

Investigating a Neighborhood: An Activity Using the C3 Framework

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Almost eighty years ago, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, founder of Bank Street College of Education in New York City, wrote about social studies in ways that sound remarkably contemporary:

In the first place, we shall say that the curriculum should continue the laboratory methods, which means it should furnish the children with as many first-hand experiences with the mores of other groups as possible, that it should supplement with vicarious experiences gained through source materials; that it should supply source materials relating to their own mores from the point of view of historic origin, present functioning, and comparative method; that the children should have more than a passive, absorbent role; that they should do something to their data.¹

Mitchell (1878-1967) was promoting the idea of “human geography” here, as she did in her popular book, *Young Geographers: How They Explore the World and How They Map the World*.² She believed that inquiry lay at the heart of “geographic thinking”:

But is knowing facts the essence of being a geographer? ... No, a geographer is an investigator of some aspect of the earth’s surface. He (sic) does more than collect factual data. He thinks in geographic relationships. He sees the bearing of one fact upon another fact and thereby produces something different from and added to the two separated facts—a relationship.³

For Mitchell, the relationship between human and environment should serve as the centerpiece of elementary education. She encouraged exploration of students’ communities through fieldwork and inquiry using artifacts, maps, and photographs. These methods would serve as the tools of problem solving as the “desired outcome of children’s direct experience” in geography.⁴

Mitchell’s ideas have new currency today with the introduction of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for State Social Studies Standards, or the “C3 Framework” for short.⁵ Geography has found a prominent place in the framework as one of four “core disciplines” of social studies—and a particularly important one for elementary education. In many states, geography is taught to all students only in the early grades.

In this article, we return to the setting in which Mitchell’s

ideas about geography and curriculum developed—New York City. We offer several teaching strategies suitable for grades 3-5 that blend three curriculum documents: Geography for Life: National Geography Standards, Second Edition,⁶ The C3 Framework, and New York City’s social studies standards for the elementary grades.⁷

Like Mitchell, the authors of *Geography for Life*⁸ emphasize “doing geography” through investigations that exploit the “geographic lens” in order to ask and answer questions. The goal of these standards is to develop “geographically informed citizens” who can use geographic tools for solving problems and making decisions, understanding human-environment interactions, and recognizing the ever-changing spatial arrangements produced by those interactions.⁹

In the November/December 2013 issue of *Social Education*, NCSS President Michelle M. Herczog describes the ways in which the C3 Framework maps onto the *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (second edition).¹⁰ In light of the C3 Framework, states across the nation will use both the C3 Framework and the *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* to further develop their own social studies standards. In this article, we focus on three standards: ❶ **CULTURE**; ❷ **TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE**; and ❸ **PEOPLE, PLACES AND ENVIRONMENTS**.

New York City’s social studies curriculum synchronizes well with the C3 Framework and the *National Curriculum Standards*. Its scope and sequence for the elementary grades takes a modified “expanding environments” approach to teaching social studies.¹¹ The C3 Framework substitutes the phrase “compelling questions” (those that produce answers that can be debated) for New York’s “essential questions,” and adds the idea of “supporting questions” (those that elicit information that can serve as evidence in support of a particular interpretation/response to a compelling question). The Framework proposes an “inquiry arc” for teaching geography and other social studies subjects. Dimensions of the C3 inquiry arc are as follows:

Dimensions of the C3 Framework’s Inquiry Arc

1. Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries
2. Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools
3. Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence
4. Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action.

A high level of convergence exists among the national and state social studies standards and “inquiry arc” framework. Our

goal here is to offer a few examples of teaching along these lines that are embedded within the curricular context of the largest school district in the nation in order to illustrate how the C3 Framework can shape teaching geography at the local level.

Research into Practice

In this section, we review the research base that has informed our approach to these teaching strategies for the elementary grades.

Over the last 30 years, geographers and cognitive psychologists have debated the degree to which young children can understand the symbol systems found in maps.¹¹ Scholars agree on the utility of having young students create their own maps as a way of understanding spatial relationships and human-environment connections. Research by scholars such as Linda Levstik, Keith Barton, and Bruce Van Sledright has demonstrated third and fourth graders' abilities to comprehend change over time through analysis of visual representations of communities, maps, and other primary sources.¹²

June Chapin, author of *Elementary Social Studies: A Practical Guide*, notes that geography education on the elementary level needs to go “beyond [rote memory of] state capitals” and should engage students with concepts and skills that will help students live productive lives.¹³ She presents several approaches that can make geography engaging at the elementary level, and her suggestions illustrate how studying a neighborhood can be used to assist students in comprehending geographic concepts. First, such a study can illustrate the concept of migration and how and why people move from one place to another. Second, the concept of land usage can be acquired when children study a neighborhood's buildings and the purposes they serve.

In the spirit of Chapin's approach, and in concert with the aims of the “inquiry arc” defined within the C3 Framework, we present teaching activities for elementary age students that use resources (photos, texts, and paintings) to investigate a small part of the storied neighborhood of Greenwich Village, then and now.

The Neighborhood Context

We selected Greenwich Village for this study because it is one of the oldest settled places in the United States and because the area has changed many times over the course of its history. As a result, the neighborhood's physical and cultural spaces have evolved greatly over time. As such, the area serves as an excellent case study for the approaches found in the C3 Framework.

Although our discussion focuses on a historically significant area, the themes and ideas discussed here can be adapted for use in any community or neighborhood. All communities, be they urban, suburban, or rural, have an architectural and geographic footprint that can be observed and studied, evidence that relates to wider themes in history and geography and the intersection between the two. At the end of the article, we offer several concrete suggestions for using our approach in other contexts.

To begin, consider the way in which “Greenwich Village” is defined as a neighborhood. Like most urban spaces, its borders



Michael P. Marino

are somewhat fluid, but are roughly delineated by the Hudson River to its west, Broadway to the east, Houston Street to the south, and 14th Street to the north. The streets of Greenwich Village are curved and haphazard in their layout. All the streets have names, typically from individuals associated with the American Revolution, e.g., Washington, Sullivan, Horatio, MacDougal, etc. North of 14th Street, the streets are laid out in a perpendicular pattern common to American cities (the “gridiron”) and they are numbered rather than named. This simple distinction in streets, observable on most maps, illustrates the historical evolution of New York. As the City expanded, its development took on a more rigid pattern that was safer (for pedestrian and vehicular traffic), more sanitary (easier to service with water and sewer pipes), and easier to navigate (e.g., numbered streets are easier to negotiate for non-native speakers).

Greenwich Village also illustrates how changes over time manifest themselves in other characteristics of the neighborhood. Originally, wealthy New Yorkers who sought to escape the noise and congestion of lower Manhattan populated the Village. Later, as New York expanded past the original settlement in lower Manhattan, this previously bucolic area of farms and estates became home to busy docks, industrial buildings, and living quarters for a growing immigrant population. Today, new townhouses for the wealthy exist alongside renovated tenements built a century ago for poor immigrants. Greenwich Village stands as a symbol of the changes that have affected New York City more generally. What was once considered an undesirable and dangerous place has now become a place where only the wealthy can afford to live.

Analyzing the theme of human-environment interaction in a city differs somewhat if the same exercise is performed in a suburban or rural setting. In the case of a city like New York, the “built environment” tends to occlude awareness of nature, ecology, and geography. One of the implicit aims of these teaching activities is to remind students that geography is about more than longitude and latitude and that large cities

continued on page 22

Activity 1: Representing a Place in Different Ways (Painting and Photo) and in Different Eras (1928 and 2014)

Guiding Question: How is a painting different from a photograph in illustrating changes in a neighborhood over time?

A concept central to understanding geography is how humans shape their physical environment to accommodate basic needs. Moreover, as these needs evolve, so, too, will the physical environment be adapted or altered. To illustrate this concept, an example is provided here using street scenes in Greenwich Village. The example presented uses a “then and now” approach to show how the physical geography of an area can change over time. It also illustrates the geographic concept of movement by showing the importance of transportation to a community.

A **painting**, “The Sixth Avenue Elevated at 3rd Street” by American artist John F. Sloan (1871-1951) is a famous example of the Ashcan School of realist art that was popular in New York City during the early decades of the 20th century. Students can view a large image of the 1928 painting at this free website, whitney.org/Collection/JohnSloan/36154.

The **photo** on page 20 was taken in the present day from a similar vantage point as the painting. The Jefferson Market Library (the steeple in the far left with its clock) provides a point of reference.

Both images show how the need for transportation shapes the physical environment. The images also illustrate how technology plays a role in creating the physical spaces in which people live.

For example, in Sloan’s painting, your eye is drawn immediately to modes of transportation—the 6th Avenue elevated train, an old trolley car, and an automobile. The artist uses these to make a point about changing technology, as older modes of transportation (the train and trolley) make way for newer ones (the car). A group of women pedestrians, 1920s “flappers,” scatter as a car makes a turn, symbolically indicating that pedestrians must now give way to automobiles. In the photo to the right, the changes to this landscape are apparent. The 6th Avenue Elevated train is gone (torn down in 1937), and the buildings on the right side of the street in the painting were removed so that 6th Avenue could be widened and made more accessible to cars.



John Sloan (1871–1951). *Sixth Avenue Elevated at Third Street*, (1928). Oil on canvas, 30 × 40 1/8 in. (76.2 × 101.9 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase 36.154

constantly negotiate the interaction between human populations and their environments.

Eric Sanderson’s wonderful book *Mannahatta: A Natural History of New York City* provides a vivid reminder that at one time the island of Mannahatta was filled with “old-growth forests, stately wetlands, glittering streams, teeming waters, rolling hills [and] abundant wildlife If “Mannahattan” existed today as it did then, it would be a national park—it would be the crowning glory of American national parks.” Now, the city seems a place “outside of nature, a place where humanity has completely triumphed over the forces of the natural world.”¹⁴

In fact, however, any city without potable water, breathable air, and functioning sewers is at risk of becoming uninhabitable. The assault of Hurricane Sandy on New York City in November 2012 was a grim reminder that cities remain vulnerable and dependent on their physical environment. Even a masterfully built city like Manhattan has only limited capacity to deal with such weather events. Indeed, how nations and coastal cities might plan for the challenges of climate change has been the subject of considerable analysis since the storm.

Given the degree to which the world’s human population is becoming increasingly urbanized, these are important teaching goals for even the youngest students: how humans have transformed cityscapes; the factors that account for change and continuity over many decades; and the “sense of place” or “ecological place” that even the most urbanized neighborhoods retain. Planting the seeds of geographic and historical thinking about urban settings, as the C3 Framework suggests, will help young students revisit these topics and skills in more sophisticated ways at a later date.

Teaching Activities: Images of a Neighborhood

Regarding the Inquiry Arc approach articulated within the C3 Framework, the compelling question that this set of teaching activities seeks to consider is:

Why and how do neighborhoods change?

Supporting questions might include:

What choices do you make in creating a map of your own neighborhood?

Why do you make those choices?

What do maps tell us about a neighborhood?

How do photos, paintings, and maps provide different and similar views of an area?

What changes and what stays the same in a city over a year? Over 100 years?

In these activities, teachers can use an online map (see sidebar, p.24) and several photos of MacDougal Street in Greenwich Village as means to develop the concepts of location, place (as distinguished from geographic location), and migration. The idea of place illustrates the transformation of a location over time and how human intervention shapes the environment in which people live.

In adapting this approach to photos of their own community, teachers might consider the following suggestions. First, it is important to focus on the “built environment,” buildings, roads, and other structures that can be found in a particular area. Considering the nature and purpose of a community’s built environment, in turn, leads to conclusions about an area’s history and geography. Questions about the built environment can be formulated and answered through resources that are easy to acquire (or make) such as photographs and maps.

Second, all communities change over time, and one way that such changes can be measured is by analyzing how the structures found in a given area have been altered, replaced, or preserved. Old photographs and maps can help reveal an area’s architectural history, but students can also research when and why specific structures in a community were built with the aid of local libraries, historical societies, government offices (such as parks and recreation agencies), and property owners.

A Written Assessment

As part of this “inquiry arc” project, students can write a paragraph in response to one or more of the above supporting questions, which can serve as an assessment for the teaching activities. After writing paragraphs on the selected questions, students then write a short summative essay on the question: Why do people live in cities?

Encourage students, as they work on their short essays, to use as much of the evidence as possible. Interpreting the images and writing responses to the above questions will also address the Common Core “Anchor Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking” standards as well as the geography strand for elementary students in the new C3 Framework.¹⁷

Although we have chosen New York City as our example, a project such as this could be created for many neighborhoods across the country. Local libraries, historical societies, old newspapers, and other cultural resources can provide documents like the ones presented here. Increasingly, free historical images are available online. Teachers can integrate history, geography, and art by combining maps, photos, paintings, and other forms of visual imagery. Such activities also provide elementary students with the experience of using primary sources. The lessons employ the NCSS standards in an accessible and inviting fashion. Equally important, this activity encourages students to be keen observers and analysts of their own communities—roles that enhance their sense of ownership as citizens of those communities. 🌍

continued on page 24

Activity2: Comparing Two Photos to See How a Place Changes Over Time

Guiding Question: What stays the same and what changes on a city block? Why?

This activity uses another “then and now” approach to show how the physical geography of an area can change and evolve over time. It also illustrates the geographic concept of “movement” by showing the importance of transportation to a community.

The **two photographs** below depict 6th Avenue approximately two blocks north of the scene shown in the painting. One photo is from the mid-1930s, the other is from the present day. The Jefferson Market Library (on the west side of the street) and Bigelow Drug Store (on the east side) provide points of reference. The images here convey an impression very different from those in Activity 1. While certain things have changed in the two photos (for example, the infamous Women’s House of Detention in the photo at left was torn down in 1974), the scenes are similar, illustrating that store fronts (which hint at basic human needs) and domestic residences remain more stable across time than forms of transportation that are more susceptible to technological change.

A “then and now” activity begins by analyzing a set of photographs. Students are assigned to groups and given one of the two

Ask students to identify what is different in the two sets of images. They can place a small “x” next to items in the older images that do not appear in the newer photo. For example, an “x” can be placed next to the elevated train and certain buildings.

After students have identified the points of similarity and difference, students can consider (either in groups or as a whole class) why and how the area has changed over time. Record their responses on the board.

In these photos, transportation is the key theme, as the city altered its physical structure to accommodate cars. More subtly, the photos also speak to a theme of gentrification and how a formerly working class neighborhood (with a jail right on the street) has become “nicer” over time.

Finally, ask students to analyze the images and consider whether they would like to live in the past or the present, and what is appealing and unappealing about each set of images.

A variation on this exercise is to acquire some old photographs of your community, and then take snapshots from the same vantage points. By comparing the resulting images from this “re-photography,” students can consider how their own communities,



6th Avenue El (Elevated Train) at 8th Street in New York City, ca. 1938. (Photographer unknown, www.nycsubway.org)

visual images. First, the groups are tasked with identifying points of similarity and numbering them on each image. For example, students can place a “1” on the Jefferson Market Library in both photographs. While buildings are relatively easy to compare, students can also be prompted to identify patterns of human activity. For example, a “2” can be placed on people walking on the street. Once the points of similarity are marked, students list and review them.



6th Avenue, same vantage point in 2014.

wherever they may be located across the country, have changed and evolved over time.

Books that feature “then and now” photographs have become quite popular, and public libraries would probably have such a book featuring the local community. Historical societies and museums are posting such images online, and they can often make copies or digital files of historical photos available to educators for free, or at minimal cost.

Michael P. Marino

Interpreting and Creating Maps

Maps Help Us Understand a Place

Students can use an online mapping website, such as [maps.google.com](https://www.google.com), to look at street maps and photos of present-day MacDougal Street in Greenwich Village. This will help students to develop the concepts of location, place (as distinguished from geographic location). Using the zoom function of an online map helps students understand how a local area is part of the wider world: the street is part of a neighborhood, which is turn part of city, state, nation, etc. The idea of place illustrates the transformation of a location over time and how human intervention shapes the environment in which people live. A few introductory questions can help students interpret a map:

1. What do the buildings tell us about the area?
2. How do photographs help make a map more understandable?
3. Do the businesses and buildings found on the street tell us something about the people who have lived in this neighborhood?
4. Why might people want to live in a city?

Initially, focus on the built environment and the buildings, roads, and other structures that can be seen. Considering the nature and purpose of a community's built environment, in turn, leads to questions about an area's history, geography, and economy.

All communities change over time, as can be seen in paintings and photographs, and now at websites such as the Panoramic Maps Collection at memory.loc.gov.

Mapping Our Own Neighborhood

Research indicates that young students can learn a great deal about maps and geography by creating their own maps. After interpreting the maps and images they see online, students can create a similar visual representation of the street in which they live or a street in their community.

Begin by questioning students about what elements they wish to include in their map; for example, the buildings, businesses, or specific and noteworthy types of architecture. Students also select a starting point and ending point for the map and then draw (on paper or screen) a simple two-dimensional representation of the street. Next, they use several photos (or drawings) to create a visual representation of the area being mapped, arranging images about where they would be found on the map. The goal of this activity is not to create an accurate map but, rather, to use the images to convey a sense of what life is like in a community. Once the map is completed, discussion questions center on what type of community exists at this place, why the physical structures (such as houses) have been built where they are, and what can be learned about the history of a community by analyzing a street within it

Notes

1. Lucy Sprague Mitchell, "Social Studies and Geography," *Progressive Education* 11 (1934): 97-105.
2. *Young Geographers: How They Explore the World and How They Map the World*, 4th ed. (New York: Bank Street College of Education, 2001), p.4.
3. *Young Geographers*, p. 4.
4. Sherry Field, "Lucy Sprague Mitchell: Teacher, Geographer, and Teacher Educator," in *Bending the Future to Their Will: Women, Social Education, and Citizenship*, eds. Margaret S. Crocco and O.L. Davis, Jr. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), p. 135.
5. NCSS, *Social Studies for the Next Generation: Purposes, Practices, and Implications of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Bulletin 113, Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013).
 - * Free PDF of the C3 Framework at www.socialstudies.org/c3
 - * Buy the paperback book (with introductory essays) at www.socialstudies.org/store.
6. Susan Gallagher Heffron and Roger M. Downs, eds., *Geography for Life: National Geography Standards*, 2nd. Ed. (Washington, DC: Geography Education National Implementation Project [GENIP], 2012).
7. "New York City K-8 Social Studies Scope & Sequence," New York City Department of Education, 2010, schools.nycenet.edu/offices/teachlearn/ss/SocStudScopeSeq.pdf.
8. The member organizations of GENIP are American Geographical Society, Association of American Geographers, National Council for Geographic Education, and National Geographic Society.
9. *Geography for Life*, p. 13.
10. Michelle M. Herczog, "The Links Between the C3 Framework and the NCSS National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies," *Social Education* 77, no.6 (2013): 331–333.
11. James M. Blaut, "The Mapping Abilities of Young Children: Children Can," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 87, no.1 (1997): 152–158.
12. Linda Levstik and Keith Barton, *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Keith Barton, "Research on Students' Ideas about History," in *Handbook of Research on Social Studies Education*, eds. Linda Levstik and Cynthia Tyson (New York: Routledge, 2008), 239-258; Bruce Van Sledright, *In Search of America's Past: Learning to Read History in Elementary School* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002); *Assessing Historical Thinking and Understanding: Innovative Designs for New Standards* (New York, Routledge, 2014).
13. June Chapin, *Elementary Social Studies: A Practical Guide*, 7th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2009), 192.
14. Eric Sanderson, *Mannahatta: A Natural History of New York City* (New York: Abrams, 2009), 10–13
15. Specific examples of learning in geography and history from the C3Framework addressed by the activities in this article:
 - * D2.Geo.5.3-5. Explain how the cultural and environmental characteristics of places change over time.
 - * D2.Geo.6.3-5. Describe how environmental and cultural characteristics influence population distribution in specific places or regions.
 - * D2.Geo.7.3-5. Explain how cultural and environmental characteristics affect the distribution and movement of people, goods, and ideas.Additionally, these activities might also address, depending on the teacher's presentation:
 - * D2.His.2.3-5. Compare life in specific historical time periods to life today.
 - * D2.His.3.3-5. Generate questions about individuals and groups who have shaped significant historical changes and continuities.

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