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CREATIVITY AS A TOOL FOR CHANGE

Honoring Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The Students Rebuild Unique & United project invites young people to explore their identities, celebrate their differences, and use creative expression as a force for empathy, unity, and bold ideas capable of transforming communities. This Martin Luther King Jr. Day, we honor Dr. King's enduring legacy by engaging with the very tools he championed: creativity, dialogue, and the courage to envision a more just world.

Through this project, students will:

- Reflect on what makes them unique and how their individual voices contribute to the larger story of humanity.
- Recognize the shared humanity between individuals, cultures, and communities: the very connections Dr. King called us to see and strengthen.
- Use creativity to spark dialogue, challenge assumptions, foster connection, and ignite bold ideas that can change the world.

What's in This Guide

This guide moves students from inspiration to action in three steps: discovering changemakers who used art for connection, including Dr. King, creating creative works, and sharing their voices through Students Rebuild. Adaptable for any art medium and any classroom schedule.

Materials Needed

- No special materials required
- Paper, markers, crayons, paint, or any art supplies
- Digital tools for digital creations
- Recycled or found materials for collage and sculpture
- Optional: device to view changemaker videos/artwork

STEP 1: Get INSPIRED

Throughout history, changemakers have used art, music, and storytelling as tools for bringing people together. Dr. King was one of them. Select one or more of the creative leaders below and share their work with your students. Afterwards, use the age-appropriate reflection questions to have a conversation about how creativity can be a force for positive change.



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Words as Art

Dr. King's speeches were carefully crafted works of art, filled with poetry, rhythm, and vivid imagery that helped people imagine a better world. In his "I Have a Dream" speech, he painted pictures with words, using metaphors like "the bank of justice" to make his vision feel real and possible.

Watch: ["I Have a Dream" speech](#)

The Freedom Singers

Music as a Tool for Courage

During the civil rights movement, activists sang freedom songs while marching and gathering together. Groups like the SNCC Freedom Singers traveled the country, using music to spread their message and unite people. Songs like "We Shall Overcome" gave people strength.

Listen: ["We Shall Overcome"](#)



Marian Anderson

A Voice That Broke Barriers

In 1939, singer Marian Anderson was told she could not perform at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C. because she was Black. Instead, she sang on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to a crowd of 75,000 people. Her courage and extraordinary voice helped change hearts and minds.

Watch: [Marian Anderson at Lincoln Memorial](#)



Jacob Lawrence

Painting Stories of Struggle and Hope

Artist Jacob Lawrence created bold, colorful paintings that told the stories of Black Americans, including the Great Migration and the civil rights movement. His work helped people see and understand experiences they might not have known about.

Explore: [The Migration Series \(MoMA\)](#)

Discussion Questions

Grades K-5

- These changemakers used their talents to bring people together. What is something YOU are good at that could help people feel connected?
- Dr. King talked about dreams for a better world. What is one dream you have for your school or neighborhood?
- What makes you unique? What is something you share with everyone in this room?

Grades 6-8

- These changemakers turned personal expression into something that united people. How can sharing what makes you unique actually help you connect with others?
- Dr. King used metaphors and vivid imagery to help people "see" his dream. What creative form (music, art, writing, video, etc.) would best help you express YOUR vision for a more connected world?
- Marian Anderson and Jacob Lawrence created work that showed experiences many people had never seen. Whose stories in your community deserve to be seen and celebrated?

Grades 9-12

- These changemakers used creativity to shift perspectives and build empathy across differences. What divisions or misunderstandings exist in your community that creative expression might help bridge?
- The Unique & United project asks you to explore both what makes you unique AND what connects you to others. Why do you think both parts of that equation matter for building empathy?
- Dr. King said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that." How can your creative work be a form of "light" in today's world?

Connecting to Unique & United: Teacher Script

"Each of these changemakers used their unique gifts to help people feel connected to one another. Dr. King used words. The Freedom Singers used music. Marian Anderson used her voice. Jacob Lawrence used paint. They didn't just make art for art's sake. They made art to help people see each other differently, to build empathy, and to inspire action.

This year, Students Rebuild is calling on YOU to do the same thing through Unique & United. We want you to use YOUR creativity to explore what makes you unique and what connects you to others. Your art might be a painting, a poem, a song, a dance, a photograph, or something we haven't even thought of yet. The question is: How will YOU use your creative voice to celebrate differences and build connection?"

Step 2: Create

Use these prompts as jumping-off points for your creation. They can be adapted to any art medium: visual, digital, performance, literary, mixed media, sculpture, culinary, etc. There is no single right way to participate. Choose the idea that speaks to you or come up with your own!

Quote Illustration

Bring Dr. King's words to life by creating a visual or performance representation of one of his famous quotes. Consider how his message about unity, justice, or human dignity connects to your own unique perspective and experiences. [See 25 Inspirational MLK Quotes](#) for inspiration.

If Dr. King Were Here Today...

Write a letter, poem, or story imagining a conversation with Dr. King today. What would he notice about our world? What would his advice be for honoring both our differences and our shared humanity? Reflect on how his values of empathy, courage, and peaceful action can be applied to your own life and to the communities you're part of.

Dreams for Our World

Inspired by the "I Have a Dream" speech, envision what justice, unity, and belonging look like in today's world. Create a mixed-media collage representing your vision of a more connected, empathetic world, one that celebrates what makes each person unique while recognizing what we share. Display collages together as a visual symbol of community vision and collective effort.

Symbolic Portraits

Create a portrait (in any medium) of Dr. King, another creative changemaker, or yourself that incorporates symbols representing values like unity, nonviolence, hope, courage, or belonging. How do these symbols show up in your own life? How does your unique identity connect to these universal values?

Visualizing the Abstract

Create posters or visual art demonstrating themes of justice, hope, unity, empathy, or courage. How do different artistic choices (color, composition, imagery) convey meaning and connect with viewers' emotions?

Extension: Investigate how art has supported movements for positive change throughout history. How have creative voices helped people see their shared humanity across differences?

Step 3: Share Your Creation

Once you've created your artwork, share it with the world! Upload your creation to the Students Rebuild website to join young people across the globe in honoring Dr. King's legacy and celebrating what makes each of us unique and united.

Register and submit here: studentsrebuild.org/projects/unique

For every work of art or student engaged, Creative Visions donates \$5, up to \$1 million, to organizations that support youth empowerment and community connection around the world.

Recommended Reading

Books About Identity, Creativity, and Finding Your Voice



Grades K-5

Martin's Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. by Doreen Rappaport

This award-winning picture book tells the story of Dr. King's life through his own powerful words, woven together with stunning collage illustrations. A beautiful introduction to a man who used language to inspire a nation.

I Have a Dream illustrated by Kadir Nelson

Dr. King's famous speech is paired with breathtaking paintings that bring his words to life for young readers. Includes an audio CD of the original speech.

Be a King: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Dream and You by Carole Boston Weatherford

This interactive book shows young readers how they can live out Dr. King's values in their own lives. Each page begins with "You can be a King" and encourages children to put kindness and courage into action.

Grades 6-8

New Kid by Jerry Craft

In this Newbery Medal-winning graphic novel, seventh grader Jordan Banks navigates life at a new school while staying true to his passion for drawing and his sense of self. A funny, heartfelt story about identity, belonging, and the power of art.

Fish in a Tree by Lynda Mullaly Hunt

Ally has always struggled in school and hidden her difficulties from everyone. When a new teacher helps her discover her unique strengths, she learns that being different is what makes her extraordinary. A story about finding your voice and embracing who you are.

The First Rule of Punk by Celia C. Pérez

Twelve-year-old Malú expresses herself through punk rock, zines, and her own creative style. When she starts at a new school, she must figure out how to stay true to herself while finding where she belongs. A celebration of creativity, culture, and being unapologetically you.

Grades 9-12

The Poet X by Elizabeth Acevedo

Xiomara has always kept her thoughts to herself, but when she discovers slam poetry, she finds a way to make her voice heard. This novel-in-verse explores identity, family, faith, and the transformative power of putting your truth into words.

Dear Martin by Nic Stone

Justyce starts writing letters to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as a way to make sense of the world around him. Through his journal, he wrestles with questions of identity, justice, and what it means to take the high road when the world doesn't always make it easy.

Brown Girl Dreaming by Jacqueline Woodson

In this National Book Award-winning memoir told in verse, Jacqueline Woodson shares the story of growing up as an African American in the 1960s and 1970s. A beautifully written exploration of memory, family, and finding your voice as a writer.

Punching the Air by Ibi Zoboi & Yusef Salaam

Amal is a teen artist and poet whose life takes an unexpected turn. Through it all, he holds onto his creativity as a source of strength, identity, and hope. A powerful novel-in-verse about the resilience of the human spirit.