

Making Inquiry Critical: Examining Power and Inequity in the Classroom

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What does it mean to approach inquiry from a critical perspective? It is not quite as simple as it may sound. We use the term *critical* in a way that is distinct from the broader educational goal of encouraging critical thinking. Although critical thinking is a crucial skill, our use of “critical” refers specifically to the use of critical theory.

Critical theory is one of the predominant schools of thought in the social sciences. Like all theory, it is a framework used for explaining—and examining—something about the world. Critical theory pays special attention to the social world, focusing on the hierarchical nature of social relations and examining how these unequal power relationships lead to privilege for some and oppression for others.¹

Researching, teaching, learning, thinking, and taking action within critical theory call for engaging in ongoing “social critique [that is] tied ... to raised consciousness of the possibility of ... liberating social change.”² In other words, critical theory is about identifying and confronting social injustices with the goal of transforming those unjust social relations. Current research and activism undertaken from a critical perspective often focuses on racism, sexism, ableism, class bias, cultural bias, religious intolerance, heterosexism, and other forms of structural and individual discrimination.

Roots of Critical Theory

Although current ideas about critical theory are quite broad, most observ-

ers trace its roots to a group of intellectuals who founded the Institute for Social Research (known as the Frankfurt School) in Germany in the 1920s.³ These thinkers sought to extend Marxist theory into the changing social, political, and economic landscape of the twentieth century by talking about how culture and ideology encourage and sustain social inequality. Although their work was diverse, a primary thrust focused on how modern capitalist societies acted as new, and subtler, forms of social control. These societies manufactured consent by creating a level of affluence and consumption that obscured ongoing inequality. Critical theorists argued that this consumer culture helped to create an illusion of freedom that prevented individuals from seeing that they were not the autonomous actors they seemed to be.⁴

Although their specific societal critiques still resonate today, the Frankfurt School’s extension of Karl Marx’s call to produce knowledge and to take action from the standpoint of the oppressed may be its greatest impact. This movement inspired subsequent scholars and activists to engage in work as a “trans-

formative endeavor’ unembarrassed by the label ‘political’ and unafraid to consummate a relationship with emancipatory consciousness.”⁵ Action taken from a critical perspective eschews neutrality, actively siding with the oppressed and promoting their liberation.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical theory’s emphasis on emancipation is most visible in educational practice through critical pedagogy. This approach to teaching and learning centers an analysis of oppression and builds knowledge from the lived experiences of the participants.⁶ Drawing inspiration from the writings of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, critical pedagogues suggest that “the school curriculum should, in part, be shaped by problems that face teachers and students in their effort to live just and ethical lives.”⁷

Freire critiqued traditional education for employing a “banking method” in which teachers deposited information into passive student recipients. In place of this model, he called for problem-posing education in which students generate questions, concerns, or themes crucial to their lives that then become the object of shared inquiry. Although the teacher does not relinquish all authority in this model, it places a greater emphasis on dialogue with and among students and on students as active creators of knowl-



(Photo by Beth Goins, University of Kentucky)

Kenny Stancil teaching at Lafayette High School in Lexington, Kentucky.

edge. Ultimately, critical pedagogy aims to help students become more conscious of their place in the world and consider how they can take action to create a more just, egalitarian society.⁸

Critical Social Studies Pedagogy

With citizenship education as its central mission and with content that allows for examination of past and current injustices, social studies should be a natural home for critical theory and critical pedagogy.⁹ The adoption of the C3 Framework¹⁰ and the development of the Inquiry Design Model¹¹ offer a useful template for implementing a critical social studies pedagogy. Inquiry-based practices position students as creators of knowledge and, when appropriate, allow students to pursue questions that are important to their lives and that touch upon important disciplinary knowledge.

However, as we outline in the next section, there are certain criteria that teachers should consider when attempting to make inquiry critical. When these standards are met, inquiry offers students the chance to identify social injustices, to build knowledge from the perspective of the oppressed, and to conceptualize action that disrupts the status quo.

Making Inquiry Critical

Constructing a critical inquiry requires a conceptualization process that may be foreign or uncomfortable to many social studies educators. Critical inquiries rely on teachers who question the commonsensical ways the world works and how social studies knowledge is presented. Teachers building critical social studies inquiries should begin with the premise that there is no such thing as neutral or objective knowledge. In contrast to tra-

ditional views of teaching as value-free, critical theory helps teachers see that knowledge is socially constructed and is beholden to how people see (or want to see) the world around them. People often construct their individual worldviews based on their personal experiences, so even when teachers believe they are being objective, they often do not account for their own biases and partial ways of knowing.¹²

Critical inquiries should be designed to identify and to challenge master narratives that legitimate systems of oppression and power. We define master narratives as overarching ideas, stories, and approaches within school curriculum that promote the worldviews of those in power in society. Master narratives shape belief systems and act to marginalize those in society who do not come from white, male, middle class, heterosex-

ual, able-bodied, Christian, and other dominant identity group backgrounds. Critical inquiries should highlight what these master narratives ignore and provide counter-narratives that complicate and expand students' understanding of the world.¹³

Crafting a Critical Inquiry with the Inquiry Design Model

To help teachers construct a critical inquiry using the Inquiry Design Model (IDM) template,¹⁴ we offer three important guidelines:

1. Ask compelling and supporting **questions** that explicitly critique systems of oppression and power;
2. Expose students to **sources** that include the perspectives of marginalized and oppressed groups;
3. Develop **tasks** and a Taking Informed Action activity that push students to take tangible steps toward alleviating the injustice explored in the inquiry.

To provide an example of these three components in action, we examine an IDM published on the Kentucky hub of the C3 Teachers site (www.c3teachers.org/kentucky-c3-hub/) focused on economic inequality: *Can we afford the super rich?*¹⁵ The inquiry was designed by Kenny Stancil, a geography teacher at Lafayette High School in Lexington, Kentucky. We highlight and explain its critical dimensions as well as offer a few suggestions that could better align the inquiry with the goals of critical theory. *Asking critical questions.* First, drawing from the previous list, critical inquiries must ask questions that critique systems of oppression. One way to do this is to stay away from inquiries that ask limiting, exploratory “*what*” questions. Critical inquiries do more than merely explore a certain social studies event or phenomenon. For example, an inquiry that focuses on a topic like apartheid in South Africa, but only examines the reasons the

system ended would not be considered a critical inquiry. Without an examination of the motivations behind apartheid and a discussion of the people who benefited from it, students would not receive a critical perspective on the topic.

Critical inquiries should be concerned with the *why*, the *how*, and the *who* of a topic. For example, in Kenny's inquiry, *Can we afford the super rich?*, the compelling question is concerned with the *who* of economic inequality and considers *how* this inequality produces negative consequences. This inquiry questions whether extreme economic inequality is commensurate with democracy. Capitalism is rarely questioned within mainstream economics curricula in the United States. The master narrative within our economics courses implies that capitalism is the best (and, perhaps, only) economic system suitable for democratic nations. What is rarely exposed within the official curriculum is *who* benefits and *who* suffers from capitalism. Doing so is important to consider because a capitalist economy depends upon winners and losers to make it function. This IDM questions the viability of an unfettered free market and, in doing so, questions the value system of the United States.

Including the voices of the oppressed. The second criterion of a critical inquiry presumes that the viewpoints of oppressed groups should be central. Within the IDM framework, a critical inquiry should explore these voices through appropriate source selections. Economics education generally assumes that the free market has the ability to help everyone achieve their own piece of the American dream. Discussion of class stratification or the difficulties of upward class mobility rarely occurs, which largely silences poor and working class experiences.¹⁶ By contrast, the IDM *Can we afford the super rich?* analyzes class dynamics directly and its sources highlight the plight of the unfortunate or the working class individual.

Sources such as “Only Little People Pay Taxes,” “Congress Ignores the Poor

Yet Again,” and “The Ones We've Lost: The Student Loan Debt Suicides” center the effects of economic inequality by examining how government action (and inaction) benefits the wealthy at the expense of the poor.¹⁷ Although these perspectives are a refreshing change from mainstream economic discourses, all of the sources are secondary in nature. Secondary sources are valuable, but we suggest that this critical inquiry would benefit from including accounts of individuals who are on the wrong end of the wealth divide. This addition would enhance its authenticity by putting faces and voices to the people victimized by economic policy.

Moving toward action in a critical inquiry. Finally, critical inquiries must provide students with opportunities to address the injustices identified in the inquiry. Within the IDM framework, Taking Informed Action (TIA)¹⁸ creates this opportunity by encouraging students to extend the inquiry outside of the classroom. Of course, we understand that societal change is not going to occur through one inquiry. What TIA does, however, is aid in the development of a critical consciousness and create a disposition toward working for change. These are important steps in helping students imagine critical civic engagement within a democratic society.

Within *Can we afford the super rich?*, the TIA portion asks the students to invite members of the community, within and outside the school, to attend a town-hall event to discuss the consequences of economic inequality. This civic action asks students to do something that can influence their community and invites collaboration. The action is also something that could reasonably be accomplished as a project outside of classroom time. For this activity to be effective, however, it would be important to pay attention to the participant list. In order to promote social change, the students and teacher should invite change makers and people from various walks of life. Participants should not only be the traditional “experts,” but also parents,

community organizers, union representatives, local store owners, and others who could help represent the views of the focal groups, the poor and working classes. The key for TIA within a critical inquiry is to help students understand where power resides in the topic of study and to devise actions that challenge those power mechanisms.

Concluding Thoughts

In this article, we hoped to make it clear that one must be purposeful when designing a critical inquiry. It is not quite as simple as examining a topic (e.g., Jim Crow, Indian Removal, same-sex marriage, the gender wage gap, Islamophobia) that could connect to social justice issues. To truly stay within the bounds of critical theory, there must be a focus on identifying unequal power relationships in society coupled with the goal of transforming those unjust social relations. To remain true to critical pedagogy, teachers should work to identify questions that are important to students' lives and that encourage them to reflect on the ways that they are either privileged or oppressed by social dynamics. And, finally, to enact these concepts in the context of the IDM, the inquiry must ask critical questions, analyze sources from the viewpoint of the oppressed, and encourage action that can make a tangible contribution toward justice. 🌍

Notes

1. When we use the term "oppression," we are referring to unjust treatment of subordinate social groups (e.g., women, racial/ethnic minorities, LGBTQ individuals) by dominant social groups (e.g., men, white people, heterosexuals) and not individual instantiations of suffering. In other words, prejudice + power = oppression.
2. Yvonne S. Lincoln, Susan Lynham, and Egon G. Guba, "Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences, Revisited," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln, eds. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2011): 119.
3. M. Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research* (London: Sage, 2003).
4. D. Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
5. Joe L. Kincheloe, Peter McLaren, and Shirley R. Steinberg, "Critical Pedagogy and Qualitative Research: Moving to the Bricolage," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 164.
6. Joe L. Kincheloe, *Critical Pedagogy Primer* (New

York: Peter Lang, 2008).

7. Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg, "Critical Pedagogy," 165.
8. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000).
9. Gloria Ladson-Billings, ed., *Critical Race Theory Perspectives on Social Studies: The Profession, Policies, and Curriculum* (Greenwich, Conn.: Information Age Publishing, 2003); Abraham P. DeLeon and E. Wayne Ross, eds., *Critical Theories, Radical Pedagogies, and Social Education: New Perspectives for Social Studies Education* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2010).
10. Read about and download the C3 Framework here: www.socialstudies.org/c3.
11. The Inquiry Design Model (IDM) is a framework for creating inquiries that include the main elements of the Inquiry Arc of the C3 Framework. An IDM consists of three components: questions, tasks, and sources. To learn more about IDM, see S.G. Grant, Kathy Swan, and John Lee, *Inquiry-Based Practice in Social Studies Education: Understanding the Inquiry Design Model* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge and C3 Teachers, 2017).
12. For more information on critical social studies, see: Avner Segall, "Revitalizing Critical Discourses in Social Education: Opportunities for a More Complexified (Un) Knowing," *Theory & Research in Social Education* 41, no. 4 (2013): 476–493.
13. For more information on master narratives, see Derrick P. Aldridge, "The Limits of Master Narratives in History Textbooks: An Analysis of Representations of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Teachers College Record* 108, no. 4 (2006): 662; Bruce VanSledright, "Narratives of Nation-State,

Historical Knowledge, and School History Education," *Review of Research in Education* 32, no. 1 (2008): 109–146.

14. Kathy Swan, John Lee, and S.G. Grant, *The Inquiry Design Model: Building Inquiries in Social Studies* (Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies and C3 Teachers, 2017).
15. The full inquiry available for download here: www.c3teachers.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/EconomicInequalityIDM_KYHub.pdf.
16. See LaGarrett J. King and Shakealia Y. Finley, "Race is a Highway: Towards a Critical Race Economics Approach in Social Studies Classrooms," in *Doing Race in Social Studies: Critical Perspectives*, ed. P. Chandler (Greenwich, Conn.: Information Age Publishing, 2015): 195–228.
17. See Featured Sources at www.c3teachers.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/EconomicInequalityIDM_KYHub.pdf.
18. To learn more about Taking Informed Action as a component of the IDM framework, read Meira Levinson and Peter Levine, "Taking Informed Action to Engage Students in Civic Life," *Social Education* 77, no. 6 (2013): 339–341.

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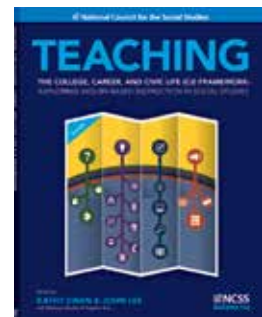
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