**Title of Lesson:** Habits of Mind as Used by Martin Luther King, Jr.

**Lesson By:** Elyse Senzon Langer

**Grade Level/ Subject Areas:** 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Grades

**Class Size:** Any Class Size

**Time/Duration of Lesson:** 1 ½ hours (at the beginning of the school year)

**Guiding Questions:**
- Which characteristics (or habits of mind) do people use effectively when they are confronted with problems to which answers are not immediately apparent?
- How did Martin Luther King, Jr. use the specific habits of mind of persistence, managing impulsivity, metacognition, striving for accuracy, questioning and posing problems, and thinking interdependently to work through problems nonviolently?

**Lesson Abstract:** This lesson allows students to learn habits of mind which will help them become more effective learners and proponents for social change through identifying and making goals related to these habits. Students will discuss the meanings of persistence, managing impulsivity, metacognition, striving for accuracy, questioning and posing problems, and thinking interdependently, and will identify these traits in Martin Luther King's nonviolent movement for civil rights. After studying Martin Luther King's example, students will write their own goals for the school year utilizing the concept of nonviolent action and habits of mind.

**Background Information:** My school's goal for the upcoming school-year is to help students work towards academic success utilizing the teaching of Habits of Mind as defined by Art Costa and Bena Kallick in their book *Learning and Leading with Habits of Mind: 16 Essential Characteristics for Success*. I plan to begin the school year discussing six of these habits using Martin Luther King, Jr. as an example and then asking the students to reflect and write their own goals with these six habits and nonviolence in mind.

**Lesson Content:**
Martin Luther King, Jr., inspired by the nonviolent movement for social change organized by Gandhi in India in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, became a leader in the civil rights movement of the 1960's. Through application of nonviolent means (such as boycotts, marches, speeches, sit-ins, and open, respectful communication with his opponents), he and the other participants of this movement eventually achieved unprecedented progress in the struggle for desegregation and civil rights. This occurred in the face of great adversity including racism, threats and acts of violence, and multiple arrests for civil disobedience.

It is evident that Martin Luther King, Jr. employed the use of very clear and effective habits of mind to achieve his goals. Regarding the need for strong habits of mind, he once said, “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy ([http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Martin_Luther_King_Jr., Strength to Love, 1963](http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Martin_Luther_King_Jr., Strength to Love, 1963)).” The six habits of mind this lesson focuses on are persistence, managing impulsivity, metacognition (or thinking about your thinking), striving for accuracy, questioning and posing problems, and thinking interdependently. Below are some examples of ways in which Martin Luther King, Jr. used each of these habits of mind, including actions and quotes that illustrate each habit.
Growing up in the segregated South, King was able to recognize early in his life the social injustices and violence of racial discrimination. He made a point of living within communities that were in need of action for desegregation. Through studying Gandhi's many successes with *satyagraha* (truth force or love force) as made into action with nonviolent social movements, King decided that, not only was nonviolent action the most peaceful, but also the most effective. Love, felt Gandhi and King, could be a “potent instrument for social and collective transformation.” This is a creed with which he persisted and to which he remained committed throughout his many social movements and his life. (Carson, 23-24)

King's persistence was evident in every effort he undertook. His first mass demonstration of civil disobedience – the Montgomery Bus Boycott – lasted for a whole year throughout threats and acts of violence against the boycotters, resistance from the city and state (including arrests and lawsuits), racism and prejudice. However, King and the people of Montgomery who participated in the boycott continued with their methodology and belief in the power of nonviolence. Their persistence paid off when the United States Supreme Court, in reaction to the boycott, eventually “declared Alabama's state and local laws requiring segregation on buses unconstitutional” (Carson, 93).

Each nonviolent effort against legal segregation that King and other nonviolent civil rights activists took on in other cities, states, and nationally eventually led to desegregation and changes to unjust laws. If they had given up when the situations they were in became uncomfortable, difficult, or upsetting, they would never have reached their goals. This is the power of persistence.

**Managing Impulsivity**

As the leader of a social movement on local, state, and national scales, King needed to be unfailingly deliberate and measured. He made no decisions without analyzing and thinking them through first. Often, he consulted with his friends and colleagues – such as his confidant and fellow activist Ralph Abernathy, or his wife Coretta Scott King – when faced with difficult decisions (Carson, 64). As a result, he took no action without weighing the options and finding the most nonviolent approach (i.e. boycotts, sit-ins, marches, and other forms of civil disobedience).

For example, the Montgomery Bus Boycott was the first city-wide social movement that Martin Luther King, Jr. was involved in and he needed to be able to weigh all the options presented to him and his community before deciding on which action(s) to take. After Rosa Parks was arrested, there were many different paths that could have been taken (i.e. rioting, violence, and even inaction). However, after long hours of thought and discussion, King and his fellow activists decided to follow Gandhi's example by planning nonviolent action. As a result, through careful and detailed planning, they organized a bus boycott in which 90% of the African American residents of Birmingham participated (*The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute*, http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/kingpapers/article/montgomery_bus_boycott_1955_1956/, accessed 8/15/09). The results were successful in that – after a year of boycotting – the original goals of the boycott were reached (i.e. bus desegregation) and, due to the success of the boycott, the social movement for civil rights progressed to a national level.

**Metacognition (Thinking About Your Thinking)**

King’s commitment to self-reflection was followed throughout his life and career. He very accurately stated, “My failure to reflect would do harm not only to me as a person, but to the total movement. For that reason I felt a moral obligation to do it” (Carson, 137).” In fact he consistently made time in
his exceptionally busy schedule to “meditate and think through the total struggle ahead (Carson, 137).” It is this habit of mind that often kept King from making rash decisions that could have moved the civil rights movement in a negative direction.

King also felt an obligation to think about issues from a critical standpoint. He studied social, political, and economic theories from many sources (including Karl Marx, Walter Rauschenbusch, and Nietzsche) and standpoints (communism - “A theoretical economic system characterized by the collective ownership of property and by the organization of labor for the common advantage of all members.”, liberalism - “A political theory founded on the natural goodness of humans and the autonomy of the individual and favoring civil and political liberties, government by law with the consent of the governed, and protection from arbitrary authority.”, socialism - “a political and economic theory or system in which the means of production, distribution, and exchange are owned by the community collectively, usually through the state.”, and capitalism - “an economic system based on the private ownership of industry.” www.thefreedictionary.com) before coming to the conclusion that Gandhi’s vision of a civilization based on nonviolent social action was the path he would follow (Carson, 17-29, Chapter 3: Crozer Seminary). It is King's commitment to this path that helped him reflect on all his social action.

Striving for Accuracy
King was quoted as saying, “If a man is called a streetsweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michaelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and Earth will pause to say, ‘Here lived a great streetsweeper who did his job well’” (www.habits-of-mind.net). In other words, he believed in bringing high quality and accuracy to all you do. He did not go through any experience without analyzing how it could have been done better. He admitted his own mistakes and then changed his actions accordingly, as with the Albany Movement of 1961, after which he said, “The mistake I made was to protest against segregation generally rather than against a single and distinct face of it (Carson, 1998, p. 168).” In other words, King realized that focusing on one particular form of segregation in Albany, such as he did with the lunch counters in Nashville, would have been more effective than trying to take action against all forms of segregation in Albany at once. Learning from this mistake in Albany helped the next major movement he undertook – The Birmingham Campaign of 1963, during which the specific strategy was to put economic pressure on the merchants of Birmingham to end segregation there through boycotts and sit-ins – all the more focused and organized (Carson, 1998, p. 174).

Additionally, any time King knew he was going to be asked to give a sermon or a speech, he worked tirelessly preparing it. Sometimes, he would decide to change his mind about what he was going to say at the last minute (as with his famous “I Have a Dream Speech”). However, it was the knowledge and experience he gained from preparation and striving towards accuracy that gave him the confidence to go “off script” (Carson, 1998, p. 223). It is also obvious how carefully and meticulously King wrote his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” the longest letter he had written in his life at that time, which was a response to local religious leaders’ criticisms of the aforementioned Birmingham campaign. This extensive letter would be fabulous to read to/with students in order to discuss the accuracy King needed to use in order to write such compelling language, accurate grammar, and effective sentence structure. Checking his facts and carefully scrutinizing the position of the religious leaders made his letter all the more accurate and effective. Discussing these points with students can help them understand the amount of trust that is built for someone who works with the amount of accuracy that King used in his letter (The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute,
Questioning and Posing Problems
According to Art Costa and Bena Kallick, who developed the concept of these habits of mind, questioning and posing problems includes having an attitude inclined to asking why a problem exists and then developing strategies to solve that problem (Costa and Kallick, www.ascd.org). It would be fair to say that King’s participation in the civil rights movement would not have gone forward at all if he had not questioned the lawfulness of segregation and recognized its inherent problems. He pinpointed one cause for the continued existence of legal segregation in saying, “I fear that there is a dearth of vision in our government, a lack of a sense of history and genuine morality (Carson, 1998, p. 142).” He then set about inspiring members of government (such as President John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon) to develop a vision of desegregation through nonviolent social action (Carson, 1998, pp. 142 – 150). He also utilized the nonviolent strategies mentioned earlier (i.e. boycotting, sit-ins, etc.). Since segregation was eventually lawfully abolished, King’s nonviolent strategies were eventually successful in combating this problem.

Thinking Interdependently
A fundamental aspect of King’s philosophy (which echoed Gandhi’s philosophy) was his understanding of the interdependence of people, communities, and nations. In his “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” he wrote, “...I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly (Carson,1998, p. 189).” One could surmise that it is this understanding of interdependence that allowed him to maintain love for those who acted as oppressors and, as a result, to persist with nonviolent resistance.

King felt that the effects of segregation were detrimental not only to those who were being oppressed, but to those who caused the oppression. He stated, “We do not seek to remove this unjust system for ourselves alone but for our white brothers as well. The festering sore of segregation debilitates the white man as well as the Negro (Carson, 1998, p. 145).” He believed in the goodness and connectedness of all humans and, consequently, had a conviction that the “self-suffering on the part of numerous Negroes” would finally “expose the moral defense of our white brothers who happen to be misguided and thusly awaken the dozing conscience of our community (Carson, 1998, p. 145).” In striving to work towards respectful communication, negotiation, and partnership with oppressive people and systems, he was able to make humanity's interdependence apparent to many people who considered themselves his opponents and work with them towards more just laws and policies.

Conclusion
King and other leaders of the civil rights movement used these six habits of mind (in addition to many others) in conjunction with each other. It could be said that, without persistence, King would not have been able to continuously question problems of social justice and take action against them. His use of metacognition allowed him to recognize and act on his understanding of human interdependence. The way he managed his impulsivity allowed him to strive for accuracy in the actions he took as a leader of the civil rights movement. The connection between these habits of mind and the ways in which their use can lead to goal achievement should be made apparent to our students as they work as members of their communities, as well. Therefore, King is a strong and positive model of habits of mind in action for our students. Students need such a model, because there is still work to be done in the work towards social justice and economic desegregation. King’s model can also help them to
apply these habits of mind in everything they do at school, academically and socially.

**State Content Standards:**  
**Massachusetts English Language Arts Curriculum Framework:**  

**General Standard 4: Vocabulary and Concept Development**  
4.13 Determine the meaning of unknown words using their context.  
4:15 Determine the meaning of words and alternate word choices using a dictionary or thesaurus.  

**General Standard 13: Nonfiction**  
13.10 Distinguish cause from effect.  

**General Standard 23: Organizing Ideas in Writing**  
23.8 Organize information about a topic into a coherent paragraph with a topic sentence, sufficient supporting detail, and a concluding sentence.

**Materials Needed:**  
- Habits of Mind Digital Story  
- Paper and writing utensils (for goal writing)  
- Easel and paper (for brainstorming habits of mind and ways we use them)

**Suggested Teaching Activities:**

1. Ask students, Which characteristics (or habits of mind) do people use effectively when they come across a problem to which the answer isn't apparent right away? Have you had positive experiences using these habits of mind? Do you know people who have? How can you use these habits of mind to create a goal for success (with nonviolence in mind) for this year?  
(Accompanying question: How can we define success?) Brainstorm a list on easel paper (or any other medium on which students can all see) and have students discuss examples of ways in which they have used these habits of mind. Relate the habits the students bring up to the six habits of persistence, managing impulsivity, metacognition, striving for accuracy, questioning and posing problems, and interdependence.

2. View the Digital Story: Martin Luther King, Jr. and Habits of Mind. Discuss the video. How did King apply each habit of mind to his work and life? What were Martin Luther King, Jr.’s goals? How did his habits of mind make him successful when working towards his goals? Can you think of other people you have studied or know who use these habits of mind to reach their goals? How have you used them in school? How do you apply these habits of mind even when you feel like your work or social communication become difficult? Have you had positive experiences when using these habits of mind?

3. Using these habits of mind as a framework, have the students write two goals for the school year – one academic and one social. Each goal should be in paragraph form and should include the following information: a) What is your goal? b) Why is this your goal? c) What do you need from your community (peers, teachers, counselors, etc.) in order to achieve this goal? d) Which strategies will you use to reach your goal? e) How will you know when you have reached your goal?

4. Ask volunteers to read their goals to the class. Then, later, post them to a bulletin board so students can refer to them throughout the year. Check in with students about their progress towards their goal once each week, and how the progress towards their goals relates to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s progress towards his goals. When a students feels a goal has been reached, a new goal can be created.

5. More detailed discussions about each specific habit of mind can be planned throughout the school year using the information from the attached content essay. For example, a lesson can be planned during which the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” can be read to/with the students in
order to follow-up on the concept of striving for accuracy. Also, the formation of the Montgomery Bus Boycott can be discussed in order for students to further understand how managing impulsivity is essential when carrying out a successful plan of action (compare this to the students' own continuing work towards reaching their academic and social goals).

Bibliography:


**QuotationsPage.com**, Martin Luther King, from *Strength to Love* speech, 1963:  
[http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Martin_Luther_King_Jr](http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Martin_Luther_King_Jr)

**Habits of Mind**: [www.habits-of-mind.net](http://www.habits-of-mind.net)

**The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development** (ASCD):  

**The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute**:  

**The Free Dictionary**:  
[www.thefreedictionary.com](http://www.thefreedictionary.com)