

Learning History through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

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Consider these two scenarios:

1. A student is in a rush to get lunch so that she can finish her homework before her next class, so she cuts the line in her high school cafeteria. Immediately the students around her begin to protest.
2. A student destroys school property; a classmate of hers is unjustly accused and taken into the principal's office. Those who know that this is an unfair accusation write an anonymous letter to the principal voicing their concerns.

Although adolescent students often do not have the knowledge of specific laws, they usually have a keen sense of justice and fairness. We have found the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) to be a powerful tool to channel students' sense of fairness into visible actions. Adopted in December 1948 by the General Assembly of the United Nations, the UDHR is an instrument that can help students anchor the universality of human rights both in their daily lives and in their study of history. It can be accessed on the Internet at www.un.org/Overview/rights.html

By using the content of the UDHR as a blueprint to examine historical issues, students are given the opportunity to discover the universal values that are at the core of this internationally recognized "declaration." Students can also explore, through the eyes of others, how people from different cultures articulate universal rights within their own contexts, and when and why nations (the United States

included) drift from universal rights in their policymaking or in practice. From the study of the UDHR at a more global level, students also learn different transformative strategies that they can use to become active agents of change in their communities.

In 1997, Human Rights USA, a partnership for human rights education, conducted a survey about the knowledge and the attitudes of people in the USA on human rights. This study revealed the need to expose students to the UDHR. Through their survey, the researchers found "that only 8 percent of adults and 4 percent of young people are aware of and can name the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."¹ In the post-September 11 world, the need for students to know and use the UDHR and other international documents is even greater than it was in 1997. As the Human Rights Resource Center (HRRC) points out in their online handbook, teaching students through the perspective of human

rights yields satisfying results. In their research, the HRRC advocates found that "Human rights education ... sets standards [and] ... produces change."² This change, according to the HRRC, is visible in students' attitudes and behaviors, and in their attunement to higher levels of "solidarity across issues, communities, and nations."³

Students want, need, and can use the UDHR as a guidepost from which they can grapple with and make judgments about world events, developments, and issues throughout history. Teachers may begin the year by introducing the UDHR and posing key questions based on this pivotal document. The UDHR then becomes the anchor with which students can judge historical events throughout the year. As the students are exploring historical events in any given lesson, the teacher may pose the following questions: "To which article does this event refer?" "Within the context of this moment in history, in what ways are human rights advanced or violated? Give evidence for your reasoning."

The strategies and activities that we describe below have been successfully implemented in university preservice and inservice social studies education classes or in high school world history and U.S. history classes. We hope that you consider using the UDHR as a focus point of your own classes, and adopt some of these activities as well.



Pakistani school children form the words “Insani Haqooq,” meaning “human rights” in the Urdu language, during a rally in Islamabad, December 12, 2000. The school children were celebrating the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

(AH/DL/Reuters)

Activities for Introducing, Interacting with, and Contextualizing the UDHR

Introducing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

1. Students stand up in the middle of the room and read provocative belief statements that involve the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. After hearing a statement, they decide whether they agree or disagree, and go to one or the other side of the room accordingly. Everyone takes a stand. Once everyone has taken a side, students volunteer to explain why they agree or disagree with the statement.⁴

Examples of these statements are:

- Human rights are ideals. They are not practical.
- Human rights are evolving. This means that they can never be permanent.
- We don’t need the Universal Declaration of Human Rights because the same ideas are in my country’s constitution.
- Men have more human rights than women.
- You can’t enjoy human rights unless you have enough to eat.
- We shouldn’t protect the human rights of drug addicts because they are breaking the law.

2. Provide a copy of the UDHR (available online at www.udhr.org/index.htm) to each student. Students read the articles of the document individually and choose the one that they consider the “most important,” and the one that they think is “least likely to be implemented on an international scale.” As the values inherent in the articles chosen for this exercise come to the foreground, more discussion ensues.

Frequently, when students first come into contact with the UDHR, their reaction is one of surprise. The majority of our students say that they did not know that such an important document, signed by almost every country in the world, even existed. Secondly, our students are eager to look for similarities between the rights and responsibilities expressed in the UDHR and in the United States Constitution.

There are two articles that students find particularly interesting. These are Article 26, which is related to education, and Article 5, which is related to torture. A section of Article 26 states that education “shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms” (UDHR, Article 26). This article draws the attention of students because of its assertion that education is for the individual and not for human capital development. They are also surprised that the

document requires that only elementary education be compulsory, rather than K-12 schooling. Regarding Article 5 (on torture), students are concerned that this right is not being upheld in many countries in the world, including the United States.

Interacting with the UDHR

1. Have students read about the conceptualization, origins, and drafting of the UDHR. Examine other primary historical documents whose purpose is to protect rights, such as the British Magna Carta, the U.S. Declaration of Independence, the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, or the U.S. Constitution. Also, look at events that led to the drafting of the UDHR, notably World War II and the Nuremberg trials, and read articles and excerpts for and against the UDHR. In doing this, students look at their own notions of democratic citizenship, nationalism, human rights, universality, and the substance and sources of their value systems.

2. Pose discussion questions based on the UDHR and create an online dialogue in which students can express and respond to each other’s views regarding the declaration and its (mis)use in various countries. An example of a discussion question is the following: Michael Ignatieff says, “Human rights are universal not as a ver-

nacular of cultural prescription but as a language of moral empowerment.”⁵ What does this mean? Do you agree or disagree?

3. Collect several newspapers with articles in which a UDHR article(s) is (are) violated, respected or even celebrated. Divide the class in small groups and provide them with the newspapers. Have them read and classify the different articles and explain how human rights are being upheld or violated in each case.

4. Either individually or in groups, have students choose one of the articles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Students will write a paper that compares the implementation (or lack thereof) of that article in the United States and another country. Alternatives to the paper include reflective essays, power point presentations, bulletin boards or murals.

Contextualizing the UDHR

1. Have students read about Nazi Germany and World War II. As they come across the different events in which human rights violations took place, have them identify the violation, link it to a UDHR article, and provide evidence. Once students analyze each event and categorize the event under an article, have them prepare for an International Criminal Court (ICC) trial for the Nazi leaders. Students will conduct research about how the court operates, and create a thorough description of charges against Nazi leaders.⁶ Finally, divide the class into Nazi leaders, accusers, and defendants, in order to conduct a mock trial.

2. Have students read about the independence movements in Africa, focusing on the UDHR articles that were upheld and/or celebrated in each country. Divide the class into small groups, and give each group a leader from the

independence movements (e.g., Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah, Nelson Mandela, or Julius Nyerere). Have students create a Human Rights Award for the African leader or activist whom they think helped accomplish the largest number of human rights. Ask each group to research their assigned leader, who will be their candidate for the Human Rights award. After doing research, students present their candidate before the whole class, providing evidence as to why their candidate deserves the award, by making reference to the UDHR. Create a committee of students to choose the winner of the award.

Adding an International Dimension

To engage students in global issues based on the UDHR, you can create an online dialogue with English-speaking students abroad.⁷ We suggest that you pose questions online that connect to the UDHR. Students may choose to either respond to the question directly,

WEB RESOURCES

The United Nations Cyber Schoolbus

(cyberschoolbus.un.org)

This is a very comprehensive site, hosted by the UN, which is geared towards youth. It is chock full of information about human rights issues, youth conferences, contests, etc. This site also includes an extensive number of K-12 lesson plans on teaching the UDHR.

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

(OHCHR) (www.ohchr.org)

This UN department seeks to promote and protect human rights worldwide. Its website contains updated information, documents and reports on diverse human rights issues, and a database of international law documents. The OHCHR section for education is www.unhchr.ch/education/main.htm.

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission

(www.hreoc.gov.au/info_for_teachers/index.html)

The Australian government’s Human Rights and Equal Opportunity commission has a large archive of resources and education modules. The website

includes a range of interactive, resource-rich, web-based learning modules for use in the K-12 classroom. The activities are creative and could easily be adapted for any local context. The student site is: www.hreoc.gov.au/info_for_students/index.html.

Amnesty International for Kids (AIKids)

(www.amnestyusa.org/aikids) Amnesty International is a leading organization that advocates for human rights worldwide, and provides AIKids, a site that is geared toward youth. This site has current human rights news and many opportunities for children and youth to participate and express their concerns. It also has games and activities. The Amnesty International site for Human Rights education is www.amnestyusa.org/education.

Street Law (streetlaw.org)

This group, started by Georgetown University students in 1972, seeks to provide practical, participatory education about law, democracy, and human rights. Its website has a section for educators with very relevant information about teaching human rights through a legal lens.

or respond to one of their classmates' responses. This gives students who feel immediately connected to the question an opportunity to express themselves directly, while those who prefer to hang back and ponder the discussion before making a contribution have the freedom to pace themselves in this way also.

Through cross-cultural online communication about the UDHR, students experience first-hand the dynamic nature of the UDHR as a living document. They learn of the uses and abuses of human rights in the United States and abroad, and most importantly, they open dialogue with virtual classmates living in a vastly different culture from their own.

As students grapple with global issues in terms of the articles of the UDHR and their cross-cultural connections online, many who initially bristle at the idea of universal human rights and universal values come to embrace the document for its spirit of hope. Students articulate their optimism for universal rights and values during the discussion, finding a

converging point in their different personal perspectives and social contexts.

Conclusion

As Human Rights educator Felisa Tibbitts has so aptly expressed, "The values and standards contained in human rights documents, beginning with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, provide a universal ethic for considering such questions as 'What does it mean to be human?' and 'What is the good society?'"⁸ In this way, hopefully, the alarmingly low percentage of young people familiar with the UDHR shown in the 1997 research study of Human Rights USA will improve.

As educators, we should invite our students to use the UDHR as a guidepost from which they can grapple with and make judgments about world events, developments, and issues throughout history. The UDHR is a living document that can help students anchor the universality of human rights both in their daily lives and in their study of history. 🌐

Notes

1. University of Minnesota, Human Rights Resource Center, "For Whom? The Need for Human Rights Education," *The Human Rights Education Handbook (HREH): Effective Practices for Learning, Actions and Change* (www1.umn.edu/humanrts/educmat/hreduseries/hrhandbook/part1D.html).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Adapted from "Where do you stand?" *Intercultural Learning T-Kit and Coyote* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe/European Commission, 1999).
5. Michael Ignatieff, "The Attack on Human Rights," *Foreign Affairs* 80, no.6 (Nov/Dec 2001): 102-166.
6. Information about the International Court can be accessed at www.icc-cpi.int.
7. Takingitglobal.org, an online community of more than 100,000 young leaders from over 200 countries, could serve as a tool for teachers seeking to connect with an international online community.
8. Felisa Tibbitts, "On Human Dignity: The Need for Human Rights Education," *Social Education* 60, no. 7 (Nov/Dec 1996).

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Youth at the United Nations (www.un.org/youth)

This UN group seeks to enhance awareness of the global situation of youth and increase recognition of youth rights and aspirations. The site contains important data and reports about the life of young people around the world. The topics of actions are linked to human rights protection and advocacy. The site also has a downloadable toolkit enabling students to evaluate their own country's policies toward the wellbeing of youth.

The People's Movement for Human Rights Learning (www.pdhre.org)

Founded in 1988, this group's website contains interesting articles about human rights and a complete library of "hot topics" related to education and social transformation.

Human Rights Education Associates (www.hrea.org)

This website has a well-equipped virtual Learning Center and Resource Center, including a virtual library, a large database, and updated news. It also offers

information on e-learning courses about Human Rights.

Human Rights Resource Center (www.hrusa.org)

Hosted at the University of Minnesota, this website has a large database of information and educational materials. It offers interesting interactive features such as an online quiz on "Taking the Human Rights temperature at your school." The library connected to this resource center is the University of Minnesota Human Rights Library (www1.umn.edu/humanrts/links/education.html). This online library contains more than 25,000 documents and useful education and human rights links.

Taking It Global (www.TakingITGlobal.org and www.tiged.org)

The TakingITGlobal community allows teachers to give students access to global perspectives on global issues, and provides students with options to express their views and their creativity. TakingITGlobal is an online community of thousands of young people, a virtual location at which students can meet to discuss local and global topics, understand issues, and take action.