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Teaching and Learning About Universal Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law: Digital Resources and Global Expectations

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Abstract

Today's education for civic engagement requires a global dimension. To live responsibly in their own communities, young people need to situate their personal and local interests in the context of their global interconnections. Bridging the personal, local, and global begins with an awareness of the universal aspirations for dignity and human rights widely shared across the human family. Increasingly, social educators recognize the need for American students to encounter the fundamental principles of human rights and humanitarian law as part of their own history and civic preparation. This article highlights pedagogically well designed human rights curricula that are available to educators online and typically without cost.

Key words: *curriculum, human dignity, humanitarian law, human rights, global interconnectedness, online resources.*

How can educators prepare students to become informed, responsible citizens of their communities, nations, and the world within the expanded, fluid space opened up to them by contemporary information technology? A starting point for engaging students with their conflicted and interconnected world is at the intersection of their essential humanity and the humanity of every other human being born. For much of contemporary history, the world community has sought to establish fundamental

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principles that apply to all human beings in all situations simply by virtue of their humanity. This is the domain of human rights education (HRE) and international humanitarian law (IHL). Lung-Chu Chen (2000), in his seminal work on contemporary international law, noted that “together these important human rights ... extend to all basic values widely cherished” (p. 202). In recognizing the fundamental humanity and, therefore, dignity of each human being, the global, local, and personal intersect. Through their developing awareness of that intersection, students can visualize and begin to construct a path toward living responsibly as global citizens while attending to their responsibilities to community, family, nation, and self.

A civic education for democracy must begin early, drawing upon and informing the young child’s evolving moral sense (e.g., Blanchard, Senesh, & Patterson-Black, 1999; Thompson, Laible, & Ontai, 2003). The fundamental concepts of fairness, empathy, and respect when experienced in familiar settings can establish the basic foundation for an understanding and commitment to universal human rights, regardless of the harmony or disharmony of surrounding circumstances.

Human Rights Education in the Post-Millennium U.S.: A Contested Territory

The need to incorporate human rights education into the curriculum of public schools in the United States is clear to many, if not most, social studies educators, as are the obstacles to that incorporation. At the turn of the millennium, only 20 of the 50 states had specific human rights standards in their social studies standards (Banks, 2000). Forward-thinking educators, looking at the impact of globalization on the American experience, identified the global dimension of human rights as an essential starting point for a genuinely outward-looking human rights curriculum in public schools in the United States. They pointed out that the inclusion of so-called “global studies” in many social studies curricula has too often been designed to produce what Mitchell (2003) called the “strategic cosmopolitan” (p. 387), the individual who seeks to utilize knowledge of global cultures and cultural diversity for economic purposes—in a sense, global awareness without global responsibility. This concern was echoed by Myers (2006), who insisted that citizenship education must be expanded to include global citizenship, and that international human rights must be the cornerstone of global citizenship. Myers proposed that such a curriculum must explicitly integrate the local and the universal, and must expand the study of the political beyond the nation-state. On behalf of the People’s Movement for Human Rights Education (<http://www.pdhre.org>), Koenig (2000) identified human rights education as an essential foundation for human security in the 21st century and asserted that building a culture of human rights that extends beyond borders can create security either within or beyond nation-state borders.

The majority of member nations of the United Nations have acknowledged the importance of human rights education to prepare the world’s children to live effectively in an interconnected world. At the initiation of the UN’s Human Rights Council, the UN General Assembly in 2010 adopted a Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (UNDHRET; UN General Assembly, 2011a). The declaration recognized: “Human rights education and training is essential for the promotion of universal respect for and

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observance of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, in accordance with the principles of the universality, indivisibility and interdependence of human rights” (Article 1.2). To assure that this essential element of global education is widely available, the declaration further proposed:

States should develop, or promote the development of, at the appropriate level, strategies and policies and, where appropriate, action plans and programmes to implement human rights education and training, such as through its integration into school and training curricula. In so doing, they should take into account the World Programme for Human Rights Education and specific national and local needs and priorities. (Article 8.1)

The United States, as a member of the Human Rights Council, joined in the consensus adoption of the UDHR. At the same time, the U.S. delegation made clear in a statement that while it encouraged the provision of human rights education and had participated willingly in the drafting of the declaration, it was not a party to any treaties that would require this as a matter of international law, and therefore did not recognize a human right to receive human rights education and training (UN General Assembly, Department of Public Information, 2011b).

Because of the perceived contentious nature of civics and history education in the United States, many observers have noted that the inward focus of American social studies education is at odds with the more outward looking approach employed in many other nations (Garii, 2000; Mitchell, 2003; Myers, 2006). Attempted revisions of social studies-related standards within the United States have been fraught with controversy and have often come to naught (Rees, 2004; Symcox, 2002). It is far from clear whether current revision efforts will rise above the political pitfalls that have so often undermined their relevance and rigor.

Children Live What They Learn: Consequences of Contemporary Status HRE/IHL Education

In connection with its dissemination of a comprehensive online curriculum on the Geneva Conventions, the American Red Cross commissioned a survey of American attitudes, opinions, and knowledge of international humanitarian law. According to the responses received by the Red Cross survey, more than half of adults (55%) felt they were familiar with the Geneva Conventions and IHL, whereas fewer youth 12–17 years old (20%) felt familiar with these rules and laws. Adults (55%) were more likely than youth (44%) to believe that rules and laws governing conduct in war were a good way to reduce human suffering. Youth were more likely than adults to believe that actions such as torturing prisoners; denying civilians food, water, and medicine; killing prisoners in retaliation for the enemy killing our prisoners; and refusing to allow neutral organizations access to prisoners were acceptable in armed conflict. An overwhelming majority of youth surveyed (80%) agreed that the United States should teach them more about the laws of war before they are old enough to vote and to enlist in the military (American Red Cross, 2011).

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The most promising finding of the Red Cross survey was that American young people want to know more than they do now about international standards such as the Geneva Conventions, which their national government has ratified or approved and which govern the way human beings should treat each other in difficult arenas such as armed conflict. Their lack of knowledge is not the product of lack of interest. Rather it reflects the failure of their educational programs to address responsible national and global citizenship.

The Expanding Availability of HRE/IHL Curricula in the Digital Age

Fortunately, many organizations, both within the United States and internationally, have developed easily accessed curricular units on various human rights topics. Some of the best material designed for use in schools in the United States had its origins in work done as part of the Decade for Human Rights Education (1995–2004), which was declared by the General Assembly of the United Nations to mark the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1995–2004, 2003). The United Nations put out some excellent materials, including the human rights curricula (continuously updated) contained in the United Nations Cyberschoolbus (United Nations, 2003) and ABC Teaching Human Rights (U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1995 or later).

A growing number of resources for teaching about universal human rights and international humanitarian law at all grade levels have been developed by American and international education, human rights and humanitarian organizations and are being disseminated online and without cost. As an example, the web site Human Rights Educators USA (2013; <http://hreusa.net>), a newly established network of human rights educators in the United States, has a resources section that includes teaching guides and lesson plans from organizations such as Advocates for Human Rights, American Red Cross, Amnesty International, The Human Rights Center at the University of Minnesota, and Human Rights Education Associates.

The Public Broadcasting System (PBS) has generated substantial curricula addressing issues of human rights and humanitarian law, both before and after 9/11, and throughout the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts. PBS has also built curricula around programs focused on human rights violations by notorious non-American villains such as the Nazi leadership (PBS American Experience, The Nuremberg Trials), Slobodan Milosevic (PBS, Wide Angle, Accountability for Human Rights Violations—Milosevic), and Salvadoran generals believed to be responsible for the rape and murder of American church women in El Salvador (PBS Frontline, Justice & the Generals). (All PBS productions were retrieved July 30, 2013. These resources continue to multiply as this article goes to press).

Where There's a Will

Education on fundamental principles of human rights and humanitarian law needs to be incorporated into the civic preparation of every American child. It is no longer possible to engage responsibly on the world stage while living in ignorance of the fundamental obligations that the United States has solemnly undertaken in treaties and supported in international declarations: to treat every human being with dignity and respect and to seek to provide the conditions through which that dignity can be realized. It is fortunate

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that in this digital age, public-minded organizations, agencies, and institutions have taken initiative to develop educationally sound resources for teaching about human rights and humanitarian law, and have made them digitally available without cost to educators, students, and the public at large. What is needed at this point is communities of educators working together to incorporate these resources into comprehensive programs of human rights education for all students. These programs must develop within all students a sense of personal dignity and a respect for that same human dignity as it is present in all others, wherever situated. They must guide children and young people to embrace the responsibility that grows from that dignity—a responsibility grounded in the recognition that the humanity we all share must be honored in all of us if it is to be secure for any of us. The resources for this humanizing enterprise are readily available. The need is apparent. There is no better time.

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