

Essential Understandings about Native Arts in Minnesota

Background and Purpose

These essential understandings can be used to support the development of arts standards-aligned curriculum that authentically and appropriately supports students to learn about Dakota and/or Ojibwe arts. They contain concepts that are important for both teachers and students to learn over time. Additionally, they describe ways in which we may need to broaden our understanding of “the arts” when teaching and learning about the arts and cultural expression of Dakota and Ojibwe people. Used in conjunction with the required Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards in the Arts, these understandings provide supplemental details about key understanding about Dakota and Ojibwe arts and cultural expression.

These Essential Understandings about Native Arts in Minnesota were first conceived in 2022 as part of the development of a Native Arts Resource (forthcoming.) A Native Arts Steering Committee working with MDE crafted these understandings.

Essential Understanding	Related understandings
Native communities are filled with artists, creators, makers, and performers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Native artists are recognized in a variety of spaces and communities. Some Native artists perform and exhibit in arts venues and spaces and others focus more on community and local activity.● Some Native artists would not identify themselves as artists yet engage in creative and cultural expressions and teachings that are valued and respected within their tribe and communities.
Continuity and change are often woven together in Native arts and cultural expressions. Native artists are, and always have been, innovative.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Native artists do not only exist in the history of Minnesota’s past. They occupy spaces within the contemporary story of Minnesota where Native artists and makers are working everywhere today.● Indigenous artists are present throughout the continuum of history and not on a separate trajectory.● “For millennia, American Indians have shaped and been shaped by their culture and environment.” (National Museum of the American Indian)● Many Dakota and Ojibwe artists incorporate both traditional and innovative elements in their artistic work. They are not mutually exclusive or separate.
It is as important to learn about historical and cultural Native contexts and different perspectives on the arts as it is to learn about Dakota and Ojibwe artistic works. Many commonly accepted ideas about the arts do not completely or accurately apply to creative expression in Ojibwe and Dakota cultures.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Native knowledge and ways of knowing are not compartmentalized. There is not a word for “arts” in Dakota and Ojibwe - cultural and creative production are ways of knowing oneself, one’s community, and the world around us.● The arts in Native communities are sometimes interdisciplinary, and not organized around arts areas like the academic arts standards and traditional K-12 courses.● In Native cultures, a clear distinction between fine arts and craft is not important to how the artistic work is valued by individuals and the community.● In Native cultures, a clear distinction between sacred and secular in the arts does not exist. For example, there is the sacred woven into the cultural expression of dancing in some pow wow dances, but they are not ceremonial.

<p>There are often multiple possible interpretations of what is created and performed by Ojibwe and Dakota people.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Resist over-generalization of symbolism and aesthetics in Native cultures. There is no universal code that can be decoded in Native artistic work. For example, there is no single “Ojibwe way” of making a basket. ● In <i>some</i> artistic work, there is culturally-specific meaning in iconography, motifs, sounds, movements, etc. ● Between tribes, and even within tribes, there are also significant differences, based on access to resources, the environment, what is valued, etc. ● Aspects of Native culture may not be apparent in the artistic work of some Ojibwe and Dakota artists. ● Native artists don’t necessarily represent anyone besides themselves. Some artists and their work are focused on carrying on traditions and ways of knowing; even in that case the artistic work does not represent the arts of ALL Dakota or Ojibwe people.
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Additional Considerations for Curriculum and Instruction Aligned to Minnesota State Arts Standards

The work to build meaningful curriculum and instruction about the “contributions of Minnesota American Indian [Dakota and Ojibwe] tribes and communities”¹ is every arts teacher’s work.

This learning is a required part of the 2018 Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards in the Arts, and therefore must be taught and assessed for every student in Minnesota. Because it is currently embedded in Arts Anchor Standard #10, this learning is required for every grade level and grade band, whether it is also present in the benchmark statement or not.

Creating and trying out curriculum that includes the required standards-based learning about Native arts with your students is critically important. It is common to feel you don’t yet know enough, but that can delay providing this learning for your students. It is impossible to know everything – practice being comfortable with that. Approach this work as a learner– there is always more to learn. Use the essential understandings as a place to start or add to your curriculum. Seek out other resources and learning opportunities that are led by or vetted by Native people and communities.

Be prepared to make mistakes or not know the answer to a student’s question. Embrace these as opportunities to learn together. Everyone still has more to learn when teaching about Native arts. This teaching and learning provides the opportunity to model the process of asking questions and learning more with your students.

Every teacher, school, and district has different opportunities and access to building relationships for this learning with local Native people, teaching artists, and communities.

Teachers can build relationships with local Native people, teaching artists, and communities who can be involved in learning experiences. This can deepen authentic learning experiences both for students and teachers. It may take time to build trust and collaboration with Native people and communities. We should never expect Native people to work with a teacher or with students for free. Teachers should also not put Native people in the position of asking for permission or approval of a lesson plan. And, keep in mind that one Native person doesn’t represent all Native people or even their community.

¹ Minnesota State Statute 120B.021, <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/120B.021>

Ultimately, teachers can't rely on Native people alone to do this teaching. If you do not have an existing relationship with a Native community or people, it is still imperative to do your own learning and provide this learning for your students. And, students should be learning about Native nations, communities, and people beyond those closest to where you live, teach, and learn— so even if you start local, don't stop there.

Build learning experiences that avoid cultural appropriation.

Oxford Dictionary's definition of "cultural appropriation" is "the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices, ideas, etc. of one people or society by members of another and typically more dominant people or society." In arts education, *creating* and *performing* are two areas of learning where special attention should be paid with regard to cultural appropriation. Not all arts learning must involve the creation or performance of artistic work by students. There is also important, standards-based learning that happens in *responding to* and *connecting* an artistic work with historical, societal, and cultural contexts.

Some examples of cultural appropriation are below; this is a starting point and not a comprehensive list. To provide students with a culturally-appropriate learning experience and demonstrate the highest level of respect for Minnesota's Native people, educators who are not Native should refrain from having students who are not Native engage in any activity that may appropriate the spiritual and cultural traditions of all Native peoples such as:

- Using objects with religious or spiritual significance
- Drumming or dancing with connection to spiritual and/or cultural traditions
- Replicating ceremonial designs and objects (such as totem poles, dream catchers)
- Replicating ceremony or cultural events such as pow-wows
- "Dressing up" in Native regalia (such as headbands with feathers, moccasins)
- Smudging (burning of sage and / or other ceremonial medicines)
- Assigning "Native" names to students

Cultural appropriation is complicated and requires ongoing thoughtful evaluation of the situation, context, teacher and student identities, and power dynamics. Cultural appropriation is not tied to ill intent. Good intentions can produce harmful impacts. If you are unsure if something you are planning involves cultural appropriation, talk to at least one other trusted colleague or person who could provide a different perspective, and consider how you could adapt the learning to address your concerns.

The forthcoming Native Arts Resource centers the arts, cultures, and people of Native Nations of Minnesota as necessary to be included in learning about the "contributions of Minnesota American Indian tribes and communities."

This focus is based on the importance of learning about the people and the 11 Native Nations that are located in Minnesota today. It also reflects the intent of the legislation that requires this learning, and the important role that these Nations had in advocating for this legislation. There is also space for Native people to be included more broadly in arts-standards aligned curriculum and instruction, but it is important to include artists and makers from tribes and communities located in Minnesota.

Overteach that Native people are contemporary people. This does not mean that we do not also learn about history, but the idea that Native people are only a part of the past is widely accepted. The idea that Native people live today is less familiar for some and it is critical for students to understand and know this.

In society and media, multiple terms referring to Native American people are in use. This resource uses a variety of terms, most commonly "Native" and "Dakota and Ojibwe." There is no single correct term, and different Native people prefer different terms. Where the term "American Indian" is used, it is because it is being quoted from another source,

such as Minnesota State Statute. Check out this resource for more information: <http://treatiesmatter.org/exhibit/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Terminology-Primer.pdf>

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