



Global Voices Information Sheet

Human Rights: Universal or Culturally Relative?



Background Info

- Over 50 years ago, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which proclaims that everyone is born free and has equal access to political freedom, regardless of race or gender or faith. It states these rights should be protected by law.
- Equitas' International Human Rights Training Program begins June 6. Participants from over 50 countries come to the Canadian-funded program to bring human rights education back to their home countries.
- There is often tension between universal human rights and cultural relativism, more recently concerning Canada's intervention in the pro-democracy uprisings in foreign countries.
- In Libya, Canada is helping to fight the corrupt dictatorship of leader Moammar Gadhafi by sending fighter jets to attack his troops. Military involvement means that Canada supports the pro-democracy movement in that country.
- A Western-style democracy might not be suitable with the cultural values and traditions of another country, and the Canadian government is currently struggling to decide what its role will be once the conflict in Libya is over.
- Ian Hamilton, executive director of Equitas, says that "Human rights education is not a case of one size fits all."

Key terms

- **Human rights**—Basic freedoms, often held to include the right to life and liberty, freedom of thought and expression, religious belief and equality under the law.
- **Universal**—relating to the entire world.
- **Cultural relativism**—the idea that human values are not equal, but vary according to one's cultural perspective.
- **Arab spring**—refers to the current sweep of pro-democracy uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. The "spring" is in contrast to the "winter" of oppression that many of these countries have faced. For example, protests have started in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Bahrain.

Global Voices Secondary Educator Resources

Note to Educators:

The following activities are designed to stimulate a current events discussion. Generative in nature, these questions can be a launching point for additional assignments or research projects. Teachers are encouraged to adapt these activities to meet the contextual needs of their classroom.

In some cases, reading the article with students may be appropriate, coupled with reviewing the information sheet to further explore the concepts and contexts being discussed. From here, teachers can select from the questions provided below. Activities are structured to introduce students to the issues, then allow them to explore and apply their learnings. Extension and conclusion activities are included to challenge students and finally, encourage them to reflect on the issues at hand.

Since these activities are designed as discussions rather than formal lessons, assessment strategies are not included.

Themes and Course Connections

- Themes: Themes: human rights, westernization, consideration, values, actions and equality.
- Course Connections: Canadian and World Studies, English, and Social Sciences and Humanities.

Materials

- Chart paper or blackboard
- Computers and internet
- Global Voices column

Specific Expectations and Learning Goals

Students will:

- Develop and express responses to issues and problems.
- Reassess their responses to issues on the basis of new information.
- Participate in active group work and class discussions.
- Communicate effectively in written and spoken language or other forms of expression.
- Demonstrate the ability to think critically.
- Develop, express, and defend a position on an issue and explain how to put the ideas into action.

Knowledge and Understanding

1. Human Rights (estimated time: 15 minutes)
 - a. Ask students: what are human rights? Encourage discussion and debate around this topic by introducing key words such as universal, equal, dignity, etc. Be sure to make clear connections between human rights and the key words you are introducing.
 - b. Following this discussion, ask students to list off different rights they have as humans and as children. Make a list of these rights on the board.
 - c. Before this list is complete, ensure to fill in any important human and children's rights that students may have missed.
 - d. Divide the class into pairs.

- e. Have each pair look at the list and identify any instances they have encountered or heard of where an individual was not being granted their rights. Pairs must discuss these scenarios together, identify the right(s) the person was denied, and what impact this had on them. Ask pairs to be prepared to share at least one scenario and its impact by the conclusion of the discussion.
- f. Ask pairs to share their scenarios and allow reactions from the class.
- g. Hold a discussion around why these scenarios took place and what needs to take place in society to ensure that people are granted their basic human rights.
- h. Explain to students that today they are going to explore an organization called Equitas that fights for human rights. Tell students that Equitas works for the advancement of equality, social justice and respect for human dignity in Canada and around the world through transformative human rights education programs.

Thinking

1. Reading Comprehension: Global Voices Column (estimated time: 15 minutes)
 - a. Pre reading steps:
 - i. Introduce the topic and encourage students to discuss what they already know about the topic, making predictions around what the column is about.
 - b. Reading steps:
 - i. Read: students must read the text independently, highlighting important points throughout the column.
 - ii. Ask: students must ask themselves what the story is about, recording five questions they are unsure of after reading the column.
 - iii. Paraphrase: encourage students to write point form notes in their own words around what the column is about.
 - c. Post reading discussion:
 - i. What are the main points of the column?
 - ii. What emotions did this column evoke in you?
 - iii. What problem is identified in the column?
 - iv. What questions do you have about the column?
2. Media Literacy (estimated time: 15 minutes)
 - a. Ask students to practice their media literacy skills by working independently to identify the following:
 - i. Title: include the full title of the article (also called the headline).
 - ii. Author: give the author's full name.
 - iii. Newspaper: write the full name of the newspaper from which the column is taken.
 - iv. Date: identify the day the column appeared in the newspaper.
 - v. Subject: identify the overall topic that the column is describing.
 - vi. Event: describe the event that led to the writing of the column.
 - vii. Main Idea: identify what the author is proving or arguing. Is the author trying to convince readers to take a side? If so, what option is the author encouraging?
 - viii. Evidence: list several facts/arguments that support the main idea and help to convince the reader or inform them of the issue. Does the author provide enough factual material to support his/her ideas?
 - ix. Significance: explain why this issue is important and whom it may affect.
 - x. Point of View: is the article, in your opinion, true, balanced or biased? Are different viewpoints presented? Which viewpoints are left out?
 - b. When this is complete, bring the class back together and discuss student answers.

Communication

1. Tension Between Cultural Norms and Universal Freedoms (estimated time: 20 minutes)
 - a. In the Global Voices column, Ian Hamilton states that “frequently the reaction to human rights activism is that these are western values,” and that certain civil liberties aren’t inherent in other cultural traditions.
 - b. Discuss this statement as a class. Begin by addressing initial reactions and feelings to this statement before going into theories and opinions.
 - c. Divide the class into pairs.
 - d. In their pairs, ask one student to argue for this statement, and the other student to argue against this statement.
 - e. Allow pairs five minutes to debate.
 - f. Bring the class back together and discuss the debates that took place, examining both sides of the argument.

Application

2. Human Rights Defenders and Educators (estimated time: 20 minutes)
 - a. Tell students that Equitas’ programs provide frontline human rights defenders and educators, government officials as well as children and youth with the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to promote human rights values and to combat inequality, exclusion and other forms of human rights abuse.
 - b. Go through the list of the frontline human rights defenders and educators below. As you address each individual, ask students to:
 - i. identify the human rights that are important to this individual
 - ii. the struggles and resistance they might face in their community
 - iii. the benefits human rights training will have on their situation
 - c. As the discussion progresses, make a list on the board.
 - d. Human rights defenders and educators included in this training.
 - i. An activist in Kyrgyzstan struggling for equality rights for the LGBT community.
 - ii. An activist in Eastern Congo documenting and denouncing sexual violence against women.
 - iii. An educator in Nairobi helping community radio stations integrate human rights into their programming for the residents of the Kibera informal settlement.
 - iv. A community organizer in Winnipeg helping children and youth learn the importance of inclusion, respect and peaceful conflict resolution.
 - v. A pastor in Haiti educating children in Cité Soleil about their rights and responsibilities.
 - vi. An educator in Colombia working with the Afro-Colombian community in the struggle for equality.
 - vii. An educator on the island of Borneo in Indonesia working with traditional leaders to integrate human rights principles into community practices.
 - viii. A village teacher in Southern India helping children recognize the urgency of ending the traditional practice of female infanticide.
 - ix. An activist in Bahrain imprisoned and abused for criticizing the government.

Additional Resources

In addition to the above lesson plans, you may want to share some additional resources with your students. Listed below are some links to useful online resources:

Free The Children –

<http://www.freethechildren.com/getinvolved/educator/programs.php?type=curriculum>

Equitas - <http://equitas.org/en/>