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ABSTRACT

This paper recounts development of a community college humanities course titled Human Rights/Human Wrongs: The History, Philosophy, Law, Art, and Literature of the Human Rights Movement. The author argues that a special focus, interdisciplinary course provides a broader base for exploring and understanding most of the pressing issues of our time. Following World War II, the United Nations' newly organized Human Rights Commission, chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt, was charged with drafting an international bill of rights. The result was the adoption by the UN of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The author uses the document as a textual basis for the class, which explores human rights issues in six units. The first unit explores the early modern period and the struggle for indigenous rights; the second unit examines issues of slavery; the third looks at industrialization and the labor movement and the demands for economic and social rights; the fourth unit takes up the issue of imperialism and subjugated people's struggle for self-determination in the modern era; the fifth covers the civil rights movement and the vast expansion of human rights in the post-World War II era; the final unit is a study of globalization and the protest movement against it. The course examines how and why social change occurs, with the goal of helping students to explore the range of human kind's capacity for good and evil from their own perspective. (AUTH/NB)

Incorporating Human Rights into the College Curriculum

Never has cultivating a human rights culture in the United States been more important than it is in these troubled times. Ultimately the only victory worth winning in the on-going war against terrorism will be one that ensures a better life for all of the world's people. For that goal to be achieved, the victor must be committed to the expansion of respect for fundamental human rights. Although the language of human rights is widely used in US discourse, genuine commitment seems shallow at best, and many around the world do not trust the US to lead a peace that puts human dignity above economic interests. If the US is to win the world's confidence in and respect for its values, as well as its weapons, we must cultivate a human rights culture within our own institutions, beginning with our educational system. I believe that human rights education should be incorporated into every level of education, from kindergarten through graduate school, and become as critical to the core curriculum as math, reading, science, literature and grammar.

In the summer of 2001, I participated in a summer seminar entitled "Explorations in Empire," sponsored by the American Historical Association, the Community College Humanities Association, and the Library of Congress, and funded by the Ford Foundation. The seminar gave me the opportunity to develop a special topics humanities course for the community college curriculum, titled "Human Rights/Human Wrongs: The History, Philosophy, Law, Art and Literature of the Human Rights Movement." Although human rights education can be incorporated into most humanities and social science courses, a special focus, interdisciplinary course provides a broader base for exploring and understanding some of the most pressing issues of our time.

The course begins with a study of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On the first day, I divide the class into groups and ask each one to draft its own declaration of human rights, listing the rights that they consider to be fundamental. The purpose of this exercise is to encourage students to think about what specific rights are essential to their lives and to help them see the difficulties involved in actually defining and listing those rights. We go over their lists to determine what principles they hold in common and the ones on which they differ.

In the following class session, I introduce the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and discuss the people and the process involved in drafting it. This important document grew from the revulsion that the post World War II generation felt for the Nazi horrors and from the hope that they held out for a better world. Until World War II, human rights issues were considered matters of national sovereignty; nation states and the international community lacked the authority to interfere in the internal domestic affairs of other states. That paradigm began to shift when the United Nations Charter specifically listed promotion of human rights, along with maintaining peace and security, as one of its key purposes. For the first time human rights took on international significance, and a state's treatment of individuals within its boundaries was no longer merely an issue of state sovereignty.

Following the war, the United Nation's newly organized Human Rights Commission, chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt, was charged with the momentous task of drafting an international bill of rights. In December 1948, after struggling for two years to find common ground and define universally accepted principles, the Commission presented the final document to the General Assembly of the United Nations where it was

endorsed with no nation voting against it and with only South Africa, Saudi Arabia and the Soviet Bloc nations abstaining. Although the UDHR is a statement of principles, rather than an enforceable agreement, it has formed the basis for all further human rights conventions and treaties, as well as helping to shape national laws and influencing court decisions.

After introducing the principles of the UDHR, the course turns to specific case studies. To give the course an historical framework, I include six units, covering the evolution of human rights concepts topically but within a chronological framework. Each of the topics involves serious abuses of human rights, but also heroic demands for dignity and respect, illustrating that rights are not dispensed from above but demanded from below.

The first unit begins with the early modern period and the struggle for indigenous rights. Beginning with early contact between Western Europeans and indigenous people sets up the historical framework for the course prior to the inception of the universal rights concept. The topic also enables students to grasp the challenge of extending respect to groups whose culture is different and to explore issues of power and oppression. We see the beginnings of the modern conversation about who is entitled to be treated as a human being with the work of men like Bishop de las Casas. Although this unit begins with the early modern era, we also discuss contemporary issues and incorporate the continuing struggle of indigenous people the world over.

In the second unit we take up the origins of slavery and the antislavery movement, which emerges as the first effort to internationalize human rights. Since the beginning of slavery in modern times is contemporary with European expansion to the Western

Hemisphere, this topic picks up themes begun in the first unit. As we study slavery, one of the most egregious denials of human dignity, we also analyze the dynamics of racism and explore the continuing legacy of slavery in the United States. On the other hand, we see how resistance to slavery laid the foundation for universal principles of human rights and the modern civil rights movement. We complete this unit by studying the tragedy of the modern day forms of enslavement.

In the third unit industrialization and the labor movement are used to study the origins of demands for economic and social rights. This unit focuses on the nineteenth and early twentieth century as slavery was being abolished and the factory was replacing the farm as the primary economic institution of modern society. The class considers how industrialization changed community and personal relationships and increased the potential for exploitation of both human and natural resources, even as it contributed to higher standards of living. From labor's long and sometimes violent struggle emerged a so-called second generation of human rights, as reflected in such demands as those for the right to unionize, a living wage, decent working conditions, and reasonable working hours. We refer back to the UDHR articles that incorporate economic and social rights along with political and individual rights and explore contemporary labor problems.

The fourth unit takes up the issue of imperialism and subjugated people's struggle for self-determination in the modern era. Relating the age of imperialism to the expansion of industrialization, we study the dynamics of the colonial empires that developed during this period. Racism, reinforced by the philosophy of Social Darwinism, provided the rationale for the modern age of empire building, which expanded resources and markets for industrialization. As with previous regimes of

abuse and exploitation, resistance remained strong and demands for independence succeeded in the post World War II era. Yet the legacy of colonialism continues to plague developing countries, as the struggle against poverty and oppression continues.

The next unit covers the civil rights movement and the vast expansion of human rights in the post World War II era. Just as imperialism is related to industrialization, the civil rights movement is tied to the international struggle for freedom and equality. We begin this unit by studying the regime of segregation and exclusion that dominated American life from the end of the Civil War until recent times. The grassroots movement that shattered that regime was the culmination of generations of struggle for recognition and respect. Under this unit we look not only at demands for racial equality, but also at the expansion of rights for such groups as women, Native Americans, immigrants, and gays and lesbians.

Finally the semester ends with a study of globalization and the protest movement in opposition to it. This final unit allows us to tie together many aspects of the human rights struggle and bring the issues studied throughout the semester up to date. The impact of globalization on indigenous people, modern systems of slavery, current labor issues, the legacy of colonialism, and the tactics of the civil rights movement are all relevant to understanding the challenges to human rights in the present day. We look at both the positive and negative aspects of globalization, as we discuss current challenges facing the human rights movement.

One of the goals of the course is to develop an understanding of how and why social change occurs. Each of the units covered deals with human wrongs and human rights, oppression and resistance, defeat and victory, revealing humankind at its worst

and at its best. My goal is for students to explore the range of humankind's capacity for good and evil from their own perspectives and to develop their own interests. I want them to see for themselves how the process of social change occurs. To give students maximum leeway to explore issues on their own, I do not use a textbook. Instead each unit begins with a lecture and discussion sufficient to give them a framework for understanding the topic. Then students select their own materials from an extensive resource list and present their independent studies to the class.

Throughout the semester we focus on the forces that are at work within society to change the way people think and respond to human rights abuses. For example, to illustrate changing attitudes, I use the book, *Without Sanctuary,* a compilation of lynching photos that show crowds celebrating the brutal deaths of lynch victims. I ask students for their reaction to these photos, and then we consider why their reactions are so different from those of the people depicted in the book. Clearly powerful forces have been at work over the past fifty years transforming societal expectations and defining the boundaries of acceptable responses. Since understanding the human rights movement requires serious analysis of the factors that have created that change, students' independent research involves an interdisciplinary variety of mediums.

As we consider each of the units, I ask students to select their materials from the different types of sources that impact public opinion and thus shape social mores. During the course of the semester they write six unit papers: a book review, a film review, a music review and an art review. Two additional papers may be over short stories, documents, web sites, essays, poems, National Public Radio reports, or interviews. Certainly information shapes public opinion, but so do mediums that tell people's stories

and make the human connections necessary to create an inclusive society. Thus we study how fiction, art, film, and music make these connections. Concepts of universal rights only become possible when our common humanity transcends our particular differences. All of these mediums can play powerful roles in creating those common bonds.

In each of the units considered, nongovernment, activist organizations have been instrumental in social change, so inevitably the course focuses on activists and their impact on society, from Bishop de las Casas' work for indigenous people, antislavery societies, labor organizers, and civil rights groups to the current anti-global protesters. For their semester projects students select an activist organization and write a research paper on it. They present this information to the class near the end of the semester. In addition, they are required to prepare a visual display on the organization's work, make brochures for publicizing its activities, and set up a table to disseminate information either on campus or at a community event. The goal is for students to see the forces effecting social change, not only in an historical setting, but also at work right now. I want them to see how people—novelists, songwriters, artists, filmmakers, activists and ordinary folks—change the world.

Most educators agree that their goal is to empower students so that they see themselves not just as spectators but also as active participants in the world. Too often students, like most of us, resist being pushed out of their narrow comfort zones because being willfully ignorant of anything outside that existence is so much easier. The events of September 11, 2001 made that zone of ignorance much less comfortable. Since then the world has been changing in profound ways, with our current era being a transition period that will determine what those changes mean. Will the world that re-forms after

the current upheaval be one that respects human dignity or one that continues to kill, oppress, and exploit? The answer depends in large measure on how we are educating today's students to lead tomorrow's world.

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