What is a community?: A first grade civics lesson plan utilizing inquiry-based instruction.

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One of the most widely accepted goals of social studies education is to produce knowledgeable and caring citizens. It is, therefore, imperative that students have the opportunity to participate in public issues and have a meaningful voice within their community. Students must learn how to gather information, solve problems, and make civic decisions (Saxe, 1997). Thus, teachers should encourage their students to create their own questions, cultivate investigative strategies, formulate theories, and apply new concepts to their own lives in a variety of methods (Fitzsimmons & Goldhaber, 1997). Inquiry-based instruction is a pedagogical strategy that places the teacher in the role of a facilitator where students are pushed to think critically and construct meaningful knowledge.

Take a minute and reflect on your daily pedagogical routines. What kinds of activities or strategies do you implement? Are you engaging your students in meaningful tasks that employ higher order thinking skills? It is often a misconception that young children cannot learn at higher cognitive levels but in basic or fundamental levels. Fundamental approaches to learning are what educators may view as lower level thinking, recalling facts, and the memorization of concepts. Thus, an education becomes an "act of depositing" where the student passively adapts to a world and "to the fragmented or distorted view of reality deposited in them" (Freire, 1970, p.73). VanSledright (2002) finds that "students rarely get opportunities in school to practice history by systematically investigating evidence trails, reading primary source documents, doing extensive research, and drawing their own conclusions for interpretations and arguments they generate for consideration among their peers" (p. 133).

It is also important to note that we no longer live in a simple agrarian or industrial society where learning should be rote memorization. Conversely, we live in a complex, globalized and ever-changing society where learning should consist of innovative, technological, multifaceted, authentic, and rigorous processes. The convolution of preparing students for the 21st century can be overwhelming for many elementary teachers due to the emphasis of standardized testing, lack of necessary resources for each classroom, pedagogical time constraints, and so forth. In terms of social studies instruction at the elementary level, a popular notion is that it will be taught "if it can be fit in" (Jones, Pang & Rodriguez, 2001). These barriers can prevent the implementation of exciting and 21st century teaching and learning methods into the elementary classroom. Nevertheless, with common core standards approaching, a large number of state’s curricula, the emphasis of end-of-course exams for middle school and high school grades, near future distance learning mandates for all school districts, and the superfluous flow of standardized tests meandering around schools today; it is important that teachers at all levels to find pedagogical
strategies that promote higher order thinking and 21st century skill acquisition. Throughout this article, we define inquiry-based instruction, provide practical steps to executing this pedagogical strategy, and describe one teacher's experience at enacting an inquiry-based curriculum in an elementary classroom.

How does an elementary social studies teacher execute higher order thinking strategies?

According to King, Goodson, and Rohani (2012), “Higher order thinking skills include critical, logical, reflective, metacognitive, and creative thinking. They are activated when individuals encounter unfamiliar problems, uncertainties, questions, or dilemmas” (p. 1). There are a myriad of methods to employ when engaging students in higher order thinking processes but (we argue) the best place to begin is through inquiry-based techniques. In inquiry-based instruction, the teacher asks specific questions that engender higher order thinking skills, such as, analysis, inference, synthesis, and evaluation.

Essentially, the role of the teacher transitions from presenter to facilitator and students change from passive beneficiaries of content to active contributors in the construction of meaningful knowledge (Kelly, 1999). Thus, teachers should encourage their students to create their own questions, cultivate investigative strategies, formulate theories, and apply new concepts to their own lives in a variety of methods (Fitzsimmons & Goldhaber, 1997). Many teachers may find that inquiry based teaching increases student engagement, motivation, participation, and content comprehension (Rossman, 1993). Inquiry-based instruction is important not only for the acquisition of 21st century skills but for the field of social studies. Moreover, teachers who employ culturally relevant teaching within the elementary classroom will have much success in terms of student learning gains as this method assists students when connecting prior knowledge with new information (Jones et al., 2001).

Why should social studies teachers utilize inquiry based instruction?

Inquiry-based learning is a crucial practice for students to grasp and the earlier they are exposed to this style of learning, the better the educational results will be in regard to cognitive development. For instance, Shimoda and Frederiksens (1999) found that students who take part in inquiry-based learning outperform those students in traditional classrooms on standardized assessments.

Furthermore, one of the most widely accepted goals of social studies education is to produce knowledgeable and caring citizens. According to Jones and colleagues (2001), social studies “nurture cognitive, emotional, and social development in students. It is an interdisciplinary subject composed of the social sciences and humanities for the purpose of teaching civic competences” (p. 35). Therefore, students are expected to participate in public issues and have a meaningful voice in their community. Students must learn how to gather information, solve problems, and make civic decisions based on the public good (Saxe, 1997). But where and when should the development of this inquiry mindset commence? We propose that it should begin at the elementary level because many students are not exposed to problem-solving and decision-making processes at an early age and remain passive learners throughout their K-12 experience.

That learning should be an active and on-going process is not a 21st century discovery or consensus. Several thousands years ago, Aristotle posited that knowledge could not be bestowed to anyone, rather, it must be acquired through discovery or inquiry based methodologies by the learner. However, a passive learner is instructed to act as a consumer of knowledge rather than a creator and thereby does not find meaning in his/her education. Thus, if we expect our students to gain civic competence in school and effectively participate in democracy at some point in their
future, inquiry based instruction may be the paramount teaching strategy to utilize when encouraging the development of this type of civic mindset.

According to Levistik and Barton (1994), higher order thinking instructional practices at the elementary level are effective when teaching abstract and challenging concepts to young students. Levistik and Barton recommended that an elementary teacher should connect the concepts (historical information) to the children’s lives to contextualize the information and utilize primary sources like pictures where multiple interpretations are ubiquitous. Yang (2009) highlighted a myriad of benefits to inquiry based teaching, such as, “it cultivates students to participate actively in the fabrication of meaning, as expert historians do, and adopt an inquiring habit of mind into how history is made” (p. 238).

Barton (2001) developed a list of criteria for authentic social studies instruction that aims for the construction of order thinking skills:

- Formulate historical questions or problems;
- Gather information from a variety of sources;
- Evaluate the authenticity and reliability of sources;
- Compare conflicting accounts;
- Take the perspective of people in the past; and
- Connect disparate pieces of information into coherent explanations. (p. 278)

For younger students at the elementary level, Barton advises teachers to utilize engaging materials and ask a variety of questions to probe students’ historical and higher order thinking skills. Overtime, with practice and proper teacher guidance, young students will begin to ask their own questions, notice historical patterns or gaps in knowledge, and discover/reach their own conclusions. Barton’s higher order thinking practices as noted above, parallel with best practices in inquiry based teaching.

**How can a social studies teacher employ inquiry based instruction in their classroom?**

Inquiry-based instruction is a flexible teaching method that encompasses a few steps. We will describe a method that is not difficult to utilize in this next section while elucidating a first grade civics lesson plan. To begin, teachers should ask five general types of questions to stimulate reflection, problem-solving, and decision making skills about a specific topic from their curriculum. These five types of questions include definitional, evidential, policy, value, and speculative. These questions can push students engage in effective historical thinking where learners “work with various forms of evidence, deal with issues of interpretation, ask and adjudicate questions about the relative significance of events and the nature of historical agency, and cultivate and use thoughtful, context-sensitive imagination to fill in gaps in evidence trails when they arise” (VanSledright, 2002, 134).

It is imperative for teachers to construct lesson plans that are meaningful and personable to their students in order to maintain high engagement, comprehension, and retention levels (Brophy, 1990). A teacher may use images, quotes, maps, various primary sources, current events, and/or video clips as a basis for a specific problem or inquiry in their lesson plans (Stonbaugh, Tassel, Day, & Blankenship, 2011). The variety of materials selected should offer diverse perspectives and opportunities for multiple interpretations as the usage of materials that only offer one viewpoint is a passive style of teaching and learning (Yang, 2009).

**Mrs. Flagg’s first grade (inquiry-based) civics lesson plan**
Mrs. Flagg, a first grade teacher in Akron, Ohio, created an authentic, inquiry-based civics lesson. To set the stage, Akron is the fifth-largest city in Ohio and is located in the northeast section of the state. The city has approximately 200,000 residents where the average household salary is around $30,000. Akron was once recognized as the “Rubber Capital” of the world and the birthplace of the Goodyear Tire Company. However, contemporary Akron faces high levels of poverty, a great number of vacant homes and businesses, and an unemployment rate of almost eight percent.

The elementary school where Mrs. Flagg teaches is considered a “Title I” school where 100% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch. Mrs. Flagg said her school has recently been labeled as a “turn around school.” Essentially, the school received a failing grade for several consecutive years and Akron City School district has chosen to implement this chosen four year academic program. A large portion of the program's funding derives from “Race to the Top” and the major focus for Mrs. Flagg’s elementary school is on the development of higher order thinking skills.

Mrs. Flagg’s inquiry based social studies lesson focused on an essential question: What is a community? Her lesson plan aligned with the following NCSS themes: Time, Continuity, and Change (II), People, Places, and Environments (III), and Civic Ideals and Practices (X). She recognized that the “primary purpose of social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world” (NCSS, 1994), and that introducing the concept of community to her first grade students was a powerful way to activate the beginning steps in her students’ lifelong civic journey.

The objective for her lesson was to teach the concept of community and then apply the concept to her students’ personal lives in Akron, Ohio. She utilized culturally relevant teaching strategies to approach this lesson as she helped her students “access culturally relevant prior knowledge and guide them as they built conceptual bridges between their prior knowledge and new knowledge” (Jones et al., 2001, p. 36). Finally, she wanted to challenge her students to think about ways to improve their community as caring and responsible citizens.

Using definitional, evidential, policy, value, and speculative questions as the basis for her lesson, it guided her in the process of evoking higher order thinking processes in her first grade classroom. Moreover, the lesson’s objective was not centered on the memorization of specific or abstract definitions but real world application. Rather, the lesson was centered on an active, student-centered environment where the students could apply their learning to a real world context.

**Definitional and evidential questions**

Definitional questions are asked to illustrate the notion that vocabulary words have a variety of meanings due to particular agendas and a uniform description of a particular vocabulary word may not always be rendered as “correct” or “incorrect”. You may find that time, perspectives, cultures, and location affect the underlying meaning of a particular word. Evidential questions are asked so that students will “dig deeper” and explain why they came to know their answer based on evidence (Ochoa-Becker, 2007). When a teacher asks students evidential questions, it creates a path for students to make connections, draw conclusions based on evidence, and explain or validate how they came to know their answer.

When Mrs. Flagg introduced the lesson, she asked her students, “What is a community?” Numerous students were puzzled and could not offer an answer that revealed proper spatial or higher order thinking processes. Mrs. Flagg displayed a power point presentation full of images and posed a variety of definitional and evidential questions to the whole class for a 20-minute period. This practice coincided with Barton’s (2001) recommendation of elementary teacher’s implementation of historical photographs into the classroom as an authentic method of engaging
students in historical inquiry. As Mrs. Flagg began the presentation, she realized her students had little information on what a community was but she wanted to show that the concept did not have a uniform description. For example, a community is viewed as being much more than a geographic space; it is a cultural space as well.

The community lesson started at the geographic macro-level as Mrs. Flagg displayed images of the solar system, earth, continents, the U.S., the state of Ohio, the city of Akron, and facets of their surrounding community. Mrs. Flagg asked her students a multitude of definitional and evidential questions. Examples included: “What is the difference between a continent and a country? How do you know this? What country and state do we live in? How do you know this?” There were a limited amount of students who could answer these questions but were able to provide an answer because they remembered some social studies concepts from kindergarten or traveled with their parents throughout or outside of Ohio. However, for those students who did not travel or hold prior knowledge/schemas, Mrs. Flagg was able to describe how we know where we live because of geographic coordinates and relative location to physical or cultural sites (e.g.: Lake Erie or the University of Akron).

After Mrs. Flagg’s students grasped the general concept of community as a geographic space, she displayed images to portray the cultural aspect of community. For instance, she displayed images of two different communities; one was an agricultural community and the other was an urban community. She asked evidential questions like, “How are these two communities different and how do you know this?” One student responded that the two communities were different because people lived on farms where their neighbors were far away and people lived in apartments with a lot of neighbors. Another student said the communities are different because people work on farms in picture A (left) and work in buildings in picture B (right).
Mrs. Flagg then showed two photographs of downtown Akron, Ohio but the photographs were more than 150 years apart in history. The students inferred reasons as to how and why Akron, Ohio changed over the years. One student noted that Akron changed because we now have paved roads and not dirt, cars but not buggies, street lights, and more buildings. Mrs. Flagg asked why Akron had more buildings in the new photograph and it was surprising to hear a student say that there are more buildings today because there are more people and they need a place to go to work. During the class discussion, Mrs. Flagg was not a deliverer but a facilitator of knowledge. She did not emphasize the memorization of facts but allowed her students to discover, infer, and construct their own knowledge of “how” and “in what ways” communities are different and change over time. As Seixas (1994) points out, “Students' understanding of historical progress and decline is a critical way in which students orient themselves in time” (p. 93).

Policy, value, and speculative questions

Policy questions are intended to inquire about social problems and value questions are asked to identify the reasons or values that underlie the solutions to social problems. Speculative questions are asked to infer if a social problem or instance could have been handled in a different manner and the effects thereof (Ochoa-Becker, 2007). These questions are imperative for lessons because they push students to identify problems and extract solutions, make civic decisions, and find a personal connection to the content. In the second aspect of the lesson plan, students were instructed to draw their communities on a poster in small groups while depicting what they think should change. Before the students started drawing they were to discuss the following questions: “What geographic and cultural locations make up your community, what are some problems in your community, how can the problems be fixed, and what will happen to Akron if these problems continue?” After a five-to-seven minute conversation in small groups, the students began illustrating their answers onto posters.
During the small-group discussions and drawing activity, Mrs. Flagg walked around the classroom and asked each group the policy, value, and speculative questions. Several of the students’ answers were impressive and cognizant. Popular answers surrounding what geographic and cultural locations were in Akron were things like grocery stores, restaurants, schools, parks, trees, houses, highways, churches, hills, and lakes. In regard to the problems in Akron, one student said she would like to repair the sidewalks and roads because they were bumpy when she rode her bike and saw it as being dangerous to other children in the community. Another student said he wanted to fix up the abandoned houses and replace them with better houses or parks. A few students wanted to give homes to the homeless in their community because they felt a duty to help them in their time of need.

The final portion of the lesson lasted about 10 minutes where the students presented their posters and highlighted their requests/solutions to the problems to the entire class. Students seemed engaged and responsive to one another’s ideas and felt that they could make a difference in their community one day. By the end of the lesson, students became aware of the fact that they could have an impact on their future with the decisions they make. Moreover, a number of students seemed like they held a sense of duty as they attempted to find ways to preserve the posterity of Akron.

Through a scaffolding approach, Mrs. Flagg reiterated the new social studies concepts and information learned during that class period and tied it to civic responsibility. For homework, she assigned her students to interview a parent or elderly figure and try to find out what changed within their lifetime and what they think should change (for the better) in Akron. Mrs. Flagg was not afraid to allow her students to construct their own knowledge regarding the concept of community and to take charge of their own learning. With the use of inquiry based teaching methods, her students revealed high engagement, motivation, and comprehension levels. Most importantly, they felt that they could make a difference one day, which was a stepping-stone in the acquisition and refinement of civic competences and engagement.

**Ask “why” and “how” and not just “what”**

Again, take a minute and reflect on your own teaching practices. Do you incorporate authentic, higher order thinking tasks? We would like to challenge elementary teachers to use inquiry based instruction as the first step in implementing higher order thinking processes in their classroom. Instead of asking the “what” about concepts, start by asking the “why” and “how”. Ask questions that make students dig a little deeper and ask how they came to know their answer(s). Inquiry based instruction will lead to a rich learning environment where students can make their learning applicable to their personal lives.
As Dewey (1915) believed, students will only remember what they practice in their daily lives. This notion of inquiry-based teaching is important for us as teachers to execute in our own classrooms because we do not want empty vessels leaving our classroom on a daily basis. It is our duty as teachers to ensure that our students leave the classroom with knowledge and skills that can be applied in future tasks and experiences. Thus, historical knowledge is a prerequisite for political intelligence (VanSledright, 2002).

Elementary teachers may encounter some difficulties when implementing this strategy initially because it takes time for students to develop an analytical mindset. It may seem frustrating in the beginning when students are not able to make connections and expand their current schemas but with practice and patience, students can take a more active role in their education. Even further, VanSledright & Frankes (2000) argue that “if young students are to develop deeper understandings of the disciplines they study as preparation for more complex efforts later on, they will need opportunities to explore the full range of conceptual and strategic landscapes in historical study” (p. 281).

Mrs. Flagg has seen a dramatic increase in her students’ epistemological curiosities as they have learned to question the content in various daily lessons. However, Mrs. Flagg found herself feeling frustrated in the beginning as her students’ came with apriori knowledge. She emphasized the importance of utilizing inquiry-based instruction because if students’ start learning in a higher order thinking fashion when they are young, it becomes a natural process and habit by the time they get to middle or high school. If she could leave teachers with one last tip, she recommends taking the risk and engaging students in higher order thinking tasks because students’ need to be critical thinkers in the 21st century and the foundation to this should be developed in the elementary years or earlier.

In conclusion, democracy will only thrive in a place where the people can respectfully discuss and solve problems within their particular society (Barton & McCully, 2007). As a result, one of the most widely accepted goals of social studies education in the United States is to actively prepare students for their lives and futures in a democratic society (Hahn, 2001). It is essential for students to gain opportunities where they are able to apply abstract social studies concepts in ways that can develop into meaningful skills and useful for their future. Playing the role of an active and caring citizen in a democracy requires more than just intellectual knowledge; it requires moral character and civic action. Therefore, the use of inquiry-based teaching is a great place to start in terms of developing students’ democratic characters.
References


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Appendix

Five General Types of Questions

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<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example(s)</th>
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| Definitional | Questions asked to illustrate the notion that vocabulary words have a variety of meanings due to particular agendas and a uniform description of a particular vocabulary word may not always be rendered as “correct” or “incorrect”. | • What is a community?  
• How would you describe your community?                                                                                           |
| Evidential | Questions asked so that students will “dig deeper” and explain why they came to know their answer based on evidence.                                                                                       | • What are important and/or unique features in your community?  
• Why are the features important and/or unique?                                                                                           |
| Policy    | Questions intended to inquire about social problems.                                                                                                                                                         | • Do you see anything you would like to fix or change about your community? Explain.             |
| Value     | Questions asked to identify the reasons or values that underlie the solutions to social problems.                                                                                                             | • Why do you think the problems in your community exist?  
• Why should citizens in the community be concerned with these problems?                                                                 |
| Speculative | Questions asked to infer if a social problem or instance could have been handled in a different manner and the effects thereof.                                                                            | • How can you and/or citizens in the community fix the problems?  
• How have citizens responded to the problems in the past?  
• What could they do differently to ensure success in resolving the problems? |