

Questions about Questions: NCSS and UbD

By Grant Wiggins

Many history and social studies teachers have asked me a question that is moving around Twitter: “What is the relationship between an essential question and a compelling question?”

Their query derives from the language of Understanding by Design – essential questions – vs. the language used in the C3 Framework (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, published by the National Council for the Social Studies) – compelling questions.

Compelling, supporting and essential questions. On the surface, there is little difference between compelling and essential questions, as suggested by the criteria proposed by NCSS:

“With the entire scope of human experience as its backdrop, the content of social studies consists of a rich array of facts, concepts, and generalizations. The way to tie all of this content together is through the use of compelling and supporting questions.

“Questioning is key to student learning. The C3 Framework encourages the use of compelling and supporting questions, both teacher- and student-generated, as a central element of the teaching and learning process.

“For example, a compelling question like “Was the American Revolution revolutionary?” is both intriguing to students and intellectually honest. Such a question can be vigorously explored through the disciplines of civics, economics, geography, and history. It is also sensitive to the idea that students are interested in how and why events are characterized as they are.

“Supporting” questions, by contrast, are convergent, leading to specific knowledge and understanding in support of the compelling question: Supporting questions assist students in addressing their compelling questions. For example, questions like “What were the regulations imposed on the colonists under the Townshend Acts?” will help students understand the many dimensions of the war as they form their conclusions about the magnitude of change associated with those Acts.”

Further in the document, the authors note that the compelling question must focus on enduring issues:

Compelling questions focus on enduring issues and concerns. They deal with curiosities about how things work; interpretations and applications of disciplinary concepts; and unresolved issues that require students to construct arguments in response.

By contrast, “Supporting” questions have agreed-upon answers:

In contrast, supporting questions focus on descriptions, definitions, and processes on which there is general agreement within the social studies disciplines, and require students to construct explanations that advance claims of understanding in response.

In our most recent UbD publication, *Essential Questions: Doorways to Understanding*, Jay McTighe and I described essential questions very similarly to the C3 compelling questions:

These are questions that are not answerable with finality in a single lesson or a brief sentence – and that’s the point. Their aim is to stimulate thought, to provoke inquiry, and to spark more questions...they are provocative and generative. By tackling such questions, learners are engaged in uncovering the depth and richness of a topic that might otherwise be obscured by simply covering it.

We then propose seven indicators of such questions:

A good essential question is

1. Open-ended
2. Thought-provoking and intellectually engaging
3. Calls for higher-order thinking
4. Points toward important and transferable ideas
5. Raises additional questions
6. Requires support and justification
7. Recurs over time

Examples of each kind – and what the examples reveal. Back in the C3 document, we find numerous helpful examples of compelling questions:

- How will an increase in the minimum wage affect local job opportunities for teens?
- What path should a new transcontinental pipeline take? Or: Should the pipeline be built at all?
- Was the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s a success?

Here are some of our sample essential questions in History and Social Studies:

- How should government balance the rights of individuals with the common good?
- Whose “story” is this?
- Why do people move?
- What is worth fighting for?

Essential questions propose recurring priority inquiries. A small but important distinction between compelling and essential questions has now emerged from the examples. Do you see a difference? Our essential questions are more open-ended and not as specific to historical particulars as the C3 examples highlighted here. Ours will “recur over time” (the 7th indicator, above) by design; the compelling questions, by contrast, seem more tied to specific content. They do not seem to address “enduring issues” as well as they might.

The best essential questions can be used for both topical inquiries and long-term recurring investigations that signal overarching ideas and intellectual priorities.

Here are some examples:

- What is the proper role of government in our country?
- Why have we gone to war and what did we learn from it – according to history, not propaganda?
- Who has the power and why?
- How well have we lived up to the ideals of our Founders? How well did our Founders live up to their own ideals?

- Who was and is an “American citizen” and why have the answers changed over time?

Each question can be easily modified to address relevant specific unit content (e.g. Why did we fight in World War II vs. Vietnam and Iraq? and Who is a citizen and why? through the lens of slaves, women, immigrants, and the interned Japanese.)

Without such recurring questions, history courses easily become merely one long series of events and issues after another without any intellectual coherence or meaning to students. Big ideas should recur.

Some examples in the C3 framework do suggest more broad (though not recurring) questions. For example, the concept of liberty is considered from the perspective of different social studies. Here are three of the four questions suggested:

- Civics: What is the line between liberty and responsibility?
- Geography: How does liberty change from place to place?
- Economics: Does more liberty mean more prosperity?

The challenge of writing good questions. The authors of 3C remind us that the work of developing such intellectually honest and intriguing questions is difficult:

“Developing compelling and supporting questions is challenging, and teachers will need to provide guidance and support in crafting them, especially for young learners.”

Alas, this advice extends not only to teachers but the writers of C3 and to the folks in the NYSED who are using the C3 framework to develop curriculum frameworks in NY.

One example of a questionable question proposed in the C3 document is: Why do we have rules? I would argue that this is more a supporting question for the more open-ended question: When do rules help and when do they hurt?

Nor did we include the 4th example under the “liberty” examples, above, because it, too, strikes us as a more leading question: When did Americans gain their liberty? As stated – and, given the habits of traditional teachers – we fear that this question, like the rules question would be treated as having an official correct answer.

The intent of the question vs. its phrasing. Thus, ensuring that both teachers and students have complete and ongoing clarity about the purpose of compelling questions is key to success of the work. We wrote the following to underscore that the issue is ultimately the purpose of the question, not its phrasing:

Intent trumps form. Why you ask a question (in terms of the desired result of asking it) matters more than how you phrase it. No question is inherently essential or trivial... What do you as a teacher intend for students to do with the question? The earlier example “Is biology destiny?” is framed in a way that to the uninitiated might sound closed or factual. But clearly we would ask it to spark interesting and pointed debate...

In other words, the essentialness of the question depends upon why we pose it, how we intend students to tackle it... If we look only at the wording of a question out of context, we cannot tell whether the question is or is not essential.

“Perhaps the intent of the one on Americans gaining liberty was to raise questions about what “liberty” and “Americans” both really mean! Perhaps the point is that students would need to realize that only a minority of Americans were guaranteed their rights in 1776 and 1789.”

Fair enough, but then that intent needs to be made more explicit. In the absence of guidance that makes this point crystal-clear, the question is easily misinterpreted, given the phrasing. Believe me, we have 15 years of seeing this mistake over and over: History teachers often define “essential” as “essential to me and my course as a history teacher.”

Helpful edits to the original question can better signal an inquiry intent. Here are a couple of ways to ask a more transparently open-ended question:

- How free were we then and are we now as Americans? Who is the “we”?
- When and how did “we” become free? (Are some of us not yet “free”?)

In NYS, a proposed “compelling” question in a model inquiry reads even more like a convergent supporting question than a compelling question:

- “Did African-Americans gain their freedom during the era of Reconstruction?”

I don't think it is picky to say that the NY example seems neither "intriguing" nor "intellectually honest." It feels like a typical "teacherly" question, the kind teachers and Professors ask and answer in lectures. At the very least, the phrasing strongly suggests that there is a correct answer to be established eventually. So, the question is not intellectually honest. Nor is this question likely to intrigue the average 8th grader as stated.

Again, to minimize (predictable) teacher confusion about the purpose of the compelling question, here are some possible edits to it:

- To what extent were freed slaves free? How long were there or have there been unfree people in our society and why?
- What did the country owe the freed slaves? Has the debt been paid?
- How does a slave or any person become truly free?

These questions now suggest more honest inquiry than the original. However, intent would still need to be made clear, repeatedly, in guidance to teachers and from teachers to students.

At the very least, I would strongly recommend that NYS trainers, facilitators, and social studies supervisors make this point explicit and unambiguous: it's only "compelling" if it leads to debate and no final "official" answer. Otherwise we will merely reinvent coverage introduced by merely rhetorical questions.

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