

Is the Common Core Good for Social Studies? Yes, *but...*

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The Common Core State Standards present a unique challenge for social studies educators. They put social studies teachers in the position of possibly having to adjust their practice to meet new demands for literacy instruction, and thus raise many difficult questions. How can we fit new requirements for literacy instruction into an already crowded social studies curriculum? What kinds of training and development opportunities will be needed for teachers? Do existing or emerging assessment systems support a new emphasis on Common Core literacies without eclipsing social studies content and practices?

Compounding these challenges, the Common Core has arrived at a precarious time for social studies. Social studies has recently struggled under the dual pressures of marginalization—the loss of instructional time at the elementary level—and the narrowing of instruction in response to multiple-choice high-stakes testing.¹ Many social studies educators have justifiably been worried about the Common Core State Standards, whose focus on English Language Arts and Math has seemed to some like yet another knock against the field. But sometimes a bit of adversity can summon resolve. Instead of morphing social studies into an arm of literacy instruction, the Common Core State Standards have provided an opportunity for social studies educators to re-frame literacy instruction in such a way as to allow social studies to regain a more balanced and elevated role in K-12 curriculum.

The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards is changing the conversation about literacy instruction in social studies. Instead of just responding to the Common Core, the C3 Framework defines the proper role of literacy in social studies—that is, literacy for a

social studies purpose. In this article, we address the presumptive question—Is the Common Core good for social studies? We make an argument that, in fact, it is good, but is an incomplete vision as it leaves out the vital purposes and practices of a meaningful social studies education, including disciplinary inquiry and civic engagement.

The C3 Framework builds on the foundational strengths of the Common Core State Standards to establish an ambitious context for teaching literacy in social studies. Two current approaches to literacy instruction in social studies provide an important context for this endeavor.

1. Content area reading.

Content area reading focuses on the context of the reading experience. Urquhart and Frazee describe content area reading as occurring at the intersection of what a reader brings to the reading experience, the climate in which the reading occurs, and the specific characteristics of the text.² The general idea is that teachers in content areas are best equipped to help students interact with text and develop meaning *in those content areas*, given the unique intellectual or academic nature

of the text. Content area reading tends to focus on making meaning in addition to other literacy skills, such as decoding, vocabulary development, and general comprehension. Learning in social studies is heavily dependent on text and thus has been a key target of content area reading.

2. Disciplinary Literacy.

Disciplinary literacy stands apart from content area reading in significant ways. Disciplinary literacies are about more than just reading. Disciplinary literacies include all the skills that are needed to understand, create, and communicate academic knowledge.³ Disciplinary literacies are also reflective of how experts think in different specialized disciplines; for example, literacy in history has distinctive characteristics that differentiate it from literacy in other social studies disciplines, such as geography and economics. Reading, writing, and other forms of expression have unique qualities in each of the core areas of social studies.

The Common Core State Standards and Literacy in Social Studies

The Common Core State Standards establish general literacy skills and some of the disciplinary skills that students need for college and career. The 32 anchor standards in the Common Core provide a foundation for literacy in social studies. The C3 Framework argues that 21 of these anchor standards are uniquely supportive of social studies inquiry, and three anchor standards are absolutely vital to literacy in social studies. Table 1

Table 1: Connections between the C3 Framework and the CCR* Anchor Standards in the ELA/Literacy Common Core Standards

Foundational	All ELA/Literacy Common Core Standards
Supportive	Reading 1-10; Writing 1, 7-9; Speaking and Listening 1-6; Language 6
Vital	Reading 1; Writing 7; Speaking and Listening 1

*College Career Readiness (CCR) Anchor Standards

Source: National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), *The 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), 20. Accessible online at www.socialstudies.org/c3.

identifies the connections between the ELA Common Core anchor standards and the C3 Framework.

At the K-5 level, the Common Core describes the skills that students need in reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language. For grades 6-12, the Common Core distinguishes these skills for disciplinary contexts by listing 10 reading standards for social studies and 10 writing standards for science, social studies, and the technical subjects.

The general focus of the literacy skills in a given standard is consistent, but becomes more sophisticated across the grades. In grades 6-12, the literacy skills also begin to reflect unique disciplinary characteristics. For example, informational text reading standard 1 for kindergarten states that students will “ask and answer questions about key details in a text.” This focus on key details advances

in sophistication so that by grades 11-12 social studies students are expected to “cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.” Three important ideas are evident in the 11-12 standards: (1) the notion of evidence; (2) the distinction between primary and secondary sources; and (3) the relationship between details from text and the text as a whole.

It’s important to keep in mind that the Common Core State Standards emphasize history in the 20 reading and writing standards for grades 6-12, so the disciplinary context for the Common Core standards is limited. We can see this narrow focus in Reading Standard 1, mentioned above. The use of evidence is a general social studies literacy skill that is relevant for all the disciplines in the

field. However, the distinction among primary and secondary sources is unique to history and thus an incomplete representation of social studies.

The C3 Framework Vision of Literacy in Social Studies

The C3 Framework builds on the foundation provided by the Common Core State Standards in three important ways. First, the C3 Framework elevates the purpose of literacy to be in the service of academic inquiry and civic action. While the Common Core Standards mention research in Writing Standard 7, the C3 Framework places inquiry at the center of social studies, animating all aspects of teaching and learning in the field.

Second, the C3 Framework expands the disciplinary context of social studies by placing on equal footing civics, economics, geography, and history and by recognizing that social studies includes the behavioral sciences. In Appendix A of the C3 Framework, the disciplinary writers map the distinct ways of knowing within their respective disciplines and further delineate the types of evidence that are particular to the discipline. Table 2 summarizes the data sources that each of the disciplines of civics, economics, geography, and history would use to address questions like: How bad was the recent Great Recession?

Table 2: Data Sources in Social Studies Disciplines

WAYS OF KNOWING	CIVICS/GOVERNMENT	ECONOMICS	GEOGRAPHY	HISTORY
	POLITICAL SCIENTISTS SAY...	ECONOMISTS SAY...	GEOGRAPHERS SAY...	HISTORIANS SAY...
DIMENSION 2				
DATA SOURCES NEEDED TO ADDRESS QUESTIONS	Government policies, policy pronouncements, political poll results, statistics, leadership efforts, political behavior; observations of local conditions, interviews; news reports	Statistics and lots of them in as real time as possible (labor, capital, credit, monetary flow, supply, demand)	Spatial and environmental data; statistics, map representations, GIS data to measure observable changes to the planet; indicators of territorial impact	Accounts from the recent recession and from hard economic times in the past, both firsthand and synthetic, as many as can be found (oral history, diaries, journals, newspapers, photos, economic data, artifacts, etc.)

Source: National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), *The 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), 67. Accessible online at www.socialstudies.org/c3.

Third, the C3 Framework details literacies that are essential for success in college, career, *and civic life*. The literacies described in the C3 Framework fall into two broad categories—those skills needed for inquiry such as questioning, evaluating evidence, and communicating conclusions; and those grounded in academic concepts and approaches to organizing and making sense out of disciplinary content.

The C3 inquiry literacies contained within the Framework are carefully and explicitly articulated in Dimensions 1, 3, and 4 in the Framework, and include the following.

C3 Inquiry Literacies

1. Questioning
2. Selecting sources
3. Gathering information from sources
4. Evaluating sources
5. Making claims
6. Using evidence
7. Constructing arguments and explanations
8. Adapting arguments and explanations
9. Presenting arguments and explanations
10. Critiquing arguments and explanations
11. Analyzing social problems
12. Assessing options for action
13. Taking informed action

The disciplinary literacies contained within Dimension 2 are more deeply embedded within the indicators. The following list provides some clarifying examples of literacies that are featured in one or more of the indicators in Dimension 2.

C3 Disciplinary Literacies

1. Using deliberative processes
2. Participating in school settings
3. Following rules
4. Making economic decisions
5. Using economic data
6. Identifying prices in a market
7. Reasoning spatially
8. Constructing maps
9. Using geographic data

10. Classifying historical sources
11. Determining the purpose of an historical source
12. Analyzing cause and effect in history

What Do C3 Literacies Look Like in Practice

In Table 3 (p. 330), we outline four of the C3 inquiry literacies listed above and embed each within a social studies discipline. We also identify instructional resources and opportunities for teachers to incorporate these literacies in authentic ways. This list is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather, a starting place for thinking about the ways in which a social studies experience can serve as an ideal staging ground for developing essential literacies.

Is the Common Core good for social studies? Yes, but...

Social studies demands a unique set of literacy skills, but did the Common

Core get it right? Even with its limited focus on history education, we think it did. The Common Core State Standards include a robust set of skills that should be the foundation for social studies literacy. There are several elements of the Common Core State Standards that are particularly useful. The Common Core State Standards are fewer, higher, and clearer, and thus push social studies to be similarly well defined in describing the skills and practices that are essential to the field. The Common Core State Standards have also shifted the discussion about literacy in social studies from an amorphous focus on context to a manageable number of clearly stated literacies that can serve as a foundation for an upgrading of social studies state standards. The Common Core State Standards specifically encourage depth of knowledge and higher order thinking, which is sorely needed in social studies, in contrast to the current tendency to favor breadth over depth,



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or factual minutia over understanding. The Common Core State Standards recognize and validate the importance of preparation for civic life. As noted in the introduction to the Common Core State Standards, students who meet the standards are able to “reflexively demonstrate the cogent reasoning and use of evidence that is essential to both private deliberation and responsible citizenship in a democratic republic.”²⁴ The Common Core State Standards also promote interdisciplinary approaches and the application of knowledge and concepts in real world settings. This has opened the door

for documents like the C3 Framework to define disciplinary literacy in social studies. 🌐

Officers (CCSSO), *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* (Washington, D.C.: NGA and CCSSO, 2010).

Notes

1. Tina L. Heafner and Paul G. Fitchett, “National Trends in Elementary Instruction: Exploring the Role of Social Studies Curricula,” *The Social Studies* 103, no. 2 (2012): 67-72.
2. Vicki Urquhart and Dana Frazee, *Teaching Reading in the Content Areas: If Not Me, Then Who?* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 3rd edition, 2012).
3. Timothy Shanahan and Cynthia Shanahan, “Teaching Disciplinary Literacy to Adolescents: Rethinking Content Area Literacy,” *Harvard Educational Review* 78 (2008), 40-59.
4. National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA) and Council of Chief State School

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Much of the text of this article also appears in a chapter written by both authors, “The C3 Framework and the Common Core State Standards,” published in *NCSS Bulletin 113*, Social Studies for the Next Generation: Purposes, Practices, and Implications of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards.

Table 3: C3 Literacies as Social Studies Experiences

C3 INQUIRY LITERACY	C3 DISCIPLINARY LITERACY	INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCE/OPPORTUNITY
ASSESSING OPTIONS FOR ACTION	Civics: Using deliberative processes	The Model United Nations (MUN) (www.nmun.org) is a program that invites students to role-play as diplomats representing a country or non-governmental organization in a simulated United Nations conference. Before the conference, students research an issue from the perspective of an assigned country and develop a solution to a world problem. Within the conference, students then take on the role of diplomat, debating and deliberating within committees, such as the Security Council or General Assembly. As students research, develop and present resolutions, they are practicing many of the C3 literacies but they are specifically using deliberative processes while assessing options for action, as the MUN expects students to work collaboratively within and across country teams. As important, the MUN draws on all of the social studies disciplines asking students to think about thorny social problems (e.g., sustainable development, clean water) that can cut across or situated within a particular discipline.
CONSTRUCTING ARGUMENTS AND EXPLANATIONS	Economics: Making economic decisions	The Council for Economic Education has created the <i>National Budget Simulation</i> (www.econedlink.org/s306) in which students serve as an economic advisor to the president. In the simulation, students must weigh an increase of military spending and decreases in social programs in order to limit the deficit. Using an online simulation students add or subtract from a line-item expenditure (e.g., national defense, energy, social security) while making decisions about the impact of an increase or decrease in taxes (e.g., corporate, individual, estate). As students weigh these economic decisions, they ultimately construct an argument explaining and justifying their balanced (or unbalanced) budget and predict the consequences of the decisions they have made. In doing so, teachers are able to nestle the very important skill of constructing an argument within an authentic economics inquiry.
QUESTIONING	Geography: Using geographic data	<i>270 to Win</i> (www.270towin.com) is a non-partisan site that contains electoral maps of the results for every presidential election in U.S. history. Also of interest is the opportunity to use the map to chart a strategy for winning the 2016 presidential race. Students can answer the questions: “What strategy would you recommend to candidates Mitt Romney (R) and Barack Obama (D) to win the presidency in 2012? How do the maps shape the strategy?” Using geographic data provided on these interactive maps, teachers can initiate a geographic inquiry with students by asking important questions of this geo-political data.
EVALUATING SOURCES	History: Determining the purpose of an historical source	<i>Beyond the Bubble</i> (http://beyondthebubble.stanford.edu) is a website launched by the Stanford History Education Group. Using the Library of Congress primary source collections, the creators provide history assessments that focus students on evaluating individual sources. For example, in one of the exercises featuring the iconic Dorothea Lange photograph from the Great Depression, students are asked to source, contextualize and corroborate the document. In sourcing the document, the students are asked several questions, including “Who created this document? When? For what purposes?” As students determine the purpose of the historical source, they are practicing an important core C3 literacy of evaluating sources—but doing so within the context of a historical investigation.