

RESOURCE LIBRARY

ACTIVITY : 1 HR 40 MINS

The Politics of Place-Naming

Students use an online geographic information system (GIS) to uncover the geographic and social context of streets named after Martin Luther King, Jr. They map street locations to identify regional patterns in honoring King, consider issues related to data accuracy, explore the demographic character of the streets' host communities, and gain proficiency using a geospatial tool.

GRADES

9 - 12+

SUBJECTS

Geography, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), Human Geography, Social Studies, U.S. History

CONTENTS

3 Links, 1 PDF

OVERVIEW

Students use an online geographic information system (GIS) to uncover the geographic and social context of streets named after Martin Luther King, Jr. They map street locations to identify regional patterns in honoring King, consider issues related to data accuracy, explore the demographic character of the streets' host communities, and gain proficiency using a geospatial tool.

For the complete activity with media resources, visit:

<http://www.nationalgeographic.org/activity/politics-place-naming/>

DIRECTIONS

This activity was authored by Jerry T. Mitchell and Derek H. Alderman and a version of it originally appeared in Social Education, the official journal of National Council for the Social Studies, Volume 78, Number 3 (May/June 2014).

Ideally, this activity will take place over the course of two days or two 50-minute sessions.

DAY/SESSION 1

1. Highlight the life and activities of Martin Luther King, Jr.

This may have been done previously as part of a larger unit on civil rights (e.g., Rosa Parks, *Brown v. Board of Education*, etc.), so a simple review may be appropriate.

2. Have students read the provided handout “Naming Streets for Martin Luther King, Jr.: No Easy Road” (Alderman, 2006) and answer the three discussion questions that appear below on the provided student worksheet.

This is a lengthy read, so you may elect to assign only certain portions. A short discussion of the reading and discussion questions may close Day One. If extra time was spent on Step 1, the reading and discussion questions may be assigned for homework.

- Question 1: Investigate Figure 11.2 (p. 218 of the Alderman Chapter). *What size community hosts the majority of streets named for King? Why?* (The majority of U.S. streets named for King are in places with a population of fewer than 10,000 people. Small places far outnumber large places.)
- Question 2: *What type of groups typically initiate campaigns to name streets for King? Why?* (Campaigns are often conducted by the NAACP, churches, and various African American-led community improvement associations.)
- Question 3: Consider the Brent, Alabama, example (p. 225). *Should it matter where the named street is located so long as Martin Luther King, Jr. is commemorated?* (In the Brent case, location mattered considerably. As to whether it *should* matter, student responses will vary.)

DAY/SESSION 2

Follow the procedure below.

1. Open the provided map, Comparing Street Names and Demographic Data. Make sure both layers are turned on. Then have students answer the first map discussion question. Suggested answers follow.

- Question 1: *An orange point indicates an area that has a street named after Martin Luther King, Jr. Is there a pattern for MLK-named streets? If so, what reason(s) account for that pattern? (Most features are in the Southeast; other features are in Northern cities with sizeable African American populations; another interesting pattern is the central California valley [farm workers, progressive politics].)*

2. In the same map, zoom in to any location. As the scale becomes larger, county lines will appear, then Census tracts, and then Census block groups. If you zoom in too far, the Census data will disappear and only the streets layer will be visible.

3. Click on any shape—county, tract, block group—and a pie chart will appear that shows the racial/ethnic make-up of that spatial unit.

4. Have students investigate the racial/ethnic make-up for several places. Suggested places outside of the Southeast include Buffalo, New York, and Bakersfield, California. Buffalo shows a high African American concentration near the streets named after King; for Bakersfield, it is Hispanic near the street point. Remember that the point is not necessarily lined up with the street. In this case (Bakersfield), there is a sizable African American population near the actual road location and a park named for King, too.

5. Have students answer Question 2 after exploring the map:

- Question 2: *Do you think that MLK-named streets are randomly located or are they purposefully located in specific neighborhoods? What data would you need to investigate this question? (Streets named after King are frequently located in sections of cities that have higher numbers of African American residents. This naming, often a street re-naming, process can be politically contentious.)*

6. After investigating various places and their relationships to streets named for King, close the activity by discussing Question 3:

- Question 3: *Why do you think re-naming a street after King is sometimes difficult? Can you think of any other historic or contemporary person that should be honored with a street name? Would other people agree with your choice? (This question is used to close the activity. Answers may vary. Obviously most Americans would be repulsed by a “Bin Laden Boulevard,” but others would express distaste for a street named for Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, or Harvey Milk depending on their political or social leanings. Street-naming is a political act that defines who controls a particular space. Many people believe that how their place is represented also has an impact on things such as property values.)*

Extending the Learning

Additional demographic and other data is available for use in online ArcGIS. For example, students may include “USA Median Household Income” and investigate the relationship between that variable and an MLK-named street.

OBJECTIVES

Subjects & Disciplines

Geography

- [Geographic Information Systems \(GIS\)](#)
- [Human Geography](#)

Social Studies

- U.S. History

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- identify factors that may make street-naming, or place-making, contentious
- compare the location of MLK-named streets with demographic data for the same area and offer explanations for any resulting patterns
- gain procedural knowledge of geospatial technology using an online geographic information system

Teaching Approach

- Inquiry-based learning

Teaching Methods

- Discussions
- Hands-on learning

Skills Summary

This activity targets the following skills:

- Geographic Skills
 - Acquiring Geographic Information
 - Analyzing Geographic Information
 - Answering Geographic Questions
 - Asking Geographic Questions

National Standards, Principles, and Practices

NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM STANDARDS

- Theme 2:

Time, Continuity, and Change

- Theme 3:

People, Places, and Environments

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHY STANDARDS

- Standard 1:

How to use maps and other geographic representations, geospatial technologies, and spatial thinking to understand and communicate information

- Standard 3:

How to analyze the spatial organization of people, places, and environments on Earth's surface

Preparation

What You'll Need

MATERIALS YOU PROVIDE

- Paper
- Pencils, pens

REQUIRED TECHNOLOGY

- Internet Access: Required
- Tech Setup: 1 computer per classroom, 1 computer per learner, Projector

PHYSICAL SPACE

- Computer lab

SETUP

Each student should have access to a computer in order to complete the investigation independently.

OTHER NOTES

- Ideally, this activity will take place over the course of two days or two 50-minute sessions.
- Free GIS (geographic information system) mapping software is available from Esri. This software can be used by establishing a user account at www.arcgis.com. Once logged in, users can change base maps and add data.

BACKGROUND & VOCABULARY

Background Information

In this activity, geography is coupled with an analysis of history and the legacy of the past to first identify patterns of naming streets for King and then to offer explanation for those patterns as they appeared over time. The dual emphasis on continuity and change in the social studies standards is especially relevant. The United States has a long history of naming places, especially streets, after patriot heroes and other notables, but the presence of roads named for King signal an important reversal or *change* in the traditional omission of African Americans within places of public commemoration. At the same time, the location-based struggles that surround the naming of streets after King highlight the continuing difficulties in challenging the social and spatial control historically exerted by a white political establishment over minorities, suggesting that naming streets “Martin Luther King, Jr.” represents an extension rather than a culmination of the civil rights movement.

A second goal of the activity is student use of geospatial technology. Geographic information systems, specifically, offer problem-solving applications appropriate across many disciplines, including the social studies, and a number of educators have successfully demonstrated its utility in the K-12 classroom. Online geographic information systems, like the type utilized here, eliminate many of the traditional barriers to GIS classroom use (e.g., cost, software maintenance, learning curve). Not only can GIS be an important teaching and learning tool; evidence is mounting that its use can result in improved student achievement.

Notes about the Martin Luther King, Jr. street dataset:

The dataset of streets named after King has been compiled over the past decade. It is a conservative, yet confirmed, listing of streets named after King. New streets are named/re-named, and not all instances may have been uncovered. The varied naming also complicates identification (street, blvd., MLK, MLK, Jr., Martin Luther King, etc.). The data points are not line features. The MLK street features are represented by a point at the center of the zip code area that contains the street.

Prior Knowledge

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Recommended Prior Activities

- None

Vocabulary

Term	Part of Speech	Definition
ArcGIS	<i>noun</i>	Geographic information software created by the company ESRI.
Census Bureau	<i>noun</i>	government organization responsible for demographic information about the U.S. population, as well as the analyzing of that data.
civil rights	<i>plural noun</i>	set of fundamental freedoms guaranteed to all individuals, such as participation in the political system, ability to own property, and due process and equal protection under the law.
civil rights movement	<i>noun</i>	(~1954-1968) process to establish equal rights for all people in the United States, focusing on the rights of African Americans.

Term	Part of Speech	Definition
data	<i>plural noun</i>	(singular: datum) information collected during a scientific study.
data layer	<i>noun</i>	individual file added to a GIS map, adding a specific type of information.
demographic	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with the social characteristics and statistics of a population.
geographic information system (GIS)	<i>noun</i>	any system for capturing, storing, checking, and displaying data related to positions on the Earth's surface.
map feature	<i>noun</i>	an item displayed on a visual spatial representation
population	<i>noun</i>	total number of people or organisms in a particular area.
spatial data	<i>noun</i>	information used to pose, analyze, and resolve problems about the Earth's surface that reflect environmental and human processes.

For Further Exploration

Websites

- [MLK Blvd: Open Source Journalism and Photography Project](#)

