

The Manifestation Project:

A Transformative Approach to the Teaching of Human Rights

Things do not change; we change.

~Henry David Thoreau

Introduction:

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the global statement of the inherent dignity and equality of all human beings, codifies for all what most of us have the privilege to take for granted. This document, whose drafting began following the horrors and atrocities of World War II, was intended to be a transformative document, one that would set the humanity on a new path toward a world in which the oppressed could have recourse and oppressors would be held accountable. While the news every day shows how far from the world envisioned in the U.D.H.R. we are, this document has nonetheless had a great impact, for, more than ever before, we are shown the world through the lens of human rights as opposed to that of pure self-interest, national security, or territorial ambition. This emphasis on human rights continues to raise the global consciousness of, inspire outrage for, and compel action against those who commit indignities against people far beyond the scope of those whom we know, whoever we are and whoever they are. With the hope that the world may continue to transform, bringing us closer to the ethical standards set forth in the U.D.H.R., we can all, especially those with the privilege to teach and to learn, engage with its ideals and find new ways to involve others in its transformative worldview.

As Community College educators tasked with designing Human Rights curriculum as part of the Stanford Human Rights Education Initiative, we began, of course, by analyzing the particular nature of our student population. They are: adults, often on the edge of maturity; reluctant consumers of information—especially unpleasant facts—outside the technology-reinforced bubble in which, commonly, they live; too often victims themselves of human rights abuses and oppression; few having knowledge or interest in civics, current events, or history; and most raised in cultures in which education was not a value or a priority. We recognized immediately that, especially for community college students, traditional pedagogy, in particular what Paolo Freire called “banking”—a teacher merely “covering” knowledge of the rights and particular cases of their violation—would be inadequate and ineffectual in achieving what we saw as the ultimate intent of the U.D.H.R. In order to help students grasp this transformative document—and the very concept of global human rights itself—teachers, we concluded, would need to guide them through a transformative process, one that was student-centered, andragogical, experiential, and reflective.

What has emerged from an assignment I had already been using in my English composition classes, my fruitful and enlightening discussions with Enrique Luna and other S.H.R.E.I. participants, a dialogue with the work of John Dewey, Ira Shor, Paolo Freire, and in particular Jack Mezirow, is The Manifestation Project. This approach to teaching human rights can be implemented across the curriculum as a means of delivering course content, outlining a transformative process by which students, while learning the content in most disciplines, can themselves become independent, effective, and self-aware agents of change. Instead of simply telling students how to think or feel about others and about oppression, the teacher’s role is to guide her or his students from their own narratives to the creation and execution of strategic actions on the behalf of others. The Manifestation Project inducts students into a series of steps that can lead to self-awareness, collaboration, knowledge, considered action, systematic assessment, and, throughout, to use Mezirow’s term, “transformative” self-reflection. Learning about Universal Declaration of Human Rights becomes both an end and a means, each transformational.

As radical in some ways this approach is and as far outside the scope of many courses as it might appear, it is our belief that, with creativity and innovation, individual instructors can adapt it to deepen their students' learning of any subject matter, to promote critical thinking and purposeful collaboration in a decentered classroom, and to teach the values and the value of the U.D.H.R. With the Manifestation Project, we can continue to meet our Student Learning Outcomes and enable those of our lower-division students preparing for transfer to get a taste of the more independent, project-oriented upper-division work that awaits them after transfer and in the workplace. Certainly, through their experience engaging with Human Rights issues and this transformational model, all students will benefit from a re-contextualizing of themselves in relation to specific course content, the lives of others, and the ideal of a more just world.

The Manifestation Project, as we offer it, is a template for teachers (in any discipline) and for campus leaders to use in designing their unique courses and curricula and to develop appropriate, discipline- and population-specific lessons themselves, as they employ all or part of the Project. SHREI is creating a website that will provide faculty the opportunity to share lesson plans and other resources that will help other instructors willing to take on the challenge of implementing the curriculum.

We invite you to consider The Manifestation Project.

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Step I: Reflecting on the Self in a World Defined by Rights

Students are provided with writing or classroom exercises and assignments adapted to diverse populations of students and designed to elicit their own personal, family, or community narratives and reflections. Teachers strive to create “safe” spaces for this work, where students can, without fear of judgment, seek to understand the narrative within which they exist, and to explore both the challenges and privileges of being themselves. Prompts for these narratives may steer the students toward an engagement with and an exploration of the content or themes of the course, but, most importantly, they should attempt to elicit from them sincere reflections on themselves in relation to others, on their motives, on their sense of personal and collective responsibility, and on their ideas about themselves as citizens of the world.

Step II: Choosing What Matters

Students are presented with the concept of a “right”—what Webster’s defines as “the power or privilege to which one is justly entitled”—and given assignments that ask them to reconsider their narratives from Step I in terms of their own rights, those they have been accorded and/or denied. How and by what codes have they or those they identify with been oppressed, oppressed others, or enjoyed the privileges individual or communal rights provide? This can function as what Paulo Freire called a “disorienting dilemma,” for, by reframing their experience, students can begin to liberate their narratives from the confining structures of oppression and corrupting or distracting political narratives that have often shaped their worldview. Next, students are shown the more specific concept of a “human right” through the introduction of the history, structure, and function of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a code that entitles *all* human beings to equal dignity and justice. Students are then asked to further build on their reflections from Step I by choosing the Articles from the UNDHR that define rights that, for their own reasons, they feel

most inspired to demand—if they feel they have been denied them in their own experience—and/or to protect. Next, working with other students who share similar concerns and/or experiences, students form small groups (3-6, ideally) around common choices.

Step III: Together Building Knowledge about Human Rights

The groups, once formed, are first given ample opportunity to develop a group identity through the sharing of their personal, family, and community experiences in relation to the rights they have chosen. This Step provides the groups with the opportunity to develop internal solidarity. It also creates for individual members a situation that encourages empathy, especially for their peers who have come together on the basis of particular rights, if not direct experiences. A leader is elected within the group and each member of the group takes on a defined responsibility based on his or her individual strength. With the teacher guiding them toward resources (but not conclusions), they discuss their chosen Article(s), their broader implications, their value, and their inherent issues. Debate should be encouraged and differences should be respected within the groups. Students are given the opportunity to reflect on why they agree or disagree with one another.

Step IV: Reaching Consensus

Next, the groups are directed toward resources (such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, a library class, or even generalized web searches) where they can learn about global violations of human rights. Instructors may direct students to explore violations that are germane to their particular course content but try to avoid steering them toward particular issues or concerns of their own. After some independent research, individuals in each group then contribute the case that is of the greatest concern to them, explain why, and attempt to persuade others with their group to take up the case for the work that follows. Through structured discussion, all of the students in their respective groups must agree that this case is worth learning more about. This process will encourage awareness of each other's diverse concerns and perspectives, reinforce their individual and collective understanding of the Article(s) at issue, help them develop their rhetorical skills, and provide them with experience in working toward consensus.

Step V: Building the Case with Purpose

Once—through both collaboration and independent research--the groups have discovered cases they feel motivated to work on, the teacher guides them in developing logical, well-reasoned positions that delineate the human rights at issue, their violator(s), those whose rights have been violated, and the broader contexts in which these violations are occurring. Then, in focused research, they discover critical, possibly course-specific evidence of these violations. Students also analyze prospective audiences for their arguments, explore potential counterarguments, and consider potential solutions. Students reflect on the challenges of evaluating evidence.

Step VI: Making Ideas Happen

Moving from the building of the argument to manifesting it in a public action requires careful planning and excellent organization. Teachers guide students toward examples of nonviolent action, both historical and contemporary, and then give individual groups the opportunity to develop their own strategies for reaching their chosen audiences. Students may visit advocacy websites or agencies. After analyzing the audience, groups calculate tone, define a clear rhetorical purpose, and refine appeals. Groups then present the logic of their arguments and their strategies

to the whole class, whom they consider as collaborators in effective action and not as members of the target audience. At this point, questions of various media can be addressed. With students taking responsibility, resources for actions are secured, a timeline established, and a means of assessment devised.

Step VII: Manifesting Ideas and Self-Assessing

The groups then manifest their arguments about Human Rights publically, attempting through their well-planned action to gain the assent of the target audience and inhabiting a new role as teachers of specific content and sincere advocates for justice on behalf of others. These actions may be live encounters with the public, virtual demonstrations, or both. Attempts are made to quantify the effects of the action and to assess both their own individual roles and the effectiveness of the group as a whole at delivering the message.

Step VIII: Reflecting on Changing

The group collaborates to prepare a report on their particular approach to the Manifestation Project, providing narrative details of the manifestation providing evidence of its impact. Then, writing individually, students reflect on both their own experience as individuals in each of the Steps and their group's effectiveness in developing and delivering the message. Finally, they reflect on how their sense of Human Rights has changed and changed them, making reference to their first reflections and reviewing their notes on each of the seven steps, exploring the evolution of their own Human Rights awareness and reassessing their roles as individuals in a complex and difficult world.