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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.

### 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

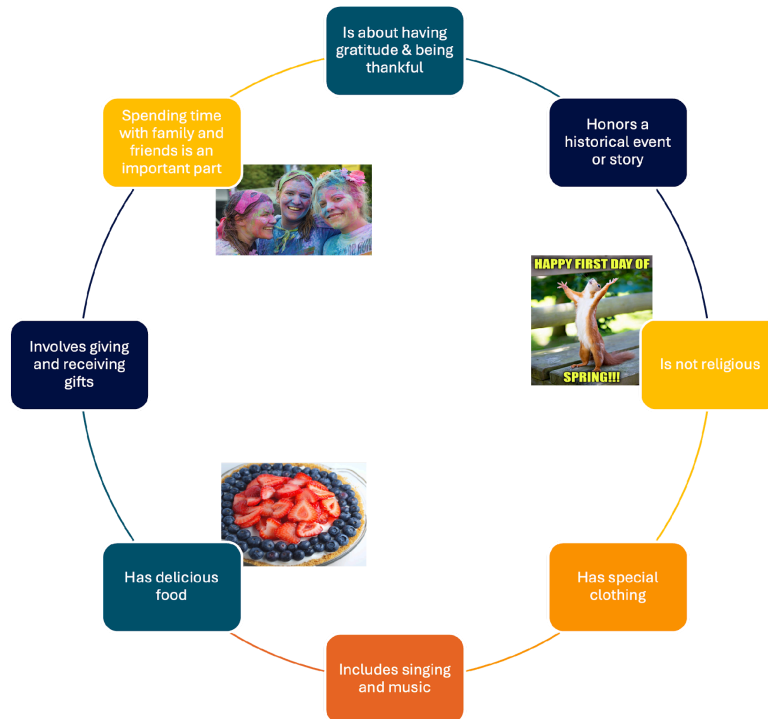
- Do you have a favorite holiday?
- What holidays do you celebrate?
- How many different kinds of holidays can you name? (national, public/bank, religious, days of personal/family significance [birthdays, weddings], cultural [Valentine's Day]). What are some similarities and differences that you notice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

## Learning Activity Guide for Middle School | Grades 6–8



### 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 holds meaning for 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 the large group discussion, ask:

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

### Setting Expectations for Respectful Dialogue in the Classroom

Full-class discussion:

- Explain that many holidays and the things we do to celebrate reflect important parts of who we are. They can reveal our deeply held beliefs, the practices that shape our lives, and the communities to which we belong. Ask: How can we discuss our differences with respectful curiosity?
- Encourage students to share "I" statements that describe respectful dialogue. Write responses on the board or smartboard.

## Learning Activity Guide for Middle School | Grades 6–8

- 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.). Depending on your classroom set-up, you can share images via a handout or a smartboard.
- Ask students to think about a holiday that is important to them.
- Introduce the terms "custom" and "ritual."
- Ask students: "What do you think these words mean?"
- Explain: "Customs and rituals are both special ways of doing things. Customs are ways of behaving that are normal in a particular society, place, or time. For instance, some cultures shake hands when they meet someone new, some bow, and some kiss on the cheek."
- Explain: "Rituals are ceremonies or sets of words and actions that happen at special times and connect us to traditions. They are usually performed in a specific way, and sometimes they help bring communities together. At a graduation ceremony, for instance, graduates wear special clothes, walk across a stage, and receive a diploma."
- Ask students: "Can you think of any customs or rituals that are part of your life?"

### Guided questions:

- What foods, colors, objects, customs, or rituals are associated with your holiday?
- Who do you usually celebrate it with?
- How does this holiday connect to your identity? How does it connect you to your family or the community?
- What emotions do you associate with it?

Explain the available materials and where to find them.

## Learning Activity Guide for Middle School | Grades 6–8

### Planning

Encourage deeper reflection with visual brainstorming. Ask students to create a sketch of their place setting plan that includes key words, colors, and shapes.

Consider:

- What do you want to include?
- What colors do you want to use?
- What materials do you want to use?
- Do you want to depict literal foods, cultural symbols, or both?
- What do you want other people to know about your holiday?
- What feeling(s) do you want to express?

### Create and Express

#### Studio Work Time and Teacher Support

- Have 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 utensils from foil, layering collage, color mixing).

#### Milestones and Check-ins

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

### Share and Impact

- Display work on a long table or the existing arrangement of desks to set up a peer gallery walk.
- Ask students to write a short artist's statement that explains why the holiday is significant to them and the choices they made:
  - "Include some facts about your holiday. When is it celebrated? Who do you celebrate with? What important things do you do on the holiday? Is there a history or story that is important to understand the holiday?"
  - "Why is this holiday important to who you are?"
  - "What materials, colors, shapes, and artistic choices did you make and why? What feelings or ideas did you want to represent?"

## Learning Activity Guide for Middle School | Grades 6–8

- Divide students into three groups (A, B, C).
- Group A will present their work while groups B and C circulate and view the projects.
- As they explore, students from Groups B and C should ask one question showing respectful curiosity about their holiday or artistic choices. Remind them of the classroom agreements they created together in the previous session.
- Next, Group B will present while Groups A and C circulate, and finally, Group C will present while Groups A and B visit their gallery.

### Reflect and Connect

#### Final Group Reflection

- Did you learn about any new holidays today? Did you see a holiday that you are familiar with or celebrate yourself represented in a new way?
- What was something interesting that you learned about another person's experience of a holiday by looking at the gallery of place settings?
- How did it feel to share your holiday with artistic, creative expression?
- Do you think art can be a good way to share cultural traditions or learn more about someone's identity?

### Share on Students Rebuild to Spark Donations!

Take a photo of what your students created and share it at [Studentsrebuild.org](https://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

- Mini Research Component: Students expand their artist's statements by doing research on the history of their holiday and the ways that it is celebrated or has been celebrated in other times and places.
- Cultural Comparison Venn Diagram: Students compare their holiday to one they learned about through the gallery walk, finding areas of common practices, values, or themes, as well as differences, and represent these visually.
- Digital Gallery Curation: Create a digital slideshow or online gallery of class projects.

## 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, invented (Star Wars Day, single family traditions), or blended (Christmukkah).

### For Abstract Thinkers vs. Concrete Thinkers

- Encourage nonverbal feedback (e.g., emojis, symbols, or color-coded stickers).
- Provide examples of symbolic vs. literal imagery. For instance, a menorah vs. a glowing light to represent Hanukkah, or baklava vs. a crescent moon for Eid al-Fitr.
- Offer project choice boards with prompts like: "show a feeling," "tell a story," or "teach about your holiday."

### For Students Who Struggle with Planning

- Break the brainstorming into guided stations (Color/Emotion, Food/Symbols, People/Traditions).
- Offer a checklist or rubric to help students stay on track during planning.

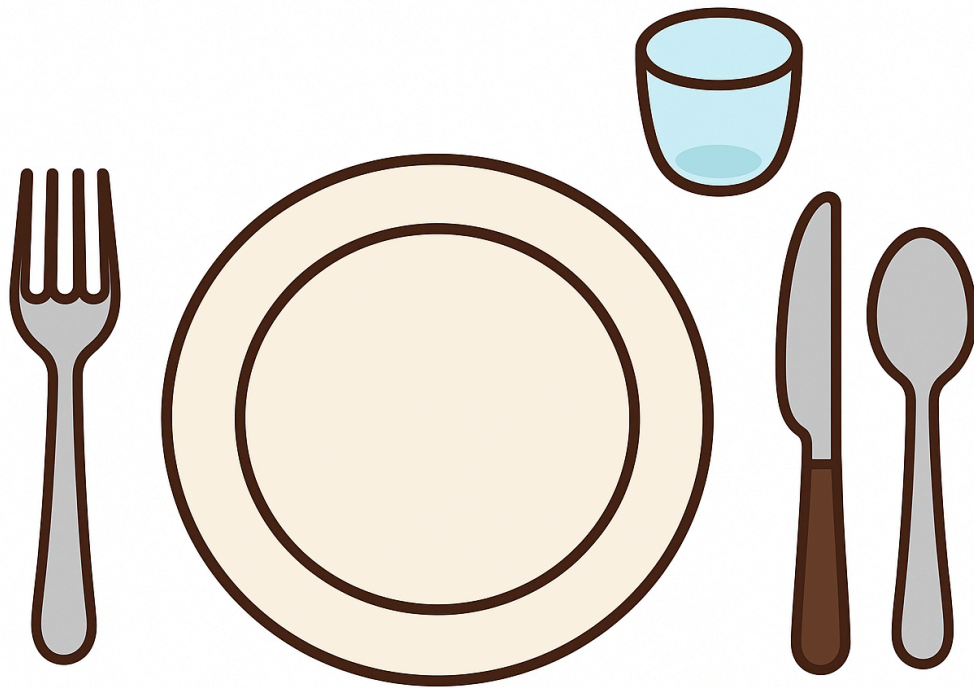
### For Students Who Prefer Verbal Processing

- Allow audio journaling or voice notes as part of the planning phase.
- Pair with a partner for reflection check-ins during studio time.

## 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.