event through multiple perspectives and to determine if the voices were unified.

Tasks

The heart of each inquiry, however, rests between two points—the compelling question and the summative argument.

The formative work (i.e., supporting questions, formative performance tasks, and featured sources) is designed to prepare students to move constructively between those two points. In a focused inquiry, the argument includes a single claim and counter claim. Because the compelling question is narrower, the inquiry has only 1–2 formative performance tasks.

In the Pearl Harbor inquiry, the formative performance task calls on students to use a graphic organizer to categorize the reactions of six American citizens to the attack. This work, along with the Staging the Compelling question exercise, allows students to move quickly

to the summative claim-making task. Ultimately, students do not construct a fully developed argument but make a single evidence-based claim like the ones below:

- Many Americans felt the attack on Pearl Harbor was a galvanizing event that unified Americans in entering the war.
 - Evidence to support this claim can be found in an interview with a clerical worker named Frank Tatrey: *I think the time has come when we should all get behind our country. After all, we are all Americans and we should all be united against these dictator countries who are trying to invade our country and spoil our way of living.*
- Some Americans felt the war at home against anti-Semitism and Jim Crow laws was more significant than the war abroad.
 - Evidence to support this claim can be found in an interview with a college student named David Heldeld: *We feel that as long as we have fascism at home it is rather futile to fight it on the outside if we are not at the same time fighting it from within.*
- Some Americans wanted to join the war effort long before the attack on Pearl Harbor.
 - Evidence to support this claim can be found in an interview with a YMCA secretary in Nashville, Tennessee, named Fadie France: *This war situation had to reach a head soon. The United States was bound to enter this war. Just what the fuse was supposed to be was the only uncertain factor.*

Building on the summative claim-making task, students are able to extend their understanding creatively or civically through either an Extension or

Taking Informed Action task. The Pearl Harbor inquiry asks students to examine the story of Pearl Harbor as written in their history textbook and propose revisions based on source work from the inquiry.

Sources

Sources complete the IDM model. Disciplinary sources require students to dig into the materials and to apply their analytical skills to move the inquiry forward.

The Pearl Harbor inquiry features a set of sources from a special collection of “Man on the Street Interviews” at the Library of Congress (www.loc.gov/collections/interviews-following-the-attack-on-pearl-harbor/about-this-collection/). The following excerpt from the collection describes their origin:

On December 8, 1941 (the day after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor), Alan Lomax, then “assistant in charge” of the Archive of American Folk Song (now the American Folklife Center archive), sent a telegram to fieldworkers in ten different localities across the United States, asking them to collect “man-on-the-street” reactions of ordinary Americans to the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the subsequent declaration of war by the United States. A second series of interviews, called “Dear Mr. President,” was recorded in January and February 1942.⁵

The Pearl Harbor inquiry heavily excerpts six of the interviews included in the collection. An example of two of the sources are included in the center column of this page.

Focused inquiries need to have sources that align closely with the outcomes planned for the inquiry. That’s just good inquiry design. But it will require that teachers make good decisions about what to include. No fluff

Carl Nimkov: My name is Carl Nimkov. I came to this country three years ago from Germany. Today, when I heard the president’s speech and I saw the United States enter this war, I was fully in favor of this declaration and I think that the United States’ entry in this war will bring to a sooner close this great tragedy and will have a very beneficial effect to the future state of the world.

Source: www.loc.gov/collections/interviews-following-the-attack-on-pearl-harbor/?fa=contributor:nimkov,+carl

Interviewer: The next person to speak is W.C. Curry, FSA Fellow from Newport News, Virginia.

W. C. Curry: The Japanese attack on the United States and the imminent threat of Italian and German aggression is a direct result of the appeasement policies towards these countries since 1934. The naval defeat Sunday and the unpreparedness of the United States is mainly due to the pro-fascist forces within this country. This is the gravest period in our country’s history. One of the gravest dangers at this time is not from abroad, but lies in those fascist-minded forces within. Courage, vigilance, and dogged determination to win should be our slogan.

The Negro as in every other crisis in our country’s history will [honorably (?)] distinguish himself in the defense of these United States, his country. And will also equally share in the better world which the ultimate victory will bring.

Source: www.loc.gov/collections/interviews-following-the-attack-on-pearl-harbor/?fa=contributor:curry,+w.c

here. Through focused inquiry, teachers direct students to the heart of the matter, carefully selecting, excerpting, and adapting sources so students are able to efficiently access the content they will need to complete the inquiry tasks.

In this inquiry, the sources were curated so that the individual voices contrasted with one another, providing multiple perspectives on the event. Additionally, each source sheds new light on the Japanese attack by providing contextual information about the individuals and the time they were written. In the first source, Carl Nimkov, a recent German immigrant, speaks about the “future state of the world.” In the second source, W.C. Curry asks the interviewer to consider issues of appeasement, fascism, and race as we entered the war. As students move through the sources, they learn more about important content (e.g., German immigration, appeasement, and fascism) and see how individual voices were unified in some ways but often different in their reaction to the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Conclusion

Abbreviating inquiry into a 1- to 2-day lesson means some ideas are going to be left on the cutting room floor. But that is true for curriculum in general. Teachers must make decisions about what to teach within the allotted time for social studies. Although content breadth is an opportunity cost of inquiry, it is important to remember what students gain in the process of inquiry. When students work with the elements of inquiry, they wrestle with important questions, mine disciplinary sources for answers and insight, craft evidenced-based claims/counterclaims, and then communicate their conclusions expressively or civically. If given a chance to do this process repeatedly, students become more proficient at it, helping us achieve the goals set out in the C3 Framework.

In a recent article, Parker talks about

inquiry experiences as the *spine* of the curriculum:

But here's the secret sauce: At the heart of deeper learning is curriculum, not instruction. Before implementing instructional strategies, teachers need to make strategic decisions about the content and skills to be learned—those that will be learned deeply, iteratively, rather than only “covered.”⁶

The Inquiry Design Model aims in the same direction by organizing curriculum around the foundations of inquiry: questions, tasks, and sources. Spines provide structure but must be able to flex. By collapsing (or expanding) a standard blueprint, we are illustrating how the IDM can operate as a curricular framework that flexes to meet the contextual needs of teachers.

Several focused inquiries including the one above have recently been published on C3 Teachers (www.c3teachers.org/). Additionally, blank focused inquiry blueprints are available for download on the site. We invite you to begin playing around with the newest blueprint and help us populate the site with interesting focused inquiries. 🌐

Notes

1. S.G. Grant, Kathy Swan, and John Lee, *Inquiry-Based Practice in Social Studies Education: The Inquiry Design Model* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Kathy Swan, John Lee, and S.G. Grant, *The Inquiry Design Model: Building Inquiries in Social Studies* (Silver Spring, Md.: National Council for the Social Studies and C3 Teachers, 2018).
2. Pablo Picasso, *The Bull (Le Taureau)* [Painting]. (1945–1946). Estate of Pablo Picasso, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
3. Grant, Swan, and Lee, *Inquiry-Based Practice in Social Studies Education*.
4. Ibid; Swan, Lee, and Grant, *The Inquiry Design Model: Building Inquiries in Social Studies*.
5. “Dear Mr. President” collection (AFC 1942/003), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/collections/interviews-following-the-attack-on-pearl-harbor/about-this-collection/; “Man-

on-the-Street” interviews collection (AFC 1941/004), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/collections/interviews-following-the-attack-on-pearl-harbor/

6. Walter Parker, “Projects as the Spine of the Course: Design for Deeper Learning,” *Social Education* 82, no. 1 (2018), 48.

References

National Council for the Social Studies. *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for State Social Studies Standards*. Silver Spring, Md., 2013.

KATHY SWAN (University of Kentucky), **JOHN LEE** (North Carolina State University) and **S. G. GRANT** (Binghamton University), are professors of social studies education and served as the lead writers of the C3 Framework. They co-created the Inquiry Design Model (IDM) through their work as project directors of the New York Social Studies Toolkit Project and recently published their new books on IDM, *Inquiry-Based Practice in Social Studies Education: Understanding the Inquiry Design Model* (2017) and *Inquiry Design Model: Building Inquiries in Social Studies* (2018). Grant, Swan, and Lee founded and co-direct C3 Teachers (c3teachers.org), a site dedicated to implementation of the C3 Framework in classrooms, schools, and states.

START A CHAPTER
AT YOUR SCHOOL



RHO KAPPA
NATIONAL
SOCIAL
STUDIES
HONOR SOCIETY

www.socialstudies.org/rhokappa

Growing Up Muslim:

Understanding the Beliefs and Practices of Islam

An academically reliable, yet fun-to-read, narrative primer on Islam and Muslims. For ages 10 & up, from Penguin Random House.

“[U]nderstandable and appealing.... This unique introduction is a good choice for dispelling misconceptions and prejudice about this faith.”

-- *School Library Journal*

“A must-have for all school libraries”

– *Peter Doering, Santa Clara County Ofc. of Ed.*

“Smart, hip, and funny”

– *Omid Safi, professor of religion at Univ. of NC*

Buy it today to enhance your curriculum!

At booksellers or in bulk at specialmarkets@penguinrandomhouse.com

