inquirED’s interactive guide and webinar provide an introduction to inquiry-based social studies in the classroom
In 2013, with the publication of the College, Career and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards, inquiry-based practice became the gold standard for social studies instruction. Almost 10 years later, new efforts like the Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy have echoed the C3 Framework’s call for inquiry in K–12 social studies education.

State education leaders are heeding that call.

According to a recent analysis, 36 states – with more to follow – have integrated inquiry principles into their social studies standards, setting the instructional priorities for more than 30 million students. The extent to which these standards shape the day-to-day experience of social studies for those students, however, depends in large part on whether or not classroom teachers receive the support they need to shift their instructional practice. Many teachers are unfamiliar with inquiry-based practices, and many more lack the high-quality instructional materials that they need to support them.
inquirED has created the Inquiry in Social Studies Interactive Guide to help educators develop their understanding of inquiry-based social studies and envision what inquiry might look like in their classrooms. The guide will explore the following important building blocks of inquiry in social studies:

- Starting with Questions
- Building Disciplinary Knowledge and Skills
- Promoting Student-Led Learning
- Taking Informed Action

The Inquiry in Social Studies Interactive Guide describes each building block of inquiry-based social studies, provides a brief narrative or testimonial from the classroom, and suggests how educators might identify these building blocks in curricular materials and classroom instruction.

Additionally, inquirED has created a 30-minute webinar to help you explore the guide in more detail. The webinar can be viewed in its entirety or accessed in time-stamped sections connected to each criterion.

inquirED was founded by teachers with the mission of bringing inquiry-based social studies to every classroom. Its elementary social studies curriculum, Inquiry Journeys, is used in schools and districts across the country to help students develop deep social studies content knowledge and build the inquiry skills essential for a thriving democracy.
In inquiry-based social studies, students learn by investigating different types of questions. Teachers (or curriculum writers) craft some of these questions to help students meet learning standards. Other questions, equally worthy of investigation, come from the students themselves, inspired by their curiosities and lived experiences. Types of questions generally include the following:

**Inquiry Questions**
A single inquiry question – also called a compelling question – drives learning over the course of a whole social studies unit of study. A great inquiry question should be:

- Complex and open-ended, igniting student curiosity and driving them forward into their investigation
- Formulated simply so students can understand it (and share it with others)
- Laying the groundwork for students to take action
Essential Questions
Multiple essential questions – also called supporting questions – frame the investigation into the larger inquiry question. Essential questions should:

- Be open-ended
- Lead to an investigation of social studies content
- Connect to the standards, objectives, and broader inquiry question of the social studies unit of study

Student-Generated Questions
Student-generated questions – also called investigation questions – play an important role in inquiry-based social studies. As students investigate their own questions, they build knowledge that is deep and lasting because their learning connects to their curiosities and interests. In general, student-generated questions should be:

- Generated throughout a unit of study
- Prioritized and improved by students
- Revisited by students to consider which ones have been addressed, and what new questions have arisen

EDUCATOR REFLECTIONS

Rhonda Jackson, Second Grade Master Teacher in Detroit Public Schools, recently shifted to inquiry-based social studies instruction. For Jackson and her students, it took time to adjust to a shift in learning through the process of investigating questions. “Before we would study subjects; now it’s based on questions. It took a while, but now my students are more excited and they love social studies.”

According to Jackson, it took even more time for students to get used to asking their own questions. “We started our unit with the Question Formulation Technique,” Jackson said, “and it was hard the first time. But now? I can’t get them to stop coming up with questions! It just took time for them to realize their questions mattered.”

“It just took time for them to realize their questions mattered.”

Rhonda Jackson, 2nd Grade Master Teacher Detroit Public Schools
WHAT TO LOOK FOR

CURRICULUM

☐ A single inquiry question (also called a compelling question) drives learning in a unit of study.

☐ Multiple essential questions (also called supporting questions) connect individual lessons into a sustained investigation of the inquiry question.

☐ Student-generated questions for investigation are incorporated into instruction, including generating, revisiting, and revising.

☐ Multiple lessons across a unit provide opportunities for students to reflect on the inquiry question, essential questions, and student-generated questions.

CLASSROOM

☐ Students are engaging in discussion about inquiry, essential, and student-generated questions.

☐ Students are using protocols and cognitive routines that support generating, revisiting, revising, and reflecting on questions.

☐ Inquiry, essential, and student-generated questions are displayed prominently in the classroom to guide student learning.

☐ Anchor charts and other learning artifacts demonstrate the ongoing process of revisiting, reflecting on, and revising questions.

WANT TO DIVE DEEPER INTO QUESTIONING?

LEARN MORE
Students in traditional social studies classrooms act primarily as record keepers. They write down information, memorize it, and then recall it on a quiz or test. In contrast, students in inquiry-based social studies act as social scientists, building knowledge and skills in the core disciplines of social studies (History, Civics, Geography, and Economics) so they can answer complex questions, solve problems, or create solutions.

When students act as social scientists, they investigate the world through the lens of each social studies discipline and use its tools. When students look at the world through the lens of a geographer, for example, they practice noticing certain relationships (human and environment interactions, climate’s effect on migration and movement, etc.) and asking certain types of questions (How have humans modified their environment? How does physical geography affect culture? etc.).
As students investigate, they may also employ the tools of the geographer, creating maps to represent migration patterns or analyzing population distributions. Each discipline has a unique lens – and a unique set of tools – through which students can examine the world.

**EDUCATOR REFLECTIONS**

Jaclyn Share, an instructional coach in Illinois, works with students and teachers to help integrate disciplinary investigations into elementary social studies classrooms. When students act as social scientists, they are not memorizing information but “building schema, constructing meaning,” according to Share.

“It’s far different from being told what to think,” she said. “The topics we learn about in social studies are the contexts of our lives. Disciplinary knowledge and skills are tools students can use to understand and affect their world.”

“The topics we learn about in social studies are the contexts of our lives.”

Jaclyn Share, Instructional Coach Illinois
WHAT TO LOOK FOR

CURRICULUM

- Lesson objectives are aligned to rigorous grade-level standards in History, Civics, Geography, and Economics.
- Disciplinary sources presenting multiple perspectives are integrated into lessons.
- Multiple opportunities are provided across a unit for students to construct discipline-specific claims supported by evidence and reasoning.
- Lessons integrate the analysis and evaluation of sources and arguments across social studies disciplines.

CLASSROOM

- Students are gathering, organizing, and analyzing evidence from primary and secondary disciplinary sources.
- Students are explaining their understanding of disciplinary texts, sources, and concepts.
- Students are working individually and collaboratively to construct claims supported by evidence.
- Students are using disciplinary tools to collaborate, create, produce, publish, and evaluate content.

WANT TO DIVE DEEPER INTO DISCIPLINARY KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS?

LEARN MORE
The concept of student-led learning can often be misunderstood to mean that students get to choose exactly what or when to learn. If this were the case, how could teachers ensure that students were meeting learning targets and developing the specific knowledge and skills required by state standards?

Instead, student-led learning in social studies means that students have meaningful opportunities to have voice and choice in the classroom: Their questions are valued and integrated into investigations, their lived experiences are important sources to inform classroom learning, and their curiosities and interests help shape the goals and outcomes of their work.

Within the context of student-led learning, teachers are positioned as designers and guides, creating the structures within which students can take ownership of their learning – and providing the needed scaffolding and support along the way.
EDUCATOR REFLECTIONS

The shift to more student-led learning experiences was a challenge at first for Peggy Clark and her fourth-grade students. Clark’s students were used to coming to her with all their questions and looking to her to direct their learning.

They struggled at first when she shared with them that they would be doing the research and sharing out what they learned on their own, “instead of me telling you what to do, how to do it, and what the end should be.”

Over time, though, her students started to become more independent (and engaged) in their learning. “It was amazing to see them develop ownership,” she reflected, “so they weren’t relying totally on me all the time!”

“It was amazing to see them develop ownership, so they weren’t relying totally on me all the time!”

Peggy Clark, 4th Grade Teacher
WHAT TO LOOK FOR

CURRICULUM

☐ Connections to students’ prior knowledge and lived experiences inform and shape learning experiences across a unit of study.

☐ Protocols and cognitive routines that support independent thinking and problem solving are integrated into lessons.

☐ Students have opportunities to choose how to represent their learning through multiple modes, including speaking, writing, visual representations, etc.

☐ Student self-assessment, reflection, and goal-setting is embedded across a unit of study to inform student work.

CLASSROOM

☐ Students do the majority of the talking, thinking, and doing across learning experiences.

☐ Students demonstrate personal agency, such as making choices about their learning, providing input, and advocating for help or resources when needed.

☐ Students engage in continued goal-setting, reflection, and feedback to revise their thinking and work.

☐ Artifacts of learning (anchor charts, unit displays, etc.) show evidence of student-led learning and collaboration.

INQUIRY IN SOCIAL STUDIES WEBINAR

Promoting Student-Led Learning

WANT TO DIVE DEEPER INTO STUDENT-LED LEARNING?

LEARN MORE
In inquiry-based social studies, students are prompted to take informed action, defined as a purposeful, public response to a challenge raised during an investigation. To better understand informed action, it might be helpful to break that definition down into its parts.

- Informed action is *purposeful* because students take time to propose, design, and iterate on their ideas.
- Informed action is *public* because students are not taking action for themselves (or just to show their teacher what they know), but instead, to have an impact beyond the walls of their classroom.
- Finally, informed action is a *response* because students are taking an action that is rooted in what they learned during their investigation.

If students are only informed during a social studies investigation, they might pursue an inquiry question but only be challenged to show their understanding to their teacher on a test. And if students only take action, then their challenge might be limited to participating in an activity that's vaguely related to their learning.
It’s not that there’s no purpose for a test, stand-alone project, or activity; during an inquiry-based social studies investigation, they can serve a valuable purpose to assess learning, engage students, and check for understanding. But these can’t be the purpose of student learning in social studies.

When an inquiry promotes informed action, however, the point becomes clear and resonates with students. They identify a challenge that is informed by learning and addresses a real-world problem – one that matters to their community and connects to their lived experience. Their audience is outside the classroom as well, whether it’s students in a different grade or outside their school building. While they may receive a grade, the grade isn’t the point of their action. Students are trying to have an authentic impact on the world.

**EDUCATOR REFLECTIONS**

Students in Jenny Hutzelman’s Ohio second-grade classroom beamed with pride as they gathered around the community garden they had created as an informed action project. They had worked for weeks investigating economic and civic principles during their unit, distinguishing between needs and wants, both as individuals and as members of a school community.

“We were in the first months of the pandemic,” Hutzelman shared, “and students identified the need for a place outside to be healthy and safe.” Students worked to create and deliver presentations to their principal and PTO – and after approval and construction, they were able to stand in front of the culmination of their work.

According to Hutzelman, it was an experience they will never forget: “They learned that just because they’re in second grade doesn’t mean they can’t make a difference, make things better.”
WHAT TO LOOK FOR

CURRICULUM

☐ Opportunities to solve a real-world problem in response to the compelling question are integrated into units of study.

☐ Students are prompted to identify challenges and opportunities in their local community to take action related to their key learnings.

☐ Students are guided to identify their audience, desired impact, and the goals they will work toward in the informed action process.

☐ Lessons integrate a multi-step design process into units of study (brainstorm, prototype, give and receive feedback, revise, reflect, etc.).

CLASSROOM

☐ Students reflect upon learnings and identify key ideas and concepts to integrate into their informed action project.

☐ Students are actively engaged in the planning of their informed action project, including identifying the audience, desired impact, and goals.

☐ Students engage in brainstorming, prototyping, feedback, and revision as part of creating their informed action project.

☐ Student-generated artifacts related to planning and implementing informed action (purpose statements, goals, reflections, etc.) are visible and accessible to students.

INQUIRY IN SOCIAL STUDIES WEBINAR

Taking Informed Action

WANT TO DIVE DEEPER INTO INFORMED ACTION?

LEARN MORE
REFERENCES


