Holocaust, Genocide and Human Rights Education: Learning Political Competencies for 21st Century Citizenship

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This article explores the use of Holocaust, genocide and human rights education to teach political competencies for American students in the 21st century.

Key Words: social studies, global studies, holocaust and genocide studies, teacher education, democratic citizenship

During the past decade, policy and research centers in Europe and the United States have sponsored several major studies that seek to reform current approaches to education about and for democracy and human rights (Council of Europe, 2010; Colby, 2003). Both the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (2010) and the Political Engagement Project of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2007), assume the critical role of teachers in preparing students to become citizens who are able to "exercise and defend their democratic rights and responsibilities in society, to value diversity and to play an active part in democratic life, with a view to the promotion and protection of democracy and the rule of law." (Council of Europe, 2010, p. 7) Just as important is teaching and learning how "to contribute to the building and defence [sic] of a universal culture of human rights in society, with a view to the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms"(Council of Europe, 2010, p. 7). Though the core questions governing these studies are slightly different, they agree on three major points:

- Active citizenship is best learned by doing, not through being told about it . . . Education for active citizenship is not just about the absorption of factual knowledge, but about practical understanding, skills and aptitudes, values and characters (Gollob &Weidinger, 2010, p. 9).

- In teacher preparation, there is a significant gap between the official policy and rhetoric regarding democratic participation and commitment to human

rights on the one hand, and curricular implementation at the school level, on the other (Gollob & Weidinger, 2010).

- Infusing citizenship and human rights education into existing curricula frequently is "stronger on paper than is evident in classroom realities" (Brett, Mompoint-Galliard, & Salema, 2009, p. 15).

Policy makers and teachers who are working toward the establishment of effective education for democracy and human rights recognize the challenges they face as they attempt to change the way in which civics education is done, especially challenges associated with fears about politicizing curricula. This challenge is highlighted in the 2003 Carnegie Foundation report, *Educating Citizens: Preparing America's Undergraduates for Lives or Moral and Civic Responsibility*, in which researchers observed that in the United States one of the subjects most frequently neglected in secondary and higher education is educating students to become political actors who have developed the knowledge base and competencies to understand and to utilize political power for specific ends (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003). Colby (2007) found that most faculty prefer the integration of apolitical community service into coursework and discourage student involvement in projects that are political in nature. Colby (2007) points out this emphasis on apolitical civic learning reinforces cynicism about the processes necessary effectively to achieve justice for all and leaves students little or no exposure to opportunities to learn the skills that empower them to effect change. In fact, students and faculty "perceive very few opportunities to become politically involved with the result that most students are left unclear about 'the route to becoming politically engaged' " (Colby, et al., 2007, p.1). Thus, while specialists in the United States and Europe agree that the survival of democratic institutions and respect for human rights requires curricula that empower young people by integrating "knowledge, action-based skills, and change-centered competence"(Brett, Mompoint-Galliard, & Salema, 2009, p. 13), strong pressures exist, even in democratic societies, to keep study about politics separated from developing the skills and the know-how to become citizens capable of political action.

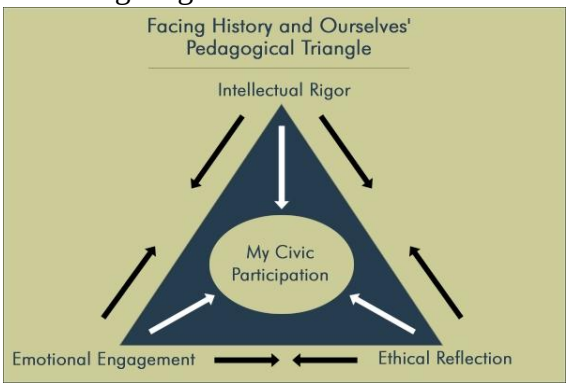
We believe that Holocaust/genocide and human rights education offers educators an effective opportunity to overcome these obstacles precisely because genocide is perceived by most governments to be reprehensible as well as the most extreme example of human rights abuse. Given the international framework presented by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the United Nations Convention for the Prevention of Genocide (1948), and the emerging body of international law available to prosecute perpetrators of genocide; Holocaust, genocide, and human rights study provide students with an appropriate context to develop a human rights ethos, acquire skill sets appropriate to democratic participation, and learn how to combine academic knowledge of what is taking place in the world with the ability to effect change.

Holocaust/Genocide, Human Rights, and Student Engagement

Since the late 1970s, scores of Holocaust curricula have led middle, high school and college students to become aware of the origins, implementation and legacy of state-

sponsored mass murder. These courses have heightened students' awareness of the role bystanders play in allowing brutality and mass persecution to occur as well as the ways in which perpetrators are able to take advantage of economic, social and political discontents to take power and introduce genocidal policies against "enemies" of the state. Many of these curricula include sections on rescuers or upstanders who refused to go along with the perpetrators and sought to help the victims of oppression and mass murder. Many of these curricula end by examining the legacy of the Holocaust, not only for the purpose of remembering those who perished at the hands of the Nazis, but in more recent years, for the purpose of preventing contemporary genocide. (Florida Department of Education, 2000; New Jersey Holocaust Commission, 2003).

This trend may be traced to teachers and students who find it difficult to look at the past and ignore current instances of genocide and violations of human rights. Organizations like Facing History and Ourselves and the Center for Holocaust and Human Rights Education at Florida Atlantic University seek to combine information, emotional response and ethical reflection to enhance civic awareness as reflected in the following diagram.



Facing History and Ourselves. (2009, July). Agenda of the New England Holocaust and Human Behavior Seminar

Although some educators initially feared that this trend would diminish the importance of the Holocaust, study of the Holocaust has often been a critical catalyst in the further development of teaching and learning about human rights. As students and teachers understand the significance of knowing the pattern of the Nazi genocide, they begin to think about methods for prevention before oppression reaches genocidal proportions in the present and future. Moreover, these courses routinely stimulate greater effort on the part of students in middle school, high school and universities to involve themselves in campaigns to both stop and intervene against genocide and mass murder throughout the world. As Gollob and Weidinger (2010) argue:

> in order to be able to take part in the various political processes, it is not only necessary to have basic knowledge of political issues, constitutional and legal frameworks and decision-making processes, but also to have general competences that are acquired as part of other subjects (such as communication, co-operation, dealing with information, data and statistics). Special abilities and skills, such as being able to argue for or against an issue, which are particularly important for taking part in political events, must be trained and promoted in education for democratic citizenship and human rights education (Gollob & Weidinger, 2010, p.12).

Based on our experience with students and teachers throughout the United States, we

believe that Holocaust and human rights education can and does prepare students to develop these competencies. With these reflections in mind we will discuss curricular considerations in the field of Holocaust and human rights education that foster the connection between knowledge, skill and action. First, we will examine the origins, basic documents and organizations of the modern human rights movement that provide norms for active citizenship in the twenty first century. Then, we will discuss two examples of Holocaust/genocide and human rights curricula that incorporate the acquisition of academic knowledge, the development of skills necessary for working with local, national and international organizations and specific opportunities that allow students to learn these skills by taking action.

Academic Learning: The Building Blocks of the Modern Human Rights Movement

As human rights educators, we believe it is our role to help our students become world citizens who are cognizant of the web of relationships among people throughout the world, familiar with the founding documents and institutions of international human rights law and skilled at using these principles and institutions to uphold human dignity. Indeed, American students should be as familiar with these international documents as they are with the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights, which provided the basis for movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that empowered disenfranchised Americans. The abolition movement, the suffrage movement, and the civil rights movement were all campaigns for change based on the notions of human dignity and equality as articulated in the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Through learning the concepts and mechanisms for achieving human rights, twenty first century Americans can play a critical role in upholding the rights of individuals throughout the world.

The creation of the United Nations at the end of World War II specified the need to preserve freedom for all peoples throughout the world.[1] Early in its formation, the United Nations supported the concept of an international tribunal at Nuremberg to prosecute war criminals, the Convention for the Prevention of Genocide, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Leaders of the international community were aware that these measures were essential to combat aggressive war and the mass brutality that characterized earlier generations. Thus, the framers of the United Nations Charter laid the international cornerstone for justice, human respect, and genocide prevention. But, as Eleanor Roosevelt, chair of the committee that framed the UDHR, observed, documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "carry no weight unless the people know them, unless the people understand

[1] The Preamble to the United Nations Charter states that We the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom, and for these ends to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours [sic], and to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and to ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest, and to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples, have resolved to combine our efforts to accomplish these aims…(U.N., 1945).

them, unless the people demand that they be lived" (Glendon, 2002, p. xix). Thus, students need to become familiar with these post World War II building blocks as part of their academic learning about genocide and human rights.

The earliest of these international legal and institutional mechanisms for defending human rights were the Nuremberg trials (1945-1949). These cases established the precedent that individual war criminals could be held accountable for war crimes, crimes against the peace, and crimes against humanity in any location, not just their respective homelands. Thus, the defendants at the International Military Tribunal (1945-6) and the twelve subsequent trials (1946-9) were tried in Nuremberg, Germany, although many of their crimes took place outside of Germany. Justice Robert Jackson, the chief American prosecutor at the International Military Tribunal eloquently opened the proceedings explaining that the deeds of these war criminals must not be tolerated if the world community was to survive and the rule of law was to prevail. At the twelve subsequent trials, Chief Prosecutor Telford Taylor explained that Nazi war criminals were similar to eighteenth century pirates who had no specific attachment to any particular country or state (Taylor, 1985). This precedent of holding individuals accountable marked a major departure from international law in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in which states, not specific individuals, were to be held accountable for crimes against peace.

Another important Nuremberg precedent was the new role established for the international community in prosecuting and punishing leaders of nation states that commit wars of aggression. Just because Germany had enacted laws permitting the persecution and murder of Jews, German leaders were not protected from prosecution by the international military tribunal. From this perspective it is easy to understand why the photos and film footage of the defendants in the dock at Nuremberg is so impressive. Here were the once all-powerful Nazi leaders now sitting as defendants in a court of justice and being held accountable according to the standards of international law.

Just as the newly created United Nations had supported the implementation of the Nuremberg trials, it also adopted a resolution on the Convention for the Prevention of Genocide. Quite unequivocally, the Convention stated that acts against civilian populations whether during peacetime or war were to be treated as violations of international law. Genocide, according to the United Nations, is defined as "acts committed with intent to destroy in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, as such:

a. killing members of a group
b. causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of a group
c. deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part
d. imposing measures intended to prevent births within a group
e. forcibly transferring children of a group to another group" (U.N., 1948, n.p.)

Not only are these documents important for students to learn, it is equally important to learn about the people who persevered in getting official, and international recognition for these documents. A case in point is the career of Raphael Lemkin, the international jurist who dedicated twenty years to developing a framework within international

law to call attention to the crime of genocide, called by Winston Churchill, a "crime without a name" (Churchill, 1941). Responsible for coining the term "genocide," Lemkin was dedicated to finding a word that expressed the moral stain of planned mass murder so that when the term was used, the world community would immediately respond by seeking to stop it and punish the perpetrators. As Power (2003) noted in her prize winning study, *A Problem from Hell*, Lemkin was an extraordinary individual who focused his personal and professional life on making *genocide* the epitome of the greatest possible evil that a group or nations could commit. Although genocide continues to occur in the twenty first century, Lemkin provided a basis for treating it as an international crime, thus establishing a basis for prosecuting post-1945 government sponsored mass murder.

On December 10, 1948, just one day after the U.N. adopted the Genocide Convention, the delegates passed the resolution for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This document contains thirty articles that framers believed constitute the rights of all human beings - rights inherent in the fact of being human, and rights that the world community should be committed to protecting. Eleanor Roosevelt, who chaired the committee for drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, did not want it to be a legal instrument—she envisioned a moral document that would have all individuals consider what should be done for all human beings (Glendon, 2004). It was in 1948 and remains in the 21st century an unfulfilled blueprint for humanity. But the significance is that the Declaration exists as an ideal to which human beings of every nation should aspire to uphold and honor.

Linking Academic Learning to Action

The vivification of such documents requires specific, practical skills to make the principles they espouse effective shapers of political will. As Glendon (2001) noted in her book about the framing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights , *A World Made New*, it was Eleanor Roosevelt's political skill that moved the diverse members of the framing committee to complete the document as we now know it. Colby et al. (2007), of the Carnegie Foundation, similarly observed that Frederick Douglas, Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela were consummate masters of a range of political skills, including "skills of political influence and action, skills of political analysis and judgment, skills of communication and leadership, and skills of teamwork and collaboration" (Colby et. al., 2007, n.p.). Without these skills, their ideas would have remained unrealized ideals.

As we noted earlier, the authors of *Growing Up in Democracy* (2010), argue that active citizenship is best learned through active learning strategies. "Education for active citizenship is not just about the absorption of factual knowledge, but about practical understanding, skills and aptitudes, values and character. . . students can learn as much about democratic citizenship by the example they are set by teachers and the ways in which school life is organized [sic], as they can through formal methods of instruction" (Gollob & Weidinger, 2010, p.9).

Class-room based projects in two south Florida high schools illustrate this point well. The first, a one-day Human Rights workshop, offers an impressive example of how students are introduced to the concept of human rights, the UDHR itself, practice the skills necessary to formulate the key concepts in the documents and apply this knowledge and these skills to effect change

in their own school. The second, an awareness raising campaign and funding drive that connects Holocaust remembrance with raising humanitarian aid for victims of the Darfur genocide is an excellent example of the effectiveness of connecting academic learning, the development of democratic skills and their application to real world issues.

In March 2009, a group of language arts teachers formed a semester-long learning circle on democracy and service that brought together over one hundred students and culminated in specific student recommendations for improving the learning environment at their high school. The Human Rights Day Workshop on March 14 was one of two concluding activities for this semester-long program. Prior to the workshop, the students had learned about the United States Bill of Rights, the United States Constitution and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Thus, they were well-versed in ideas and practices related to rights that are inherent in one's citizenship in the United States. The Human Rights Day took them a step further to learn about rights inherent in the fact that one is a human being. The key components of the workshop were based on active learning strategies and critical pedagogy.

In order to help students understand the connection between civil rights and human rights, the workshop opened with a warm-up activity based on the Amnesty International Human Rights Squares (Flowers, 2010). All students were asked to move about the auditorium, seeking at least one specific example of each of the twenty topics listed in the squares. The topics included:

- human right
- a country where violations of human rights are occurring
- a document that proclaims human rights
- a country where people are denied human rights
- organizations that seek to preserve human rights
- film/video about rights
- a singer who signs about rights
- rights your parents have/had that you don't have
- books about rights
- human rights not available to everyone living in the United States
- rights that all children should have everywhere in the world
- the types of human rights violations that most disturb you

Following the gathering of specific information and learning each other's names, the facilitator moderated a lively discussion among students about six of the topics. By the end of the activity the students showed an understanding of the similarities and differences between civil liberties as articulated in the Bill of Rights and human rights as spelled out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The facilitator then introduced the students to a Facing History and Ourselves activity designed to clarify the meaning of human rights that apply to all humans just because they are human. The activity, "Human Rights? Where do you stand?" involved students in the process of determining what constitutes a universal human right (Facing History and Ourselves, 2011).

Students were divided into groups of seven, including one teacher and one college student facilitator. These groups then studied a set of cards listing many of the rights stated in the thirty articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The students were asked to determine if the right on each card should always be

applicable, usually be applicable or sometimes be applicable. The students in each group discussed where they disagreed on the placement of each card. Heated discussions centered on a number of placements. Moreover, students discussed how the language used in each card was too vague or general and needed clarification. In essence, the students were going through a process similar to the one experienced by members of the original United Nations Human Rights Committee who were charged with framing a bill of rights for all human beings. Only after this activity concluded, did students hear a short description of the difficult negotiations that characterized the meetings of the Declaration's framers from Glendon, author of *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (2002).

Once the students learned about human rights and the complexity of defining them, they were introduced to a diverse group of student leaders from a local university who were engaged in a number of efforts to promote human rights. Among the leaders were activists in statewide Hispanic organizations, Save Darfur clubs, Amnesty International, and Migrant Workers' Rights. The student leaders explained how they became activists and why they felt such a commitment to their work.

Following the inspiring presentations of university student leaders, the high school students divided into groups of ten to identity three human rights improvements they would recommend for their school. This activity gave students an opportunity to engage in negotiation, collaboration and mobilization. And, in many cases the groups went beyond writing their recommendations to suggesting ways their recommendations could be implemented. At the end of the workshop, each group presented its recommendation.

The students' evaluations of the workshop revealed how effective it had been for them to spend a day examining the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in this manner. There were three major positive responses from the majority of participants. First, they appreciated learning from college student activists and felt inspired to do something themselves. Particularly effective was the Hispanic immigrant who started college with minimal mastery of English to become the Student Government Vice President. One student summed up what many thought of these presentations: they "helped open my eyes to what I can achieve" (South Broward High School, 2009).

Another positive response reflected participants' enjoyment of sharing ideas in small groups. They were excited to hear colleagues expressing different opinions and considering how they could emulate the college student activists they had heard. One participant observed, "[B]ecoming involved is not too hard. [All I have to do] is talk to someone about joining or starting a club." Another student interested in forming a human rights club wanted to do so "because I've realized I have strong opinions on human rights issues" (South Broward High School, 2009).

A third positive response was the participants' realization that they could take action. They began thinking about how they could implement recommendations they had made at the end of the workshop and were eager to share their information with students who had not attended (South Broward High School, 2009).

A minority of the participants were less positive. They were skeptical that an individual, no matter how well educated, could make a difference. They also doubted that individuals had the ability to "change

people's prejudiced opinions" (South Broward High School, 2009). Fundamentally, the critics of the workshop did not believe that the experiences of one day could make people more tolerant and caring. Yet, even these critics admitted that the experience had caused them to think more about issues dealing with human rights (South Broward High School, 2009).

Remembering the Holocaust and Saving Darfur: the Triangles of Truth Project

Students at another south Florida high school connected their knowledge of the Holocaust, genocide and human rights to action by forming a club to raise funds to support humanitarian aid to victims of genocide in Darfur, Sudan. In learning about the lack of response from the world community to the plight of European Jews during the Holocaust, these students were equally frustrated to learn that the world community failed to respond to the plight of Darfuris in the 21st century. Realizing that bystander behavior on the part of nations and individuals contributed to the Holocaust, as well as the recent genocide in Darfur, students felt the need to take action. Not only did they link their academic understanding of genocide to political engagement, they also developed practical skills that enabled them to inform the public about genocide and raise funds needed for intervention in Darfur (Triangles of Truth, 2011).

With the guidance of a dedicated social studies teacher, they developed a strategic plan. They created a club, Students for a Better Tomorrow, which researches the names of Holocaust victims and prepared triangles to commemorate the victims. In addition to Holocaust memorialization, the Triangles explicitly link inaction during the Holocaust with a call to help victims of genocide in Darfur. These triangles are marketed locally, nationally and internationally. Students have learned how to manage donors' funds and to connect with national and international organizations so that their donations would be funneled directly to aid the victims of violence and genocide in Darfur. Using the internet to expand the reach of their project, they created a website, www.microgiving.com/profile/trianglesoftruth.

Triangles of Truth began with five students in 2007. Three years later, though the founders have graduated, their work is carried on by many more students at this high school and has spread to over thirty schools in the United States, Israel and South Africa. At participating schools, students display the triangles they sell in public places, including school cafeterias, libraries, hallways and classrooms. As stated on the project website:

> Together we can and will stop the genocide occurring around the world, for the sake of those suffering and for the memories of the Holocaust victims who perished when so few people chose to save them. We hope to prove that we have learned from the lessons of the Holocaust and can use our knowledge to prevent present-day and future genocide (Triangles of Truth, 2011).

What these examples demonstrate is that youth can marshal the energy, creativity and partners to make the public aware of injustices and suggest possible ways to create a better world once they learn not only what and why, but also how to do this.

Conclusion

These examples suggest that the competencies that these students developed

through the marriage of academic knowledge, skill acquisition, and opportunities for taking action, are essential elements in the education of rising generations to make democracy function well for all members of the society as well as in the international struggle to achieve human rights for all people. Eleanor Roosevelt (Glendon, 2002) who was so instrumental in the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights noted that learning about human rights close to home was a critical first step in becoming advocates for human rights around the world. She observed:

> Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places close to home --so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any map of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person. The neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm, or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world (Black, 2000).

It is equally clear that by linking academic learning about genocide and human rights to opportunities for action both at home and abroad, secondary and higher education have a critical role to play in preparing American students to engage with their counterparts throughout the world to advance respect for fundamental human rights, including opportunities to learn the political skills necessary to do this.

Preventing and stopping genocide, a profound violation of human rights, requires a large, informed and active constituency of people who know how to use the framework of national and international law. Recent research by the young scholar Rebecca Hamilton (2011), strongly suggests the need for a profound paradigm shift away from national security concerns toward a concern for human security, the very essence of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Without this paradigm shift, without this knowledge, and without these skills, demands for effective, timely global action will continue to be slowed down as each new generation of grass roots human rights activists and global citizens are faced with the equivalent of on-the-job training.

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