

Teaching Human Rights as a Tool for Social Transformation

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“When I was young and free and my imagination had no limits, I dreamed of changing the world. As I grew older and wiser, I discovered the world would not change, so I shortened my sights somewhat and decided to change only my country. But it too seemed immovable! As I grew into my twilight years, in one last desperate attempt, I settled for changing only my family, those closer to me, but alas, they would have none of it. And now as I lie on my deathbed, I suddenly realized: If I had only changed myself first, then by example I would have changed my family. From their inspiration and encouragement, I would then have been able to better my country and, who knows, I may have even changed the WORLD!”

Sean Covey, *7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*, 1998

I studied to become a teacher in the Philippine Normal University (PNU). There I was taught to become an agent of social transformation. My rigorous training and experiences with human rights organizations (UNESCO Club, Amnesty International, etc) during my college days impressed upon me that to become a vehicle of change in a society beset with problems of material and moral degradation, a strong commitment to uphold human rights must be pursued at the classroom level.

I have been teaching for 10 years now. I spent my first three years of teaching in an international school. In a multicultural setting of students with different social, racial, nationality and cultural backgrounds, I felt inadequate in terms of knowledge and skills but passionate in bringing about change in my small sphere of undertakings. Interacting with primary students from families of well-to-do expatriates, Overseas Filipino Workers, and local elite became my day-to-day challenge.

I transferred to PNU where I taught different social science courses such as Sociology, Philippine Constitution and Government, Basic Economics and sometimes Human Rights

and Peace Education (elective course for Bachelor of Science in Education - Social Science majors). I was confronted with another set of young teenagers coming from the different islands of the Philippines who wanted to pursue education as their life career.

I subsequently concentrated on teaching education-related courses like Teaching Strategies in Social Studies, Foundations of Education, and Curriculum Development and Instruction.

One particular experience happened on my second year of teaching in PNU. I was responsible for the graduating class of very gifted and talented primary students in the university's

demonstration school. A traffic accident on the road near the school that killed one of my students prompted them to take action. They decided to investigate the traffic situation on the road - how many vehicles pass, their average speed, the percentage of drivers who would have been unable to stop quickly to avoid accidents, and the number of students crossing the road during peak hours. The findings were compared with the local government's guidelines for the construction of a pedestrian overpass. The students wrote a report on the degree of risks involved in crossing the road to reach the school and the best location for the overpass. They included data (in figures, bar charts, graphs, photographs) and suggestions in their report. The initial response of the local government was not encouraging. Back at the classroom, we discussed their rights as citizens not only as students. Out of concern for the safety of fellow students and a strong will to solve the problem, they gave different proposals. I also invited the representatives of a local non-governmental organization and the local government for a dialogue. Although the school was quite hesitant to pursue the activity, the students themselves convinced the school principal that the forum would be carried out in an environment of mutual respect. The local press association also facilitated the move to invite local government officials to the school.

The dialogue became a very good vehicle for the students to practice their civic responsibilities and apply what they have learned from our class. The representative of the local government promised to study the proposal and report to us the action that they would take to solve the problem. When I finished my assignment in the school after a year, we received a letter from the mayor's office informing us of the construction of a pedestrian overpass on the location that we have suggested. As a teacher I felt inspired to continue this newfound strategy.

Teaching college students calls for discussion of human rights issues that affect the situ-

ation in the "larger classroom", the country. Corruption, election scandal, failed coup d'états, killing of journalists and political activists were discussed almost daily inside the classroom. They were linked to discussions on international human rights instruments. Resource speakers from the government, academe and civil society were invited in my class regardless of their political and ideological orientation in order to deepen the students' awareness of the political instability happening in the country.

The classroom dialogues and discussions were translated into a declaration calling for the protection of human rights amidst political problems. The declaration was passed on to a larger audience in the university community to solicit support from student organizations and university authorities. The declaration became a voice of the students in their firm stand against continuous human rights violations perpetuated not only by the state but also by non-state actors. In order to reach as many students as possible, the declaration and statement of action were reproduced through electronic, print and broadcast mediums. The students participated in small-group discussions, debates in radio and television programs, and internet discussion groups to create and influence public opinion regarding the issue. These activities reminded me of the student involvement in the 2001 "people power" that led to the removal from office of then President Joseph E. Estrada. The PNU students responded quickly to the call for people to express their indignation at the attempted suppression of evidence at the impeachment trial of President Estrada.

Contrary to the belief of some teachers that teaching human rights encourages non-conformist behavior and extreme activism among students, it makes students more accountable for their action especially when condition of mutual respect and trust has been developed in the classroom. In a Sociology class, some students questioned the existence of God, the

power of prayer and belief in faith in understanding Catholic practices. Most of their classmates tried to isolate them, called them names, and deprived them of information coming from other professors. As a result, these students attended the class less frequently and failed to submit the required assignments on due date.

I felt that teaching concepts such as social institutions, cultural processes and Filipino values, all covered in the course syllabus, was not enough. I have to emphasize religious tolerance as a value alongside the teaching of freedom of religion and belief as a human right. Although it was not part of the course content, I discussed with the students cases of discrimination based on religion reported by Amnesty International like the cases of Falung Gong in China, the Jehovah Witness in Singapore and other cases in Africa. I shared with them a story from a teaching module developed by Miriam Peace Education Center. It is a story of a Muslim woman who was discriminated in Manila:

Last May 2000, while the fighting between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the government's military was intense, I decided to go to Manila with my family to flee from the armed conflict that had adversely affected my village in Mindanao. I lived with my relatives in the big city and everyday I went out to look for work. As a Muslim woman, I wore the traditional head cover. I found some Manilans heartless because they jeered at me in the streets as I walked and called me names. They told me "Go home to Mindanao! You terrorists!" The taunt seemed to have come from their identification of Muslims with Abu Sayyaf, the group notorious for kidnapping and killing their hostages. On television and the radio, I could hear commentators urging the government to exterminate the Muslims because they are troublemakers. I also could not find any work. No employer seemed to be interested in me and I felt it was because I am a Muslim.

The story became a springboard for the students to denounce discrimination based on religion. Some felt guilty for their action toward their fellow classmates. Some became aware that their actions were part and parcel of discrimination and prejudice. Some even discovered that there are different religious orientations, not just the Roman Catholic religion. Some students shared their feelings about the topic and the bad experiences they suffered because of different religious beliefs. They said that the reason for their frequent absence in class was the feeling that they were not accepted. The whole class asked for forgiveness from this group of students for the misdeeds and promised to help them with the missed assignments and projects. These students together with their classmates are now very active in the Interfaith Youth Project of the UNESCO Youth Club of the university, where I serve as adviser. They organize music festivals, camps and peace-building encounter with other youth groups in the university to eradicate prejudice and discrimination based on religion.

Teaching human rights concepts and issues in the Philippines is a commitment, not just a process of transferring knowledge and skills. It calls for a personal transformation of shifting age-old paradigms regarding myths in teaching human rights. While many seasoned teachers believe that teaching civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights as defined under the international human rights standards is the arena of liberal arts disciplines, classroom experiences reveal otherwise.

All these encouraging experiences taught me that teaching human rights is not only a great task for social transformation but needs commitment on the part of the teacher to make things happen. As the saying goes "*If I had only changed myself first, then by example I would have changed my family. From their inspiration and encouragement, I would then have been able to better my country and, who knows, I may have even changed the WORLD!*"