

A steep hill to climb: lessons from professional development on inquiry creation

Inquiry
professional
development

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Abstract

Purpose – In the Fall of 2020, three teacher educators in Ohio collaborated on a three-month long online professional development series on how to write Focused Inquiries, a la the Inquiry Design Model (IDM).

Design/methodology/approach – The authors detail the contents of the six group professional development (PD) sessions and share the lessons that the authors learned as a result of leading this training.

Findings – Given this study's mixed results, the authors often came back to the questions of “maybe it was us? Maybe it was the pandemic? Maybe there wasn't enough training? Or maybe IDM creation isn't a skill that all teachers possess and maybe that's ok?” The authors share the struggles with these questions and situate all of this within the current culture wars raging around schools today.

Originality/value – Finally, the authors offer the current approach to inquiry training for teachers that situates inquiry creation later in the process after significant structured introductory work.

Keywords Professional development, Inquiry, C3 framework, Inquiry design model

Paper type Viewpoint

In 2022, the volume of educational gag order bills introduced and passed by state legislatures increased 250% compared to 2021 (Young and Friedman, 2022). At the time of writing this proposal, another 100 bills are currently live across states that target classroom censorship (Pen America, 2023). One way that teachers are able to challenge these legislative chokeholds is through the use of critical inquiry (Crowley and King, 2018) and through leading students through inquiry investigations of the specific legislation that it affecting their ability to learn about perceived controversial or taboo topics in the social studies (Behnke *et al.*, 2022; Lewis and Darolia, 2022). However, creating high quality critical inquiries is easier said than done and research argues that there is a gap between what literature says is effective teaching and what occurs in daily teacher practice (Russell, 2010).

The purpose of this paper is to share the authors' experiences and reflective self-study findings from a three-month long online professional development series on how to write Focused Inquiries, a la the Inquiry Design Model (IDM). This paper chronicles the six group professional development (PD) sessions, the lessons learned and the reflections we made as result of leading this training through our own self-study. Given our mixed results, we often came back to the questions of “maybe it was us? Maybe it was the pandemic? Maybe there wasn't enough training? Or maybe IDM creation isn't a skill that all teachers possess and maybe that's ok?” We conclude by offering context for building inquiry creation in a time of classroom censorship.

The COVID-19 pandemic, our nation's ongoing struggle with white supremacy and the 2020 presidential election were at the forefront of every social studies teacher's mind when we entered the summer of 2020. It was also clear that teachers were hungry for high-quality PD



despite this trying environment. While the challenges of the pandemic created difficult scenarios for PD, our experience shows that we could not simply wait for the pandemic to resolve to continue providing inquiry PD. Kaka (2020) found that in the state of Ohio, 79.9% of social studies teachers were not trained in the C3 framework and inquiry, but they wanted to learn more about it. Since there was a strong desire amongst teachers wanting opportunities to increase their inquiry skills, especially as it concerned creating more dynamic and engaging online learning, our collaborative was approached by the Ohio Department of Education to conduct a series of professional development webinars aimed at training teachers to do inquiry-based instruction throughout the summer and fall of 2020.

Conceptualization of the project

In the summer of 2020, the Ohio Department of Education's social studies curriculum leader reached out to a key group of higher education social studies professors asking what could be done to support teachers as they go back to school in the fall of 2020 amidst COVID teaching restrictions. A group of six social studies educators, four of whom are higher education faculty, one who directs PD for a statewide Civics non-profit and one large district social studies curriculum leader, came together to plan a series of summer PD sessions around C3 and inquiry. We offered three free online professional development sessions in August of 2020 as part of the Ohio Department of Education's summer professional development series. As the authors had been trying to embed inquiry more effectively into Ohio's social studies classrooms for the better part of the past decade, it seemed like the perfect time to create PD opportunities for Ohio's social studies teachers. We felt we could leverage the exigency for training in how to teach hybrid/online to simultaneously create opportunities for inquiry training in the process. Within this framework were our own biases and assumptions around content and pedagogy, namely that good inquiry teaching meant original inquiry creation.

However, we realized that was not enough—in order for teachers to really embrace inquiry in Ohio, we needed to go further than just telling them about the C3 and IDM—we believed that they needed to actually learn how to create inquiries that would be used in the classroom. From there, the authors of this paper, two social studies methods professors and the nonprofit PD director, decided to collaborate and dig deeper with a core group of educators who wanted to learn more.

The professional development we provided was grounded in the IDM (Grant *et al.*, 2017). Following the model that had been established up to this point by Grant *et al.* (2017), we centered our training on the theory that teachers should work up to the creation of their own IDM lessons. Trainings in which original inquiry creation by participants was the end goal was the format in which all three authors were introduced to C3 Inquiry. However, Swan *et al.* (2018) admits that designing IDMs is challenging, complex and ambitious for teachers. With this in mind, we did all that we could to mitigate the challenges when designing our PD sessions, as we describe below. In the work that has developed around the C3 Framework, the hope and ultimate goal is that students eventually grow into fully-fledged investigators creating and conducting their own inquiries (Swan *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, the model anticipates that teachers exposed to the theories of inquiry will grow into creators of their own inquiries for their classrooms. However, through our own self-study, we were left questioning whether this expectation best serves the goals of inquiry.

An unfortunate primacy for originality exists within teaching that is wholly discordant with other professions. Preservice teachers are routinely expected to produce original lesson plans, despite substantial gaps in pedagogical knowledge and experience (Drost and Levine, 2015; Lim *et al.*, 2018). This in turn creates the expectation that to teach, one must also write content. These knowledge gaps continue as they go into their own classrooms as inservice

teachers (Huizinga *et al.*, 2014), yet, education professionals expect them to create, plan, teach and assess right out of their teacher preparation programs.

However, society does not apply the same expectation of original work in other professional practices. Imagine a doctor who has spent the last twenty years performing surgeries invented by other doctors. They have a high success rate and have mastered the technique. As a patient, would you rate their skills any lower because they are not the inventor of the procedure? Simultaneously, few patients would willingly go under the knife for a surgeon with no track record or data of efficacy simply because they invented the procedure they are performing after observing more skilled surgeons. But this is what occurs when educators (or worse, preservice educators) are pushed to focus on inquiry creation before *demonstrating* mastery of inquiry instruction. In our case, however, the “patients” (i.e. K-12 students) do not get a say in who will be performing the operation.

The expectation of originality, however, does not match the classroom realities of most educators. Johnson (2016) noted that “one of the fundamental curricular tools for most social studies teachers is the textbook” (p. 12). This fact of reliance on a textbook is well-documented, sometimes at the exclusion of all other texts. Russell (2010) found that only 40% of social studies educators reported using any material beyond the textbook, and that reading aloud from the text comprised more than half of instructional time. This dependence on textbooks-as-curriculum not only leads students down a limited, often incomplete path towards historical knowledge (Loewen, 2007), but also hampers teachers’ own growth and development as curricular designers.

This is not to suggest that teachers are not capable of creating “good” inquiries, nor is the intent to suggest that teacher educators should stop trying to train and develop teachers with an interest in curriculum creation. As we share below, however, our self-study reflections suggest that having a solid pool of vetted and approved inquiries that teachers have been thoroughly trained in implementing may be a more impactful goal to make inquiry-based teaching normative practice in classrooms. Knowing that writing IDMs can be a challenge for teachers (Swan *et al.*, 2018), we posit whether focused PD on masterful execution of exemplary inquiries vetted in classrooms is a better way to integrate inquiry, instead of asking teachers to create their own inquiries.

Self-study design

A recruitment email went to all who participated in the summer PD sessions asking if they would be interested in learning more about inquiry throughout the fall semester. From that list of 69 educators, 12 signed up to participate in the semester-long training. A pre-training survey was sent to all participants asking them a variety of questions about their teaching style and their knowledge of inquiry. When asked how confident they were with using inquiry in the classroom, half responded that they were not confident, while half responded that they were confident, so it was a very mixed group with regards to knowledge of inquiry. 92% ($n = 11$) were in an urban community, while 8% ($n = 1$) was from a small rural community; seven were female and five were male; six held bachelor’s degrees, while six held master’s degrees; three were preservice teachers, three were within their first five years, one was in their 11th year, and the remaining five teachers were in years 19+. Participants were predominantly high school teachers, with one K-12 district curriculum coordinator and one nonprofit PD coordinator.

Our goals were that teachers would (1) develop familiarity with the pedagogy underlying inquiry, (2) situate the C3 framework in the larger context of inquiry and (3) successfully develop focused inquiries. In designing the sessions, we determined that six two-hour sessions accompanied by two one-on-one check-ins would be most likely to produce the desired results. A brief outline of the structure of the PD can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1.
Overview of the PD
sessions



Source(s): Author's own work

Recognizing the inherently organic nature of this training, our self-study methodology tracked more closely to a living educational theory (Whitehead, 1989, 2009, 2019) than to classical propositional research paradigms. All of the authors had been brought through the traditional inquiry training approaches, as such we were steeped in the classic model. Similarly, all three of the authors developed as a result of this traditional training the capacity to create inquiry learning experiences that adhered to the C3 Framework. Using our own inquiry development as our unit of appraisal, we engaged in an action reflection cycle to determine whether what we believed of our own development was true (that the traditional inquiry training model produces practitioners capable of inquiry creation) and whether we were in fact adherents of our own beliefs about our development (i.e. our practice reflected the standard training model).

This looser structure gave us the opportunity to attempt to respond to the participants' needs in real time. Both as facilitators of the PD sessions and as a research team, the authors routinely engaged in reflection dialogues between each intervention to determine if we were on track, whether our preconceived notions of the PD design was still pedagogically sound, how the participants responses were (or were not) adhering to expected learning outcomes, and what if any growth could be projected at the different checkpoints. As a team of three, we also had the distinct advantage of always having at least two observers to critique our own design and delivery. We were able to serve as response partners to each other at each reflection point to consider whether we were remaining consistent with our own stated principles on the subject of inquiry creation, and, when contradictions were identified, to determine whether these were intentional, unconscious or reflexive as a response to learner needs.

PD sessions overview

In designing the arc of study for participants, we chose to focus our energy on the smallest unit of inquiry identified by the C3 Framework in *Blueprinting an Inquiry Based Curriculum* (Swan *et al.*, 2019), the “Focused Inquiry.” Focused inquiries “zoom in so that students work with narrowly focused sources and practice particular skills toward developing their expertise in source work” (Swan *et al.*, 2019, p. 80). In designing the session breakdown, we determined that six two-hour sessions accompanied by two one-on-one check-ins would be most likely to produce the desired results and meet the three goals described in the study design section.

The first session was born of our experience in leading prior inquiry training. Because direct instruction is replete in the social studies, we often find that teachers new to inquiry require a few paradigm shifts to fully understand the process on which they (and eventually their students) will embark. Inquiry-based instruction requires a transfer of the cognitive burden in the classroom away from teachers and onto students. We have found, therefore, that conducting inquiry training without breaking teachers of their expectation of who is doing the thinking in the classroom results in inquiries where the teacher is routinely short-circuiting the thought processes of their students and/or “rounding-up” (Lemov, 2010) for students who have not completed the task. The first session was designed to move teachers toward a student-centered approach and to introduce the basic concepts of the C3 Framework, namely, questions.

Session two was geared toward helping teachers understand the different ways that questions operate within the C3 Framework, and to help them refine their questions to better match standards, maintain relevance, and overcome designer bias. We spent time chunking their previously generated questions from session one into inquiry sets of one compelling question and at least one supporting question. Time was spent in teaching the art of stress-testing with argument stems and distinguishing characteristics of exemplar questions (argument-driven, rigorous, unbiased, etc.).

After the second session, participants completed one-on-one check-ins with one of us to discuss their topic and initial compelling question. Each participant had at least 30 minutes with one of the three facilitators in which to present their questions and receive pointed feedback. Feedback was to be integrated prior to the next session.

In session three, we shifted our attention to sources. Time was spent reviewing the ways in which sources are the “meat” of an inquiry and must be matched to the questions. Encouraging a rich texture of sources (types, perspectives, length, etc.), we showed teachers examples of how sources form the foundation of a student being able to build an argument. Argument stems, therefore, became a guiding principle for knowing when you had the just-right-slice of content for the inquiry, and had given students enough to produce a true argument instead of simply an explanation.

Session four was dedicated to tasks. Our experience has been that teachers have the most intuitive understanding of this portion of the IDM framework (readily drawing upon examples already used in their practice), so we were able to spend more of our time on task authenticity and rigor. Time was spent reviewing examples and providing criteria to determine whether tasks truly demonstrate mastery rather than “busy work”.

Session five introduced the capstone of inquiry, the extension and taking informed action. In a focused inquiry, typically one or the other is utilized, but teachers needed grounding in both to determine which best fit their inquiries. This is arguably a place where teachers can flex the most creative license, so we spent significant time talking about how to keep them relevant to the inquiry and authentic to the context.

After the fifth session, as teachers should have completed the creation of their focused inquiry, we conducted the second one-on-one check-in. This was an opportunity for teachers to present their work to date and to begin polishing the inquiries for classroom readiness.

Similar to the first check-in, participants received targeted feedback on their work to be integrated by our sixth and final session.

As the conclusion of our series, the sixth session was designed to focus on inquiry coherence. As a sort of bookend to the first session that overviewed inquiry-based instruction, the sixth session was intended to question whether the inquiries when viewed holistically reflected best-practices within the field and created a coherent learning experience for students. Time was spent back testing the argument stems that teachers purported to be working toward to determine if the inquiry was sufficient to support students in an argument, whether the questions arranged content in a logical and manageable fashion, and whether the tasks created enough structure to guide students in synthesizing the sources. We revisited our first session paradigm shifts to discuss the role of a teacher in guiding students through inquiries to avoid “tipping” or “rounding-up” for students as a short-circuit of the learning process. As aforementioned, throughout the entire professional development series, we engaged in consistent reflection, critique and formative assessment of the series through our notes and facilitator dialogue sessions.

Findings and lessons learned

Maybe it was you, maybe it was me, but it sure felt [not] right.

-Maybe it was Memphis (Anderson, 1991).

Our experience yielded several takeaways that will shape future work. [Thacker et al. \(2017\)](#) argued that “providing professional development opportunities for teachers is central to encouraging more C3-aligned inquiry practice among teachers” (p. 98). But in the self-study reflection of our practice, we learned that providing online professional development to teachers already stretched incredibly thin felt like an uphill battle. Although we worked to make our sessions interactive and discussion based, we also reflected on how *we* weren’t trained to do this either. Though online PD has been found to be effective in place of face-to-face PD ([Binmohsen and Abrahams, 2022](#); [Lander et al., 2022](#)), nothing in our professional training had prepared us for pivoting online any more than that of our K-12 teachers, and so it was most likely messy at times.

However, [Thacker \(2014\)](#) defined five qualities of successful professional learning as focusing on content, pedagogy, context, being ongoing and being collaborative. Of these five, our sessions were successful across all factors, but probably the least so in context and collaboration due to the online environment of the PD and the lack of shared teaching contexts of our participants since they were from various regions in the state of Ohio. Still, by being an ongoing professional learning opportunity and by being thoroughly rooted in content and pedagogy, the sessions offered major pieces of what makes successful professional development.

Although the research suggests the efficacy of PD for inquiry integration, other paradigms exist that may limit classroom implementation. There is a gap between what the literature says about effective teaching generally and teacher practice ([Russell, 2010](#)). Similarly, there is a level of mediation that regularly limits the extent to which district-level (or school-level) change filters into classrooms ([Johnson, 2016](#)). To overcome this filter, we believe it is necessary to create the kinds of incentive structures that cause teachers to *want* to break from their own experiences; to shift away from the “conventional epistemological beliefs, traditional pedagogical divisions, and conservative dispositions . . . which predispose them toward instructional approaches that are more pedantic than bold” ([Grant et al., 2017](#), p. 22). Such a dispositional shift comes intrinsically from them wanting to be better teachers ([Colley et al., 2021](#); [Journell, 2013](#); [Salinas and Blevins, 2013](#)).

This affective filter manifested in specific ways throughout the PD, particularly around student agency. Participants struggled to provide students opportunities to be curious, to form their own arguments, and to be allowed the space to have answers that were not “right.” Even after writing multiple argument stems, participants often prioritized sources that guided students toward a single answer. This disconnect with student agency resulted in participants crafting explanatory essay assignments rather than inquiries. But we believe the space in which this disconnect resides is vital to disrupting the status quo of social studies classrooms. [Crowley and King \(2018\)](#) argued that “critical inquiries rely on teachers who question the common-sensical ways the world works and how social studies knowledge is presented” (p. 15). Without being willing to sit in the uncomfortable pedagogical space, teachers would not be able to create critical inquiries that help students question the world around them.

As [Grant et al. \(2017\)](#) note, inquiry growth is also stymied by teachers’ own lack of experience as students in inquiry-based classrooms and absence of peer/mentor examples. Most educators in practice today did not have formative educational experiences in inquiry-centered classrooms. When our participants struggled with the concept of student agency, this was very likely impacted by the lack of agency they themselves experienced during their own K-12 education. We question, therefore, whether a more productive approach to inquiry training might require more time spent exposing teachers to good inquiry experiences under master educators, and training them in the application of exemplary inquiries created by others.

Our last pivotal finding from our self-study was that perhaps social studies teachers should be freed to focus on the ability to implement powerful, critical and engaging inquiries without the pressure to *also* be expert inquiry creators. While we would never discourage teachers who want to write their own inquiries, we also found ourselves questioning if that is truly a step every teacher *must* take. Is there less value added if we would have taught these teachers, over the series of our professional development sessions, how to understand the C3 and IDM and then adapt and implement a vetted inquiry for their classroom context? To walk them through the inquiry implementation? To use the ongoing model of professional development not to create curriculum writers, but to create teachers who are actually using inquiry? As we have argued throughout this manuscript, we think perhaps not.

The implications for teacher education in this shift would be to focus less on curriculum development and more on application. Instead of assessing what preservice teachers know about classroom structures, timing, lesson planning and inquiry through curriculum design assessments (i.e. lesson plans, IDMs, etc.), it would mean shifting to instruction-based assessments within the methods classroom (i.e. focused inquiry implementation, mock teaching, cultivation of resources adapted into focused inquiries, etc.). Research shows there is a disconnect between research and practice in teachers’ instructional choices ([Russell, 2010](#)) and so perhaps more classroom practice is needed for preservice teachers on how to successfully apply, adapt and shift instruction into inquiry.

Inquiry PD in the time of culture wars

We would be remiss if we failed to tie the lessons learned from our PD to a way forward, especially given the culture wars and the current polarization of our country and state (Ohio). “Over the past three academic years, legislators in 45 states proposed 283 laws that either sought to restrict what teachers can say about race, racism, and American history; to change how instructors can teach about gender identity, sexuality and LGBTQ issues; to boost parents’ rights over their children’s education; . . . and/or to promote what legislators defined as a ‘patriotic’ education” ([Natanson et al., 2022](#), para 2). Inquiry is a pedagogical tool that pushes back on, and works within the constraints of, these laws.

The language in some of the bills says that teachers have to take a balanced approach when teaching issues that are perceived to be controversial, must teach them from multiple perspectives and cannot push one agenda over another. Inquiry is the natural method that teachers can use for this since one of the most critical skills that students will walk away with after participating in an inquiry-based lesson is that of argumentation (Swan *et al.*, 2018). Argumentation requires students to be exposed to multiple perspectives and points of view around one topic to answer the compelling question, which is what these laws require teachers to do. Recognizing the important role that inquiry can play in helping teachers (and students) respond to this wave of polarization and censorship, it becomes even more critical that inquiry trainings are designed to maximize the implementation of inquiry in the classroom without the pressures of inquiry creation.

An additional way that inquiry may be used to support teachers when teaching during these divisive times is in the questions they ask and the sources they use to support critical pedagogy and historical thinking. Inquiry can allow teachers to bring in marginalized and oppressed voices that have otherwise been silenced (Crowley and King, 2018). These types of inquiries are critical historical inquiries, as they are attuned to issues of power and allow students to question the typical historical narratives taught (or not taught) in K-12 schools (Santiago and Dozono, 2022).

Sources allow teachers to include firsthand narratives instead of substituting their own values and judgment for individuals. For example, in an inquiry on Indian boarding schools, it is vital that educators use sources that highlight indigenous voices talking about their own experiences or one on Indian removal that enables teachers to ask questions such as “What does it mean to remove a people?” (Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, n.d.). From there teachers can have students wrestle with the question of “How did Black Genius help build American democracy?” (Summit Learning, n.d.a) that allows students to examine the conflict between the institution of slavery and America’s founding ideals. Elementary students can answer the question “What Makes ‘Equality’ Equal?” (Summit Learning, n.d.b) that allows them to explore the tension around the assumption that all people are created equal and begin to learn about inequity around the LGBTQ + community. Finally, oppressed religious groups may benefit from exposure through inquiry, too. Students can work through the inquiry, “How Do Religious Communities Respond to Challenges and Opportunities?” (Sikh Coalition, n.d.) that provides them with opportunities to investigate Sikhism and the challenges and opportunities the Sikh community has faced over time.

In this time of polarization, it is imperative that teachers spend time focusing on doing inquiry well in their classrooms instead of creating inquiries. Poorly created inquiries can do more harm than good, just as other methods can do when used without forethought. A teacher that employs a simulation in their classroom of a slave auction will potentially cause trauma and do harm to their students of color. The same can be true of inquiry when done wrong—if teachers write what they believe is a beautiful inquiry, but in actuality includes questions or sources that further marginalize students, it could cause chaos and trauma for them. This further forces us to rely on well-constructed, well-vetted inquiries such as *How did slavery shape my state?*, *Can words lead to war?* and *Why did the south secede?*, along with others found on the *Learning for Justice* website (Learning for Justice, 2022).

Conclusion

One question that the authors have come back to repeatedly as we process through and reflect upon what we learned through this experience is whether teachers have the curriculum design fluency needed to create inquiries? Huizinga *et al.* (2014) found that teachers have gaps in their curricular design skills surrounding their pedagogical content knowledge and curricular

consistency expertise. Is it fair, therefore, to expect teachers to be curriculum authors, and create inquiries? Does the profession place unreasonable demands upon educators to become experts at skills not truly *required* for “good teaching?” We are unsure of the answer to any of these questions but know that more work needs to be done to determine them.

Teachers have limited time to do everything that this profession demands of them, and the hill of inquiry is particularly steep. This same dilemma naturally extends to inquiry PD for teachers, particularly when the expectation is to fundamentally shift the nature of classroom instruction *and* develop teachers’ ability to create their own inquiries. Recognizing the aforementioned gaps between research and classroom practice, content level expertise, and absence of inquiry experience as students, we posit that we may be trying to do too much in too little time. Perhaps the way up the hill is not to train teachers to write their own inquiries, but instead to show them how to leverage inquiry experiences for their particular contexts and for our current moments as a nation. The findings from this self-study have opened several possibilities for experimentation with the IDM. With time, we are optimistic that a systematic and practiced approach will give teachers the guidance they need to successfully scale the summit and learn to create original inquiry experiences for their classrooms.

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