

Meeting the Moment: How Micro-Inquiry Could Save Us in These Divisive Times

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As we enter the second decade of the College Career and Civic Life (C3) Framework, we celebrate the ways that it has altered the landscape of what is possible within the discipline of social studies education. As passionate proponents of an inquiry-based approach, we have relished the opportunity to introduce new teachers to the method and deepen our own exposure and knowledge of the field. As we have engaged in this work, however, we must acknowledge that the path to full integration has not always been smooth. While some of the hurdles have been perennial since the inception of the Framework, some novel challenges have also arisen. We routinely bump into three challenges that limit integration of the C3 Framework into more classrooms: heightened political tension around social studies, the increased time that inquiry-based teaching requires, and the time investment and difficulty of inquiry writing.

Increased scrutiny over classroom content has been dominating the current cultural conversations around America's classrooms; as such, we are living in a moment of uncertainty where teachers are fearful about what they should (or can) teach.¹ More and more teachers find themselves living and teaching in states where legislation explicitly limits what and how they can teach.² Even in states *without* such legislation, more than half of teachers report that they are actively self-censoring to avoid problems.³ Within much of these legislative efforts, however, there is common ground with what legislators purport to desire in K-12 classrooms: the teaching of multiple perspectives on contemporary and historical

issues.⁴ As social studies educators, this is baked into our discipline.

Researchers have long argued for the incorporation of multiple perspectives as an educational best practice, and the publication of the C3 Framework 10 years ago gave teachers a pathway to accomplish this in their classrooms.⁵ Although the writers of the C3 Framework may not have had in mind the wave of resistance that teachers would be facing a decade later, the reality is that inquiry has given us the perfect tool to meet this moment. Acknowledging that inquiry is the right tool to tackle this dilemma, however, is only the first step into making it standard classroom practice.

As we seek to face this cultural context and continue the work toward deeper inclusion of inquiry within our own state, we are also keenly aware of the need to respond to the most common hesitation of teachers: time. The number one reason teachers cite for not using inquiry and the Inquiry Design Model (IDM) in their classroom is both a lack of time to plan for and to actually integrate inquiry.⁶ We strongly believe that there is so much value for both students and teachers when using the IDM, but the challenge of time is a very real one. Overcoming this challenge will require us to address not only the classroom time required for inquiries (which is tackled head on through things like focused inquiries expertly elucidated by the framers of the C3) but also the planning time required from teachers which can be exorbitant.⁷

The pedagogical shift that an inquiry-based approach requires is novel terrain for many traditionally trained teachers and takes time to nurture and refine. The question of *how* to plan for

inquiry (namely constructing new inquiry lesson plans) has been a barrier for some educators wanting to include more inquiry experiences in their curriculum.⁸ The tools in the Inquiry Design Model created by Swan et al. have been invaluable in helping to train teachers in planning inquiry-based learning experiences, but we have found that some teachers still need an additional introductory step and more guidance in source selection.⁹

Swan et al. eloquently described the “essence of inquiry” as questions, tasks, and sources.¹⁰ They introduced us to the Focused Inquiry, which can be completed in one to two class periods. This revolutionized the way that many of us thought about inquiries (previously three to five days of instructional time) and opened new avenues for more thorough inclusion of inquiry throughout a year. The creation of focused inquiries, however, has continued to prove challenging for the teachers with whom we routinely work.

As inquiry designers and teachers ourselves, we have learned from them, and drilled down even more to create what we call “micro-inquiries,” a hyper-distilled inquiry format which still includes that “essence,” and gives teachers more concrete guidance for the art of inquiry creation. As a more prescriptive format, we have found that the end product from first-time inquiry writers has tended to be better than when we provided more open models like Focused Inquiries. We see micro-inquiries as a response to the C3 framers’ assertion that “there are more than five types of inquiry out there and, as such, we know that there are exponential ways to alter a blueprint.”¹¹

Parts of a Micro-Inquiry

Like their larger cousins, micro-inquiries are composed of defined parts. These components are intended to be workable within a single class period (or less) while still providing a full inquiry experience for students. By tightening the source typologies, these components are also workable for inquiry designers in the limited time that they have available for lesson planning. All micro-inquiries have the following elements:

- **Compelling Source:** This is the spark of the inquiry; the inciting small source

that sets in motion student exploration of the compelling question. This is an engaging, interesting source that piques students’ interest and curiosity.

- **Compelling Question:** This is a central question for which there are at least two possible correct answers driven and supported by the sources included in the micro-inquiry.
- **Context source:** This source situates the compelling source and the inquiry as a whole in the relevant historical, cultural, political, or other context. Typically, the context source will be of a different source type from the compelling source to give students practice at analyzing different media (e.g., a photo of a petitioner in a Supreme Court case may be the Compelling Source, and a context source could be an excerpt from the oral arguments in the case)
- **Contrast Source:** This source provides the basis for an alternative argument stem to the compelling question (e.g., if the featured source suggests a “yes, because...” answer, a contrast source could reflect a “no, because...” response).
- **Complexity Source:** This source provides an additional argument stem that can either bolster the Compelling, Context, or Contrast Sources, or provide more complexity to the response (e.g., compelling source was “yes, because...” and a complexity source could provide a “neither, because...”). This helps students understand that history isn’t always cut and dry, and that some things are more complex than what you may first think.
- **Argument:** The “task” for a micro-inquiry will be a condensed argument consisting of only an argumentative stance (e.g., yes, no, etc.), a “because” statement, and at least one piece of evidence. Although

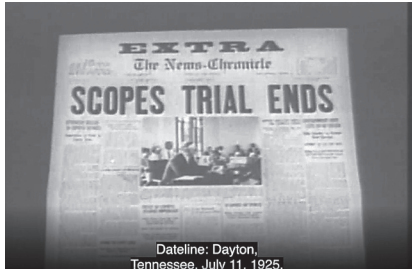
formatting can vary, methods like argument trees are a clear way to capture this structure in an easily reviewable format, saving assessment time for educators.

Sample Micro-Inquiry

In our experience creating micro-inquiries, we find that their genesis often lies in the same kind of curiosity and excitement that we are hoping to inspire in our students. As unapologetic and proud “history nerds,” we routinely find ourselves coming across a source that gets the gears of our own curiosity turning. We encounter

these sources in collections of primary sources, museum archives, digital collections, and more. When we come across these sources, we have found the first key component of a micro-inquiry: the compelling source. In the example inquiry, we were struck by the historical parallel to the current moment in which we find ourselves as a profession. The story of John T. Scopes and his “controversial” lesson on the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin echoed to us, and the 1960 educational film reel telling the story of his trial felt like the perfect way to hook students into the topic. This becomes the compelling source for

Table 1. **Scopes Micro-Inquiry**

Inquiry Segment	Content	Explanation/Instructions
C3 Standard	D2.His.2.9-12. Analyze change and continuity in historical eras.	
Goal of the micro-inquiry	For teacher training purposes: Learn the structure of a micro inquiry and the purpose of the different classifications of sources within the template. For students: [The Student Will Be Able To] classify a series of historical events and categorize as examples of change or continuity.	
Compelling Source	PBS Learning Media video “The Scopes Trial,”  https://wosu.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/evol07_sci_scopestrial/the-scopes-trial	Tell students you are going to show a short 1960 video clip that was part of the series, “Great Headlines of the Century.” Ask them to take note of their thoughts on these questions as they watch, • Paying particular attention to the language in this video, in what ways is it intentionally provocative? On which side? • Why do you think that a public school became a battleground for the entire nation?
Compelling Question	Does history echo?	Explain to students that they are going to examine sources that will allow them to answer the question “Does history echo?”
Potential Argument Stems	Yes, because the situations themselves are comparable, the Butler Act and SB0623 are very similar in content. No, because popular pressure is not in favor like it was in Scopes’s day. Scopes lost, but the Indiana teachers were victorious in preventing the legislation. No, because the Butler Act mandated biblical instruction—SB0623 is not overtly religious.	
Context Source	Tennessee’s Butler Act, 1925 Section 1. <i>Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Tennessee,</i> That it shall be unlawful for any teacher in ... all other public schools of the State ... to teach any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals.	Read through the excerpt from The Butler Act, passed in Tennessee in 1926. As you read, take note of your thoughts on the following questions: • What do you see? • What do you think about that? • What does it make you wonder?

this inquiry. It is an engaging centerpiece that can spark student curiosity, generate questions about important issues within the discipline, and provide information to allow for the construction of arguments.

An equally valid approach to the construction of micro-inquiries would involve the construction *first* of a compelling question, followed by the finding of a compelling source to match. We have found more often, however, that the compelling source comes first. In the example inquiry, the compelling source triggered a series of questions in our minds that would allow students to wrestle with content and practice the skills of argumentation. For the present inquiry, the compelling question that flowed from the compelling source felt natural: “Does history echo?” This question is

broad enough to give students space to explore, but is also grounded in a necessity of comparing historical periods, rooted in key historical thinking standards that are present in many states.

Once students have been introduced to the compelling source and the compelling question they will answer, they must be given the context in which the question occurs. This may differ depending upon the goals of the inquiry (skill-based vs. content-based, discipline studied, etc.). The micro-inquiry creator should seek out a source that gives students the historical, political, cultural, geographical, or other important context to begin extracting meaning from the inquiry. In the present inquiry, we opted to provide students with the text of the legislation under which Scopes was tried. The Butler Act of 1925 forbids

Table 1. **Scopes Micro-Inquiry (cont.)**

Inquiry Segment	Content	Explanation/Instructions
Contrast Source	“Educators Fight Back Against Gag Orders, Book Bans and Intimidation” (NEA News, July 2022) Indiana’s legislation ... would have banned “the use of supplemental learning materials to promote certain concepts regarding sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, or national origin.” ... But Indiana’s educators saw what was happening in other states, and they were ready. ... By late February, momentum for passage had ground to a halt and—to the surprise of many—the bill was soon pulled from consideration. “Indiana is a great example of what can happen when educators, parents, librarians, and others put pressure on moderate lawmakers, help them come to their senses and see how dangerous these bills are,” explains Jonathan Friedman of PEN America, an organization that works to protect freedom of expression. “Mobilization and awareness have an impact.” www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/educators-fight-back-against-gag-orders-book-bans-and-intimidation	Read through the excerpt from the article written and published in July 2022 by the National Education Association regarding teachers’ victory over HB 1134. As you read it, take note of your thoughts on the following questions: • What do you see? • What do you think about that? • What does it make you wonder?
Complexity Source - Optional extension	Tennessee SB 0623, <i>effective</i> 6/1/2021 “(1) The following concepts are prohibited concepts that shall not be included or promoted in a course of instruction, curriculum, instructional program, or in supplemental instructional materials: ... m. All Americans are not created equal and are not endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, including, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; or ...” https://wapp.capitol.tn.gov/apps/BillInfo/default.aspx?BillNumber=SB0623&GA=112	Read through the excerpt from Tennessee’s SB 0623, signed into law on May 25, 2021. As you read it, take note of your thoughts on the following questions: • What do you see? • What do you think about that? • What does it make you wonder?
Argument Task	Once students have completed their analysis of each document, have them complete an argument tree that answers the question “Does history echo?” using the format “<i>answer</i> because <i>reason+evidence</i>.” If time allows, have students turn to their neighbor and share their argument tree. Then ask a few to share out with the class.	

instruction that denies the divine creation of man. This source gives students the opportunity to see the legal context under which John Scopes was tried and found guilty. Because the compelling question asks about the potential “echo” of history, this context source also sets up the ultimate question in which students will consider whether past legislation is similar to or dissimilar to the Butler Act.

From here, the micro-inquiry must provide students with differing perspectives that allow them to weigh the respective merits of different arguments and to harvest material for possible argument stems. Because the outcome of the Scopes trial was a guilty verdict (and a later state supreme court ruling upholding the statute’s constitutionality), we felt an appropriate contrast source would be an instance in which similarly restrictive legislation was successfully overturned. This contrasts with the outcome in the Scopes trial and provides students with possible evidence that history does not echo because we have *evolved* in our views enough to not adhere to such strict limitations.

The last source of a micro-inquiry provides a critical component of the exercise; we introduce a complexity source as the final piece of the puzzle to introduce tension into the dialogue and discourage purely binary thinking. Unlike the film reel that kicks off this narrative, history is rarely purely black and white. A complexity source introduces the possibility that any answer given is temporary, that it can and should change with new information. This can be achieved by giving a source that provides a “neither” response to the question, presents a third possible option for argument, or a source that sets up an unresolved outcome. In the present case, we point students towards a current Tennessee law that feels remarkably reminiscent of the Butler Act, but that has not had sufficient time for testing in the real world to understand the full implications. This lack of resolution means that students can opt to point out differences in the language that make the two laws distinct, can point to the uncertainty around the law given its recency, or other such arguments that embrace the complexities of our disciplines.

Once students have been exposed to all of the sources of a micro-inquiry (and performed tasks

that require them to engage with the material), they set about answering the compelling question in the form of an argument. Although, even with such a limited set of sources, students could form rather complex and lengthy arguments to the compelling question, the goal of a micro-inquiry is achieved when students construct a simplified argument. Ideally, these arguments form the basis of classroom conversations, or further study. Simply responding with “*answer because reason+evidence*” is sufficient to accomplish an inquiry task and fulfill the three key components that we know to be the “essence of inquiry.”¹² This can be a single sentence, a paragraph, or even an “argument tree” graphic organizer that students complete.

There is certainly a need and a place to practice the skills of long-form argumentation, but this is not the goal of a micro-inquiry. The arguments students construct should match the hyper-distillation that we see in a micro-inquiry overall. The short-form nature of the arguments that cap a micro-inquiry are also intended to address the planning time required from educators. When inquiry culminates in an essay, there will always be a limit to how frequently an educator can assess. Using short claims, however, means that inquiry and inquiry-based assessments could be practiced daily. A number of existing models can then be applied to these claims (see e.g., the four dimensions of the Persuasive Claim framework) enabling teachers to provide meaningful feedback on the essence of students’ argument without the major time investment of grading long-form writing.¹³

Absent from this overview of the sample micro-inquiry is an explanation of the tasks that students performed while interacting with the source materials. In the present case, we borrow the See, Think, Wonder protocol from *Making Thinking Visible* to encourage students to extract meaning from the sources.¹⁴ An instructor could, however, just as easily opt to use a different protocol or task with which they want to give students practice. By simplifying the writing process and reducing the number of sources within a micro-inquiry, teachers can invest more of their time building their arsenal of source analysis methods rather than grappling with inquiry creation. What matters most in a

micro-inquiry is that students interact meaningfully with the sources in a manner that allows them to extract evidence for the concluding argument. *How* students interact with the material is less important.

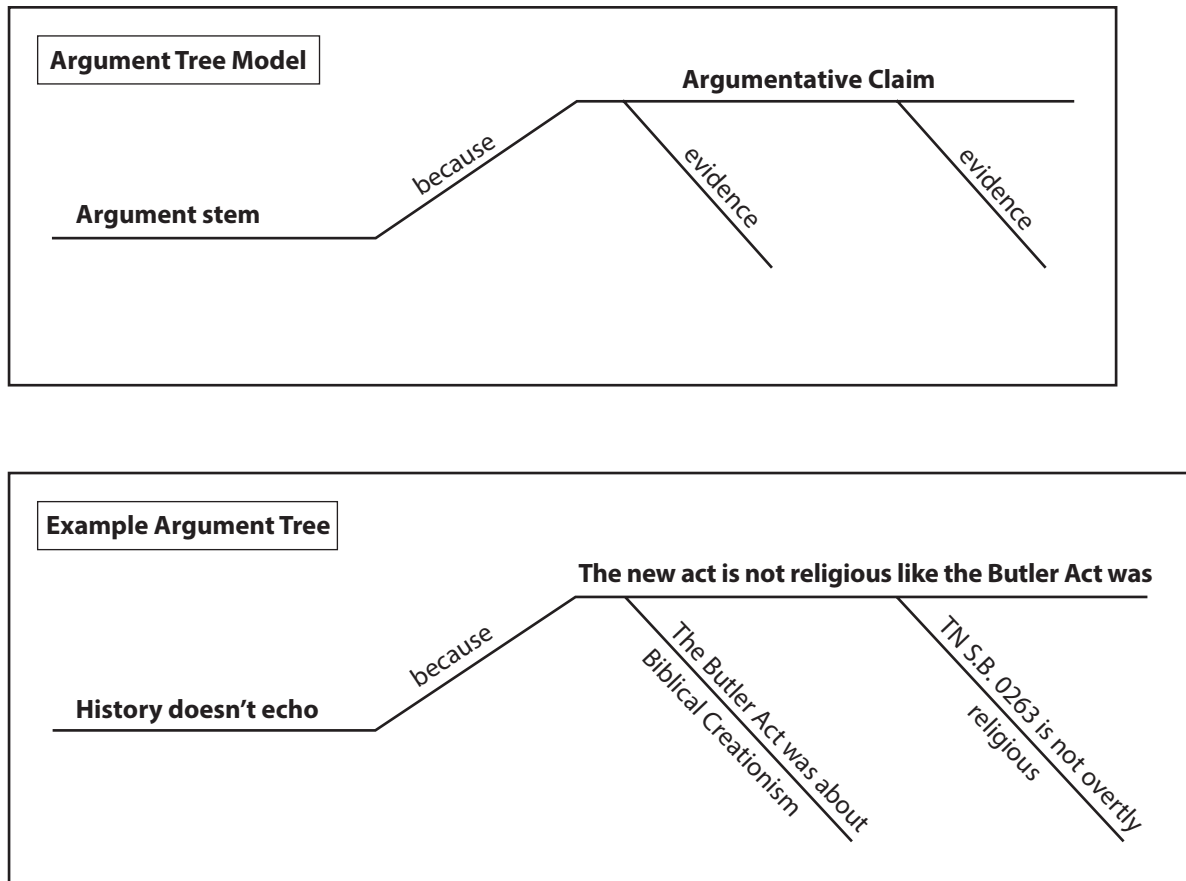
Conclusion

Inevitably, the critique of micro-inquiries (and most inquiry-based learning experiences) will be that they fail to capture the full richness of historical perspective of an issue. Any historian will look at one of our inquiries and declare it to be woefully incomplete. But the same would be true even if the students were spending multiple days on a single subject. Ultimately, it is important to teach students (and teachers) to be “ok” with the incompleteness; being “ok” with having *an* answer on *that* particular day, based solely on what they currently know, accepting that it will almost certainly change with new evidence.

Embracing inquiry in the classroom should be done in a way that fosters a student’s innate curiosity, to the extent that they might hope for their views to change as they discover more. If we are truly going to teach social studies as the social science it is meant to be, the scientific method becomes our guide. The answers students give to an inquiry is merely the newest negatable hypothesis. Further experimentation (i.e., finding and evaluating more sources) may refine, change, or completely change the hypothesis (i.e., their argument).

Psychologist David Myers emphasizes the importance of this shift when he highlights the dire need to instill within students the three aspects of The Scientific Mindset: curiosity, skepticism, and humility.¹⁵ Adapting his definitions slightly to match the language of inquiry, one could say that the cure for the “post-truth” era in which we are living is to help foster within

Figure 1.



students curiosity (when put to the test, can my argument be confirmed), skepticism (how do these sources know what they know), and humility (accepting that knowledge is incomplete through a willingness to be surprised by new ideas and information).

It is a scary time to be an educator, even more so to be a social studies teacher. But we must not cower in the face of a rising tide of resistance. By intentionally designing the hyper-distilled micro-inquiries to include multiple perspectives on a single issue, we hope to create opportunities to turn every lesson into a chance to expose students to more than one narrative. The authors of the C3 Framework and the IDM have shown us for the last 10 years that inquiry is good for students. The evidence bears this out in student performance.¹⁶ The reality might be that it's what is good for teachers' *job security* and our democracy as well. 🟦

Notes

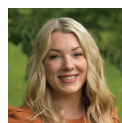
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