



## **DIVERSITY MEMO: Thanksgiving & Native American Month: Who's Missing from the Table?**

November brings the holiday of Thanksgiving. It's a time of year when we are reminded of our blessings, and encouraged to express gratitude for all that we have. It's also a national holiday that embraces all of the many ethnic groups of people that make up the immense diversity of America.

November is also Native American — or American Indian month. Often the myths and stories of America's first inhabitants meeting the early immigrants is remembered in image, story and often in plays in our schools.

As educators we carry the responsibility to address the complicated and painful aspects of our history that occurred between the pilgrim settlers and the Native peoples of North America. These enduring images of oppression and violence from the past call out for fresh examination today. In this *RaceBridges Diversity Memo* can lead to a new consideration of your students' own experiences of inclusion and exclusion. It also offers a more rounded understanding of the Thanksgiving holiday.

Native American Month also offers a rich opportunity to become more familiar with the contemporary life of Native America peoples. The more we learn the more we are able to transform our disappointments and anger over the past into action today working together for a more just world.

In this *RaceBridges Diversity Memo*, you'll find a classroom activity and ideas for longer lesson plans. You'll find links to helpful sites. Check out the unusual Native American stories with lesson plans on this Race Bridges for Schools website to support your exploration of the rich and often complex holiday of Thanksgiving.

May this season offer important lessons, opportunities for reflection, and many reasons for gratitude.

Enjoy!

# Classroom Activities

This brief lesson-starter suggests activities without being overly prescriptive so that you can adapt the activity to your classroom. A pledge or action item is included at the end.



This classroom activity leads students through a process of observing, reflecting and posing questions in response to images of European settlers and Native American or First Nations people to explore issues of inclusion and exclusion today.

This activity can be built around images in your textbook, images around the school, or through the resources available through the Library of Congress website:

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/thanksgiving/>

- First, ask your students to make **OBSERVATIONS** along the following lines: What do you notice first? What is small but interesting to you? What do you notice that you can't explain?
- Next ask your students to share **REFLECTIONS** on where the images came from. Why do you think somebody made this? Who do you think was the audience for this item? If someone made this today, what would be different?
- Finally, ask you students to pose some **QUESTIONS** in response to the images. Who...? What...? When...? Where...? Why...? How...?
- Ask students to draw contemporary parallels to the way that Europeans and Native people were portrayed. For homework, ask students to bring in images from current media that reflect similar themes of exclusion between people today. Ask students to present on the images by making observations, sharing reflections, and posing questions.
- You could make these images into a collage and use it as the starting point for a class pledge for a more thoughtful Thanksgiving holiday.

## *Create a Classroom Pledge:*

Creating a pledge for a class or group can be a way to further focus your learning theme and surface some action steps for your students. Such a class pledge or statement could be:

As we prepare to celebrate Thanksgiving table, let us remember that we are part of creating history today with our actions. We'll do what we can to be inclusive in our own lives.

Today we remember those who have been left out of the discussion, the decision-making and the fellowship of our school and of our country.

We remember times during which we have been left out or we have excluded others. And we remember times when others have extended their hands in welcome to us or when we have been the ones to include others.

May we remember to include all people at the tables at which we sit in the future.

There is room for all of us.

# Lesson Plan Ideas

## Some ideas to get started in the classroom.

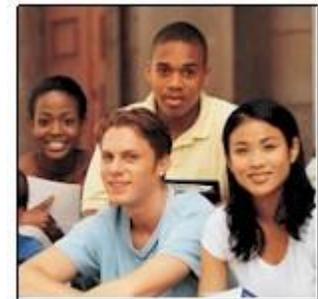
- Students could read the Presidential Proclamation of Native American Heritage Month and then investigate the people the President refers to as distinguished “inventors, entrepreneurs, spiritual leaders, and scholars”. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/presidential-proclamation-national-native-american-heritage-month>
- Students could do a very local and current assessment of issues of power today by focusing on what groups are not “at the table” of decision making at your school or in the community.
- Students could research what Native tribes lived or live in your region and investigate the particulars and challenges of those communities now.
- Students could research the stories of how their own families came to the United States, where they settled, who used to live there, who lives there now, and then share those stories during class time.



## A Checklist for Teachers

### Check these out before diving into the topic.

- Remember that conversations about power and historical accuracy can be complicated and uncomfortable for students on all sides of the issue.
- Lay the groundwork to create a non-judgmental climate in the classroom to honestly explore these issues.
- Research Native history and contemporary life in your region so that treatment of these questions is not only historical, but also up to date.



# Resources to help you plan lessons about the topic

## See the related lesson plans at [RaceBridgesStudio.com](http://RaceBridgesStudio.com)

- Thanksgiving: Who is Missing from Our Table?
- What's Racism Got to Do With Me? How History and Context Shape Us and Others

Also, please refer to these excellent stories told by professional storytellers using their personal experience to ground historical accounts of Native American life. Both of these stories are accompanied by lesson plans.

- Storyteller, Gene Tagaban, tells the story **I am ... Indopino**, weaving Native American voices into a rich mixed-race journey and vision.
- Storyteller Dovie Thomason, tells the story **The Spirit Survives** about the American Indian Boarding School Experience then and now.



## Other Recommended Resources

Native American Heritage Month / Educator Resources

<http://nativeamericanheritagemonth.gov/teachers/>

Presidential Proclamation of National Native American Heritage Month

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/presidential-proclamation-national-native-american-heritage-month>

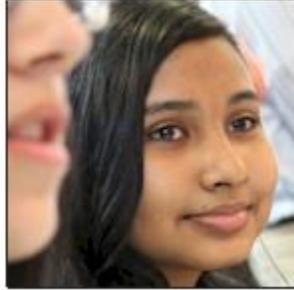
Education World includes a list of lesson plans on Native American history.

[http://www.educationworld.com/a\\_lesson/lesson209.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/lesson209.shtml)

# Words to Remember

Some quotes and words that are lasting and provocative. For your reflection and use with your students.

Use these quotations at the beginning of the lesson or unit to spark student interest; try having students respond to them in writing or discuss them in small groups.



**“Nothing is more honorable than a grateful heart.”**

- Seneca

**“If the only prayer you said in your whole life was, “thank you,” that would suffice.”**

- Meister Eckhart

**“As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them.”**

- John Fitzgerald Kennedy

**“On Thanksgiving Day we acknowledge our dependence.”**

- William Jennings Bryan

**Iroquois Thanksgiving Prayer**

We return thanks to our mother,  
the earth, which sustains us.

We return thanks to the rivers and  
streams, which supply us with water.

We return thanks to all herbs, which  
furnish medicines for the cure of our diseases.

We return thanks to the moon  
and stars, which have given to us  
their light when the sun was gone.

We return thanks to the sun,  
that has looked upon the  
earth with a beneficent eye.  
Lastly, we return thanks to the  
Great Spirit, in Whom is embodied all  
goodness, and Who directs all things  
for the good of Her children.

*Iroquois Prayer, adapted  
(Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace)*

### **Create a Gratitude List.**

Dedicate some time this month to  
reflect on your blessings. You could  
ask your students to do this as  
individuals, working in small groups  
or as a whole class. Begin with simple  
things. What are you carrying in your  
bag that you are grateful for? What is  
in the room with you that represents  
some sort of blessing or gift? Gradually  
turn your attention out to the school,  
your family, your town, your state,  
country, and our planet. Your gratitude  
list could include visual images  
or longer stories. Your list could stand  
on its own as a reflection on gifts  
large and small.

# Reflections:

Use these questions to inspire your own thinking and teaching about Thanksgiving and Native American history

- What are the enduring images of the origins of our Thanksgiving tradition?
- What familiarity do your students have with contemporary issues of Native American life? How can you bring local and contemporary connections to your lesson planning based on your geographic location and regional history?
- Think of the students in your classroom: for whom will this be a difficult discussion? Who will need extra attention or care around this topic?
- Remember the best “difficult” conversation you’ve had in your classroom: what went well? What did you do to facilitate the conversation? What is your strongest skill as a conversation facilitator?

