

# Inquiry

*By Tracy Middleton*

*Inquiro* is the Latin term for “I ask.” While questions have long guided teacher instruction, students asking questions is fundamental to inquiry in social studies. Questions spark curiosity in students and deepen their investigative process as they navigate rigorous content. Asking questions strengthens citizenship skills through the application of knowledge in real-world situations. The rigorous content and development of citizenship skills, along with inquiry skills of investigation, evidence, close reading, and argumentative writing, may appear too daunting for many students. However, with five fundamental instructional shifts, students can be successful with the rigors of inquiry.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Tracy Middleton is an education consultant and Master Teacher/Peer Facilitator for the Bob and Marion Wilson Education Department of Colonial Williamsburg.

Having taught social studies and humanities, Tracy served as southern area Vice President on the California Council for Social Studies Board of Directors for five years and the National Council for Social Studies Board of Directors for three years. For 16 years, she was the Teacher Leader for Social Studies Professional Development at the Escondido Union School District, Escondido, California.

She received a B.A. in Liberal Arts with a minor in Social Science and an M.A. in Education, Leadership, Learning, and Instruction, from California State University, San Marcos.

## Instructional Shifts

- 1. Craft questions that spark and sustain inquiry.** There are two kinds of questions that students should experience—compelling and supporting. Compelling questions are content-based problems and issues that set the stage for inquiry while supporting questions guide student investigations. Challenge students to come up with their own compelling questions. Many middle school students might not be ready to create compelling questions, so it is appropriate to give students a compelling question to begin the inquiry; however, teach students to generate their own supporting questions as they work through primary and secondary source analysis.
- 2. Cultivate and nurture collaborative civic spaces where students can work together to apply the principles of civic virtue.** Provide opportunities for students to communicate conclusions within the classroom and outside in their communities. This includes providing them with time to identify problems, propose solutions, and devise a plan in order to communicate conclusions.
- 3. Purposefully integrate content and skills into your social studies curriculum.** There are four disciplinary literacies that should be addressed in every inquiry—geography, economics, civics, and history. When providing students with primary sources and other relevant content, ensure that the content addresses the four disciplinary literacies. Teaching students the historical thinking skills of sourcing, contextualizing, corroborating, and close reading will help them successfully analyze primary sources in order to develop a conclusion to the compelling question.
- 4. Promote literacy practices and outcomes.** In addition to the disciplinary literacies necessary for inquiry, provide students with opportunities to build and strengthen academic discourse skills, as well as the skills of deliberation, consensus-building, and writing arguments.
- 5. Provide opportunities for taking informed action.** Students should use their inquiries as starting points for taking informed action. At the end of inquiries, students are expected to communicate their conclusions, including how they can take informed action. When creating inquiries, make sure to provide students with experiences within the curricula to consider, debate, and organize a plan for taking informed action.

## Generating Supporting Questions

Inquiry is student-driven, with students asking the supporting questions that guide their research. When teaching students how to ask supporting questions, focus on the importance of asking more open-ended questions, such as *Why?* and *How?* Those questions will lead them to a deeper understanding of the content. However, don't neglect closed-ended questions, such as *Who?* *What?* *When?* and *Where?* as they play a role in inquiry as well. After students have generated supporting questions, help them decide which is more important—getting background information, in which closed-ended questions are more appropriate, or delving deeper into the primary sources, in which open-ended questions are more appropriate.

## Disciplinary Literacy

Disciplinary literacy is critical to students understanding social studies content. Providing students with primary sources that cover geography, economics, civics, and history will sometimes be challenging. Using the Inquiry Journal will help introduce students to geography, economics, civics, and history. Another way to build disciplinary literacy is to provide students with opportunities for close reading. Give them pages from the text or an article and have them think like geographers, economists, citizens, or historians by asking guiding questions to help them pull information from the text.

It isn't necessary for students to answer all of the questions when reading a text. In some texts, not all of the questions will be addressed. The purpose of the questions is to guide students' thinking as they look for information related to the four disciplines. For a more structured reading, pre-read the text and provide students with specific disciplinary questions that will be addressed in the text.

## Communicating Conclusions

When planning inquiries, provide time for students to engage in discourse. Providing time for students to draw conclusions through deliberation, debate, and consensus-building helps them see multiple perspectives and ideas. Provide opportunities for students to argue positions with supporting evidence from the documents and readings. Making time for academic discourse helps students improve their listening and speaking skills. To further strengthen students' listening and speaking skills, provide them with opportunities to present their conclusions to a variety of audiences in different ways, such as public service announcements, annotated timelines, infographics, and essays.

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