

2016

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## Recommended Citation

Adomaitis, Alyssa and Saiki, Diana, "Inclusion is the Key: Promoting Cultural Diversity through Historic Costume" (2016). International Textile and Apparel Association (ITAA) Annual Conference Proceedings. 80. [https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/itaa\\_proceedings/2016/posters/80](https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/itaa_proceedings/2016/posters/80)

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## Inclusion is the Key: Promoting Cultural Diversity through Historic Costume

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Key words: Curricular Diversity, Historic Costume, Education

**Background and strategy purpose:** Many Americans have seen or read news reports about unarmed African-Americans who appeared to be treated unjustly. Examples of these individuals include the death of Eric Garner of Staten Island for illegally selling loose cigarettes and the death of Michael Brown of Ferguson Missouri for stealing cigarettes from a liquor store. These events resulted in violent protests across the nation (Alcindor, 2015; Healy 2014). Outcomes from these events for some students may be pain, rejection, and exclusion from mainstream society. As colleges and universities become increasingly ethnically diverse, it is an opportune time to reflect on issues tied to cultural diversity in the classroom, as well as, to incorporate it within courses (Gonzalez-Mona & Publido- Tobiassen, 2015). Strategies that build positive cultural identities and respect for differences among students in a course can result in an acceptance, understanding, and valuing of the multi-cultural world which surrounds them not only in the classroom but also as a microcosm of broader society.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this teaching strategy was to assist students in understanding and valuing cultural diversity while completing a term project for a costume history course. Curricular diversity or the infusion of diversity in curriculum can benefit students engaging in or learning about diverse racial/ethnic/gender experiences (Shaw, 2005). A typical history of costume course examines apparel and accessories in varied cultures and time periods. This teaching strategy was designed to incorporate curricular diversity in a historic costume course while meeting the course objectives, which included to: (1) identify the elements of fine and decorative art movements in historical sequence; (2) apply the defining elements of a period to contemporary dress; (3) use critical thinking skills in examining the relationships of dress to art and art movements; (4) trace the identifying elements of movements over multiple eras and (5) demonstrate the ability to utilize various sources (websites, slides, fashion plates, and film) to create a “visual story” of how fashion is developed.

**Implementation of strategy/practice:** The proposed term project had three primary steps and was designed to last the entire course term. Part I asked students to identify a culture that related to their heritage. They were then required to create a visual timeline of one particular garment or style that has re-emerged across the decades within the selected culture. For example, students researched ancient Greek costume items (e.g., himation, peplos, and chiton). These students discussed how Greek styles were rectangular in shape, decorated with designs, demonstrated use of varied colors, and were wrapped or draped diagonally over one shoulder or both shoulders (Tortora & Eubank, 2005). While creating the timeline, students needed to illustrate informational literacy or to use historical and fashion/art databases to find appropriate literature and determine credibility of sources. Students searched online through related historic collection databases that had information and artifacts from ancient cultures (e.g. Metropolitan Museum of Art). For example, a student discussed the re-stylization of classic Greek garments and how Greek culture was an inspiration for fashion designers, such as Fortuny of the 1920s, Halston of the 1970s, Versace in the 1990s (Koda, 2003; Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-2006).

Part II students were asked to identify links between the historic costume from part I to how this civilization influences dress and traditions today. To continue with the Greek example, two students wrote that they attended Greek Festivals, wore parts of Greek national dress at dance festivals, and about the importance of the Easter Holiday to Greek Orthodox. One student noted Greek traditional food, such as souvlaki, gyros, and moussaka has permeated American culture as many Mediterranean Restaurants offer these menu staples. Some additional cultures students discussed were Jewish, Austrian, Korean, Ecuadorian, Italian, Swedish, and Dutch.

For Part III of the assignment, students were required to write an article that might be published in a popular journal (e.g., *The New York Times*, *Elle Magazine*) or for a university student journal (e.g., *Campus Daily*). A press article helped define expectations for the assignment including a set page-minimum, cohesive and concise writing style, in-text citations and references, and use of illustrations. This was a unique way to format the assignment that provided sample work for a portfolio. Students were also required to prepare a 10-15 minute oral presentation and facilitate a discussion.

**Description of effectiveness:** The activity was completed in courses at two different universities and participating students were asked to evaluate the activity. The instructors observed, having students create a visual timeline with supporting documentation furthered student knowledge about contemporary fashion, cultural diversity, gender, dress, and contributed to an understanding of the significance of ancient civilizations and cultures who were style icons and innovators throughout time. The variety of cultural traditions identified was a strong indicator that students were integrating the importance of other cultures and assimilation of these into mainstream American culture. During discussions the instructors observed students felt included sharing their findings and showing an appreciation for diversity in the classroom, ancient civilizations, historic dress, and of the power of knowledge of the past to understand contemporary fashion. In responses to the open-ended assessment questions, students said it was inspirational to research their personal heritage through dress and they realized the significance of dress as a manifestation of cultural identity. One student wrote: *The Austrian-Hungry Empire was once so large but now is small due to conflict and war yet traditional dress such the Tarcht is quite common as the youth are reclaiming traditions. During the Nazi invasion of Austria, the Jewish people were forbidden to wear their traditional clothing as it was often seen as a political statement. It is amazing to think that clothes and dress have such an impact on the self-expression that can be interpreted around the world.* Students also noted a widening perspective of culture as it relates to dress, themselves, and the country. A student said: *I learned how Aztec designs and motifs are incorporated into today's fashion (anything from a pencil to an haute couture dress) and how popular different cultural motifs influence the U.S.* Another student commented on overcoming cultural stereotypes: *I along with a lot of other people use to think they (muumuus) were just for older ladies who wanted garments that weren't tight fitting, but now I know more about their uses.* Students discussed the benefits of the activity in studying costume history. A student said: *I really enjoyed doing this assignment. It gave me a chance to look at something I was clearly passionate about but was not that informed about. It was awesome to compare everything I learned in class that initially did not "hit home" to something that is part of me and I am part of it.*

**Indication of plans for continuation, revision, or follow-up:** This assignment fostered an inclusive attitude among students and gave students the opportunity to research and view visual images of different appearances and ethnicities. It also allowed students to educate their peers about their heritage and build a multicultural classroom environment of respect and understanding. Students gained insight into their own and their peers' cultural traditions while learning about costume history. The activity is flexible enough to allow for parts of it to be incorporated in the class (e.g. assign part I only). It can also be revised to fit other courses, such as a fashion industry or international markets course where instead of visually tracing the history of a garment, a student can trace its production globally.

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