Educating About and For International Human Rights

To counteract the continuing rape of human rights around the globe, educators must engender in students concern for those rights and the courage to act in their defense.

Human rights. What this term means to you, your colleagues, and your students is crucial. Does it mean freedom of expression and opinion, or something more? Is "human rights" an area of concern or largely an abstraction?

Before students can appreciate all that this term stands for, they must be aware of what human rights are and are not, why human rights is an issue, and what has been done on a worldwide scale to devalue those rights as well as protect them.

Human Rights Defended

During the past 38 years the United Nations has established what has become known as the International Bill of Rights. It is composed of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (unanimously adopted by the General Assembly on December 10, 1948).

Edwin Lopez was arrested by military intelligence agents at the offices of the Community Integrated Development Services on 26 February 1982 in Quezon City, Philippines. He was tortured repeatedly with electric shock over a five-day period, according to Amnesty International.
It is one thing to have heard and read something, 
that is, merely to take notice; 
it is another thing to understand 
what we have 
heard and read, that is, to ponder. 
—Martin Heidegger

Assembly in 1948); the Covenant on 
Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights; 
and the Covenant on Civil and Political 
Rights (both of which were adopted by 
the General Assembly in 1966 and 
fully implemented in 1976). The Cove 
nants turn the principles of the Univer 
sal Declaration of Human Rights “into 
treaty obligations and ... establish in 
ternational machinery to supervise 
and enforce their application” (Torney 
1980). The upshot is that the Interna 
tional Bill of Rights delineates the obli 
gations of member states of the UN in 
protecting international human rights. 
These and other documents, such as 
the United Nations Convention Against 
Genocide, were a direct result of the 
world’s reaction to the atrocities com 
mited by the Nazis during World War II. 
The Universal Declaration deline 
ates, in 30 articles, the rights to which 
all persons should be entitled by vir 
tue of their humanity. They include 
the rights to life, liberty, justice, educa 
tion, asylum, freedom of movement, 
freedom of expression, and freedom 
of peaceful assembly. Slavery, torture, 
arbitrary arrest and detention, exile, 
and the deprivation of one’s nationali 
ty and property are outlawed. Other 
articles address economic and social 
rights such as adequate medical care, 
food, clothing, and housing.

Human rights are those rights which 
belong to every man, woman, and child 
simply because each of them is a person, a 
human being. They are rights which exist 
before and independent of governments. 
Human rights, therefore, are rights which 
are inalienable.

Another way to explain what human 
rights are is to explain what they are not. 
Human rights are not a very recent discov 
ery, a passing concern, an ephemeral issue. 
Human rights are not something about 
which only people in the Western World 
care. Human rights are claims asserted 
and recognized ‘as of right’, not claims 
upon love, or grace, or brotherhood or 
charity; one does not have to earn or 
deserve them. They are not merely aspira 
tions or moral assertions, but increasingly, 
legal claims under some applicable law.

... Human rights, in sum, are more than 
abstractions, more than theoretical legal or 
philosophical concepts. Human rights are 
the birthright of every person, because 
each man, woman, and child has inherent 
dignity and each is a member of the human 
family (Branson, 1982, pp. 7–8).

If it were as easy to protect human 
rights as it is to assert what they are, 
then all might be right with the world. 
Unfortunately, that is not the case in a 
world rife with conflict among politi 
cal, racial, and religious groups. As 
Isebill Gruhn trenchantly observed, 
“When it comes to human rights... the 
West and the third world seem to be 
peering through the same telescope, 
but from different ends” (1980, p. 40).

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peaceful assembly.”
The fact is, while the Western world stresses civil and political rights, communist nations stress social and economic rights, and Third World nations—where abject living conditions are endemic—generally stress the right to basic needs.

Most Western nations that adhere to the tradition set forth by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke place major emphasis on the natural rights of individuals. In contrast, most communist and Third World nations that adhere to the tradition set forth by Jean Jacques Rousseau and Karl Marx, place major emphasis on social transformation. Of course, in the real world, such ideas are not so neatly separated, and injustices of almost all types take place frequently in almost all parts of the world.

Over the past two and a half decades many independent groups have been organized to conduct research, publicize human rights violations, educate the public and government officials about human rights issues, work in the behalf of those deprived of their rights, and lobby individual governments and international bodies to strengthen human rights legislation or measures. These groups have been instrumental in prodding governments (and their citizens) into becoming more concerned either about their own human rights records or those of their allies and antagonists. Just the names of some of these organizations give one an idea of their diverse interests and concerns: Amnesty International, Bread for the World, Campaign Against Investment in South Africa, Cultural Survival, Helsinki Watch, Indian Law Resource Center, the Institute of the International Conference on the Holocaust and Genocide, Minority Rights Group, Survival International, Washington Office on Africa, and Washington Office on Latin America.

Brutality Continues

The fact remains that from the time the UN adopted the Declaration of Human Rights up to the present, the deprivation of human rights has been rampant and brutal. Since the liberation of the surviving Jews from the Nazi death camps, there have been numerous cases of genocide: the Ache Indians in Paraguay, the Cambodians by the Khmer Rouge, the Guatemalan Indians, and the Cuaiva Indians of Columbia. Apartheid continues to virtually imprison black people in South Africa from the day they are born to the day they die. Slow but inexorable starvation still plagues peoples across the globe. The Soviet Union continues to incarcerate dissidents in psychiatric hospitals where they are plied with body- and mind-wrenching drugs. Am-
The victims of torture include people from all social classes, age groups, trades, and professions. Amnesty International received reports that these women prisoners in Evin Prison, Iran, were tortured in the presence of their young children.

 Amnesty International, which was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1977, has reported that torture "is not an isolated but a worldwide phenomenon. It is an epidemic in the world." (1984, p. 2). It is estimated that 98 countries practice some type of torture. The list could go on and on.

 Jack L. Nelson succinctly evaluates humanity's evolution toward civilization vis-à-vis its concern for human rights:

 "Certainly, one cannot argue that the development of human rights throughout the world has followed a consistently expansive pattern. For each example of rights, one can produce an example of human wrongs. The major difference is that in earlier time periods such actions were perceived as natural and universal (1980, p. 398).

 In a similar vein, Israel Charny, executive director of the Institute of the International Conference on the Holocaust and Genocide, sees hope in evolutionary development:

 "Can anything be done to prevent genocide?... Unfortunately, the real answer in our day and age is still not very much can be done. Nonetheless, for those who have [an] optimistic evolutionary view of the long haul of human history, there is hope based on the fact that a definite process of change is taking place in the history of ideas, especially since the Holocaust. For the first time, increasing numbers of scholars are looking at possible active steps to punish genocide-doers, people and governments, and to prevent genocides as they gather momentum. Even the weak United Nations Convention on Genocide sounds a clarion call to civilized people against the mass murders that were once taken entirely for granted... (1985, p. 451).

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 Thus, in the midst of despair over the continuing brutalization of people across the globe, glimmers of hope are shining through, but it is still too early for humanity to be self-congratulatory.

 The Role of Educators

 Now that the machinery of human rights is in place, we need an educated and caring citizenry to insist on and assist in the promulgation of mandates, charters, and conventions. And this is exactly where educators can play a key role. Either we can take our own rights for granted and ignore the plight of those who are being deprived of theirs, or we can educate our students to act as concerned citizens.

 As the profound significance of this endeavor, philosopher Karl Jaspers stated:

 "There exists a solidarity among men as human beings that makes each co-responsible for every wrong and every injustice in the world, especially for crimes committed in his presence or with his knowledge. If I fail to do whatever I can to prevent them, I too am guilty (Beres 1982, p. 44).

 To help students understand human rights issues, teachers in all curricular areas can use at least three primary elements: knowledge, values, and so-
Social participation (Hahn 1985). On a basic level, students should gain knowledge about (1) both their own and other national constitutions that spell out citizens’ rights and about international human rights documents; (2) key concepts such as rights, justice, dignity, and interdependence; (3) the goals, accomplishments, and work of quasigovernmental and nongovernmental organizations that address the issue of human rights; and (4) the role that their nation plays in protecting or abusing the basic human rights of citizens and citizens of other nations. As Carole Hahn has pointed out:

Social sciences and the humanities can also contribute to students’ knowledge of human rights. Anthropologists and sociologists can teach how individuals learn the meaning of justice in their cultural contexts and how different societies deal with injustice. Both economics and geography can contribute to an understanding of economic development in the Third World and the achievement of economic and social rights. Political science and law can teach about issues of national sovereignty and international law. History and philosophy can present the historic and philosophic roots of human rights. Literature, too, can contribute to human rights knowledge with its expression of concern from people in all countries and times who dream of realizing human rights (1985, p. 482).

To help students understand human rights issues, teachers can encourage them to examine their own values, their nation’s, and those of others. Two ways to incorporate this element into study are to invite guest speakers who have suffered from the deprivation of human rights or are engaged in human rights work to talk to and with students and to have students conduct oral histories of those individuals. These activities provide students with opportunities to interact with courageous and often dynamic individuals and to discuss their stories. These educative experiences often become unforgettable events, helping students empathize with survivors and activists. Such people are readily available for speaking engagements and can be contacted through local human and civil rights agencies. The use of thought-provoking discussions and debates on human rights issues also helps students confront their ideas, feelings, beliefs, and ultimately, their values.

Social participation engages students in coming to grips with what the human rights issue is all about. As the National Council for the Social Studies Curriculum Guidelines (1979) state:

Knowledge without action is impotent. . . . A commitment to democratic participation suggests that the school abandon futile efforts to insulate pupils from social reality, and instead, find ways to involve them as active citizens.

Social participation activities are limited only by the amount of energy, time, and imagination that students and teachers wish to invest, and, of course, should be voluntary. One of the most worthwhile activities is for high school and college students to join in the efforts of a human rights organization. Amnesty International has campus chapters in which students work, with their instructors, in behalf of prisoners of conscience. It is important that the students become knowledgeable about the various issues inherent in the area in which they are working. Otherwise the activity becomes perfunctory in nature.

Human rights education can be doctrinaire, nationalistic and static, or it can be critical, global and dynamic. The goal and purpose should be to further the development of human rights world-wide, not to further nationalistic or imperialistic education (Nelson 1980, p. 400).

Overall, the most worthwhile study about human rights, it seems, will strive to engender what psychologist Rollo May calls “perceptual courage”:

It is highly significant, indeed almost a rule, that moral courage has its source of identification through one’s own sensitivity with the suffering of one’s fellow human beings. I am tempted to call this “perceptual courage” because it depends on one’s capacity to perceive, to let one’s self see the suffering of other people. If we let ourselves experience the evil, we will be forced to do something about it. It is a truth recognized in all of us, that when we don’t want to confront even the issue of whether or not we’ll come to the aid of someone who is being unjustly treated, we block off our perception, we blind ourselves to the other’s suffering, we cut off our empathy with the person needing help. Hence, the most prevalent form of cowardice in our day hides behind the statement, “I did not want to become involved” (1975, p. 16-17).

References


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