

Questions that Compel and Support

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“What’s the difference between a compelling and supporting question, again?” Perhaps no other question arises more frequently than this one during the professional development sessions we lead. Teachers quickly grasp of the power of questions, but the line between a compelling and a supporting question can blur.

The simple distinction is that a compelling question frames an inquiry and a supporting question helps make the compelling question actionable. In other words, supporting questions provide the subject matter scaffolding necessary for students to make and support arguments in answer to the compelling question. Underneath this distinction, however, are several points that should aid teachers as they work on the critical elements of the Inquiry Arc of the C3 Framework in general and the Inquiry Design Model (IDM) in particular.

Inquiry and the Inquiry Design Model

Before we turn directly to the difference between compelling and supporting questions, let us set the context for inquiry-based practice in social studies.

Over the years, talking about inquiry has proven a popular topic in education circles. Teachers have also developed their share of inquiry-based projects.¹ All of this effort has generated a lot of interest in teaching social studies in more ambitious ways. But it has failed to grow deep roots in school classrooms.

Today, research evidence clearly supports the power and practicality of inquiry-based teaching and learning. Reports increasingly show how teachers make inquiry the centerpiece of their instructional practices.² Even better are those studies that show students—all students—benefitting from inquiry-based instruction. Inquiry can be as effectively pursued with elementary students as with

their secondary peers and is as valuable for academically challenged students as the academically gifted.³ Moreover, studies of large-scale, standardized tests show a positive correlation between high scores and inquiry-based instruction.⁴

Rooted in these research findings, the Inquiry Arc of the C3 Framework promotes a vision of inquiry that can be achieved in any classroom. To make that vision more practical, we developed the Inquiry Design Model, an approach to writing curriculum that privileges the knowledge and expertise of classroom teachers.⁵

IDM reflects the three elements common in inquiry teaching and learning. Those elements—questions, tasks, and sources—are represented in a one-page *blueprint* that offers a visual snapshot of an entire inquiry such that the individual elements and the relationship among those elements can all be seen at once.⁶

In this column, we focus on one of those elements—questions—and the distinctions between compelling and supporting questions.

Crafting Compelling Questions

The other school subjects—English language arts, mathematics, science, physical education, art—all help students grow into fully functioning human beings. Only social studies, however, asks the big question of why people do the things they do. Spinning out from that simple question are a myriad of others that enable students to examine the wider world of individuals and groups, how they inter-

act, and why those interactions go well and not so well. Importantly, social studies allows students to look at these relationships through a range of disciplinary lenses—economic, geographic, historical, and political, just to name the most obvious. From these disciplines come the big and small questions that speak to the social world around us.

Compelling questions carry a heavy content and instructional load. But compelling questions do nothing unless they are ... well, compelling. Sometimes a robust compelling question will come easily; all too often, however, crafting a great question poses a real challenge. The key is hitting the sweet spot between the qualities of being intellectually rigorous and relevant to students.

The first criteria for a compelling question is that it has academic value. Although many questions might appeal to students on a superficial level, cutely phrased or outrageous questions will not hold students’ interest long. Compelling questions must speak to important ideas and issues, ideas and issues that are worth examining.

Rigorous content is important, but a compelling question must have worthwhile academic *and* student angles. Jerome Bruner argued that “any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development.”⁷ Taking this point seriously does not mean that we have to dumb down the curriculum. In fact, it means just the opposite: Teachers *should* teach rich, intellectually robust material. The key is to see within that material those ideas about which teachers expect their students will care. If teachers are able to pull students’ interest toward natural resources, the structure of gov-

ernment, or the Boxer Rebellion, they will need to pull from those ideas connections that are relevant to their students' lives.

Think about how each of the following examples speaks both to the academic content and to the things students care about:

- Why did the Pilgrim-Wampanoag friendship go so wrong?
- What should be done about the gender wage gap?
- Can peace lead to war?
- Is free trade worth the price?
- Am I going to vote?

Compelling questions can come in many forms. The Pilgrims-Wampanoag question is an example of an analytic question, one that examines the component dimensions of an idea, event, or phenomenon. An example of a problem-based question is the one about the gender wage gap because it asks students to propose potential solutions to a real-world social problem. "Can peace lead to war?" is an example of an ironic question in that students must consider meanings below the surface of an idea. Word play is a terrific source of compelling questions; a question like "is free trade worth the price?" pushes students to juxtapose different meanings of words and ideas. And sometimes teachers will want to put a topic directly into students' laps through a personalized question such as "am I going to vote?" More examples of compelling question types can be found in the recent book, *Inquiry-Based Practice in Social Studies Education: Understanding the Inquiry Design Model*.⁸

Crafting Supporting Questions

Compelling questions function as the headline of a news story. They catch the reader's attention and provide just enough content to preview the story to come. By contrast, supporting questions function as the section headings that keep the narrative on track. Headlines serve

a powerful purpose, but section headings keep the story from wandering. A good inquiry functions in much the same way: A compelling question frames an inquiry; supporting questions provide the subject matter scaffolding that allows the inquiry to unfold in a coherent fashion. Supporting questions may not be as flashy as compelling questions, but without them, inquiries lose focus.

Supporting questions, then, function

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as a way to build the academic content central to the inquiry. If a compelling question is as academically rigorous as it is student relevant, then it signals the importance of the content coming. The supporting questions spell out the content directions an inquiry is to take.

Although they can be phrased in lots of ways, supporting questions ask the particulars of a content topic:

- Who were the ancient Hebrews?
- What are the arguments in favor of Puerto Rico's statehood or independence?
- When can school officials exert control over students' use of social media?
- Where is the gender gap most pronounced?
- How did British policies inflame tensions in the American colonies?

- Why did the framers of the U.S. Constitution feel a new document was necessary?

These examples help demonstrate the key difference between a compelling and a supporting question: Although each question above has academic value, that value multiplies when it is associated with a larger compelling question.

Compelling and Supporting Questions: An Example

Fairness, as any teacher (or parent) knows, is a sure-fire way to light up students' interest. Every adult we know has heard, at one time or another, "that's not fair!" expressed with all the attendant outrage a child or teenager can muster. Of course, "fairness" can mean any number of things—justice, equality, impartiality, or evenhandedness. To students, "that's not fair" can mean something that is not fair to all ... or simply not fair to *them*.

Uncertainty around the meaning of the term notwithstanding, notions of fairness generate high appeal to students. An inquiry that locates a big content idea under the mantle of fairness offers no guarantee of success, but it offers a very fine chance.

In a middle-level inquiry on the U.S. Constitution, fairness presents a useful lens on one of the central stories behind the creation of that document—the Great Compromise that resulted in the structure of the new national government. Questions hung in the air when delegates gathered for the Constitutional Convention at the Pennsylvania State House in Philadelphia. Who should be responsible for the debts incurred in the revolution? How should trade policies be managed? How much power should the president have? What to do about slavery?

Perhaps the most intractable among these was the question of representation in the legislative branch. It was here that competing interests in large and small states fell into a conflict that threatened to derail the convention. Should each

7th Grade Great Compromise Inquiry

Is Compromise Always Fair?	
New York State Social Studies Framework Key Idea & Practices	<p>7.4 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONSTITUTION: The newly independent states faced political and economic struggles under the Articles of Confederation. These challenges resulted in a Constitutional Convention, a debate over ratification, and the eventual adoption of the Bill of Rights.</p> <p>🔗 Gathering, Using, and Interpreting Evidence 🔗 Comparison and Contextualization</p>
Staging the Question	Describe daily life instances where compromises were made.

Supporting Question 1	Supporting Question 2	Supporting Question 3	Supporting Question 4
How was representation determined under the Articles of Confederation?	What was the Virginia Plan?	What was the New Jersey Plan?	How did the Connecticut Plan break the impasse?
Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task
Write a description of how states were represented in the Congress under the Articles of Confederation.	Write a summary of the Virginia Plan highlighting the impact on large and small states.	Write a summary of the New Jersey Plan highlighting the impact on large and small states.	Write a claim with evidence about how the Connecticut Plan broke the gridlock at the Constitutional Convention.
Featured Sources	Featured Sources	Featured Sources	Featured Sources
<p>Source A: Excerpt from Articles of Confederation</p>	<p>Source A: Excerpt from <i>Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787</i> (Virginia Plan)</p> <p>Source B: Diagram of the Virginia Plan</p> <p>Source C: Chart of the US population in 1790</p>	<p>Source A: Excerpt from <i>Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787</i> (New Jersey Plan)</p> <p>Source B: Diagram of the New Jersey Plan</p>	<p>Source A: Excerpt from <i>Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787</i> (Connecticut Plan)</p> <p>Source B: Excerpt from <i>Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787</i> (Virginia and New Jersey Plans)</p> <p>Source C: Excerpt from <i>Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787</i> (Connecticut Plan)</p>

Summative Performance Task	ARGUMENT Is compromise always fair? Construct an argument (e.g., detailed outline, poster, essay) that discusses whether or not the Great Compromise was fair to both less populated and more populated states using specific claims and relevant evidence from historical sources while acknowledging competing views.
	EXTENSION Hold a mock Constitutional Convention debate about the Great Compromise.
Taking Informed Action	<p>UNDERSTAND Investigate an issue that requires compromise over representation in a school or community setting (e.g., representation on a student council for the school).</p> <p>ASSESS Determine the benefits and drawbacks for various approaches to representation.</p> <p>ACT Create a plan that balances the needs of both sides and share it with students and leaders in the school.</p>

citizen be represented equally or should the interests of individual citizens be represented through states? The Virginia Plan, crafted by James Madison and presented by John Randolph, proposed a bicameral legislative branch with representation in both houses determined by population. The New Jersey Plan, presented by William Paterson, proposed a unicameral house with equal representation by state. The solution in the Great Compromise did what many compromises do; it split the difference. Was that fair? It probably depends on who you ask.

The compelling question framing our inquiry on the Constitutional Convention, “Is compromise always fair?” is an example of a broad-brush compelling question. Broad-brush questions express issues of a wide-ranging nature. Asking if compromise is *always* fair is to ask about an enduring quality or condition, one that can define or exemplify an element of the idea under study. The fairness angle works well because it was a key element of the actual debate over the creation of the legislative branch. The construct of compromise has many attributes worth exploring; the fairness angle offers an opportunity to examine this rich, but thorny idea through a familiar lens.

But even the best compelling questions do not teach themselves. And with a topic as complex and nuanced as the Great Compromise, careful scaffolding of the content is key if students are to think and learn deeply.

Although any number of supporting questions might support the content behind an inquiry on the Great Compromise, a relatively easy approach is to sequence the questions around the unfolding events. For example, the sequence below begins with the notion of representation as portrayed in the Articles of Confederation, moves through the Virginia and New Jersey Plans, and then culminates in the Connecticut Plan, later termed the Great Compromise:

1. How was representation determined under the Articles of Confederation?
2. What was the Virginia Plan?
3. What was the New Jersey Plan?
4. How did the Connecticut Plan break the impasse.

The options offered—the Virginia Plan, the New Jersey Plan, and the compromise Connecticut Plan—each answered the question of how to fairly represent the populace and the states. Yet fairness is rarely a simple construct.

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In this case, delegates had to decide whether it was fairer to allocate legislative representatives equally or based on population. Advocates of each position could make compelling arguments; it was up to Roger Sherman and his peers to see a third way, a compromise that would represent and honor both visions of fairness. (See the IDM blueprint for this inquiry on p. 202.)

Conclusion

In the end, compelling and supporting questions are both necessary, but neither is sufficient. Supporting questions *need* a compelling question to give them purpose; compelling questions *need* their supporting friends to give them structure.

It’s a sympathetic relationship, one that enables students to see the power that deep academic study can bring to their understandings of themselves and the social work around them. 🌍

Notes

1. S.G. Grant, Kathy Swan, and John K. Lee, *Inquiry-Based Practice in Social Studies Education: Understanding the Inquiry Design Model* (New York: Routledge, 2017).
2. Robert Bain, “‘They Thought the World was Flat?’ Applying the Principles of *How Students Learn* in Teaching High School History” in *How Students Learn: History, Mathematics, and Science in the Classroom*, ed. M. Suzanne Donovan and John D. Bransford (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2005), 179-213; S.G. Grant and Jill M. Gradwell, J.M., *Teaching History with Big Ideas: Cases of Ambitious Teachers* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).
3. Susan De La Paz, “Effects of Historical Reasoning Instruction and Writing Strategy Mastery in Culturally and Academically Diverse Middle School Classrooms,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 97, no. 2 (2005): 139-156; Haydeé Marie Rodríguez, Cinthia Salinas, and Steve Guberman, “Creating Opportunities for Historical Thinking with Bilingual Students,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 18, no. 2 (2005): 9-13; Bruce VanSledright, *In Search of America’s Past* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002).
4. Alexandra S. Beatty, Clyde M. Reese, Hilary R. Persky, and Peggy Carr, “NAEP 1994 U.S. History Report Card” (Washington, D.C.: US Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1996).
5. Grant, Swan, and Lee, *Inquiry-Based Practice*.
6. Kathy Swan, John Lee, and S.G. Grant, “The New York State Toolkit and the Inquiry Design Model: Anatomy of an Inquiry,” *Social Education* 79, no. 6 (2015): 316-322.
7. Jerome Bruner, *The Process of Education* (New York: Vintage, 1960).
8. Grant, Swan, and Lee, *Inquiry-Based Practice*.

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