global-e



Do Rights Belong in the Classroom?

February 17, 2009 | Volume 3 | Issue 2
Robin Kirk

The history of what is studied in universities is long and abundant in controversy. In his old age, Plato once complained that his star student, Aristotle, was “kick[ing] me, as foals do their mothers when they are born” by refuting his teachings.

In more recent times, we’ve seen battles erupt over area, gender and ethnic studies. Some lament a perceived eclipse in traditional disciplines like history and

philosophy. Others argue for an expanded and shifting menu that includes new subcategories that reflect the emerging regions or issues of the moment.

One newcomer that hasn't generated much talk is human rights. I teach a course (full disclosure here) at Duke University that begins with Homer's account of how Achilles desecrated Hector's body during the Trojan War and the nearly 1,200-page letter indigenous Peruvian writer Guamán Poma de Ayala wrote to Spain's King Phillip III. The letter contains 398 line drawings, many depicting the killings and acts of torture by conquistadores that Poma de Ayala asked the king to halt.

I believe that the study of human rights should go well beyond the category of the law and should incorporate questions about how human societies struggle over questions of what is moral and who is human.

But the entrance of human rights into the university classroom is relatively recent. The first American university to create a human rights program was New York's Columbia University. Founded in 1977, the Center for the Study of Human Rights sought, according to its own mission statement, "[t]o integrate Human Rights into the intellectual and programmatic life of the University."

One area that Columbia has focused on is the training of young people from around the world. Individuals from Latin America and poor US communities can apply for a four-month residency to study advocacy, networking, and academic human rights courses.

I believe that the study of human rights should go well beyond the category of the law and should incorporate questions about how human societies struggle over questions of what is moral and who is human.

Another way human rights has entered the university is through law and public policy schools. A number of law schools have human rights clinics where students can take part in hands-on litigation. Notre Dame now offers a J.S.D. (the equivalent of a doctorate) in International Human Rights Law along with the more common LL.M. in International Human Rights Law.

One of the more interesting areas is the emergence of undergraduate human rights

concentrations and programs. In 2003, Bard College began offering a B.A. in human rights. Students take courses across disciplines like history, literature, anthropology, economics and film and media. They can also work with local human rights groups, such as those working with migrants.

The degree doesn't assume human rights are beyond criticism. According to the program web site, students are encouraged to treat human rights as an intellectual question and challenge orthodoxies even as they may contemplate a human rights career.

At Duke, we are developing a human rights certificate that students can earn along with their more traditional degrees. In keeping with Duke's emphasis on community service, students will be required to work in a human rights group, dealing with issues like the death penalty, immigration or extraordinary rendition (many of the CIA flights originate just two hours southeast of campus). In the summer of 2009, Duke will bring 10 students to Northern Ireland to work with groups trying to bridge the persistent sectarian divide that was at the root of the Troubles.

Are students getting human rights jobs with these degrees? In fact, the whole notion of human rights as a career is a new one dating from as recently as the 1990s. When I graduated with a BA from the University of Chicago in 1983, my goal was to become a writer and foreign correspondent. Without the cash for journalism school, I opted for the tried and true route of heading to troubled countries (Peru and Colombia) and freelance writing. Years later, I realized that I didn't want to just cover political violence, but work to protect the brave men and women who risked their lives for human rights.

I got myself hired by Human Rights Watch not because I had a degree, but because I cared passionately about my countries and knew the "ground truth." Trained as a journalist – one of the few professions that continues to value chutzpah more than a degree – I was able to get in, write, then figure out how to get people, including American policymakers, to care.

Realistically, however, few student will manage to – or even want to – work in human rights. But a human rights education will help make them into informed global citizens.

But things have changed. Increasingly, the ranks of human rights groups are filled with lawyers, Ph.D.s and people who spent their youth in multiple Masters programs (not hopping trucks or searching out guerrillas and paramilitaries, like me). In some ways, this is laudable; sixty years since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was ratified, human rights can be a career that absorbs specialists in refugees, the environment, public health as well as the law.

Realistically, however, few student will manage to – or even want to – work in human rights. But a human rights education will help make them into informed global citizens. They will have a passing knowledge not only of the darker side of human nature, but also of the successful movements that have moved us all away from evils like slavery, torture and discrimination. In my view, the study of human rights – like the study of history or literature – is a rich way to learn how to be an adult in a complex world.

And it wouldn't hurt if a few of our students came away inspired to right the wrongs that still confront us.

Tags

human rights

higher education



Robin Kirk is the Director of the Duke Human Rights Center at Duke University.

View PDF