

Taking a Leap of Faith toward Inquiry: Introducing the Building Block IDM Blueprint

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In the iconic movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Indy is in search of the Holy Grail and must complete three tasks in order to save his father and secure the ever elusive cup. One of its most memorable scenes is when he must take a leap of faith across a deep, dark canyon to reach a doorway on the other side of the chasm. Passage seems dangerously impossible. He consults his guidebook for directions and he reads, “Only in the leap from the lion’s head will he prove his worth.” Indy then takes a breath, raises his left foot, and takes a brave step into the unknown. Instantly, a camouflaged bridge appears, and he is able to cross the void and retrieve the Holy Grail.

Teaching with inquiry can feel like this film scene. Social studies teachers look out into the eyes of students and fear that the inquiry bridge might not appear. After all, inquiry is filled with unknowns. Teachers may have a solid inquiry curriculum stocked with compelling questions, sources, and tasks, but that is no guarantee that students will care or engage with the material. And, even if they do, there can be a palpable fear of losing control—what might students say in response to a question? Could the interpretation of a source land the teacher in an uncomfortable place? What if students get heated or offended by another student’s argument? And, then, if teachers are able to pass the

first two “tests” of inquiry-based curriculum and instruction, there is always the leap of faith needed to help students take informed action and participate civically. Inquiry teaching is fraught with instructional challenges and fear can often get the better of us.

What, then, can move a teacher to take that leap of faith toward inquiry? In this article, we build on work that we have been doing in the C3 Teachers Innovation Lab. First, we talk about the role of trust in an inquiry experience and the three key processes that build a culture of trust in the classroom: deliberation, collaboration, and production. Then, we introduce a new Inquiry Design Model (IDM) blueprint—the Building Block

IDM—that focuses on building trust with students. We walk through several Building Block inquiries and then point colleagues to C3 Teachers, where we are starting to build out a bank of these inquiries along with a blank Building Block blueprint for teachers wanting to build their own.

Trust

As previously mentioned, we have landed on three key inquiry processes that build a culture of trust in the classroom: deliberation, collaboration, and production.¹

Deliberation involves core instructional practices that allow students to speak and listen to each other’s ideas. These practices might include a Harkness Discussion, Think-Pair-Share, Take a Stand debate, or Socratic Discussion. These types of deliberative experiences engender respect for others and an appreciation for a pluralistic democracy where people hold different perspectives on life. Deliberative exercises build trust by fostering empathy between students and between teacher and students because

they show that teachers trust their students to think about big ideas.

Collaboration involves core instructional practices that allow students to work with others to problem solve through teamwork. This might include a Jigsaw, Question Formulation Technique exercise, or Structured Academic Controversy. During collaborative experiences, students negotiate with others and learn to respect other ways of knowing and doing. If a task is “group worthy,” students learn to value other team members’ strengths and to value their own contributions to the whole. These kinds of experiences build trust by creating interdependence

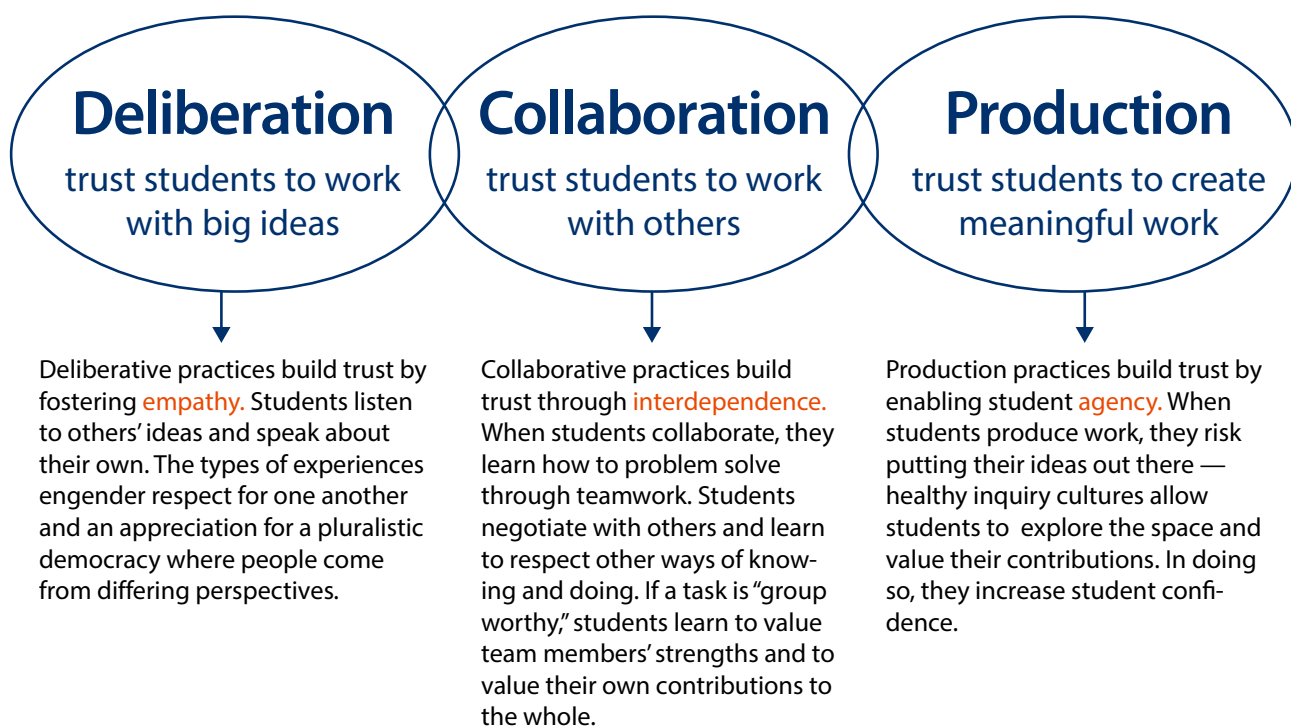
between students and demonstrating that a teacher trusts their students to work with others.

Production involves core instructional practices that allow students to construct meaningful work. This could include crafting evidentiary arguments or projects (Public Service Announcement, Museum exhibit). It could also include formative work such as constructing a map, timeline, or T-chart. When students produce work, they risk putting their ideas out there, but they also cultivate agency in the process. Healthy inquiry cultures enable students to explore frontiers and create forgiving spaces to learn and grow. In doing so, they build classroom trust.

By allowing students space to think (deliberate ideas), talk (collaborate around ideas), and do (produce ideas), teachers build a culture of classroom trust with their students that engenders key attitudes of empathy, interdependence, and agency that can accelerate inquiry-based learning in the classroom. While these processes and attributes are not exclusive to social studies, they do connect deeply to citizenship and our role in preparing students for civic life.

Learning to teach for trust represents both old and new frontiers for us. We would argue that all of the Inquiry Design Model blueprints thus far require trust. The formative and summative performance

Inquiry Processes and Attitudes that build a classroom culture of **trust**



tasks are opportunities for students to deliberate, collaborate, and produce ideas. However, we also know we need to surface trust in explicit ways and have worked on a new IDM template—the Building Block IDM—to help make trust more visible and accessible for teachers.

Teaching for Trust: The Building Block IDM Blueprint

A Building Block Inquiry is a 25–45 minute exercise constructed to draw students into a vibrant learning space where they have opportunities to deliberate, collaborate, and produce ideas. Some components of this blueprint resemble other IDM templates:² there is a compelling question, a set of featured sources, and a formative performance task built around a standard. But there are also differences. Whereas all IDM blueprints thus far have ended with a claim-making/argumentation exercise,³ Building Block inquiries focus on the instructional processes (deliberation, collaboration, and production) that may or *may not* end in argumentation but always help students build knowledge and engender a sense of wonder. IDM heresy? Maybe. But we too are growing as inquiry designers and want to be exploratory and flexible in our approaches. We think there is value in productive struggle, even when that struggle doesn't conclude with an answer, even if that answer is tentative and the outcome is straight up curiosity. We also

think that inquiry teachers need a range of tools to create these trust-worthy classrooms and so, like good developers, we want to create resources that will help them get there.

A Building Block IDM Inquiry is a 25–45 minute exercise built on a compelling question that allows students to explore a source or set of sources and to engage in an inquiry task that includes opportunities for deliberation, collaboration, and/or production of important ideas in a social studies unit of study.

Building Block Inquiries are organized into four major sections. The first section highlights the compelling question that is based on a standard. The inquiries we developed used the C3 Framework indicators but may also include state social studies standards. The second section features the sources that will be used in the instruction. The sources have been prepared for immediate classroom use by opting for visual or auditory sources when possible but always selecting and adapting the sources to be low-threshold, high-yield entry for students. In other words, we want the inquiries to

be accessible for all students thereby enabling a curricular equity in the experience. The third section describes the Formative Performance Tasks in terms of our trust framework, where students are explicitly building knowledge by deliberating, collaborating, and producing work. Finally, we have included an Instructional Snapshot, where we suggest an instructional sequence and explain how we originally saw the inquiry unfolding. One of the most important principles of IDM is true here: *We want teachers to do what they do best and craft curriculum for their particular group of students and for their style of instruction.* So we grant full permission to change what needs changing!

Next, we unveil several trust building inquiries. Example A is designed around the compelling question “How can art unite a divided democracy?” and sets students up to think about the ways that musicians can often do what U.S. politicians cannot. Example B is about Budget Priorities and features the compelling question “What should the U.S. spend its money on?” asking students to grapple with one of the most vexing civic issues around our values and national spending. Example C focuses on photographic evidence of the Great Depression and highlights the compelling question “What stories do photographs tell?”

Example A: “How can art unite a divided democracy?”

This civics Building Block IDM Inquiry leads students through an investigation of the ways in which artists are trying to heal political polarization that has divided Americans. Students analyze recent events (e.g., the 2024 Fast Car duet between Tracy Chapman and Luke Combs) and how these artists created some aspect of unity in their work. Students consider the role artists can play in a democracy and how people find commonality within the humanities generally, and art specifically.

Example B: “What should the U.S. spend its money on?”
This economics Building Block IDM Inquiry is grounded in the concept of scarcity, which ultimately means there is not enough stuff (e.g., food, movie theaters, healthcare) to go around. As a result, economic

reasoning emphasizes making informed decisions about how to distribute goods and services efficiently and in ways that yield the best outcomes. It seems like a straightforward process, but this process is value laden: What do individuals value? How should we reconcile different values? This inquiry lesson sets the stage for wrestling with competing priorities at both the macro and personal levels.

Example C: “What stories do photographs tell?”
This historical Building Block IDM Inquiry features a collection of photographs from the Great Depression which serve as a poignant story of the past, offering visual narratives that transcend time and space. Through the lens of historical photographs, we gain intimate glimpses into bygone eras,

witnessing pivotal moments, societal shifts, and individual experiences frozen in time. These images capture an essence of historical events, from wars and revolutions to everyday life, allowing students to empathetically connect with the people and their stories.

A few things we noticed when we developed and test drove this new IDM blueprint template.

Sources took the lead in development. In each inquiry, we began with a juicy source or source set, not with the topic or compelling question. For example, in Example A, we feature the “Fast Car” duet between Tracy Chapman and Luke Combs. We started with these engaging and thought-provoking sources, the song lyrics and the article about the Grammy’s moment, and then landed on the question,

How Can Art Unite A Divided Democracy? (Political/Social Polarization)	
C3 Framework Standard	D2.Civ.5.9-12. Evaluate citizens’ and institutions’ effectiveness in addressing social and political problems at the local, state, tribal, national, and/or international level.
Featured Sources	
Source A: <i>Fast Car</i> by Tracy Chapman Source B: “A Rare Moment Americans Could All Share”	
Formative Performance Tasks	Instructional Snapshot
1. DELIBERATE: Annotate the lyric sheet as you listen to “Fast Car” by Tracy Chapman. Select your favorite lyric and share with a partner. 2. COLLABORATE: Listen to the story and work with a group of four to answer this question: Does the artist change the meaning of the song? If so, how? If not, why not? 3. PRODUCE: Interview a classmate you <i>do not know</i> well (at least someone you have not worked with thus far). Use the protocol for questions and add a question of your own.	Class begins listening to the song, <i>Fast Car</i> , by Tracy Chapman and students individually annotate by highlighting the lyrics that most resonate to them and then select their favorite lyric and share it with a partner (15 minutes). Next, students listen to <i>The Atlantic</i> story, “A Rare Moment Americans Could All Share,” and work in a group of 4 to understand the background of both Tracy Chapman and Luke Combs and what they have in common and how their unique perspectives impact the meaning of <i>Fast Car</i> (their individual versions as well as the duet)—15 minutes. Finally, students are asked to interview someone in the class that they do not know well using the protocol questions. Each student is asked to add a question to make it their own—30 minutes. Ultimately, teachers could use these three instructional stages (Deliberate, Collaborate, Produce) to have a larger classroom conversation about the compelling question and what other artists have helped create unity (e.g., <i>Hamilton</i> , the musical).

What <i>Should</i> the U.S. Spend Its Money On? (National Budget)	
C3 Framework Standard	D2.Eco.1.9-12. Analyze how incentives influence choices that may result in policies with a range of costs and benefits for different groups.
Featured Sources	
Source A: Budget Priority Cards Source B: “Policy Basics: Where do our federal tax dollars go?” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2023	
Formative Performance Task/s	Instructional Snapshot
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. DELIBERATE: Rank order the Budget Priority cards from #1-10 based on how you think the government should spend its money. 2. COLLABORATE: Pair up with a classmate and compare rank orders noting differences between each other's ranking. Input rankings in a Google form. 3. PRODUCE: Compare your rankings with the actual U.S. budget and note the difference/s between student priorities and national priorities. 	<p>Begin class with a collaborative sorting exercise in which students work to prioritize 10 cards (Source A) that have competing budget priorities on them. For example, one card features an image of U.S. soldiers with the caption: “MILITARY: Spending for national defense and support for U.S. allies and interests abroad.” Another card reads, “HEALTH CARE: Spending for research to cure or prevent disease and services for low-income and elderly Americans.” Students are then asked the question, “What should we spend our money on?” and in small groups deliberate which order to place the cards (e.g., Military, Healthcare, Education, Environment)—15 minutes. Then, students put their rankings into a Google form and examine in real time how the entire class ranks the various priorities—10 minutes. The teacher might end the class with students examining a pie chart of the current budget priorities to compare their priority list with the reality of the U.S. Budget—10 minutes. Students may be surprised at how little proportionally the government spends on education.</p>

How can art heal a divided democracy? We suspect that sources will inspire the Building Block inquiries.

Student engagement was elevated in the design. In developing the formative performance tasks, we intentionally used “trust verbs” that convey both student action and agency. We see the tasks as opportunities for teachers to trust students to *do* things in the inquiry like sort, rank, choose, find, interview, and poll. This prioritization signals a shift toward students making the meaning and teachers ceding the learning space to students. Again, this is not unique to the Building Block IDM blueprint, but something we really emphasized in development. For example, in Example B, “What should the U.S. spend its money on?” students physically manipulate a set of national priorities slides and rank order

them from most important to least important (see photo). The experience is intentionally tactile. Students move from

rank ordering, to inputting those rankings into a Google form, comparing their rankings to others, and then comparing



Pictured here, Christy Cartner’s students at Bryan Station High School in Lexington, Kentucky, rank order 10 budget priorities, August 2024.

Photo by Christy Cartner

What Stories Do Photographs Tell? (Great Depression)	
C3 Framework Standard	D2.His.12.6-8. Use questions generated about multiple historical sources to identify further areas of inquiry and additional sources.
Featured Sources	
Source A: Great Depression Migrants Photograph Set, <i>Library of Congress</i>	
Formative Performance Tasks	Instructional Snapshot
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. COLLABORATE: Annotate a series of photographs using a guided observation exercise. 2. DELIBERATE: Sort aspects of the image into created themes that “tell the story” of migrants’ experiences during the Great Depression. 3. PRODUCE: Suggest new titles for each photograph that reflect an accurate “telling” of the Great Depression. 	<p>Class begins with a brief discussion of the Great Depression, which caused many problems for small farmers living in the Great Plains. Dust Bowls made farming difficult and few jobs were available to meet a family’s needs. To find better opportunities, many people migrated west to California, hoping to find land to farm and raise livestock. But the journey wasn’t without hardship—5 minutes. As they explore the photographs, students are divided into expert jigsaw pairs to annotate the images in the Great Depression Migrants Photograph Set using a guided observation exercise. Students analyze and annotate the images by including details they see and connections they make about what the image tells them about the migrants’ experiences—10–15 minutes. To begin a process of theme development around the images, students are regrouped into study groups to sort the post-its into themes that “tell the story” of migrants’ experiences (e.g., perseverance, hopelessness, uncertainty). Students can create their own themes, or the teacher may provide or suggest themes for added scaffolding. Students share the details they included by themes—10 minutes. Finally, the teacher may task students with suggesting a new title for each photograph that exemplifies an overall theme.</p>

those to how the budget is set up. The students should be moving and the energy should be high.

We embedded teaching tools (a Google poll, graphic organizers, etc.) to assist teachers in the delivery of the lesson. As we started to develop these inquiries, we wanted to solve an age-old problem of inquiry: time. Teachers understandably struggle with the time to create these kinds of exercises and that time can be a barrier to entry. We tried to tackle this challenge by making these inquiries “Grab n’ Go” for teachers. In Example C, “What stories do photographs tell?”, we curated the photographic sources, formatted them in a slide deck, then created a guided observation form for teachers to use as is or edit

accordingly.⁴ By including classroom-ready instructional materials, we hope to lower the inquiry threshold for teachers.

We see these Building Block inquiries as a sort of “trust fall” for both teachers and students. In other words, these types of inquiries can be a good starting place for teachers who want to dip their pedagogical toes into inquiry-based instruction *and* as a way to build confidence in themselves and in their students for trying more extensive inquiry experiences. But we also see these Building Block Inquiries as an important tool for more experienced inquiry teachers who want to provide their students deeper conceptual knowledge and additional practice in specific inquiry skills. In other words, Building Block Inquiries are for *all* social studies teachers

who are making space for inquiry and who want efficient exercises for building a trust-worthy classroom.

In the next section, we delve into the ways that we see Building Block inquiries as living up to their new name—that is, as building blocks toward knowledge and skills.

Trust, Knowledge, and Skills

It could go without saying, but let’s be reminded that we teach with inquiry to help our students know and know *how* to know. Our efforts with students to build trust is really a necessity for strengthening students’ knowledge and skills in social studies. If knowledge and skills are inquiry muscles, trust is really the fascia, the connective tissue, that allows those muscles to move and get stronger. We see knowledge

and skills inextricably linked to the practices of trust—that is, building knowledge and skills through inquiry demands that we trust our students, and they trust us.

We know all too well there's a slippery slope with knowledge building and skill development. Without care and trust, knowledge and skill building can devolve into the drudgery of memorization, drill and kill, recall for recall's sake, and the soul crushing teacher-centered pedagogies that we sometimes suffer. But when we break down the inquiry process into manageable steps and then build up our students using carefully curated and trust-oriented exercises, we can realize our ultimate inquiry goals. When students *collaborate* to build knowledge, they are supporting each other and thus making the tasks feel less daunting. When students *deliberate* about the knowledge they are building, they gain confidence and are empowered to do something with their new knowledge. When students *produce*, they are using tools to be successful in communicating what they know without feeling overwhelmed. When students are collaborating, deliberating, and producing, they are building knowledge while practicing with inquiry skills *and* learning to trust themselves and each other.

Conclusion

Are Building Block IDM inquiries the holy grail? Frankly,

we don't know. Like Indiana Jones, we are on a persistent quest for it, hoping that in doing so, we help our fellow educators in getting closer to the magic, zest, and everlasting promise of inquiry. Like any sequel, we do worry that we will miss the mark or not stay true to the original plot that brought IDM coherence. On the other hand, some would argue that *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (the third film in the series) was the best of the franchise. We are hoping the Building Block inquiry falls squarely into that category—one of the best in a series of blueprints.

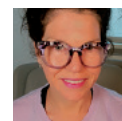
As a final note to our fellow inquirers out there, take heart knowing that perfection can be the enemy of the good. For new-to-inquiry teachers, don't worry about being the perfect inquiry teacher, just try taking a small step like the ones described above and then pay attention to how the students, the classroom culture, and you begin to change. Then, keep taking more (maybe larger) steps. For veteran inquiry teachers, leap onto that inquiry bridge and show us why we need to continue crossing it. In the words of the Grail Knight, "you have chosen wisely." ■

Notes

1. Kathy Swan, S.G. Grant, and John Lee, *Trusting Inquiry: Teaching with the Inquiry Design Model* (Silver Spring, Md.: National Council for the Social Studies, 2023).
2. Swan, Grant, and Lee, *Blueprinting an Inquiry-based Social Studies Curriculum* (Silver Spring, Md.:

National Council for the Social Studies, 2019).

3. Swan, Lee, and Grant, *Inquiry Design Model: Building Inquiries in Social Studies* (Silver Spring, Md.: National Council for the Social Studies, 2018).
4. Ibid.



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