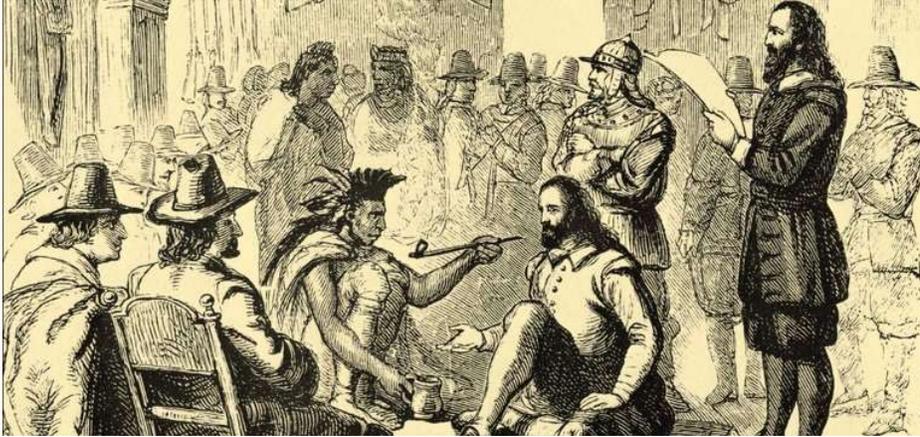


3 ways to expand Native American curriculum beyond Thanksgiving myths

Generalizations tied to the holiday don't paint the whole picture of the numerous cultures that were spread across the Americas.



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Classroom lessons around the Thanksgiving holiday are populated by mostly mythic stories about the celebration's origins, painting rosy images of the pilgrims of Plymouth, Massachusetts, and local Wampanoag tribe of Native Americans coming together to share a feast.

Children's and young adult author [Cynthia Leitich Smith](#) sees room for educators to push beyond their lessons a bit when it comes to teaching these topics, suggesting curriculum can be integrated throughout the school year — and across any discipline — with just a bit more sleuthing on the part of teachers and students alike.

Teaching a science unit on astrophysics or the space program? A picture book about Chickasaw astronaut [John Herrington](#), "Mission to Space," for example, is a nice fit.

"Inclusion of Native topics in the curriculum should be interdisciplinary and take place all year round," Smith told Education Dive by email. "Rather than tie into Thanksgiving, focus instead on Native Heritage Month, and then continue integrating respectful lesson plans during every other month of the year, too."

When it comes to using Thanksgiving as the traditional marker for incorporating lessons on Native American culture and history, many experts, like [Natalie Martinez](#), a New Mexico Public Education Department [Indigenous New Mexico Curriculum Initiative](#) curriculum lead team member, point out that these "origin myths" are rife with inaccuracies and stereotypes.

The better approach is to bring original sourcing, along with native voices, to the classroom and weave these perspectives into lessons. Those who want to get started can begin by examining the history in their own backyard.

Finding sources in your community

Martinez suggests educators begin their search online, where there are a number of curriculum options for K-12 classrooms. She points to the "[Indigenous Wisdom](#)" curriculum from the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center, the "[Since Time Immemorial](#)" curriculum mandated by the state of Washington, and "[An Indigenous Peoples' History for Young People](#)," which has an added curriculum guide written by Martinez along with several lesson plans for teachers to use.

Educators should also look within their own neighborhood and community for sourcing. To start, Martinez points to the website [Native Land](#), which is curated by an indigenous-led, nonprofit group and includes an interactive map that can users can search to find indigenous territories across Canada and the United States.

Thanks! Look out for an email from us soon.

“Educators can present balanced curriculum in their classrooms by accessing appropriate resources beyond the standard text to build student experience with Native American-based content,” Martinez told Education Dive via email. “A great way to begin is to determine which Indigenous Nations are nearest the schools/cities, then contacting the governmental offices directly to request assistance with finding appropriate resources for teaching.”

Look to native voices

While Smith gives a nod to much of the work being done today by native teachers and school librarians, she also wants to encourage educators to turn to “authentic native resources,” she said, to help broaden depictions brought into the classroom of Native American life from their own perspective.

Smith, also an honorary board member of [We Need Diverse Books](#), believes while there are rich options for curriculum material from national sources like the [Native Knowledge 360 from the Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian](#) or young adult literature options on [her site](#), teachers and administrators can also turn to resources in their own communities, as Martinez had suggested.

“Educators can research to find out whether Native Nations in their area can direct them to speakers for school visits and/or invite native children’s and young adult authors and illustrators to speak about their work,” she said. “An in-person or virtual presentation can have high impact. Remember to ask for information about their honorarium and be prepared to pay it. Video can be a successful fallback choice.”

Be specific

Laura Ferguson, who has taught Native American studies at [Helena College](#) and [Carroll College](#), both in Montana, also encourages educators to push against generalities that can come up in K-12 classrooms when teaching about the Thanksgiving holiday and to avoid references to Native Americans presented in a broad sense. Ferguson notes there is a great deal of diversity between people, even in the same regions.

“You want children to understand they are bound to a specific landscape, with a specific culture,” said Ferguson, currently the associate editor at [Montana The Magazine of Western History](#), published by the Montana Historical Society. “There is a place where you can talk about people, but it’s best practice to talk about specific people and where they are geographically located.”

For those educators who are looking to bring Native American histories into their class and to tie them to the Thanksgiving holiday, Ferguson suggests giving students an assignment to take apart the myths associated with what’s often described as the “first encounter” and the “first holiday” instead.

“Turn [students] into document sleuths,” she said. “Tell them to look at the information presented to them, and discern what is accurate and what is not. Have them decide what are facts and what are not facts.”

Forming partnerships with local organizations can support this work, particularly in helping students uncover original materials, primary documents and the voices of local people. This is an assignment Ferguson herself has used with students and educators in her former work, bringing together schools, local museums and people, she said.

She remembers a student who had grown up on a ranch owned by their family since the 1850s. He felt a deep connection to the land, and she recalled he told her he didn’t think it had belonged to anyone else before his family had lived there. But Ferguson encouraged him to imagine that if he felt that strongly about land belonging to several generations of his family, to try to think how others would feel who had a connection to the land for hundreds of generations.

“Wherever they are in the United States, they are on someone’s former tribal land,” she said. “Some may say there weren’t any people [on a piece of land], because there aren’t any people there now. But they need to find out, if there aren’t any people there now, where were they displaced or moved? They need to dig deeper.”