Minnesota Humanities Center

Introductory Guide to Designing Inquiry-Based Units

This guide presents a flexible, step-by-step process for designing inquiry-based social studies units, meant to be refined iteratively as the unit develops.

Best Practices

- **Begin with the inquiry, not the materials.** Start with a compelling, inquiry-based theme rooted in social studies. Existing instructional materials can enrich your unit, but they shouldn't determine its focus.
- **Collaborate with thought partners.** Work with 2–5 colleagues, including social studies content experts and grade-level educators, to refine ideas and ensure disciplinary balance.

Designing Inquiry-Based Units

Step 1: Bundle Benchmarks Across Social Studies Disciplines

- Print and arrange the Hexagon Social Studies Benchmarks into bundles based on theme.
- Bundles typically include 3–5 benchmarks, providing enough content for meaningful inquiry without overloading the unit.
- Include at least two of the five social studies disciplines in each bundle.
- Save benchmarks that could fit in multiple bundles until the end, when their best placement becomes clear.
- After grouping benchmarks into bundles, adjust them as needed.

Step 2: Solidify the Theme for Each Bundle

- Review each bundle and label it with a theme that connects the benchmarks.
- Themes should be broad enough to allow for multiple entry points and perspectives.

Step 3: Write the Compelling Question

- Write a compelling question that reflects the unit theme and benchmarks and is broad enough to support inquiry and exploration.
- Compelling questions are:
    - **Conceptual** – Consist of an abstract idea specific to social studies.
    - **Interdisciplinary** – Engage multiple social studies disciplines.
    - **Argument Driven** – Has no single agreed upon answer within the disciplines.
    - **Relevant** – Focus on issues that are relevant and engaging to students' interests and curiosity.
- Avoid leading questions that point students toward a specific answer.

Step 4: Write Supporting Questions

- Write a supporting question for each benchmark that helps build toward answering the compelling question by breaking the inquiry into smaller parts.
- Supporting questions are:
    - **Explanatory** – Offer explanation or description rather than argumentation.
    - **Established** – There is a generally agreed upon answer within the discipline.
    - **Informative** – Help students organize information needed to answer/engage with the compelling question.
    - **Open-ended** – Generally not answered with a simply yes or no.
- Avoid leading questions; allow students to discover the answer on their own.

Step 5: Review and Refine

- Share your unit framework with a small team of 2–5 people for feedback, including:
    - **Social studies content experts** with knowledge across all five disciplines.
    - **Grade-level educators** who can assess developmental appropriateness.
- Look for interdisciplinary connections to strengthen student understanding and provide multiple ways to engage with the content.
- Refine your questions and framework to improve clarity, ensure alignment with benchmarks and themes, and represent multiple perspectives.

Step 6: Curate Sources

- Choose sources to support students in engaging in disciplinary literacy, building knowledge, and constructing explanations and arguments. Sources should be:
    - **Student facing** – Students use the sources to answer supporting and compelling questions directly.
    - **Authentic to the discipline** – In social studies, source type is defined by how it is used to investigate questions and build understanding.
        - **Primary**: Show perspectives from the time (not just "eyewitness accounts").
        - **Secondary**: Interpret the past using primary sources as evidence.
        - **Tertiary**: Provide summaries or overviews; use sparingly.
    - **Diverse** – Include a mix of texts, such as original documents, oral histories, photographs, maps, charts, and television. In early grades, consider using fictional and historical picture books.

Step 7: Develop Formative Tasks

- Develop formative tasks in which students actively use the featured sources to answer the supporting questions. Formative tasks should:
    - **Align with benchmarks** – Target the specific skills and knowledge students are expected to develop.
    - **Connect to sources** – Give students opportunities to work directly with the featured sources, using them to construct understanding.
    - **Answer the supporting question** – Ensure each task provides a clear path for students to respond to the supporting question.
    - **Develop disciplinary literacy** – Use approaches and repeatable routines students can apply across tasks and units to build disciplinary thinking.

Step 8: Design the Summative Task

- Develop a summative task in which students construct an argument addressing the compelling question. Summative tasks should:
    - **Address the compelling question** – Have students construct an argument directly responding to the unit's compelling question.
    - **Demonstrate benchmark mastery** – Give students an opportunity to show understanding of each benchmark in the unit.
    - **Use multiple sources** – Require students to draw on more than one source from the formative tasks to construct their argument.