Religious Holidays in Public Schools: Day of the Dead
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In an effort to honor the contributions of Mexican Americans to the rich cultural tapestry of the United States, many schools include Día de los Muertos or Day of the Dead activities during the first couple of days of November. Challenges to these lessons have grown recently on First Amendment grounds to the great confusion of teachers who have been working hard to make school a welcome place for students of all cultures. A greater understanding of the history of the holiday and of the First Amendment will help educators decide the best manner in which to approach a study of this major Mexican American holiday that meets the instructional and cultural needs of students while at the same time protecting the First Amendment rights of all.

Historians trace the origins of the holiday to indigenous observances dating back thousands of years, and to a month-long Aztec celebration dedicated to Mictecacihuatl, the goddess of death. The Spanish priests who accompanied the conquering soldiers with the goal of spreading Christianity in America considered this a macabre celebration of death. Gradually the Spanish priests merged the Mictecacihuatl festival with the Catholic Christian celebrations of All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day and moved the date for the holiday from August to November 1 and 2 when these Catholic celebrations occurred. The result was a merged Native American and Christian religious tradition celebrated today in Mexico, parts of Central America, the United States and regions of Canada as Día de los Muertos or Day of the Dead.

Since celebrations are unique to various Mexican and Central American regions as people honor and welcome the spirits of their loved ones, they also vary in the U.S. Almost always Day of the
Dead festivities begin with the building of an arched ofrenda or altar. In addition to sacred images and objects, the altar displays portraits, foods, special possessions and symbolic artifacts representing memories of the loved one to whom it is dedicated. The colors used on the altars have specific meanings. Skulls symbolize death and rebirth, special bread (pan de muerto) represents the souls of the dead, incense represents the changing of the physical to the spiritual, and salt and water represent ongoing life. Candles represent light, faith and hope. Fresh flowers, especially marigolds represent the impermanence of life.

In some places, families spend the day at the cemetery where their loved ones are buried. They decorate gravesites with marigolds, candles and maybe incense. People may bring toys for dead children (usually on November 1) or bottles of liquor to adults (usually on November 2), and have picnic meals next to gravesites, eating the favorite food of their loved ones. Most festivals feature skulls, which once symbolized death and rebirth to the ancient people. For example, in some regions at the Día De Los Muertos people wear wooden skull masks called calacas (skeletons) and dance to honor their deceased relatives.

The culture and history of Day of the Dead provide an incredibly rich opportunity for learning but, as institutions representing government, schools must remember the religious elements of the holiday so that they do not infringe on the constitutional rights of their students and their families. Teachers must be careful not to cross the line between teaching about religious holidays (which is permitted) and celebrating religious holidays (which is not). Teaching about a religious holiday is constitutional if it furthers a genuine secular program of education, is presented objectively, and does not have the effect of advancing religion through simulating or participating in a sacred ritual or practice.

**Questions to Ask**

Any teacher or administrator should ask him/herself the following questions as he/she plans holiday lessons and activities:

1. Do I have a distinct educational purpose in mind? If so, what is it? Is it part of my curriculum?

   *It should not be the purpose of public schools to celebrate or observe religious holidays*
but to learn about them.

2. If I use holidays as an opportunity to teach about religion, am I balanced and fair in my approach?
   
   For example, if you teach about Day of the Dead, consider also teaching about Ramadan, Diwali, etc.

3. Does the planned activity have the primary effect of advancing or inhibiting religion?

4. Does it ask students to perform or simulate religious rites or create sacred symbols?
   
   Remember that the school’s approach should be academic, not devotional. It is never appropriate for public schools to practice or appear to practice religion.

5. Is the instruction accomplished in such a manner that information about the religious meaning of the holiday is aligned to California Content Standards and enriches student understanding of history and culture?

Teaching About Día De Los Muertos

To avoid the appearance of sacred practice, selecting public school appropriate resources and lesson activities is crucial. While having students create and decorate altars clearly crosses the line (an activity in many popular lessons), learning about the sacred traditions does not. Literature is a great resource, with books such as the following available from most libraries and bookstores: Pablo Remembers (1993) by George Anacona, Day of the Dead (2000) by Tony Johnston, El Dia De Los Muertos: The Day of the Dead (2002) by Mary Dodson Wade, Uncle Monarch and the Day of the Dead (2008) by Judy Goldman, and The Day of the Dead: A Mexican-American Celebration (1995) by Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith.


Teaching the cultures and beliefs of all peoples in our pluralistic communities is an important role of our schools. When this is done with careful consideration for the freedom of conscience of all students, not only do young scholars learn, but schools fulfill their trust of passing along America’s democratic values to the next generation as public education was designed to do.

For further information on teaching about religious holidays in a constitutional manner, see the First Amendment Center site http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/rel_liberty/publicschools/topic.aspx?topic=religious_holidays for legal guidelines and a consensus policy statement from seventeen religious and educational organizations.