Improving on Past Practice: Embracing a New Direction in Secondary Social Studies Teaching and Learning

Régine Randall and Joseph Marangell
Southern Connecticut State University and East Haven Public Schools

Mrs. PONTE WAS FACING A DILEMMA. Knowing that her students rarely read the text and did even less written homework, Mrs. Ponte felt compelled to remove these obstacles to content learning through her classroom instruction. She carefully prepared lectures that included summaries of what was in the textbook (the one students didn't read) and delivered these lectures verbatim every day. Mrs. Ponte tried to make the information interesting with anecdotes and analogies. Initially, students were only required to take notes based on what she said and then recall this information on unit tests that were taken directly from the teachers' guide in the textbook. It was a workable system that could be repeated unit after unit, month after month, year after year. Over time, however, Mrs. Ponte began to notice that the rapid expansion of technology in schools seemed to cause her twenty-first-century students to grow increasingly restless with her twentieth-century techniques and use of traditional classroom materials; they even stopped taking notes on her presentations. What had seemed "student proof" now led to issues of classroom management, apathy, and declining achievement. Could it be that her students wanted something more, something different, to happen in the classroom? Mrs. Ponte wanted the same thing.

Standards and the C3 Framework

With the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), many schools faced significant challenges when updating curricula in a wide range of academic areas to reflect literacy-based instructional shifts specific to college and career readiness.[1] One of these shifts reintroduced the idea that all teachers were instrumental in developing the speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills of students through content area instruction.[2] While most disciplines were already aligned with standards developed by their professional organizations (e.g., NCTE, NSTA, NCTM, NCSS), teachers in the social studies were faced with a dual task.   First, teachers and instructional leaders were rewriting curriculum so that it aligned with the Common Core State Standards for Literacy in History, Science, and Technical Subjects; second, they were also determining how to integrate elements of the recently released C3 Framework so that K-12 instruction reflected authentic inquiry-based experiences.[3]

The common characteristics of inquiry-based instruction could be described in this way, and can actually fit most—if not all— content areas: (1) questioning becomes a tool for content learning rather than the sole means of content assessment; (2) students are the ones developing at least some of the questions to guide how they construct meaning; (3) as students construct meaning using disciplinary tools, they can also discover new questions that resist definitive answers; (4) the plurality of responses allowed through open-ended questions on a variety of texts and other materials must also position students to engage in the critical thinking necessary to evaluate sources and reach plausible conclusions; and (5) taking informed action is specific to the inquiry conducted and the context in which students learn.[4] The C3 Framework, which is grounded in inquiry-based instruction, provides a blueprint for how teachers can better implement this approach in any area of the social studies disciplines. This article reviews how Mrs. Ponte, an avatar built from our own experiences as well as those of our colleagues, embedded the dimensions of the C3 Inquiry Arc in a high school classroom. To that end, Mrs. Ponte helps us understand what experiences and decisions can lead to the "informed action" that many educators must initiate in their own classrooms.

Setting the Stage for Inquiry

Mrs. Ponte noticed that her students frequently assumed that they understood very broad and complex concepts and issues, although these understandings were often incomplete, flawed, or not based on either evidence or experience. To address this, she wanted to develop a project that would be interesting to students and put them in the primary role of social scientists. Previously, she had selected projects for students and outlined exactly how they would progress through the work. In this case, however, Mrs. Ponte decided to create a single unit, shaped by the inquiry-based shifts of the C3 Framework; and, within that, she offered students broad choice in their topics as well as what materials would help them best understand. Further, knowing that her high school students were already immersed in materials culture (without perhaps the inclination or tools to question the artifacts they found most important to them within their own lives), Mrs. Ponte took a novel approach and chose to work from an anthropological perspective going forward, even though this was a fairly traditional history classroom. She believed that the application of anthropological methods to historical inquiry would provide a relevant entry point and motivate students to continue working on projects that required a great deal of independence and time management. Mrs. Ponte carefully planned opportunities for students to discuss their ongoing research informally with one another. These conversations actually energized students because they had the opportunity to discuss their work without being "critiqued" by an authority—in reality, these conversations did help students better prepare for a summative assessment. Finally, it was her hope that the introduction of this new way of engaging in historical inquiry—at least for her students—would have carryover for all subsequent units.

Mrs. Ponte began by asking students to consider: *How do the practices and products of different groups reveal cultural values?*[5] One of her goals was to help students recognize that culture emerges as much with individuals as it does with a geographic region. In fact, national borders are often quite permeable when a common interest or quality is the defining element of culture, and it is this quality that then creates affinity in a broad group (e.g., footballers).[6] To that end, she posed additional supporting questions that included, but were not limited to:

- What are cultural products?
- What are cultural practices?
- How do groups promote, or make public, their cultures?
- How is culture preserved?
- What conditions bring about change in cultures?[7]

Initiating a unit with questions represented a change in Mrs. Ponte's lesson planning as well as a change in what her students were typically asked to do. As a warm up, Mrs. Ponte introduced this new unit by developing a "carousel walk" activity where teams of students traveled to different stations in the classroom to brainstorm responses to the above supporting questions using "teen culture" as the discussion topic.[8] Mrs. Ponte anticipated that this change in routine might cause students difficulty when generating ideas, particularly due to the vocabulary within each question. Because of this, Mrs. Ponte had written out responses to each one to serve as a model (e.g., cell phones and iPods were examples of products, texting and sleeping late were examples of practices, posting obsessively to social media was an example of promotion, and graduation pictures in the yearbook were an example of preservation). Mrs. Ponte then reviewed what she had written at each station of the carousel walk using a "think-aloud" protocol often associated with both language arts and content area reading instruction.[9] She hoped her "middle-aged" responses to these questions would provoke students to challenge some of the stereotypical characteristics of teens that she had deliberately included in her answers. Students took the bait, but now she had to reel them in so that energetic exclamation became discourse.

The primary function of the carousel walk in Mrs. Ponte's classroom was to have students record initial responses to a question or a prompt that was posted on chart paper. Students worked in teams as they moved from station to station. One member of the team wrote down ideas related to the question before they moved on. As the activity progressed, teams were encouraged to respond to ideas already recorded. Also, they were encouraged to go back to stations they had already visited to add to or modify their initial thinking. In this way, students had the opportunity to evaluate their own thinking informally as well as that of their peers in real time. While students were moving about the room, Mrs. Ponte also visited each station, adding

in other comments to further probe student thinking. She engaged in spontaneous conversation with students about the comments—regardless of who wrote them—already recorded on the chart paper.

Unlike previous instruction, where she almost always addressed the entire class, this gave Mrs. Ponte the opportunity to talk to students individually or in small groups so that she could help them notice the importance of considering the multiple perspectives immediately before them. Since these conversations were not already "scripted" into a lesson plan, they reflected the type of ongoing exchange that characterizes authentic dialogue. Once all students and Mrs. Ponte had a chance to work at and revisit each station, she reconvened the class so that they could begin a whole-group discussion. The product of this whole-class discussion was a set of main idea statements for each station that reflected salient points as they related to cultural products and practices.[10] Further, by using concrete examples, Mrs. Ponte avoided the confusion that can often result from an abstract definition of historical terms. The examples, themselves, illustrated the definitions of *products*, *practices*, *promotion*, and *preservation*; students then generated and edited actual definitions of these terms in a whole-class informal writing activity. The resulting document became a common class reference that students continued to use throughout the year.

Following the carousel and main idea activities, Mrs. Ponte asked students to consider whether, and to what extent, those main ideas might evolve and change based on independent research of diverse topics. She planned to post students' responses in the physical space of the classroom while also using an electronic platform, such as a wiki, that allows for editing and revision so that students could revisit their thinking on the essential questions and main ideas. Ultimately, students were able to explore the role that products and practices play in the promotion and preservation of culture in class as well as in an online environment. Mrs. Ponte was thrilled with the bell-to-bell engagement of her students, as well as their willingness to continue the conversation outside of class using online tools.

Choosing a Lens

Mrs. Ponte's primary goal in this unit would be for students to understand how the choices, actions, texts/narratives, and even

physical artifacts of a group reflect the values of its members. Analogous to the permeability of boundaries, students would have the opportunity to explore how time and context impact the continuity of a group and its ability to change or preserve its qualities. Since a key disciplinary concept articulated in the C3 Framework is the study of change, continuity, and context throughout all grade levels, Mrs. Ponte chose to frame this unit through that lens. Understanding change, continuity, and context in history is not possible without also having a deep understanding of culture and its impact on decisions at various levels (personal, to community, to national, to global).

Building Knowledge through Investigation

Now that students had some experience with the premise of cultural study through a question scaffold and had selected their own topics of interest (e.g., British graffiti, Fascist Italy in the Interwar Period, Renaissance fashion, Imperialism in the Congo), the next step involved in-depth exploration of a historical period or group based on their own research questions. Students began by identifying iconic artifacts of their chosen cultures—including documents—and examined those artifacts through the lens of change, continuity, and context.[11] Mrs. Ponte realized that her students had little experience collecting materials to support their research that were not print texts or acquired through a generic Google search. She wanted students to understand the plurality in sources so that they could include diverse materials in their research. Also, by having diverse materials, she wanted to support students in developing the skills to recognize the materials' relative value and contribution to the overall research process. Examples included interviews, site visits, and primary and secondary source materials (such as documentaries and popular films, art and architecture, textiles, and even statistical data). Having diverse sources also gives students authentic practice in corroborating evidence to strengthen their claims.

Although a primary feature of this project is self-direction, Mrs. Ponte wanted to be sure to create a scaffold to help students organize and process pertinent information specific to their topics. She accomplished this by providing a calendar of formative checkpoints (see **Figure 1**).

Activity	Due Date
Formative Checkpoint #1 Requirements: • Topic selection (in the form of a research question) • At least two sources (cited correctly) • Note card(s) for each source	February 10
Formative Checkpoint #2 Requirements: • At least four sources (cited correctly) • Note card(s) for each source	February 17
Formative Checkpoint #3 Requirements: • At least six sources (cited correctly) • Note card(s) for each source	February 24
Formative Checkpoint #4 Requirement: • Preliminary research outline	March 1

Figure 1: Assessment of Formative Checkpoints

Students then worked independently to locate as many resources as they initially felt would help them complete the project. Mrs. Ponte asked them keep a log of their work in a shared document, with their initial reflections as to why they included such sources, so she could remain apprised of their progress and comment upon their source selection through the series of formative checkpoints. Based on her past experiences with students collecting a large number of source materials that only had tangential relevance to the topic, Mrs. Ponte made it clear that there was no prize for the person who collected the most resources. Rather, the goal was to find the most relevant, accurate, useful, and interesting materials for their projects.[12] To assess this, Mrs. Ponte asked students to informally quantify the extent to which they thought each source could contribute directly to topics identified in their preliminary outlines; literally, how much evidence students planned to cite in their papers (e.g., direct quotations, statistics, graphics, paraphrased information, etc.) from each source.

After students completed their initial research and preliminary outlines, Mrs. Ponte then explained and demonstrated how these

sources should be evaluated more formally through an annotated bibliography. She was hoping to replicate one of the authentic processes that is used in research, where historians discover new material to investigate because it is described in other works. In their annotated bibliographies, students first identified and described each source. As appropriate, they went on to summarize the main ideas of each one and linked the essential content to one of the project's guiding questions. Students were quick to notice that certain cultural products also reflected what that culture promoted, made public, and preserved. Mrs. Ponte was equally surprised and impressed by her students' willingness to go beyond the requirements of answering the required questions in order to develop additional questions that they then also investigated. For instance, one student who was studying imperialism in the Congo wondered whether environmental degradation and the exploitation of resources could ever be overcome when an indigenous population has been made vulnerable by colonial practices. Another student questioned why such distinct regional differences could be observed in cuisine in Italy when only one culinary style or even menu dominates what is available in other parts of the world. Such questions were unique to these individual students' topics, but clearly had relevance to the larger class project. More importantly, it was their systematic investigation of primary and secondary sources that helped students supplement their initial questions. These supporting questions often led to additional entries in students' research logs; again, this experience led to an authentic discussion of topics for further research, which is often the last paragraph in articles published by professional journals. As varied as students are, so too were the quality and detail produced by students in their notes. As she did with the initial formative checkpoints, Mrs. Ponte continued to use a rubric to provide students with feedback on their notes (see **Figure 2**). Indicators from this formative rubric would be revisited in the rubric for the final project.

Managing the Research Process
through Differentiated Note-Taking

Regarding the categories of annotation and note cards, Mrs. Ponte found that students still had some difficulty understanding what represented "sophisticated" analysis as well as "comprehensive"

	Exemplary	Proficient	Developing	Beginning
Bibliography Entries	• You have at least 2 sources within your bibliography AND • Sources are cited correctly	• You have at least 2 sources within your bibliography AND • Sources are cited correctly, but may contain minor errors	• You have at least 1 source within your bibliography AND • Sources contain several formatting errors	• You do not have any sources within your bibliography AND/OR • Sources are formatted incorrectly
__ / 10	10 9	8 7	6 5	4 3 2 1 0
Note Cards	• You have at least 1 note card for each source AND • All note cards are thorough and reflect sophisticated analysis of the topic	• You have at least 1 note card for each source AND • Note cards include sufficient evidence and reflect adequate analysis of the topic	• You do not have a note card for each source AND • Note cards include limited evidence and reflect limited analysis of the topic	• You do not have any note cards for sources AND/OR • Note cards include inaccurate evidence or irrelevant analysis
__ / 10	10 9	8 7	6 5	4 3 2 1 0
Annotations	• Annotations are both fully comprehensive and accurate	• Annotations are both sufficient and accurate	• You have only one annotation AND/OR • Annotations are lacking specificity or accuracy	• You do not have any annotations AND/OR • Annotations are completely inaccurate or irrelevant
__ / 10	10 9	8 7	6 5	4 3 2 1 0

Figure 2: Sample Formative Checkpoint Rubric

use of evidence in their notes and annotations. Reminding students of the work done earlier in class as a group with the main idea statements, she implemented a second approach that asked students to consider how ideas are related by refocusing their attention on the specific language of their sources. Her goal was to help students

take compact, "vocabulary-dense" text and allow them to parse out concepts in magnet summaries. In this approach, students identify a key term or phrase that is central to their research. Next, they choose three to five additional terms that are relevant to the first. Finally, they write a single statement (or set of short sentences) that identifies the relationship between the terms in a way that either defines it or offers analysis of the event, issue, topic, etc.[13] For students who needed a scaffold prior to successfully using magnet summaries, Mrs. Ponte introduced sentence stems to help them organize and express their thoughts. These included general statements to focus the analysis of their sources (e.g. "This text is mostly about…"; "This issue is controversial because…"; "A different way to look at this issue is…"; "This is most important to…"; "What I still don't understand is…"; "This issue mostly affects…"; etc.). For students who required even more support prior to writing, Mrs. Ponte created a simple "herringbone organizer" that allowed students to collect information related to who, what, when, where, and how, and then use this information not only to articulate a main idea, but also to convey its relative importance to their research questions.[14] Even though students might be working with many sources, the use of magnet summaries and these other scaffolds facilitated accurate paraphrasing and precise use of language, both of which are central to the research process.

Mrs. Ponte recognized that students thoroughly immersed in their own research could still benefit from an opportunity to collaborate with classmates. One way she accomplished this was to set up a peer-editing schedule, where students reviewed their classmates' research notes in order to provide feedback and offer additional insights. Yet, ever cognizant of limited time, it was not necessary for this type of activity to occur during class. Mrs. Ponte asked each student to post an excerpt from one of his or her sources along with their magnet summaries on Google Classroom. While any student was allowed to "weigh in" with his or her thoughts on the work of another, Mrs. Ponte required that each student comment on at least two different posts. In fact, she actually assigned students with partners to ensure that everyone received feedback. In this way, Mrs. Ponte was also building a culture of collaborative inquiry, which is different from the single-reader experience (the teacher) to which most students are accustomed.

Learning from Each Other

After Mrs. Ponte reviewed the bibliographies, her students continued to add to and refine their research over the next several months. This represented an important shift in her instructional assessment practices. Rather than closing this unit with a forty-five-minute test, Mrs. Ponte created a calendar that would allow students to continue with their research and receive formative feedback while she moved onto other topics in the curriculum. Each new unit gave her an opportunity to experiment with other interactive and inquiry-based instructional strategies.

By the last month of school, when teachers and students are often "done" regardless of when the final school day falls, Mrs. Ponte was able to keep her students engaged by resurrecting this project and giving students uninterrupted time to consolidate and synthesize their findings using a variety of formats. These included formal papers paired with presentation media such as Glogster, research posters, and iMovie.[15] She even allowed students to propose their own formats. Regardless of the topic and choice of format, however, all student work was evaluated using a common rubric that detailed what information needed to be included, as well as standards for quality. While students were familiar with the rubric from formative checkpoints throughout the year, they were held to a higher standard with the final project because it reflected the culmination of an extensive body of work prepared over the last several months. The students needed to demonstrate clearly how ideas and evidence taken from a broad array of sources corroborated. In turn, this close reading and analysis of sources led them to an original, contextualized interpretation of the information necessary to answer their research questions.[16] Without the time and scaffolds built into the project, students would have had insufficient support to consider and refine their work. A final class activity to celebrate students' accomplishments, as well as—perhaps—their first truly authentic research experience in Mrs. Ponte's class, was a "gallery walk" in which students traveled to various exhibits to view and discuss the work and selected artifacts of their peers.[17]

While this project did not directly lead to all students taking informed action outside of the classroom, it raised their awareness of how culture is shaped and perceived. Students' skills showed

consistent growth in locating and accessing relevant evidence, summarizing information, interpreting and evaluating materials, and writing in various formats. Mrs. Ponte encouraged her students to apply their work through participation in civic and multicultural activities sponsored by the school and community. Beyond social studies learning, students also left this project with improved ability to conduct research, review and critique materials, summarize work in progress, write extended discussions, and share conclusions with their classmates and, possibly, larger audiences. Of no small significance was Mrs. Ponte's realization that the audience for student work should not be the teacher alone acting as a single reader.

Final Thoughts

Mrs. Ponte learned as much as her students did about culture. She also learned the value of taking the chance to incorporate a more constructivist approach to the instruction in her class. With this well-planned and carefully organized project, Mrs. Ponte allowed students more autonomy than she had at any other point in her career. Within the scope of this project, students were reading and studying more because their research was almost entirely self-directed, and their success with the project was dependent on their interaction with the sources. Mrs. Ponte was satisfied with her students' work. She observed that their growth in using disciplinary tools seemed to take them closer to reaching college and career readiness. Mrs. Ponte was also satisfied that her own willingness to take a risk resulted in greater feelings of personal efficacy and professional rejuvenation. By rethinking the instructional practices that had characterized her classroom, she now gave her students a greater voice in their learning—a decision that also required them to demonstrate greater responsibility and a higher level of commitment to the work they undertook in her class.

Notes

1.   National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* (Washington, D.C.: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010).

2.   Achieve the Core, "The Common Core Shifts at a Glance," available as a PDF download at <http://achievethecore.org/file/260>.

3.   National Council for the Social Studies, *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* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013).

4.   Kylene Beers and Robert E. Probst, *Notice and Note: Strategies for Close Reading* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2013).

5.   Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins, *Essential Questions: Opening Doors to Student Understanding* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2013).

6.   James Paul Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, second ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Trade, 2007).

7.   Régine Randall and Joseph Marangell, "Who ARE These People? Facilitating Cultural Understanding through Historical Inquiry" (poster session presented at the National Council for the Social Studies Annual Conference, St. Louis, MO, November 22, 2013).

8.   Cathy Allen Simon, "Brainstorming and Reviewing Using the Carousel Strategy," ReadWriteThink, <http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/brainstorming-reviewing-using-carousel-30630.html>.

9.   Beth Davey, "Think Aloud: Modeling the Cognitive Processes of Reading Comprehension," *Journal of Reading* 27, no. 1 (October 1983): 44-47.

10.   Cris Tovani, *So What Do They Really Know?: Assessment That Informs Teaching and Learning* (Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers, 2011).

11.   Kate Pahl and Jennifer Rowsell, *Artifactual Literacies: Every Object Tells a Story*, Language and Literacy Series (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010).

12.   M. Anne Britt and Cindy Aglinskas, "Improving Students' Ability to Identify and Use Source Information," *Cognition and Instruction* 20, no. 4 (2002): 485-522.

13.   Doug Buehl, "Magnet Summaries," in *Classroom Strategies for Interactive Learning*, third ed. (Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2009), 111-114.

14.   Janice Pilgreen, "Teaching the Language of School to Secondary English Learners," in *Adolescent Literacy Instruction: Policies and Promising Practices*, ed. Jill Lewis and Gary Moorman (Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2007), 238-262.

15.   Régine Randall and Joseph Marangell, "History RE-Presented: Moving toward Empathy with Media-Savvy Students" (poster session presented at the National Council for the Social Studies Annual Conference, Seattle, WA, November 16, 2012).

16.   Stanford History Education Group, "Reading Like a Historian," <http://sheg.stanford.edu/rlh>.

17.   Facing History and Ourselves, "Gallery Walk Teaching Strategy," <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/gallery-walk>.