

OVERVIEW OF THE KIT

Media Constructions of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Overview, Objectives, Pedagogy, and Practice

Overview

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated before his 40th birthday, yet his image and words have come to define the popular notion of social change in America. “I Have A Dream” has become as iconic as the image of King himself. But Martin King, the nonviolent visionary who poetically confronted segregation, was also a harsh critic of U.S. foreign policy, the economic system’s tolerance of poverty, and our very system of capitalism. It’s clear that some of Dr. King’s speeches and ideas are more frequently repeated in the popular media than others; some visual images of him and his work have made their way into popular culture, while others have been ignored. When new generations come to see and learn about who Martin Luther King, Jr. was and why he is considered such an important figure in American history, what do they see and hear? And what *don’t* they see and hear? Who gets to decide which King we see, which King gets remembered, which King to honor?

These lessons intend to help young people to understand and analyze the messages about Martin Luther King, Jr. that have been, and continue to be, constructed by different sources for different audiences and different purposes. These media constructions have complex historical contexts and diverse political biases, are likely to be interpreted differently depending upon the unique lenses of each viewer. If we can educate a generation to be capable of understanding these complexities and able to make their own thoughtful judgments about the challenge of change in our communities, then we will have made a deep contribution to Dr. King’s legacy.

Objectives:

- To teach core background information about the life, ideas, and legacy of Dr. King and the civil rights movement.
- To have students identify and understand both the literary and oratorical devices used and philosophical positions taken in three of Dr. King’s speeches.
- To train students to understand and evaluate authorship, credibility and bias in different media sources and forms.
- To teach students to analyze how the portrayal of Dr. King has been constructed differently and gives different meaning to his memory depending upon: who was doing the constructing, for what purpose, for what audience, with what bias, from what historical context, using what techniques, and using what media form.
- To engage all students, but particularly those disengaged from traditional school work, in complex critical thinking and the development of reading, listening and visual decoding skills and attitudes that support life-long democratic citizenship.
- * To have students reflect on justice, human rights and the challenges of social change.

Design of the Curriculum Kit

This kit was designed by educators in Ithaca, New York as part of the 2010 Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Build. These lessons were intended to integrate media literacy and critical thinking skills into a study of the history and ideas of Dr. King for the English Language Arts curriculum. The content and document-decoding approach makes the lessons usable (or easily adaptable) for middle school through college level classes in English, social studies, history, politics, and media

Media Literacy and Citizenship

The founders of the United States articulated the need for a literate citizenship as core to the development of a deep and enduring democracy. We live in an age when the most influential messages about pressing social issues and events are delivered through mass media, such as television, magazines and the Internet. Most students use the Internet as their primary source of information, yet few have any formal training in assessing the credibility of information in Web sites. It is essential to the success of our democracy that young people consciously and consistently analyze and evaluate media messages. They need to be taught to seek out current, accurate, and credible sources of information; they need to be aware of the influence of media messages on their understanding of the world; and they need training in identifying and using various techniques for communicating messages in different media forms. Without these critical skills, we risk losing the diversity and freedom of thought that underpins a culture of true democracy.

Collective Reading of Media Messages

This curriculum is based on the classroom practice of collective reading and discussion, in which the teacher leads the class through the process of decoding images, sounds and text as a way of developing a range of critical thinking skills while teaching core knowledge. This constructivist approach encourages the development of moral reasoning as students clarify their own interpretations, listen to the analysis of their peers, and discuss ethical issues. Decoding of the documents in this curriculum will help train students to distinguish fact from opinion, analyze point of view and identify bias, interpret historical documents, and use evidence to back up a thesis. The classroom decoding process is particularly effective in involving students who rarely share their opinions about print-based material, including students with reading disabilities, visual learners, and English language learners.

Challenges in Creating This Kit

In creating the series of lessons for this curriculum kit, we faced a number of challenges. One had to do with how to refer to Martin Luther King, Jr. (should he always be called Dr. King? Reverend King? Just Martin King?). Another had to do with the terms used when discussing different racial and ethnic groups (White or Caucasian? Black or African-American? Or Negro, the term Dr. King himself typically used?). In the end we used a range of terms, depending on the context of the material – but we encourage you to reflect on and discuss these issues as you explore the lessons.

It's also important to note what is left out of the media constructions included in these lessons. There is very little here from the Black Press or from alternative media sources; most of the lessons focus on the mainstream press and popular media constructions with which the students are likely to be already familiar. Again, we encourage you – if you have the time and interest – to explore how Dr. King's words and image have been constructed in those other types of sources, and to compare them with more mainstream and traditional media representations.

Finally, these lessons were designed primarily to be used in middle and high school English classes. If your context for presenting the lessons is very different (e.g., in a college level politics or history course), you will want to adapt the background material and questions to address your own particular context and needs.