

Thanksgiving and Teaching about Native Americans

Each year it happens. The year progresses toward November, "Native American Month" and the Thanksgiving holiday. In the fall, museums with Native American collections are inundated unlike no other time of the year with tour requests and questions from parents, teachers, students and Native Americans about programs and information about the First Thanksgiving. The Eiteljorg Museum's curators and educators have collected a number of materials and suggestions from Native Americans and others (see the Suggested Resources section for titles.) Here is a synthesis of those suggestions and comments that our staff and teacher-advisors have been asked to make available.

We turned to literature from the museum educators and Native representatives at Plimoth Colony, Mass., a living history site, to determine some of the answers below. A portion of their information was originally written by Native and non-Native educators and developed for the Madison Metropolitan School District in 1977, and a later revision was updated in 1994. Other suggestions come from materials in the Suggested Resources section.

Questions and answers:

Q: What are the suggestions for celebrating Thanksgiving in the classroom?

A: Many educators and advisors have trouble with this question and try to suggest alternatives to costumes and pageants. The traditional curricula of re-enactment of a famous dinner can engender stereotypes of both Pilgrims and Native Americans.

Native Americans and others try to help people understand that some words and actions that were used frequently in the past to portray Native Americans are no longer acceptable because they cause hurt feelings and are not polite. ("Squaw" for example, originally meant "woman" and came from the Algonquian language, but today it has an insulting meaning.) Use language in a positive manner and help to eliminate other phrases that enforce stereotypes. Avoid the use of phrases around children such as "we sure had a group of wild Indians today." Children will understand that Native Peoples are to be as respected as other groups and that people are not to be used as dress-up subjects if this type of play is not condoned by adults. (See Alternative Thanksgiving Activity Ideas.)

A: Was there really a "First Thanksgiving"?

Q: Probably not like that big feast many Americans were taught about. There have been harvest celebrations and times of Thanksgiving since ancient times. For thousands of years in the Americas, and in the area that later became Plymouth Colony, the Native Peoples had several times during the year to recognize an abundance and give thanks for what Mother Earth gave them. The Green Corn Festival is one still celebrated at late-November time that is associated with early Cape Cod-area peoples. Other celebrations took place in Europe and at least one of these was a practice familiar to the Pilgrims.

In the journal of William Bradford, the second governor of Plymouth Colony (considered the most reliable primary source for colonial history of Plymouth), there is no mention of a First Thanksgiving. A book titled Mourt's Relation described a gathering of Pilgrims

and Massasoit and 90 Native men, but there is no mention of God or of giving thanks. Rather, the purpose seemed to be that of a big party and a way for the Pilgrims to demonstrate their military power for the Native guests' benefit.

There is more in Bradford's journal that places a cloud over the book Mourt's Rebellion. The book exaggerated the life of the colony and implied that Pilgrims and Natives were getting along fine. Its purpose appears to have been that of an early marketing tool, to get more European colonists to come over. Bradford's journal continually revealed the suspicion and hostile relations that actually existed between most Native people and the Europeans. The many differences between the book and journal lead one to distrust the story of a friendly celebration with Pilgrim hosts and Native guests.

Q: Why do some Native Peoples insist on seeing Thanksgiving as a day of mourning?

A: There could be several reasons. The late Professor William Newell (Penobscot Nation) of the University of Connecticut may have found the most likely answer. His research suggested that the First Thanksgiving was proclaimed in 1637 to commemorate the massacre of approximately 700 Pequot Native Peoples at Mystic Fort (near present-day Groton, Mass). Bradford's journal gives a chilling narrative of the murders, and additional information is related in Hazen-Hammond's book (see Suggested Resources section).

Q: Why is there opposition to encouraging young children to dress like Indians and make costumes to wear to Thanksgiving activities?

A: This type of activity will help children learn a stereotypical, untrue image of what "Indians" wear and what they did in those clothes, as well as and that they lived long ago and that Native Peoples are not alive today. Native Peoples do not wear costumes, other than for make-believe. The standard headdress-and-paper-bag-fringed-vest classroom ensemble is not at all similar to what is known about seventeenth century eastern Native clothing. Today, Native American traditional clothing is called "regalia," not "costuming," and is worn for very special, sacred purposes. Allowing a child to be wrapped in a sari from India or a kimono from Japan is a much different activity. Those clothes are traditional, but they do not carry the same ceremonial context, nor are they imbued with the different religious connections that the multitude of present Native American regalia symbolizes. Encouraging the development of drama and imagination in a child can happen without fake headdresses or made-up versions of historic clothing. A majority of Native Americans and others are unhappy with this practice.

Children recognize when they are treated respectfully and learn to respect others in a multicultural society when given the opportunity. The next section presents ideas for classes.

Alternative Thanksgiving Activity Ideas

We've taken Thanksgiving as a focus, but many of the activities below could be enjoyed or scheduled during other times of the year to support other themes and curricula.

Heritage Foods. Start talking to your students about the types of foods their families enjoy at special times. Do they know why the favorites became favorites? Why are certain foods served? Who usually makes the recipes? Do the children in all families help? How do families pass down traditions of celebration? Is there a connection between family history and food? Who has a food from another region or country? Who follows dietary laws? What preferences do the families share and what is different?

Find one food that all seem to have eaten. Then list the similarities and differences. Do they all use "dressing" or "stuffing"? How do the potato recipes differ? Do they all use the words "dinner" and "supper" the same way? Is a gelatine-molded food considered "salad" or "dessert"?

Depending on the answers your class brings back, there is a wealth of things that can be done. A class recipe book or a celebrations calendar can be illustrated, written and shared. Guests can come to talk about their special gatherings and why food is a part of a celebration. If you think it won't embarrass anyone, your class can pretend to make food and describe it as everyone shares a lunchtime together.

Create Together: You can also talk about what activities people do when they get together, aside from preparing and eating food. Maybe your class can make a toy or game, create a class quilt or write and draw in books the students make, such as artists did to remember special events.

Research and find a universally known toy or game, maybe ring-on-a-stick. (This is easily made by tying one end of a string on a drapery ring and the other on a stick. The object is to catch the ring on the stick.) Where else in the world has this toy been enjoyed? Does the class think that someone brought the idea here or that someone in the Americas invented it?

Make a Time Line. Agree on the form your time line will take and the starting date. What are significant dates for your class? Why? Are celebrations recorded? How did other people record important events? How did they know when a month passed or a year if they were far from home? How can your class tell time during the day without a clock? Is keeping time important to everyone? What jobs need to have schedules, or what jobs depend on the calendar for results?

Heritage Garden Project. Did people in your region always grow food? How did they do it? Is the way we grow corn now the same way the Miami Indians of Northern Indiana grew it long ago? What foods are native to the Americas? Which foods were brought here from other places? Which ones do we eat every day?

Can you plant a garden with your class? How did the settlers traveling west bring plants along with them? Has everyone had a chance to grow a plant from seed? What other ways can plants be started?

How Did Our Families Get Here? Long ago, the Pilgrims came to a new land to set up a colony. Why did your students' families settle where they are? How did they arrive? Did their families need to learn another language to get along? Can you encourage them to do a family genealogy project? Can students agree on similar questions to use when interviewing their sources? Can they use school equipment to record responses?

Trade. Have you ever traveled and forgotten anything? Did you ever need different clothes than what you brought along? Did you see something you knew someone back home would really like? What was important for people long ago to have when they arrived in a strange new place? What did they see as an opportunity that was needed at home and in abundance in the Americas?

Divide the class into two sections and give them "trade goods." What happens if one of the trade goods is consumed? What happens if one group doesn't want to trade? Does your class think other people may have had similar experiences? Can the class find historic examples?