

A Mini-Lesson for Martin Luther King Jr Day

This is a self-contained lesson designed for educators who are looking to devote about ~45 minutes of class time to reflecting on the ethics of scientific advancement while recognizing the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Starting point for teachers

- For this lesson, students will need to read independently, draw one or more graphs using a data table, and write a reflection in a format that is suitable for your classroom.
- The broad question is *whether “moral progress” (specifically, racial justice, poverty reduction, and peace) has kept up with science and technological progress over the past 60 years.* Younger students may need help imagining what life was like in the 1960s.
- This lesson plan touches on challenging topics, including racial inequality, that may feel uncomfortable for many science teachers and students. If you have extra time and want to further discuss themes explored in this lesson with your students, we recommend starting out with some [norms for productive discussion](#).

In-Class Investigations

Reading [15 minutes]

Have students read Martin Luther King Jr’s 1964 Nobel Peace Prize lecture, linked here:

<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/lecture/>

An abridged version is included on the last page of this lesson plan.

Making graphs [15 minutes]

We have collated data related to the three main themes—“racial injustice, poverty, and war”—that Dr. King identified in his lecture as being problems central to our struggle as humans. Share the following data tables with students, and ask them to create suitable visualizations of this data (e.g., column graphs, scatter plots, etc). The goal is to get students to work with, and think about, these numbers. Depending on your students and classroom, you could ask all students to make all three graphs in their notebooks, have pairs make a single graph on a whiteboard and do a gallery walk, or something different.

Average US Household Income, in 2024 dollars adjusted for inflation

	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020
Black	45,700	47,500	54,200	67,000	62,400	82,700
White	70,000	74,500	85,000	101,300	101,800	126,400
Hispanic	55,400	56,700	61,100	75,200	71,400	90,300



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* Data for other demographic categories is not available before 2002

** Source: <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/2025/demo/p60-286.pdf>

Number of people worldwide living on less than \$1.90 per day ("in poverty"), inflation adjusted

	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020
In Poverty	1.8 billion	1.9 billion	1.9 billion	1.7 billion	1.1 billion	0.7 billion
Not In Poverty	1.9 billion	2.5 billion	3.4 billion	4.4 billion	5.8 billion	7.1 billion

* Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/world-population-in-extreme-poverty-absolute>

Number of people worldwide killed in wars

	1961-1970	1971-1980	1981-1990	1991-2000	2001-2010	2011-2020
Deaths	1.23 million	1.72 million	1.86 million	0.51 million	0.22 million	0.70 million

* Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/war-and-peace>

Evaluation [15 minutes]

Ask students to take 3 minutes to make a list of technology that exists today, but that didn't exist when Martin Luther King Jr. made his speech in 1964. Examples might include the internet, mobile phones, and personal computers. Encourage them to take a moment to reflect on how much science and technology has advanced over the past 60 years.

Finally, have students reflect on the following question, and submit their reflections in a form that is suitable for your classroom: written slips of paper, discussions with a peer, or an online form:

Martin Luther King Jr. concluded his Nobel Prize speech by saying that

"...mankind's survival is dependent upon man's ability to solve the problems of racial injustice, poverty, and war; the solution of these problems is in turn dependent upon man squaring his moral progress with his scientific progress, and learning the practical art of living in harmony."

To what extent have we, humankind, been successful over the past 60 years in matching our scientific progress with moral progress? Have improvements in racial justice, poverty reduction, and peace kept up with the pace of scientific and technological advancement?

What's Next?

If you and your students found that lesson interesting and worthwhile, consider devoting a few classes to the [Underrepresentation Curriculum](#) later in the term.



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Abridged version of Martin Luther King Jr's 1964 Nobel Lecture

This evening I would like to use this lofty and historic platform to discuss what appears to me to be the most pressing problem confronting mankind today. Modern man has brought this whole world to an awe-inspiring threshold of the future. He has reached new and astonishing peaks of scientific success. He has produced machines that think and instruments that peer into the unfathomable ranges of interstellar space. He has built gigantic bridges to span the seas and gargantuan buildings to kiss the skies. His airplanes and spaceships have dwarfed distance, placed time in chains, and carved highways through the stratosphere. This is a dazzling picture of modern man's scientific and technological progress.

Yet, in spite of these spectacular strides in science and technology, and still unlimited ones to come, something basic is missing. There is a sort of poverty of the spirit which stands in glaring contrast to our scientific and technological abundance. The richer we have become materially, the poorer we have become morally and spiritually. We have learned to fly the air like birds and swim the sea like fish, but we have not learned the simple art of living together as brothers.

This problem of spiritual and moral lag, which constitutes modern man's chief dilemma, expresses itself in three larger problems which grow out of man's ethical infantilism. Each of these problems, while appearing to be separate and isolated, is inextricably bound to the other. I refer to racial injustice, poverty, and war.

The first problem that I would like to mention is racial injustice. The struggle to eliminate the evil of racial injustice constitutes one of the major struggles of our time. The present upsurge of the Negro people of the United States grows out of a deep and passionate determination to make freedom and equality a reality "here" and "now". In one sense the civil rights movement in the United States is a special American phenomenon which must be understood in the light of American history and dealt with in terms of the American situation. But on another and more important level, what is happening in the United States today is a relatively small part of a world development.

A second evil which plagues the modern world is that of poverty. Like a monstrous octopus, it projects its nagging, prehensile tentacles in lands and villages all over the world. Almost two-thirds of the peoples of the world go to bed hungry at night. They are undernourished, ill-housed, and shabbily clad. Many of them have no houses or beds to sleep in. Their only beds are the sidewalks of the cities and the dusty roads of the villages. Most of these poverty-stricken children of God have never seen a physician or a dentist. This problem of poverty is not only seen in the class division between the highly developed industrial nations and the so-called underdeveloped nations; it is seen in the great economic gaps within the rich nations themselves. Take my own country for example. We have developed the greatest system of production that history has ever known. We have become the richest nation in the world. Our national gross product this year will reach the astounding figure of almost 650 billion dollars. Yet, at least one-fifth of our fellow citizens – some ten million families, comprising about forty million individuals – are bound to a miserable culture of poverty.

A third great evil confronting our world is that of war. Man's proneness to engage in war is still a fact. But wisdom born of experience should tell us that war is obsolete. There may have been a time when war served as a negative good by preventing the spread and growth of an evil force, but the destructive power of modern weapons eliminated even the possibility that war may serve as a negative good. If we assume that life is worth living and that man has a right to survive, then we must find an alternative to war.

Martin Luther King Jr. – Nobel Lecture. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Prize Outreach 2026. Thu, 8 Jan 2026. <<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/lecture/>>



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