

"This Is An American" Action Project

The "AM I AN AMERICAN OR AM I NOT?" exhibition poses a question that has been contested throughout the history of the United States, and especially today: **Who is American?** One way that students can influence that debate is by working together to inspire their own community towards a vision of American society that is inclusive, just, and humane. The "This Is An American" project described below offers students the opportunity to use their voices and creativity to inspire their community to uphold these values.

The project unfolds through four stages:

1. Students create and curate a collection of artwork and artifacts that portray an inclusive definition of what it means to be an American.
2. Students share, respond to, and strengthen each other's contributions.
3. The class designs an exhibition that organizes their individual pieces into a larger experience.
4. The class shares the exhibition and introduces their work to the community.

Many teachers will need to adapt this project to meet the specific needs and interests of their students and to fit within the available class time. We encourage you to modify or omit any of the project stages, or to add entirely new components of your own to the project.

Stage #1: Create and Curate

Explain to students that this project is entitled "This Is An American," and that the goal is to create a collection of images, words, objects, or other artifacts that depict who Americans are and what they do when they are at their best. This is their opportunity to speak out creatively against exclusion and "othering" in the country today and create a humane and inclusive vision of what it means to be an American. Every item they create or gather for this project represents an example of an American, including not just people, but also their values, ideals, identities, and more.

"AM I AN AMERICAN OR AM I NOT?" – Fred Korematsu

Give students the opportunity to work individually or in small groups to create artwork and curate found objects that represent the best of what they think Americans are or should be. As they brainstorm ideas about what to create and collect, ask them to keep in mind how they can represent:

- The diversity of people who are or should be able to live in America.
- The actions Americans take to promote fairness, justice, respect, and inclusivity.

It is up to you to set guidelines for student contributions and the amount of time you want to spend on this stage of the project. The types of items students create or collect are limited only by what you are able to support in terms of time and materials. Items may include:

- Student-created artwork: illustrations, paintings, sculpture, comic strips, animation
- Student journalism: interviews with community members, reports of events in their community, videos, photographs
- Found objects: signage, flyers for community events, newspaper or magazine clippings, other "real-life" evidence of inclusive community
- Historical documents: primary sources, images/photos/political cartoons from the past

We recommend that you assign students to write a short statement (length depending on grade level) that explains the item they created/collected and how they think it relates to the title "This Is An American."

Stage #2: Share and Respond With Classmates

Give students the opportunity to see and respond to pieces their classmates created and collected. If you have the available time, you can have each student share and explain their items to the class one by one. Or, for a more efficient approach, you can have students leave their items and statements on their desks and then let the class browse the collection through a [gallery walk](#).

However you arrange for students to view each other's items, follow up with a whole group discussion. Give students time to ask each other specific questions about their work and then to assess the collection as a whole. You can use some or all of the following questions:

- What did you notice about the variety of ways we represented the idea of who is an American? What similarities or patterns do you notice in our work?

- When you look at the collection we created as a whole, are there any particular voices, experiences, or ideas that come through especially strongly? Are there any voices, experiences, or ideas that are missing?
- Are there any items in our collection that seem to be in conflict with each other or suggest opposing answers to the question of who is an American? How should we respond to the existence of these conflicting ideas?
- Taken as a whole, what statement is our collection making in response to the question, "*Who is American?*" What makes you say that?

Stage #3: Design an Exhibition

After students have had the opportunity to engage with and discuss the pieces they have created and collected, they can turn their attention to how they want to share the collection with the larger community outside the classroom. For example, maybe they want to create an exhibition to be installed in a physical space or shared online.

The first step in creating a physical exhibition is to find a space for it. The exhibition space could be as simple as a bulletin board in or near your classroom, or a display case in the school library or lobby. You might also consider contacting the local public library, municipal buildings, community organizations, and local businesses to see if they are willing to give your students' work a more public showcase.

The process for creating a virtual museum exhibition will rely largely on the tools, platforms, skills, and other resources available to you and your school.

Once you have secured a space (physical or online), engage your students in the process of designing how their work will be displayed in the exhibition. You can first discuss the following questions:

- What do we want our audience to think about and learn?
- How do we want them to feel as they view our work?
- What else do we want them to experience?

Once the class has answered those questions, consider:

- How do we want the exhibition items to be grouped, organized, arranged, and/or sequenced?
- What titles and subtitles will help guide viewers through the exhibition?
- What should an introduction to the entire exhibition say?

At this stage of the project, you may need to form a small group of student volunteers to lead the process. This may especially be the case if you have multiple sections of students engaged in this project. If the exhibition will be displayed off-site from the school, you may also need to divide the tasks of designing, building, and installing the exhibition between class time (with help from the whole class) and after school hours (with a smaller group of volunteers).

Stage #4: Welcome an Audience

Consider planning an event to introduce the class exhibition to the community. Wherever it is displayed, you can invite other students, the school community, local community leaders, and/or the general public. If it is a virtual exhibition, you can hold the event in a school gathering space and project the exhibition on a screen.

Students can introduce the exhibition by explaining their inspiration for creating it and why they think it is important to speak out for an inclusive definition of what it means to be American at this particular moment in our history. They can also be on hand while audience members tour the exhibition to discuss their work.

The class might also create a postcard-sized exhibition guide for audience members to keep that includes a class artist statement and two or three reflection questions about American identity, belonging, exclusion, and solidarity for people to consider as they experience the exhibition.