

# The C3 Framework: One Year Later

On September 17, 2013 (Constitution Day), the C3 Framework was released under the title *The College, Career and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History*. The C3 Project Director and lead writer was NCSS member Kathy Swan, who is associate professor of social studies education at the University of Kentucky. Kathy evaluated the progress of the C3 Framework in its first year in a recent e-mail interview with *Social Education*.



## One year later, what are the prospects of the C3 Framework being adopted nationwide?

Adoption has always been a tricky word with the C3 Framework. Unlike the Common Core and the Next Generation Science Standards, the C3 document was never intended to be adopted, but instead integrated into existing standards documents or used as a foundation for new standards. I think we should speak the language of local “implementation,” not “adoption.”

The C3 Framework honors local contexts and allows states to determine the appropriate content to be taught at each grade level. It’s not your grandmother’s Common Core! As long as there is a commitment to the key tenets of the document, including inquiry, disciplinary literacy, student agency, and civic engagement, I think standards and implementation could vary from state to state.

I have always seen the C3 movement as one that is grassroots and organic. I often say it’s like the slow food movement and should be driven by local needs. It should not be a top-down, one-size-fits-all effort. It is important that we emphasize the notion of student agency throughout the document—agency around the questions that are asked, agency around the ways in which evidence-based arguments are communicated, and agency around action.

The ethos of the document, and quite frankly of social studies in general, is around individuals or collections of

individuals making a difference. To me, the implementation of C3 should honor these foundations.



Kathy Swan

We have seen incredible progress on the C3 Framework in different states. A number of states (e.g., New York) have officially hard-wired the C3 into current standards documents through the Inquiry Arc and in ways that should inform how content standards are created and taught. Other states (e.g., Connecticut, Kentucky) have either begun or are about to begin the process of writing new standards and are using the C3 Framework in doing so.

## What have been the most positive developments of the last year for the C3 Framework?

Well, I think there are many. In addition

to the way in which the C3 Framework is making its way into official state policy documents, we see many other impressive developments that use C3 as a framework rather than a set of standards. For example, districts like Rockwood in St. Louis, Missouri, Clark County in Nevada, the District of Columbia, and others are working to develop curriculum that embraces the Inquiry Arc of the C3 Framework. We see this kind of work percolating throughout the country through C3 professional development that focuses on the use of inquiry and innovative assessments.

Curricular organizations are also joining in. John Lee and I collaborated with 15 curricular partners this year to edit the upcoming NCSS Bulletin, *Teaching the C3 Framework: A Guide to Inquiry Based Instruction*. We worked individually with these organizations to create lessons that incorporated the entirety of the Inquiry Arc in one to five days worth of instruction. We are pleased that the book will be a resource for teachers, but equally pleased that these organizations have embraced C3 as a key resource for their educational outreach.

For example, this fall, the Smithsonian National American History Museum (NAMH) is offering a Massive Online Open Course (MOOC) for secondary social studies teachers that features C3 and object-based instruction at the museum. This work has mushroomed into other requests by our curriculum partners (e.g., Federal Reserve, Library

of Congress, Ford's Theater, National Museum of the American Indian) who are developing new educational materials that feature the Framework.

We also see individual teachers taking informed action. Check out C3 Teachers ([c3teachers.org](http://c3teachers.org)) and hear from master teachers as they wrestle with the big ideas and instructional implications of the C3 Framework. In collaboration with NCSS, this online community of approximately 500 teachers from around the country are sharing their instructional experiences as they tinker with the dimensions of the Inquiry Arc. I encourage the readers of *Social Education* to sign up—it's both free and inspiring—and puts the locus of educational reform where it should be, in the hands of teachers.

Lastly, but definitely not least, the state of New York has recently stepped into the C3 limelight with a commitment to building a toolkit of instructional resources that would fuse the C3 Inquiry Arc with the newly published New York Social Studies Framework. The most exciting part of this project is that this toolkit will be published in July 2015 with a creative commons license and thus will be available for other states to use or modify according to their own state standards. So, stay tuned!

### **What do you think are the biggest problems facing the implementation of C3?**

One of the biggest challenges that we face in C3 implementation is the perennial debate over content and skills. In the C3 Framework, we left the selection of curricular content up to states but stated very clearly that this content is essential for animating the Inquiry Arc. Without content, what would we inquire about?

The greatest challenge that states are currently facing, then, is to what degree should states articulate curricular content and how should they approach curricular content in standards? For example, at what point does standards writing become curriculum writing with a fully

articulated scope and sequence? What responsibility should districts and teachers hold in fleshing out this content?

In states where there is local control of content, we see teachers struggling with issues that are more pedagogical in nature. For example, how much content should be "pre-loaded" before approaching an inquiry? Or said differently, does content become fully developed within the inquiry or should there be some direct teaching before the inquiry begins? These are good questions and ones that teachers struggled with long before C3. I would argue that the Dimensions have an intentional sequence, but should not be approached too rigidly.

### **What is an obstacle for teachers implementing the C3?**

I think many educators are scared to get it wrong. I get weekly emails and calls asking for advice on how to use the C3 Framework in ways that perhaps went unstated in the document. I am always encouraged by these conversations, as our community wants to get inquiry right. I am often saying that, while I really love the C3, it was intended to guide what students should know and be able to do. As a result, although there are instructional implications in the C3, very little is said about how teachers might support students within an inquiry.

So, for example, should teachers create compelling questions? Absolutely! It would be too challenging to develop a curricular scope and sequence without some direction and modeling. The key is to offer students an opportunity to practice their own questioning skills. Another issue that has come up is whether it is all right to abridge the Inquiry Arc? Again, absolutely! Of course, I think students should practice the process of inquiry from questioning to communicating conclusions as often as possible, but it may be that a unit allows for experiences with only Dimension 2 and 3.

In the end, the Inquiry Arc is a model whose tires can be kicked a bit by teach-

ers. I think it's an excellent model, but I don't think teachers should fear innovating around it, or get paralyzed if they think they are breaking a C3 rule or covenant. We should be a community that is open to interpretation, context, and innovation and I encourage teachers and district leaders to be flexible in interpreting the C3.

My C3 co-authors, S.G. Grant and John Lee, and I wrote a short document called the "C3 Instructional Shifts" as a way for teachers to begin thinking about how they might best support students within a C3 inquiry ([www.c3teachers.org/c3shifts/](http://www.c3teachers.org/c3shifts/))

### **What kind of teacher-student relationship is implied by C3?**

One of the C3 writers, S.G. Grant, wrote about this in *Social Education* last year soon after the C3 Framework was published:

Trust matters. The Inquiry Arc reflects a level of trust between teachers and students that is not part of the traditional pattern of schooling. Good teachers know that students will blunder sometimes as they embrace the greater responsibilities an inquiry approach demands, but they also know that students will not become the kind of life-long learners that we desire if they are not trusted to take an active role in their education.\*

I can't improve on that explanation—trust matters and it's at the very heart of the C3 teacher-student relationship.

### **How do you think C3 can change social studies classrooms?**

I want to start by saying that we did not invent inquiry or the other important components within the C3 document. What we did do is package them in a way that we hope structures and enriches students' social studies experience. C3

\*S.G. Grant, "From Inquiry Arc to Instructional Practice: The Potential of the C3 Framework," *Social Education* 77, no. 6, (November–December): 2013, 351.

offers a model for practicing the elements of inquiry alongside civic participation. In this way, I think it is a road map for doing all the things we believe are fundamental tenets of social studies.

Ultimately, the C3 Framework is not going to change anything unless teachers want to change classroom pedagogies that are not inquiry-based. Teachers need to be comfortable with any such change. I like to think of teachers moving along a professional journey and constantly improving. We should encourage teachers to be reflective about their own practice and to begin experimenting with the C3 where they see areas for growth. For example, while I helped write the C3 Framework, I do not think I ever had students create a compelling question. I wrote them; I asked students to answer them. But, I never created enough instructional space for students' own questions to drive their inquiries. Doing so is a shift for me and I have begun the uncomfortable exercise of modifying my own instructional practice. Teachers get beaten up from all sides these days, and I would hate to think of the C3 Framework being used as a punishing ideal.

**If a state developed new standards, or accomplished an overhaul of existing standards just before the C3 Framework was published, and it does not want to go through the process again, what can supervisors and teachers in that state do to advance C3?**

There are a number of states that are in this very situation: North Carolina, Kansas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, and others. What I have seen many states do when state standards cannot be revised is look to professional learning networks to examine the ways in which the Inquiry Arc could help animate their current standards. Additionally, some states are looking at curriculum models that infuse the C3 Dimensions into the heart of new units or lessons. An additional area is teacher evaluation. Many states are looking at alternative ways to evaluate teachers using new metrics and

student growth models. I have seen social studies departments and districts use the C3 indicators as targets for measuring student growth over time.

In the end, the C3 movement is about flexible implementation that meets the needs of states and their capacity for reform. For supervisors and teachers, I would look to the ways in which the C3 Framework could inform professional learning communities, curriculum development, teacher education, and, of course, assessment. There is no prescription for this—only encouragement to follow their instincts and look to concrete ways in which they could start a dialogue. A first step would be mirroring the C3 project and pulling together a local community that could begin brainstorming approaches. The C3 effort benefitted greatly from the wide range of expertise and perspectives. For example, we pulled together academics, teachers, state department social studies consultants, professional organization leaders, and others for a national conversation around college, career, and civic readiness. I would recommend creating a similar community that would focus on C3 implementation at the state or local level.

**Does implementation of the C3 Framework require an overhaul of existing social studies assessments?**

The short answer is yes. Current assessments, particularly high-stakes assessments, lack the architecture to measure the kinds of skills and conceptual knowledge that the C3 Framework states are vital for college and career readiness.

Some individuals and organizations are already generating new thinking about assessment. For example, Stanford's *Beyond the Bubble* project is beginning to make inroads using classroom-based performance assessments called History Assessments of Thinking or HATs. Other scholars are also working in the assessment space. For example, Bruce VanSledright just published a book last year, titled *Assessing*

*Historical Thinking and Understanding: Innovative Designs for New Standards*. And the College Board is also working to redesign many of its content exams to align them to new standards and ways of thinking about the disciplines.

Social studies educators should also follow the efforts of two assessment consortia, in which groups of states are working together to develop assessments—the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), and Smarter Balanced, and the degree to which they will create literacy performance assessments that are valid and scaled. Their success or failure to do so will greatly inform how states proceed with social studies. If the aims of C3 are to be realized, states will need to make room for more authentic assessments. Some states are already moving in this direction. For example, Virginia just recently announced that in an effort to reduce testing load on students at the end of year, it would cut the number of tests in half by removing social studies and science tests. The glass half full on this proposal is that there may be an opportunity to move social studies in the direction of the C3 Inquiry Arc and have students demonstrate competency by working proficiently through inquiry and, if we are really lucky, practicing informed action.

**The C3 Framework emphasizes preparation for civic life. It is easy to pay lip service to this ideal. What more should schools be doing to put it into practice, and what can individual teachers in schools do to advance this objective?**

There is a danger of losing the civic purposes that ground our academic inquiries. One of the victories of the C3 Framework has been the inclusion of Dimension 4—preparing students for collaborative conversations and for taking informed action. I think we need to demystify taking informed action and

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the often-complex registration system.

Third, students should experience civil and well-informed discussions of the kinds of issues that are debated in campaigns. These issues must be current (not only historical), and they will often be controversial—because politics is what we use to address controversies. Not every topic that arises in a social studies classroom must be a hot-button, divisive issue; yet we cannot avoid issues just because they divide. Students must learn how to think about controversies and exchange ideas with people who disagree. As Diana Hess pointed out in this journal in 2004, good discussions involve questions for which there is no single right answer, and for which both the teacher and the students have prepared carefully in advance. There is also evidence that suggests that students who participate in discussions in school are more likely to participate in civic activities after they leave high school.<sup>17</sup>

One of the 12th grade C3 standards (D4.6.9-12) is to “Use disciplinary and interdisciplinary lenses to understand the characteristics and causes of local, regional, and global problems.”<sup>18</sup> In fact, inquiring and deliberating about public problems is woven through the whole “arc” of the standards, which takes students from “developing questions and planning inquiries” to “communicating conclusions and taking informed action.” Our analysis of the 2012 survey data confirms what many previous studies have also found: inquiring about, studying, and discussing controversial current issues increases students’ understanding of politics and their motivations to vote. As the 2014 election approaches—and indeed, in every semester—it is vital to include politics and voting in social studies instruction. 🌍

#### Notes

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create a continuum of experiences that either blur the lines between communicating conclusions and action or make action much more doable than many teachers currently see. In the instructional shifts document I mentioned, we talk about teachers providing tangible spaces for action. My hope is that as curriculum is developed, we do not lose this incredible opportunity to define action within and as a result of academic inquiry.

There are many curricular organizations that are leading the way in defining and illustrating action within the social studies. For example, Mikva Challenge has been working with Chicago youth to mobilize them as meaningful actors in the political process. Other organizations like National History Day and C-Span have created public spaces for students to communicate their conclusions from academic inquiries in ways that are in keeping with Dimension 4 of the C3. Still other efforts, like the Speak Truth to Power video competition sponsored by the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights, provide a focus for middle and high students to become engaged in human rights issues through video production.

In an article in last year’s November-December issue of this journal, Meira Levinson and Peter Levine presented many ways of taking informed action to engage students in civic life.\*\* It would be fantastic to read about how teachers are interpreting their ideas and preparing their students to take informed civic action. 🌍

\*\*Meira Levinson and Peter Levine, “Taking Informed Action to Engage Students in Civic Life,” *Social Education* 77, no. 6, (November-December 2013): 339-341.

The NCSS book *Social Studies for the Next Generation* includes the published hard copy of the C3 Framework plus important explanatory chapters that introduce the C3 Framework and the Inquiry Arc, explain the links between C3 and the Common Core Standards and national social studies standards, and discuss approaches to assessments. It can be ordered at [www.socialstudies.org/C3](http://www.socialstudies.org/C3).