

El Día de los Muertos

Professional Development Workshop

October 2010



Vocabulary

Classroom Activities

Resources



Center for Latin
American Studies

Vocabulary

Altar

Anticipating visits by the spirits of their deceased relatives and ancestors, family members construct altars in their homes. The act of preparing an altar by placing photographs, flowers, candles, favorite foods and drink of the loved one provides a special time to remember, and to transform grief into acceptance. Some families prepare the altar of offerings at the family grave site, lighting a candle for each dead one, remembering the names, and placing flowers at the cemetery.

Barriletes

The tradition of flying kites, or *barriletes*, on November 1 is a unique aspect of the Guatemalan celebration. This custom reaches its height in the town of Santiago, Sacatepequez, whose residents spend months constructing enormous kites, up to several stories high, to fly from the cemetery hillside on November 1. Kites serve as a symbolic connection to the dead with the thread providing a direct line of communication, and they help guide returning spirits to their families. Once the celebrations have ended, the kites are burned so that the dead may return peacefully until the next year.

Calaca

Calacas are hand crafted skeletons that are funny and friendly rather than frightening or spooky. They represent the beloved dead ones, their occupations and hobbies. As they are placed on the altar, the delightful skeleton figures bring back fond memories and cause the grieving ones to smile.

Calavera

Calavera means skull in Spanish. A calavera is a type of traditional Latin American ornament or treat used on the Día de los Muertos ("Day of the Dead"). They are primarily made of sugar and are shaped in the image of skulls - usually with colorful designs. These skulls traditionally have family member's names in icing on the top.

Cempasúchil

Flowers, symbolizing the brevity of life, are massed and fashioned into garlands, wreaths and crosses to decorate the altar and the grave. The marigold is the most traditional flower of the season. In Aztec times it was called the *cempasúchil*, the flower of 400 lives. The fragrance of the *cempasúchil* leads the spirits home. Sometimes paths of the petals lead out of the cemetery and to the house to guide the spirits. A cross of marigold petals is formed on the floor so that as the spirit approaches the altar, he will step on the cross and expel his guilt.

Copal

Copal is the resinous sap of a Mexican tree, burned as incense since the time of the Aztecs as an offering to the gods. On the Day of the Dead altar, the scent attracts spirits, drawing them home. It is also used to cleanse the area, and to ward off evil.

Day of the Dead

While death is a topic usually avoided in the United States, celebration honoring deceased ancestors and loved ones are traditional among diverse cultures around the world. *El Día de Los Muertos* (November 1st and 2nd) is a holiday celebrated annually in Mexico, parts of the United States, and Central America; it is not a sad time but instead an occasion for remembering and rejoicing.

Mariachis

Mariachi is a type of musical group, originally from Mexico. Usually a mariachi group consists of at least two violins, two trumpets, one Spanish guitar, one *vihuela* (a high-pitched, five-string guitar) and one *guitarrón* (a small-scaled acoustic bass), but sometimes featuring more than twenty musicians. The original Mariachi were Mexican street musicians.

Ofrenda

Offerings, which often include orange marigold flowers called *Flor de Muerto*, Spanish for "flower of the dead", or *cempasúchil* which are thought to attract souls of the dead. Toys are brought for dead children (*los angelitos*, or little angels). Families will also offer trinkets or the deceased's favorite candies on the grave. *Ofrendas* are also put in homes, usually with foods such as candied pumpkin, *pan de muerto*, or sugar skulls and beverages such as atole. The *ofrendas* are left out in the homes as a welcoming gesture for the deceased.

Pan de muerto

Pan de muerto is a soft bread shaped like a bun with bone-like designs on the top made out of icing.

Papel picado

Colorful tissue paper, *papel picado*, is cut into intricate designs and strung to flutter around the altar. This custom comes from the Aztecs who used paper banners in rituals. The colors used represent:

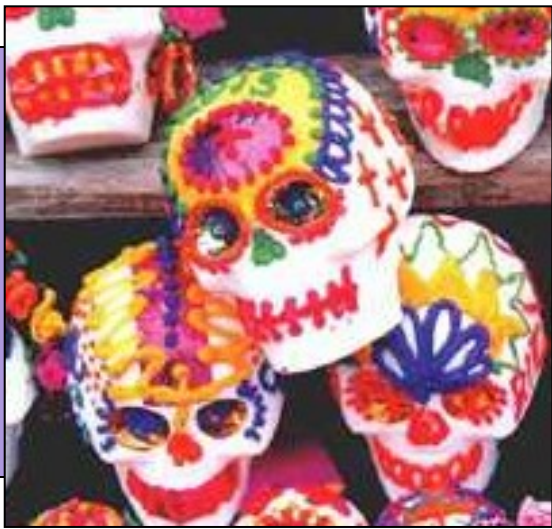
- Black for the PreHispanic religions and land of the dead
- Purple from the Catholic calendar to signify pain, suffering, grief, mourning
- Pink for celebration
- White for purity and hope
- Yellow and Orange for the marigold, the sun, light

Red representing for Christians, the blood of Jesus; and for the indigenous, the life blood of humans and animals

Sugar Skulls

Decorated with colorful icing, sugar skulls are a traditional folk art from Central and Southern Mexico that are used to celebrate *El Día de Los Muertos*. (For more information - see Calavera definition.)

Adapted from the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art El Día de los Muertos Educator's Guide.



Sugar Skulls

- Mix 1 teaspoon Meringue Powder for every cup of granulated sugar used (be sure the dry ingredients are mixed well before adding water). Sprinkle sugar mixture with 1 teaspoon water per cup of sugar used. Mix well with hands until every bit of sugar is moistened (about 3-4 minutes). If your fingerprints remain when you squeeze the sugar in your hands, it is ready to mold. It should feel like “beach sand”.

For Example:

- 4 cups sugar
- 4 teaspoons Meringue Powder
- 4 teaspoons water
- Mound sugar into mold and pack mixture **FIRMLY** into mold. Use a straight edge (or cardboard square) to scrape off the excess sugar until the back is absolutely flat. Place a stiff piece of cardboard over the mold and invert immediately. Lift mold off carefully. Air dry for approximately 8 hours.
- Use your favorite recipe for royal icing (with food coloring) to decorate the sugar skulls.
- See attached sheet for more information and recipes from www.mexicansugarskull.com.



Barriletes (Kites)

- Create a circular base for the kite using the outer ring of a paper plate or a cardboard circle (cutting out the middle of the circle).
- Using colored tissue paper triangles, arrange and glue the pieces on the circle with a glue stick. It is easiest to put the glue on the white circle first, rather than risk tearing the delicate tissue.
- Think about how you would like to overlap the triangle edges and how different colors will show through the translucent tissue. Allow about a $\frac{1}{2}$ inch of tissue paper to hang off the edge of the circle base.
- Now, turn the base with colored triangles over to the back. If you would like to add fringe and streamers to your kite, glue the edges to the back of the circle base.

How to make fringe: Using tissue paper triangles or rectangles, cut several snips along one side. Glue the solid edge to the back of the circle base, allowing the fringed edge to hang off the edge of the kite.

- When the front of the kite and streamers are attached to the circle, glue all of them to the cardboard ring. It is easier to spread the glue on the cardboard ring, rather than the tissue paper or white circle.
- If you would like to cover up the back of your kite, you may glue more triangles or one bigger piece of tissue paper to the back.
- Lastly, embellish the center of your kite with sequins! You may also add smaller tissue paper squares and shapes to the front of your kite, by carefully applying the glue to the tissue paper.



Calaveras Masks

- Photocopy the attached template onto cardstock.
- Have students decorate the mask using brightly colored markers, colored pencils, crayons, paint and sequins.
- Cut out the masks, and holes for the eyes.
- Staple or glue colored craft stick to the mask at the base.



Papel Picado

- See attached activity sheet and template from www.storyboardtoys.com.

Family Journals



- Cut white sheets of copy paper (or any paper you have) into 4 equal square pieces. You can use however much paper you want to make the journal as thick or thin as you would like.
- Cut a piece of colored construction paper to be the front and back cover. These pieces should be the same size as the white paper.
- Cut pieces of copper foil (you can use aluminum foil for young students or check with your local hardware store for other cheap foil materials).
- Have the students “emboss” the foil using a soft pointed tool (such as a dull pencil). As students “emboss” have them think about the pressure they are applying and how lines or marks might change because of this pressure.
- Turn the metal sheet over so the lines are raised up, and look embossed. The other side would appear to look engraved.
- Punch 2 holes in the top of journals about an inch apart (see photo at the top of the page), and then run raffia through the holes to tie a decorative knot in the front.



Memory Tree

- Cut strips of colored construction paper.
- Have a discussion with students about what a memory is? Do you remember smells, things you see or hear?
- Ask students to write a memory or thought about their family or loved one on the strip of paper.
- Punch a single hole at the top of each strip.
- Tie a piece of yarn or string through the hole, making a loop at least 5 inches in diameter.
- Hang the pieces on a tree at school or home.



Paper Marigolds

- Take 4-5 sheets of tissue paper and layer them (if you want multicolored flowers, use different colors). Cut into 8-inch squares.
- Keeping the sheets layered, take one set of squares and fold it like an accordion so it looks like a thin rectangle. At the center of the rectangle, cut a small v-shaped notch on both sides.
- Take the end of a pipe cleaner and twist it around the notch. With the stem pointing straight down, gently pull up one layer of tissue into the center. Pull up the remaining layers, one by one. Repeat for the other side of the flower.
- Once all the layers are pulled up, fluff them in place to look natural. Continue making more flowers with the remaining stacks of squares.

Tips and variations: For sturdier stems, wrap two pipe cleaners together. Cut smaller or larger squares to change the size of your flowers. Add more layers for thicker flowers or less layers for thinner ones. For a shiny effect, dip the top edges in white glue and then dip in loose glitter. Glue a pin on the back of a flower for a fluffy lapel decoration. Make smaller flowers and string them together as garland.

See more about this activity at: http://www.azcentral.com/ent/dead/articles/dead-crafts_paperflowers.html#ixzz10k6DD5xx

Additional Classroom Activities

Science:

Living vs. Non-Living

Discover what constitutes living organisms, non-living organisms, and non-living things. Discuss how all organisms and organic material are living things which have a life cycle with a genesis, growth and development period, and death. Take your class outside or to a nearby park to find nature. Have students work in groups to collect items and classify them as organic or non-organic. Then meet back together and have each group report on their findings. Select several items for class discussion and prompt students to consider what happens to each object as it begins to develop as well as die and decompose. How does the object change in: color, size, shape, smell, and other physical properties?

Language Arts:

Reflective Writing Activity

Students can reflect on a friend or family member who has passed away, and write an essay about that person's life and how they touched theirs. How would they construct an altar for their deceased loved one. What would they include on the altar? What were some of their loved one's favorite things?

Social Studies:

Research Project Topics

Have your students do a little research on what kinds of foods people enjoy eating during the Day of the Dead. Find a recipe for *pan de muerto* (or check with a local international grocery store) and bring some for your class to try.

Different cultures around the world have unique ways of remembering the dead and confronting the issue of death. Have your students research a variety of different cultures' and religious groups' views of death and report their findings to the class. (Suggestions include the ancient Sumerians, Egyptians, and Mayans; also Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians).

Build an altar!

You will need:

- A photo of the person to whom you'll devote your altar
- A few large cardboard boxes for the base
- Paper to cover the boxes (butcher paper works well)
- *Papel picado*
- Candles (if you are able to have some at school!)
- Flowers (you can use real marigolds or make them out of tissue paper)
- Offerings of food or drink to the deceased
- Skulls (paper, sugar, plastic, etc.)

Resources

Books

Amado, Alisa. *Barrilete: A Kite for the Day of the Dead.* (Publishers Group West), 1999.

Ancona Daz, George. *Pablo Remembers : The Fiesta of the Day of the Dead.* (New York: Lothrop, Lee, and Shepard Books), 1993. (This is a good book for children to learn about the holiday.)

Andrade, Mary J. *Através de los Ojos del Alma, Dia de Muertos en México / Through the Eyes of the Soul, Day of the Dead in Mexico.* Oaxaca. (San Jose, CA), 1999.

Berdecio, Robert and Stanley Applebaum. *Posada's Popular Mexican Prints: 25 Curs by Jose Guadalupe Posada.* (New York: Dover Publications), 1972.

Carmichael, Elizabeth and Chloe Sayer. *The Skeleton at the Feast: The Day of the Dead in Mexico.* (Austin: University of Texas Press), 1991.

Garciagodoy, Juanita. *Digging the Days of the Dead: A Reading of Mexico's Dias de Muertos.* (University Press of Colorado), 1998.

Greenleigh, John and Rosalind Rosoff Beimler. *The Days of the Dead: Mexico's Festival of Communion with the Departed.* (Rohnert Park, CA: Pomegranate), 1998.

Hoyt-Goldsmith, Diane. *Day of the Dead: A Mexican American Celebration.* (New York, Holiday House), 1994.

Johnston, Tony and Jeanette Winter. *Day of the Dead.* Voyager Books, 2000. (This book is suitable for children ages 4-8.)

Kalish, Richard A. *Death and Dying: Views from Many Cultures.* (Farmingdale: Baywood Publishers), 1980

Lasky, Kathryn. *Days of the Dead.* Photographs by Christopher G. Knight. (New York: Hyperion Books for Children), 1994.

Lechuga, Ruth. *Fiestas in Mexico: Complete Guide to Celebration Throughout the Country.* (Mexico, D.F.), 1978.

Levy, Janice. *The Spirit of Tio Fernando: A Day of the Dead Story.* (Monton Grove, IL: A Whitman), 1995.

Luenn, Nancy. *A Gift for Abuelita.* Rising Moon, 1998. (This book is suitable for children ages 4-8.)

Trenchard, Kathleen. *Mexican Papercutting: Simple Techniques for Creating Colorful Cut-Paper Projects.* (New York: Lark Books), 1998.

Websites

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<http://www.holidays.net/halloween/muertos.htm>

http://www.mexconnect.com/mex_/feature/daydeadindex.html

<http://www.dayofthedead.com/>

<http://www.mexonline.com/daydead.htm>

<http://www.globalgourmet.com/food/egg/egg1096/daydead.html>

<http://www.nacnet.org/assunta/dead.htm>

<http://teacherlink.ed.usu.edu/tlresources/units/byrnes-celebrations/day.html>

<http://rubberstamping.about.com/od/projects/ss/SmallPaperFlower.htm>

Adapted from the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art El Día de los Muertos Educator's Guide.