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How Can Human Rights Education Mobilise Us for Peace?

Orla Ní Cheallacháin*

Abstract This essay argues that human rights education is an important vehicle for securing the right to peace and an important riposte to the polarisation of public and political discourse that is often a precursor to militarisation and violent conflict. Rooted in the author's experience of leading an international postgraduate programme in human rights and democracy, the paper reflects on the challenges and opportunities of education about, through and for human rights in the context of weakening multilateralism and increased violent conflict around the world. While acknowledging that conceptions of both human rights and peace are subject to contestation, nonetheless the essay argues that human rights education is an essential vehicle for nurturing the necessary cognitive and normative skills that are required to uphold the right to peace. Precisely because conceptions of human rights are contested, human rights education requires educators and learners to engage in deep thinking about what we mean, as individuals and as societies, when we invoke the term human rights. This in turn means that educators need to insist on the scholarly values of curiosity, rigour and criticality. However, education about, through and for human rights is distinctive because it grounds these scholarly values in a legal, normative and action framework. This means human rights education is a particularly rich vehicle for engaging in moral reasoning, critical thinking and complex problem-solving that are necessary in order to mobilise for peace.

Keywords: human rights education, higher education, peace, security

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Introduction

It is easy to find cause for alarm, disenchantment and fear in contemporary national and global politics. Global military spending increased by 6.8% in 2023 and resulted in the highest estimated level of global military spending ever recorded (SIPRI, 2024); the Democracy Report 2024 noted that for nearly 15 years the numbers of people living in autocratising countries has outnumbered those living in democratizing ones and 'the level of democracy enjoyed by the average person is also in decline'(Nord et al., 2024, 4); and 59-state based conflicts were taking place in 34 countries in 2023, the highest number of such conflicts recorded since 1946 (Rustad, 2024). Moreover, human rights are facing sustained attacks by populist actors, and are misappropriated to pursue exclusionary or repressive ends (de Búrca and Young, 2023). Harder to measure, although familiar to anyone who works in the field of human rights, is the impact of reduced budgets, the closure of programmes, and job losses. Exposure to the suffering caused by violent conflict is becoming normalised, as is the deepening sense that those who violate their obligations under international law do so with impunity. This has deepened social, ideological and political cleavages and has adverse consequences for the legitimacy and relevance of International Human Rights Law (IHRL) in the eyes of those most in need of its protection. In short, crises prevail wherever you look, and thus reflection on how to realise the right to peace is urgent.

The relationship between peace and human rights is well articulated within the UN and its human rights institutions. Indeed, recently, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, argued during the 55th session of the UN Human Rights Council that 'the right to peace is the mother of all rights. Without peace all other rights are quashed'. Clearly, societies destroyed by violent conflict can guarantee neither human dignity nor the protection of human rights. However, increasingly responses to violent conflict invoke claims to security rather than claims to peace. This distinction is not idle hair-splitting. In crises, the protection of human rights is often framed in opposition to security, and as a luxury that should be sacrificed to resolve such crises (see for example Criddle, 2016). While human rights are rooted in the values of human dignity and equality, security practices are governed by different logics, in which democratic decision-making is replaced by the urgency of 'exceptional politics' or 'states of emergency' rooted in the exclusion of a dangerous other (Aradau, 2004; Bright, 2015; Buzan et al., 1998; de Londras, 2019; Hagmann et al., 2018). Peace on the other hand, at least conceptions of positive peace, 'requires reciprocal interactions and reconciliation between people affected by protracted conflict' in which

social justice and human flourishing is the goal (Kim et al., 2024, 23). While it is common to hear peace and security spoken in the same breath, the grammar of peace and security are quite different and while the right to peace may be the mother of all rights, contemporary international politics are being firmly shaped by the language of security

This paper makes the case for the importance of human rights education in addressing these trends, and focuses, particularly, on the role of postgraduate, multi-disciplinary human rights education in Europe. Education about, through, and for human rights helps to sustain the facilitating conditions required to foster and secure a culture of peace. In theory, it does so by cultivating the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to navigate difference guided by dignity and equality rather than by fear. Precisely because conceptions of human rights are subject to contestation, human rights education brings together learners and educators with different motivations, understandings and expectations of human rights and helps cultivate dialogic tools necessary to resolve conflict without recourse to violence. However, contemporary politics demand we also ask questions about the 'what', 'how', and 'why' of human rights education in the context of polarising societies. This requires us to engage in deep thinking about what we mean, as individuals and as societies, when we invoke the term human rights and what it might mean to others in different contexts. Such engagement is essential if human rights education is to meet its stated ends of contributing to a culture of peace.

1. The Purpose of Human Rights Education

Article 2 of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training adopted in 2011 outlines a framework that encompasses education about, through, and for human rights aimed at 'providing persons with knowledge, skills and understanding and developing their attitudes and behaviours, to empower them to contribute to the building and promotion of a universal culture of human rights'. Thus, education *about* human rights aims to provide 'knowledge and understanding of human rights norms and principles, the values that underpin them and the mechanisms for their protection', education *through* human rights requires that the delivery of such education includes 'learning and teaching in a way that respects the rights of both educators and learners' and education *for* human rights seeks to empower 'persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others'. This framework has been called the 'hands, head, and heart' approach to human rights education that gives its learners

the skills, knowledge and motivation to transform their lives and the lives of others in ways that are consistent with the principles and values of human rights (Tibbitts and Sirota, 2023). This Declaration sits within a body of instruments within the United Nations that seek to link the importance of education in general, and human rights education in particular, to the creation of a culture of peace, tolerance and understanding that is required to sustain international peace and security (for an overview see Cargas, 2020).[1] Together these instruments rest on the assumption, so clearly articulated in the opening of the Constitution of UNESCO, that since 'wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed'.

The appeal of this framework is clear as it neatly categorises both the aims and the means of delivery for an education that seeks, quite literally, to transform the world. Of course, in practice, the picture is more complex for both educators and learners and consequently for what kind of world a culture of human rights could or should achieve. For example, Dembour (2010, 4–5) identifies four ideal-types of human rights scholarship that see the foundation of human rights quite differently. There are ''natural scholars' that conceive of human rights as *given*; 'deliberative scholars' as *agreed upon;* 'protest scholars' as *fought for;* and 'discourse scholars' as *talked about''* (emphasis in the original). Dembour further elaborates these distinctions into a conceptual map that traces different orientations concerning the basis of human rights. There are those that 'ground human rights transcendentally' ('natural' and 'protest' scholars) and those that see human rights as a 'society/language-based reality' ('deliberative' and 'discourse' scholars). Additionally, Dembour identifies distinct approaches to social justice. On the one hand, there are 'liberal and individualistic' approaches to social justice held by 'natural' and 'deliberative' scholars, and on the other 'more collective' approaches held by 'protest' and 'discourse' scholars. That there are diverse schools of thought on the foundations of an object of study is not unique to human rights scholarship. However, there is something particular about human rights as an object of study and as an academic discipline. Unlike other subjects, at a minimum, human rights can be seen as a 'symbolically universal law under the supervision of the UN' in which local communities across the world find meaning in different

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[1] See also the recently updated the UNESCO Recommendation on Education for Peace and Human Rights, International Understanding, Cooperation, Fundamental Freedoms, Global Citizenship and Sustainable Development (2023). Its preamble centred states' responsibility to achieve the aims set forth in the Charter of the United Nations, the Constitution of UNESCO, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and all other relevant human rights instruments.

ways, namely the process of vernacularisation (Merry and Levitt, 2017, 213). This means that what is at stake for students of human rights is often quite different to what is at stake for students of other subjects, and consequently, this requires different forms of engagement from both educators and learners.

This is relevant if we are to take sincerely the stated purpose of human rights education, and if it is to contribute to a culture of peace. In international, postgraduate human rights programmes, the diverse meaning of human rights creates a student body with very diverse sets of motivation for study and very different understandings and hopes for what 'human rights' can do in their worlds. This is both a challenge and an opportunity to which human rights educators must respond. The challenge is partly derived from a common assumption by students that their educators and peers see human rights in the same way they do. Where university educators of human rights place themselves in a matrix such as Dembour's is an intellectual and socio-political question the answer to which will be shaped by disciplinary training, an individual's positioning in the world, and particular understandings of scholarly values. However, students' expectations may be very different. Navigating such expectations and assumptions can be particularly challenging in relation to contentious political issues, and particularly so in light of 'cancel culture' dynamics which can and do enter the classroom.

However, herein lies the opportunity of human rights education. As Tobin (2021) argues while debates on whether human rights academics should or should not be activists are important, they are important not because of the answer, but because such questions should prompt reflections on what it takes to be an effective teacher. Here, recalling the work of John Hattie who identifies 'cognitive change' as the most important sign of effective teaching (Hattie, 2009 quoted in ibid, 193), Tobin argues that the model teacher is not a facilitator or an activist but an 'activator' who plays 'an active role in enabling a student to construct his or her own understanding and knowledge of human rights' (ibid, 193). This requires reflection on the 'what', 'why' and 'how' of human rights education, and importantly who is in the human rights classroom and why they have come.

2. Who Wants an Education in Human Rights?

If human rights educators are to be activators, reflection on who our students are and what may have brought them to the classroom is important. In this section, I outline a set of four constituents in a human rights classroom and how each constituency comes with a different set of expectations of

human rights and of their peers. [2] There are 'those who suffer', 'those who act', 'those who believe' and 'those who are not there'. These categories are ideal types, and they are not mutually exclusive. Moreover, characteristics such as empathy, creativity, and commitment to a life of public service can be found in all these constituencies and this also influences the shape of a human rights classroom in profound ways. Such characteristics drive graduates of human rights programmes to make significant contributions to their societies. Neither is the purpose of such categorisation to cast judgement, but rather to highlight that our students come with histories and lived experiences of human rights that can diminish or collapse the critical distance from the object of study that academic work often demands. While there are parallels with Dembour's framework, this categorisation is not rooted in epistemological or ontological questions about the foundations of human rights, but rather in questions of motivation. Many who seek a postgraduate human rights education do so with an eye to practice. Therefore, understanding how they expect human rights to act on the world is an important starting point for thinking about the 'what', 'why' and 'how' of human rights education and how it can support a culture of peace.

2.1. Those Who Suffer

'Those who suffer' are students who have experienced the trauma and violence of human rights violations, discrimination or exclusion; who have suffered, who continue to suffer and who fear that they or others will suffer in the future. What is at stake for this group is very often a search for remedy, for justice or simply for the tools to prevent their suffering happening to someone else. The question they bring to the classroom is how to make the suffering stop. The dynamic they introduce to others is the lived emotion and pain of the lived experience of human rights violations.

2.2. Those Who Act

'Those who act' comprise practitioners, activists, field officers, policymakers, government officials, security officers, all those who have worked or seek to work in the field, including those who might see human rights mechanisms and standards as an obstacle to their work. The question they bring to the classroom is whether and how human rights can support their work. The dynamic they bring can range from pragmatism to scepticism and the lived

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[2] The following reflections are rooted in observations made within the context of an international postgraduate human rights programmes delivered in Europe, and as such are drawn reflections on groups of students who have the resources to pursue full-time education to an advanced level.

experience of trying to apply the values and principles of human rights to the field.

2.3. Those Who Believe

'Those who believe' are those who are strongly committed to an idea of human rights, its normative underpinnings and seek certainty from this position. It can also include those who are strongly critical of the human rights agenda. While those in this category fall across a spectrum in terms of the rigidity of their positions, the key characteristic they share is a conviction of holding the correct interpretation of human rights, its histories and its possibilities. Often, the question this constituency bring to the classroom is where is the evidence to support my position? The dynamic that this constituency can bring can be both inspirational faith in the possibilities of the human rights framework as a catalyst for change as well as reluctance to engage with self-reflection on their own positionality.

2.4. Those Who Are Not There

Finally, the fourth set of constituents in a human rights classroom are those who are not there, the empty chair at the table. The basic question that this constituency asks is why should we care? This also brings an important dynamic to the classroom and invites educators and learners to reflect on the limitations of the human rights framework and how its value can be communicated to those who find no relevance in it.

These categories, like all categorisations, are ideal types, and are not mutually exclusive. However, my claim here is that this diversity of motivations, hopes and views of how human rights can act on the world that appear in the classroom, replicate dynamics outside it. Such differences can provoke curiosity between students and their peers, but they can also create tensions and disagreements, even disenchantment with the whole idea of human rights. Thinking about how to deliver education about, through and for human rights to each of these constituencies is both a pedagogical question and an invitation to reflect on how to ensure a human rights agenda, and its core values of human dignity and equality, remains relevant to public and political discourses. It requires reflection on how, in the context of difference and profound lived experiences, education about, through and for human rights can be a vehicle for delivering the skills necessary for peace. In the final section, I make the case for employing the scholarly values of curiosity, rigour and criticality as a methodology for human rights education which together can cultivate skills for dialogue with those with whom we disagree,

and which is essential if we are to address and prevent violent conflict in sustainable ways.

3. What Education Can Human Rights Do: Curiosity, Rigour and Criticality

How are knowledge and skills translated into attitudes and values that uphold human rights and behaviours and actions that protect and defend human rights? The contestation concerning the nature of human right is a strength when it comes to cultivating the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to build a culture of peace. However, such diversity can also lead to tension and disenchantment with human rights inside and outside the classroom. My purpose in identifying different constituents in a human rights classroom is to show that there are deeply held expectations of the human rights framework that are born from different understandings and experiences of the legal, political, historical and normative processes that have created what Merry and Levitt (2017) referred to as the 'symbolically universal law' of human rights. Here, I propose that centring the scholarly values of curiosity, rigour and criticality can strengthen human rights education and help to address growing disenchantment with human rights as a framework for action and for peace by providing a way to think about how to deliver on education through and for human rights. Arguably, education about human rights is the most developed aspect of human rights education, however, cultivating attitudes of curiosity, rigour and criticality can help support education through and for human rights by creating structures for dialogic exchange and self-reflection. Rooting human rights education in curiosity is essential to any scientific endeavour and creates the structures required for dialogic exchange and exploration. Rigour grounds human rights education in scientific method and evidence-based reasoning and criticality insists on constant reflection on positionality, power relations and the outcome of such endeavours.

First, from an intellectual point of view curiosity cultivates open-mindedness and inquisitiveness, while socially it encourages reciprocity. Curiosity is an essential scholarly value if research agendas are to remain dynamic. However, it is also important in thinking about education through and for human rights because it invites students to ask questions not only about the international standards, institutions and mechanisms of human rights and the values that underpin them, but also to ask questions of each other. To ask questions from a position of curiosity requires recognition of the dignity of the other, which also invites such recognition in return.

Thus, curiosity helps establish the values of dignity and equality. Second, the scholarly value of rigour insists on evidence-based reasoning, systematic thinking and intellectual honesty about the scope and depth of the evidence that underpins specific knowledge claims. A legal education about human rights insists on a such standard of rigour. Indeed, legal reasoning provides a methodology for navigating ways in which competing rights can be balanced. However, rigour goes beyond legal methodologies. Rigour requires a commitment to seeking out and understanding the most complete picture available and only then drawing conclusions, this encourages engagement with a plurality of perspectives. Finally, criticality invites us to think deeply about for whom, by who and for what purpose are human rights acting on the world.[3] As pointed out by Foucault (1988, 154) to engage in critique is 'to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed, to see that what is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as such. Practicing criticism is a matter of making facile gestures difficult'. Very often criticality is practiced toward an external object that is viewed as holding power, less often is criticality practiced towards oneself. This final scholarly value is important in addressing polarisation in society, and is a particularly important skill to cultivate if human rights education is prompt the cognitive change noted by Hattie as key to effective teaching.

Together these three scholarly values suggest guiding principles on how knowledge about human rights can be delivered through and for human rights. The end of the Cold War created a window of opportunity for the establishment of peace processes and an important international architecture for human rights education. The Vienna Declaration and Program of Action (1993, Section 1, para. 33) identified human rights education as essential for fostering mutual understanding, tolerance and peace and underscored that human rights education went beyond legal knowledge and should include education about peace, democracy, development and social justice. This in turn led to a range of activities including the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education 1995-2004 (OHCHR, no date(a)), and the World Programme for Human Rights Education 2005-present (OHCHR, no date (b)), which seeks to promote a common understanding of basic principles and methodologies for human rights education. However, arguably, the window of opportunity born from the of the Cold War, closed following the attacks by Al Qaeda on the United States in 2001 and the subsequent response by the United States and its allies. The language of peace, negotiated settlement,

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[3] This framework of for whom, by who and for what purpose was first introduced by Robert Cox (1981) and has been taken up, in particular, by critical security scholars. See for example Krause and Willians (1997).

and human rights was quickly replaced by securitized discourses that re-centred the state and framed the protection of human rights as contingent on security concerns. These dynamics continue but now operate in an international system that is more unstable.

Nonetheless, this increases rather than diminishes the importance of human right education and its role in creating a culture of peace. In 1995, as parties to the Northern Ireland conflict inched towards a peace agreement, then British Prime Minister, John Major framed the nascent peace process as a deeper and wider endeavour than the exploratory talks with paramilitary groups that were ongoing at the time. Rather, he said it was 'everyone's task […] to create a rolling tide for peace that no-one can withstand' (Major, 1995). I have argued here that human rights education is important and relevant in creating a rolling tide for peace. This is because sincere engagement with human rights, understood as a collection of legal, political, historical and normative processes, requires us to go beyond the binaries of insider/outsider or friendship/enmity that sustains violent conflict, and it provides a methodology to do so. However, if human rights education is to generate the such momentum, deep and sustained reflection is needed to find ways to communicate the value and relevance of human rights within and between different communities of actors.

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