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Illinois Council of Social Studies



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and the University of Florida**

Stephen Stewart Masyada

**Inquiring Minds: Quality Social Studies Teaching and Learning and the C3 Framework**

What makes for quality instruction in K-12 social studies? As we work to develop our pedagogical tools for the 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom, this is a question that we must consider. In attempting to answer this question, the National Council for the Social Studies has put forward a ‘vision of powerful teaching and learning’. According to NCSS, quality instruction in the social studies is meaningful and authentic, integrative, active, value-based, and challenging (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2008). These characteristics of quality social studies instruction, which we shall explore later in this piece, connect smoothly to an inquiry model as presented in the recently released College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework. This paper will present the C3 Framework and its associated inquiry model as a method by which to reach each of the characteristics of quality and effective social studies instruction suggested by the NCSS.

**Inquiry and the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework**

Inquiry based instruction has a long and storied history, especially in the social studies, but it is one that has fallen out of favor over the past few years as social studies has faced a decline in curricular importance (Heafner & Fitchett, 2012; Lintner, 2006; Thornton, 1994). Kaplan (2002) connects an inquiry based model to the work of John Dewey, with an emphasis on providing learning experiences to students that are connected to the practice of participatory democracy. These experiences, according to Dewey (1938/2007), encourage students to develop the knowledge, skills, and conceptual understandings necessary to approach the problems of American democracy with verve and vigor.

Chard (1998) suggests that an inquiry approach to instruction provides for a rigorous and active model of learning, forcing the teacher and the learner to constantly pursue answers to questions they have constructed and refined, developing necessary and vital research skills, critical thinking approaches, and presentation models that allow for the pursuit of truth or the asking of new questions.

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An inquiry model of teaching and learning also offers a number of advantages that reflect both quality pedagogy and effective civic education. It helps students develop strong questions, and understand what makes a quality question. It provides students the opportunity to have a voice in their learning as they choose a question that interests them, as well as the sources that they will use to answer the question while acknowledging the knowledge and lived experience that they bring to the question. As a result of the heavy focus on developing and answering a quality question, it also reinforces some basic skills of research, collaboration, and critical thinking necessary in a democratic republic. An inquiry model also encourages an interdisciplinary approach, integrating the strands of the social studies and even moving outside to fields such as math, science, and the arts (Chard, 1998; Kaplan, 2002).

The National Council for the Social Studies, recognizing the importance of using a strong inquiry model, has recently presented to its members and the broader social studies community a new framework for thinking about standards, curriculum, and instruction: the College, Career, and Civic Readiness (C3) Framework. This framework (note that nowhere in the document will you find the framework referred to as standards; rather, it is intended as a guide for the *creation* of standards and curriculum) is intended to encourage students and teachers to engage in inquiry, broaden understanding of the strands of the social studies and take action in areas of civic need. Containing four dimensions that lay out the skills and attitudes that students should develop in order to best prepare for their lives as citizens, the framework provides a foundation for social studies that may begin at the elementary level and be carried forward all the way through to graduation.

### **A Brief Overview of the Four Dimensions and the Inquiry Arc of the C3 Framework**

#### *Dimension One: Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries*

This dimension emphasizes the importance of crafting quality questions and understanding how to find quality and effective sources that allow students to answer the questions. Indeed, questions are ‘central to a rich social studies experience’, and this dimension places a great deal of emphasis on effectively crafting questions that encourage quality research (NCSS 2013, p. 23). In order to effectively answer those questions, however, students must begin the process of source analysis, determining which sources may be used to address the question or questions. This dimension sets the foundation of the research skills that are built upon in Dimension 3 (NCSS, 2013).



### *Dimension Two: Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools*

Disciplinary literacy has risen to an increasing prominence in social studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, moving beyond the broader and more general content area literacy approach toward a deeper and more conceptual sense of what it means to be a literate student of the social studies. As a result, the authors of the C3 Framework include disciplinary literacy as its own dimension. Students are guided in considering their questions through four core disciplines of social studies: civics, history, economics, and geography. Each of these disciplines, while having some commonalities as disciplines within the field of social studies, demand from teachers and students a different and particular set of skills in order to understand them effectively. Analyzing historical evidence from a document, for example, requires a different lens than one might use to interpret spatial patterns and movements of a human population, which would demand a geographic lens (NCSS, 2013).

### *Dimension Three: Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence*

The third dimension of the C3 Framework is one that reflects what Dewey (1938/2007) would see as a key element of preparing students to be citizens within the American system: understanding how to evaluate sources and use evidence. While Dimension One introduces students to sourcing, Dimension Three builds on and refines student understanding of quality sources. Students develop the skills necessary to distinguish good sources from bad, learning where they can find what they need in order to answer the question that has been crafted, as well as determining whether a source is appropriate. They also explore how to integrate the evidence provided by those sources into their work as they seek to answer the question. Ultimately, this dimension contributes to a final product that addresses the question at hand. Dimension Four helps students craft this final product into something they can share with the broader community and take action (NCSS, 2013).

### *Dimension Four: Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action*

Once students have determined the answer or answers to the questions that they have posed, they must determine a means to share their conclusions. Dimension Four encourages students to find ways to share their findings with specific audiences, as well as to consider the validity of the conclusions that they have drawn. Most significantly, the C3 Framework does not simply stop at presenting the findings; rather, it encourages these future citizens take what it terms as ‘informed action’ in relation to the posed question. This perfectly reflects Dewey’s expectation that education is supposed to prepare students to address the issues and concerns of civic society (Dewey, 1916/2009).



## The Characteristics of Quality Social Studies Instruction and the C3 Framework

The C3 Framework and its inquiry arc seeks to ensure effective and quality social studies instruction that reflects the goals of the field: engaging students in developing questions and considering themes that touch on active citizenship and learning, human choices, and civic values (Barton & Levstik, 2001; Meyerson & Secules, 2001). The characteristics of this quality social studies instruction, as described in *A Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies: Building Social Understanding and Civic Efficacy* (NCSS, 2008), allow for a wide latitude in curricular approaches, but generally contains certain expectations about what is going to happen in the classroom. As we consider the characteristics of quality social studies instruction, let us also think about how these characteristics may be embedded within the C3 Framework.

*'Social Studies should be meaningful and authentic.'*

If social studies is to be taught in a way that allows students to develop as learners while growing as citizens, it must reach a conceptual level that encourages depth. Erickson (2007) has discussed conceptual instruction in depth, and her argument that concept based curriculum and instruction allows for a greater level of understanding without sacrificing content and context applies in this case. At the same time, students should develop the tools necessary to be effective and active citizens, such as media literacy, issue research, and civic collaboration and discussion (Torney-Purta & Vermeer, 2004; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

Meaningful and authentic social studies is only achievable if teachers are truly reflective concerning their craft. Thinking about how best to implement the curriculum, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the instruction, requires the teacher to engage in reflective practice. Happily, this engagement in reflective practice also models for the student a key element of quality civic life: critically thinking about problems as well as critically assessing how you choose to approach those problems (Dewey, 1916/2009).

The C3 Framework, and the embedded inquiry arc within it, is designed to encourage meaningful and authentic social studies. The entire arc is built around meeting students where they are most interested and engaged, and encourages students to take ownership of their learning by taking ownership of their questions. The key here is relevancy, and Dimension One of the framework stresses the importance of ensuring that the questions are indeed relevant to the students. A class of elementary students, for example, might consider a compelling question that explores why it is



necessary to have rules. This question is both relevant to their developing interests as young students and citizens, as well as a key question in civic literacy (NCSS, 2013). Meaningful and authentic questioning allows the student to go beyond what one might consider to be ‘Googleable’ questions, answerable through a quick Internet search or a glance at Wikipedia. Instead, students are capable of diving deeper into questions of interest and need.

While Dimension One of the framework is perhaps the most obvious connection to a vision of social studies teaching and learning as meaningful and authentic, Dimension Four of the framework should be seen as just as important. As described earlier, Dimension Four encourages students to assume complete ownership of their learning by both sharing what they have studied and taking informed action that could possibly address the questions that they have considered. For example, an elementary school class that considered why it is necessary to have rules might then share their finding with the larger school community and propose ways in which the school might ensure the establishment of equitable rules within the school (NCSS, 2013).

*‘Social Studies should be integrative.’*

One of the most common critiques of social studies through the years has been that history is prioritized above most other content areas in the field (Thornton, 2005). Quality social studies curriculum and instruction, then, should seek to integrate across the many strands. A lesson on the American Revolution, for example, should consider the content through the lens of the historian, the geographer, the economist, the political scientist, and perhaps even the cultural anthropologist! Integrating social studies across a variety of strands, and considering the content through a variety of lenses, encourages a greater level of both critical and conceptual thinking and a deeper level of understanding (NCSS, 2008, 2013).

For the four dimensions of the C3 Framework, an integrative approach is necessary for the inquiry arc to have true value. The compelling and supporting questions that students are asked to develop, for example, require both teacher and learner to consider all strands of the social studies in order to get to the level of consideration that is necessary for strong questions. Dimension Two, with the emphasis on disciplinary literacy, inherently encourages the use of an integrative approach to the social studies. Within this dimension, students and teachers are encouraged to consider the strands of the field as “the lenses students use in their inquiries, and the consistent and coherent application of these lenses throughout the grades should lead to deep and enduring understanding” (NCSS, 2013, p. 29).



*'Social Studies should be active.'*

If social studies is meaningful, authentic, and integrative, it does lend itself well to also being active. Indeed, it might be argued that the most meaningful and authentic social studies must be active (NCSS, 2008, 2013; Newmann & Wehlage, 1993; Tanner, 2009). Active learning, in the social studies as in other content areas, requires the student to process and think about what they are learning. The key here, then, is the thinking. The student must be allowed to take ownership of and process the learning that they have done if social studies instruction is to be effective.

The inquiry arc of the C3 Framework encourages students to engage with the questions, the research, and the outcomes of their work. The active nature of the framework is evident in how Dimension Three asks students to consider the quality of sources and how best to use evidence that they have gathered in the process of pursuing answers to their compelling and supporting questions. The depth of the research, and the tools that students are encouraged to use within this dimension, requires them to be active and engaged with the work and the material as they seek to find answers and solutions to their inquiries (NCSS, 2013).

While Dimension Three certainly contains elements that encourage active social studies, Dimension Four connects most directly to this part of the vision of quality social studies. As students develop conclusions to their research, Dimension Four encourages civic engagement with their findings. Depending on the age and level of the student, as well as the inquiry that took place, civic engagement may range from “making independent and collaborative decisions within the classroom, to starting and leading student organizations within schools, to conducting community-based research and presenting findings to external stakeholders” (NCSS, 2013, p. 59). Ultimately, Dimension Four encourages students to apply their knowledge and work in order to act as civically literate citizens. This is a key feature of active social studies as encouraged by the vision of the National Council of the Social Studies.

*'Social Studies should be value-based and challenging.'*

Value based instruction may raise some concerns for many teachers who fear the possibility of controversy (Dahlgren, 2010; Suh & Traiger, 1999), but in this case the value-based instruction advocated by NCSS relates to principles of the American system of government, such as justice, equality, and freedom (NCSS, 2008; Suh & Traiger, 1999; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Indeed, if we consider that social studies is one of the most important curricular fields for preparing students for citizenship, then this sort of value-based instruction is key. Students should be engaging in experiences that focus on developing those principles and skills that have been mentioned; these experiences should encourage fair-mindedness, critical thinking, problem solving



and decision making. These will challenge students and, as stressed earlier, encourage a higher level of conceptual thinking within the social studies.

We have focused here on value-based instruction as it relates to students, but it should also relate to the teacher as well. The importance of reflection connects to value-based instruction; the teacher must be aware of the values and perspectives that they are bringing into the classroom with them. At the same time, the teacher must consider how those values may ultimately shape what they emphasize and what they do in the classroom.

This value-based and challenging approach to social studies connects wonderfully to the C3 Framework as a whole, as this model is embedded within the entirety of the inquiry arc of the framework. Consider, for example, that from the beginning, students are encouraged to develop questions that pose a challenge to them and may have no right answer or more than one right answer. At the same time, students must develop responses to those questions that require them to reach some level of conceptual understanding of their research as well as civically engage with their findings. All four dimensions of the framework, then, connect to developing a social studies learner, and a citizen, that is reflective and engaged, key elements of value-based and challenging social studies, as well as two characteristics that we might hope to encourage within citizens.

### **The C3 Framework and a Vision of Social Studies**

The College, Career, and Civic Life Framework for Social Studies State Standards puts forward a model for not just standards but for a quality social studies curriculum as a whole. It connects very well to the expectations of the National Council for the Social Studies concerning what powerful and effective teaching and learning in our field looks like, and serves as a means to encourage students to think much deeper about the curriculum that they are studying. It also encourages us as educators to reflect more deeply on how we might engage our students and build a social studies classroom that prepares students more effectively for the rights and responsibilities of good citizenship, long before they can even vote. Ultimately, our standards and our curriculum should embed questions, encourage disciplinary literacy, develop 21<sup>st</sup> century research skills, and put forward a vision of active and engaged citizenship for this century. The C3 Framework, in conjunction with that vision of powerful and effective social studies, is a way forward. So what might this way forward look like in an elementary classroom?

Imagine, if you will, a kindergarten classroom at the very beginning of the year. The teacher, seeking to use this first week to encourage students even at this young age to take ownership of their learning and their responsibilities as citizens, asks a very simple question: *why do we need rules?* This is a question intimately connected to the lives of children at this grade level, and thus stands as both meaningful and authentic, especially as these children begin to really consider boundaries within the home and school communities. In this lesson, children are encouraged to talk with

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their peers within the classroom about why rules exist and matter, and how they learned about rules before they came to kindergarten. In addition, the children are tasked with asking at least two people outside of class about rules; these may be siblings, friends, or adults. Later this year, and certainly at higher grade levels, they may formulate their own question for exploration. For these students at this point however, it is important that we model the inquiry process by helping them ask an important question that can mean something to them. As students ask the question and share what they learned, they begin the process of inquiry embedded within the C3 Framework!

In the next phase of the lesson, as the students discuss what they learned about rules, the teacher asks the students to consider who might be more knowledgeable about rules: a friend or an adult? Very simply, this exposes students to the idea of sources as described in Dimension One and Three, and encourages active engagement with the question that is being considered: *why do we need rules?* Moving now into the next phase of the lesson, the class considers different types of rules that are used in different places, building on the original question with additional questions, such as how rules differ between the school and the home, or between the home and the community, or even between the classroom and the school. These sorts of questions encourage students to use multiple lenses to explore rules, combining for example the geography and civics lenses to consider rules and place. To help in this exploration, the class may read a grade level appropriate book, such as *What if Everybody did That?* (Javernick & Madden, 2010) or *Never Spit on Your Shoes* (Cazet, 1993), both of which explore the questions of why rules matter and what the different kinds of rules are. Here, again, we expose students to three of the four dimensions of the C3 Framework while connecting civic learning to their own experiences and integrating multiple lenses of the social studies. At the same time, this portion of the lesson connects the students for the first time in the class to considering the values that will continue to shape their lives while really challenging them to think about the connection between rules and values at some level.

Once students in this kindergarten class have really explored and engaged with the original question, it becomes time for the students to fulfill the expectations of Dimension Four and do something with what they learned. With the help of the teacher, the young children collaborate to create and share with other members of the school community rules for their classroom that are connected to their original inquiry: *why do rules matter?* At this point, all of the different elements of powerful and effective social studies instruction come into play. These young Kindergarten students have used the Four Dimensions of the C3 Framework, are actively engaging in meaningful and authentic learning, integrating across the strands of social studies, thinking critically, conceptually, and collaboratively, and ultimately taking their first steps as true citizens.



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