Questions that Compel and Support

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

“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. 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. 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. Moreover, studies of large-scale, standardized tests show a positive correlation between high scores and inquiry-based instruction.

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.

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.

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 interact, 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.” 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-
Design Model

September 2017

Inquiry-Based Practice in Social Studies

Word play is a terrific source of conversation. 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 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.

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Compelling and Supporting Questions

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

- 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?

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.

Washington, D.C., is not the only place where “fairness” is not how everyone perceives it. Here is an example from 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 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?

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 control over students’ use of social media?

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7th Grade Great Compromise Inquiry

Is Compromise Always Fair?

New York State Social Studies Framework Key Idea & Practices

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.

Gathering, Using, and Interpreting Evidence
Comparison and Contextualization

Staging the Question
Describe daily life instances where compromises were made.

Supporting Question 1
How was representation determined under the Articles of Confederation?

Formative Performance Task
Write a description of how states were represented in the Congress under the Articles of Confederation.

Featured Sources
Source A: Excerpt from Articles of Confederation

Supporting Question 2
What was the Virginia Plan?

Formative Performance Task
Write a summary of the Virginia Plan highlighting the impact on large and small states.

Featured Sources
Source A: Excerpt from Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787 (Virginia Plan)
Source B: Diagram of the Virginia Plan
Source C: Chart of the US population in 1790

Supporting Question 3
What was the New Jersey Plan?

Formative Performance Task
Write a summary of the New Jersey Plan highlighting the impact on large and small states.

Featured Sources
Source A: Excerpt from Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787 (New Jersey Plan)
Source B: Diagram of the New Jersey Plan

Supporting Question 4
How did the Connecticut Plan break the impasse?

Formative Performance Task
Write a claim with evidence about how the Connecticut Plan broke the gridlock at the Constitutional Convention.

Featured Sources
Source A: Excerpt from Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787 (Connecticut Plan)
Source B: Diagram of the Connecticut Plan
Source C: Excerpt from Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787 (Virginia and New Jersey Plans)

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
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).

ASSESS Determine the benefits and drawbacks for various approaches to representation.

ACT Create a plan that balances the needs of both sides and share it with students and leaders in the school.
The fairness angle works well because it
The construct of compromise has many
Was that fair? It probably depends on
Great Compromise, careful scaffolding
Connecticut Plan, later termed the Great
Convention, “Is compromise always
compromises do; it split the difference.
Was that fair? It probably depends on
you ask.
The compelling question framing
in the Great Compromise did what many
representation by state. The solution in
Great Compromise, 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.

In this case, delegates had to decide
whether it was fairer to allocate legisla-
tive 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 fair-
ness. (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 pur-
pose; compelling questions need their
supporting friends to give them structure.

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

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