**Teaching Human Rights**

*An ethical landscape*

Human rights is ostensibly a topic ideally suited to the several agendas of study abroad. In practice, however, this area of potential investigation receives muted attention. A preoccupation with the specifics of “cultural” and national contexts has created a limited range of vision: metaphorical myopia in which trans-national, global topics are relegated to secondary relevance. As a consequence, intensive microscopic examinations of the veins on the leaf have rendered the forest obscure. The recurrent focus is on matters of “cultural” difference and national distinctions at the expense of substantial considerations of common concerns that transcend those national differences. In that process, opportunities to study global issues, the context in which nations have developed and function, are lost. The teaching of human rights would offer perspectives on global dynamics and create some insight into the nature of the interdependence of nations.

Human rights also raises the critical question of the degree to which ethical assumptions are uncritically embedded in approaches to the teaching of disciplines that are based around ideals. Peace studies and civil rights might also raise similar questions: in short, are we teaching or preaching?

In the academic context, there needs to be a clear understanding of learning objectives. There is a substantial distinction between these intended outcomes: to expose students to issues related to the subject matter and, as a consequence, to inspire them to become advocates and activists; to teach students the histories and philosophies associated with the subject and to lead them towards some familiarity with the complex political and ethical questions related to the subject. The students in the latter case may or may not become advocates or activists but, in any case, conversion is not an integral learning objective. These
are not, of course, mutually exclusive or absolute educational aspirations but a matter of emphasis. That said, the ethical and political foundations upon which the course is constructed should be explicitly defined so that students and colleagues can make informed judgements about the legitimacy of the approach.

We do, however, need to recognize that all education contains a set of ethical assumptions; it is not value free. It is assumed that knowledge is better than ignorance; that it is better to read books than to burn them; that learning usually confers status. Except in the most totalitarian of environments (where knowledge may be seen as a threat and ignorance a form of social control), the value of wisdom and erudition is embedded in the social construction of hierarchies: professors, teachers, sages, gurus, Brahmin have an elevated status based upon the fact that they know more than those they teach. Thus, implicit in the idea of education is the concept of the value of knowledge whether that be expressed in terms of individual enrichment, social and political development, or some combination of those.

There are circumstances in which the moral value of what is taught performs an explicit ideological function, most obviously when the subject matter relates to religious or political ideologies. The function of education in those circumstances may be to ensure a level of compliance with prevailing orthodoxies. However, even within the liberal educational tradition in which the ostensible function of education is, at some level, to question orthodoxies, there are (contested) values embedded in the educational curriculum. In some contexts, that is entirely explicit: an obvious example would be the Marxist historian. In contrast, Pure Mathematics may be an example of a discipline in which ethical values are implicit and located within the more general value given to education as a whole.

*Education abroad and the ethical agenda*
In the context of education abroad, there are ethical assumptions that may be unspoken and unrecognized. These include the notion that diverse social and political environments enrich learning through engagement with some kind of difference: the domestic environment does not represent a monopoly on truth or wisdom: a view of the world that is essentially inclusive and liberal. A parochial view might, in contrast, perceive the world elsewhere as under-developed, of less value or interest, in need of improvement; this is the classic assumption behind political colonialism and a missionary agenda. In contrast, education abroad recognizes the potential for diverse environments to demonstrate that what we believe and know is neither necessarily superior nor inclusive of that which is true or of significance.

These distinctions may be demonstrated by constructing an entirely theoretical spectrum along which it is possible to place student intentions in studying abroad. The following are extremities of variables rather than descriptions of what may drive specific student participation. At one extreme end of a theoretical spectrum is what we might call the missionary tendency: the notion that the student has qualities, abilities or insights that are missing in the foreign environment. These may range from a knowledge of the true God that the student has an obligation to transmit to the spiritually bereft locals, to a belief that the student has the capacity to enrich (even transform) the lives of poor, deprived natives (these parody the Mormon Mission and a perverse form of service learning).

At the other end of this motivational spectrum is the idea that “abroad”, wherever it is, is a richer, more sophisticated environment than that of home. Prioritizing the transformative power of “abroad” implies that artistic, social and political diversity within the USA is of less intrinsic interest and has less educational potential as a learning environment.
Both of these extreme forms of imagined engagement have roots in American political and intellectual history, particularly that of the nineteenth century. They also persist, in some form or another, as formative assumptions in the construction of the idea of “abroad.”

Manifest Destiny encapsulated a notion of American exceptionalism that had a long tradition within the development of the national myth. The term Manifest Destiny was coined in 1845 by John L. O'Sullivan who envisaged a “destiny of growth”. At the root of this version of American identity is a unique combination of intimacy with divinity, and ideals that align with myths of origin. As early as 1630 John Winthrop envisioned a role for the nascent country that combined continuity with biblical sources and recognition of a unique responsibility: "We shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us." Those dynamics found further expression in the Monroe Doctrine and became a recurrent element in national rhetoric.

In January 1961, for example, President-elect John F. Kennedy cited Winthrop’s vision: “Today the eyes of all people are truly upon us—and our governments, in every branch, at every level, national, State, and local, must be as a city upon a hill—constructed and inhabited by men aware of their grave trust and their great responsibilities.”. Barack Obama also echoed the idea of America’s unique responsibility in his second inaugural address: “What makes us exceptional -- what makes us American -- is our allegiance to an idea articulated in a declaration made more than two centuries ago.”

In this persistent version of the national myth, Americans have a special responsibility to bring enlightenment and enrichment to the world.

In paradoxical contrast, there is a recurrent notion that Europe, in particular, is a richer, socially more complex environment: a dreamed landscape with profound potential to
transmit wisdom, social grace and a form of cosmopolitan sophistication. In this context, the American does not bring exceptional abilities but is a youthful innocent anxious to learn of the arcane mysteries of the Old World. That view of Europe is recurrent in American literary history, exemplified by Washington Irving, Henry James, Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald, Henry Miller and a host of other American writers. Washington Irving defines the European world as space in which social and historical depth contrasts with the relative superficiality and naivety of home. This represents the holy grail sought by some students in studying abroad. It is a kind of secular pilgrimage:

… Europe held forth the charm of storied and poetical association. There were to be seen the masterpieces of art, the refinements of highly-cultivated society, the quaint peculiarities of ancient and local custom. My native country was full of youthful promise: Europe was rich in the accumulated treasures of age. Her very ruins told the history of times gone by, and every mouldering stone was a chronicle.

The motivations of American students in studying abroad are unlikely to be explicitly shaped by these theoretical models but they offer a set of conflicting narratives that, in one way or another, connect with the ways in which the agenda of study abroad has evolved: as an opportunity to contribute to the international environment as an idealistic participant and, conversely, as a way in which to become enriched by the sophisticated mysteries to be found in the worlds beyond domestic borders.

The values inherent in any educational enterprise, at home or abroad, may be unspoken and a matter of embedded assumption. However, making those unspoken values an implicit part of the educational enterprise would serve to enrich student learning. In studying abroad, students are part of a tradition of engagement: a context that has shaped
their own experiences. We do not spring uniquely formed into the world but carry with us the baggage of our histories.

The example of peace studies

In short, teaching and learning agendas would be richer, broader and more inclusive if students and their teachers integrated the materials they teach with an awareness of the values embedded therein. An enhanced level of such consciousness would give students abroad an opportunity to understand the contexts in which they study. Those contexts are not neutral.

There are then areas of academic knowledge that would benefit from some kind of analytical deconstruction not necessarily so as to devalue the enterprise, but rather to reveal assumptions. A brief consideration of peace studies highlights issues that are equally relevant to the teaching of human rights. The extracts cited below are adapted from a variety of current syllabi and are indicative of learning objectives that are potentially problematic:

…how nonviolent conflict can be used to right social wrongs…how their chosen vocation or discipline contributes to building sustainable peace. Examine their own role and responsibility in contributing to a more peaceful and just community, nation, and world. Only when each person and each sector contributes appropriately to this effort can a more genuinely peaceful society result.

In practice, of course, the teaching of these courses may be exemplary and students may be invited to examine the underlying assumptions in a critical manner. The rhetoric of peace studies, nevertheless, embeds a core question: is the underlying intention to encourage activism or is it to raise key questions about the nature of peace? Precisely the same question needs to be raised in relation to teaching human rights.
The rhetoric suggests that peace is an ultimate aspiration, which might preclude the consideration that there is such a thing as a just war. The common collocation of “peace and justice” may also not necessarily stand up to the scrutiny of history. The simple example of Apartheid demonstrates a potential flaw. Nelson Mandela (frequently and strangely given an iconic status in the peace agenda) and his comrades in the ANC understood that the choices facing the anti-Apartheid activist were between peace or justice. His statement at the Rivonia Trial on the 20 April 1964 signifies that justice can, in the circumstances prevailing only be achieved through violent resistance:

Firstly, we believed that as a result of Government policy, violence by the African people had become inevitable… Secondly, we felt that without violence there would be no way open to the African people to succeed in their struggle against the principle of white supremacy.

Mandela’s speech raises key questions about the nature of peace. The assumption that it equates with justice is not inevitable. Students should be taught to examine other challenges to that assumption including the American War of Independence, the Russian Revolution, the Hungarian Uprising and so on.

**The example of human rights**

The challenge of teaching subject areas with explicit ethical content is to retain the integrity of learning objectives. It may be that the intention of a course is to create activists committed to becoming disciples in the given cause. Unless we define the purpose of education as the inculcation of an ideological agenda, that proposition sits uneasily and uncomfortably in the context of liberal education.
As an area of investigation human rights is multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary to the point where it challenges the traditional parameters through which we define knowledge. Boundaries between disciplines are fragile, temporary and artificial. The growth of multi-disciplinary approaches in study abroad reflects the convergence of a number of dynamics: in the broadest context, radical alterations to conditions of our environments, and the pace of that change, makes new modes of analysis almost inevitable; a growing awareness of the force of globalization (in all its paradoxical shapes) undermines the credibility of traditional perspectives; study abroad adds another dimension of disturbance to those complexities: geographical dislocation and disruption combines with the challenge of new concepts to enforce radical disconnection with traditional modes of understanding the world.

Creative education abroad integrates subject study with situational and experiential learning and, thus, expands learning environments in an intentional, strategic manner. Challenging assumptions behind teaching and learning is part of an intellectual obligation intensified by the conjunction of new ideas in new environments. The teaching of human rights aligns with those innovative dynamics.

The colonial critique

An awareness of deeply contested and paradoxical contexts is an essential aspect of the teaching of human rights. It impacts upon the ways in which we consider history, and in the manner in which we perceive our reality. It is also a matter of matter of historical and contemporary controversy.

By way of example, a recurrent and standard critique of the 1948 Declaration on Human Rights is that it is a product of western values: a form of moral imperialism. That narrative derives from a post-colonial assumption that predominantly Western European and
Christian values are embedded within the text. Thus, according to this narrative, the Declaration was an attempt to impose a set of alien values upon emergent nations. In 1948, it is a matter of fact that African countries had no part in the construction of the Declaration. Paradoxically and simultaneously however, it was a source of inspiration in the anti-colonial struggles in the second half of the twentieth century not least for Julius Nyerere, the first President of Tanzania. In 1961, in his first address to the United Nations Nyerere affirmed the Declaration as a benchmark for the newly emergent African nations:

> The underlying theme of the Universal Declaration, that of human brotherhood, regardless of race, colour or creed, is the basic principle of which we ourselves … and we believe other peoples in Africa and other parts of the world, have been struggling to implement.

The critique of the Declaration of Human Rights as a form of colonial intrusion coexists with the fact that it was an inspiration in the anti-colonial struggle. The ideals embedded in the Declaration were critical to the politics of liberation.

Furthermore, simple statistics suggest that the view of the Declaration as an extension of Western, Christian colonialism is, at least, worthy of challenge. Of the 48 signatories, 32 were not European countries. 11 European countries signed the declaration, less than 25% of the total. 12 signatories were not formally Christian countries. 17 of the signatories represented Latin America. While African nations were not part of the UN process, the ethics embedded in the Declaration were inspirational in the anti-colonial struggle.

Post-colonial denigration of the human rights agenda is arguably a distortion of historical reality. Similarly, suspect is the assumption that colonialism undermined human rights whilst post-colonialism brought improvements in the rights of liberated citizens.
By way of illustration, post-colonial Hong Kong has not seen enhanced freedom or greater self-determination. The leadership of the liberated confederation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland may demonstrate further uncomfortable truths: Robert Mugabe emerged as the leader of what had been called Southern Rhodesia and became Zimbabwe; Hastings Banda led Malawi (formerly Nyasaland); and Kenneth Kaunda, Zambia (Northern Rhodesia). It would take some significant act of selective imagination to see this trio as unequivocally better custodians of human rights than the colonial administrations that preceded them.

In practice, post-colonial governments in Africa did not prioritize the liberation of the people in any noticeable way. For most of the population, post-colonial life was less prosperous and less secure. In many cases the absence of colonial controls led to a widespread increase in corruption. The lifting of restraints imposed by the colonial powers, released violent forces and oppressive practice.

This is not a preamble to a defence of colonialism, nor is it an expression of some kind of imperialistic nostalgia. It is intended rather to draw attention to an uncomfortable truth. There are many contexts in which post-colonialism made life worse rather than better for most of the population. The record of post-colonialism in Africa was, for the most part and with noble exceptions, marked by governments that were corrupt, incompetent and, sometimes, brutally cruel. Many of them still exhibit a disregard for the welfare of their peoples that would have deeply shocked the colonial administrators. For most of the citizens (apart from a privileged elite) the transition from colonial to post-colonial in Africa led to no marked increase in prosperity, security, democratic potency or the maintenance of human rights.

It may be that human rights have been made ambiguous and complex by history but they nevertheless, we might argue, offer a necessary set of benchmarks against which we can
recognise and condemn barbarism, inhumanity and cruelty. Post-colonial narratives, combined with cultural and ethical relativism, have created an environment in which it becomes permissible to make those benchmarks conditional and problematic. However, if we dismiss or denigrate the principles of human rights, what values may offer credible moral alternative? If notions of civilisation are hopelessly compromised, what is left? Where are the limits of tolerance? Cultural relativism, embedded in study abroad, contradicts the moral imperatives implicit in the idea of human rights that are, theoretically, universal, absolute and applicable across all political, national, and social structures.

**Human rights and national sovereignty**

A core question embedded in the notion of human rights is, then, the concept of universality. In practice the word “universal” is a tautology; in so far as these rights apply to humans, they are applicable to all. Concepts of European human rights or African human rights may have political utility but they are redundant because universality overrides regional fragmentation.

A source of political controversy derives from universality. The sovereign powers of nations are compromised by the theoretical obligation to align with principles defined by others that may contradict national will, customs or ideologies. That reflects the fact that the Declaration of Human Rights emerged precisely out of the failure of nation states to maintain basic humane principles in the first 50 years of the twentieth century, as H.G. Wells indicated: “These sovereign governments have given us nothing but inconclusive wars on a larger and larger scale, and we have to get rid of them all.” There is a real sense in which the principles of universal rights emerged from the hideous ashes of the holocaust: from the systematic bombing of civilian populations. These and many similar outrages destroyed the notion of a rational world. The nation could no longer be trusted with the fate of humanity.
The persistent power of nations to violate human rights, and the relatively ineffectual mechanisms to punish those violations, has undermined the credibility of the idea of universality. Consequently, civil rights are perceived as far more significant because they are defined and guaranteed by national law. Without denying that political reality, there is an obvious transaction between the principles of universal human rights and the legal implementation of civil rights within the nation state. Furthermore, the fact that ideals are not necessarily universally applied does not, surely, make them devoid of ethical power. (The meek did not, after all, inherit much of the earth but that does not render worthless the Sermon on the Mount). In terms of education abroad it also implies that what unites us is equally significant as the forces that divide us: a principle that subverts priorities given to “cultural” and national characteristics. The teaching of human rights suggests an expanded agenda for our research, teaching and learning.

Ideologies in conflict

Discussions of human rights resonate with history and contemporary reality in many complex ways, manifestly in helping students understand the great ideological divides that have shaped our experience. An emphasis on political rights relates to the ideas of liberal democracy: priority is given to, for example, the right to vote, to worship, not to be arbitrarily detained. In defining human rights in economic terms, the emphasis shifts to issues such as the right to work, to education, to healthcare: rights that ally more clearly with state intervention and control.

This is another dimension of the diverse ways in which freedom may be constructed. Freedom “to” and freedom “from” imply different models of state engagement. Freedom to may be defined variously as: vote, travel, worship and so on – an enabling philosophy which limits the role of government. Freedom from, in contrast, may be defined in terms of free
from hunger, homelessness, discrimination, poverty: a condition that implies more extensive state control. In embryonic terms, those distinctions embody the divergent principles behind liberal democracy and state socialism.

Arguably the great ideological division in our times has been between the values of individualism and collectivism: human rights belongs most clearly to ideas of collectivism. The obligations we have to each other are, by implication, more significant than individual desires. At the geo-political level, human rights (the collectivist ethic) supersede the individual priorities of the nation.

Teaching human rights, in short, places students at the center of those ideological divisions that have fundamentally created the conditions in which they live.

**What students learn**

In studying human rights students have the opportunity to understand that all learning contains ethical assumptions and that, consequently, an understanding of those assumptions enriches teaching and learning. This will also challenge students to examine their own ethical values and assumptions. Are they, for example, grounded in the context of domestic moralities or inspired by global principles, or shaped by a pragmatic synthesis of both?

The history of human rights also opens a door to understanding the dynamics of global history and politics. Trans-national institutions emerged because of the failure of nations. Simultaneously, the ideological and political schisms that fragmented the twentieth century resonate with the ethical complexities, paradoxes and tensions accumulated around this topic.

In short, this discussion demonstrates the rich potential of human rights in the field of international education. Study abroad is ideally suited to achieve two paradoxical objectives:
to demonstrate the importance of national difference and to demonstrate the importance of values that transcend national difference.

However, a key question has to be are we teaching or preaching? If we are teaching rights, we are engaging students with key questions that impact upon their reality. If we are preaching rights, we ought to be in the pulpit. If we are aiming to create a new generation of activists, we ought to be engaged in political action. If our aim is to develop consciousness of paradoxes and challenges, we are creating a field of study that is both relevant and challenging. Both of those aspirations may have moral validity. It is simply that one of these objectives belongs in the classroom and the other does not.

Notes


Obama, Barak. Second Inaugural Address, January 21, 2013
