

## Addressing Cultural Appropriation in the Classroom: Tools and Resources

December 13, 2016 9 min read

*With a multitude of media influences and unknown personal biases in play, many students and adults are unaware of issues surrounding cultural appropriation—including what it even is—and how their choices can impact social environments and the community around them. Marketing & E-Communications Specialist Jason Papallo and Youth Programs Director M'Liss DeWald at [National Conference for Community Justice](#) provide definitions, conversation starters, and resources.*

By guest bloggers Jason Papallo and M'Liss DeWald

### What is Cultural Appropriation?

A crucial first step in the endeavor to understand cultural appropriations is to accurately define it in a classroom setting without igniting a defensive attitude from students. Teachers can begin during the opening to a lesson by providing the right context. Here are some definitions that can be used to get the conversation started:

*Cultural Appropriation:* “Taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else’s culture without permission. This can include unauthorized use of another culture’s dance, dress, music, language, folklore, cuisine, traditional medicine, religious symbols, etc. It’s most likely to be harmful when the source community is a minority group that has been oppressed or exploited in other ways or when the object of appropriation is particularly sensitive, e.g. sacred objects.” (From, [Who Owns Culture? Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law](#), by Susan Scafidi)

*Exploitation:* The action of making use and benefiting from sources.

*Internalized Dominance:* When members of the agent group accept their group’s socially superior status as normal and deserved.

*Internalized Oppression:* When a member of an oppressed group believes, and acts out imposed stereotypes.

*Assimilation:* The process of a person or group’s culture, language, and/or customs resembling those of another person or group.

### Appreciation versus Appropriation

After going over basic terms and definitions associated with cultural appropriation and sharing some examples, explain to students the difference between appreciating a culture and appropriating it to provide better context for the conversation.

One example that is very relatable to students is that of Halloween—a time of fun, excitement, and unfortunately cultural appropriation. While most Halloween costumes are harmless, some are not. The conversation around Halloween costumes and cultural appropriation has been happening for at least the last decade. For example, in 2011, Ohio University did a poster campaign called “[We’re a Culture, Not a Costume.](#)” that quickly took off in social media and has been updated by the university a few times. This campaign highlights the importance of understanding how wearing a costume for just one night can have a negative impact. In 2012 the poster read, “You wear a costume for one night. I wear the stigma for life.”

In K-12 classrooms you can begin by discussing common Halloween costumes and whether or not they are cultural appropriations.

## Have the Challenging Conversations

The next step is not shying away from the challenging conversations that may occur from the sometimes politically charged attitudes that are often met within these conversations and the nature of the content. Make sure that the students are ready to move the conversation forward by finding active solutions to the complicated problems that cultural appropriation creates while bringing light to the misconceptions around them.

You can offer up some of these questions and conversation starters to help open up the classroom dialogue:

*How do you appreciate a culture you are not part of? And can you?*

Appreciation comes from sincere understanding, and understanding means going beyond books. Look at the social and emotional connections to culture that students experience in their own lives. Connect those experiences to the idea of cultural appropriation and have students provide examples from their own lives or media sources. Remind students that just because someone understands a culture, it doesn't give them the right to claim it as their own.

*Is the culture inviting you to celebrate it?*



There isn't a fine line between culture appropriation and internalized domination/oppression. Americans have a sense of entitlement around the concept of "the melting pot," which often carries with it the assumption that because we have a diverse amount of cultures in our country, that all of them belong to all of us. Within the classroom dialogue, look for examples of what types of behaviors could come from appropriating a culture in everyday life, including but not limited to fashion, accents, vocal inflections, and art among other artifacts. Ask them to only speak about their experiences and own cultural identities, not anyone else's.

*You can explore and be fascinated or engulfed by a culture and not appropriate it. It becomes appropriation when you change a part of your personal identity to "match" or "claim" that culture.*

Choose some examples of cultural appropriation to give. (Try a [celebrity example](#) or one of the others below). Then move the discussion toward how some may express or have a preference for one or a few cultures within their interests, and that having a fascination doesn't qualify as a personal bias. Have students share their own cultural experiences, and make sure that questions

can be asked within a safe environment about their own cultural identities and their interests in other cultures. If comfortable, allow people that are part of a target group that is appropriated (e.g., students of color, religious minorities) to talk about their experiences. Make sure to find balance within your classroom population. It shouldn't be a space dominated by agent groups, nor should it only be target groups. If possible, have students invite a parent or other relative in for a day centered around stories of personal experience that explore culture, societal biases, and other unique aspects of that cultural identity within the United States.

### **Clearing Up Misconceptions**

#### *Personal experience:*

Whether students are aware of it or not, all of them at some point have been placed by society within a box of preconceived notions based on their cultural identity, which is usually perceived from their outward appearance. Have students work as a group to combat this issue at varying levels of scale, whether it's dealing with prejudice or simple misconceptions. Ask them to provide a detailed outline of what a plan would be that incorporates a written and visual element of their choice.

#### *Celebrating other cultures while respecting their linguistic identity and traditions:*

Look at how language and inflection spans race as well as different socioeconomic classes, and how the intentions behind how certain words, phrases, vocal patterns, and false accents can make seemingly innocent conversations into atmospheres for harmful environments. Go through personal and vicarious experiences of this behavior with the class by having students share stories.

#### *Looking at the reality behind media representation:*

Students should examine film, literature, music, and other art forms with a strong emphasis on language, as well as the ways popular fashion has impacted their perception of cultural appropriation. Then encourage curiosity with a discussion exploring how different cultures are represented in all forms of media, followed by an analysis that includes historical context and personal reflection.

Discuss the impact of media and pop culture as an influence on and perpetuator of the misconceptions many see around cultural identity and where cultural appropriation is modeled and taught to society. After showing students the videos below, select some direct examples of cultural appropriations and create a Venn diagram to compare and contrast perpetuated stereotypes and cultural theft versus the reality of the societal and personal experiences that center around cultural appropriation.

### **Video Examples:**

- [Cultural Appropriation: Why Your Pocahontas Costume Isn't Okay: Aaliyah Jihad](#)
- [Cultural Appropriation in Music Videos](#)
- [Costume #Fails](#)
- [The Redskins' Name - Catching Racism](#)

### **Consider This**

Assessment within a group discussion can often depend on participation points and other areas of interaction. Use the following discussion questions to encourage a deeper level of thinking on these issues.

*Can students identify cultural appropriation?*

- What cultural appropriation have you witnessed in the media (television, magazines, music, etc.)?
- If you saw someone wearing or doing something that was culturally offensive, what would you do?
- Is what I am doing or wearing perpetuating any racial or religious stereotype? Am I reducing anyone or any culture down to a caricature?
- When shopping ask yourself if what you want to buy is tied to a culture. Is it accurately representing that culture or stereotyping it?
- Think about your favorite artist and whether or not you have ever seen them wearing or doing something that was cultural appropriation. Think about the popularity of this person and the impact they have on their fans. Many will assume that if they do it, it is okay. Question this notion.
- Have you ever worn anything just because you were trying to make a “fashion statement” without realizing it is from another culture and is cultural appropriation?
- Are you really appreciating a culture when it is represented from something bought from stores like Target, Wal-Mart, or another commercialized chain stores?

*Questions to have students ask themselves on whether or not what they’re doing/wearing is okay:*

- Is it offensive to any race, religion, culture, belief, group of people, etc.?
- Does it mock/make fun of/or represent a certain group of people/culture/belief/etc. in any way?
- Does it reinforce stereotypes?
- Did people from the other culture endure negative experiences that people from your culture have not?
- Are you wearing it just because it “looks cute”?
- Do you think that because your favorite celebrity/icon/whoever is wearing it, it makes it okay?
- Did your friend, who is part of the culture it originated from, tell you that they don’t care if you wear it because it doesn’t offend them? Does this mean it doesn’t matter?

To all of these questions, if a student answers “yes,” then they shouldn’t do it. Even if one person isn’t offended, it doesn’t mean others won’t be. Gently remind students to take caution and be thoughtful.

## **Conclusion**

In our schools there is no longer one [majority population](#)—minority students, when added together, now make up the overall majority of students in our classrooms. It is critical for students to understand cultures different from their own and be able to appreciate—not appropriate—them. This means educators can’t shy away from having these challenging conversations in the classroom. Hopefully these resources and ideas are a first step.

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## **After-Discussion Articles and Handouts:**

- [Cultural Appropriation 101, Featuring Geisha Katy Perry and the great wave of Asian Influence](#)
- [The Difference between Cultural Exchange and Cultural Appropriation](#)
- [Cultural Appreciation Versus Cultural Appropriation?](#)

## **Other Resources:**

- [Culturally Appropriated Halloween Costumes Are Offensive to the Groups They Depict](#)
- [It’s Time We Have A Real Talk About Culture-Based Halloween Costumes](#)

- [I Was That Girl On Halloween -- Here's How I Learned My Lesson](#)
- [What J.K. Rowling's New Story Can Teach Us About Cultural Appropriation](#)

*A version of this piece originally appeared on the NCCJ blog and portions were derived, with full permission for use, from the NCCJ Bulletin resource "[Cultural Appropriation](#)."*  
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