

It Might Not be a Matter of Life or Death, But Does Soccer Really Explain the World?¹

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Whether it is called football, fútbol, footy, or soccer, it is little secret that “the beautiful game” has been and continues to be immensely popular throughout the world. One billion people worldwide viewed the men’s 2014 World Cup final, according to estimates.² Televised soccer has not been as popular in the United States; however, an estimated 25.4 million people watched the women’s 2015 World Cup final, in which the U.S. Women’s National Team sealed its third World Cup championship. The 2015 final game was the most watched soccer match in U.S. television history, bettering the men’s 2014 World Cup game between USA and Portugal, which had over 18 million viewers, as well as the final game of the 2015 NBA playoffs, which had just over 23 million viewers.³ While soccer is a pastime, it is simultaneously a massive worldwide business that has undergone major transformation in the past quarter century, and offers a lens through which to teach social studies in an authentic, inquiry-based manner.

Soccer provides a context for learning history, economics, and geography. At the same time, soccer serves as a metaphor for global interconnectedness by studying who plays (both amateur and professional), where they play, the teams they play for, the leagues and international tournaments they play in, how individuals and corporations contribute to and are impacted by the economics of soccer, who watches soccer, and where and with whom they watch. In this article, we provide an Inquiry Design Model (IDM) that is framed by the compelling question: Does soccer *really* explain the world?⁴ Prior to this, we provide an example of how soccer can be used with students to illustrate the concept of globalization.

The English Premier League and Globalization: An Illustrative Case

On December 28, 1992, about halfway through the inaugural season of the English Premier League, Tottenham Hotspur and Nottingham Forest played in London. Of the 22 starting players, 18 were from England, with one from Scotland, one Wales, and one Ireland; only one was not from Great Britain. The Tottenham players wore shirts that were designed by Umbro and sponsored by Holsten (a German beer company); the Nottingham Forest players’ uniform was also designed by Umbro and had a Labatt’s (a Canadian beer company) logo on it. Players only wore a number without their name and the match did not have a live television broadcast; a

ticket could be found for £11 (\$19.75 in 1992 dollars).

In contrast, 22 years later to the day, Tottenham played against Manchester United. The increased diversity of players was apparent: though 20 of the 22 players starting that match were European, 11 countries were represented, and only 9 of the players were English. The Tottenham players wore shirts designed by Under Armour and sponsored by AIA (a Pan Asian insurance provider), while Manchester United players’ shirts were designed by Nike and advertised Chevrolet. All players had their names on their shirts, the match was broadcast live around the world, and ticket prices started at £25, going up to £81 (\$41.25 to \$133.65 in 2014 dollars). It is now commonplace for foreigners to view as well as attend Premier League matches, as evidenced by the multitude of supporters’ clubs around the world, as well as a worker at their ‘ground’ (stadium) who noted that he has “spoken to fans from North Carolina, New York, Florida, and other places.”⁵

This juxtaposition of two matches exemplifies the changes that have taken place and is representative of soccer’s globalization. This is apparent in the players themselves; in the highest level of English soccer, the English Premier League (EPL), the number of English

players was halved. Players' names on shirts illustrate the growth of individual player brands as well as team brand. Uniform makers such as Umbro (an English company) and Under Armour and Nike (American companies) alongside shirt sponsors such as insurance companies from Asia and car makers from the United States reflect developments in international marketing as various industries strive to reach an ever growing global audience.

Soccer Studies, we contend, can be an engaging inquiry-based pathway to learning social studies. The inquiry-based sequences outlined in this article follow the Inquiry Design Model (IDM) format (developed in response to the C3 Framework), which emphasizes the use of compelling and supporting questions and follows the C3 Inquiry Arc.⁶ Compelling questions are open-ended and require students to “apply disciplinary concepts” and use evidence to “construct arguments and interpretations.”⁷ Supporting questions align with a compelling question to help students investigate the compelling question as they move through an inquiry; they “focus on descriptions, definitions and processes about which there is general agreement within the social studies disciplines.”⁸ Supporting questions have an answer, and as students figure out those answers, they build their understanding and their argument about the compelling question as well. The Inquiry Arc is “a set of interlocking and mutually reinforcing ideas” built from the four dimensions of the C3 Framework: (1) Developing questions and planning inquiries; (2) applying disciplinary concepts and tools; (3) evaluating sources and using evidence; and (4) communicating conclusions and taking informed action.⁹

Soccer Studies and the C3 Inquiry Arc

To explore the inquiry, “Does soccer *really* explain the world?” in a timely manner, we envision a jigsaw method, in which students work to investigate one of the three supporting questions

in expert groups before coming back together to collaborate and share ideas in base jigsaw groups. We developed two “tracks” through which students could investigate the compelling question. In this way, teachers have the option to choose the track that is most relevant for their students and course content or combine the two tracks into one inquiry.

One track focuses on national interpretations of soccer’s globalization; the other offers an international lens. Throughout the national track, students explore the professional soccer leagues in the United States—Major League Soccer (MLS) and the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL). Throughout the international track, students explore the international governing body of soccer, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), and look at the English Premier League (EPL) as a case study of one international league. Following the IDM format, the inquiry is organized into three supporting questions. The two

tracks provide corresponding resources student expert groups could use as they work to complete a formative performance task for supporting questions one, two, or three. For example, in the national track, as students compare and contrast the salaries of male and female professional soccer players, they will be prompted to analyze the economic inequality between the two groups. To organize their emerging expert knowledge about their assigned supporting question and prepare for reporting back to their base group, students can complete a graphic organizer such as an adapted FRAME (See figure 1).¹⁰

Each track builds to a suggested summative performance task, to be completed in the base jigsaw groups, which represents the culmination of the inquiry through which students communicate their argument about the compelling question. In the summative performance task, students share their expert note FRAMES as they collaborate to craft

Figure 1. Example of an expert notes FRAME

Does soccer *really* explain the world?

Expert Notes—Group#	Key Topics Soccer Studies	is about...
Exploring how soccer explains the world: Expert Group 1—Who plays soccer?		
<input type="radio"/> Main idea from exploring resources		
Essential details to support your main idea		
Significance? (What’s important to understand and be ready to share?)		

an argument for the compelling question. Finally, we envision a full class discussion and deliberation as base groups share their ideas and arguments for the summative performance task. The class could create a final class FRAME, using deliberation strategies to come to a consensus on how to answer the compelling question, or each individual student could create a final argument after hearing ideas from each group.

Initiating the Inquiry and Engaging Students

Prior to beginning an inquiry, IDM emphasizes the importance of “staging the question” to engage students in the inquiry.¹¹ This can take many forms and teachers can use knowledge of their students to build interest and intrigue. One possibility for staging this inquiry is to view a short clip from *The Simpsons* in which much of Springfield attends a soccer game. In the suggested clip (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qjpiZrvn8VQ>), two announcers contrast sharply. The American announcer is visibly and audibly bored with the game while the international announcer enthusiastically hangs on every touch of the ball. The clip can lead into a class discussion on the American conception and stereotypes of soccer as a dull sport versus the popularity of the sport globally. From there, we suggest that students could complete an anticipation guide about the popularity of youth soccer in the U.S., prior to exploring some local/national data (www.usyouthsoccer.org/media_kit/keystatistics) on youth soccer to help them fill in the guide.

Following the IDM format, Table 1 outlines the supporting questions, corresponding resources, and performance tasks for the inquiry.

Supporting question 1, “Who plays soccer?”, draws upon geography, economics, culture, and civics content as students consider the multiple factors that influence the diversity—or lack thereof—of the game of soccer nationally and/or globally. With the overarching compelling question in mind, students

can consider how these factors reflect national and/or global issues, such as population patterns, economic inequality, religious trends, and impacts of globalization. In the national track, students will explore MLS and NWSL, taking note of the teams’ rosters, including the nationality of the players, and comparing the roster rules for the two leagues. In the international track, students look at FIFA and its members (more countries are members of FIFA than the United Nations!) and also take an in-depth look at the players in the World Cup and where they play soccer. In addition, students will focus on the players in the EPL and how the international makeup of players has increased over time.

Supporting question 2, “How has the soccer economy changed over time?” focuses on the rapid growth of the sport and business of soccer. Corporate sponsorship and players’ salaries have increased significantly with the rising popularity of soccer. By investigating changes to the soccer economy, students consider globalization, the political ramifications of this growing economy, and the social and civic issues these changes bring. Specifically, in the national track, students will compare MLS and NWSL salaries, noting inequalities in pay between the two leagues. Like international soccer leagues, MLS is a large and expanding business, with sponsors purchasing advertisements on players’ shirts. Students can compare shirt sponsorships of MLS teams to those of international teams, noting that while sponsorships within MLS are growing (LA Galaxy, for example, is sponsored by Herbalife at \$4.4 million per year), international club sponsorships for the top teams are more lucrative and draw more international sponsorships (Bayern Munich is sponsored by Deutsche Telekom, a major European telecommunications company, at \$37.3 million per year). In the international track, students will again focus on the EPL, looking at shirt sponsorships over time as the industry has grown and become more global in scale. In doing this, students can trace and categorize the

range and types of industries that sponsor teams over time. Students can also evaluate women’s soccer and the continuing gender inequalities in the World Cup, in FIFA investment and leadership, as well as in the NWSL.

In supporting question 3, “How does soccer shape and reflect our affiliations?” students take a broader look at the socio-cultural, political, and geographical implications of soccer and soccer teams. In Great Britain, for example, the seemingly simple revelation of which team one supports can also indicate whether a person is Catholic or Protestant. Soccer can be a source of conflict and rivalry, but it can also be a uniting force. The Christmas Truce of 1914 between German and British troops in World War I is a famous example of the sport’s fraternal potential.

By examining how soccer shapes and reflects affiliations, students can consider how these affiliations do or do not explain the world. For example, in the national track, students will examine the geography of fans of MLS teams, as well as compare the EPL to traditionally American sports leagues such as the National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), and the National Basketball Association (NBA). Finally, students will explore data from the Pew Research Center that points to some demographic trends in soccer fandom. In the international track, students examine the location of EPL stadiums—with many teams located in close proximity to each other, even in the same towns—as a way to understand the geographical and historical implications of team affiliations. Additionally, students examine social media trends to trace the relationship between the geographic location of fans worldwide and the EPL clubs they follow. Students will also examine the ‘Old Firm,’ one of the most famous rivalries in international soccer, between Celtic and Rangers in the Scottish League; the Old Firm is a storied rivalry with religious, cultural, political, and geographical roots and implications.

Table 1. **Soccer Studies Inquiry**

Inquiry Design Model (IDM) Blueprint		
Compelling Question	Does soccer <i>really</i> explain the world?	
Standards and Practices	<p>Selected indicators from the C3 Framework (NCSS, 2013). Individually and with others, students...</p> <p>D1.4.9-12: Explain how supporting questions contribute to an inquiry and how, through engaging source work, new compelling and supporting questions emerge.</p> <p>D2.Civ.9.9-12: Use appropriate deliberative processes in multiple settings.</p> <p>D2.Eco.15.9-12: Explain how current globalization trends and policies affect economic growth, labor markets, rights of citizens, the environment, and resource and income distribution in different nations.</p> <p>D2.Geo.2.9-12: Use maps, satellite images, photographs, and other representations to explain relationships between the locations of places and regions and their political, cultural, and economic dynamics.</p> <p>D2.His.5.9-12: Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people’s perspectives.</p> <p>D3.1.9-12: Gather relevant information from multiple sources representing a wide range of views while using the origin, authority, structure, context, and corroborative value of the sources to guide the selection.</p> <p>D4.6.9-12: Use disciplinary and interdisciplinary lenses to understand the characteristics and causes of local, regional, and global problems; instances of such problems in multiple contexts; and challenges and opportunities faced by those trying to address these problems over time and place.</p>	
Staging the Question	Discuss the varying popularity of soccer nationally and globally using popular culture (<i>The Simpsons</i> clip, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qjp1Zrvn8VQ) and data on Youth Soccer in the U.S. (http://www.usyouthsoccer.org/media_kit/keystatistics/) to ground the conversation.	
Supporting Question 1	Supporting Question 2	Supporting Question 3
Who plays soccer?	How has the soccer economy changed over time?	How does soccer shape and reflect our affiliations?
Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task
Use the FRAME format to summarize key points and supporting details from sources.	Use the FRAME format to summarize key points and supporting details from sources.	Use the FRAME format to summarize key points and supporting details from sources.
Featured Sources	Featured Sources	Featured Sources
National	National	National
<p>Portal to MLS teams; each team has published its roster, complete with background information on players: http://www.mlssoccer.com/clubs</p> <p>MLS roster rules: http://pressbox.mlssoccer.com/content/roster-rules-and-regulations</p>	<p>MLS salaries: http://www.sounderatheart.com/2013/5/6/4306550/mls-player-salaries-analysis-charts-and-tables</p> <p>NWSL salaries: http://www.bbc.com/sport/0/football/33114171</p>	<p>Comparison of fandom for professional soccer and NFL, NBA, NHL, MLB: http://fivethirtyeight.com/datalab/the-distribution-of-fandom-in-pro-leagues/</p> <p>Geographic trends of MLS fans: http://www.foxsports.com/soccer/inside-mls/fox-soccer-facebook-project-mls-fans-in-united-states-and-canada-maps-030615</p>



Figure 2.

Subsequent to groups completing their in-depth consideration of supporting question 1, 2, or 3, they will work within their expert groups to prepare to bring their understandings back to their jigsaw base groups to complete the summative performance task.

Conclusion

By considering whether soccer really explains the world, students tackle issues of gender inequality, globalization, migration/emigration of skilled workers, and political, social, economic, and other sources of power. Soccer has a rich history and continues to evolve as evidenced by the recent FIFA global corruption scandal under investigation by the U.S. government. There are various ways to creatively extend the present inquiry; for example, students could share and explore new compelling questions and investigate different levels and leagues of soccer. Further, given the recent Supreme Court ruling in *Obergefell et al. v. Hodges et al.*, which effectively legalized same-sex marriage in all U.S. states, the media coverage and support of the kiss between U.S. soccer player Abby Wambach and her wife, Sarah Huffman, at the end of the game, can prompt a look at broader social issues reflected in soccer.¹² As a further extension surrounding gender issues reflected in soccer, students could consider why the “breathhtakingly sexist” tweet published by the England team’s official twitter account welcoming home the women’s soccer team after the 2015

World Cup (above) was quickly removed after a wave of criticism.¹³

We hope this article serves as a generator of ideas for using soccer to facilitate student learning in social studies, *rather* than a prescription for how to do so. Ideally students would end the inquiry with more questions about how to explain the world, and we encourage teachers to take time at the end of the inquiry to allow students to share and discuss their questions. 🌍

Notes

1. The title is from two sources: (1) former Liverpool manager Bill Shankly is credited with saying “Some people believe football is a matter of life or death... I can assure you it is much, much more important than that”; and (2) the second phrase is attributed to Franklin Foer, *How Soccer Explains the World: An Unlikely Theory of Globalization* (New York: 2004).
2. FIFA, “2014 FIFA World Cup Reached 3.2 Billion Viewers, One Billion Watched Final,” FIFA Media Release (December 16, 2015), www.fifa.com/worldcup/news/y=2015/m=12/news=2014-fifa-world-cuptm-reached-3-2-billion-viewers-one-billion-watched-2745519.htm.
3. Matt Bonesteel, “Women’s World Cup Draws Huge TV Audience,” *The Washington Post* (July 6, 2015), www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/early-lead/wp/2015/07/06/womens-world-cup-final-draws-huge-tv-rating/; Justin Block, “Women’s World Cup Final was the Most Watched Soccer Match in U.S. History—For Men or Women,” *The Huffington Post* (July 6, 2015), www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/07/06/most-watched-us-soccer-game_n_7736438.html?utm_hp_ref=sports&ir=Sport.
4. S.G. Grant, John Lee, and Kathy Swan, “The Inquiry Design Model” (C3 Teachers, 2014), www.c3teachers.org/idm/.
5. Steve Hayward, email message to author, June 2, 2015.
6. Grant, Lee, and Swan, “The Inquiry Design Model”; for the full copy of the C3 Framework, see National Council for the Social Studies, *Social Studies for the Next Generation: Purposes, Practices,*

and Implications of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards (Washington, D.C.: NCSS, 2013).

7. *C3 Framework*, 97.
8. *Ibid.*, 105.
9. *Ibid.*, 17.
10. Edwin S. Ellis, *The Content Enhancement Series: The Framing Routine* (Lawrence, Kans.: Edge Enterprises, Inc., 1998); Darren W. Minarik and David Hicks, “Toward an Inclusive Social Studies Classroom,” in *Strategies for Teaching K-12 Social Studies in Inclusive Classrooms*, ed. Timothy Lintner and Windy Schweder, (Charlotte, N.C.: Information Age, 2011), 47-56.
11. Grant, Lee, and Swan, “The Inquiry Design Model.”
12. Wilfred Chan, “Abby Wambach, Wife Sarah Huffman Share Kiss after U.S. World Cup Win,” CNN (July 7, 2015), <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/07/06/football/womens-world-cup-abby-wambach-wife-kiss/>.
13. Aubrey Allegretti, “England’s Official Twitter Account Deletes ‘Breathhtakingly Sexist’ Tweet in Women’s World Cup Aftermath” *The Huffington Post – United Kingdom* (July 6, 2015), www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/07/06/england-football-team-womens-world-cup-tweet_n_7735344.html.

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