

Human Rights Education at Curtin University: The Interconnections of Education, Research and Advocacy

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IN THIS PAPER, we discuss the human rights education program provided by the Centre for Human Rights Education (CHRE) at Curtin University in Perth, Australia. Although we are providing an overview of the curriculum and the pedagogical processes, we also focus on the broader purposes of human rights education in creating awareness that contributes to social change. Drawing on policy examples from Australia, the interconnections of education, research and advocacy in tertiary education will be explored.

Human Rights Education in Australia

Human rights education is often portrayed as a means of rectifying all that is evil in society through its focus on communicating the importance of human rights to the populace. Indeed, human rights education may well be able to engage members of society on the important issue of how we should treat one another, and promote a human rights framework as the guide to this treatment. However, for human rights education believers like ourselves, the road is a hard one and what we do within the cloisters of an academic environment is only part of the solution. Although we focus in this paper on prospects, there are barriers to human rights education from outside and within the academy.

One of the biggest problems, and this does not just include the Australian context, is that there is not much value given to human rights per se. Despite Australia having ratified most of the international human rights treaties, little of the contents of these treaties have been enshrined in Australian law. There is also the common assumption that given Australia's democratic system of government, it must be a strong protector of human

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rights. But in many spheres we do not adhere to international human rights norms, including realizing the rights of Indigenous peoples and asylum seekers (Fleay 2010). One only has to hear the robust debates of the human rights students at Curtin University to know that all is not well in Australian society.

Reflecting some community concerns that a greater focus on human rights was needed in Australia, in 2009 the federal government ran a robust consultation to establish the level of community support for introducing human rights legislation. Indeed, the level of support from those who participated in the consultation was relatively high but the government eventually announced that it would not introduce a charter of human rights, causing disappointment to many advocates. This means Australia stands out as the only western country without human rights legislation. To have had a human rights charter would have provided greater hope that human rights thinking would develop across areas of concern in Australian society. However, the federal government did announce an intention to introduce greater legislative scrutiny for compliance with Australia's international human rights obligations (Australian Government Attorney-General's Department 2010). The government also announced investment would be made into human rights education, with A\$12.4 million to be spent on programs to support such education in primary and secondary schools, the community, and the Commonwealth public sector (Gillard and McClelland 2010). As the former Australian Minister for Education, Julia Gillard, declared:

The Consultation Committee's report noted that: "Human rights can be protected and promoted effectively only if an understanding of and commitment to human rights have become a part of everyday life for all in the community." That is why we are...investing over \$12 million in a comprehensive suite of education initiatives to promote a greater understanding of human rights across the nation (Gillard 2010).

While falling short of government support for human rights legislation, this support for legislative review and human rights education is at least some development towards a greater national focus on human rights. But it remains to be seen how this proceeds, and the impact this emphasis on human rights education will have on community education programs, the public sector, and primary, secondary and tertiary education curriculums.

This is the national context within which the CHRE at Curtin University operates. We now turn to the work of the CHRE to explain our approach to human rights education.

CHRE: Curriculum and Pedagogical Framework

Human rights is a powerful framework for engaging with the world as it articulates a utopian vision on how human beings ought to treat each other. Tertiary education can help to both promote, as well as critique, such a framework by engaging with students on human rights in a dialogical manner. In Australian universities we have seen some ad hoc developments of human rights education programs. Some are located in law faculties while a few others (including at Curtin University, University of Sydney and RMIT) have developed from a multi-disciplinary paradigm.

The CHRE at Curtin University was established in 2003 to conduct research, education and advocacy in human rights. Since this time, the CHRE has engaged in education in its broadest sense, including community education, public sector consultancy and education, raising awareness about particular human rights issues, promoting understanding and debate around human rights issues, as well as education in the more formal setting of the university. At the university level, the CHRE offers postgraduate coursework degrees in human rights, as well as a Masters by Research and PhD program. The CHRE is multi-disciplinary, drawing on research and expertise from disciplines and professions such as philosophy, political science, sociology, education, health sciences, social work, law, international relations, psychology, anthropology, business and media studies. Much of the work of the CHRE also seeks to bridge the gap between scholarship and practice, a gap that has too often inhibited the effectiveness of both. A major focus is to develop a sound theoretical and conceptual base for human rights practice and education, as well as undertaking research and scholarship that is grounded in the reality of practice and people's day-to-day experience of human rights.

Accordingly, the curriculum offered by CHRE reflects a commitment to:

- The achievement, protection and promotion of human rights;
- The promotion of multi-disciplinary understandings of human rights;

- The promotion of dialogue across communities, cultures, nations and religions about human rights;
- Engaging in teaching, research, consultancy and community education to realize these commitments.

We have developed a scheme to guide our education endeavours, reflecting various levels of engagement in human rights (Briskman and Fiske 2008).

First we engage students in a *philosophical* reflection on human rights. We explore human rights ideas that have developed over centuries in order to provoke students and others to think beyond their own contexts. Through critical reflection, students engage with such questions as whether we can consider that human beings have certain rights, such as the freedoms of thought and conscience and rights to adequate food, clean water and shelter, and where these rights might stem from.

Next we explore an understanding of the *political* aspects of human rights thinking, acknowledging that the causes and solutions of most human rights issues stem from the political realm. This is beyond an understanding of party politics and instead delves into the heart of ideological beliefs and how they are played out in politics, including those areas where there are the most rugged critiques of governments such as anti-terror laws, Indigenous rights and asylum seeker rights in Australia.

An understanding of *history* is also explored. This includes, for example, understanding how the United Nations was established and how the Universal Declaration of Human Rights came into existence, as well as the international human rights conventions that followed. Understandings of the Holocaust, the World Wars and Cold War politics are interrogated as part of this examination. Closer to home in Australia, an understanding of the impact of colonization on Indigenous peoples and how the Indigenous rights and land justice movements evolved is focused on.

Then there are what might be termed *anthropological* questions investigated to seek out human rights perspectives and approaches from a non-western worldview. Human rights are often seen as western constructs with a neo-colonial agenda with little regard that human rights are vested in many cultures and religions. Debates about universal constructions of human rights (same rights for all) as opposed to cultural relativist approaches are explored here. This includes encouraging students to engage in contentious debates, such as those in relation to the wearing of the *burqa* and fe-

male circumcision, to develop an appreciation of multiple perspectives and to go beyond the public debates on these issues that are often polemical and unreflective.

Human rights from a *legal* perspective is also examined, highlighting the development of international and domestic human rights institutions and instruments, their prospects and limitations. This includes gaining an understanding of the role of non-governmental organizations in the United Nations system to demonstrate how actors other than states can contribute to human rights deliberations.

Finally, there is an emphasis on the *practical* throughout the CHRE curriculum where students are encouraged to not only understand the world through theory, but to contemplate ways to change it. Human rights spans both theory and practice. This approach recognizes students as change agents and throughout the courses offered by the CHRE they have opportunities to engage in practice-based ways that may include theater production, media involvement or immersing themselves in a human rights campaign. For example, some students work with CHRE staff on a human rights advocacy project that seeks to raise the awareness of Australian Members of Parliament regarding gender violence, and promote the adoption of a National Plan of Action to stop violence against women. Other students choose to complete an internship as the final project component of the Master of Human Rights, engaging in human rights work in the field in a variety of organizations.

The curriculum of our postgraduate courses in human rights reflects all of the above. Units are offered in human rights theory and philosophy, and human rights across cultures and religions, to explore a wide range of approaches to human rights as well as the major debates within the discourse. Particular aspects of human rights theory and practice are explored in units on human rights and development, community education and consciousness raising, human rights activism and advocacy, and human rights instruments and institutions. (See Box 1: Master of Human Rights Coursework Units). For the Master of Human Rights, the final component of the program is project-based where students can opt to complete a dissertation, or an internship with a human rights organization.

Box 1: Master of Human Rights Coursework Units

Human Rights Theory and Philosophy

This unit begins with a general discussion of what we mean by human rights, followed by an examination of the foundations of conventional human rights discourse in western philosophy. The unit then examines the development of the post-Holocaust human rights tradition, in particular the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and some contemporary human rights perspectives including human rights norms and regimes and socialization theories. Critiques of universalism are also explored from the cultural relativist, postmodern, postcolonial and feminist perspectives.

Community Education and Consciousness Raising

This unit looks at education's potential power to transform both personal and social-political realities. It looks at education as a tool for changing deeply held (and sometimes denied) prejudices such as racism, sexism or homophobia. It covers theories and examples of consciousness-raising, dialogue and non-traditional community education; techniques which can be used in working with community groups; and theater, storytelling, problem posing education, critical pedagogy, sentimental education, dialogue and other methods.

Human Rights and Development

This unit explores development by critiquing dominant models of economic development and exploring the relationship of human rights to development issues and development practice. It also focuses on colonialism and anti-colonialist practice; human rights abuses of Indigenous populations in the name of "development"; Indigenous understandings of human rights and Indigenous challenges to colonialist development; human rights, development and environmental issues; gender and development; and the role of international financial institutions in development.

Human Rights History Across Cultures and Religions

This unit provides an overview of the development of the idea of human rights and related concepts in a range of cultures and religions. Topics covered include the Enlightenment tradition and human rights; non-western traditions of human rights; the debate about cultural relativism; the role and practice of

dialogue; ideas of human rights in different religious traditions; colonialism and human rights; Indigenous understandings of human rights and perspectives on human rights protection, practice and education; and human rights in the context of globalization.

Human Rights Instruments and Institutions

This unit covers human rights treaties, conventions and declarations; the role of the UN, international law, and national law in defining, protecting and upholding human rights; the recognition of Indigenous rights, racial and ethnic minorities, women's rights, and rights of other groups; the investigation and reporting of human rights abuses; tribunals, truth commissions, etc; and the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as domestic NGOs, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

Human Rights Activism, Advocacy and Change

This unit explores the role of social movements and advocacy groups in bringing about change. It covers theories looking at power, identity politics, social movement theory, post colonial theories and others as well as exploring specific movements and methods such as Gandhi's non-violence and *satyagraha* campaigns, Fanon and the Algerian independence movement, the US civil rights struggle, Indigenous people's struggles for recognition and land, trade unions and women's movements. It also looks at political lobbying, monitoring, letter writing and other strategies.

Human Rights Issues – two optional units

These units cover one or more specific human rights issues and the issue(s) chosen for study will vary from year to year. Issues which may be covered include: refugees, Indigenous rights, women's rights, environmental rights, world poverty, children's rights, labor rights, prisons, rights of people with disabilities, aged care, etc.

A dialogical approach is adopted in the classroom for all of these units. Individual and collaborative learning (both students and lecturers) emerges through group discussions, engagement in case studies and role plays. This recognizes the high level of motivation of postgraduate students to partici-

pate in their learning, as well as the rich experiences of many of the students in the human rights field. Students are expected to prepare for classes by reading appropriate academic and non-academic literature in relation to weekly topics, encouraging them to go beyond their existing perceptions and knowledge of particular human rights issues even prior to classes. Students are also encouraged to participate, and are assessed, both verbally in class presentations as well as through their written explorations of particular topics. Half of the program units are also now offered online, providing a challenge to the CHRE to engage distance education students at the level that internal students engage in the learning process. From 2011 all of the CHRE's human rights programs will be available online.

CHRE lecturers all engage in both the theory and practice of human rights and are experienced educators. All are also engaged in ongoing human rights activism and advocacy. This reflects a shared belief that we should not just rest on the laurels of our formal postgraduate degree programs, but extend this to embrace contributions through research, advocacy, activism and public engagement, particularly with the media. In addition, we provide guest lectures to other Curtin University programs, and regularly employ guest lecturers with expertise in particular aspects of human rights to further engage and promote the knowledge base of the students in our own programs.

What is important to us is that human rights education is not passive. Although it is important to have the foundations of human rights covered at a theoretical level, the main benefit from our perspective is what we in the university sector can contribute to the creation of just societies. Part of this is exposing human rights abuses and providing an educational program that supports students who seek to be policy and civil society activists. As a number of students commented upon completing their studies:

The Master of Human Rights course has given me the opportunity to not only become more aware of human rights issues, but to develop skills to be able to do something about it!

When you have a desire to make change finding an academic 'home' is not easy. Curtin's Master of Human Rights not only provided a home, it provided a framework for all those 'good ideas' that sound fine over red wine but lack substance in practice.

Thus formal education within this framework is seen here as both an intellectual and transformative approach (Evans 2006).

Our own human rights education program brings together experienced students (for both our postgraduate coursework degrees and the Masters by Research and PhD program) from Australia and abroad. Many have worked in organizations that are involved in human rights, and others wish to do so. Our programs are framed around respectful dialogue, recognizing that we all learn from one another, students and lecturers alike. If there are two things we identify for tertiary students to gain while they are with us, apart from the academic content, it is how to engage in respectful but persuasive dialogue and how to be effective activists from both inside and outside organizational structures.

Beyond the Classroom

The formal side of education—what we teach, who we teach and how we teach—is only one part of the CHRE’s human rights work. When our Centre was reviewed in 2008, we were delighted that the external reviewer praised us for three levels of activity—teaching, research and activism—acknowledging the importance of an engagement in human rights beyond the classroom.

One of the most important aspects of human rights education is giving people the courage to work towards change, even though for some it can be a risky business. Human rights educators need to be actively engaged in working towards change and to be role models to those we want to take with us. The CHRE has actively participated in a range of human rights projects to this end. Ongoing research is conducted by the CHRE into the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees in Australia, including the mandatory detention of asylum seekers who arrive by boat. This research has informed a great level of CHRE engagement with the media and general public to raise awareness around these issues, as well as the lobbying of government. CHRE advocacy has also supported calls for stopping violence against women in Australia through commencing a lobbying project aimed at educating Members of Parliament about this issue, and bringing about the adoption of a National Plan of Action to stop this violence. In addition, the CHRE is involved with the disability rights movement both locally and nationally, challenging new forms of welfare governance that are increasingly puni-

tive, especially for women with disabilities. Working with a diverse range of disability civil society groups, the CHRE has supported the development of policy submissions to national inquiries into disability and immigration, and disability support. The Centre has also helped to found the Australian Sociological Association–Critical Disability Studies group to ensure these human rights issues are captured within research agendas across Australia.

The activism of students, both past and present, continues to be a source of inspiration to CHRE staff. International students often arrive having had considerable experience as human rights advocates in their own countries and return after their studies to continue their work, sometimes at great risk to themselves. Similarly, local students often bring to the classroom their experiences in human rights work both here and overseas. Some students commence employment with international and national organizations after their studies with us, equipped with a human rights framework that they proceed to apply to their work. What is clear from many of our students is the ongoing collaborations they enjoy with their former classmates. As a former student remarked,

working towards a more peaceful and just world can sometimes feel like a lonely journey. I found the connections I made, and the encouragement I received enabled me to continue this work with renewed hope and even excitement!

For example, in Perth a number of former students continue to work in the feminist collective they established while studying at the CHRE. In this sense, the CHRE human rights programs provide the space for the development of new human rights collectives, helping to further the growth of a human rights culture in Australia and beyond.

Contributing to a Human Rights Culture

Developing a human rights culture in Australian society is a tall order, especially without legislation to back up this activity. Despite this limitation, there are a few priority areas that need the engagement of human rights educators. The first is the professions where there is a need to ensure that professional practice is consistent with a human rights framework. Although most people would think there was such compliance there are examples to show this is not the case. For example, the complicity of doctors in the Nazi

regime in Germany is well known (Kater 1989). A lesser known example is the complicity of health professionals in immigration detention practices in Australia, including force-feeding and the use of chemical constraints for deportation (Briskman et al 2010).

Social work is one profession that operates in controlled settings where people have their rights stripped away – such as child protection, criminal justice and mental health systems. Human rights educators have a role to play in professional development in the crafting of professional codes of ethics and in encouraging critically reflective practice as one way of fostering change (Nipperess and Briskman 2009). One of the CHRE's PhD projects is actively engaged in such an endeavour in relation to social work.

Organizations are where human rights educators can play another role. In Victoria (as in the Australian Capital Territory), unlike at the national level, there is a charter of human rights and all public authorities are required to comply with its provisions in law and in practice. Thanks to the vision of Mmaskape Sejoe, who heads the Human Rights Unit at the Victoria Police, there have been endeavours to move beyond the legal framework to enabling the police to see how the development of a human rights culture can produce human rights compliance. Through the CHRE's educational programs with the Victorian Police, we have observed marked shifts in the approach of participants in courses who grapple with issues as far-flung as traffic offences, police cell practices and multicultural approaches. The CHRE also hosts regular public events on human rights issues, helping to raise public awareness of these issues and contributing to a better informed human rights community. To date in 2010 these events have highlighted the abuses of women in Papua New Guinea, Afghanistan, and Australia, the debates around the human rights consultation process in Australia, the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees, the engagement of the resources sector in human rights, and transnational activism in relation to China, Okinawa and Guam. These events are often collaborative exercises with other human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, asylum seeker and refugee support agencies, and other Curtin University schools.

Further Contributions to Social and Political Change

Influencing government is perhaps the key way to foster social and political change but this is the hardest to achieve especially when we position our-

selves as activist scholars, research activists or policy activists. It is important that human rights educators have a strong knowledge and experiential base if they do not want their views discredited. One example in relation to the CHRE is asylum seeker advocacy. From 2005 to 2008 our Centre was involved with the Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work in the convening of the People's Inquiry into Detention which produced *Human Rights Overboard: Seeking Asylum in Australia* (Briskman, Latham and Goddard 2008). This activity took some courage as we did not have any authority to conduct this citizen's inquiry except by virtue of being citizens of a democratic nation. From this project, we amassed first hand material from people experienced in detention matters—former detainees, professionals, advocates—to present to government and others. We started off as subversives but ended up in the mainstream, particularly as the book received a human rights award in 2008. It was the sort of activity that seemed out-of-left field for academic educators but ended up putting social work human rights academics to the forefront.

Braving the media can also take courage, another endeavour the CHRE engages in. Most educators are not media savvy and are even media shy. But the experience of CHRE staff has proven it is worth taking the risk because it sparks debate. With the increasingly negative rhetoric being reported in the media around the arrival of asylum seekers by boat to Australia leading up to the 2010 federal election, the CHRE actively engaged with media sources to increase the dissemination of well-informed opinions on the issue. Online media outlets were particularly good for this as they generate strings of responses and help gauge community opinion, although one needs a "thick skin" when reading the replies.

Future Prospects for Human Rights Education

The experiences of the CHRE highlight that there is a place for human rights education in the university in both the narrow and broad senses of the term. Our vision would be to see human rights education spread so that it is a core unit in all university courses but this is unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future. In the meantime we can do our best with our own students, guest lectures and promoting human rights in other educational activities and education sectors. Challenges for our future lie in responding to increasing numbers of students wishing to engage in our courses online, allowing for

our educational programs to reach beyond the limits of Perth. These students nudge us towards an increasing engagement with new technologies that define new forms of interpersonal communication and collaboration between students and staff.

Most importantly we will continue to perform what some call a public intellectual role but what we would prefer to call a public advocacy and activist role. This role continues to be the very reason for the CHRE's engagement in research and education. It reflects our belief that engaging in research and education in the human rights field brings with it a responsibility to use this knowledge through participating in processes of social and political change. Given the continued social and political reticence in Australia to further embrace a human rights framework at the federal level, there is much work to be done.

Note:

For more information on the Centre for Human Rights Education at Curtin University, please visit the following website: <http://info.humanrights.curtin.edu.au/>

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