



Key Concepts:
**A Feminist Approach to
Human Rights Education**

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Key Concepts:
A Feminist Approach to Human Rights Education

Introduction

RATIONALE

Developed for the *Stanford Human Rights Education Initiative* (SHREI), this curriculum project examines connections among Gender Studies, feminist theory, and human rights movements around the world.

In *Teaching To Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks asserts that “learning is a place where paradise can be created” (207). Supporting this startlingly idealistic claim, hooks advocates for educational practices that will lead not only to students’ personal liberation but also to their commitment to shape a more just and humane world. Inspired by her ideas, I focus here on key concepts developed by hooks and other feminist scholars:



- *dignity*
- *gender*
- *feminism*
- *global citizenship*

Only one of these terms—*dignity*—appears in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR), which was adopted by the United Nations in 1948. At that time, the concept of universal human dignity provided the core ontological rationale for developing a list of universal human rights. Since then, the concepts *gender*, *feminism*, and *global citizenship* have become central to human rights discourse, as writings by scholars and activists such as Allida Black, Charlotte Bunch, Rhatna Ghosh, Virginia Held, and William Talbott make clear (Black 133-55; Bunch 29-39; Ghosh 81-95; Held 141-55; Talbott 87-112).

By attending to these four concepts—*dignity*, *gender*, *feminism*, and *global citizenship*—my work highlights both the strengths and the limitations of the 1948 UDHR. Studied together, these concepts indicate the way forward on the journey toward a just and equitable future. My project provides a map of this journey, along with activities for guiding students as they explore the terrain of contemporary human rights.

A MAP OF THE CURRICULUM

This SHREI project presents its four key concepts through four curricular units, or chapters, each with a series of activities that can easily be adapted for use in courses in many disciplines.

Each chapter contains these elements:

- A definition of the key concept.
- An example of the use of the concept in a human rights document.
- A brief essay on the value of the concept for human rights education.
- A series of activities that
 - guide students in using gender, race/ethnicity/nation, and class as lenses for analyzing social justice issues;
 - include transnational and multicultural perspectives on gender and human rights issues;
 - use “best practices” pedagogies for teaching human rights topics in community colleges.

Within each chapter, activities are organized from simple to complex. Most activities, however, have self-contained objectives and can be used independently of the others. Sections on “Extending the Learning” offer longer readings or in-depth material for advanced courses.

FEMINIST PEDAGOGY AND HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

A Brief History

As bell hooks emphasizes in her discussion of Paolo Freire’s work, feminist professors are passionately committed to transforming college classes into sites of shared intellectual inquiry (hooks 45-58). This transformational process has been going on for nearly forty years. In a 1987 edition of *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, Nancy Schniedewind and Frances Maher researched the characteristics of feminist pedagogy in its first decade: they found that feminist scholars use “pedagogical approaches that are democratic, cooperative, experiential, integrative of cognitive and affective learning, and empowering of students to create personal and social change” (5).

When Law Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the concept *intersectionality* in 1989, feminist scholars combined this and similar concepts (*positionality* and *standpoint theory*) to develop pedagogies that include “comparative critique of the structural, historical, and personal aspects of one’s own and others’ situations and lives” (Maher and Tetreault 210-227; Crenshaw 39-44; Harding 1-16). Shirley Parry describes these “personal aspects” more specifically when she asserts that feminist methodology “makes explicit that how we experience and understand things is rooted in our social position, based on a variety of factors, including gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexual preference” (45-7). This intersectional methodology is of great value

in Human Rights Education (HRE) because it provides powerful analytic tools for critiquing social structures that impede the implementation of the UDHR.

Best Practices

In “Human Rights Education,” Felisa Tibbitts and Samuel Totten propose a list of pedagogical strategies promoted by HRE practitioners. By combining these strategies with feminist pedagogies, I have developed the following “best practices” for human rights educators:

- *Experiential and activity-centered approaches* that draw on learners’ prior knowledge and honor their experiences—while also challenging them to reevaluate these in the lights of new knowledge and experiences.
- *Participatory approaches* that promote collective efforts to clarify concepts, analyze issues, and engage in activities.
- *Problem-posing approaches* that ask learners to think critically about why things happen and how they occurred.
- *Dialectical approaches* that ask learners to compare their knowledge with information from other sources.
- *Analytical approaches* that use gender, race, class, and culture as lenses for examining the elements of an issue in order to understand its significance.
- *Healing and caring approaches* that promote human rights in intrapersonal and interpersonal relations by fostering an ethic of responsibility.
- *Strategic-thinking approaches* that direct learners to set goals and to create processes for achieving them.
- *Action-oriented approaches* that direct learners to plan and implement actions in relation to their goals.
- *Interdisciplinary approaches* that encourage learners to pursue ideas across disciplinary boundaries.
- *Affective approaches* that strengthen learners’ emotional intelligence by connecting affective and cognitive domains, and by developing learners’ appreciation of empathy as a valuable element of human rights work.
- *Creative approaches* that encourage learners to create literary, visual, and performing arts works to express ideas.

CROSSING BORDERS: INTERDISCIPLINARY EXPLORATIONS

Because Gender Studies is itself an interdisciplinary field, this project incorporates ideas and methodologies from a variety of disciplines:

Anthropology	Economics	Music
Art History	English Composition	Philosophy
Communication Studies	Film Studies	Photography
Creative Writing	Global Studies	Political Science
Dance	History	Sociology
Developmental Reading and Writing	Linguistics	Theater Arts
	Literature	Visual Arts
	Media Studies	

Inspired by performing arts educators who work with at-risk youth through an Oakland-based HRE program, *The World As It Could Be*, I have made special efforts to incorporate arts-based activities into this project. Teacher-training HRE workshops given by these HRE experts demonstrate that “[t]he creative arts provide a powerful mechanism for teaching in a way that compels student engagement, deeper learning and personal connection to otherwise abstract content.”

BRIDGING CULTURES: A GLOBAL JOURNEY

The activities in this SHREI project take students on a global journey that includes over two dozen countries:

Afghanistan	Egypt	Nigeria
Antigua and Barbuda	El Salvador	Peru
Argentina	England	Philippines
Bangladesh	Ethiopia	Scotland
Brazil	Haiti	Senegal
Cambodia	India	Sierra Leone
Cameroon	Kenya	Uganda
Chile	Morocco	USA
Cook Islands	Nepal	Zimbabwe
Democratic Republic of Congo	New Zealand	

I hope these activities help students discover the value of human rights during their travels on this global journey.

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