

Exploring COVID-19 in a Social Studies Methods Course: Pre-Service Teachers Harness the Current Pandemic to Design Inquiry-Based WebQuests for Elementary Learners

Erin Vaughn Piedmont
University of North Alabama

Abstract:

COVID-19 quickly upended life in many ways, presenting teachers with the opportunity to confront the issue with their students or forge ahead in the midst of a societal crisis. Teachers can harness such current events with youth in ways that foster active democratic citizenship, but they must be prepared to implement such pedagogy. This article illuminates how pre-service teachers in an elementary social studies methods course explored the global pandemic of COVID-19 to become more informed citizens and to plan for powerful inquiry-based learning about the current pandemic with young learners.

Introduction

COVID-19 upended life in a myriad of ways, from a drastic shutdown of the U.S. economy to forced school closures and mandatory quarantine orders to prevent the spread of the virus (Glanz et al., 2020). There were so many questions that governed how we moved through our daily lives: “How does the virus spread?” “When will a vaccine be ready?” And even, “Is it safe to go to the grocery store?” Life as we knew it changed all over the globe.

Life-altering events like the current pandemic, or other societal crises such as 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina, present an opportunity for teachers to channel their students’ questions and concerns into meaningful examination that can help them both make sense of and cope with the event (Lipscomb, 2002; Passe, 2006). Because social studies education aims to foster civic competence that “[helps] young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the common good”

Corresponding author: evaughn1@una.edu

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(National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2010, p. 3), examining such timely events can prepare youth to be informed citizens who collectively solve problems in their communities.

This means that teachers must be prepared to harness such teachable moments in powerful and developmentally appropriate ways with their students. Likewise, teacher education programs play a role in preparing pre-service teachers for such pedagogy. Thus, this article illuminates how pre-service teachers in an elementary social studies methods course explored the global pandemic of COVID-19 to become more informed citizens and to plan for inquiry-based learning about the current event with young learners.

Teaching Current Events

Scholars have argued for the inclusion of current events in social studies curricula to better foster an informed citizenry with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to participate in their communities. Examining such events help youth build connections to the broader community, encouraging them to engage with social, economic, and political issues relevant to their daily lives (LeCompte, Blevins, & Ray, 2017; Obenchain & Pennington, 2017; Shiveley, 2014). Furthermore, exploring current events provides the potential for children to unpack their own beliefs and consider the diverse perspectives of their peers, enhancing their abilities to develop informed opinions and collectively solve problems (Beck & Parker, 2017; Camicia & Dobson, 2010; LeCompte, Blevins, & Ray, 2017; McCafferty-Wright & Knowles, 2016). Meaningful learning centered on current events provides opportunities for children to *act* as citizens, “to see the things that need doing and respond” (Parker & Beck, 2017, p. 174), the essence of living in a democracy.

Many teachers avoid current events for a variety of reasons, some regarding their controversial nature (Lipscomb & Doppen, 2013), an already-demanding curriculum (LeCompte, Blevins, & Ray, 2017), and/or beliefs that children are too young to understand (Parker & Beck, 2017). However, when in the midst of a societal crisis, teachers are faced with a choice: continue “business as usual” or confront the issue with their students (Lipscomb, 2002, p. 237). Teachers who rise to the challenge can create nurturing spaces where youth simultaneously make sense of and cope with the issue while also fostering a sense of agency (Lipscomb, 2002; O’Mahony, 2017; Passe, 2006; Veugelers, Derriks, & de Kat, 2006). A powerful way to teach current events is through inquiry-based learning.

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Exploring Current Events via Inquiry-Based Learning

Inquiry-based learning is a powerful pedagogical approach for teaching current events due to its investigative nature and because it nurtures the most valued habits of democratic citizens (Grant, Swan, & Lee, 2017; Parker & Beck, 2017). Transcending traditional bounds of social studies instruction, where children are often perceived as passive recipients of knowledge, inquiry-based learning engages youth in the investigation of powerful ideas and issues. Reflecting the dimensions of the “Inquiry Arc” of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards, inquiry-driven instruction prioritizes “the pursuit of knowledge through questions” (NCSS, 2013, p. 12). Teachers act as facilitators while students socially construct knowledge by searching for answers to compelling questions such as “Who benefits from advertising?” and “Why is there poverty in rich nations?” (Parker & Beck, 2017, p. 285). Throughout the inquiry process, children critically evaluate and corroborate across a variety of sources in order to develop and defend evidence-based arguments. Furthermore, inquiry-based learning can provide opportunities for youth to take action beyond the classroom walls, utilizing their knowledge of an issue to improve their communities (Swan, Lee, & Grant, 2018). Thus, the major tenets of inquiry—asking questions, interrogating sources, and developing evidence-based arguments—are among the most desired skills of democratic citizens.

WebQuests are one example of an instructional tool valuable in guiding inquiry-based units of study and which have served as a powerful way to integrate social studies and technology (Byker & Thomas, 2018; Dodge, 1995; Halat & Karakus, 2014; Obenchain & Morris, 2015). Reflecting the major goals of the C3 Framework (NCSS, 2013), “WebQuests support the inquiry arc as learners use technology to research a question or issue through an analytical process in order to communicate their findings” (Byker & Thomas, 2018, p. 19). The format typically includes the following attributes that guide learners through the inquiry process: 1) an introduction that stages the exploration, including the compelling questions; 2) a series of learning experiences via which students explore web-based sources of information; and 3) a summative assessment task that requires them to defend their response to the compelling question of the unit. Utilizing a WebQuest served as a particularly beneficial tool for exploring COVID-19 as a current event when university and K-12 learning environments transitioned online due to the pandemic.

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Designing the Unit on COVID-19

The goals of the inquiry-based WebQuest in my elementary social studies methods course were twofold: 1) to foster my pre-service teachers' construction of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to discuss issues within the pandemic, and 2) to model how to design inquiry-based learning focused on a current event. As I planned the unit, I sought to foster what McCafferty-Wright and Knowles (2016) described as an "open classroom climate" where my students felt safe and valued enough to discuss sensitive issues and were positioned as co-constructors of knowledge (p. 116). Therefore, I administered an anonymous survey to my students to gain insight into their interests and/or hesitations about exploring the pandemic. A theme that arose in their responses was the need to feel safe and hopeful amidst the uncertainty that many felt. Using this information, I centered the unit on the concept of *support* with the following compelling questions: 1) "How can society support its citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic?" and 2) "How can we make sure to support our citizens in equitable ways?" These particular questions would foster my students' construction of disciplinary concepts and tools focused on civics, as described in the C3 Framework (NCSS, 2013), while they explored ways in which citizens of their communities were working collectively to support each other and solve problems during this crisis, additionally examining the inequities brought further to light that continue to shape how individuals and groups have experienced the pandemic differently. Furthermore, I included time during each class period to unpack how I planned each learning experience of the WebQuest using an adapted version of the Inquiry Design Model (IDM) Working Blueprint, a one-page representation of the questions, tasks, and sources of the entire inquiry (Grant, Swan, & Lee, 2017), in order to scaffold my students' experiences as they planned their own units of study.

Exploring COVID-19 via Inquiry-Based WebQuests

The pre-service teachers spent the initial class session setting guidelines to better foster an open classroom climate as we explored the pandemic, some of which included: 1) empathize with others' experiences; 2) use credible sources and have evidence-based discussions; and 3) listen as much as you talk. We had already spent a significant portion of the semester discussing the importance of such discourse in the context of social studies education; therefore, we did not have to spend much time unpacking these ideas before beginning the unit.

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I introduced the unit via the IDM Working Blueprint (see Figure 1) and the accompanying WebQuest and reviewed the four dimensions of the Inquiry Arc in the C3 Framework (NCSS, 2013), a process we had revisited throughout the semester. For each learning experience of the WebQuest, the pre-service teachers worked collectively to synthesize across the sources and develop arguments in response to the compelling questions. To conclude the inquiry, they developed individual videos sharing their final arguments using a variety of digital mediums such as Flipgrid and Tik Tok.

Figure 1 IDM Working Blueprint

Inquiry-Based WebQuest Blueprint		
Compelling Question(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are citizens being supported during the COVID-19 pandemic? • How can we support individuals and groups in equitable ways? 	
Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • C3 Standard D2.Civ.6.3-5. Describe ways in which people benefit from and are challenged by working together, including through government, work-places, voluntary organizations, and families. • C3 Standard D2.Civ.9.3-5. Use deliberative processes when making decisions or reaching judgments as a group. • C3 Standard D3.1.3-5. Gather relevant information from multiple sources while using the origin, structure, and context to guide the selection. • C3 Standard D3.4.3-5. Use evidence to develop claims in response to compelling questions. • C3 Standard D4.3.3-5. Present a summary of arguments to others using print and oral technologies. 	
Learning Experience #1	Learning Experience #2	Learning Experience #3
Supporting Question	Supporting Question	Supporting Question

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How are medical professionals and scientists working to support citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic?	How are public officials working to support citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic?	How are other citizens in the U.S. (teachers, essential workers, non-essential workers, our neighbors, etc.) working to support each other during the COVID-19 pandemic?
Formative Assessment Task	Formative Assessment Task	Formative Assessment Task
Create a symbol that represents a major take-away from your exploration.	Create a Wordle using vocabulary that highlights the most important ideas from your exploration.	Pretend you are a state public official. List 2-3 policies you would propose to support our most vulnerable citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic.
Sources	Sources	Sources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NPR: <u>States Get Creative to Find and Deploy More Health Workers in COVID-19 Fight</u> • NPR: <u>Some Insurers Waive Patient's Share of Costs for COVID-19 Treatment</u> • BBC: <u>Coronavirus – How Close Are We to a Vaccine?</u> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The New York Times: <u>5 Key Things in the \$2 Trillion Coronavirus Stimulus Package</u> • NPR: <u>Schumer Calls for Hazard Pay for Frontline Workers in Coronavirus Fight</u> • CNBC: <u>How Small Business Owners Are Coping with COVID-19 Pandemic</u> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TIME: <u>Los Angeles Embarks on Massive Effort to Move Homeless Residents into Hotels Amid Coronavirus</u> • PBS: <u>"I Am Not a Virus." How This Artist is Illustrating Coronavirus-Fueled Racism</u> • TIME: <u>The Achievement Gap is 'More Glaring than Ever' for Students Dealing with School Closures</u>
Summative	Compose a speech that you would give during a White House press briefing to the citizens of the United States explaining how you will support all citizens, especially	

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Assessment Task	the most vulnerable, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Record the speech using a digital medium of your choice (Smartphone/tablet video or audio recording, Flipgrid, Tik Tok, etc.).
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Throughout the inquiry, the pre-service teachers engaged disciplinary concepts and skills related to civics, or “the study of political processes, as well as how citizens solve problems together as members of a civil society” (NCSS, 2013, p. 31), as they explored how citizens were supported throughout the pandemic while also grappling with the ways in which support was limited or at times exclusionary for some. To illustrate, they examined sources related to financial aspects of the pandemic, such as Senator Schumer’s address to increase the pay of frontline workers, including nurses, doctors, and first responders (Gringlas, 2020), and the key elements of the Coronavirus Stimulus Package that had not yet been passed at the time of this lesson (Edmondson, 2020), both of which appeared on the surface to be supportive actionable steps for citizens. Their discussions revealed holes in each approach, which are illuminated in the sample exchange below.

Bobby: “Why are medical professionals the only jobs considered to be on the front lines? What about grocery store workers? Or gas station workers? We have to have those places open to survive.”

Hannah: “Yeah, I work at the local grocery store and I don’t get paid much more than minimum wage. I think people like me would need the raise more than doctors.”

Me: “This discussion makes me think of that lesson when we examined the state minimum wage in comparison to the essential expenses a family might have each month. Did anyone else make this connection?”

Sarah: “It just seems unfair that the workers we literally rely on right now weren’t even making livable wages to begin with and now they are facing worse circumstances with the virus. They definitely need to include more than just medical professionals if that gets passed.”

The pre-service teachers also critiqued the Coronavirus Stimulus Package, as most of them were first-generation college students whose parents claimed them as dependents on their tax

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returns, making them ineligible for stimulus checks. They expressed the “unfairness” of this gap, as many worked to support themselves and had lost jobs due to the shutdown of the economy. “How will we be able to pay rent if our parents cannot help us?” was a widely debated question. Their interrogation of such sources allowed them to consider multiple perspectives and suggest alternative solutions, disciplinary skills aligned with Dimensions 2 and 3 of the C3 Framework.

For the summative assessment task, the pre-service teachers constructed evidence-based arguments to the compelling questions of the inquiry, reflecting Dimension 4 of the C3 Framework. They shared their findings via “White House press briefings” that synthesized their learning throughout the unit and addressed how they would support citizens across the country, particularly the most vulnerable. Some of their ideas included: 1) provide housing to citizens experiencing homelessness; 2) ensure access to high-speed Internet and technology for teachers and students in PK-12 and higher education settings; and 3) provide hazard pay to all essential workers. The civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions fostered throughout the unit encouraged the pre-service teachers to make evidence-based decisions about the communities they live in, reflecting the major goals of social studies education.

Planning Inquiry-Based WebQuests about COVID-19

The pre-service teachers planned inquiry-based WebQuests for elementary learners by analyzing the process of “backward design,” instructional planning that emphasizes learning reinforcing the alignment of goals, assessment tasks, and learning experiences/activities (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011, p. 7). This approach optimizes student understanding of big ideas and concepts rather than promoting their participation in a series of meaningless, disconnected activities. To reinforce backward design, the pre-service teachers used the IDM Working Blueprint as I guided them through a step-by-step planning process.

To begin, the pre-service teachers composed compelling questions for their inquiries, which aim to represent “big content ideas” that have relevance in the daily lives of students and frame the inquiry in its entirety (Swan, Lee, & Grant, 2018, p. 31). I asked them to draw from the knowledge they had constructed about the pandemic in order to compose a list of three essential understandings for elementary learners. Several of their ideas included: 1) how to stay safe; 2) how citizens are working together to solve problems; and 3) what children can do to help. They then reframed them into compelling questions. For example, if the essential understanding was “how to stay safe,” then it was reframed to ask, “How can we stay safe during the pandemic?”

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Addressing Dimension 1 of the C3 Framework, they created compelling questions reflecting the civics discipline, which guided the social studies content of their WebQuests.

Next, the pre-service teachers planned for assessment tasks that reinforced student understanding of the compelling questions and that could be completed in a home setting, given the current circumstances of online learning. Using my IDM Working Blueprint as a model, we discussed how each formative assessment was a stepping-stone in preparing learners for the summative task. One example of a formative assessment task they designed required the learner to create several laws that would ensure the safety of all citizens during the pandemic. As my students planned the summative assessment tasks, we reviewed Dimensions 3 and 4 of the Inquiry Arc, whose major goals require youth to construct and share evidence-based arguments in response to compelling questions. An example of a summative task required the learner to video record a news anchor segment explaining the need for specific safety measures during the pandemic (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Student WebQuest Sample

COVID-19 WebQuest

For the final task of this WebQuest, you will pretend you are a news anchor for a big News Channel. Compose a 1-3-minute news segment telling your "viewers" what you learned from this WebQuest. Some topics to include are: what the COVID-19 pandemic is, how it is affecting our country/the world, important takeaways, safety tips, and how we can help out and do our part. Take a video of yourself or do a live news showing for your family members. You got this!

Introduction Learning Experience #1 Learning Experience #2 Learning Experience #3 **Final Task** Conclusion

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Finally, the pre-service teachers chose sources appropriate for elementary learners that aligned with the compelling questions and assessment tasks of their inquiries. As they explored available web-based sources about the pandemic (see Table 1), we reviewed Dimension 3 of the Inquiry Arc, which encourages learners' analyses of multiple sources in order to make evidence-based claims. Thus, they sought to include multiple sources for each learning experience that fit the content goals of the unit. The pre-service teachers used their IDM WebQuest Blueprints to design WebQuests that were donated to local students to be used at home during the state-mandated quarantine.

Table 1 Elementary Web Resources about COVID-19

Resource	Grade Level	Title of Sources
Newsela https://newsela.com/	3-5	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● <i>Play it Safe: What Kids Should Know About the Coronavirus Outbreak</i>● <i>Why Everything is Closing for Coronavirus: It's Called "Flattening the Curve"</i>● <i>Why the Coronavirus Looks Different to Black America</i>
A kids book about https://akidsbookabout.com/	K-2; 3-5	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● <i>A kids book about COVID-19</i>
TIME for Kids https://www.timeforkids.com/	3-4	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● <i>Coronavirus Questions?</i>● <i>Slow Reopening</i>● <i>Vaccines in Progress</i>

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Conclusion

The primary purpose of social studies education is to develop informed citizens capable of making reasoned decisions that support the common good. Exploring COVID-19 provided an opportunity for my pre-service teachers to construct civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions that enabled them to delve more critically into different aspects of the pandemic while considering solutions to issues that have arisen during this crisis.

Furthermore, the pre-service teachers applied their knowledge of both the pandemic and the inquiry process as they designed WebQuests appropriate for elementary learners. These experiences will benefit them both as citizens of their communities and as future social studies teachers committed to citizenship education. Moreover, this unit provided a unique opportunity to support the local community by providing relevant social studies units to students and their families who suddenly found themselves teaching and learning at home.

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About the Author:

Erin Vaughn Piedmont is an Assistant Professor of Elementary Education in the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Leadership at the University of North Alabama. She currently teaches social studies and literacy methods to undergraduate pre-service teachers, as well as qualitative research methods to graduate students. Erin earned her doctorate degree in social studies education at Purdue University in 2018.

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Corresponding author: evaughn1@una.edu

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