

*Notes From the Field*  
**Implementing Human Rights Education in  
Service-Learning Courses**

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**Abstract**

In an attempt to understand the potential impact of Human Rights Education (HRE) at community colleges, this article calls for an open discussion of human rights and service-learning. I argue that framing my Social Problems course with a service-learning requirement from a human rights perspective offers students a formative educational experience that fosters respect for humanity and introduces the struggle for human rights at home and abroad. Working with vulnerable populations in the community, students can experience the ways in which local organizations and agencies promote human rights. In providing access to my teaching plan, I hope that other teachers will see how HRE and service-learning offer the space for students to connect theory and practice. It is through praxis that educated, global citizens and teachers can further the universal struggle in human rights.

**Keywords**

Human Rights Education, Service-learning, Pedagogy, Community College

*Feed imagination food that invigorates.*

*Whatever it is, do with all your might.*

*Never do to another what you would not wish done to yourself.*

*Say to yourself, 'I will be responsible.'*

(Moore as cited in Darder, Baltodano, and Torres 2009: 79)

As a sociology instructor at Gavilan College, I have come to appreciate the wide array of opportunities and rewarding experiences that the community college system offers its students. However, the growing diversity within community colleges and the pressure on our institutions to produce global citizens present several challenges to the instructors, students, administrators, and local communities. The various race, class, gender, sexual and religious identities found on our campuses are a result of changing demographics, localities, and needs.

Coupled with a palpable sense of individualism in American society 'stressed to the extent that social concerns are almost deemed irrelevant' (Murphy 1989: 161), where we have 'helped educate students to acquire a veritable passion for ignorance' (Darder et al. 2009: 79), our students are unable to cope with the demands of the global world. In order to help students succeed in this environment and beyond, instructors and administrators must understand and negotiate these realities. Despite the grim outlook of rampant individualism in the US, the past half-century has witnessed a worldwide human rights movement. I propose that the solution to addressing the challenges that surface with students of varying needs, abilities, and backgrounds, is to infuse community college curriculum with ways of teaching and learning that foster a sense of dignity, respect, and understanding: all critical elements of a truly global, multicultural environment.

This article captures the valuable connection between Human Rights Education (HRE) and service-learning. Because I believe that an inclusive campus culture can be fostered through HRE, this article aims to encourage community college instructors to integrate introductory concepts of human rights into course syllabi, the curriculum and their teaching practice. As defined by Amnesty International, HRE is:

'A deliberate, participatory practice aimed at empowering individuals, groups and communities through fostering knowledge, skills and attitudes consistent with internationally recognized human rights principles...Human rights education seeks to develop and integrate people's cognitive, affective and attitudinal dimensions, including critical thinking, in relation to human rights. Its goal is to build a culture of respect for and action in the defense and promotion of human rights for all.'<sup>1</sup>

Using this definition, I have designed a Social Problems course with a service-learning component to be instituted soon, and in a forthcoming article, will reflect upon its value to students. But for the purposes of this article, I argue that framing a course from a human rights perspective and supporting it with the UDHR will help students see the multiple connections between social justice, education, and the

world in which they live.

### **Why Human Rights Education?**

Human rights are literally the rights one simply has for being human; or as Brunsma beautifully states, ‘Because one is a member of the human family, because one is a member of this planet, because of one’s humanity, because one *is*, so they have rights *as humans*’ (Brunsma 2010: 14). Although the idea of human rights can be traced to Greece and later to the Enlightenment, the modern definition, circa 1948, is founded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), a document containing thirty articles outlining fundamental rights and freedoms. The term *human right* is applicable to all individuals—regardless of their complex identities—and encompasses *civil and political rights* and *economic, social and cultural rights*. All these rights are equally important and intricately interconnected, as described by Johnson:

‘The differing sets of rights are mutually self-supporting: without personal rights, there can be little of talk of social, economic, cultural, minority, or indigenous rights. Likewise with these latter rights: without these, there can be little in the way for personal rights to accomplish.’

(Johnson 2009: 120)

The UDHR offers a glimpse of shared global norms and values, central to establishing a global human rights culture; specifically, the UDHR represents ‘A common standard and achievement for all peoples and all nations’ (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 1948). Universality is the foundation of the international human rights standards adopted by the UN and can serve as the basis for educating populations to be global citizens and human rights protectors and purveyors. As suggested by Osler and Starkey (2003), we can promote more universality in our classrooms by developing and educating for cosmopolitan citizenship whereby youth learn to live in diverse local communities and concomitantly with the increasingly interdependent world. Rather than asking individuals to reject their national identity, cosmopolitan citizenship encourages ‘connections between immediate, national and global

contexts...[and] implies recognition of our common humanity and a sense of solidarity with others' (Osler and Starkey 2003: 252). This universality 'recognizes no borders or privilege or no state's citizens over any other' (Moncada and Blau 2006: 113).

Another position on universality is offered by Paulo Freire, renowned Brazilian educator:

'When I speak of a universal human ethic...I am speaking of something absolutely indispensable for human living and human social intercourse...I speak of a universal human ethic in the same way I speak of humanity's ontological vocation, which calls us out of and beyond ourselves.' (Freire 1998: 25)

Freire's philosophy of education offers a guiding pedagogy and ethical judgment for the implementation of a human rights curriculum at the community college. He envisions a classroom environment that allows teachers and students to be *human*. If denied, students are unable to critically reflect on the world in which they live, detaching the school environment from their everyday lives (Freire 1971, 1998). 'If we have any serious regard for what it means to be human, the teaching of contents cannot be separated from the moral formation of the learners. To educate is essentially to form' (Freire 1998: 39).

According to Freire, education is a form of intervention in the world (Freire, 1998). As such, education is important if we are taking the risk in imagining a new world, a world in which human rights is respected. In *Pedagogy for Freedom*, he outlines the morals and ethics necessary to create a just world and argues that education is never neutral. In a similar vein, Ira Shor claims, 'No pedagogy is neutral, no learning process is value-free, no curriculum avoids ideology and power relations. To teach is to encourage human beings to develop in one direction or another' (as cited in Darder et al. 2009: 300). Teaching and learning is a process that forms our students to act on the world, and if we expect to foster a human rights culture, we must start in our classrooms.

Recognizing the power and importance of education, the United Nations declared 1995-2004 the Decade for Human Rights Education. The UN defines HRE as the 'training, dissemination and information efforts aimed at the building of a universal culture of

human rights through the imparting of knowledge and skills and the molding of attitudes' (Flowers, 1998). As cited in Bajaj (2010) the UN believes that this definition guides HRE in the:

- Strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms;
- Full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity;
- Promotion of understanding, tolerance, gender equality and friendship among all nations, indigenous peoples and racial, national, religious, and linguistic groups;
- Enabling of all persons to participate effectively in a free and democratic society governed by the rule of law;
- Building and maintenance of peace;
- Promotion of people-centered sustainable development and social justice. (as cited in Bajaj 2010: 2)

The incorporation of content and pedagogy related to international human rights norms is facilitated by funding and support from many intergovernmental agencies like UNESCO, the Council of Europe, the UN High Commission for Human Rights, and the World Programme for Human Rights Education. Currently, more than 100 countries have placed HRE into national initiatives (Bajaj 2010: 1). Ramirez, Suarez, and Myer (2006) found that the number of organization dedicated to HRE quadrupled between 1980 and 1995, from 12 to 50 (as cited in Tibbitts 2008: 2). In one international study of social science textbooks, the researchers found a rise in human rights themes since 1994 (Meyer, Bromley and Ramierz 2010: 135). A global movement is evident.

Furthermore, as a way to pursue human rights in our own communities, HRE provides the vehicle for us to know our rights. In order for individuals to claim their rights and to hold leaders accountable, they must be aware of these rights. 'Human rights begin as declarations or unenforced laws, but become tools for analyzing relationships and reimagining communities, and can only be achieved if people claim them' (Henry 2006: 106). A 1997 study by Human Rights USA, as cited in Flowers, showed that 93% of people in the US have never heard of the UDHR (Flowers 2003: 16). The most vulner-

able groups with the most to gain from human rights recognition, are only able to claim rights if they know why they are excluded, otherwise the vicious circle is self-sustaining. The purpose of the incorporation of HRE into schools is to prepare students to participate in society and to develop fully as individuals.

HRE supports a learning experience that engages students and helps them relate emotionally and intellectually to course material, connect their personal biographies and narratives to world events and 'transform their own lives so they are consistent with human rights norms and values' (Tibbitts 2008: 3). When brought into the classroom, there are many advantages. According to research by Henry, 'the idea of human rights can connect [students] with their own reality...[helping them] apply analytic ideas to students' own experiences' (Henry 2006: 104). In this sense, Henry argues that 'human rights norms and standards can provide clarification and analysis for often emotionally driven issues' (Henry 2006: 108). In the classroom, the UDHR supports the ethical concerns that will inevitably arise. Henry argues that there is power in helping students develop moral agency, but they need to develop it on their own. If a teacher succeeds at such a task, then college students are able to see human rights as 'liberating, not as a set of rules' (Henry 2006: 111).

### **Why Service-Learning?**

The practice of service-learning is evolving, which proves difficult when attempting to define it as a pedagogical tool. However, Belsile and Sullivan attempt to tie service-learning to a core concept from which the practice is grounded: 'Service-learning ties learning objectives with the intent that the participant will acquire greater skills, values, and knowledge while the recipient benefits from the service' (2007: 23). From this foundational description, service-learning is a methodology wherein participants learn about community issues and academic content through active participation in service and reflection.

By combining HRE education and service-learning, students can engage in action-oriented service projects and classroom experiences that teach about current issues, promote human rights values, and provide essential life skills. Working in the classroom and in the 'field,' a crucial link is established between the content of a

discipline and the various realities that exist in the world. This experiential approach builds opportunities that transcend the classroom walls and focuses on *doing* human rights, thereby providing hands-on experiences that students can apply in their lives and careers. Service-learning can provide young people with experiences that are eye-opening, challenging and satisfying. It allows them to see the 'influence and impact that each individual can have on their community, and ultimately, it empowers them to use that influence toward the creation of a better, more humane world for all' (Belisle and Sullivan 2007: 1).

Herzberg (1994) argues that for service-learning to enhance academic outcomes, critical analysis of the issue regarding service is necessary; otherwise it is simply charity (as cited in Parker-Gwin and Mabry 1998: 246). Barber (1998) expands on this concern:

'Serving the other is not just a form of do-goodism or feel-goodism, it is a road to social responsibility and citizenship. When linked closely to classroom learning...it is an ideal setting for bridging the gap between the classroom and the street, between the theory of democracy and its much more obstreperous practice...Service is an instrument of civic pedagogy...In serving the community, the young forge commonality; in acknowledging difference, they bridge division; and in assuming individual responsibility, they nurture social citizenship.'

(as cited in Parker-Gwin and Mabry 1998: 246)

In order to prevent the confirmation or ossification of preconceived prejudices and to connect the individual to local and global communities, an HRE perspective can help bridge the gap through *universal* rights. HRE enables students to reflect on the UDHR in relation to their own lives, the lives of others and the lives of those in the community:

'Human rights are grounded in respect for the rights and dignity of others. For this reason human rights are not simply legal instruments, but also everyday practices, rooted in community culture and in rhythms of everyday life. They are

collective like democracy is—the more people participate the better the outcome for everyone and encompass the rights of distant others.’ (Blau 2008)

In this sense, ‘human rights education teaches both *about* human rights and *for* human rights’ (Flowers 1998). Teaching students to see and learn about the value-laden nature of human rights issues will develop critical thinkers and encourage them to *act* on their choices. HRE brings to light the power of civic engagement and can help students see human rights in the context of personal responsibility and the realization that individuals and social agencies—past and present—make a difference. With a firm grounding in human rights, the possibilities of global (and local) social change are revealed.

### **Why Community College?**

On December 10, 2004, the General Assembly declared the World Programme for Human Rights Education to begin January 1, 2005, in order to advance the implementation of human rights education programs (World Programme for Human Rights Education 2006: 1). The first phase (2005-2010) was dedicated to primary and secondary schools. Now in the second phase (2010-2014) of the World Programme, the focus is ‘on human rights education for higher education and on human rights training programs for teachers and educators, civil servants, law enforcement officials and military personnel at all levels,’ while maintaining programs from the first phase (World Programme for Human Rights Education 2006: 7). According to UNESCO, higher education is defined as ‘all types of studies, training or training for research at the post-secondary level, provided by universities or other educational establishments that are approved as institutions of higher education by the competent State authorities’ (World Programme for Human Rights Education 2006: 1). Through the core functions of research, teaching and service to the community, institutions of higher education must maintain a ‘social responsibility to educate ethical citizens committed to the construction of peace, defense of human rights and the values of democracy, but also generate global knowledge to meet human rights challenges’ (World Programme for Human Rights Education 2006: 9).

Based on the recommendations of the second phase of the

World Programme, it is imperative to focus on the community college. Originally geared toward local students with local needs, community colleges were designed to serve their surrounding communities. Basic mission statements often revolve around serving the local community by 'providing educational opportunity to all' and creating the pathways to building strong, unified communities that establish a lifetime of learning (Story 1996: 81). One would assume that local contributions to the community would also be central to the institutions' mission. However, in a study of mission statements, Levin notes that the 1990s saw a drastic paradigm shift from 'serving local communities to serving the economy' (2001: 19). Emphasis swung from education to training, from community needs to business needs, from individual improvement to workplace training (Levin 2001: 2). As technological innovations and the global economy usher in an era of higher education in which community colleges are called upon to produce global citizens, most community colleges are ill-equipped to address the cultural and social differences between administrators, educators, students, and the surrounding communities, let alone international actors.

The narrative behind these institutions touts their role as 'champions of diversity,' which in practice has been difficult to espouse (Wallin 1997: 230). Bowen and Muller follow this rhetoric and describe community colleges as 'gateways to democracy' (Bowen and Muller 1999). Thus, if democracy and social justice represent the means to achieve the universal values embodied by the UDHR, an important place to inculcate this viewpoint is in the public education system. Open admission policies allow community colleges to act as a vehicle of access, and ideally social mobility, to immigrants, people of color, women, first-generation college attendees, and students of lower socioeconomic backgrounds and have empowered millions of individuals who may have not been issued a right of entry to other institutions (Bowen and Muller 1999). If these institutions truly are gateways, than this unique learning environment rightfully positions community colleges to take a leadership role in human rights curriculum and organization reform in higher education.

Helping students connect the local to the global will show them how the schools they attend are important sites for social struggle. Richard Russo argues that social justice, which is unarguably

linked to human rights, needs to be emphasized in general education courses—the core of academic classes at community colleges (Russo 2004: 102). He underscores how the perspective of the community college teacher is often overlooked, even though community colleges are important equalizers in American society. As ‘open’ institutions, they allow talented students with inadequate funds or ‘blemished’ academic records a path to success in higher education. In times of economic hardship, historically community colleges have offered a beacon of hope; ironically, as the line for entry grows, doors are slamming shut across the country due to budgetary constraints (Russo 2004: 102). Rather than expanding to meet the needs of the complex realities of our world, we are cutting programs. I believe that human rights awareness through HRE, with its strong global focus, can help attract and keep motivated the diverse students enrolled in these institutions, simultaneously benefiting the surrounding community.

#### **What Does an HRE-Framed Course Look Like?**

Within HRE there is no one-size-fits-all approach - whether course, teacher, discipline, school, or country. However, I do feel that an overview of my syllabus and class content can benefit curious instructors.<sup>2</sup>

The goal and purpose of my course, as envisioned by Merret is to ‘narrow the gap between reality and social justice ideals by teaching...students to adhere more closely to the progressive standards embedded in our founding documents’ and the UDHR (2004: 93). Using research on service-learning course design, I attempted to construct a class that leads students from the notion of ‘service’ and ‘charity’ to one that is more consistent with HRE and social change. In order to better understand the impact that service-learning pedagogy has on student’s civic and academic outcomes, Parker-Gwin and Mabry studied one semester of their sociology courses. Findings suggested that students’ attitudes may not become more favorable to service than before the course, and depending on how the course is structured, students may range from helpless or worthless based on their experience (Parker-Gwin and Mabry 1998: 284). One important pedagogical concern raised by the study is requirement. Consistent with their findings, they suggest that an optional component of service-learning deters any resentment students may have towards time spent

out of class (Parker-Gwin and Mabry 1998: 286). The authors suggest that it may not just be the requirement alone, but they found that having the projects completed in groups or as a class positively affected their feedback. According to Eyler and Giles (1999), service-learning did have a positive impact on students' motivation, a deepened understanding of the subject matter and social complexity, an increased awareness of community needs, and the experience fostered a feeling of connection to the surrounding community (as cited in Sullivan-Catlin 2002: 48).

Keeping the previous information in mind, I then chose Dolgon and Baker's *Social Problems: A Service-learning Approach* (2010) to serve as my course textbook. This text intertwines case studies of real-life student service projects with the concepts necessary in developing a sociological perspective. Accompanying readings are assigned and focus on global human rights and their connections to local and national social problems. The goals for my course are for students to understand the content of my discipline by gaining a basic understanding of the sociological perspective. Having students connect their individual service, the social structure, and the potential for social change develops their sociological imagination. The structure of the course enables students to apply this perspective to becoming active community members and defenders of human rights. I believe that studying human rights through a sociological lens offers a global framework for critical analysis and sociological inquiry. Because students are grappling with theoretical concerns of universality and cultural relativism, constantly connecting the global to the local, and discussing the UDHR with those in the community, the student learning outcomes of my course can be realized.

A 'meta-question' drives my course: How can a human rights-based approach to social problems empower local agencies, volunteers, and community members? Each week of the semester addresses various social problems, and I have framed the inquiry around the articles of the UDHR and the respective covenants and treaties. Linking social problems to human rights exposes the similarities and differences between the global responses and our local responses (or lack thereof).

Regarding assignments and student learning outcomes, the

importance of reflection cannot be emphasized enough. Reflection, through journal writing, in-class discussions, class presentations, and papers, is crucial to positive outcomes (Parker-Gwin and Mabry 1998: 287). Eyler and Giles (1999) have called reflection ‘the hyphen in service-learning: it is the link that ties the student experience in the community to academic learning’ (as cited in Sullivan-Catlin 2002: 44). In my course, I have created a ‘Collective Journal,’ which is a blog to which all of the students contribute. Weekly reflection assignments combine sociological inquiry with service-learning, thereby enabling students to move beyond the individualistic explanations of social phenomena (while raising awareness and inquiry about structure, ideology, and social justice). Other assignments include a photo essay documenting a chosen UDHR article in their neighborhood, leading a class discussion, and educating the community about human rights. A final assignment asks them to research a specific social problem and write an informed letter to a person in a position of power. This activity ensures students will grasp their critical roles not only as learners, but also as advocates for human rights.

### **Conclusions**

‘Our human condition is one of essential unfinishedness...we are incomplete in our being and in our knowing...we are ‘programmed’ to learn, destined by our very incompleteness to seek completeness, to have a ‘tomorrow’ that adds to our ‘today.’”  
(Freire 1998: 79)

This article has outlined the necessity for connecting human rights education and service-learning. As a way to pursue human rights in our communities, our nation, and the world, HRE allows us to know our human rights. HRE and service-learning facilitate empowerment by nurturing the development of students and offering the opportunity for praxis. By emphasizing critical thinking, authentic dialogue, and creativity, this combination provides a worldview of emancipation necessary for restoring our humanness.

The foundations of HRE stress the importance of theoretical knowledge and its relevance to local situations, the connection between theory and practice, and foster a belief in democratic, anti-racist ideas. HRE educates our students to uphold the following:

'Because one is a member of the human family, because one is a member of this planet, because of one's humanity, because one *is*, so they have rights *as humans*' (Brunsma 2010: 14). There is danger in HRE, as human rights are often seen as unrealistic, idealistic, remote, fringe, as a luxury for the fortunate. This is where I think that service-learning, with the proper pedagogical implementation, offers to remedies this concern. HRE offers the framework to facilitate students' understanding of the commonalities between the local and the global; furthermore, this curriculum educates the students to live and work in a pluralistic society. A human rights perspective demands the instituting of respect in the classroom and on campus, continuously learning *through* difference rather than *with* difference, and integrating a curriculum that emphasizes critical thinking.

Fundamental changes must be made in order to foster a human rights culture on our campuses. To study human rights through one or two *required* classes or the celebration of a thematic month further reifies and objectifies the notion of culture and universal rights. We need a curriculum that not only discusses human rights, but works on making human dignity a world reality. I believe that the solutions do not lie in simplifying the mission of the community college or creating programs that claim to be 'multicultural' or 'diverse,' but rest in the 'leadership and cultural environment of the faculty, as well as the vocality of the local communities' (Story 1996: 79). Until our colleges' missions and course offerings are relational in nature, as opposed to rendering difference as an object to study, there will be little advancement in creating a multicultural, democratic, and essentially human environment (Aleman 2001, 585).

When deconstructed, it is ironic that the higher education system in the US, and specifically community colleges, claims to embody the ideals of democracy, yet does not provide its students with the analytical tools to contemplate the social order today and see the 'discrepancy between [these] ideals and reality' (Zinn 2005: 69). Brunsma suggests that Americans are socialized 'away from understanding our shared vulnerability...as human beings...Currently the [educational] structure trains and prepares citizens not humans' (2010: 8). In a call to arms, he argues that 'We need human rights principles not only taught in our classrooms, but also structured into the relational fabric of our schools—wherever learning takes place.' I

agree that a transformation of higher education is necessary if we are to create critical thinkers able to fight for social justice and equality. Parker Palmer suggests we 'create academic programs that are open to student [and teacher] critique, challenge, and change' (Palmer 1998: 195). By challenging the status quo and humanizing our curriculum *and* our pedagogy, which 'values the student's background knowledge, culture, and life experiences, and creates learning contexts where power is shared by students and teachers,' more students will be successful at our institutions of higher education (Darder et al. 2009: 352).

As an instructor at a community college, I recognize my unique responsibility to instill democratic ideals because I work at a crucial site for social change. My vocation itself contains tools for change. In agreement with Brunson and Overfelt, I believe that 'teaching...is where our shared humanity is more apt to flourish' (2007: 71). Connections must be made with instructors who are teaching for social justice. The American Sociological Association (ASA) is supportive of this endeavor. On August 17, 2005, the ASA released a statement in defense of scholarly work and freedom of thought as it relates to human rights. On August 12, 2009, the ASA *affirmed* and *expanded* on the original statement to include a more comprehensive discussion of human rights, recognizing that 'human rights and the violation of human rights are embedded in societies and communities which are fundamental subjects of sociological study.' The closing remarks confirm my belief in the power of HRE, particularly when united with service-learning, in declaring that the ASA strives to 'serve the public good, including the advancement of human rights and freedoms' (ASA Council 2010).

In conclusion, I contend that a transformation of higher education is necessary; at the very least, a rethinking of our curriculum is needed to nurture critical thinkers able to fight for social justice and equality. HRE, combined with service-learning, stresses the importance of theoretical knowledge and its relevance to local situations, the connection between theory and practice, and the belief in democratic, anti-racist ideas. This framework calls for instituting respect in the classroom and on campus, continuously learning through difference rather than with difference, and integrating a curriculum that emphasizes critical thinking. Although the UDHR is

impressively yet imperfectly multicultural, in that the idea of universality derives from Western traditions, I argue that it is less about enforcement and more about enculturation. To better prepare our students for a future they will inevitably be a part of, we must provide an education that enlightens and liberates. Through education students will find a way to make these rights a reality in order to reduce the atrocities to which we bear witness. In affirming human rights, the possibility for social change can be realized.

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### **Endnotes**

1. For more information, as well as useful teaching resources, visit <http://www.amnesty.org/en/human-rights-education>
2. Copies of my syllabus and any other assignments can be requested at [lpadilla@gavilan.edu](mailto:lpadilla@gavilan.edu)

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