

## Teaching the “Black Death” in Social Studies Courses

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### **Abstract**

*This paper will create an original application of the C3 Framework using the 1346-1353 Black Death in Europe to demonstrate how students can create an inquiry project requiring research, reading, writing, and technology to produce a curriculum unit plan that could be implemented in secondary social studies courses. The College, Career, and Civic Life Framework (C3 Framework) for Social Studies State Standards was created to foster student’s intellectual capacity to apply social science research methods—developing compelling questions, formulating hypotheses, collecting and analyzing data, evaluating empirical evidence, and drawing conclusions—in order to take informed actions as citizens in a pluralistic democracy and highly complex and interdependent global economy. It is vital that students possess the knowledge and skills that are necessary for success in college, careers, and civic life; this requires research and thinking skills, creativity, and problem-solving skills that can lead to changes in our policies and behaviors.*

**Key Words:** C3 Framework, inquiry projects, critical thinking, Black Death, research, cooperative learning.

### **1. Introduction**

The College, Career, and Civic Life Framework for Social Studies State Standards (henceforth, referred to as the C3 Framework) was created by fifteen professional organizations committed to improving civic education and preparing all students for democratic participation in a globally competitive economy (The C3 Framework, 2013). The rationale for the creation of the C3 Framework is predicated on the notion that students will need content knowledge, disciplinary skills (how social scientists structure their disciplines), special skills (creativity, problem-solving, critical thinking, and communication), and the ability to work in cooperative environments characterized by high level computer technologies and a rapidly globalizing economy. The C3 Framework is centered on the core social science disciplines of history, civics, economics and geography; these are the four federally defined social studies disciplines chosen to streamline the development process (The C3 Framework, 2013, p.18). Other disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology, while not covered in the C3 Framework, are important and may be incorporated into the C3 Framework. Creating thought-provoking and interesting questions that can be answered by rigorous research, critical thinking, collaboration, and applying the tools of each social studies discipline is the intellectual foundation of the C3 Framework.

One of the outstanding features of the C3 Framework is that it is a conceptual curriculum that can be applied to any social studies discipline or issue; this article will demonstrate how this can be achieved by describing and explaining an application of the C3 Framework to the Black Death (1346-1353) in Europe. Furthermore, the C3 Framework was designed to foster civic education by providing students opportunities to work in collaborative settings to solve problems and practice the “arts and habits of civic life” (The C3 Framework, 2013, p.6). The C3 Framework is aligned with the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts—as of 2015, there are no Common Core Standards for social studies—and social studies educators have a responsibility to teach literacy in their classes (The C3 Framework, 2013). The C3 Framework is a student-centered conceptual curriculum that goes beyond traditional instruction—lectures, note-taking, reading textbooks, and worksheets—and students are physically and mentally active in the entire inquiry process. It is an intellectually challenging education that also requires creativity, problem-solving skills, collaboration and communication skills, which are highly valued in the new global economy.

The C3 Framework is not a federal or state mandated curriculum; it focuses on an Inquiry Arc—“a set of interlocking and mutually supportive ideas that frame the ways students learn social studies content” (C3 Framework, 2013, p. 6) — that allow students to engage in research, data collection, data analysis, communication, and the application of knowledge to solve problems. Each state will determine the specific content knowledge to be taught at each grade level and fuse that content knowledge within the C3 Framework. At its core, the C3 Framework is educational philosophy that actively engages students in developing inquiry projects that lead to the acquisition of relevant knowledge and skills that can be applied to real life problems and issues; the C3 Framework, by allowing students, in conjunction with the teacher, to develop compelling questions on issues that are relevant to their lives, has the potential to generate passion and interest in social studies topics that will help students become informed and engaged citizens. The C3 Framework features four interconnected Dimensions of the Inquiry Arc in social studies. The first Dimension (Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries) is concerned with the development of compelling questions—“questions that focus on enduring issues and concerns” (The C3 Framework, 2013, p.23) — and lend themselves to rigorous debate, in-depth research, and empirical analysis. Compelling questions are highly complex, often controversial, stimulate thought, appeal to the cognitive, affective, and reflective domains, and are of interest to students. For example, a compelling question in history might be: “How successful was the 1950s and 1960s civil rights movement?”

In economics, “What should society do to reduce poverty?” would be a powerful question because poverty often provokes powerful emotional responses in addition to the relevant economic and political issues associated with poverty. Furthermore, excellent compelling questions are interdisciplinary and can be examined using all four social studies core disciplines. These questions are enduring and of interest to students, two characteristics of compelling questions. Compelling questions have the power to generate powerful emotions, controversies, and intellectual curiosity. Supporting questions help guide students in the inquiry process and allow them to acquire specific knowledge, construct explanations, descriptions of historical fact and empirical data, and identify and verify resources. Dimension 2 (Applying Disciplinary Tools and Concepts) “includes four subsections—civics, economics, geography, and history—which include descriptions of the structure and tools of the disciplines as well as the habits of mind common in those disciplines” (The C3 Framework, 2013, p.12). Each of the four core social studies disciplines has subsections that provide for the acquisition of knowledge and skills—for example, how do political scientists construct knowledge, explain civic virtues, describe the structure and functions of government, and analyze vital political institutions—that are unique to each discipline. Thus, Dimension 2 stresses conceptual content as opposed to curricular content; the conceptual content centers on key concepts, such as power, imperialism, cultural values, racism, poverty, and nationalism, that allow students to acquire curricular content at different grade levels. Dimension 3 (Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence) demonstrates the importance of gathering and analyzing data in order to draw viable conclusions. Educators must emphasize that students must support their claims with empirical data—statistics, facts, examples, historical evidence—that justifies their policy recommendations.

It is vital that students are able to evaluate the credibility of sources and make distinctions between values, facts, opinions, and political ideologies; teaching students to recognize biases, faulty logic, myths, and being able to distinguish between correlation and cause/effect are vital skills in the social studies and are mandatory for methodologically sound inquiry learning (The C3 Framework, 2013). The C3 Framework allows students to work outside of the school setting; in fact, working with government institutions, charities, religious organizations, and the private sector is vital to engaged and active learning in social studies. Finally, Dimension 4 (Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action) is the final stage in the C3 Framework and students present their conclusions and describe their policy recommendations for solving problems and improving society via civic engagement. Students, working individually and collaboratively, will present their findings via essays, reports, multimedia presentations (PowerPoint’s, videos, blogs, and other forms of social media), debates, posters, mock trials, moot courts, and other activities. The audience for these presentations may include outside officials who were involved in the C3 projects, as well as parents. Moreover, these presentations give students opportunities to critique their work (as well as other students’ projects), accept constructive feedback, make modifications, and gain valuable experiences that will help prepare them for college, career, and civic life. Taking informed action is the final stage of the C3 Framework, as student actions and recommendations come after they are grounded in inquiry research (The C3 Framework, 2013). The C3 Framework is highly flexible and can be applied to any social studies topic, problem, or theme. Teachers have the freedom to develop inquiry projects based on state mandates, grade level, and the specific needs of their students.

The following inquiry project on the Black Death (1346-1353) provides an example of how to fuse the C3 Framework (a conceptual curriculum) with a pivotal and specific event in world history (a content curriculum). Moreover, lessons from the Black Death are relevant today as infectious diseases, such as Ebola and influenza, continue to pose threats to humanity. This paper will examine the Black Death through all four core social studies topics and include examples for psychology and sociology and link the past to the present. This project will be designed for secondary (grades 9-12) school students; therefore, there will be higher expectations in terms of all four dimensions of the C3 Framework. Of course, this project can be modified to meet the specific needs of teachers at the elementary and middle school levels. The final project is a substantial intellectual achievement and will be characterized by a wide variety of products, activities, methods, and resources. The projects could include (here, teacher discretion is important) essays, portfolios, multimedia presentations, dramatic plays, mock trials, primary sources, debates, the use of the fine arts and music, interviews with experts, recorded discussions, artifacts, and other products. Regardless of the products chosen for the project, it must be guided by a sound research methodology and the development of excellent questions that stimulate students' motivation and passion.

The bubonic plague, popularly known as the Black Death (so called because victims developed painful pus-filled buboes, or inflammation of the lymph nodes, especially in the groin and armpits that were very dark in color), ravaged Europe between 1346 and 1353. Few historical events can compare for the sheer magnitude of human misery and the utter destruction of the established political, economic, and social order. The Black Death was a transformative event that accelerated the demise of medieval Europe and hastened the Renaissance, which, in turn, spawned the beginnings of the modern world. It has been estimated that this plague killed 50 million people, or 60 percent of Europe's population, in the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Benedictow, 2006) Students will find a wealth of information on the Black Death and in the process of creating this project will come to understand the relevance of history to the present and the importance of solid research methodologies to creating knowledge and solving social problems.

## ***II. The C3 Framework and the Black Death***

The Black Death is a superb topic for the C3 Framework because educators and students can develop several compelling and supporting questions for inquiry in all social studies disciplines. Furthermore, there are excellent opportunities to engage in research, critical thinking skills, and applying disciplinary tools to create an inquiry project that connects the past and the present in a meaningful way. This section will outline in three stages how teachers can construct this C3 Inquiry Project. First, this section will provide a compelling question for the entire inquiry project and supporting questions for each social studies discipline. It is important that students establish the connections between the past and the present; students are more interested in social studies when they see the contemporary relevance to their lives. Second, guidelines will be provided for developing procedures, collecting and analyzing data and evidence, and activities. Finally, guidelines will be given on how students can communicate their findings and engage in civic participation. Of course, teachers can make any modifications based on grade and ability levels, state or district requirements, and other considerations.

## ***III. Stage One: Developing a Compelling and Supporting Questions***

During this critical stage—the development of excellent questions is the foundation for a successful inquiry project—teachers and students can work together to create questions. However, teachers should be aware of the fact that students will possess limited knowledge which hinders their ability to create good questions. Teachers may start this process by introducing the Black Death via a PowerPoint presentation using music (the nursery rhyme “Ring around the Rosies” details some symptoms of the plague), art, pictures of a plague victim, a short video showing the relationships among *Yersinia pestis*, fleas, rats, and human beings, or a brief fact sheet on the plague to stimulate interest and motivation. The questions must be open-ended, stimulate thought, and have the potential to lead to new inquiries.

**Compelling Question:** How did the Black Death impact Europe economically, politically, and socially in the 14<sup>th</sup> century?

This question reflects an enduring issue in history and the social sciences, and students find it an interesting topic. Furthermore, this compelling question can be taken in several directions giving students flexibility and allows them to be creative. All of the following supporting questions are designed to stimulate thought, motivation, and guide students in their research.

**Supporting Questions for History:**

1. How many people died from the Black Death?
2. How did people in the 14<sup>th</sup> century respond to the Black Death?
3. Why were Jews blamed and persecuted for the Black Death?
4. How does the mortality rate compare with the 1918 influenza pandemic?
5. What are the similarities and differences between public reaction to the Black Death and the HIV/AIDS pandemic?
6. What caused the Black Death?

**Supporting Questions for Economics**

1. How did the Black Death impact feudalism?
2. Why did serfs and peasants benefit from high mortality rates?
3. What is the relationship between demography and economic growth?
4. How did the Black Death impact trade among countries?

**Supporting Questions for Geography:**

1. How did the Black Death spread from Asia to Europe?
2. Why were some areas spared from the Black Death?
3. What role did climate play in the spread and impact of the Black Death?
4. How did the Black Death impact China and India?

**Supporting Questions for Civics/Government:**

1. How did the Black Death impact government in England and Italy?
2. How did the Catholic Church respond to the Black Death?
3. How do pandemics encourage cooperation among countries?
4. What steps have been taken in the United States to prepare for an epidemic or pandemic today?
5. What are the treatments and prevention strategies for bubonic plague today?

**Supporting Question for Psychology:**

1. Why was the Black Death so devastating psychologically for families and communities?

**Supporting Questions for Sociology:**

1. How did the Black Death impact different social classes?
2. How did many religious people respond to the Black Death?

***IV. Stage Two: Developing Procedures, Data Collection and Analysis, and Student Activities***

After the compelling and supporting questions have been created, teachers should create groups of 4-5 students. Ensure that all students understand the questions and then provide guidelines for beginning their research. Of course, teachers have options on how they modify the assignment. For example, each group could be assigned to answer the supporting questions for one core discipline, but all groups make a contribution to the compelling question. An excellent place to start, given current technology and students' interest and capabilities on the computer, is with web searches on the Black Death. For example, the History Channel (2015) provides several short (ca. 4-5minutes) videos on various aspects of the plague that will motivate students to learn more, ask more sophisticated questions, and seek answers. In addition, this website provides articles explaining the nature, causes, symptoms, and consequences of the plague in Europe. Generally, secondary school students need some initial guidance and access to a few scholarly resources; subsequently, they will be able to locate other resources and conduct their own research.

The Science Museum (2015) in London, England provides a superb interactive website entitled "Brought to Life: Exploring the History of Medicine" that examines the Black Death and other infectious diseases. This website is informative and entertaining and treats infectious diseases as medical mysteries to be solved by inquiry and research. It also examines infectious diseases from several perspectives, such as colonialization, industrialization, urbanization, medical controversies, and war. Today, the Internet provides access to literally hundreds of millions of websites on specific topics; this presents a major challenge to teachers and students: limiting searches to the most accurate and relevant information in order to create a viable inquiry project. Teachers must guide students in this endeavor and place limits on the number of resources used in the project.

In addition to websites, it is important that students use books and peer-reviewed journal articles in their research in order to support their project with empirical evidence; this is a major goal as the C3 Framework requires students to move beyond uninformed and unsubstantiated opinions to evidence-based claims. The books cited in this article are excellent resources to initiate the projects; they are scholarly, well-researched, and employ primary sources that are essential as students engage in research. For example, Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, written between 1349 and 1351, provides a superb analysis of the psychological and social effects of the plague on Florence, Italy (Aberth, 2005). This is a valuable primary source that has become a classic in European literature and helps connect social studies to ELA requirements mandated by the Common Core. It is important that students learn to check their resources for accuracy and biases. As they collect data, statistics, and relevant historical information they will encounter contradictions, discrepancies, distortions, and important omissions; teachers should use this opportunity to inculcate a healthy skepticism into students regarding sources. This is a major component of social science research and students must learn to verify information and question their methods, hypotheses, and conclusions. Effective research and positive civic participation require open-mindedness and flexibility; unquestioned certitude—especially when characterized by arrogance, ideology, and condescension—is the mortal enemy of all research.

During this stage of the process—Applying Disciplinary Tools (Dimension 2) and Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence (Dimension 3)—it is essential that teachers provide close guidance in terms of literacy skills (identifying biases, the power of language to persuade opinion, authors' points of view, main ideas, and accuracy) and the relevance of all information (C3 Framework, 2013). The process of gathering and evaluating data lead to tentative claims to be rejected or accepted based on empirical evidence and further research. Furthermore, students must understand that history is a complex and interpretive endeavor subject to revision based on new documents, advances in technology, and paradigms shifts in thinking. During this stage of the inquiry project, teachers can create a variety of assignments that can help students develop their research, cognitive, and collaboration skills. For example, students may wish to create a mannequin characterized by Black Death symptoms, such as the buboes covering the body and bleeding just below the skin, and explain how the victim became infected and describe, in medical terms, why the victim will die from the plague. In addition, students could research how current medical science has developed new tools to examine the Black Death; scientists have extracted *Yersinia* DNA from 14<sup>th</sup> century plague victims (many were buried in cemeteries especially for plague victims) and can compare it to modern plague victims to determine if the strains are identical. Students could, if feasible, interview epidemiologists, medical geographers, and biomedical researchers to gather expert testimony on the medical aspects of the Black Death. Today, highly sophisticated GIS (Geographic Information Systems) programs allow researchers to describe and graph large amounts of data and show the geographic patterns of infectious diseases, chronic diseases, migration patterns, climates, and other phenomena that students could incorporate into their projects.

Another interactive and student-centered activity would involve producing a video or multimedia presentation describing the spatial diffusion of the Black Death and the geographical, economic, and social reasons explaining how and why the disease was spread across Europe. This might include looking at topography, trade routes, demography, living conditions in urban and rural areas, and conquests by the Mongols and other groups. There are websites that provide excellent maps, many of them interactive that allow students to manipulate data, of the origins and spread of the plague. The presentation could include experts from primary sources, such as John Aberth's *The Black Death: the Great Mortality of 1348-1350*, that document the spread of the plague. Moreover, this book provides chapters on the medical responses to the plague, how religious institutions responded to it, the economic and social impact, and the psychological impact of this devastating disease. This book provides 46 primary sources, including the impact of the plague in Islamic regions, such as Constantinople and Damascus that can provide students with first-hand accounts of the Black Death. Teaching history via primary sources allows social studies teachers to teach literacy skills—interpretation, the use of metaphors, symbols, allegories, analogies, recognizing biases, distinguishing between facts and opinions, and vocabulary terms—that are essential for college and civic participation. Since the C3 Framework is highly interdisciplinary, one interesting assignment would involve examining the arts and literature produced during or after the plague destroyed much of Europe and Asia. For example, *The Dance of Death* was performed in France to ward off the disease—primary sources have been collected from churches and monasteries, these institutions generally kept records of births, deaths, population figures, and important events—and was eventually expressed in paintings and poetry (Aberth, 2005).

Unfortunately, some of the frescoes, such as one in St. Paul's Cathedral in London have not survived, but many of the poems, such as *The Dance of Death* by John Lyngate, written in 1430 (Aberth, 2005, p.165), have survived and can be used to connect English Language Arts requirements to the C3 Framework. Teaching students how to interpret art and literature is an essential social studies skill because the humanities reflect political, economic, and social events, values, laws, and attitudes of specific historical eras. For example, an early printed woodcut showing the burning of Jews—about 300 Jewish communities throughout Europe were destroyed by 1353, and thousands of Jews were burned at the stake, ostensibly for their role in causing the Black Death by poisoning the wells—could be used to start a class discussion on anti-Semitism and how the Black Death resulted in mass deportations of Jews from western Europe (Aberth, 2005; Weber, 2000). The Black Death, of course, did not cause anti-Semitism; fabricated stories about Jews killing Christ, blood libels, Jews as agents of Satan, and Jews as rapacious sinners date to antiquity (Prager & Telushkin, 1983; Weber, 2000). Thus, the Black Death exacerbated anti-Semitism, destroyed Jewish communities, and dehumanized Jews, a long tradition that helped create a foundation for the 20<sup>th</sup> century Holocaust (Prager & Telushkin, 1983). Social studies topics, such as anti-Semitism, are inherently controversial and teachers must create a classroom characterized by respect, civility, tolerance for dissent, and equality. One of the most important dispositions that students must learn is trying to understand the mindset of people in antiquity or medieval times. For example, during the 14<sup>th</sup> century, people were profoundly ignorant regarding science, medicine, and the natural world. Illiteracy, superstition, irrational fears, and a ubiquitous belief that God afflicted people with the plague to punish them for their wickedness were commonplace.

This was a time long before the 17<sup>th</sup> century Scientific Revolution, the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment, or the astonishing advances of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—genetics, DNA, “miracle” drugs, modern surgery, and computer technologies—that are taken for granted by young students whose world view, attitudes, values, and behaviors are inescapably modern. A classroom discussion on the topic of presents would help students gain insight into radically different ways of thinking throughout history. This would help meet some of the C3 goals for Dimension 2 in history; specifically analyzing how peoples' perspectives are shaped by the historical context—different eras have specific paradigms for morality, acceptable attitudes, values, and behaviors, and political and economic institutions—and interpreting the past is fraught with challenges (C3 Framework, 2013). Finally, student activities could include dramatic play in which students take on the roles of different characters during the Black Death—victims, flagellants, Church officials, feudal lords, serfs, Jews, and monarchs—and act out the events of the plague. The dramatic play must be accurate, despite the horrors of the plague and oppression suffered by Jews and others, and teachers must ensure that students are well-prepared for serious roles (Chapin, 2015). Dramatic plays, mock trials, and role-playing are viable methods—they are especially beneficial for allowing students to develop empathy and understanding different perspectives— but can create emotional and controversial situations in the classroom (Chapin, 2015). The Black Death, like most social studies topics, can generate opposing viewpoints and cause students discomfort; this is especially true for students who have experienced discrimination, oppression, or victimization and teachers should always exercise prudence in the classroom.

### ***V. Stage Three: Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action***

The final stage of the Black Death Inquiry project based on the C3 Framework involves students communicating their conclusions and taking informed action, ideally with the larger public community (C3 Framework, 2013). After the inquiry project is complete—students have answered the compelling and supporting questions based on the procedures set forth in the C3 Framework—each group will present its findings in the classroom. This gives all stakeholders an opportunity to evaluate and critique all of the projects and receive feedback from the teacher. Factual errors, important distortions or omissions, and flaws in their research methods can be discussed and corrected. It is crucial that the final project helps prepare students for college and careers; this is why the process is so important and the teacher must be actively involved in every stage to ensure an excellent final product. The project, because of the strong focus on research, the tools of each social studies discipline, data analysis, literacy skills, and evidence-based claims, is conducive to college level work. Furthermore, the emphasis on collaboration and communication, and personal responsibility are indispensable to success; the projects help students develop the civic virtues required for informed participatory democracy. The Black Death project is especially relevant today because infectious diseases remain a serious threat to humanity.

For example, malaria is the world's and Africa's most deadly vectored disease and kills one million people, most of them African children under the age of five, annually (DeBlij, Muller, and Nijman, 2014, p.298). Students could get involved by joining organizations that provide medications, mosquito nets (this is showing promising results), and eradication campaigns. There are numerous non-governmental organizations, such as The Red Cross, Doctors without Borders, and the CDC Foundation dedicated to fighting infectious diseases, as well as providing food, potable water, and access to doctors, medications, and education programs in the developing world. The current Ebola crisis and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which has killed about 39 million people since the early 1980s (World Health Organization, 2014), provide students with opportunities to join groups that provide education (this is vital in many inner city schools where HIV/AIDS rates are the highest among American adolescents) and support.

Moreover, students should know that researchers have made remarkable progress in combating infectious diseases in the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries; maybe involvement in the Black Death project will motivate some students to seek careers in medicine as physicians, public health officials, or researchers. Civic engagement is at the heart of democracy; ideally, the Black Death project (of course, this is just one example and students will have different passions and interests that should guide the development of topics and compelling questions; poverty, hunger, child abuse, social justice, war, the environment, women's issues, terrorism, religion, and other topics relevant to students can be fused with the C3 Framework to produce superb projects) will motivate students to take informed action—not because it is a course requirement for a grade but because they are passionate about the issue—by organizing student groups, working with local officials, charities, churches, and the private sector to solve problems, enhance democracy, and improve the lives of individuals and communities.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Globalization, increased international economic competition, and the changing demands of the business community require schools to adapt to prepare students for success—defined as possessing the knowledge, skills, and virtues required for viable employment—in the new high-tech economy. Collaboration, problem-solving skills, and creativity are becoming increasingly vital in a world characterized by scientific and technological advances. Moreover, citizens will need more knowledge and communication skills to engage in informed civic activities as demographic patterns, increasing immigration, and a host of social issues transform the United States. The C3 Framework is poised to offer students intellectual opportunities to formulate compelling questions on real world issues—environmental degradation, religious and ethnic conflicts, cyberbullying, rising inequality, human rights, terrorism, substance abuse, teen suicides, First Amendment cases, access to higher education, and a plethora of historical events—that are relevant to secondary school students and will impact their lives. One of the attractive features of the C3 Framework is that any social studies discipline or issue can be the subject of this research-based inquiry project.

The C3 Framework has enormous potential (of course, teachers and curriculum are not a panacea for the serious problems—poverty, dysfunctional families, negative peer pressures, substance abuse, and crime—faced by so many students today) to improve civic education and prepare students for college, career, and civic life. The C3 Framework is intellectually challenging and rigorous; student success will require that they not only possess academic skills, but the virtues—hard work, personal responsibility, self-discipline, honesty, perseverance, and collaboration—demanded for success in college and the workplace. The C3 Framework, in conjunction with quality teaching, can provide students with the academic knowledge and skills, as well as the virtues, values, and habits that will foster success in college, careers, and civic life.

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