
An Introduction to Cultural Appropriation, Appreciation, and Celebration

The Work of Diversifying the Waldorf Curriculum

~ Dr. Joaquin Muñoz

In my work with schools and teachers in the Waldorf education movement, one of the most frequently asked questions relates to cultural appropriation. This is not a new question, nor is it one that has been resolved completely. The complexities of understanding culture and what appropriation, appreciation, and celebration are lead us along a path of making a lifelong commitment to engaging communities, understanding the intricate nature of culture, and being willing to learn and practice. The question of cultural appropriation has not been resolved because the nature of culture is constantly in motion. No culture is ever set in stone, but is always in flux and transformation. And one way that this transformation manifests is in the changing conceptions of what is and is not acceptable to be taught in school; what is and is not acceptable to be shared with those outside of the culture; and, in the United States, what is acceptable to teach about, period.

Another reason why the question “Is this cultural appropriation or cultural appreciation?” is a challenging one to answer is because the answer is often a painful one to hear. In some cases, the answer is dismissed completely. Chelsea Vowel, a Metis scholar from Alberta, Canada, includes a list of the most frequent responses to the concern of cultural appropriation in her 2016 book, *Indigenous Writes*. There are often knee-jerk reactions that occur when the question of cultural appropriation arises. I have heard some of these in my own work with Waldorf teachers, ranging from an attempt to show appreciation, as in the “I’m just showing my appreciation for the culture!” response; to the patronizing “You should be happy people care about your culture and want to celebrate it!”; to references to vague notions of freedom of speech or freedom of artistic interpretation. What these knee-jerk responses communicate is a lack of interest in engaging the conversation from the point of view of the other person—often a BIPOC person—in pointing out when a boundary may have been crossed.

Complicating this situation is the difficulty in distinguishing when an action is a form of cultural appropriation or a form of cultural violence. Oftentimes the two are lumped together in unhelpful ways. One example is the frequent conflict over Native American mascots and Indigenous people calling for the end of their use. The hurtful racist chants and responses made by fans of the imagery pose a different kind of problem than a teacher attempting to share a story or a song or an artistic style in the classroom. However, both can cause hurt because of lack of understanding or lack of legitimate engagement with the community represented that stands behind it.

A crucial concern for many teachers is clear definitions around cultural appropriation and how this is different from forms of cultural violence. The two are interrelated but different. Cultural appropriation often takes the form of sharing, repackaging or communicating information without an awareness of the proper protocols, practices or context from which those cultural expressions came. This can often mean teachers or educators sharing stories without the context of origin or why they are important. This can also mean the sharing of cultural elements without proper credit, acknowledgment, or compensation to the creator.

Cultural violence, on the other hand, is a far more problematic practice and often involves the communication of harmful stereotypes and prejudices with no move to redress those harms. Examples of cultural violence related to cultural appropriation often include school mascots depicting Indigenous People, or the example of a California school teacher who used a construction paper headdress and stereotypical “Indian” war chants to teach a math lesson. These examples are egregious versions; but smaller acts of cultural appropriation should not be ignored as being less problematic or traumatizing.

I hope to help teachers learn more and develop an understanding of culture, cultural appropriation,

and cultural appreciation and celebration. As an educator committed to social justice, anti-racism and anti-oppression, I think about what an education for the future means, in the light of our diverse world. I consider that social change is happening—it's a fact of life—and that this has an impact on how we engage in teaching and learning. And I think about all of the ways that I impact social change: whether my actions contribute to greater and greater freedom, or promote old practices that can oppress and hurt. We need to rethink our work of diversity not only in terms of the people around us, but also as a way to challenge our own worldviews. We need to develop our awareness of our structural power—our privileges—to support all people to self-realize and self-actualize. Only then can we all be our most complete selves. Then diversity can actually be acknowledged and appreciated, and inclusion effectively practiced.

What does this mean for the questions of culture, appropriation and appreciation? It means that our understanding of culture—the patterns of shared basic assumptions, behaviors, and experiences within a group of people that are learned and taught—must be understood through the lens of history and its internal logic. It means we have to understand that our actions as educators have in the past erased cultures, and continue to do so today. At the same time, we must also see that our attempts to remedy this historic wrong can be problematic as well, as educators often engage cultures in our classrooms without full respect and understanding for what we are bringing, and why. We may create the conditions for cultural appropriation, which Maisha Z. Johnson defines as the “taking of intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else’s culture—including dance, dress, music, language, folklore, cuisine, traditional medicine, religious symbols—without permission.”

Start with Capital “C” Culture

In order to come closer to awareness of cultural appropriation, and move towards cultural appreciation, we must begin with an understanding of culture, because culture encompasses so many different aspects of our life experience; and culture shapes the ways we make sense of the world. It is important to start with culture in order to be able to have a better understanding of what exactly it means when someone says this is cultural appropriation or that is cultural appreciation.

Let's begin by considering cultural awareness and how we think about cultures. We often think about some of the surface level aspects of culture, the things that are easily accessible and easily seen as being differences. Often when we focus on culture, we can ignore or miss some of the more fundamental pieces because it is easier for us to access and understand what is on the surface. We misinterpret or misunderstand aspects of culture in two different ways. One is to claim universalism and a belief that, in essence, all people are the same or identical with some small differences. This, however, is not an accurate assessment given that all groups of people have distinct characteristics and practices that make them unique human beings. Added to this is asserting the assumption that cultures are the same because we are interpreting them using our own cultural lenses and giving hyper-attention to similarities and downplaying differences.

In education we often focus on the surface levels of culture and this can be seen in lessons or content that explores the surface level differences of communities: things like stories, dance, dress or outfit, food, and other elements that are easily visible. Often this is the safest level to engage in; it requires less awareness and knowledge on our part. This level of culture is the least complex because it is the most easily accessible. Deeper examination of culture, however, points to multiple concepts and themes which are harder to understand and more complicated to integrate in a space like a classroom. Examples are different conceptions of physical proximity and comfort, or different perceptions of tone of voice and meaning, to name just two.

Knowledge and understanding are central to bringing diverse cultural experiences into the classroom. We cannot only focus on the surface level, but we must be willing to explore further down. This is particularly true if teachers who represent dominant social identities are examining the experiences of cultures that have been minoritized or oppressed. It is always helpful to remember a few crucial concepts when exploring culture for its inclusion in the classroom:

- 1) All aspects of culture, even those aspects that we disagree with or don't like or don't understand, have a logic that makes them function.
- 2) We have to remember that all aspects of culture require knowledgeable carriers. Knowledge keepers have often suffered—and continue to suffer—for carrying the cultural knowledge they have.

- 3) It is important to remember that all aspects of culture inform each other. Another way to say this is that every experience of culture, whether it's food, psychology, music, or ways of knowing the world, is interrelated to every other.

An Understanding of Cultural Appropriation

With this as a starting point, we can begin to explore why the topic of cultural appropriation is such an important topic as well as a sensitive one. If cultural appropriation is the act of taking songs, stories, dress, food, etc. from a marginalized group, usually without respect for or knowledge of their culture, then any connections to cultures different from our own should be carefully explored. We should immediately turn to some key concepts like history, power, and oppression. In thinking about cultures, we have to think about the history of the treatment of different peoples, especially Black, Indigenous and People of Color, who have unique histories in relation to the United States. This history includes enslavement, genocide, forced removal, and kidnapping. This history must be considered when planning to engage these communities in the classroom.

Power must also be considered: how power has been used historically and in contemporary situations to demonstrate dominance and control. In this way, decisions we make about cultural artifacts, stories, or histories being brought into the classroom should be considered carefully with relation to power. Whose identity is considered to have power and decision-making capability? And what does that mean for including or excluding others? Finally, we must attend to the complexity of cultures. This means that we must attend to the rich diversity within communities as well as the constantly changing nature of culture. Teachers often ask about the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples' stories in their classroom content, which frequently means the inclusion of stories which frame Indigenous Peoples as historic relics. Little or no attention is given to the contemporary expressions of Indigenous peoplehood and this can communicate to young people that "real" Indigenous People are in the past.

Some common practices of cultural appropriation in school settings include:

- Monetizing or profiting off of another person's culture without appropriate compensation.
- Viewing a community member practicing their own culture as deviant or problematic, but seeing this as interesting or creative when practiced by someone of dominant culture. Examples of this include hairstyles or artistic expressions. When practiced by African American youth, these styles are seen as negative, while white youth engaging the same practices are seen as interesting or creative.
- Carefully selecting elements of culture to share that are seen as positive and inclusive, but are actually problematic because they only share carefully curated examples of diverse communities. This curation can often uphold certain people's visions of power and privilege as well as framing certain members of diverse communities as being the "true" representations. For Indigenous Peoples, this often comes in the form of a hyper focus on spirituality, or connection to the natural world, without sharing other aspects such as contemporary authors, artists, or political activists. In African American communities, this is often seen as the focus on peaceful agitators such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. without attending to other expressions of African American culture.

These examples help to uphold biases and stereotypes because they do not challenge status quo visions and interpretations of reality. To move toward appreciation, we have to begin to investigate an alternative way of being with people, which means understanding and healing wounds, while working to prevent future trauma. As we move from cultural appropriation practices and cultural violence, we must begin to consider all aspects of culture and work to see how all peoples have developed practices for the survival and development of their communities.

We must begin to think about power. We must begin to think about context and place. And we must remember that cultural interactions and exchanges do not occur in a vacuum, they occur in relation to power, privilege, and history.

Towards Appreciation and Celebration

The move towards cultural appreciation is a generative love that calls for relationship and community and demonstrates a drive towards unification. This drive is not a force towards conformity or assimilation but rather a joyful celebration of the uniqueness of all peoples. We must try to bring aspects of culture into our classrooms that are framed not only by the

practitioners themselves, who speak through their own lenses of culture and reality, but through the lenses of originators. We must remember that all aspects of any culture are what groups have created and adapted to stay alive and to thrive in the world in which we live. While some aspects such as dances or regalia may be displayed or shared now, these often originated to achieve survival or as a crucial component of a culture's existence.

There are things we can do and questions we can ask when considering different cultures and their inclusion in our curriculum. Fundamental to the project of cultural appreciation is the need to be in relationship. If we are interested in Indigenous stories, we need to engage the Indigenous communities that the story originates from. Are we inviting or connecting to Indigenous communities for the purposes of classroom inclusion and looking to be in reciprocity? Put another way, are we engaging communities in a balanced and equitable way, or are we only engaging communities when we want or need something from them? We must think about elements of power involved when thinking about culture. Who is credited for the creation of the element? Has anyone been compensated appropriately? Are we contributing to the continued support and relationship of the community or have we only taken something and given nothing back? Has the culture that we are seeking to share been freely given or is it an element that we may have found and are using out of context? And am I attending to a key component of relationship, permission and consent, or is my action one of entitlement?

We must think about context and place when engaging cultural inclusion. We have to ask ourselves if we are attending to the immediate, local communities and contexts around us and if we are engaging the specifics of place. Or is our attempt at inclusion stretching beyond my context and potentially overlooking those in my community? Frequently, I am asked by teachers about permission, protocols or appropriateness of utilizing stories, songs, or artistic production of Indigenous communities. However, teachers in one part of the country ask about the practices of an indigenous community on the other side of the country! Teachers will also inquire about the use of story, culture, or artistic production of the more well-known, or well-documented Indigenous

communities. It is an unfortunate act of erasure for a school in Texas to inquire about using Anishinaabe stories for example. (The Anishinaabe White Earth Nation is located in central Minnesota.) Part of our relationship work must be to pay attention to the folks who are immediately around us, the history of our location. We must hold awareness of the experience of the people where we are.

Finally, we must remember that cultural exchange does not occur in a vacuum. We often must contend with a history of racism and oppression when considering diverse communities. And we must know our history around the experiences of the communities around us. This includes the history of other schools or institutions taking from these communities, and acknowledging controversies or historic traumas of practices like mascots or other forms of cultural violence. When asking permission, we must also be ready to be told “no” and to accept that “no” for an answer. And while there may be conflicting points of view around inclusion of certain content or ideas, we must continue to explore and navigate.

The answer is not for us to disengage from communities completely because the going is challenging. The answer is also not to rely on safe or general history and culture at the expense of local context. Instead we must consider how we enter into relationship with the communities around us and how we bring that rich diversity to the children who are in front of us. ♦

Joaquin Muñoz is an assistant professor of Indigenous Education at The University of British Columbia in Vancouver, British Columbia. He grew up on the Pascua Yaqui Indian Reservation in Arizona, where he learned early on about the complicated issues of race, culture, history, and oppression. His research focuses on Indigenous Education and teacher education, with a focus on supporting teachers to be effective when working with diverse Indigenous populations. He also consults with schools internationally, working on anti-racist education, cultural competency and culturally responsive approaches.