

A New Take on New Year Celebrations

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People all over the world relish the opportunity to count down the final moments of the year and welcome an exciting New Year full of opportunities and fresh beginnings. They often do so while watching live video of celebrations in a major city, such as Jakarta, Indonesia; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Reykjavik, Iceland; or Times Square in New York City.¹

Different cultures also have historical traditions of welcoming in the New Year, from eating black-eyed peas in the American South to creating geometric *Rangoli* (a form of sandpainting decoration) in India as part of the five-day Hindu festival of Diwali. (The fourth day of Diwali falls on the first day of the lunar New Year.) These culturally rich celebrations offer time for both reflection on events past and resolutions for future behavior.

In the United States, the New Year's holiday is truly global, as opposed to holidays such as Thanksgiving or Independence Day that arise from our national history. The New Year's holiday offers students the opportunity to consider critically the multicultural traditions practiced in our society. A study of the changing of the year offers myriad social studies connections—from questioning how calendars have developed, to analyzing celebrations across geographic and political boundaries, to making a personal commitment to improve the community in some way.

Seizing the Day

Teachers with whom we work lament that New Year's is a frequently forgotten holiday in elementary schools. “The holiday is often left out of school curriculum because we aren't here [in the school],” says Donna Lehmann, a fourth-grade teacher in Martinsville, Indiana. Amy Strain, a second-grade teacher in Indianapolis, says, “Everybody celebrates... Valentine's Day and Halloween at school. These holidays are fun, but not that important in terms of what kids learn. I would like to be more intentional and thoughtful in terms of what holidays I include in my curriculum.” Shifts in our educational landscape, in particular the current marginalization of social studies at the elementary level, put a premium on using instructional time for social studies meaningfully and effectively. Thus, when we decided to devote time to teaching

about holidays—which often involve powerful, personally relevant topics for young learners—we re-conceived the ways we approach them, so that we can engage students with rich social studies content, including history, sociology, geography, and citizenship.



Celebrating Chinese New Year, Pasar Baru, Jakarta

A Global View

In an effort to move beyond craft-based “celebrations,” we use the New Year's holiday to emphasize global understanding, multiple perspectives, and civic responsibility. By cultivating a deeper awareness and understanding of traditions practiced in the United States and abroad, students develop knowledge of diverse cultures and make global connections.

Additionally, by moving from the personal to the global, students recognize the ways in which they can use the fresh beginning of a new year to work as active global citizens by making resolutions that involve community-based civic action.

In this article and the following Pullout, we describe three classroom activities:

1. Creating a historical timeline showing how the start of a calendar year has been celebrated by different civilizations and societies;
2. Visiting stations in the classroom that focus on New Year symbols and customs from the current day; and
3. Discussing and creating New Year resolutions that can lead to civic action.²

LESSON 1. History and Cultures

Our inquiry-based lesson begins by encouraging students to question why the United States celebrates the New Year's holiday on January 1st. Working together, students construct an illustrated timeline indicating when New Year's was celebrated in the ancient and classical worlds. Students analyze the holiday's complicated history, discovering that the Ancient Babylonians' New Year's celebration was in March, at the start of the spring season, while the Egyptians celebrated in the summer when the Nile River flooded. Moreover, students explore calendar development from Persia to the Roman Empire, learning that January 1 was not solidified as New Year's Day in the western world until 1582. When the illustrated timelines are completed, we discuss the following questions:

- What generalizations can be made about the times of year when people celebrated the New Year?
- To what extent does January 1 reflect the holiday's agricultural beginnings?

There are about 40 calendars used in the world today, particularly for determining religious dates. Most modern countries use the Gregorian calendar for their official activities. Westerners should keep in mind that there are indeed several calendars actively in use.³

Key free resources for this lesson (for teacher background) include:

A Walk Through Time

www.nist.gov/pml/general/time/index.cfm

The U.S. National Institute of Standards and Technology presents both the history of timekeeping and a peek at its current state.

Calendars Through the Ages

www.webexhibits.org/calendars

Sponsored by IDEA, a nonprofit organization committed to enhancing the public's knowledge of science and culture. This website begins with an in-depth look at the astronomical basis of calendars. Significant historical calendars (such as the Roman and Mayan) and currently used international calendars (Jewish, Chinese, and Islamic) are covered in Various Calendars

Clockworks

www.britannica.com/clockworks/main.html

Sponsored by *Britannica Encyclopedia*, Clockworks explores our notions of time, starting with a history of calendars and timekeeping. This is an excellent site for middle and high-school students, sprinkled with dozens of apt quotes from the likes of Einstein, Ben Franklin, William Shakespeare, and Tennessee Williams.

LESSON 2. Today's Symbols and Customs

Next, students examine key elements of various New Year's traditions and symbols in five "learning centers" in the classroom. Handouts and resources to use with these lessons comprise the Pullout on four pages following this article.

Center 1: Students compare and contrast celebrations in Times Square in New York City from 1904 to today,

Center 2: Students examine videos of local celebrations across the country (Key West, Boston, New Orleans, etc.) to gain insight into how they reflect local geography, climate, and culture.



New Year 2011 in Sanok, Poland

Center 3: Students view online video clips of fireworks from cities such as Taipei, Sydney, and Rio de Janeiro, locating the city and specific landmarks on a world map, and noting the time zone for each city.

Center 4: Students discuss the meaning of *Auld Lang Syne* by listening to and decoding the song lyrics.

Center 5: Students analyze the image of "Father Time and Baby New Year," discussing the meaning and symbolism of the picture, and suggesting alternative ways to symbolize endings and beginnings.

Image found at wikimedia commons.

After students cycle through the centers, the class reconvenes to draw conclusions about the larger meanings of New Year's celebrations and symbols. In pairs, students then create their own song, symbol, or celebration that reflects this larger meaning.

LESSON 3. Community-Based Resolutions

New Year's resolutions often involve people creating personal goals to improve their life or make changes in their daily habits. While making personal resolutions is important, they may promote students to think primarily about themselves, rather than about their role as citizens in the local or global community. Jarith Witt, a second-grade teacher in Cedar Falls, Iowa,

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Image found at wikimedia commons.



Father Frost of Belarus in Belovezhskaya Pushcha

Suggestions for Service-Learning Activities

Fighting Hunger

- Partnering with a local organization that fights hunger
- Working to decrease food waste at your school
- Raising awareness about the realities of hunger in your community

Promoting Literacy

- Writing books to share with a local or global organization
- Starting a reading partnership with a local group or another classroom
- Raising awareness about decreased funding at your local library

Fostering Healthy Habits

- Hosting a family fitness event at your school that promotes healthy habits
- Combating unhealthy lunches at your school
- Raising awareness about the consequences of decreased physical activity

Supporting Animal Welfare

- Partnering with a local animal shelter to support their efforts
- Raising awareness about puppy mills in your area or state
- Investigating laws about animal treatment in your state

Responding to a Local or Global Disaster

- Partnering with the Red Cross, or another organization to provide relief to flood victims
- Raising funds and/or gather products to send to an afflicted community
- Educating others about emergency preparedness procedures in your area

Children's Literature about the New Year

Bae, Hyun-Joo. *New Clothes For New Year's Day*. La Jolla, CA: Kane Miller, 2007.

This beautifully illustrated book tells the story of a young Korean girl as she excitedly tries on her new clothes to celebrate the Lunar New Year.

Gilmore, Rachna. *Lights for Gita*. Gardiner, ME: Tilbury House, 2000.

Recent Indian immigrants Gita and her family celebrate Divali, the Hindu Festival of Lights, for the first time in their new home in America.

Hoyt-Goldsmith, Diane. *Celebrating Chinese New Year*. New York: Holiday House, 1998.

This non-fiction text follows Ryan Leong and his family through San Francisco's Chinatown as they prepare for and celebrate the Chinese New Year.

Kimmelman, Leslie. *Sound the Shofar: A Story for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur*. New York: Harper Collins, 1998.

The story of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, is told through the eyes of one family.

Miller, Pat. *Squirrel's New Year's Resolution*. New York: Albert Whitman, 2010.

Squirrel learns about New Year's resolutions and learns that actions speak louder than words.

Piernas-Davenport, Gail. *Shanté Keys and the New Year's Peas*. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman, 2007.

When her grandmother runs out of black-eyed peas, Shanté looks to borrow some, but she discovers that her neighbors have different food traditions to celebrate the New Year.

Shea, Pegi Deitz. *Ten Mice For Tet*. San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2003.

A village of mice prepares to celebrate the Vietnamese New Year in this simple, yet informative counting book.

Waters, Kate. *Lion Dancer: Ernie Wan's Chinese New Year*. New York: Scholastic, 1990.

Ernie and his Chinese-American family prepare to celebrate the Chinese New Year, culminating in Ernie's first experience dancing the Lion Dance in the parade.



Image found at wikimedia commons.

New Year celebration in Sydney, Australia

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“tries to have students think globally about their wishes for the world, rather than just what they would wish for themselves.” Our second strategy builds upon Witt’s ideas and supports students creating community-based resolutions and then acting upon them in their local or global community.

We begin by reading *Squirrel’s New Year’s Resolution* by Pat Miller. The story features a squirrel who learns that New Year’s resolutions are promises you make for self improvement or to help others. As squirrel walks through the woods trying to think of his personal resolution, he ends up helping various friends. When Squirrel cannot think of a resolution, his friends point out the ways that he has already helped them and that actions are more powerful than words. We use this text to help move students from the notion of personal resolutions to civically minded resolutions that can effect change in a wider community.

Students work in small groups to develop community-based resolutions that might involve their classroom, school, local area, or even places around the world. Students share their ideas with the class, identify common themes, and decide which ideas to pursue as service-learning projects. A graphic organizer (see the Pullout) helps move students through this process. A service-learning project might involve any of the activities listed in the sidebar here.

As we work with students to develop their service-learning projects, we help identify guest speakers, community and print-

based resources, and potential partnerships that will support student academic learning and civic engagement. As the service-learning projects are being implemented, we build in time for reflection, so that students can explore the value and impact of the projects.

Developing and implementing community-based New Year’s resolutions allows students to recognize that they have a voice and can effect change. This approach to the New Year’s holiday enables us to go beyond the party hats and horns to nurture young citizens who can make a difference. 🌐

Notes

1. Timeanddate.com offers a table showing “when year 2012 starts around the world, that is when the clocks turn to midnight on January 1,” at www.timeanddate.com/counters/firstnewyear.html. Timeanddate.com is operated by a company near Stavanger, Norway.
2. In addition to the following Pullout, we’ve posted some supporting material (lesson plans, detailing both strategies including student handouts and teacher materials) for this article online at happynewyearncss.weebly.com/. The website www.weebly.com allows anyone to build a free website.
3. Calendars through the Ages, www.webexhibits.org/calendars/calendar.html.

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