6.0 The Case for Genuine Inquiry

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Inquiry is an approach to teaching and a mindset for students to formulate their own conclusions about everything we want them to learn.

Inquiry has been advocated as a powerful teaching approach in history, geography, and the other social studies disciplines for more than a century, and it has also been encouraged in recently approved curricula across Canada (British Columbia, n.d.; New Brunswick, 2021; Nova Scotia, 2022; Ontario, 2023). Despite widespread support for inquiry, in our experience it is more often advocated than effectively realized in many classrooms. One reason for this neglect is confusion about what inquiry is and how to do it. As a report by Historica Canada (2021, p. 7) noted, "not all inquiry is created equal"—it may simply pose leading questions that prompt expected answers. And it is often implemented ineffectively (Barton & Levstik, 2004) with the unfortunate result that teachers don't see its potential. In response to these challenges, we offer three goals for this chapter:

- clarify what inquiry is and is not;
- explain why it is beneficial and so widely recommended;
- address common obstacles that impede effective implementation.

What Is Genuine Inquiry?

Somewhat ironically, we begin our explanation of what inquiry is by describing what it is not. In our experience using inquiry to teach social studies to secondary students and teaching about inquiry to teacher candidates and practising teachers, we regularly encounter four misconceptions:

- **Is the same as research.** Some teachers mistakenly believe that inquiry is essentially the same as conducting research. They provide a research question (or students develop their own) and ask students to find the factual "correct answer" in textbooks, videos, online, or in other sources. Unfortunately, locating and retrieving predetermined conclusions about topics and summarizing them is unlikely to develop a deep understanding of what we want students to learn. Genuine inquiry can involve locating facts and understanding received knowledge about a topic, but it must require students to draw their own critical conclusions about what to believe or do using this information (Gini-Newman & Case, 2015, p. 16).
- **Is a specific teaching strategy.** Inquiry is often seen as just one of many teaching strategies that teachers should use in their practice, like lecturing, assigning readings, discussing in groups, and watching videos. Furthermore, some teachers subscribe to false dichotomies that draw sharp distinctions between student-centred, skills-based inquiry methods and teacher-directed, content-focussed "traditional" methods. Inquiry is not a single teaching strategy, and contrary to what many critics of inquiry-based approaches claim, as explained in Chapter 9, it is not oppositional to commonly used teacher-focussed pedagogies as long as they are used to support students in forming their own conclusions about the topic being investigated (Scott et al., 2018).
- **Is a particular process.** Inquiry is sometimes presented to students as a fixed multi-step procedure that consists of posing an inquiry question, building background knowledge, identifying evidence, analyzing evidence, and sharing findings. Viewing inquiry as a linear, sequenced process oversimplifies what is a complex and recursive orientation to learning that comes in many forms. Furthermore, each "step" of inquiry needs to be seen as its own inquiry by asking, for, example, Is this

the right question to ask? What information do we require? and What counts as relevant evidence? Inquiry is a mindset focussed on questioning things. It is about being inquisitive and inclined to probe, not about following a specific procedure.

- **Expects students to discover independently.** Inquiry is sometimes mistakenly and disingenuously compared to discovery learning, where students are expected to independently respond to complex questions in a sophisticated manner with little teacher instruction or support. Research has illustrated that unguided or discovery-based learning activities often result in shallow and naïve understandings and reinforce misconceptions and inaccuracies (Kirschner et al., 2006). Not only does inquiry require considerable guidance from the teacher, it is profoundly collaborative and consultative. Teacher input and the sharing of ideas among students are necessary if students are to succeed at inquiry (Saye, 2017; Parker & Hess, 2001).

Now that we have outlined what inquiry is not, we turn to describing what it is. Genuine inquiry is best understood as a response to transmissive teaching, whereby teachers communicate factual information and established conclusions that students are expected to accept at face value. Instead, inquiry expects teachers to raise questions about and problematize what they want students to learn in order to help students experience the social studies disciplines as interpretive areas of study where conclusions are constructed, interpreted, and assessed. Inquiry is not simply a pedagogical approach; it involves developing an inquisitive mindset in students that they are to apply in self-regulated ways in their lives beyond school. This mindset is characterized by three orientations:

- **evaluative:** engaging in open-minded scrutiny of a question, problem, or issue that is focussed not on finding the correct answer via research but on judging which conclusions or options are more justifiable or defensible;
- **imaginative:** looking beyond predetermined or obvious answers to consider new, original, or innovative solutions and responses;
- **consultative:** seeking out and considering ideas and recommendations from a variety of relevant sources and multiple perspectives and viewpoints.

Why Embrace Inquiry?

Researchers have identified multiple reasons for embracing genuine inquiry. We discuss five of these reasons:

- is more engaging and meaningful for students;
- reveals how knowledge in the social studies disciplines is produced and evolves;
- leads to deeper understanding of the subject matter;
- strengthens important civic competencies and values;
- is more satisfying to teach.

More Engaging and Meaningful

Many students are bored by the study of history, geography, and other social studies disciplines because they are treated as passive recipients of knowledge rather than as active inquirers and knowledge constructors. Inviting students to investigate authentic and relevant issues and to formulate their own interpretations and conclusions is more likely to engage their interest and curiosity than asking them merely to recall other people's conclusions (Foster & Padgett, 1999, p. 363). The intention is not simply to find ways of making the "facts" more exciting or meaningful for students; it is to make the subject more intellectually active by inviting students to question and use what they are learning. Studies have found that an inquiry approach increases motivation and better reaches learners who are not always successful in traditional classroom settings and enables those who have often been excluded from official curriculum to deepen and expand their understanding (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Darling-Hammond et al., 2008; Grant, 2018). As the teacher explains in the textbox 6.0(1), his Grade 8 students' interest greatly increased when given the opportunity to inquire into the significance of historical figures from the War of 1812.

Reveals How Knowledge Develops

Most textbooks, maps, charts, reports, documentaries, lectures, and films that secondary students interact with are the end products of inquiry. Rarely are students invited to consider how these products were created or to construct their own interpretations after analyzing evidence. In history, for example, students are often presented with accounts or narratives framed as "the" true story of events and are expected to learn and accept them as presented by completing basic recall and comprehension tasks. This approach does not encourage students to see history as an interpretive area of study where conclusions are constructed, interpreted, and assessed and are often incomplete and evolving. For example, until recently curriculum in Canada did not include Indigenous perspectives and knowledges or explore the negative consequences of colonialism for Indigenous people. Current history and social studies textbooks differ in content from those used 20 years ago, and even more so from books written 50 years ago. Ten years from now, different issues and topics will emerge, and our interpretations and understandings will change with them. In this sense, all interpretations are "revisionist"—interpretations must be constructed, not simply accepted. Unless students are taught to recognize and explore the factors that influence what gets

discussed and represented in their textbooks, and to understand that there can never be a single, definitive conclusion about a topic or issue, they will not understand the nature of the subject. As discussed in Chapter 13.3, students' ability to grasp the nature of the content knowledge they are introduced to is impaired if they do not understand that experts construct interpretations that need to be critically assessed rather than accepted as "the truth." In short, neither the subject nor the subject matter can be properly understood without engaging in inquiry.

Promotes Deeper Understanding

For more than a century, students in the social studies disciplines have been taught "the facts" about the past and the world around them, and yet generations of research reports regularly lament students' lack of knowledge and understanding about history, geography, and civics. Inquiry has the potential to deepen students' understanding of both substantive knowledge (for example, generalizations, facts, substantive concepts) and procedural knowledge (for example, disciplinary strategies, methods, procedural concepts) (Barton & Levstik, 2004, p. 189). As explored more fully in Chapter 3.1, inviting students to investigate meaningful problems and questions has been shown to promote deep learning and transfer of learning to different contexts (Bransford et al., 1999; Bransford & Swartz, 2000; Darling-Hammond et al., 2008). However, achieving these results requires helping students address preconceptions, strengthen their content knowledge, apply disciplinary concepts and procedures to new situations, and develop metacognitive strategies to guide their thinking and learning.

Strengthens Essential Civic Competencies and Values

Engaging students in inquiry has the potential to develop the knowledge, perspectives, dispositions, values, and competencies necessary for informed citizenship (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Levy et al., 2013). It can help students establish their personal identity and agency, by seeing themselves as individuals with a personal past shaped by the society and communities they are part of, as well as developing their values, opinions, and beliefs (Van Straaten et al., 2016). There is a growing body of evidence from civics education research that suggests that pedagogical approaches that invite student voice and active engagement in community issues have a significant impact in fostering active citizenship (Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2013). Diane Hess and Paula McAvoy (2014) found that students who are regularly invited to discuss controversial political

The Power of Genuine Inquiry **6.0(1)**

I was selected to be a part of a team creating teaching resources to support a new social studies curriculum for Alberta. As a part of this process, the team was given the opportunity to learn how to develop critical thinking challenges. These lessons became some of my most successful classes of the year. One particular lesson with my Grade 8 class stood out.

I created a critical challenge on the historical figures involved with the War of 1812. We focussed on three individuals: Tecumseh, Laura Secord, and Isaac Brock. The challenge asked students to decide which of these historical figures was the "most heroic." After collectively identifying criteria for what would constitute a "hero," students were given fact sheets for the three individuals. Once the students had made their decision according to the criteria and prepared their arguments, we were to debate the heroism of the three historical figures.

I was not prepared for the lively discussion that ensued. Rarely have I seen my students so engaged as they debated the heroism of Brock, Tecumseh, and Secord. My role changed quickly from teacher to referee, as I almost needed to restrain some students physically. As the bell rang, the debate raged into the hallway and on into their next class. I felt very satisfied with the lesson, as this level of engagement is rarely seen at the junior high level. However, it was not until later that night that the impact of that critical challenge really hit home.

I am the school basketball coach and that night we were playing in the city championship. It was a thrilling back-and-forth game that ended with the other team hitting a last-second three-point shot to beat us. After the excitement had died down, I was in the gym cleaning up when I heard some players arguing in the hallway. I thought that some of my players were upset about the game, so I went to investigate. As I opened the door, the first thing I heard was one of my players yell: "How can you seriously say Isaac Brock was not the most heroic of the three when he risked his own life and died for what he believed in?"

A smile crept across my face as I realized that the players were not arguing about the championship game, but rather about the topic introduced that morning in social studies. This seemingly simple critical challenge had fostered curricular understanding in a way that my students saw as meaningful and important. I left the school that night as a critical-challenge convert anxious to engage my students by creating more.

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issues are more engaged in class, feel more confident in their ability to participate in discussions, demonstrate increased political knowledge, display more interest in politics, follow the news more regularly, are more likely to engage in political discussions with people they disagree with, and are more interested in listening to opinions different from their own. One teacher we interviewed about using inquiry said, "I feel like the skills that I am able to work with them [students] on are certainly rooted in history education but they go far beyond the history classroom." Citizenship competencies include making sense of competing perspectives and viewpoints, using a "discerning eye" to evaluate arguments and the evidence and reasons they are based on, and reaching informed evidence-based decisions. Thomas Holt (1990) maintains that historical inquiry helps students appreciate and understand people different from themselves, better understand the relationship between the past and the present, and transform how they see the world. Students who are accustomed to doing inquiry will likely make better sense of ongoing controversies by learning to consider the types of questions that need to be asked and the perspectives that need to be considered. In this way, inquiry contributes to students' civic consciousness and helps them make better connections in their daily lives with the past, present, and future.

More Satisfying for Teachers

Experienced teachers who regularly implement inquiry report that the subject is more interesting, fun, and rewarding. According to teachers we have interviewed, an inquiry approach introduces greater variation and flexibility in their teaching. One social studies teacher stated that inquiry "always makes it interesting, and keeps me interested even though I teach the same things." Teachers also report that their interactions with students changed because inquiry provided the space for them to have conversations with students individually and in small and large groups. This enabled teachers to provide specific and descriptive feedback about students' learning in relation to the topic under investigation, check in with students more often, and get to know them better. Another teacher commented that inquiry made him "a better teacher and a better listener to [his] students." The teacher's experience reported in the textbox 6.0(1) is typical of many testimonials to the potential of inquiry to increase the satisfaction for teachers in the social studies disciplines.

Why Is There Resistance?

While inquiry offers substantial rewards for teaching and learning, there are real and perceived challenges that obstruct effective implementation. Many teachers and students "have enormous difficulty carrying out some of the key components of historical inquiry" (Barton & Levstik, 2004, p. 185). Understanding these challenges is the first step towards finding ways of overcoming or at least mitigating them. Let's consider what can be done to address five of these obstacles:

- logistical challenges built into the school system
- uncertainty about how to assess inquiry learning
- teachers' personal resistance to the implied changes
- the paucity of accessible resources
- student reluctance and difficulty with inquiry

Logistical Challenges

Teachers encounter systemic challenges in the education system that pose obstacles to genuine inquiry that are often difficult to overcome because they are beyond teachers' direct control. These challenges include the following:

- short class periods that do not provide enough time to engage in meaningful inquiry;
- lack of time to "cover" overcrowded and overly prescriptive curriculum;
- insufficient teacher planning time;
- large class sizes and increasingly diverse student populations with varying abilities and exceptionalities;
- pressure to prepare students for high-stakes exams that emphasize factual recall, not deep understanding and disciplinary thinking.

These are legitimate challenges that all teachers face, and it is not clear that an inquiry approach makes any of them more difficult to overcome. In fact, the reverse may be true. The challenges posed by large classes with varying abilities and exceptionalities are experienced by teachers regardless of their teaching approach. It is worth noting that students who are interested in a subject are invariably easier and more enjoyable to teach than those who are largely bored by it. With patience and persistence these obstacles can be mitigated, and suggestions on how to do this are found throughout the Anthology:

- start small with more manageable tasks (see Chapter 6.1);
- initially keep inquiry teacher controlled and gradually release responsibility (see Chapter 11.4);
- assemble student-accessible resources gradually over time (see Chapter 13.0);
- create a truly co-operative classroom to support co-learning (see Chapter 10.1);
- prioritize what we choose to teach and devote little time to the less important topics (see Chapter 2.0).

Even the obstacles posed by high-stakes factual-recall exams can be mitigated. This begins by altering the emphasis of the exams we administer so they assess depth of understanding and thinking about the subject matter. Since only a few end-of-year exams are externally mandated, changing the focus of the exams at most grade levels is within teachers' authority. As suggested in Chapter 12.2, end-of-term assessments should emphasize students' ability to apply and consolidate what they have learned rather than to remember the details. Even if we must test for factual recall, we can use an inquiry approach to better prepare students for these exams—using inquiry to engage students in thinking about what they are learning has been shown to translate into higher results on standardized tests (Case et al., 2015, p. 43; Newmann et al., 2001).

Uncertainty About Assessment

Teachers report uncertainty when adopting an inquiry approach in knowing what and how to assess students' work. As one teacher noted, it is "difficult to put a number on" the ideas, conversations, and discussions that occurred during inquiry. One of the most difficult hurdles is transitioning from assessing a single right answer to assessing evidence-based conclusions. Assessing students' recall of factual information is relatively straightforward, but assessing the quality of their thinking during an inquiry is more complicated. Drawing conclusions involves making claims that are supported by sound arguments and reliable evidence while also considering other possible interpretations and counter-arguments (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2008). The arguments and evidence used to support an opinion or claim are what counts, and the conclusions are rarely definite, only more or less plausible. This is no different than what is required when we assess for competency—instead of looking for a specific answer, we are looking for evidence that the desired qualities or characteristics are present in a student's answer (see Chapter 12.2 for more on mining students' answers for evidence of achievement).

Personal Resistance

Implementing any new teaching approach is always daunting, and teachers who have tried inquiry commonly report wide ranging concerns including fear of change and of making mistakes; being unable to answer students' questions; and real or perceived push-back from colleagues, school administrators, and parents about meeting and assessing curricular expectations. Many teachers avoid inquiry because they believe their students lack the necessary knowledge or are incapable of completing inquiry activities without constant teacher guidance and supervision. Teachers also justify not using inquiry because their students just "want to be told the answers," rather than be asked inquiry questions that require thoughtful consideration. Addressing these concerns is not simple, but framing provocative questions (Chapter 6.1), creating a supportive learning environment (Chapter 10.0), and providing students with the tools they need (Chapter 11.0) will help mitigate this resistance.

Some teachers resist adopting an inquiry approach because it challenges their beliefs about teaching and learning. Inviting students to develop their own interpretations is often in tension with traditional expectations of getting the "right" answer. This disjuncture between the principles of inquiry and teachers' insistence on "teaching the facts" or "telling the one true story" is likely influenced by their own experiences as students. While it may be difficult for some to appreciate the value in having students construct their own interpretations, virtually every Canadian jurisdiction encourages teachers in the social studies disciplines to engage their students in meaningful inquiry.

Paucity of Accessible Resources

Although countless primary and secondary sources, lesson plans, and learning resources are available online, many teachers report difficulties in locating relevant sources that are accessible to students of different ages and reading abilities. Furthermore, teachers often struggle to find professional resources to help them plan activities which invite students to think about and with different types of evidence. In the absence of ready-to-use resources, many teachers mistakenly believe that implementing inquiry requires redesigning everything from scratch and discarding all the lessons, materials, and learning resources they acquired throughout their career. This is an extreme and unnecessary response. We suggest a practical two-pronged approach: adapt existing lessons, activities, and projects for use in inquiry activities and, over time, gradually build a library of new inquiry-based lessons, activities, and primary and secondary sources that are engaging and accessible for students. Chapter 13.0 describes a number of strategies, tools, and resources to identify and activate a wide range of resources.

Student Reluctance and Challenges

Students encounter various challenges when asked to engage in inquiry. The most commonly reported are the imposition of unrealistic expectations that do not consider their current abilities and levels of understanding and students' lack of familiarity with what is expected of them during inquiry. Academically successful students may encounter difficulties because inquiry can challenge their understandings about the nature of the subject matter and the expected norms about what learning in school should be. Additionally, analyzing evidence and responding to inquiry questions place a substantial cognitive load on students (Bransford et al., 1999). Many students disengage if they are asked to do activities they feel incapable of doing and are doubtful of succeeding at

them. This is especially the case with students' difficulty and reluctance in working with textual primary sources to construct evidence-based interpretations. These challenges are doubly significant for developing or struggling readers and for those with learning disabilities (De La Paz et al., 2014; Reisman, 2012). All these challenges speak to the importance of working within students' zone of proximal development—what they can realistically be expected to achieve with an appropriate amount of support—and systematically developing the intellectual resources or "tools" that students require to succeed at the tasks presented to them. Many chapters in the Anthology offer ways to mitigate these problems, particularly Chapter 6.1 on differentiating inquiry questions to accommodate student differences and those on developing the tools that students will require in the Section "Building Student Capacity" (Chapters 11.0–11.5).

Concluding Comment

We have argued that the benefits of engaging in genuine inquiry outweigh the challenges that teachers and students regularly encounter when implementing this approach. The chapters which follow in this section offer much support in this endeavour, including how to problematize what is being learned, sustain inquiry over an extended period, engage in thoughtful teacher questioning and classroom discussion, and support independent student inquiry and reading comprehension. Conducting genuine inquiry does not eliminate all the challenges of teaching in the social studies disciplines, but it does enable the creation of more engaging, creative, co-operative, and thinking classrooms.

INQUIRY

How convinced am I of the case for genuine inquiry?

Describe what you understand inquiry teaching in the social studies disciplines requires of you and identify the three or four biggest hurdles you have experienced or anticipate experiencing. Think of the things you would need to do or learn about to overcome these hurdles. If you made these efforts, how confident are you that inquiry teaching would be a realistic and effective approach for you?

Acknowledgement

This chapter is a shortened version of "Inquiry Doesn't Just Happen" which appeared in the fourth edition of the Anthology.

Extending the Discussion

Additional ideas and resources on the following topics are available:

In other chapters

- **prioritizing what is important:** Chapter 2.0 "Teaching So It Matters"
- **deepening understanding through inquiry:** Chapter 3.1 "Deep Understanding"
- **framing and differentiating inquiry questions:** Chapter 6.1 "Problematizing What Is to Be Learned"
- **supporting student learning:** Chapter 9 "Facilitating Scaffolded Inquiry"
- **creating a supportive learning environment:** Section "Creating the Conditions for Learning" (Chapters 10.0–10.1)
- **teaching students the "tools" they need:** Section "Building Student Capacity" (Chapters 11.0–11.5)
- **assessing learning in an inquiry setting:** Chapter 12.2 "Reporting on Overall Achievement"
- **using resources to support inquiry learning:** Chapter 13.0 "Activating Resource Opportunities"
- **understanding the nature of history:** Chapter 13.3 "Primary Historical Documents"

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