

Classroom Connections

Language Arts and Visual Art

DAY OF THE DEAD AND HALLOWEEN

I find that students and parents LOVE Halloween. Since Day of the Dead starts right after Halloween it is important *not* to mention Day of the Dead during Halloween to avoid confusing or inter-mixing the two celebrations. One way to handle this dilemma that has worked very well with all the elementary grades I have taught is this language and vocabulary activity, which can inspire additional writing and art activities, as well.

I have students call out single words (nouns and adjectives) that describe Halloween as I write them on a large chart sheet (Option: Use colored markers and write the words randomly just to make it interesting). Words: funny, fun, candy, ghosts, witches, scary, monsters, costumes, pumpkins, zombies, cemetery, spider webs, mummy, bloody, masks, trick or treat, jack-o-lanterns, bats, mask, make-up, flashlights, cold, howling, dead, tombstone, claws, etc., etc. Then put the chart away for later use. This is important.

To introduce Day of the Dead, ask students what they know about this important celebration. Do not write this down, just accept all answers and tell them they will be finding out in the following days. Whatever artifacts or visuals you may use to display in somewhat of an altar format can spark their interest and curiosity. Depending on the grade, read or tell a story, discuss an artifact on display, show a film or short video, or share a set of images of altars. Perhaps talk about a personal experience such as making an altar. Discuss if your plan is to have students build an altar in the



I constructed a portable altar for the classroom that I used several years. It was much more helpful to introduce and discuss a traditional home altar with my own ancestors. I still use it for workshops and presentations and have refurbished it and continue to add new artifacts (all handmade by me). Creating my own mini-altar was so much fun that I taught many portable altar workshops for teachers over the years. Now my best students—my daughters—are doing this work.

Para Mis Seres Queridos, Portable Ofrenda (12'X10''X17''), 1992-today, by Ofelia Esparza.

classroom or somewhere on site. Keep this initial presentation simple. Announce any call for materials if they will be needed, depending upon activities. There are many resources and ideas for the classroom, some are provided here.

After all Day of The Dead lessons and activities are done, students will do the word association lesson like they did after Halloween. On a new large chart sheet of paper write students' answers (nouns and adjectives) to "what single words describe Day of the Dead?" Words: fun, family, love, ancestors, sad, candles, Catrina, bread, funny, happy, honor, grandparents, skeletons, skulls, thankful, candy, altar, flowers, puppets, colorful, photographs, food, fruits, hummingbird, tamales, corn, papel picado, face paint, cemetery, butterfly, etc. After discussion, bring in the vocabulary chart they did after Halloween. Display both charts and have students observe and discuss similarities and differences in the vocabulary that describes both celebrations. The goal of these two lessons is, "Día de Los Muertos Is NOT Mexican Halloween!" Here are many opportunities for authoring stories and making art.

FAMILY STORIES

Have students interview a parent, a grandparent, an elder, or any family member who can tell the student about a grandparent or ancestor. The purpose is for the student to learn about an ancestor whom the student can write about. Ideally, there would be a photograph, if available. The ancestor writing/artifact will be added to a Day of the Dead altar or as part of a bulletin board display. The teacher can set guidelines for suggested questions for the student to ask. The parents should be informed about this assignment, and they can decide who will be the person the student will learn about. Since sensibility is important here, the assignment can be quite simple if necessary, such as a brief profile of the person who will be honored. Along with the writing (at least a short paragraph depending on the grade level) the student will make a drawing of the ancestor.



The 2019 Tucson Meet Yourself Folklife Festival collected photos from the public to memorialize their loved ones in this community altar. Over 500 photos and dedications collected were displayed on the TV screen as a looping video. During the three-day event, people brought in more photos, which they mounted and hand-embellished on paper frames, then added to the Ofrenda.

Tucson Meet Yourself Folklife Festival community altar (24"x12"x16"), 2019, by Rosanna Esparza Ahrens and Ofelia Esparza, Tucson, AZ.

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Día de los Muertos Altars: Bridges to Remembrance, Healing and Community
by Ofelia Esparza

CULMINATING PROJECTS

All the activities, projects, writings, artwork, and oral presentations for Day of the Dead can be presented as a culminating event in a classroom with other classes or grades or in a schoolwide program. Students can act as docents for each classroom. Parents and/or volunteers are vital. Most available parents are happy to help in their children's school events. Just reach out to them. There are always talented people willing to carry out tasks that a teacher will appreciate, such as helping preparing work to be displayed, room decorations, distributing arts and crafts materials, teaching other parents a crafting skill needed in executing a big event, directing the movement of visiting classrooms or coordinating the scheduling for visitors, etc.



Familia Querida, 2012, by Ofelia Esparza and Rosanna Esparza Ahrens, Self Help Graphics & Art, Los Angeles, CA

RESOURCES

There are many more resources in English available to educators today than when I started building public altars and teaching about Day of the Dead more than 40 years ago. Those I still recommend can be found online if they are out of print. A few published later I found to be valuable, although several use excerpts from older publications. Today resources for teachers and books for children abound. Check school and public libraries as well.

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I find that activities for the classroom are repeated in many teaching materials. It takes teachers' innovation to create different versions or extensions of these, but teachers know how to do that. I got many ideas from looking into the wonderful Day of the Dead folk art books or at local Mexican marketplaces. The creativity found in the folk art of many cultures offers a wealth of ideas. I believe that students of all ages should have opportunities to compare and benefit from this kind of experience.

Ofelia Esparza's Suggested Readings

Teaching Resources

Artes De Mexico #62, Día de los Muertos, Ritual Serenity. Artes de Mexico, 2002. Bilingual.

Day of the Dead Crafts: More than 24 Projects that Celebrate Día de Los Muertos. Kerry Arquette, Andrea Zocchi, and Jerry Vigil. Cantata Books, 2008. [A photo of Ofelia's altar is on page 15 under "What is your Ofrenda style?"]

The Day of the Dead, El Día de Los Muertos: A Mexican Celebration Handbook. Ann Stalcup, Four Winds Press, 2013, grades 1-5.

Days of the Dead: Mexico's Festival of Communion with the Departed. John Greenleigh and Rosalind Rosoff Beimler, Pomegranate, 1998. Bilingual.

Indo-Hispanic Folk Art Traditions II. Bobbi Salinas-Norman. Pinata Publications, 1988. Bilingual, excellent activities.

Ofrenda: Altar Makers Create Bridges between Life and Death. Kimi Eisele (author in this JFE issue) spoke to Ofelia and her daughter Rosanna to learn more about the commemorative practice of altar making, <https://borderlore.org/ofrenda-altar-makers-create-bridges-between-life-and-death>.

Skeleton at the Feast: Day of the Dead in Mexico. Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloë Sayer, University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Through the Eyes of the Soul: Day of the Dead in Mexico, Mary J. Andrade, La Oferta Publishing, 1999. Bilingual.

Children's Books

Abuela. Arthur Dorros (Author), Elisa Klevin (Illustrator), Puffin Books, 1997, ages 3-9.

Calavera Abecedario: A Day of the Dead Alphabet Book. Jeanette Winter (Author, Illustrator), HMH Books, 2006.

Gift For Abuelita / Un regalo para Abuelita: Celebrating the Day of the Dead/En celebracion del Día de los Muertos. Nancy Luenn (Author), Robert Chapman (Illustrator), 2004, Rising Moon Books Multilingual .

I Remember Abuelita: A Day of the Dead Story. Janice Levy (Author), Loretta Lopez (Illustrator), Miguel Arisa (Translator), Albert Whitman & Company, 2007, ages 4-8. Bilingual.

Pablo Remembers. Gregory Ancona (Author, Illustrator), HarperCollins, 1993, ages 6-9.

The Spirit of Tio Fernando: A Day of the Dead Story. Janice Levy (Author), Morella Fuenmayor (Illustrator), Teresa Mlwar (Translator), Albert Whitman & Company, 1995, ages 4-8. Bilingual.

Uncle Monarch: The Day of the Dead. Judy Goldman (Author), Rene King Moreno (Illustrator), Simon & Shuster, 1974, ages 6-9.