

# Teaching guidance Indigenous peoples: Dos & Don'ts

Dear educator,

Thank you very much for choosing Survival International's educational resources. A core part of our mission is supporting teachers in introducing Indigenous rights to young people. Our goal is to help you engage your students with the rights and struggles of Indigenous peoples in a respectful and culturally sensitive way. By keeping our five key Dos & Don'ts in mind, you'll find it easier to adapt our materials for different age groups and to promote understanding and respect for Indigenous peoples' rights in your classroom.

If you're unsure about any of these points, you can always write to us at [info@survivalinternational.org](mailto:info@survivalinternational.org).

Your Survival education team

## About Survival International

Survival International is the global campaigning movement for Indigenous peoples' rights. Since 1969, we've been working to prevent their destruction and give them a platform to speak to the world about the genocidal violence, slavery and racism they face on a daily basis. By lobbying the powerful, Survival helps defend the lives, lands and futures of people who should have the same rights as other contemporary societies. Unlike many other organizations, Survival refuses government money and does not take donations from companies that might violate the rights of Indigenous peoples. To learn more, visit [www.survivalinternational.org](http://www.survivalinternational.org)

## The Five key Dos

### 1. Do everything you can to amplify the voices and testimonies of Indigenous peoples in your lessons

*"Indigenous people are the experts of their own histories and realities."<sup>i</sup>*

*Montreal Urban Aboriginal Community Strategy Network, Canada*

For too long, Indigenous peoples have been silenced. As educators, we have both a responsibility and an opportunity to use our classrooms to amplify Indigenous voices. Learning *about* Indigenous peoples

should involve hearing directly from Indigenous peoples, speaking in their own words and on their own terms. We should:



- Structure our lessons so that Indigenous voices are the central focus.
- Think less about what we will say during our lessons and think more about what Indigenous peoples would say (remembering that Indigenous peoples are diverse and no single viewpoint can represent them all).
- Consider effective alternatives for the integration of Indigenous voices into your class discourse and lessons, be it through video, audio, or written testimonies.

Brazilian Indigenous leader Sheila Juruna during a demonstration, calling for the halting of three controversial mega-dam projects under construction in the Amazon, Brazil.  
© Survival

To watch testimonies from Indigenous people across the world, check out [Survival International's Indigenous Voices project](#).

## 2. Do think how your teaching can contribute to the promotion of human rights

**"I am angry because of what is happening to us, to our environment, to our world. We think it is important for all the world to know what is happening to us and to other Indigenous peoples. We all must support one another in our common struggle."**

Kayapó man, Brazil

As educators, we aim to create an enjoyable and safe learning environment. However, teaching about Indigenous peoples in an ethical and responsible way must include the grave human rights violations they endure. Consequently, lessons may not always be “fun”. Do focus as an objective on the meaning of justice and what it means in a global context and for Indigenous peoples.

Some questions to ask yourself:

- Am I sugar-coating or exoticizing the reality of Indigenous peoples to make this a “fun” lesson?
- Would I speak similarly about people in Spain, California or London?
- Could I be doing more in this lesson to raise awareness and further the cause of Indigenous peoples?

## 3. Do acknowledge and challenge stereotypes

**"It's uncomfortable to talk about race, our unconscious biases and our privileges. What's even more uncomfortable though is living through and experiencing racism."**<sup>ii</sup>

Bizzi Lavelle, Wakka Wakka, Australia

In our classrooms, students may hold inaccurate and even racist stereotypes about Indigenous peoples, often influenced by cultural and media portrayals. It's vital to create safe spaces where these beliefs can be voiced, unpacked, and challenged, recognizing that unlearning can be as crucial as learning.

### **Myth 1: Indigenous people all wear feathers and headdresses, have body paint, face paint and tattoos**

Consider the quote: “**You can't look at someone and “see” if they're Native or not.**”<sup>iii</sup>

**Simon Moya-Smith, Oglala Lakota, USA**



The Guajajara Guardians protect their forest in the Brazilian Amazon. Paulo Paulino Guajajara (on far right) was murdered in 2019 by loggers.

© Survival

This myth is dangerous for two reasons. Some Indigenous peoples, such as the world's more than 150 uncontacted peoples, continue to avoid contact with outsiders and wear clothing specific to their own ways of life. However, many Indigenous peoples, like many people across the world, wear t-shirts or jeans. There's diversity in Indigenous appearance and lifestyle, which we should emphasize to students. Secondly, being Indigenous goes beyond appearance. We must echo the sentiments of Indigenous peoples, who stress that their identity is based on their deep connection to and reliance on their land.

### **Myth 2: Indigenous people are backward, are like our ancestors and “don't live in modern society”**

Consider the quote: “**...Indigenous people are not in the past; we are contemporary, we are modern...**”<sup>iv</sup>

**Geo Soctomah Neptune, Passamaquoddy People at Motahkomikuk, USA**

Indigenous societies are just as modern and as much part of the 21st century as anyone else. Viewing them as primitive or backwards is both false and dangerous: it can lead to persecution, such as forced development efforts to “catch them up” with the “civilized” world. Indigenous peoples have long developed advanced, culturally specific technologies, such as the creation of complex processes for fishing, sustainable agricultural practices that work in harmony with the land, and intricate methods of navigation. This innovation in managing their environments is constantly evolving to adapt to new pressures due to climate change. Indigenous peoples, like other societies, evolve, and many embrace digital technology, such as mobile phones and social media in their daily lives. This doesn't diminish their Indigeneity.

### **Myth 3: Indigenous peoples are more violent than we are**

Consider the quote: “**All the years of calling the Indian a savage has never made him one.**”

**Luther Standing Bear, Lakota Sioux, USA**

We need to actively debunk the myth of the “brutal savage”. This racist stereotype has long been a core myth driving the oppression of Indigenous peoples and must be challenged. Negative narratives about Indigenous peoples significantly impact and are used to justify how they are treated.

#### 4. Do go further than a one-off lesson

**"In many cases educators bring in one off lesson plans that focus on arts and crafts. When we reduce Indigenous knowledges, arts, and pedagogy into activities like drum making, dream catchers and songs, then we are putting Indigenous education into a container to be commodified and colonized."**

**Carolyn Roberts, Squamish Nation, Canada**

To properly honor their diverse ways of life, vast knowledge and tireless resilience against centuries of oppression, we must move beyond token gestures or one-time lessons, and instead we should find long-term strategies to integrate Indigenous voices and perspectives into our classrooms consistently.



Baka people, Cameroon. Indigenous peoples are the best conservationists and guardians of the natural world. Evidence proves they manage their environment and its wildlife better than anyone else. © Edmond Dounias/Survival

- Could you do more to weave Indigenous perspectives into all lessons so that they are integrated into your schemes of learning rather than "contained" into an isolated one-off lesson?
- Could you share the works of Indigenous authors, poets, scientists, historians, artists, and filmmakers with your class?
- Could you introduce an Indigenous 'thought for the day' for students to discuss with students daily? Otherwise, you could do an "Indigenous knowledge highlight" which connects Indigenous knowledge to the subject that your students are learning about in that class.

#### 5. Do be the voice of change to all those around you

**"Notice us. Notice our absence."**<sup>vi</sup>

**Patty Krawec, Ashinaabe, Lac Seul First Nation, Canada**

Indigenous peoples are all but absent from our school curricula. Without significant change, generations may complete their schooling without meaningful knowledge of Indigenous peoples even though they are a central part of human diversity. In your school and wider networks, advocate for integrating Indigenous voices and perspectives into schemes of learning at all levels. Here are some ideas:

- Hold an assembly to share what you and your students have learned with the wider school community.
- Organize a meeting with colleagues where you consider how Indigenous perspectives could be brought into schemes of learning.
- Share your thoughts and ideas with teacher networks on social media to provoke a discussion about the absence of Indigenous voices in the curriculum.

# The Five key DON'Ts

## 1. Don't attempt representations of Indigenous peoples

**"Generations of Native people were literally marked as criminals for possessing cultural objects whether it be ceremonial gourds, feathers, dresses, or cultural items. This has continued to affect Native people today; I know of elders who still continue to hide and limit access to ceremonies from non-Natives. These elders still live and carry the fear of persecution for maintaining their cultural identity. So it is more than a costume..."**<sup>vii</sup>

Eryka Charley, Navajo, USA

As educators, our goal is to cultivate empathy for the challenges faced by (Indigenous) people. We must ensure our efforts don't inadvertently create insensitive classroom activities. Attempts at representations of Indigenous peoples and their customs are inappropriate. Firstly, they risk perpetuating inaccurate and generalized views that Indigenous peoples are striving to overcome. Secondly, students may find dramatized or role-play activities "fun", which could unintentionally shift the focus away from the serious struggles of Indigenous peoples fighting for their fundamental human rights, thereby minimizing and trivializing their plight. There's also a danger of upsetting or triggering Indigenous or ethnic minority students in the class.

As such, we should:

- Avoid any activity which involves students "dressing up" as Indigenous peoples in any way. This includes using face-paint, masks, headdresses and the like.
- Avoid reenactments of cultural and religious practices e.g. dances or ceremonies.
- Avoid asking your students to "play the part of" or "assume the role" of an Indigenous person.

## 2. Don't promote generalizations about the unique ways of life of Indigenous peoples

**"In many ways, our cultures have been reduced to nothing more than patterns on a shirt. There's more to us than that..."**<sup>viii</sup>

Dr Jessica Metcalfe, Turtle Mountain Chippewa, USA



Nomadic Hongana Manyawa group in the Halmahera rainforest. © AMAN

We must avoid perpetuating the myth of a uniform Indigenous culture. We share our planet with more than 476 million Indigenous people, representing more than 5,000 distinct groups and speaking over 4,000 languages. It's not only impossible but also demeaning to oversimplify their diverse practices into a generic category of "Indigenous" art, music, dance, headdress, or clothing for example. As educators we have a responsibility to thoroughly educate ourselves about the unique cultural practices of different Indigenous peoples and to address the issue of diversity before incorporating them into the classroom.

Learn more about some of the world's Indigenous peoples [here](#).

### 3. Don't promote the idea that Indigenous peoples belong to the past

**"We are not myths of the past, ruins in the jungle or zoos. We are people and we want to be respected, not to be victims of intolerance and racism."**

**Rigoberta Menchu, Kiche' Maya, Guatemala**

All too often students learn about Indigenous peoples solely as figures of the past, in history classes. They might study the Mayan and Aztec Empires of centuries past, rather than learning about, for example, the millions of Maya living in Central America today. This focus on the Indigenous past risks neglecting the present existence of the more than 476 million Indigenous people with whom we share our planet.

### 4. Don't fall into paternalism or narratives of "white saviorism"

**"It's crucial that our story is heard, but not in a way that further erases our survival and resilience. We need to talk about it in a way that reflects the barriers we have overcome and the tremendous successes we have achieved in spite of all the tragedy."**

**Samantha Maltais, Aquinnah Wampanoag, USA**



Shanti, from the Jenu Kuruba people, protests with her people outside the Nagarhole National Park, India. © Survival

Students should understand that Indigenous peoples aren't helpless; they're at the forefront of a global rights movement, displaying fierce courage. Despite being victims of injustice, they're active agents of change. Since colonization, they've been organizing and resisting to overcome the injustices they face. They don't rely on outsiders for solutions; they hold the answers. Our task is to listen, amplify their voices, and provide support in their struggle.

### 5. Don't be afraid to ask!

When uncertain about how to approach teaching in a culturally sensitive manner or addressing Indigenous rights in the classroom, it's always best to seek guidance. This way, we can learn together, ensuring that well-intended projects are culturally sensitive and effectively promote the rights of Indigenous peoples, with whom we share our planet. Write to us at [info@survivalinternational.org](mailto:info@survivalinternational.org) if you've got any questions.

<sup>i</sup> [https://gallery.mailchimp.com/86d28cccd43d4be0fc11c71a1/files/102bf040-e221-4953-a9ef-9f0c5efc3458/Ally\\_email.pdf](https://gallery.mailchimp.com/86d28cccd43d4be0fc11c71a1/files/102bf040-e221-4953-a9ef-9f0c5efc3458/Ally_email.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/18/most-of-my-white-friends-avoid-talking-about-racism-i-dont-have-that-privilege>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.vice.com/en/article/pa5a3m/how-to-be-an-ally-to-native-americans-indigenous-people>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/CQGiHPpLCdu/>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.carolynroberts.net/single-post/this-isn-t-an-add-and-stir-approach-to-education>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://twitter.com/gindaanis/status/1455166335487520779>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.unco.edu/inside-unc/campus-community/nass-halloween.aspx>

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/may/18/native-americans-cultural-misappropriation>