



Designing and Teaching a Critical Inquiry: Lessons Learned

Emma S. Thacker and Josephine L. Valentine

Since the publication of the *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards*, social studies teachers, school leaders, and teacher educators have explored ways to implement it in the classroom, with various results. Much of the published work around the implementation of the *C3 Framework* in classrooms highlights its use in middle and high school classrooms; however, particularly in the context of limited instructional time for social studies in elementary classrooms, the possibilities of using the *C3 Framework* to bring more inquiry-based elementary social studies instruction needs more attention. In this article, we explore how a second-grade teacher used the Inquiry Design Model (IDM) as a way to engage in inquiry-based social studies instruction with students in a low-income, majority-minority elementary school with attention to both her challenges and successes.¹

Background

We know that elementary social studies instruction is minimized across educational contexts and that the quality of social studies instruction that students receive in low-income schools is substandard compared to their peers in affluent contexts.² Solomon and colleagues argued that the deficit-driven perspective with which policymakers—as well as some educators—view diverse schools, students, and families, can mean narrow and less relevant curricula, and increased emphasis on test preparation

at the expense of curricula that represent students' lived experiences.³ The inquiry arc of the *C3 Framework* speaks to the preparation of youth for a more inclusive and critical citizenship, by helping students to ask questions (Dimension 1), to use disciplinary knowledge and skills (Dimension 2), to evaluate sources (Dimension 3), and to communicate conclusions and take informed action (Dimension 4) on social issues that are relevant to their lives.⁴

Swan and colleagues developed the Inquiry Design Model (IDM) to provide guidance for

social studies teachers and teacher educators as they create relevant and rigorous social studies inquiries. They defined questions, tasks, and sources as the foundational elements of inquiries—components that are familiar to social studies teachers.⁵ By culminating in taking informed action, such inquiries have the potential to prepare students for informed, engaged, and critical citizenship. Building off this work, Crowley and King described three components of critical social studies inquiries: (a) asking “compelling and supporting questions that explicitly critique systems of oppression and power,” (b) selecting “sources that include the perspectives of marginalized and oppressed groups,” and (c) designing “formative and summative tasks and a Taking Informed Action activity that push students to take tangible steps toward alleviating the injustice explored in the inquiry.”⁶ In this article, we share the lessons we learned as Josephine Valentine designed and implemented

a second-grade inquiry and consider the extent to which the inquiry worked towards the goals of critical inquiry.

Context

Spotswood Elementary School has among the highest percentages of economically disadvantaged and racially or linguistically marginalized students of any elementary school in Harrisonburg, Virginia, a diverse school district that boasts over 50 languages spoken and serves students who hail from over 50 countries. Not surprisingly, given what we know about educational policies and standardized assessments, Spotswood is the only local elementary school that was accredited with conditions (i.e., conditionally accredited) by the state at the time of this work. Those conditions were due to more pronounced “achievement gaps” for students with disabilities and African American students on state standardized test scores—meaning the school was identified as one that needed to improve students’ test scores. What may be more surprising is the progressive approach Spotswood administrators and teachers take to addressing these “gaps.” Rather than focusing narrowly on preparing for standardized tests, the school puts resources into creating relevant curriculum and meeting students’ learning needs in innovative ways.

As part of the school’s goal of providing a social justice-oriented curriculum, I (Emma) led a professional learning

project guiding the second- and fourth-grade teams in learning about and developing critical inquiry-based units for their social studies classes in the 2020-2021 school year. We began this project and partnership in fall 2019, when I wrote a grant proposal to support the work in partnership with Spotswood’s principal. We were awarded the funding in July 2020, after COVID-19 had shut down in-person learning in our area. Grant funding supported stipends for teachers for their curriculum design work.

After an all-day virtual workshop introducing teachers to the IDM, the teams worked throughout fall 2020 and into early winter 2020/2021 to design critical inquiries and prepare to implement them in their virtual classrooms in spring 2021. In this article, we highlight Josie’s experience with the design and implementation of the second-grade inquiry with the compelling question, “How can I give back to Indigenous People today?” (see Figure 1).

Lessons Learned

In the following sections, we organize our lessons learned around the central inquiry components—questions, tasks, and sources—and reflect on the ways the inquiry aligned with goals of critical IDMs. Josie has so far taught the second-grade inquiry twice, in the spring of 2021 and then again in the spring of 2022, so we share ways she has adjusted the IDM blueprint since its design as well as ideas for going forward.⁷

Questions to Critique Systems of Power and Oppression

The compelling question served to center the inquiry in critical ways. Our second-grade team asked “How can I give back to Indigenous People today?” and specifically included historical and current events in which Indigenous people were/are treated inequitably. We made the decision to focus our content around a compelling question that would represent Indigenous people more authentically and holistically and emphasize that Indigenous communities not only existed in the past, but are living and active in our nation today. Though some Virginia standards mention teaching about Native American lives today, that part of the standard typically provides an incomplete history and does not receive as much focus in instruction. We did not want to reproduce common flaws in teaching this content, such as perpetuating the false narrative that Native Americans are people of the past, or utilizing crafts that minimize Native American traditions and contribute to cultural appropriation. In emphasizing the modern *presence* of Native Americans in Virginia and throughout the United States, our inquiry pushes back on one of the failings of traditional curriculum.⁸ Further, we wanted to ensure that we did not only focus on oppression of Native Americans, but rather centered Native resistance and resilience. We accomplished this goal in

Figure 1: IDM Blueprint of a Second-Grade Inquiry

Inquiry Design Model (IDM) Blueprint™																				
Compelling Question	How can I give back to indigenous people today?																			
Standards and Practices	VA SOL 2.3: The student will compare the lives and contributions of three American Indian cultures of the past and present.																			
Staging the Question	Facilitate class discussion on what it means to give back and how giving back can create change. Read <i>Malala's Magic Pencil</i> and discuss how she took action to create change.																			
<table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="width: 33%;">Supporting Question 1</th> <th style="width: 33%;">Supporting Question 2</th> <th style="width: 33%;">Supporting Question 3</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>What did Native Americans do/create in the past that shaped the way we live today?</td> <td>What past events influence the need to give back to indigenous people?</td> <td>How can we join in the work that's being done?</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">Formative Performance Task</td> <td style="text-align: center;">Formative Performance Task</td> <td style="text-align: center;">Formative Performance Task</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Graphic organizer to identify and describe Native American contributions and their connections to today.</td> <td>Discuss observations of mistreatment against Native Americans. What trends are prevalent? Students complete "thought bubbles" on images of mistreatment.</td> <td>Create a list of opportunities to be involved in supporting indigenous-led activism. Choose one to support.</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">Featured Sources</td> <td style="text-align: center;">Featured Sources</td> <td style="text-align: center;">Featured Sources</td> </tr> <tr> <td> <p>Source A: Teacher-created slideshow featuring contributions such as language medicine, and government</p> <p>Source B: guest speaker about Powhatan Nation</p> </td> <td> <p>Source A: Teacher-created slideshow featuring quotes and images of injustices around land rights, featuring sources from Native Knowledge 360° highlighting Native resistance, Cherokee perspectives on forced removal, and "invasion of America" map</p> <p>Source B: Teacher-created slides focused on environmental abuse, featuring quotes and photographs by Ponca Tribe and of the Torres Martinez reservation</p> <p>Source C: Teacher-created slides featuring images and secondary text highlighting Boarding Schools and cultural abuses.</p> </td> <td> <p>Source A: TRUST Arizona video featuring Jaime Lynn Butler, Navajo youth climate activist</p> <p>Source B: <i>We are water protectors</i> (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020)</p> <p>Source C: Earthguardians website featuring indigenous leadership from over 20 nations</p> </td> </tr> </tbody> </table>			Supporting Question 1	Supporting Question 2	Supporting Question 3	What did Native Americans do/create in the past that shaped the way we live today?	What past events influence the need to give back to indigenous people?	How can we join in the work that's being done?	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Graphic organizer to identify and describe Native American contributions and their connections to today.	Discuss observations of mistreatment against Native Americans. What trends are prevalent? Students complete "thought bubbles" on images of mistreatment.	Create a list of opportunities to be involved in supporting indigenous-led activism. Choose one to support.	Featured Sources	Featured Sources	Featured Sources	<p>Source A: Teacher-created slideshow featuring contributions such as language medicine, and government</p> <p>Source B: guest speaker about Powhatan Nation</p>	<p>Source A: Teacher-created slideshow featuring quotes and images of injustices around land rights, featuring sources from Native Knowledge 360° highlighting Native resistance, Cherokee perspectives on forced removal, and "invasion of America" map</p> <p>Source B: Teacher-created slides focused on environmental abuse, featuring quotes and photographs by Ponca Tribe and of the Torres Martinez reservation</p> <p>Source C: Teacher-created slides featuring images and secondary text highlighting Boarding Schools and cultural abuses.</p>	<p>Source A: TRUST Arizona video featuring Jaime Lynn Butler, Navajo youth climate activist</p> <p>Source B: <i>We are water protectors</i> (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020)</p> <p>Source C: Earthguardians website featuring indigenous leadership from over 20 nations</p>
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Summative Performance Task	Argument	Construct an argument using evidence that addresses the compelling question about how you can give back to indigenous people today.																		
	Extension	Create an action plan to support your chosen action from Formative Performance Task 3.																		
Taking Informed Action	Brainstorm a variety of action items from Formative Performance Task 3. From these action items students will choose one to put into action (e.g., school audit, fundraiser to donate to Native-led activism, tracking and lowering carbon footprint, creating protest signs, writing thank you letters to indigenous activists, write a letter to cancel Keystone XL pipeline).																			

the third supporting question, “How can we join in with the work that’s being done [led by Indigenous people today]?” We wanted students to understand how Indigenous people have been mistreated, but we also wanted to highlight that they are people who have always resisted and are still resisting, and there are ways that students can support that resistance.

In looking back on our compelling question, we notice that we could have designed it to be more open-ended. By asking “how can I give back,” we presume students will conclude that some kind of reparation is appropriate. Trying to apply the traits of a strong compelling question while at the same time crafting questions that critique systems of power and oppression was a challenge and our compelling question in the end was more critical and less open-ended. Going forward, we need to learn how to better balance both expectations. We did not change any of the questions in the second implementation, but are working to make some revisions in the future. A question such as “How can I demonstrate citizenship as I learn about the way Indigenous people have shaped today’s world through their contributions and resistance?” would allow students to investigate the same information included in the inquiry, but without first concluding that it is necessary for them to give back to Indigenous communities. There would also be more standards-based activities to

use when staging the compelling question because there are state standards centered around citizenship.

Tasks to Alleviate Injustice

In the first implementation, my (Josie’s) students were engaged in mostly discussion-oriented tasks throughout supporting questions two and three, particularly about justice, though I included some scaffolds to support their discussions. For example, in students’ second formative performance task, they used “thought bubbles” to respond empathetically to images showing modern and historical systemic mistreatment of a variety of Native American groups. They began to recognize the impact of removal, and environmental mistreatment by sharing words such as “sad, angry,” and “disgust” to describe feelings they might have had if they were treated the same way. The thought bubbles exercise was one that I added to support students’ engagement with the sources. I recognized that students needed varied ways to engage and interact with each other and the sources, particularly since we designed the inquiry to be implemented virtually and ended up teaching it in-person. Going forward in designing IDM blueprints, I will infuse more interactive and active formative tasks throughout from the outset.

As a first-year teacher planning an inquiry with the additional constraints of navigating a school year disrupted by COVID-19, I had to give myself

grace for running out of time before implementing the taking informed action piece of the inquiry. Still, I was proud of the space we created for students to engage in meaningful dialogue. The conversations students had throughout the inquiry showed that they were increasing their understanding of the need to alleviate injustice against Indigenous people and learning about meaningful ways to do so. Students were able to critique the *power* dynamics and Indigenous agency, and learn about and move towards supporting Indigenous activism and *partnerships*, but we needed more time to carry out the summative argument task and for taking informed action.⁹

In the second implementation, we took a multi-disciplinary approach and focused on deepening students’ interactions with the content of the inquiry and on the integration of language arts and social studies through tasks that asked students to read, write, and speak about their understanding of the sources provided. Integrating social studies inquiry with English Language Arts can allow for more instructional time. I also continued to focus on creating opportunities for students to interact with the material in a way that supported them in processing topics that highlighted some of the injustices in U.S. history, since that had been an effective addition in our first implementation.

In formative performance task 2, for instance, in addition to the “thought bubble” task,

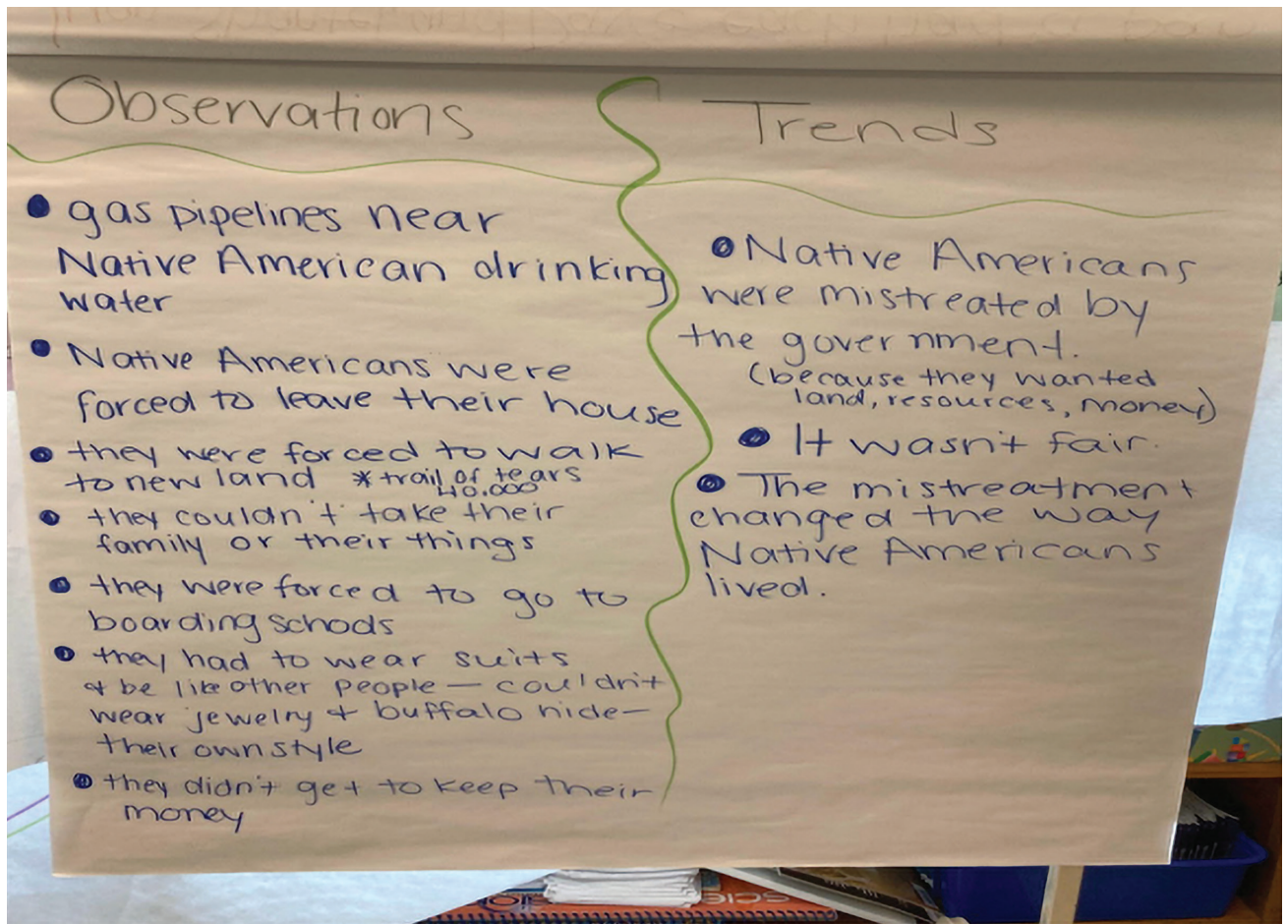


Figure 2. Formative Task 2 Anchor Chart.

I asked students to respond in real time using Pear Deck (a Google Slides Add-On that can collect and display student thinking during a lesson) as they analyzed sources about environmental mistreatment. Students typed responses to questions such as “What do you notice about the picture?” “What is something you wonder about what you have learned so far?” and “Type a feeling word in response to the information from the article.” This activity prompted students to grasp what was being expressed through pictures and words in the slides and articulate their ideas in a way

that made their thinking visible and embedded more student writing in the inquiry. The culminating formative performance task for supporting question 2 asked students to participate in a whole group discussion to summarize their observations from the three sources describing mistreatment and to search for trends they noticed. We constructed a class anchor chart (Figure 2), which shows that students understood multiple injustices experienced by Native Americans and recognized that this treatment was systemic.

The trends students identified from their learning throughout

supporting question 2 are powerful in that they express the motivation behind the mistreatment inflicted upon Native Americans “by the [U.S.] government,” the understanding that these actions “changed the way Native Americans lived,” as well as the perception of justice and empathy they expressed when saying “it wasn’t fair.” The addition of more structured written tasks supported students as they interpreted sources and provided stronger assessment evidence for me that students were able to achieve deeper levels of historical understanding.

Sources to Center the Perspectives of Marginalized Groups

In our efforts to make instruction authentic, we chose sources for our inquiry that included Indigenous voices. For example, we included multiple sources drawn from Native Knowledge 360°, part of the educational resources at the National Museum of the American Indian as well as the Anishinabe/Métis-authored and Kiks.ádi-illustrated children's book *We Are Water Protectors*.¹⁰ The Indigenous voices in our sources supported students in developing and expressing empathy toward their perspectives in their eagerness to make sense of the harm being done to Indigenous communities. The sources for supporting question 3 intentionally amplify Indigenous activism so that students are serving as allies to Indigenous-led projects, rather than assuming they know what is best for Indigenous communities when they begin to take informed action. After reflection, we noticed that the featured sources in supporting question 1 presented *about* rather than *through* Native American voices and perspectives, and it was in supporting question 1 that students were expected to access all of the content required by the state standard, focusing on Native Americans' contributions to ways of life in the United States today. We needed to identify more sources authored by Native Americans for supporting question 1, rather than relying on sources teachers had used in the past.

Recognizing the limited Indigenous voices in the first supporting question, we added the Standing Rock Sioux-authored children's book *Greet the Dawn: The Lakota Way* to the sources for supporting question 1 in the second implementation of this inquiry. We also added Cherokee Nation-authored children's book *We Are Still Here* to the sources for supporting question 2.¹¹ *Greet the Dawn: The Lakota Way* provided background knowledge for students to understand the importance of the relationship between the environment and Indigenous cultures. *We Are Still Here* summarized 12 aspects of Native Nations' lived experiences in a way that shares inclusive history and is comprehensible for young people. It was used as an interactive read aloud to clarify and review information students engaged with throughout the other resources in supporting question 2 and act as a bridge for moving into supporting question 3. Sorell wrote in the Author's Note, "I hope this book's text, art, and timeline make it clear that Native people have always been actively engaged in protecting our sovereignty and culture."¹² The focus on Indigenous resistance made this a powerful read aloud for bridging to supporting question 3.

Ms. Valentine's Reflection

I am extremely grateful I had the opportunity to participate in the inquiry design work and the ways it empowered the vision I have as a teacher—to educate

students in a way that fosters agency, empathy, knowledge and collaboration through equitable and accurate pedagogy. As a first-year teacher, I feared becoming employed in the current education system and losing my passion for social justice teaching, but this project provided me the opportunity to strengthen it. Planning an IDM-based inquiry is a challenging task because of the time-consuming efforts to deepen my own understanding of content as well as find sources that are both accurate and that highlight the voices and perspectives of marginalized groups. Particularly as a teacher in the K-2 grade band, I spent a lot of time adapting sources that I found to make them interactive and developmentally appropriate for younger students without detracting from the content.

After implementing this inquiry twice and presenting the inquiry to other staff members for use in their instruction, I've learned how important it is to continue learning and growing when teaching with the IDM. Each time I have taught the inquiry, I have changed it to make it more meaningful to students and to give them more opportunities to discover ideas independently using truthful sources. I see the teacher's responsibility as providing scaffolds for students to draw conclusions and acting as a facilitator in student conversations. It's important especially in today's climate to protect the use of pedagogy like the Inquiry Design Model

by making it student-centered and factual and eliminating as much teacher bias as possible. Doing so helps create space for rigor and critical thinking in the learning process and I believe that analyzing sources is a powerful skill that will serve students and the world well if they are able to learn it. The next time I teach this inquiry, I expect to focus on strengthening and adapting the summative performance task and taking informed action pieces so that students can not only share their understandings but also use them to inform their decisions about how they react to the information they consume about their country's history, past, and present. This approach should give the inquiry and the students a greater sense of purpose.

Despite the countless hours it took to design the inquiry, I found it to be a huge growth opportunity for me and my students. I was able to learn (and unlearn) so much about Indigenous people and increase my awareness of the

need to continue educating myself about ways to be an ally to marginalized groups in society. It was rewarding to hear the conversations students were having because they were deeply engaging with the material and it gave me great hope for how students might advocate for social justice in their futures, or at least have less biased understandings of U.S. history as they grow older. As teachers, we want our students to grow up to be agents of change and that starts with us being change-makers in our classrooms with the content we teach. IDM excites me as a teacher because it enables us to present accurate information to students in a way that is centered around making student thinking visible. I am eager to see how I might use inquiries in my future to continue pushing my students to dig deeper into social studies and the meaning of equity.

Conclusion

Previous research on the implementation of the C3

Framework in K-12 schools has been encouraging, with findings indicating that teachers believe using inquiry is effective and worth the effort to design and implement instruction in this way, even in elementary settings.¹³ Our students should be prepared to question social issues and to take informed civic action to disrupt and dismantle racist and unjust systems. While recognizing the importance of this work, teachers also need support to do it. In particular, Josie points to the time needed to increase her own content knowledge, find appropriate sources, and modify sources for her students. Depending on the school and local context, teachers may also worry about administrative support for implementing critical inquiries such as the one described here; Josie was confident in the support of her administration, which helped her feel confident to teach ambitiously. ■

Notes

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