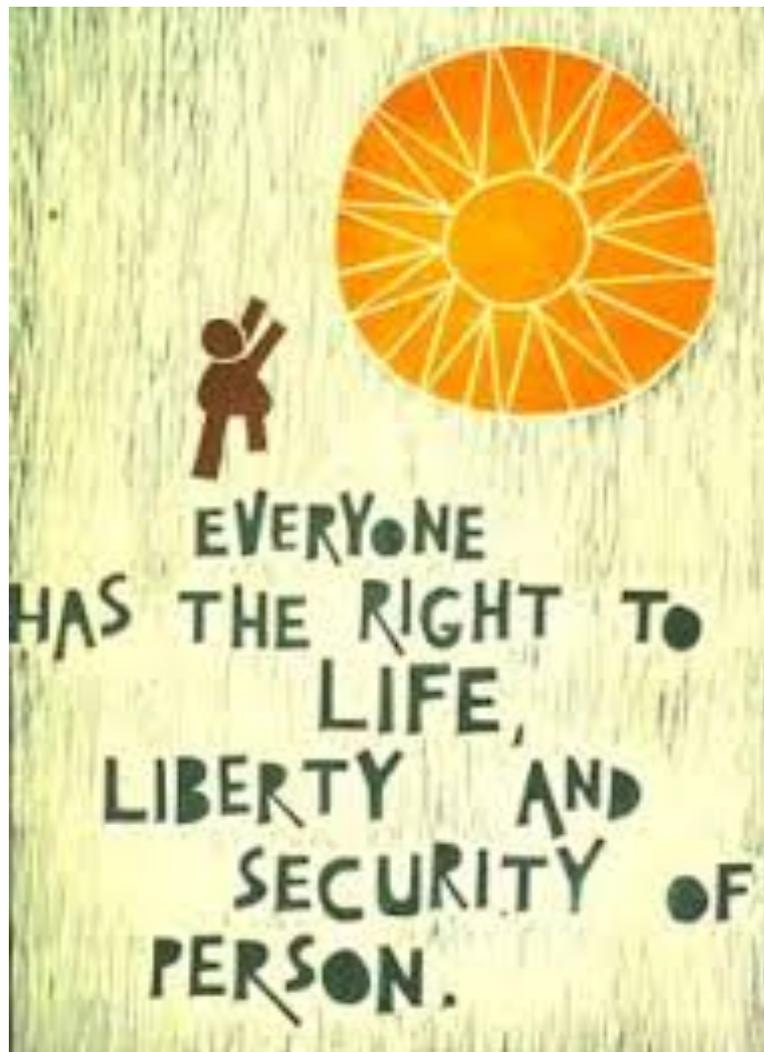


RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Introduction: Radical Teaching About Human Rights

by Michael Bennett and Susan O'Malley



POSTERS AND GRAPHICS COURTESY OF THE UN

When the idea of devoting an issue of *Radical Teacher* to Human Rights Education (HRE) first came up at a meeting of the Editorial Collective, some members were not enthusiastic. As self-proclaimed radicals, many of us were suspicious of the discourse of human rights (Whose rights? How are they defined, and by whom? Who enforces them, and how?); suspicious of HRE (or any educational movement that has become an acronym often invoked uncritically by adherents with a sometimes unclear political agenda); just plain suspicious (Isn't it the job of radicals to be critical of mainstream discourses and movements, including self-criticism when our own ideas become mainstreamed?) Co-editor Susan O'Malley, who since her retirement has worked with the NGO Committee on the Status of Women at the UN, suggested that human rights was much more complicated than the discussions at *Radical Teacher* meetings indicated, although she admitted that she knew little about how human rights was being taught. At MLA in 2013, she organized a panel on "Women and the Language/Literature of Human Rights" that elicited great interest and produced a number of excellent papers, one of which by Amy Levin has already been published by *Radical Teacher*. When we wrote the call for articles on teaching about human rights, we had no idea that we would receive so many proposals that we are now planning a second issue on "Teaching About Human Rights."

We took the Editorial Collective's suspicions seriously as co-editors while we delved into the many proposed essays from a wide variety of teachers engaged with the HRE movement, with which neither of us were very familiar when this process began. We learned that HRE has a long and complicated history, and that lately the HRE movement has become larger and more active than we were aware. Most histories of HRE begin with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which was passed unanimously by the UN in 1946. Signatories to the UDHR pledge that they "shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms." Article 26 of the UDHR states that "Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages . . . Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms." These initial declarations were followed by the 1974 United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) document that recommitted the UN to HRE; the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna reaffirming that "States are duty-bound . . . to ensure that education is aimed at strengthening the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms"; the establishment of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights shortly thereafter; the declaration of the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education 1995-2004; and the 2011 UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (DHRET). Felisa Tibbitts traces the concomitant development of HRE in the United States from Amnesty International-USA and their Human Rights Educators Network to the relatively recent U.S. Human Rights Educators Network (HRE USA) (12-13).

One of the most important divisions in the discourse of human rights is between those activists and educators who emphasize the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and those who focus on the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The former covenant has historically been emphasized in the Global North by those devoted to individual civil rights but less interested in communal socio-economic rights. The opposite has generally held true in the Global South. This contrast in the content of HRE is often mirrored by a contrast in form between educators who address legal violations of universal human rights in traditional hierarchical classrooms and those who practice some variety of critical or transformative pedagogy in exploring specific cultural contexts. Radical teachers have emphasized the latter in terms of both form and content.

This historical context reinforces our sense from reading through a few dozen essays and proposals for this issue on "Teaching about Human Rights" that HRE is not necessarily radical and often has been greatly influenced in practice by neoliberalism. Many of the proposals that we rejected seemed naively to assume that merely mentioning human rights is a radical act. These essays fell into several categories: those that felt it was enough to point to a series of human rights atrocities and condemn them; those that acted as a kind of advertising campaign for the far-sightedness of particular institutions or departments addressing human rights in some fashion; and, most perniciously, those that wanted the United States to point fingers at others for violating human rights without considering our context as citizens of an imperializing settler colonial state.

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The following essays, which we were pleased to read and excited to publish, don't necessarily agree with each other or with our own commitments to HRE, but they avoid the obvious pitfalls of the essays we rejected, and they create a useful dialogue between those who are sure that there is a radical way to engage students in learning about human rights and those who are less sure and more critical of the HRE movement even as they participate in the movement. In the former category of educators/activists who have dedicated all or most of their careers to building platforms for HRE, perhaps the foremost is Nancy Flowers, whose essay "The Global Movement for Human Rights Education" along with accompanying tools for "Taking the Human Rights Temperature of Your School" and finding "Resources for Human Rights Education" provide an overview of the global movement for HRE—its impetus, challenges, and contrasting developments in different

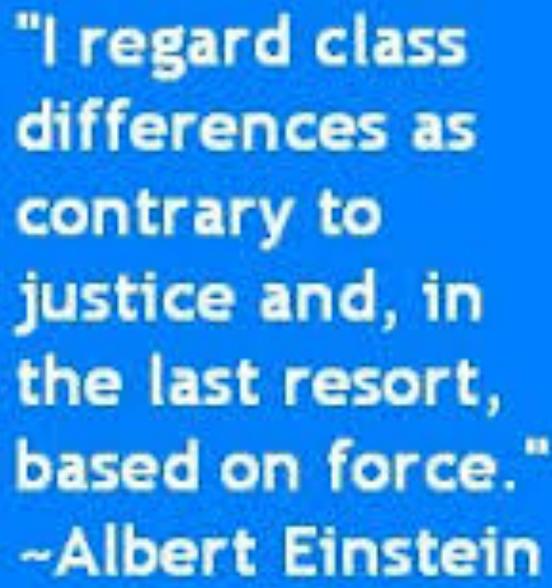
regions of the world, focusing especially on Latin America, the Philippines, South Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. Flowers seeks to put HRE in the United States into an international perspective, exploring the variety of goals that inspire HRE and how methodologies have evolved to meet specific regional and political cultures and needs. We were happy to see that this overview focuses on the most useful forms of HRE not as an imposition of the Global North on the Global South, but as growing out of indigenous movements for human rights.

While some critics have complained that the discourse of human rights is too easily coopted by neoliberalism, Gillian MacNaughton and Diane F. Frey maintain the opposite in "Teaching the Transformative Agenda of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights." They believe that the norms and aspirations elaborated in the UDHR provide a framework for a radically different world than the one we have today. MacNaughton and Frey revisit the content of the UDHR, beginning with the right to a social and international order in which everyone's rights can be realized, and consider other key provisions that conflict with neoliberalism, including the rights to the benefits of science, to full employment and decent work, to progressive realization of free higher education, to nondiscrimination on the grounds of economic status, and to solidarity. They also share some activities that they use in the classroom and online to make the transformative agenda of the UDHR visible to students and demonstrate how far neoliberalism has strayed from the aspiration of a world in which everyone enjoys their human rights. The article concludes that teaching a holistic vision of the UDHR in a neoliberal world is central to a radical human rights curriculum.

By contrast, Robyn Linde and Mikaila Mariel Lemonik Arthur are troubled by the ways in which the new human rights regime that grew out of the UDHR is consistently presented as a progressive teleology that contextualizes the expansion of rights within a larger grand narrative of liberalization, emancipation, and social justice. In "Teaching Progress: A Critique of the Grand Narrative of Human Rights as Pedagogy for Marginalized Students," Linde and Arthur examine the disjuncture between the grand narrative on international movements for human rights and social justice and the lived experiences of marginalized students in urban environments in the United States. They advocate for a critical and transformational approach to human rights pedagogy to counter and overcome the pervasive individualization that undergirds the grand narrative of human rights, arguing that a critical (and radical) human rights pedagogy must evaluate the

position of the individual in modern life if liberation through human rights law and activism is to be possible.

Similarly, Melissa Canlas, Amy Argenal, and Monisha Bajaj discuss radical approaches, pedagogies, and practices for a weekly high school human rights club that serves immigrant and refugee youth who have come to the United States within the past four years, many of whom had experienced forced labor and food scarcity in their home countries and in the migration process. In "Teaching Human Rights from Below: Towards Solidarity, Resistance, and Social Justice," they discuss some of their curricular and pedagogical strategies and students' responses to lesson plans and activities that aimed to build solidarity, resistance to dominant and assimilative narratives, and action towards social justice. This article discusses a radical approach to teaching Human Rights along three key themes: student-centered human rights pedagogy, cultural wealth and HRE, and students' articulation of human rights language into action.



"I regard class differences as contrary to justice and, in the last resort, based on force."
~Albert Einstein

The final two essays are most critical of the HRE movement, even as they participate in it. Molly Nolan's "Teaching the History of Human Rights and 'Humanitarian' Interventions" explores how she teaches about human rights and so-called humanitarian interventions to MA and Ph.D. students. The course has three main themes or foci. First, what are human rights and why have the social and economic human rights laid out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights been so neglected or rejected, especially by the United States? Second, how has American foreign policy used and abused human rights? Third, why have liberal or humanitarian interventions of a militarized sort become so prevalent since the end of the Cold War and why are they so damaging? Nolan's goal is to get students to look critically at the meaning and uses of human rights, about which many display a naive enthusiasm.

Finally, Shane McCoy's "Reading the 'Outsider Within': Counter-Narratives of Human Rights in Black Women's Fiction" focuses on the function of literary counter-narratives as a useful pedagogical strategy for teaching about human rights in the composition classroom. McCoy examines the ways in which contemporary black women's writing problematizes the rhetoric of 'women's rights as human rights.' McCoy argues that Michelle Cliff's *Abeng*, Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* are cultural productions that interrupt the totalizing effects of neocolonial and imperial discourses so often produced in dominant Western literature. McCoy argues that the counter-narratives produced by these writers make privy the position of the cultural outsider to

American students who have “taken-for-granted assumptions” of human rights discourses as cultural insiders in the United States. With insights drawn from critical pedagogy, he constructs a counter-curriculum that intervenes in a reproduction of global human rights policies constructed through neoliberal ideologies.

Topping off this issue on “Teaching About Human Rights” are two book reviews of current literature on Human Rights Education and a reprinted Teaching Note by Janet Zandy on teaching the Declaration of Human Rights.

We and our contributors would agree that radical teaching about human rights isn't only based on knowledge about such rights but also on classroom praxis that is based on students' enjoying and exercising their rights in the process of upholding the rights of others.

Despite the criticisms levied at HRE by many of our contributors, it would be difficult to deny that there is something at least potentially radical in the insistence in the *United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training* that such education needs to be *about, through, and for* human rights. That is, HRE is a matter of content, form, and goal. It relies, in other words, on a combination of understanding, process, and empowerment. We and our contributors would agree that radical teaching about human rights isn't only based on knowledge about such rights but also on classroom praxis that is based on students' enjoying and exercising their rights in the process of upholding the rights of others. One may, of course, critique any form of rights-based discourse, but there does seem to be a radical way to engage such discourse.

Our experience in editing this first issue of “Teaching About Human Rights” is that for many of us the

understanding of and the possible usefulness of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been compromised by the refusal of the United States to sign on to human rights documents such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (we are the only country that has not signed) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (here the United States is in the company of Iran, Somalia, and the Sudan), while using human rights to justify “humanitarian interventions.” The articles in this issue have convinced us that many teachers are effectively exposing both the contradictions and usefulness of the practice of human rights in educating students about social justice.

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