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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

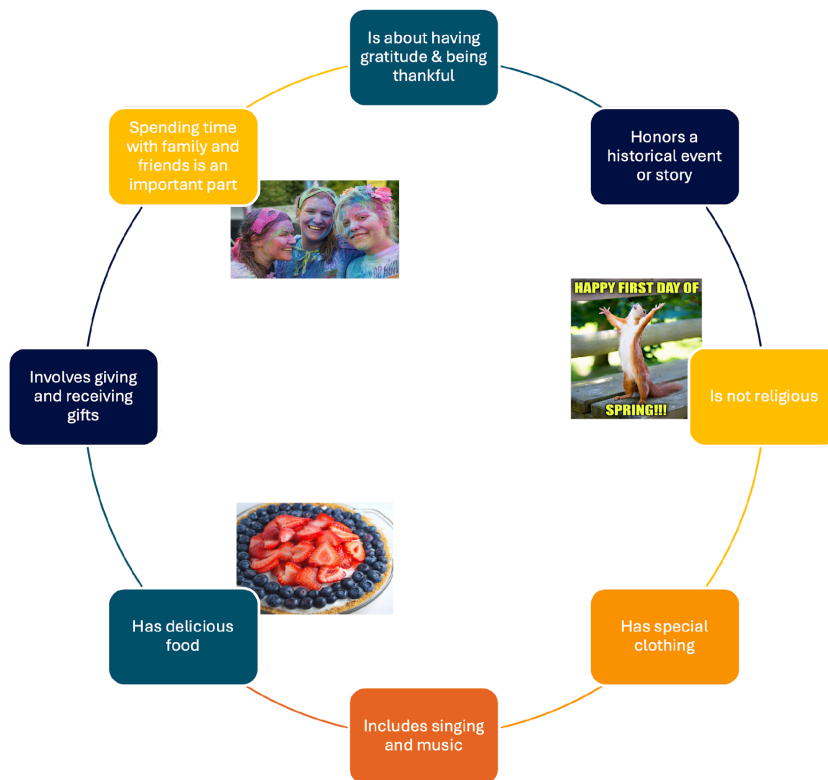
- Do you have a favorite holiday?
- What holidays do you celebrate?
- How many different kinds of holidays can you name? (national, public/bank, religious, days of personal/family significance [birthdays, weddings], cultural [Valentine's Day]). What are some similarities and differences that you notice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

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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

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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.
- 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.

Optional Art History Extension: Contemporary Jewish Art and the Seder Plate

Begin by giving students some information about Passover. You may invite students to do independent research and/or refer them to some of the following resources:

- The Seder Plate (My Jewish Learning)
- Unique Passover Traditions (Unpacked for Educators)
- Passover (The Pluralism Project)

Show your students images of a traditional Seder plate and three artistic depictions of the Seder plate by contemporary Jewish artists:

- A traditional Seder plate
- Allan Wexler's Scaffold Seder Plate (2009)
- Harriete Estel Berman's Eons of Exodus Seder plate (2008)
- Danielle Durchslag's Seder Bonnet (2022)

Each of the links above includes high-quality images of the works and short descriptions of the artists' goals, which should also be shared with students (either by worksheet, smartboard presentation, or teacher summary).

Using a format appropriate for your classroom (journaling, think-pair-share, large group discussion), ask your students to consider the following questions:

- What do you notice about the goals of each of these artists? What do they have in common, and what differences stand out to you?
- What does Wexler's use of scaffolding make you think about? How does it help the viewer to see the Seder plate differently?

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- Berman includes non-traditional elements, including an orange and the depiction of African refugees. What message do you think she is trying to convey? Is she successful?
- Durchslag's piece is designed to be worn in a space that does not usually include Jewish holidays and voices. Why do you think she makes that choice? Do you think it would feel different to see her piece in a museum vs. at a parade?
- Each artist uses different materials and artistic styles -- what do you notice? Do you think their pieces would feel different in another medium?
- How do each of these artists think about or represent inclusion and diversity?
- If you could ask the artist(s) any question, what would it be?

Part 2: Sharing Our Unique Traditions Through Creativity

Imagine and Plan

- Share the images from 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.
- Invite students to brainstorm abstract vs. literal ways of representing ideas, practices, and feelings that they associate with their holiday.
- Explain the available materials and where to find them.

Guided questions:

- What foods, colors, objects, customs, or rituals are associated with your holiday?
- What is special about how you celebrate it?
- Who do you usually celebrate it with?
- How does this holiday fit into your identity or your family/community traditions?
- What emotions do you associate with it?

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. Prompt planning and brainstorming with questions:

- What do you want to include? What mix of literal and abstract/symbolic representation do you want to use and why?
- What do you want other people to learn about you and your holiday through this piece?
- How can you use form and material to express emotion or narrative?

Create and Express

Studio Work Time

- 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 to encourage attention to craftsmanship, concept, and originality:
 - What story do you want to tell with your piece? What do you want to communicate about who you are?
 - Tell me about how you are using your materials -- do you feel confident working with these tools? How is your choice of materials helping you to express specific feelings or ideas?
- Require a creative process journal or log to document decisions, techniques, and challenges.
- Students should set their own milestones with teacher guidance.
- Offer mini-demos and technical support with the materials as needed.

Milestones and Check-ins

- Class period 1: Students should finish brainstorming, 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 it 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.
- Divide students into smaller feedback groups using a "two stars and a wonder" format.
 - Each student should identify two aspects of their peers' work that they thought were especially interesting or successful and ask one question to inspire further reflection or suggest a possible area of improvement.
 - Invite students to reflect on their peers' artistic choices, how they conveyed their personal connection to the holiday, and what they learned from the piece.
- Ask students to write a formal artist statement that addresses their concept, the materials used (or the way they were used), symbolism, challenges, reflection on their process, and what they learned about expressing cultural diversity through artistic creative expression. Feel free to share guiding questions:
 - How did your choices with color, texture, and materials help you to express particular emotions or messages?
 - What did you want to share, reveal, or communicate about your holiday? What did you want to express about its importance to who you are?
 - Did your thought process change as you worked on your piece?

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Reflect and Connect

Final Group Reflection

- Invite students to share some of their reflections on their artistic process or ideas that arose during their feedback groups.
- What surprised you about this exercise? What did you learn about yourself? Your classmates?
- How did it feel to ask questions or have conversations about holidays from outside of your cultural experience?
- Invite students to think more deeply about diversity in culture, practice, and identity. How can visual art be uniquely effective in communicating personal and shared traditions and beliefs? What are the limitations of representing personal traditions and cultural holidays through a visual medium?

Optional Extension Activities

- Art History Case Study: Have students research a work of art depicting their holiday and present it to the class, commenting on its historical context, the significance of the holiday to the artist, and the differences between this representation of the holiday and their own experience with it.
- "Dinner Party" Inspired Project Design: Students design their own conceptual group artwork, exploring underrepresented holidays or narratives in a shared "table" format.
- Cross-Department Collaboration: Partner with English or Social Studies to deepen the cultural/historical context of holidays or traditions.

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).
- Offer different studio paths, including a quiet zone (independent work, no talking), a collaboration table (shared materials, non-disruptive peer feedback and collaboration allowed), and a teacher check-in station (opt-in support and mini-conferences).
- Use a timeline checklist and planning sheet to guide time management, and make announcements to cue transitions from one step to the next.

For Conceptual Thinkers vs. Literal Thinkers

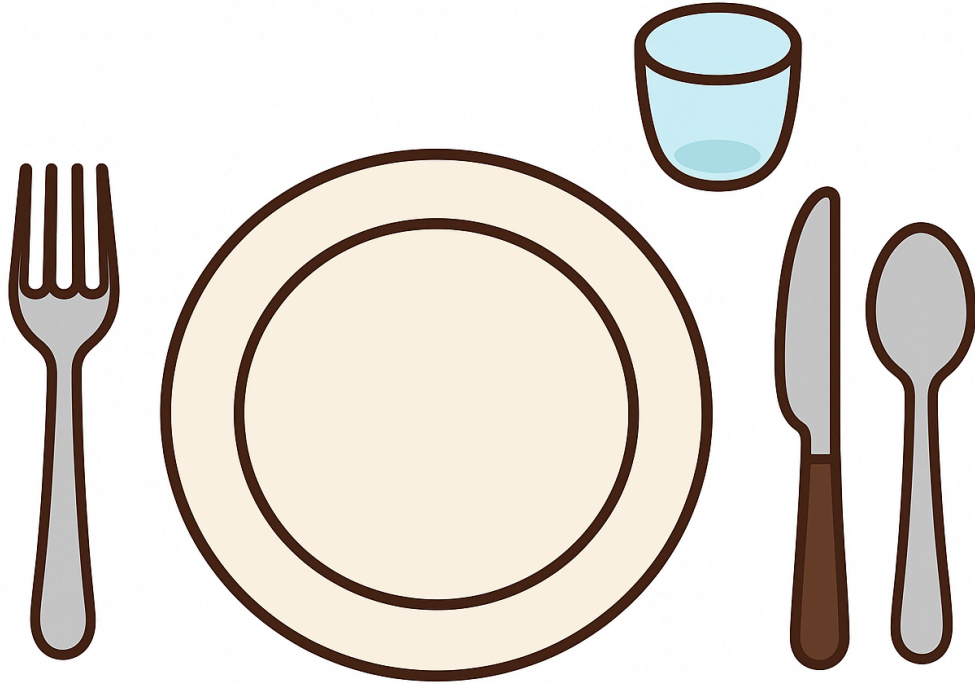
- Provide case studies of other conceptual art pieces focused on identity and culture.
- Invite students to choose a lens: literal (represent your holiday with traditional imagery), personal (focus on your emotional experiences or memories), or social (explore how your holiday is represented or how other people celebrate it).

For English Language Learners or Struggling Writers

- Allow artist statements in multiple formats, including bilingual written statements, video recordings, and audio recordings.
- Use sentence starters to assist with writing artist statements.
- Offer a visual dictionary of visual art and holiday-related terms (e.g., ritual, tradition, palette, collage, symbolism).
- Pair students with a peer editor who can help translate ideas or check grammar in artist statements.

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.