A Politician, A Social Scientist, and A Social Worker Walk into A Bar: Towards A Taxonomy of Social Studies Inquiry Questions

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Abstract

Inquiry-based learning has gained prominence in secondary-school humanities education in Singapore in recent years. In Social Studies (SS), the loci of inquiry learning are "Issue Investigation" as found in the 2016 Express and Normal (Academic) syllabus and "Performance Task" in the 2014/15 Normal (Technical) syllabus, respectively. Due to the relatively short time inquiry has been given explicit emphasis, to date research into this new aspect of SS education remains very limited. This paper focuses on an important yet often neglected step of the SS inquiry process—the development of inquiry questions. To explore how different ways of crafting the SS inquiry question may lead to distinct inquiry approaches and processes, a taxonomy of SS inquiry questions is proposed based on empirical observations. The taxonomy comprises three categories of questions: the "politician's question", the "social worker's question", and the "social scientist's question". The implications and applications of this taxonomy for SS instruction are also discussed with reference to the multi-faceted aims of SS education in Singapore.

Introduction

An inquiry approach to learning has gained traction and importance in secondary-school humanities education in Singapore in recent years. Defined by the Ministry of Education (2016a) as "a purposeful act of seeking information or knowledge, activating prior knowledge, investigating significant questions, and constructing knowledge" (p. 21), inquiry learning is said to promote "student-centred learning by creating opportunities for students to take ownership of their own learning rather than receive information purely through direct instruction" (p. 21).

In history and geography education, this shift to inquiry can be seen in the incorporation of "Historical Investigation" (HI) and "Geographical Investigation" (GI) in the respective syllabi (Afandi, 2013; Lim, 2018; Seow, Chang, & Irvine, 2019). For Social Studies (SS), the locus of inquiry learning is the "Issue Investigation" (II) component, introduced in the Express and Normal (Academic) (E/NA) syllabus of 2016. In the Normal (Technical) (NT) syllabus (2014/15), an equivalent of II is the "Performance Task" (PT), which similarly scaffolds an inquiry-based learning process for NT students.

Since the introduction of SS II and PT lagged slightly behind that of HI and GI, research on inquiry learning in secondary SS in Singapore has only begun to emerge very recently. The first author has looked into teachers' conceptions of II (Yang, 2021) and their experiences of implementing and enacting II, including the challenges and coping strategies (Yang, 2020). Despite this burgeoning scholarship, overall, there remains a significant knowledge gap from both scholarly and education practitioners' perspectives.

This paper addresses this knowledge gap by focusing on a crucial yet often overlooked step of the SS inquiry process—the development of *inquiry questions*. An interest in this issue developed as the authors respectively grappled with SS inquiry in their own ways. In conducting professional development courses on SS inquiry for in-service and pre-service teachers, the first author—an SS teacher-educator—encountered a variety of inquiry questions developed by teachers, and gained insights into some of the common experiences of teachers in relation to crafting inquiry questions. For the second author—a postgraduate student-teacher—undergoing pre-service training in SS education provided opportunities to reflect on what makes an inquiry specifically "social", a problem which is often only implicitly alluded to in university-level courses, and frequently resolved with a "know-it-when-you-see-it" approach.

In what follows, the authors draw on their experiences as well as materials gathered in the course of their work and studies to explore *how different ways of asking the inquiry question may lead to distinct inquiry approaches and processes in Social Studies*. The next section briefly discusses the nature of inquiry as found in the Singapore secondary SS syllabi. We then foreground the importance of SS inquiry question development by drawing on both local and some international perspectives on this matter. Subsequently, a taxonomy of SS inquiry questions is proposed and explicated by examining specimens of inquiry questions. Following that, the implications and applications of this proposed taxonomy for SS instruction are explored. Potential limitations of the taxonomy are also briefly discussed.

Background: Inquiry in Singapore Social Studies syllabi

To appreciate the nature of inquiry in Singapore secondary Social Studies syllabi, it is instructive to look at how inquiry is defined in the official textbooks. The 2016 E/NA coursebook dedicates a full chapter (i.e. *Chapter 12 Skills for Issue Investigation*, which incidentally is also the longest single chapter in the coursebook) to Issue Investigation. This chapter explains II as follows to learners:

> An Issue Investigation encourages you to identify a societal issue to develop a response to. A societal issue is one that is of concern to society and people have points of view about. An Issue Investigation allows you to analyse factors and perspectives that shape the development of societal issues. Through the course of the investigation, your group will also understand the impact the selected societal issue has on society and develop possible responses and recommendations to address the issue. (Ministry of Education, 2016b, p. 367)

Following the Humanities Inquiry Approach—a common framework shared among all three secondary humanities subjects (Ministry of Education, 2016a, p. 22)—the SS E/NA coursebook suggests a four-stage cycle for the execution of II: (1) sparking curiosity; (2) gathering data; (3) exercising reasoning; (4) reflective thinking.

In the 2014/15 SS NT coursebooks ("*All About Social Studies*" 1A, 1B, 2A, 2B, 3, 4), the emphasis on inquiry learning is not as explicit, which can be inferred from the absence of a dedicated chapter on inquiry. Instead, an equivalent of II—"Performance Task" (PT)—is interwoven in selected chapters in the NT textbooks. One key difference between PT and II is that with the former, the question for investigation is pre-formulated and presented readily to learners, whereas in the latter, the inquiry question is not pre-given, and the crafting of it falls under the "sparking curiosity" stage of the inquiry exercise. In fact, Chapter 12 of the E/NA coursebook contains a section on how to develop the II question. (This difference may be interpreted as revealing an assumption on the part of the curriculum developers that crafting an inquiry question is an academically more demanding activity.) Consequently, the inquiry cycle for PT comprises four stages—(1) gather information; (2) analyse; (3) create; (4) reflect—more or less the same as the II cycle except for the initial stage of developing the inquiry question. It is also worth mentioning that the PT sections of the NT coursebooks demonstrate a more "scaffolded" nature, with the textbook pages doubling as worksheets.

Inquiry Questions

The above discussion highlights the crucial importance of the inquiry question for the entire inquiry learning process—after all, inquiry has to be driven by some puzzle, expressed in the form of a question. As evidenced in the following passage in the *Teaching and Learning Guide (TLG)* issued by the Ministry of Education (2016a), curriculum developers stress the centrality of the inquiry question:

> Inquiry-based learning seeks to spark and build on students' curiosity so as to create meaningful learning. Questions are used to activate students' prior knowledge and challenge their assumptions, as multiple perspectives are presented for their consideration, especially when exploring problematic situations. This in turn leads to the eliciting of students' own questions out of curiosity. Thus, learning is achieved through inquiry as it is driven by teachers' and students' questions to investigate, extract, analyse and synthesise information regarding issues. (p. 22)

What, then, makes a good inquiry question? The SS E/NA coursebook defines a well-crafted II question as one that allows students to collect data; requires "investigation, analysis of data, and reasoning"; and which is "authentic" and "meaningful" (MOE, 2016b). Other than this somewhat general characterization, however, a gap seems to remain with regard to *how* and what *types* of inquiry question(s) can be developed.

In extant scholarship situated in contexts beyond Singapore, most approaches to inquiry question development adopt a criterion-driven framework. For example, the National Council for the Social Studies in the United States defines a "compelling question" as one that "deals with curiosities about how things work; interpretations and applications of disciplinary concepts; and unresolved issues that require students to construct arguments in response" (Grant, 2013). While approaches like this are useful in highlighting the features of a sound inquiry question, they might inadvertently suggest to students that there is a singular way of framing a social inquiry. Moreover, these frameworks also have a tendency to be fairly general, with the potential to apply equally to other disciplines.

In contrast, a type-based approach to inquiry question development foregrounds

the plurality of lenses through which social issues might be investigated. In the New Zealand context, for example, Wood (2013) has developed an inductive, type-based approach to inquiry question development. Her taxonomy differentiates between "information-based questions", "values-based questions", and "issues-based questions". Although Wood's typology of questions might offer inspiration for Singaporean teachers, it is heavily influenced by the context of a "whole-school social studies focus on a local community social inquiry" (p. 23). In Singapore, by contrast, SS emphasizes national and global perspectives on contemporary issues, and therefore gives rise to some alternative types of inquiry questions which we try to make sense of through our taxonomy.

Empirically, in the Singapore SS education context, the first author has observed that, despite the centrality of inquiry question development to the inquiry process, in teachers' actual practice, the step of developing inquiry questions seemed to receives less critical attention than the subsequent steps of data collection and analysis. In particular, it seemed to the first author that while SS teachers were often concerned with managing the *scope* of the inquiry question, they appeared less focused on interrogating the *nature* of the inquiry question, and the implications for the inquiry approach and process.

This may be partly attributable to the fact that the SS textbooks make inquiry questions readily available for teachers to use. As mentioned earlier, the NT coursebooks simply present pre-formulated questions to learners; meanwhile, although the E/NA syllabus expects learners to craft II questions as part of "sparking curiosity", the coursebook nonetheless contains a list of "possible Issue Investigation questions" (Ministry of Education, 2016b, p. 379).

Making available pre-formulated inquiry questions as such, though no doubt helpful and convenient, may reduce or remove the incentive for teachers and students to undergo thoroughly the crucial step of inquiry question development by exercising their own critical thinking and analytical capabilities. It bears reminding that such exercise of critical and analytical thinking is meant to be an integral part of the inquiry process, and a key reason why inquiry learning is advocated in the first place.

In the next section, we unpack the step of inquiry question development and uncover some of the unexplored analytical complexities and opportunities inherent in this step. We first collate a list of SS inquiry question specimens and demonstrate that the nature or characteristics of these questions often vary. Then, based on this, we suggest a taxonomy comprising three categories of questions.

A taxonomy of SS inquiry questions: the "social scientist's question", the "social worker's question", and the "politician's question"

Table 1 below gathers all the inquiry questions found in the 2016 E/NA coursebook (Ministry of Education, 2016b) and 2014/15 NT coursebooks (Ministry of Education, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c; 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). To this list, the authors have added a third group ("C") containing a few specimens purposefully selected from questions proposed by student-teachers in a postgraduate pre-service course at the National Institute of Education (course code QCL52D) that the first author was involved in teaching.

Table 1. Specimens of SS Inquiry Questions

S/N	Specimens of inquiry question and source
A	**Issue Investigation (II) Questions in *Upper Secondary Social Studies (E/NA) Coursebook***
A1	*What does being Singaporean mean to students of your school?* (Chapter 1, p. 27)
A2	*Have the integration efforts in Singapore been successful in integrating immigrants?* (Chapter 7, p. 248)
A3	*How has the spread of foreign popular culture affected Singapore's culture?* (Chapter 10, p. 323)
A4	*Why do some Singaporeans feel that integration efforts in Singapore are successful while others disagree?* (Chapter 12, p. 379)
A5	*What can Singaporeans do to make immigrants feel welcome in Singapore?* (Chapter 12, p. 379)
A6	*Will having more integration programmes increase interaction between Singaporeans and immigrants?* (Chapter 12, p. 379)
A7	*Has the integration of immigrants in Singapore been successful?* (Chapter 12, p. 379)
A8	*How have integration efforts led by immigrants benefited them?* (Chapter 12, p. 379)
A9	*How have integration efforts by government organisations benefited immigrants?* (Chapter 12, p. 379)
A10	*How can schools contribute to the integration of immigrants in Singapore?* (Chapter 12, p. 379)
B	**Performance Task (PT) Questions in *All About Social Studies (NT) Coursebooks* (1A, 1B, 2A, 2B, 3, 4)**
B1	*Do common spaces in your school promote interaction among the different cultural groups?* (1A, p. 101)
B2	*How can we help students who are migrants integration in school?* (1B, p. 115)
B3	*How can individuals contribute to peace in Singapore?* (2A, p. 78)
B4	*How can we encourage the practice of recycling in school?* (2B, p. 59)
B5	*What do you think the government needs to spend the country's reserves on?* (3, p. 82)
B6	*How can we improve the way we show care for others?* (4, p. 103)
C	**Issue Investigation Questions proposed by postgraduate student-teachers in pre-service course (QCL52D)**
C1	*Should ethnic quota for housing be abolished?*
C2	*Should there be a quota for international students in schools?*
C3	*Should there be a quota for hiring foreign labourers for companies based in Singapore?*
C4	*Should National Service be voluntary?*
C5	*Should the Presidency be reserved along racial lines?*

Poring over this list reveals that these SS inquiry questions are of somewhat different natures.

A majority of these questions (A1, A2, A3, A4, A6, A7, A8, A9, B1) appear as social "scientific" questions, namely questions that primarily invite the researchers to answer by relying on empirical evidence. The clearest example is A1 ("*What does being Singaporean mean to students of your school?*"), since it is a well-defined empirical question ("What does being Singaporean mean") with a

well-delimited scope ("to students of your school"). The researchers should be in relatively little doubt that they simply need to survey and/or interview an appropriate sample of students in their school, and the empirical data so gathered should allow them to answer the investigation question. Some of the other specimens here are not as straightforward as A1: for example, questions A2 and A7 are *evaluative* in nature, and thus in addition to gathering empirical evidence, answering them may also require some form of measurement or comparison (i.e. against the criteria of "successful integration"). Despite minor differences such as this, the common characteristic of this first category of questions is their *empirically driven* nature: in other words, they are basic research puzzles that *can be* answered in a relatively objective manner through empirical data. Thus, we may call this type of questions the *Social Scientist's Question*. It is noteworthy that there is a concentration of social scientist's questions in the E/NA syllabus/coursebook.

In contrast, a number of other questions (A5, A10, B2, B3, B4, B6) appear to be driven primarily towards some forms of desirable practical social outcome (e.g. "social integration", "peace in Singapore", "care for others"). These questions, often starting with the word *"how"*, are asked in a way that orients the inquirers towards finding social solutions and interventions. The nature of the social issue and the desirability of the specified social outcomes are themselves *not* the subject of inquiry or investigation, but are presented as self-evident. Instead, the aim of the inquiry is to arrive at solutions or recommendations in line with those pre-determined outcomes. Thus, this second category of inquiry questions may be viewed as guided by certain social values and visions from the

outset, whereas the inquiry *per se* becomes more practical and "problem-solving" in nature. Hence, these questions can be dubbed the *Social Worker's Questions*. Although the term social worker may evoke the provision of direct services and casework, it is worth noting that Singapore's definition of social work is broader and refers to a "practice-based profession that promotes social change and development, social cohesion and the empowerment and liberation of people" (MOH et al., 2015).

In addition to the above two categories which account for the II/PT questions found in the official SS syllabi/textbooks, the authors also observed in the course of their work and study a third category of questions frequently used by teachers for SS inquiry. Illustrated by questions B5 and C1-5 in Table 1, this category of questions are highly distinct from those in the first two categories in that they are concerned explicitly with contentious and/or controversial matters of politics and policy. Typically beginning with the word "*should*", these questions lend themselves to debate and argumentation. Often, though perhaps not always, an element of moral or political value judgement is inherent in these questions. Therefore, we refer to this category as the *Politician's Question*. Although politician's questions do not feature prominently in the official SS textbooks, they do seem popular among SS teachers. We surmise this is because one commonly used strategy for inculcating citizenship is to put students in the shoes of the policymakers of having to weigh difficult questions of politics and policy.

The foregoing analysis thus yields a taxonomy comprising three main categories, which we summarise and further elaborate in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Taxonomy of SS inquiry questions

Type of SS inquiry question	*Key characteristics*
Social Scientist's Question	• A research puzzle that can be answered more or less satisfactorily with empirical evidence in the form of data and analysis of data; • Concerned with social facts and processes, and *why* and *how* they are the way they are; • Not guided explicitly by social/political/moral visions or values; • No explicit involvement of value judgement or contestation.
Social Worker's Question	• Focused on finding practical social solutions and interventions for given social issues/problems; • Not focused on questioning or deconstructing the social issues/problems *per se*; • Explicitly guided by social visions and outcomes recognised as desirable or normative; • Not concerned with questioning or contesting the guiding social visions, outcomes, and the underlying values.
Politician's Question	• Concerned explicitly with contentious and/or controversial matters of politics and policy, with wider societal significance; • Lends itself to debates and argumentation, as it often entails trade-offs; • Answering the question may ultimately require an act of moral and/or political value judgement.

Implications for Conducting II

By providing teachers and students a common vocabulary for articulating various avenues of social inquiry, our taxonomy gives expression to the multifaceted purposes of SS education in Singapore. Although the theoretical scholarship on SS sharply distinguishes between the goals of citizenship transmission, social transformation, and social science education, in practice SS instruction in Singapore serves a combination of these functions (Adler & Sim, 2007). Depending on their specific learning intentions, teachers and students may therefore formulate different types of inquiry questions. For example, if a school emphasizes the citizenship transmission dimensions of SS, and intends to "piggy-back" SS II with a Values-in-Action community service project (Yang, 2020), then the SS II inquiry question would likely take the form of a Social Worker's Question. By contrast, if the school privileges social transformation as a goal of SS, and seeks to allow students to engage with contemporary debates that they read about in the news media, then the inquiry question might take the form of a Politician's Question.

While all three types of questions can facilitate meaningful inquiry, each type of question will require a different inquiry approach and will yield different investigation outcomes. Our taxonomy therefore provides a framework for clarifying the cognitive demands placed on students by different types of questions. We provide a non-exhaustive schema of these demands in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Cognitive demands of SS inquiry questions

Type of SS inquiry question	Cognitive Demands	
	Inquiry Approach	*Investigation Outcome*
Social Scientist's Question	• Operationalization of target concept (e.g. integration) • Design and implementation of appropriate data collection instruments • Interpretation and evaluation of data to produce *evidence*	Valid and reliable conclusion, with some degree of generalizability
Social Worker's Question	• Analysis of community needs and "pain points" • Generation and evaluation of potential solutions	Feasible and effective recommendations which address the identified problem
Politician's Question	• Identification of stakeholders and competing perspectives • Interpretation, evaluation, and synthesis of competing perspectives	Informed and reasoned judgement on a controversial issue

To be clear, students may use similar *methods*—such as surveys, interviews, participant observation—to address the different types of inquiry questions. However, the *application* of these methods will vary according to the type of inquiry question posed. For example, in addressing a Social Worker's question, students may conduct interviews to better understand and empathize with experiences on the ground. In the process, students become embedded in the communities their project is intended to serve. When addressing a Social Scientist's question, students may similarly conduct interviews, but their approach might be more detached and "clinical", so as to preserve a measure of analytic objectivity.

While different types of questions place different *demands* on students, the authors caution that the type of inquiry question posed does not necessarily make the II more or less *demanding*. While there is a concentration of social worker's questions in the NT syllabus/coursebooks, perhaps because they allow students to draw on practical reasoning and everyday experiences, social worker's questions also require a high level of inventive thinking as well as a sensitivity to context-specific implementation considerations. By contrast, a Politician's Question may require students to operate at a higher level of abstraction, but it does not necessarily demand the same attention to the design or enactment of possible interventions. To the extent that our taxonomy of inquiry questions is used to facilitate Differentiated Instruction, we recommend that it is used to differentiate students according to interest and learning profile, as opposed to student readiness (described in some contexts as "progress" or "ability").

Applications beyond II

While this article primarily focuses on the formulation of inquiry questions in the context of SS II, we believe our taxonomy has the potential to extend to other instructional contexts in secondary-level SS.

In the N/O-level examination, the first sub-question of the Structured-Response Question (SRQ) frequently requires students to make recommendations on a societal issue, such as plastic waste or environmental sustainability. It therefore contains features of the Social Worker's Question. Other times, the first sub-question of the SRQ requires candidates to explain the causes of a particular phenomenon, such as increased diversity in Singapore or increased healthcare spending. In such instances, students are effectively being asked to address a Social Scientist's

Question. By contrast, the second sub-questions of the SRQ requires students to explain two factors or perspectives and (for the O-level examination) to make a judgement on their relative importance. In the 2018 examination, for example, O-level candidates were asked whether they thought the government or individuals should bear the greater responsibility for healthcare costs, a prompt which evinced features of the Politician's Question. Given the pivot to standards-based assessment in the Singapore educational landscape and the corresponding increase in attention to articulating the demands of test items, our taxonomy offers a heuristic for reflecting on the role of different types of questions across the SS curriculum. Additionally, it highlights the cognitive switching required of students in managing different tasks in SS.

Beyond the specific purpose of formulating and unpacking inquiry questions, our taxonomy can potentially advance the curricular outcome of encouraging perspective-taking. By understanding that different social agents may ask different questions of the same societal issue, students can reflect on why different perspectives exist. As an illustration, in examining the issue of minimum wage legislation, a social scientist may focus on measuring a specific outcome, such as the impact on levels of unemployment. By contrast, a politician might focus on managing the trade-offs between the interests of different stakeholders, such as businesses and workers, and might also be guided by his or her ideological beliefs. The politician and social scientist may not exactly disagree, but they will nevertheless offer different perspectives, in part because of the types of question to which they each implicitly respond. This understanding offers students a more sophisticated model for explaining why perspectives differ, as compared to the

simplistic notions that sources are either "biased" or "unbiased" (Lee & Shemilt, 2004). By highlighting differing approaches taken toward social issues, our taxonomy also deepens students' understanding of the concept of polycentric and distributed governance, which underpins Issue 1 in the SS syllabus, with its emphasis on the roles of organized groups, individuals, and the government in working for the good of society.

Limitations and cautions

Notwithstanding its potential applications, our taxonomy has several limitations, and should be used with some caution in SS teachers' practice. First, our taxonomy might come across as essentialising, and might foster a misconception that the identity of a social agent determines the questions which or she is entitled to pose. Students might come to believe, for instance, that politicians *only* ask the Politician's Question, or even more perniciously, that *only* politicians can ask a Politician's Question. Like all models, our taxonomy ultimately represents a simplification (or "ideal types") of the real world, where the boundaries between politics, research, and practice are necessarily more blurry. Just as policy debates are often informed by empirical evidence, social scientists may also build on their research findings to make political interventions in the public sphere. Similarly, the role of social workers can extend to advocating for action on wider structural issues. In organising inquiry questions around ideal types, our taxonomy could inadvertently distort the complexity of public discourse, and thereby mislead or confuse students.

Furthermore, some inquiry questions may not fall neatly into the three categories of questions we have identified. Reconsider inquiry question B2 from Table 1 (*How can we help students who are migrants integrate in school?*). At face value, B2 presents a Social Worker's Question. However, it is entirely conceivable that a politician or social scientist might pose the same question, except that they are likely to approach the question with a different set of priorities and considerations. A politician might be more concerned with structures and policies to promote integration in schools, whereas a social worker might be more interested in ground-up programmes and initiatives. Conversely, a social scientist may address the question by measuring the efficacy of various interventions.

Given these considerations, we stress that our taxonomy is not meant to be a straightjacket that confines the development of inquiry question into one of the three categories suggested. Rather, the taxonomy is intended to draw out the implications that different types of inquiry question may have for inquiry approaches and practices. We therefore recommend that the taxonomy be applied with a "light touch", and urge teachers and students to avoid an overly formulaic or prescriptive approach to framing inquiry questions. Ultimately, inquiry in SS should foreground *students' questions*; our taxonomy is more akin to a form of cognitive apprenticeship, through which students are exposed to and inducted into the process of framing questions that resonate with their interests and values.

Conclusion

Given the volatility and complexity of the twenty-first century, finding the "right" question or problem to solve is just as important a skill for students to acquire as finding the "correct" answer. In practice, however, the questions we ask are not neutral constructs that arise in a vacuum; they inevitably reflect our personal

experiences and professional interests, as well as the discursive and epistemological norms of the communities in which we are situated. Whereas inquiry learning in History and Geography tends to be governed by clearer disciplinary conventions that delimit the types of questions posed, the multi-faceted purposes of Social Studies can create divergent possibilities for the framing of social inquiry.

The taxonomy of SS inquiry questions proposed in this paper is not meant to reflect in a realistic manner the work performed by real-life politicians, social scientists, and social workers; rather, the purpose of the taxonomy is to provide an accessible shorthand for framing three distinct but interrelated types of questions that students might ask when investigating a societal issue. Through providing a common vocabulary for articulating the features of different types of SS inquiry question and approaches, it is hoped that this taxonomy will aid both students and teachers of SS in their journeys of understanding societal issues of importance.

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