

unique and united

I AM—WE ARE: A PORTRAIT OF US



Why Unique and United?

The Students Rebuild: Unique and United project challenges middle school students to explore their evolving identities, embrace what makes them different, and use creative expression to build bridges of understanding in their communities. At an age when fitting in often feels more important than standing out, this project celebrates the power of authenticity and the strength found in diverse perspectives.

Educational Objectives

Through this activity, students will:

- Reflect on what makes them unique.
- Recognize shared humanity between individuals, cultures, and communities.
- Use creativity to spark dialogue, challenge assumptions, foster connection, and ignite bold ideas that can change the world.

Teacher Overview

This guide provides two implementation options: a streamlined single-period version for quick implementation and an extended multi-day version for deeper exploration. Both versions address the unique developmental needs of middle school students while maintaining psychological safety and educational rigor.

Important: The safety guidelines below are essential for creating an appropriate learning environment when students share personal information.

Materials Needed

- Dan Eldon's Creative Works (on Page 9)
- Student photographs or option for digital self-portraits
- 10" x 10" cardstock or poster board
- Mixed media supplies (markers, paint, fabric, found objects)
- Digital devices for audio/video recording
- QR code generator or class website for digital integration
- Magazines, newspapers for collage materials
- Access to online resources for research and inspiration



CREATING A SAFE AND RESPECTFUL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Before beginning this project, it's essential to establish clear guidelines for maintaining a respectful and safe classroom community. This section should be reviewed with students before starting the activity.

Sharing Guidelines for Students

Boundaries Matter: You are in control of what you share. Include only information and images that you're comfortable having others see and discuss.

Avoid Sensitive Personal Details: Don't include information about family problems, financial situations, medical conditions, or other private matters that could make you feel uncomfortable later.

Think About Future You: Consider whether you'd be comfortable with this information being known by classmates, teachers, and family members who might visit our gallery.

Community Agreements

- **Respectful Viewing:** We approach each other's artwork with curiosity and kindness
- **No Negative Comments:** Keep observations positive and supportive
- **Ask Before Sharing:** Don't photograph or share classmates' work without permission
- **Support Each Other:** If someone seems uncomfortable, we help them feel included and valued

Teacher Guidelines

- Review all portraits before display and gently guide students to modify anything that might inadvertently invite unwanted attention or comments.
- Emphasize that being authentic doesn't mean sharing everything - it means sharing what feels right and safe for each individual.
- Monitor peer interactions during gallery walks and discussions for supportive engagement.
- Have conversations with students who may be sharing too much personal information.
- Create alternative options for students who may not feel comfortable with any level of personal sharing.



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OPTION 1 | SINGLE CLASS PERIOD | 50 minutes

Best For: Quick implementation, introduction to identity exploration

Phase 1: Opening and Artistic Inspiration | 10 minutes

Teacher Setup:

- Prepare Dan Eldon's Creative Works, found on Page 9
- Have discussion questions ready

Teacher Script: *At your age, you're figuring out who you are and who you want to become. Sometimes it feels like you have to choose between fitting in and being yourself. Today we're going to explore how being authentic - showing who you really are - actually makes our community stronger.*

Teacher Instruction: Show examples of Dan Eldon's Creative Works, which can be found on Page 9 of this guide. He was a young artist and photojournalist who used collage to tell his story. Look at how he combined photos, drawings, words, and objects to show different parts of who he was.



Global Connection: After Dan Eldon's death in Somalia at age 22, his mother, Kathy, and sister, Amy, founded Creative Visions Foundation, the organization behind Students Rebuild. They created the term "creative changemaker" to describe people like Dan who use art, media, and storytelling to create positive change.

Quick Discussion Questions:

- "What do you notice about how Dan showed different aspects of his identity?"
- "How might creating art about yourself help others understand you better?"
- "What's one thing about you that you wish people understood?"

Phase 2: Create Your Portrait | 30 minutes

Teacher Instructions: Provide clear guidelines while encouraging authentic expression. Circulate to provide individual support and ensure appropriate content.

Teacher Script: *You're going to create a portrait that shows who you really are. Start by placing your photo somewhere on your canvas - it doesn't have to be in the center. Then fill the space around it with images, words, drawings, and symbols that represent different parts of your identity.*

What to Include:

- Things you're passionate about or interested in
- Words that describe your personality or values
- Images that represent your culture, family traditions, or background
- Your goals, dreams, or aspirations
- Something about yourself that might surprise people

Teacher Note: Monitor for appropriate content and guide students toward positive self-representation while maintaining authenticity.

Phase 3: Gallery Walk and Reflection | 10 minutes

Teacher Instructions: Post portraits as a gallery titled “I Am—We Are: A Portrait of Us.” Guide students through a respectful viewing experience.

Teacher Script for Gallery Walk: *Let's look at our portraits together. As you move around, think about what you're learning about your classmates and how our individual stories create a picture of our community.*

Closing Discussion Questions:

- "What did you learn about a classmate that surprised you?"
- "How do our differences make our class stronger?"
- "What does it mean to be 'unique and united'?"

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OPTION 2 | EXTENDED MULTI-DAY VERSION | 2-3 CLASS PERIODS

Best For: Deep identity exploration, comprehensive community building

Day 1: Identity Exploration and Artistic Inspiration | 50 minutes

Opening: The Complexity of Identity | 15 minutes

Teacher Setup: Begin with a discussion that helps students think critically about identity formation and expression during adolescence.

Teacher Script: *As middle schoolers, you're at a unique time in your lives where you're figuring out who you are and who you want to become. Sometimes it feels like you need to choose between fitting in and being yourself. Today we're going to start exploring how being authentic - showing who you really are - actually makes our community stronger.*

Discussion Starters

- "What's the difference between how you present yourself online versus in person?"
- "Why might someone choose to hide or highlight certain aspects of who they are?"
- "How has your sense of identity changed since elementary school?"
- "What assumptions do people make about you that might be wrong?"

Introduce Dan Eldon: Art as Authentic Expression | 20 minutes

Teacher Instructions: Use Dan Eldon's Creative Works as a model for authentic creative expression while connecting to the broader mission of creative advocacy.

Teacher Script: *I want to introduce you to Dan Eldon. He was a young photojournalist and artist who used his creativity as a way to tell powerful stories that could help others. Through his collage journals, he documented not just what he saw, but how he felt about the world around him. His art became a tool for connection and positive change.*

Global Connection: Dan's Impact on Creative Expression: After Dan Eldon's death in Somalia at age 22, his mother, Kathy, and sister Amy founded Creative Visions Foundation - the organization behind Students Rebuild. They created the term "creative changemaker" to describe people like Dan who use art, media, and storytelling to create positive change. Today, Creative Visions has supported projects worldwide, proving that individual creative voices can spark positive movements. Your portrait project continues this legacy of using authentic self-expression to build understanding and community.

Analyze Dan's Work:

- "How did Dan use mixed media to tell complex stories?"
- "What can you learn about his personality and values from his art?"
- "How might creating authentic art help combat the pressure to present a 'perfect' image?"
- "In what ways can honest self-expression help build connections with others?"

Creating a Safe and Supportive Environment | 10 minutes

Teacher Script: *Before we begin creating, we need to talk about how to share appropriately and create a safe space for everyone. Remember, being authentic doesn't mean sharing everything - it means sharing what feels right and safe for you.*

Review Guidelines with Students:

- Boundaries Matter: You control what you share
- Avoid Sensitive Personal Details: Keep private matters private
- Think About Future You: Consider long-term comfort with sharing

Establish Community Agreements:

- Respectful Viewing
- No Negative Comments
- Support Each Other

Identity Mapping Exercise | 15 minutes

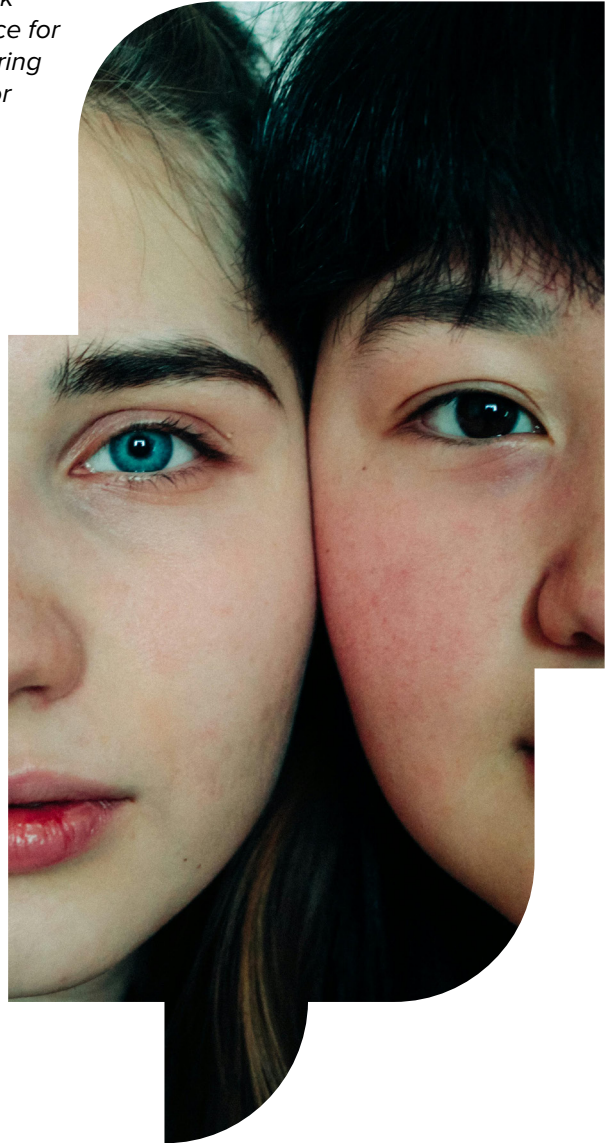
Teacher Instructions: Guide students through a private reflection exercise that will inform their portrait creation without requiring them to share everything publicly.

Teacher Script: *Before creating your portraits, you're going to complete a private identity map. This is just for you - it will help you think about what aspects of your identity you might want to include in your public portrait. You get to choose what to share.*

Identity Map Categories:

- Public Identity: How others see me
- Private Identity: Parts of myself I don't always share
- Evolving Identity: How I'm changing or want to change
- Values & Beliefs: What matters most to me
- Challenges & Growth: Obstacles I've overcome or am working on
- Dreams & Goals: Where I see myself going

Teacher Note: This mapping is for personal reflection - students choose what to include in their public portrait.



Day 2: Creating Multimedia Self-Portraits | 50 minutes

Portrait Creation Process | 40 minutes

Teacher Instructions: Provide clear guidelines while encouraging authentic expression. Circulate to provide individual support and ensure appropriate content.

Teacher Script: *Today, you're going to create your multimedia self-portrait using the ideas from your identity map. Remember, you're in control of what you share. Think about how to represent yourself authentically while maintaining boundaries that feel comfortable.*

Guidelines for Authentic Expression:

- Include your photograph as an anchor, but transform the space around it
- Incorporate symbols, words, images, and textures that represent different facets of your identity
- Consider including elements that challenge assumptions others might have about you
- Balance sharing meaningful personal aspects with maintaining comfortable boundaries
- Experiment with layering, collage, and mixed media techniques

Encouraged Elements:

- Cultural background and family traditions
- Personal growth moments (that you're comfortable sharing)
- Passions and interests (both popular and unique)
- Future aspirations and current goals
- Quotes, lyrics, or words that resonate with your worldview
- Visual representations of your values in action

Reflection Prompts for Creation:

- "What aspects of your identity do you want people to understand better?"
- "How can you visually represent internal qualities like resilience, curiosity, or empathy?"
- "What elements of your portrait might surprise your classmates?"

Digital Storytelling Component | 10 minutes

Teacher Instructions: Guide students in creating brief audio reflections that will accompany their portraits.

Teacher Script: *Now you're going to record a 60-90 second reflection that will accompany your portrait. This is your chance to share the story behind your artwork and help viewers understand your choices.*

Recording Instructions: *Use your Chromebook or other device to record a short 90-second audio or video reflection. You can use the built-in recording app, Voice Recorder, or any recording software available on your device.*

Link the Voice to the Portrait: Use a QR code generator to link the audio file to each student's portrait. Tape or glue the QR code to the corner of their paper.

Students create a 90-second multimedia reflection combining audio narration with visual elements:

Storytelling Prompts:

- "One thing my portrait shows that people might not expect about me is..."
- "The biggest misconception people have about me is... but actually..."
- "Something I'm proud of that isn't obvious from looking at me is..."
- "A challenge I've faced that has shaped who I am is..."
- "My portrait represents my values because..."

Day 3: Gallery Creation and Community Dialogue | 50 minutes

Install the Gallery: "I Am—We Are: A Portrait of Us" | 10 minutes

Teacher Instructions: Arrange the gallery to maximize impact and encourage thoughtful viewing.

Teacher Script: *We're going to transform our classroom into a gallery called 'I Am—We Are: A Portrait of Us.' As we set this up, think about how your individual portrait contributes to our collective story.*

Display Strategy:

- Arrange portraits to encourage close examination
- Include QR codes or digital access to audio reflections
- Create sight lines that allow viewers to experience both individual stories and collective impact

Introduce Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's Pulse Topology | 10 minutes

Teacher Instructions: Use this contemporary art example (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Zy39kMf_3o) to help students understand how individual contributions create collective meaning.

Teacher Script: *I want to show you an artwork that connects to what we've created. This is called 'Pulse Topology' by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. In this interactive installation, individual heartbeats create a collective light and sound experience.*

Connect to the Installation: This artwork demonstrates that:

- Each person's contribution is unique and irreplaceable
- Individual authenticity creates collective beauty
- Sharing our most fundamental human experiences reveals our connection
- Art can make the invisible visible and the personal universal

Reflection Question: "How does your portrait gallery function similarly to 'Pulse Topology' in making individual experiences part of a larger story?"

Structured Gallery Walk and Dialogue | 20 minutes

Teacher Instructions: Guide students through a respectful and meaningful viewing experience.

Gallery Walk Protocol:

1. **Silent Observation | 5 minutes:** Move through the gallery, taking notes on what you notice, what surprises you, and what resonates with you
2. **Listening Stations | 10 minutes:** Listen to selected audio reflections - focus on hearing your classmates' stories
3. **Partner Sharing | 5 minutes:** Discuss your observations with a partner - what did you learn?

Reflection Circle | 10 minutes

Teacher Instructions: Facilitate a closing discussion that connects individual learning to community understanding.

Teacher Script: *Let's come together to reflect on what we've learned about ourselves and each other through this project.*

Discussion Questions:

- "What patterns do you notice across our portraits? What themes emerge?"
- "How did learning more about your classmates change or challenge your assumptions?"
- "What did you discover about the relationship between individual identity and community belonging?"
- "How might understanding each other's authentic selves change how we interact as a class?"
- "What would our school be like if everyone felt safe expressing their authentic identity?"
- "How can we carry the insights from this project into our daily interactions?"

Take a photo of what your students created and share it at Studentsrebuild.org. Creative Visions will donate \$5, up to \$1 million for each submission or student engaged. The project is open from September 15, 2025 - June 1, 2026.

extensions and community engagement

Interactive Elements for Visitors

"Understanding Differences" Station:

- Provide cards with questions about identity and belonging
- Invite visitors to write about how the portraits they've seen expanded their understanding of middle school students

"You Belong Here Too" Interactive Mirror:

- Place a mirror at the center or edge of the gallery with a sign: "You belong here too"
- This reminds visitors that the gallery isn't just about the students - every person who views it is part of the community
- Provide sticky notes where visitors can write what makes them unique and add it to the display



Family Dialogue Starter

Send home conversation cards with prompts like:

- "What did you learn about identity from your child's portrait project?"
- "How has your own sense of identity evolved since middle school?"
- "What family values do you see reflected in your child's self-expression?"

Cross-Curricular Extensions

- **Social Studies:** Research identity and belonging in different cultures and historical periods
- **English Language Arts:** Write narrative essays exploring how specific experiences shaped identity
- **Science:** Investigate the psychology of identity development during adolescence
- **Technology:** Create digital galleries, podcasts, or short documentaries expanding on portrait themes
- **Art:** Study other artists who use self-portraiture for personal expression or community building

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DAN ELDON'S CREATIVE WORKS



 **students**
REBUILD

 **CREATIVE**
VISIONS









