

Questions, Frameworks, and Classrooms

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Overview

The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards (or C3 Framework) (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013) puts forward a vision for what inquiry-based teaching and learning can look like in social studies. A vision for inquiry is one thing, actually committing to and enacting this vision is another. To that end, C3 Teachers has partnered with the Right Question Institute (RQI) to tackle what is perhaps the thorniest problem in implementing the C3 Framework—helping students become confident and proficient in asking their own questions.

The Inquiry Arc of the C3 Framework suggests that two types of questions help animate inquiry—compelling and supporting. Academically rigorous and relevant to the lives of students, compelling questions help to frame an inquiry. Supporting questions are narrower in focus and help create a pedagogical and content structure. Teachers who develop their own compelling and supporting questions can readily use them in instruction. The bigger challenge is how to help students formulate their own questions that will spark and sustain an inquiry.

The Right Question Institute and the Question Formulation Technique

Enter the Right Question Institute. Twenty years ago, Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana learned from their civic education work with people in a wide range of communities that it is not enough to rely on the questions others generate. Dan and Luz helped found RQI on the idea that democracy thrives when we ask our own questions and learn how to participate in decisions that affect us. Through their experiences in communities and classrooms, they created the Question Formulation Technique (QFT). This deceptively simple strategy lays out a process for students to:

- Generate their own questions following a set of rules for producing those questions
- Categorize and sharpen their questions
- Prioritize and strategize how to use their questions to investigate issues
- Reflect upon what they learned and how they learned it.

QFT was introduced to educators four years ago through the book *Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions* (2011). Since then more than 100,000 teachers have implemented QFT with great success in their classrooms. Educators perceive QFT as a simple, practical, and powerful methodology that enables students to construct questions that matter to them.

C3 Teachers has partnered with the Right Question Institute to develop strategies for using the QFT process as a regular part of a C3-inspired inquiry. This brief examines our shared beliefs and describes a strategy for using QFT as a part of the inquiry process.

What beliefs do we share?

1. Questioning is at the heart of inquiry and democracy.
2. Asking good questions is hard work.
3. Students must develop questioning skills early and practice them often.
4. The development of good student questions requires the involvement of skilled teachers.
5. Teachers, if given resources that are easy to integrate into their teaching, will quickly and expertly make them part of their pedagogical toolboxes.
6. QFT, as a model for developing students' questioning skills, is well aligned with the Inquiry Arc of the C3 Framework.

Our shared beliefs have led us to develop several approaches for incorporating the QFT process into an emerging inquiry design model that is aligned with the C3 Framework and Inquiry Arc. These approaches respond to three critical instructional questions:

- How do we help students find the relevance and importance of compelling questions?
- How do we make it easier for students to develop their own compelling and supporting questions?
- What are practical instructional approaches for using QFT in an inquiry?

The QFT Process and the Inquiry Design Model

Ultimately, the C3 Framework is more than just a collection of standards. The four dimensions of the Inquiry Arc provide the contours of inquiry as it moves from questions to disciplinary knowledge and practices in order to communicate conclusions and take informed action. But, the Inquiry Arc does not provide a model for designing inquiries. Thus, C3 Teachers has been busy building such a model around the interlocking concepts of questions, tasks, and sources (Grant, Lee, & Swan, 2014). The resulting Inquiry Design Model (IDM) is represented in our Inquiry Blueprint - <http://www.c3teachers.org/idm>

Given this approach to inquiry, we have developed the following strategy for using the QFT process in an inquiry. This strategy is demonstrated in inquiry lessons C3 Teachers is publishing as part of the New York Social Studies Toolkit Project (<http://c3teachers.org/newyork>).

QFT and Compelling Questions

We developed the compelling question—“What do the buried secrets of Tenochtitlan tell us about the Aztecs?”—as the framing idea for an investigation of the Aztec Empire through a study of the fate of its capital city, Tenochtitlan (<http://www.c3teachers.org/aztecs>). But is crafting a compelling question and putting it in front of students enough to engage them? Not always—teachers need to create an instructional space in which students are able to find merit, relevance, and interest in the investigation. In the Inquiry Design Model (IDM), we call this “Staging the Compelling Question.”

In this case, we used the QFT to stage the Aztec inquiry’s compelling question. The QFT is a strategy that allows teachers to scaffold questioning outcomes by creating a curricular space for students to be curious at the onset of an inquiry. The process begins when teachers provide students with a provocative “Question Focus” or stimulus—a juicy quote, a stunning image, a sardonic political cartoon—and a little bit of structure—don’t censor yourself, ask a lot of questions, and be curious. And then, we observe. For the Aztec inquiry, we provided students with a Question Focus using the following quote and images from the article “Mexico City’s Aztec Past Reaches Out to Present” (*New York Times*, September 2, 2012).



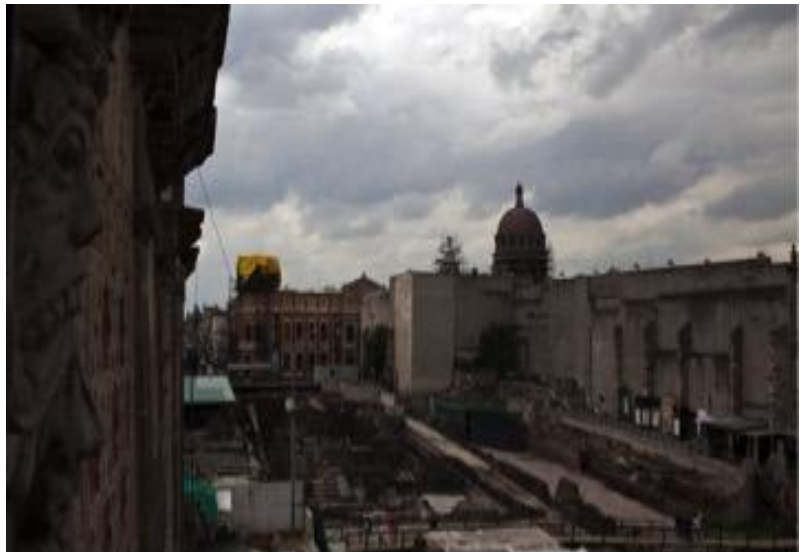
Archaeologists removed human bones found recently at the Templo Mayor site

“It is like a book that we are trying to read from the surface to the deepest point” (Raúl Barrera, who leads the exploration of the city’s center for the National Institute of Anthropology and History).

With a Question Focus in mind, students move through three distinct but important steps in generating their own questions (<http://rightquestion.org/educators/resources/>):

- Step One: Produce questions—Students are placed in small groups and, using the Question Focus, follow a procedure to produce as many questions as they can without stopping to judge or answer the questions. A recorder is assigned to write down every question exactly as stated. Students learn to change any statements they make into questions.
- Step Two: Categorize questions—Students work together to categorize the questions by labeling them as “compelling” or “supporting” (or alternatively, open or closed). Teachers should then discuss with students the advantages and disadvantages of asking both types of questions, focusing on the utility of each.
- Step Three: Prioritize questions—Students then prioritize the questions they have generated choosing what they consider to be the three most important questions. They provide a rationale for their choices and consider how they will then use their questions.
- Step Four: Reflect on the process—Students consider the process in which they engaged and answer the question, “What did I learn about Tenochtitlan? and Aztecs by working with our questions?”

At this point, teachers may want to introduce the teacher-developed compelling question for this inquiry and ask students to think about the ways in which their questions relate to it. For example, if students generate a question like, “How will we ever really know about the Aztecs if the civilization was literally buried?” a teacher might bridge the two questions. In pursuing both of these questions, a teacher could talk about how the students will be reading a variety of sources including newspaper articles, maps, and first-hand accounts stressing the importance of considering the veracity of the sources and the problem of an incomplete historical record. Additionally, the teacher may want to look for questions raised by students that mirror the questions that frame this inquiry and then acknowledge any gaps. In the cases where the students’ questions help further the inquiry, a teacher could construct another formative task(s) or augment the current tasks. In this way, students’ curiosity is woven into the teacher-designed instructional sequence and students’ intellectual efforts are recognized as important contributions to the inquiry process.



The ruins of the Aztecs' Templo Mayor 1

A very different approach to using QFT puts the responsibility for generating a compelling question on students. In this case, the inquiry would be built more organically with the tasks and sources emerging from the students’ questions rather than being pre-planned. Teachers might use the stimulus described above, but then build in time for students to linger over and refine their questions such that they ultimately define the compelling and supporting questions that they then investigate through independent and/or partner research.

Conclusion

The writers of the C3 Framework broke new ground by defining compelling questions as intellectually rigorous and relevant to students' interests. That notion of relevance requires teachers to consider the role students play within both planned and organic investigations. One way to do so is by populating an inquiry with student-generated questions. The Question Formulation Technique allows teachers and students to work with questions in transformative ways as it prioritizes students' interests and provides a collaborative civic space for curiosity and wonder.

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