

Making Social Studies Shine: Strategies for Implementing the C3 Framework in Elementary Classrooms

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Every single day elementary school teachers face difficult decisions about allocating their limited minutes of instructional time among each educational discipline. Because language arts and math are typically given a higher priority by both formal policies and informal norms, influenced heavily by state testing requirements, social studies is frequently marginalized.¹ NCSS has advocated strongly for the discipline, recognizing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes it provides students to participate effectively in an increasingly complex and social world.² In addition to social studies' irreplaceable role in preparing students for civic life, the subject presents unique opportunities for students to develop the very college and career ready skills of problem solving, synthesis, and analysis that are being tested.

When social studies does make its way into the elementary school schedule, it often suffers from a limited conception. Social studies is considerably less powerful if only one aspect, such as history, is taught in isolation and without the complement of other essential disciplines, like geography.

The exploration of events and actions that shaped our past and continue to influence our future must be examined through multiple perspectives and approaches. As outlined in the second dimension of the C3 Framework, there are four significant disciplines or perspectives (as we refer to them in our elementary schools) of social studies: history, economics, geography, and civics. These disciplinary concepts, set on top of a foundation of inquiry, foster a deep understanding that enables students to develop the knowledge, skills, and atti-

tudes set forth by NCSS. Using a single perspective provides only a portion of the whole picture that may be blurry, incomplete, or even inaccurate. Viewing events through various lenses enables students to formulate well-versed conclusions. To demonstrate the value of this interdisciplinary approach in elementary schools, we share Cathy's experiences and applications derived from the collaborative professional learning opportunities afforded by the C3 Literacy Collaborative (C3LC).³

Before participating in the C3LC, I (Cathy) struggled to understand many of these ideas. Although I could see the connections among disciplines, I found it very difficult to design effective social studies units and lessons that would support my students' literacy development. Although I often used an inquiry approach to my instruction, I was unfa-

miliar with the C3 Framework and how inquiry could be applied to social studies. After the C3LC professional development experience and collaboration among team members, I now have a clearer vision of the steps necessary to incorporate disciplinary knowledge with higher level thinking skills. In the sections that follow, I will share some of the C3LC instructional practices that worked in my classroom in the hope that these ideas will spur the advancement of your own social studies teaching.

Step 1: The Inquiry Foundation

An inquiry approach is a natural invitation to learning. Rather than stifle curiosity, in the elementary environment we as teachers want to promote an inquisitive nature and divergent thinking, especially as it relates to understanding our world.⁴ However, asking questions that lead to further exploration of social studies is a difficult skill for students and teachers alike. After completing the Investigation for Dimension 1: Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries,⁵ our team decided to vertically align our investigations to highlight the progression of content through interrelated inquiries. Formulating strong questions that stimulate thought, pique curiosity, and encourage more questions proved to be

Four Disciplines of Social Studies	
<p>History</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dates • Events • People • Timelines • Documents • Speeches • Cause and Effect 	<p>Geography</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Landforms • Regions • Environment • Map • Boundaries • Settlements • Culture • Movement
<p>Civics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Laws • Rules • Government • Politics • Voting • Responsibilities • Values • Beliefs • Constitution 	<p>Economics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost vs. Benefit • Money • Taxes • Jobs • Resources • Business • Income • Goods and Services • Trade
<p>Graphic 1. Breaking the four disciplines into one-word attributes or short phrases.</p>	

a challenging task. Compelling questions rely on supporting questions to provide students with the scaffolding needed to respond to higher level inquiries, so designing such questions that consider students’ background knowledge and incorporate multiple perspectives required careful thought and consideration. Collaboration was essential to help ideas, concepts, and thoughts morph and solidify. Through trial and error (with several instances of complete silence in the room and the *Jeopardy!* theme song running through my head), several revisions, and a positive support system, we developed a few thoughtful compelling questions to use with all grade levels. One example is “How does your location in the world influence your perception of the world?” Initially, my students struggled to comprehend the complexity of this question, but through well-crafted supporting questions and scaffolded activities they began making insightful lasting connections.

Step 2: Teaching Elementary Students Disciplinary Understanding

Before students can investigate and construct arguments to answer compelling and supporting questions, a firm understanding of each social studies discipline of Dimension 2 is required.⁶ For instance, to address the supporting question, “From Native American settlements, to missions, to ranches, how has the economy of California changed?”, students will need modeling of systematic ways to tackle this complex inquiry as well as direct instruction to unpack obstacles hidden in specific disciplinary knowledge. Scaffolding is necessary to deconstruct terms such as “economy” into comprehensible words and phrases, tapping into students’ background knowledge to allow even the youngest learners access to core disciplinary constructs. Graphic 1, shared by Tracy Middleton during C3LC professional network virtual discussions and modified for specific student needs in my

classroom, shows how each discipline can be unpacked through one-word attributes or short phrases that create meaningful associations more familiar to students.⁷ These attributes are introduced at the start of the school year in a unit of study entitled “What is Social Studies?” in which we spend time exploring the disciplines and the other concepts outlined in the C3, such as primary and secondary sources. Mapping them onto this grid helps remind students of the key attributes of social studies and serves as foundational understandings that will be the backbone of future content-based inquiries.

Supporting activities that address all learning styles through varied modalities help reinforce learning and interpretation of the disciplines. To build visual literacy, I have students work in cooperative groups to create posters that depict each perspective through pictures or graphics. In 30 minutes, students may cut out images from magazines, draw their own illustrations, and add their own words or sentences to depict their thinking. After completion, each group orally shares their creation. During each presentation, groups pose arguments to justify why individual illustrations or graphics fit under the main topic, which shows the connections and understandings they are building of the discipline. Graphic 2 on page 368 shows how one group visually interpreted the concept of economics.

To incorporate kinesthetic modalities, I have my students connect movement to abstract concepts, which helps solidify key ideas and allows for easier recall. Together, we brainstorm different symbolic gestures and words that relate to each of the four disciplines of social studies. For example, “economy” can be represented by rubbing the thumb against the index and middle fingers of both hands while whispering “money, money, money.” Established movements are reinforced during a 10-minute activity in which I verbalize attributes from the four perspectives of social studies, and students perform the con-

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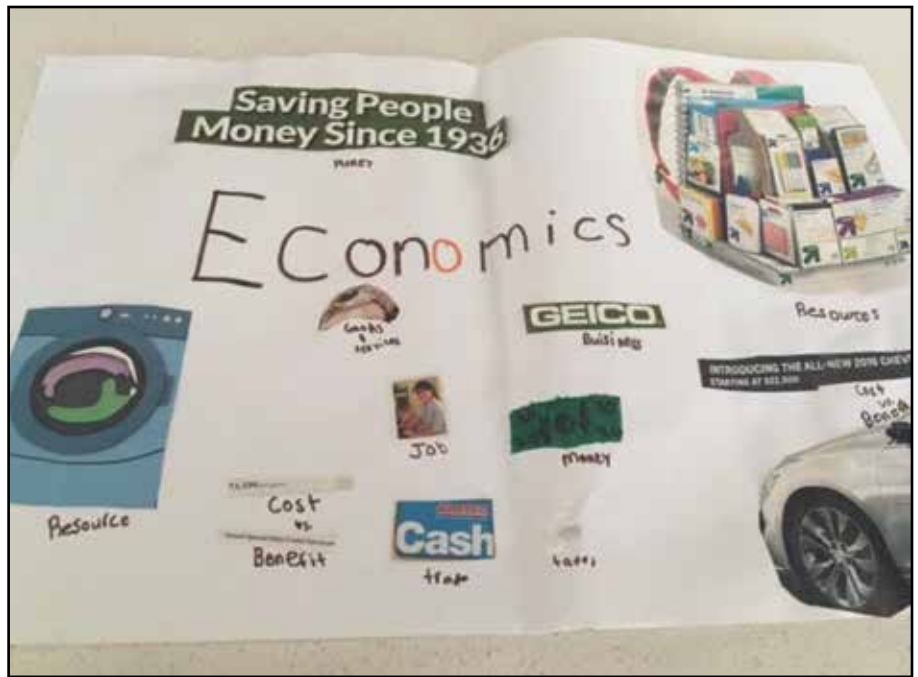
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nected action. Over the next few days, I methodically insert these attributes into other academic conversations. Students are required to be active listeners. This fun exercise not only reinforces difficult concepts, but incorporates ELA listening standards.

Step 3: Applying Concepts

Finally, to bridge the gap between learned disciplinary concepts and authentic reading of social studies sources requires some direct instruction. Through explicit modeling, my students learn to annotate and analyze short texts through different lenses of social studies. They use different colored pencils, one for each discipline, to identify passages that support previously taught attributes. The real magic occurs when close reading is coupled with student generated symbolic gestures. Using partner reading, one student orally reads the annotated passage while the other student acts out the corresponding movements when disciplinary knowledge is uncovered. Partners switch roles and the process is duplicated.

After laying the groundwork by unpacking information using the four disciplinary tools, my students begin to actively apply the concepts through primary and secondary sources to construct arguments based on evidence (Dimension 3). To ensure a seamless transition between abstract concepts and concrete information, I utilize an interactive bulletin board, which helps students classify textual evidence into the four disciplines of social studies, as seen in Graphic 3 (at right). Students are divided into groups tasked with applying one perspective to a specific source. While reading and examining these documents, groups apply knowledge gleaned through previous activities to identify appropriate evidence. Based on which discipline the groups are assigned, students cooperatively interact to examine material through the lens of a historian, a geographer, a lawmaker, or an economist. Viewing social studies through various lenses enables students to develop a



Graphic 2



Graphic 3

richer contextual understanding of issues as well as consider problems from alternate angles. These higher-order thinking skills are critical for academic success, and especially democratic citizenship in our nation and world today.

Conclusion

Primary educators strive to help their students build connections among multiple experiences in order to reinforce

previously taught concepts and promote interdisciplinary learning. This linking of ideas and understandings is vital as students grapple with twenty-first-century complexities. The activities suggested in this article are most effective when repeatedly employed, building layers of rigor over multiple units of study. Comparing or contrasting the same facet through various periods of time promotes higher levels of cognitive

thought. As a result of interweaving these four disciplines into existing content curriculum, my (Cathy's) elementary school students are much better equipped with the tools necessary to address compelling and secondary questions. The question pertaining to the evolution to California's economy illustrates how introducing a single facet enables students to synthesize diverse material and formulate lasting connections.

The C3 Literacy Collaborative afforded me the collaborative opportunity to interpret new curricula and to personalize applications with my elementary school students. The beauty of the the C3 Framework is that its basic principles are not dependent on a certain textbook for implementation; rather, it enables teachers to strategically use any materials to shape meaningful inquiries for students. The interpretive products developed by C3LC teachers are not packaged curricula, but rather authentic

classroom applications. By promoting interdisciplinary learning, the hallmark of Dimension 2 of the C3 Framework, it is possible to maximize instructional time by supporting literacy development and integrating disciplines through a focus on problem solving, real-world queries, and understanding perspectives of disciplines. Embracing the C3 Framework and utilizing the resources of the C3 Literacy Collaborative can help other elementary teachers foster inquiry and interdisciplinary social studies learning for their young citizens. ●

Notes

1. National Council of the Social Studies. "Social Studies for the Early Childhood and Elementary School Children: Preparing for the 21st Century," an NCSS Position Statement (June 1988), www.socialstudies.org/positions/elementary.
2. Paul G. Fitchett, Tina L. Heafner, and Richard Lambert, "Assessment, Autonomy, and Elementary Social Studies Time," *Teachers College Record* 116, no. 10 (2014): 1-34.
3. For a description of the C3 Literacy Collaborative (C3LC) Grant Project, please see www.socialstudies.org/c3_literacy_collaborative.

4. Yong Zhao, "Education in the Flat World: Implications of Globalization on Education," *The EDge* 2, no. 4 (March/April 2007): 3-19; National Council for the Social Studies, *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Silver Spring, Md., 2013): 82-91; S.G. Grant, "From Inquiry Arc to Instructional Practice: The Potential of the C3 Framework," *Social Education* 77, no. 6 (2013): 322-6, www.literacyinlearningexchange.org/sites/default/files/grant_article.pdf.
5. To access this Investigation, please see www.socialstudies.org/resources/c3/c3lc/dimension-1-developing-questions-and-planning-inquiries.
6. This idea grew out of a collaborative discussion with Tracy Middleton, a middle school teacher, at the NCSS 2015 conference in New Orleans. I modified the original document to be elementary friendly.

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