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Unique and United

A Seat at the Table: Exploring Holidays, Identity, and Community through Creative Expression

Why Unique and United?

Students Rebuild: Unique and United helps students explore what makes them special while celebrating how everyone is different in wonderful ways. Through art and sharing around cultural and holiday traditions, students will learn that being unique is something to be proud of and that differences make communities stronger and more interesting. This lesson was created by the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding for the Students Rebuild Unique & United project.

About the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding

Tanenbaum promotes justice and builds respect for religious difference by transforming individuals and institutions to reduce prejudice, hatred, and violence.

As a secular and non-sectarian non-profit, Tanenbaum works to promote religious peacebuilders who help counter extremism and violence in armed conflicts, and to reduce religious bullying of students, harassment in workplaces, and disparate health treatment for people based on their beliefs.

Tanenbaum's Education program works to teach students skills of respectful curiosity and positive communication, setting them up for lifelong success. We develop curricular and professional development resources and work with educational institutions to build environments where students of all religious and non-religious backgrounds feel safe, heard, and respected.

Activity Overview

Students will plan, create, and share an original creative expression that represents their connection to a personally significant holiday or celebration.

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Learning Objectives

Students will:

- Share holiday traditions of significance to them through creative expression
- Recognize unique cultural practices and shared values.
- Practice empathy and curiosity towards different cultures and belief systems.
- Explore how practicing inclusivity in celebrating holidays strengthens classroom community.

Required Materials

- This lesson is medium-neutral by design. It can be completed with simple materials like construction paper, tape or glue, pipe cleaners, markers, mixed media, or Play-Doh for younger groups, but can also be adapted for medium-based sculptural units such as clay, ceramics, papier mâché, printmaking, or collage with 3D elements.
- Students will also need materials for writing artist statements and optional journaling activities. Younger students may benefit from pre-written worksheets with writing prompts.

Duration

2-3 class sessions of 50 minutes each (with options to extend)

For a complete list of standards and competency alignment, see the final page of this guide.

Part 1: Discover and Connect by Activating Prior Knowledge

General Discussion

- Do you have a favorite holiday?
- What holidays do you celebrate?
- How many different kinds of holidays can we name? (national, public/bank, religious, days of personal/family significance [birthdays, weddings], cultural [Valentine's Day]). What are some similarities and differences that you notice between these types of holidays?

Step into the Circle

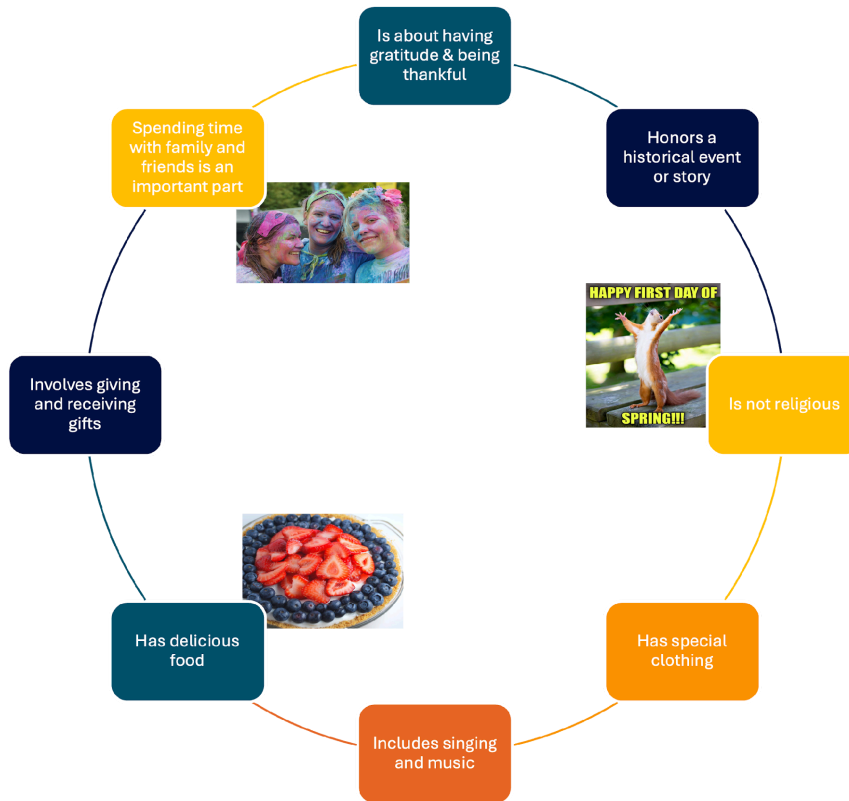
Begin by reminding students that celebrations vary across countries, communities, and families, and that even shared holidays can be observed in different ways.

- Gather students in a circle with room to move. Explain that you will read a series of categories, and students should step into the circle – and then step back out – when a category applies to them.
- After each category, invite (but do not require) students who stepped into the circle to share the holiday or practice they were thinking of. If several students

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mention the same holiday, ask them to try to identify some similarities and differences in how they celebrate.

- You may also invite students who remained outside the circle to share holidays they know about, but do not personally celebrate, that fit the category.



Think/Pair/Share with Active Listening

Divide students into pairs. Explain that during this activity, they will:

1. Describe a personally meaningful holiday to their partner.
2. Listen as their partner describes a holiday that is meaningful to them.
3. Report back to the class with the information they learned about the holiday celebrated by their partner.

Before starting, remind students to listen carefully, and, if age-appropriate, encourage note-taking. Begin by asking:

- "What is a holiday or celebration that is important to you?"
- "How does your holiday look, feel, sound, taste, and smell?"

Teachers should keep track of time and cue students when it is time to switch speaking and listening roles. When it is time to come back to large group discussion, ask:

- "What did you learn about your partner's holiday?"

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Setting Expectations for Respectful Dialogue in the Classroom

Full-class discussion:

- Explain that the way we celebrate holidays can be an important part of who we are.
- Ask: How can we be respectful when we talk about our differences?
- Encourage students to share "I" statements that describe respectful dialogue. Write responses on the board or smartboard.
- Note: The goal of this exercise is for students to set their own standards for respectful and curious communication. If students are having trouble coming up with answers, you can suggest some of the following:
 - "Just because I celebrate a holiday one way doesn't mean that that is right for other people."
 - "Recognize that people celebrate different holidays for different reasons, or have different motivations for celebrating the same holidays."
 - "Everyone's traditions matter."
 - "Always ask questions respectfully, don't make assumptions."
 - Use I statements – "I am representing my experiences and community."
- After the lesson, write the standards out on a piece of chart paper and post them on a wall in the classroom where everyone can see them.

Part 2: Sharing Our Unique Traditions Through Creativity

Imagine and Plan

- Share Worksheet 1 and some images of objects on holiday tables (a Thanksgiving dinner, a Passover Seder plate, a Chinese New Year spread, etc.). Ask students to think about a holiday that is important to them.
- Explain the available materials and where to find them.

Guided questions:

- Is any special food served during this holiday?
- Who do you usually celebrate it with?
- What colors, symbols, or decorations are part of this holiday?
- How do you feel when you celebrate this holiday?
- Do you do anything special during this holiday (e.g., light candles, play music, wear special clothes)?

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Planning

Hand out copies of Worksheet 1. Instruct students to draw a simple sketch of their place settings. Offer brainstorming and planning prompts:

- What do you want to include? Are you going to make any foods, objects, or special symbols from your holiday?
- What colors do you want to use?
- (If applicable) What materials do you want to use?
- What do you want other people to know about your holiday?

Create and Express

Studio Work Time and Teacher Support

- Students begin working independently on their creative expression.
- Encourage students to make intentional choices in design, color, texture, and form. Ask reflection prompts as they work:
 - How does this part tell a story?
 - Is this showing your personal experience or family tradition?
 - Are there textures or materials that could make this more expressive?
- Provide ongoing support in working with the available materials. Offer mini-demos as needed (e.g., how to shape foil, layering collage, color mixing).

Milestones and Check-ins

- Class period 1: Students should complete their brainstorming, planning, and begin constructing their creative expression.
- Class period 2: Students should finalize their creative expression, prepare it for presentation, and share it with the class.

Share and Impact

- Display work on a long table or the existing arrangement of desks with simple caption cards (written or dictated, depending on grade and level of writing fluency).
- Use sentence starters for artist statements:
 - "I made this because..."
 - "This reminds me of..."
 - "I used _____ to show..."
 - "This tells the story of..."
- Once projects and artist statements are ready, give students instructions for safely circulating around the room for a gallery walk. If space is limited or your group would benefit from more structure, you can use the "musical cues" method, where you play music to let students know when to move to the next project, table, or area.

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Reflect and Connect

Final Group Reflection

- Did you learn about any new holidays today?
- What was something cool or interesting about someone else's place setting?
- How did it feel to share your holiday with artistic, creative expression?

Share on Students Rebuild to Spark Donations!

Take a photo of what your students created and share it at [Studentsrebuild.org](https://www.studentsrebuild.org). Creative Visions will donate \$5, up to \$1 million for each submission or student engaged. The project is open from September 15, 2025 - June 1, 2026.

Optional Extension Activities

Holiday Museum Labels: Students can expand their caption card into a museum label that includes a title, a statement of purpose (based on provided prompts), and two facts about their holiday.

Tips for Differentiated Instruction

Universal Accommodations

- Use a step-by-step visual guide of the project stages (plan > build > label > share).
- Students should be allowed to share ANY holiday that is meaningful to them, whether it is religious, non-religious, personal, or informal (Star Wars Day, single family traditions), or blended (Christmukkah).

For Emerging Communicators (ELLs or younger students)

- Use visual prompts or picture cards (e.g., images of foods, family gatherings, decorations).
- Allow students to dictate their ideas to a peer or adult while drawing or assembling.
- Encourage nonverbal feedback (e.g., emojis, symbols, or color-coded stickers).

For Neurodiverse or Sensory-Seeking Learners

- Offer a sensory station with textured papers, fabric, foil, etc.
- Provide pre-cut shapes or stencils to reduce fine motor fatigue.
- Allow paraprofessionals to help with construction as appropriate.

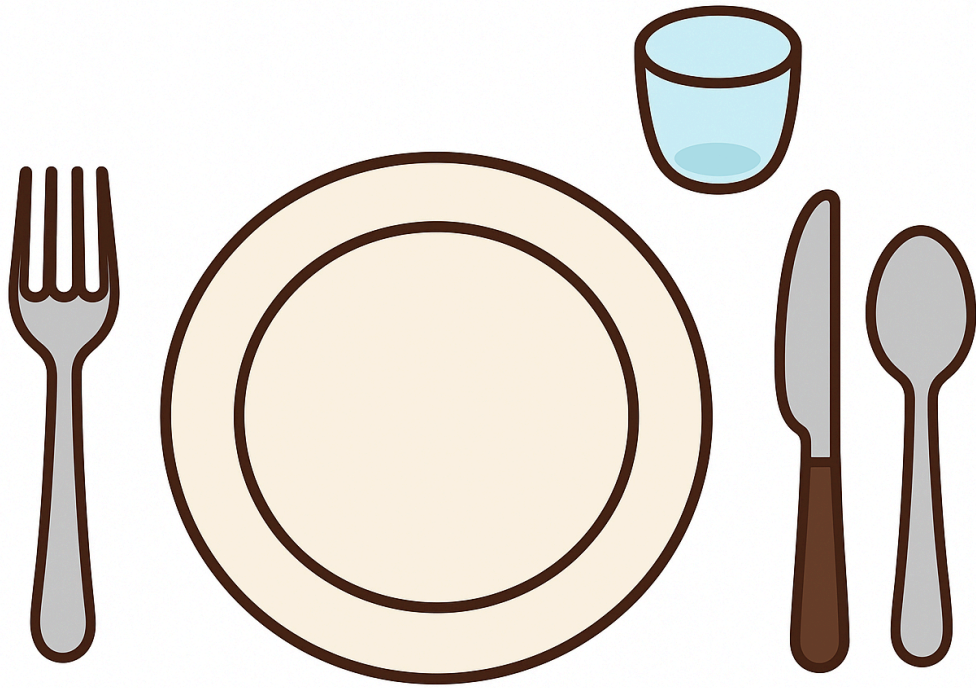
For Students Needing Structure

- Create small group rotations for students who need individualized support.

Worksheet 1: Simple Western-Style Place Setting

Use this blank place setting to imagine and plan your place setting project.

What do you want to include? Where will you put different objects and shapes?



Standards and Competencies

National Core Arts Standards Alignment

1. Create – Using Art for Self-Expression

- NCAS Anchor Standard VA:Cr1.1 – Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.
- NCAS Anchor Standard VA:Cr2.1 – Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

2. Present – Sharing and Interpreting Holiday Art

- NCAS Anchor Standard VA:Pr4.1 – Select, analyze, and interpret artistic work for presentation.
- NCAS Anchor Standard VA:Pr6.1 – Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.

3. Respond – Exploring and Understanding Peer Traditions

- NCAS Anchor Standard VA:Re7.1 – Perceive and analyze artistic work.
- NCAS Anchor Standard VA:Re8.1 – Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

4. Connect – Respecting Diversity and Building Community

- NCAS Anchor Standard VA:Cn10.1 – Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.
- NCAS Anchor Standard VA:Cn11.1 – Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

CASEL Core Competencies in Social-Emotional Learning

- **Self-Awareness:** Exploring one's identity through creative expression.
- **Social Awareness:** Appreciating others' traditions and perspectives.
- **Relationship Skills:** Engaging respectfully in dialogue and feedback.