

## **Designing Inquiry During a Pandemic: A Professional Learning Experience for Social Studies Teachers**

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This paper describes a collaborative project between a district curriculum specialist and university-based researchers to provide on-going support to social studies teachers as they transitioned to digital learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. We developed an asynchronous, on-line and self-guided professional learning project to support teachers at each stage of designing a C3 inquiry. Early results suggest the combination of scaffolding through the digital project as well as 1:1 communication with teachers provided the necessary support to help teachers navigate the instructional shifts associated with inquiry-based instruction.

Like hundreds of school systems around the world, Wake County Public Schools faced the excruciating decision to close all public schools in March 2020. By the time of the crisis, we (the district curriculum specialist and the university-based teacher educators) had already established a research practice partnership (Penuel & Gallagher, 2017) related to the district's "4C" initiative to "graduate students who are collaborative, creative, effective communicators and critical thinkers" (WCPSS, 2015). To these ends, during the 2019-2020 school year we led face-to-face professional development sessions about the *C3 Framework* (NCSS, 2013) for over 800

social studies teachers in the district. We also worked with a group of teachers in a yearlong research study funded by the Spencer Foundation focused on designing and implementing inquiry. In response to the pandemic, we took on the new challenge of supporting teachers in their transition to digital learning, while also creating a continuity plan for our professional development and research projects.

## Literature Review

The intellectual rationale for the *C3 Framework* builds on empirical data that inquiry-based teaching is the most effective approach for students to develop substantive content knowledge and disciplinary skills in the social studies (e.g., Barth & Shermis, 1970; Engle, 1960; Newmann, King, & Carmichael, 2007; Parker, et al 2013; Saye & Brush, 2005). According to VanSledright, for “deep understanding” to occur, “children and adolescents must ask questions about what they do not understand, embark on an investigative journey that begins to address those questions, explore resources for learning, develop evidence-based understandings, and be able to communicate them cogently and coherently” (p. 334). The C3 Framework was developed to provide students with “an investigative journey,” facilitated by teachers through carefully scaffolded performance tasks. Central to the framework, the Inquiry Design Model (IDM), includes questions, tasks, and sources (Swan, Lee, & Grant, 2018, see appendix A).

Social studies teachers have been slow to adopt inquiry into practice (Saye, 2017). According to Grant and Gradwell (2009) this is because inquiry teaching is “ambitious” and demanding; it requires a great deal of prior content knowledge, careful planning, and close attention to the needs of all students. Ambitious teachers must, “navigate a rocky road, one that includes the need to seize control of the curriculum, come to terms with the evolutionary nature of one’s teaching practice, and respond to administrative realities” (Grant and Gradwell, 2009, p.1). Not surprising, it is “challenging and frustrating” for teachers to integrate C3 inquiries into practice (Thacker & Friedman, 2017, p. 372). This is due to issues related to vertical and horizontal alignment of the compelling and supporting questions, sourcing, and content knowledge background (Journell, et al, 2018; Thacker & Friedman, 2017).

Despite challenges associated with teaching inquiry, research on teacher professional learning suggests that, with the proper scaffolding, teachers can shift their practice (Crocco & Livingstone, 2017). This is particularly

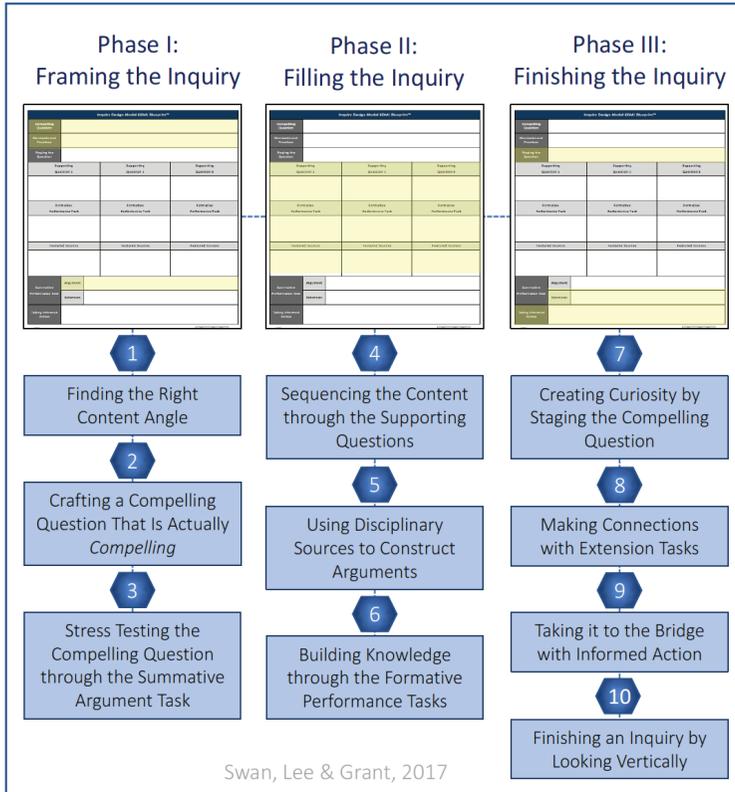
true when professional learning connects directly to issues of practice and is focused on student learning (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2017). Digital professional learning can accomplish many of the same goals as face-to-face professional learning experiences and may actually deepen teacher outcomes since there is an opportunity to provide continued, formative feedback and support for teachers (Fishman, et al, 2013; Masters, et al, 2010; Powell, et al, 2010).

## Process

As mentioned above, prior to the initiation of this project, we had been engaged in a year-long research project funded by the Spencer Foundation focused on integrating the C3 Framework into instruction (see appendix B). Over the course of three cycles, teacher participants collected and analyzed data related to planning, implementing, and assessing C3 inquiry in the classroom. Early results from the study suggested that student learning outcomes improved over time and teachers improved their pedagogical content knowledge.

In order to build off this research, we endeavored to create a digital professional learning platform to support more teachers in designing their own C3 inquiries - “Designing Inquiry Using IDM” (see: <https://sites.google.com/ncsu.edu/designing-inquiry>). We utilized the design process of IDM to guide teachers in planning and developing a C3 inquiry (Figure 1).

## The Design Path for IDM



**Figure 1.** The Inquiry Design Path.

Through the website and email communication, teachers were provided careful guidance to complete five design challenges based on the “IDM Design Path.” They were prompted through brief overviews of each design challenge and then asked to complete a relevant task (see figure 2).

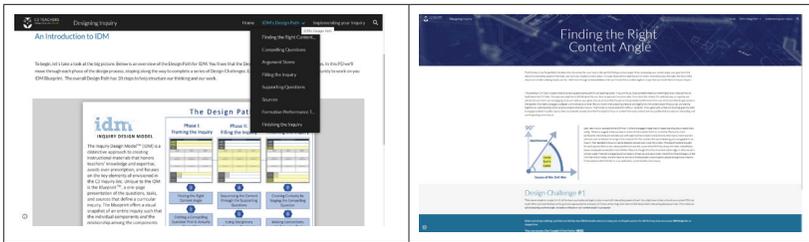


Figure 2. IDM Design Path and Design Challenge #1.

## Results

Our project provided teachers with a digital opportunity to hone their ambitious teaching skills through curriculum development (Grant & Gradwell, 2009). Here teachers developed C3 inquiries for students that included performance tasks designed for students to display “how they think and understand” (Vansledright, 2013, p. 337). Using IDM we broke down the design of a C3 inquiry into smaller, more concrete tasks, providing necessary scaffolding for teachers to develop a C3 inquiry (Thacker & Friedman, 2017). This, along with continuous, on-going support, made the overall design of the inquiry more manageable. In order to understand participant experiences we recorded progress reports for each teacher and analyzed teacher work samples.

Although still in the initial phase, our project is already yielding productive insights. Specifically we noted two particular areas in which it was important to provide formative feedback: 1) sourcing and 2) designing performance tasks. In one representative example, a teacher participant designed a C3 inquiry around the compelling question - “Has the United Nations successfully accomplished its goals?” He needed to revise his initial inquiry to include more relevant excerpts from the sources he selected for each supporting question and to simplify or annotate complex vocabulary. For the summative performance task, we recommended he replace the open-ended debate with a structured academic controversy to enable student dialogue and a more intellectually rigorous approach to weighing alternative perspectives. In these instances, we were able to provide direct guidance to the teacher participant during the design process, helping him avoid many of the pitfalls of designing C3 inquiries (Journell et al, 2018).

Our findings reiterate that designing C3 inquiries is a complex, iterative process (Swan, Lee, & Grant, 2018). However, through scaffolding, professional dialogue, and on-going formative feedback we can support teachers

in designing effective inquiries. This is particularly true when school-based professional learning teams (PLT) participate in on-line professional development (Gess-Newsome et al, 2003). For example, in our project, six teachers from one middle school PLT participated as part of a larger school-based initiative to integrate inquiry-based teaching. As a result they were able to leverage the benefits of both our professional learning project and collegial support.

## Implications

Our approach to providing a self-directed, digital professional learning opportunity for teachers can be replicated in other school districts or teacher education programs. We invite teacher educators to adopt our web-based format to their own contexts. We recommend that similar initiatives connect with district-based curricular and professional mandates and support the day-to-day work of teachers (Penuel & Gallagher, 2017). By breaking down the IDM into manageable steps and providing on-going formative feedback, teacher educators can support preservice or experienced teachers as they thoughtfully plan C3 inquiries (Thacker & Friedman, 2017).

We plan to follow up with teachers as they implement their inquiries into the classroom. We foresee engaging teacher participants in also collecting data related to their implementation and assessment of C3 inquiries into either face-to-face or digital classrooms in the future. There is a natural opportunity for us to monitor the affordances of providing digital, on-going support for teachers in the planning phases before they implement inquiry in the classroom. Similar to Fishman et al (2013) we will be able to compare the outcomes of digital professional learning experiences to face-to-face approaches. At the same time we will be able to cast a larger net in terms of monitoring student learning outcomes over time.

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**APPENDIX A: C3 BLUEPRINT**

| Inquiry Design Model (IDM) Blueprint™        |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <b>Compelling Question</b>                   |  |  |
| Content Angle<br><br>(NC Essential Standard) |  |  |
| Staging the Question                         |  |  |
| <b>Supporting Question 1</b>                 | <b>Supporting Question 2</b>                                       | <b>Supporting Question 3</b>   |
|  |  |  |
| <b>Formative Performance Task</b>            | <b>Formative Performance Task</b>                                  | <b>Formative Performance Task</b>  |
|  |  |  |
| <b>Featured Sources</b>                      | <b>Featured Sources</b>  | <b>Featured Sources</b>  |
|  |  |  |
| Summative Performance Task                   | <b>Argument</b>  | Construct an argument (e.g., detailed outline, poster, essay) that discusses the impact of _____ using specific claims and relevant evidence from historical sources, while acknowledging competing views. |
|  | <b>Extension</b>   |  |
| Taking Informed Action                       | <p><b>Understand:</b></p> <p><b>Assess:</b></p> <p><b>Act:</b></p> |  |

**APPENDIX B:  
SPENCER GRANT PROJECT OUTLINE OF ACTIVITIES AND TIMELINE**

**“Changing Teaching Practice: Integrating the C3 Framework through Action Research”**

**Project Timeline**

| <b>Date</b>                   | <b>Description</b>  |
|-------------------------------|---|
| August 2019                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Host summer retreat with teacher participants               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Introduce C3 Framework and begin planning process for integrating the C3 into instruction</li> <li>○ Introduce action research data collection plan</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Teachers submit first (of two) C3 module - blueprint</li> <li>● Conduct second interview with teacher participants</li> <li>● University based researchers analyze qualitative data (C3 modules, preliminary plans, interview data)</li> </ul>   |
| September 2019                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Teachers refine C3 modules and implement into instruction (if applicable)</li> <li>● First discussion group meeting date - September 30</li> <li>● University based researchers analyze qualitative data (field notes from discussion group meeting)</li> </ul>  |
| October 1 – November 30, 2019 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Teachers integrate C3 module into instruction</li> <li>● Teacher participants collect data about their practice (implement action research plan) and submit via google folders (See data collection plan):               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Action research journal entries,</li> <li>○ samples of student work (from formative and summative tasks)</li> <li>○ Summative performance task assessment scores [rubric?] for final assignment</li> <li>○ Survey and/or interview data</li> </ul> </li> <li>● University-based researchers conduct at least one classroom observation in each participant’s classroom</li> <li>● University based researchers analyze qualitative data (field notes from classroom observations)</li> </ul> |
| December 2019                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Teachers submit interim report by Dec 10</li> <li>● Second discussion group meeting date Dec 10</li> <li>● Group analysis of data from first round of action research</li> <li>● Teachers begin refining second C3 module and action research</li> <li>● University based researchers analyze qualitative data (field notes from discussion group meeting)</li> </ul>  |
| January 2020                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Integrating Library of Congress resources workshop</li> <li>● Teachers develop and submit second (of two) C3 modules using Library of Congress resources</li> <li>● Teachers develop and submit revised action research plan</li> <li>● Conduct third interview with teacher participants</li> <li>● University based researchers analyze qualitative data (C3 modules, action research plans, interview data)</li> </ul>  |

| Date               | Description  |
|--------------------|--|
| February 2020      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Teachers integrate second C3 module into instruction using Library resources</li> <li>● Teacher participants begin collecting data through their action research</li> <li>● University-based researchers conduct classroom observations</li> <li>● University based researchers analyze qualitative data (field notes from observations)</li> </ul>   |
| March 2020         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Teachers submit interim report</li> <li>● Discussion group meeting</li> <li>● Group analysis of data from first round of action research</li> <li>● Teachers begin planning third C3 module</li> <li>● Conduct fourth interview with teacher participants</li> <li>● University based researchers analyze qualitative data (field notes from discussion group meeting, interviews)</li> </ul> |
| April 2020         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Teachers integrate third C3 module into instruction</li> <li>● Teacher participants begin collecting data through their action research</li> </ul>  |
| May 2020           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Teacher submit third interim report</li> <li>● University based researchers analyze qualitative data (final research reports)</li> </ul>  |
| June 2020          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Writing retreat [revise final reports based on feedback from university researchers]</li> <li>● Develop next steps for conferences/journal publications</li> <li>● Project wrap up and celebration</li> </ul>   |
| June – August 2020 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Disseminate action research findings</li> <li>● Draft final report of meta-analysis of action research project and results from the project</li> <li>● Develop scalable professional development plan based on findings</li> </ul>  |