


1-1-2022

Transforming Sociology Courses with Human Rights Education: Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Classroom Environment Considerations

Karie Jo Peralta
University of Toledo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/swb>

 Part of the [Human Rights Law Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Peralta, Karie J.. . "Transforming Sociology Courses with Human Rights Education: Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Classroom Environment Considerations." *Societies Without Borders* 16 (1): 74-90.
Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/swb/vol16/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Cross Disciplinary Publications at Case Western Reserve University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Societies Without Borders by an authorized administrator of Case Western Reserve University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

Transforming Sociology Courses with Human Rights Education: Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Classroom Environment Considerations

By
Karie Jo Peralta
University of Toledo

Received October 2021; Accepted April 2022

Abstract

Sociology courses have significant potential to liberate students. A promising way to achieve this aim is by grounding courses in human rights principles such as respect, equity, equality, and democratic participation. Using a college-level, introductory sociology course as an example, this paper explores how a human rights education (HRE) framework can serve as a foundation for the teaching of sociology. The purpose is to show how sociology educators can relatively easily embed HRE into the learning experience. To begin, I will present a HRE framework. Then, I will illustrate how common course topics, teaching methods, and classroom conditions can be based in HRE. Finally, I will conclude by recognizing some constraints that instructors may face when using a HRE framework and strategies for overcoming them. The hope is that this analysis will provide initial ideas to spark curricular, pedagogical, and class environmental changes that, if implemented, will be more likely to guarantee student transformation.

Keywords

Sociology, Curriculum, Pedagogy, Human Rights Education

A common learning outcome of introductory sociology courses is that students will be able to articulate implications for social policies and action using their critical assessments of society. Beyond acquiring skills and knowledge to improve their communities, a goal is that students will feel empowered to enact positive change. The hope is that by learning about social injustices, students will develop a sense of responsibility to eliminate them. Therefore, sociology courses are intended to be transformative, even when not explicitly stated as such.

Fulfilling its transformative potential is essential for human rights education (HRE) to be considered successful. The United Nations (1996) defines HRE as “training, dissemination and information efforts aimed at the building of a universal culture of human rights through the imparting of knowledge and skills and the molding of attitudes.” More specifically, HRE strives to foster peace, tolerance of difference, respect of human dignity and for fundamental freedoms, equality, and participation.

Sociology course objectives are consistent with those of HRE that are oriented toward promoting democratic participation in building an equitable world free of all forms of discrimination (United Nations

1996). Moreover, there is a shared emphasis on the transformation of lives in both sociology and HRE curriculums. However, HRE has greater capacity than sociology programs to guarantee transformation because it *requires* humanizing conditions and holistic pedagogical approaches that promote dialogue, inclusivity, critical reflection, and empowerment (Freire 1985; Mujica 2002). For HRE to truly satisfy its purpose, revolutionary shifts in students' thinking and acting are essential (Stone 2002), not merely possible, outcomes.

Therefore, grounding curriculum, instructional practices, and the classroom environment in HRE principles is a viable way to increase sociology's positive impact in the world. With such clear overlap of the aims of sociology programs and HRE, a path has already begun to be carved for a human rights framework to shape sociology education. Moreover, the integration of HRE at the post-secondary level was an aim of the World Programme for Human Rights Education during its second phase from 2010-2014 (United Nations 2004).

The purpose of this paper is to describe how sociology educators can relatively easily embed HRE into the learning experience. To begin, I will present a HRE framework. Then, I will use a college-level, introductory sociology course as a model to show how common course topics, teaching methods, and classroom conditions can be based in HRE. Finally, I will conclude by recognizing some constraints that instructors may face when using a HRE framework and strategies for overcoming them.

The inspiration behind this paper stems from my reflection on my experience of virtually completing a certificate program in HRE that was housed at the Pedro Francisco Bonó Higher Education Institute (el Instituto Superior Pedro Francisco Bonó) in the Dominican Republic and sponsored by a larger consortium of universities in Latin America known as the Association of Universities Entrusted to the Society of Jesus in Latin America (la Asociación de Universidades Confiadas a la Compañía de Jesús en América Latina). I was motivated to participate in this program because, over the last several years, I have collaborated on research projects with a grassroots organization that works to guarantee Haitian immigrant children in the Dominican Republic the right to education. Therefore, I began the HRE certificate program assuming that what I would learn would be beneficial for my research. What I did not expect, however, was that my perspective on teaching sociology would be transformed.

Although my teaching philosophy has always been informed by Freire's (1970) seminal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I had spent little prior time making explicit connections between teaching sociology and HRE. I imagine that most other sociology professors, especially those who grew up in the United States education system, have had no formal HRE, as a result of the nonexistence of comprehensive public

policies to support HRE in primary and secondary schools (Stone 2002). Also, their training in sociology was not likely based in a HRE framework, given the discipline's Eurocentric history that sustains white supremacy (Brunsma and Padilla Wyse 2019) and promotes Northern dominance (Go 2013). Therefore, learning about human rights is often an informal pursuit and personal passion as members of *Sociologists without Borders* would likely attest.

Perhaps due to the lack of HRE, and the prevalent promotion of US exceptionalism, in American schools, there is a widespread unawareness of human rights violations in the United States, predominately among middle-class white people. A common assumption is that human rights violations happen elsewhere but not in Western societies. After the political and social uprisings during the summer of 2020, however, people are less easily able to ignore the human rights abuses that happen on US soil every day. The young generation, in particular, has mobilized significantly and expressed substantial concern for the need for America's brutal history to be taught in schools.

College students are taking advantage of their sociology courses to engage with their peers in serious thought and discussion on a variety of social issues, perhaps, for the first time in their lives. As an important site of critical reflection and debate, sociology courses provide students with a space to systematically process and voice their thoughts in ways that political conversations with family and friends do not always allow. Indeed, students are hungry for perspectives to make sense of past and present social strife as well as for tools that they can use to make a difference in their communities. Therefore, sociology instructors have a unique opportunity before them to ensure that they are meeting the expectations of their students and facilitating their transformation. HRE provides a guiding framework for this effort.

HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION FRAMEWORK

HRE entails education *about, through, and for* human rights (United Nations 2011), in order to account for the need for people to not only learn about human rights through humanizing practices but also understand how to promote and defend them (Stone 2002). In other words, HRE involves the interplay of theory and action, or praxis, whereby the practice of respecting human dignity in all areas of life is informed and reinforced by conceptual knowledge of human rights and vice versa (Rodino 1999). Accordingly, HRE concerns more than simply content on international human rights laws, human rights-related history and values, and mechanisms to defend human rights but also a pedagogy that is consistent with human rights principles (Tibbitts 2002).

The focus of HRE is human formation, and its central purpose is liberation. According to Magendzo (1993) a pedagogy to achieve this aim has six foundational pillars: (1) values; (2) the subject; (3) knowledge; (4) learning; (5) school; (6) and the teacher. Values are principles that guide individuals to treat one another with respect and dignity. The subject pillar recognizes the human capability to demand, exercise, and protect one's rights. The knowledge pillar refers to the understanding that what separates human beings from other creatures is that people have the capacity to use their knowledge of history and understandings of their life experiences to reflect on and critique the state of the world and whether human rights principles are being upheld. In terms of learning, this methodologically-based pillar requires that individuals take responsibility for their education and assume an active position in the process. Learning is accomplished with not only the mind but also the body, feelings, and spirit through participation. With respect to the school pillar, this formal setting where learning occurs is viewed to be critical because its social organization, physical conditions, and social dynamics influence the educational process and should be humanizing. The last pillar, the teacher, has the essential roles of creating conditions that empower students to take control of their own learning, modeling how to adhere to human rights values, and facilitating student interactions that are grounded in mutual respect.

HRE curriculum involves three main components. The first is knowledge-related in that students are expected to learn concepts, theories, histories, institutions, laws, and agreements related to human rights. The second component comprises the values and attitudes guided by human rights principles, such as respect, equality, and empathy, that students are supposed to develop. The third and last component is competency-based in terms of the skills that students need to exhibit, including the ability to engage in dialogue, participate democratically, and think critically (Rodino 2003).

Each of these three components require different approaches because they are embodied in different ways. Demonstrating one's knowledge, for instance, is an intellectual enterprise that often requires memorization, while recognizing values and taking on particular attitudes involves the expression of sentiments. The only way to show one's skills is through action. The components are distinct, yet interrelated, and they each demand a different level of effort from the student's mind, spirit, and body. For example, as students problematize content and reflect on their values, they also exercise their knowledge and display their attitudes (Rodino 2003).

These curricular components need to provoke critical engagement with the limits of human rights. Students should be invited to question the liberal ideology that underpins human rights concepts, Western dominance in the creation of human rights laws, and

Eurocentric influence in the diffusion of human rights (Mutua 1996). Using sociological relational theories, human rights can be seen as a reactive movement to imperialism with a history of overlooking existing ethical frameworks of non-Western societies (Go 2013), disregarding indigenous and Black communities, and imposing hegemonic discourse (Gómez Sánchez 2020). Accordingly, the construction of key documents, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Genocide Convention, and their meanings are not beyond critique, which opens the opportunity for students to consider culturally different interpretations and political implications of human rights (Mutua 1996).

Current education debates have centered on the role of teachers in keeping politics out of the classroom and not “indoctrinating” students with their political beliefs. From a HRE perspective, teachers should not dictate what students should believe but, rather, foster students’ critical thinking skills that support them in forming their own beliefs. This framework recognizes that education is always political and must be concerned with equity (Freire 1985). Therefore, the expectation for teachers to be neutral is not only impossible but also misguided, because teachers have a duty to stand up for justice.

Teachers are responsible for creating conditions that allow students to feel their humanity and develop themselves as whole people (Magendzo and Donoso 2001; Mujica, 2002). Through problematization, reflection, recognition of context, multicultural dialogue, democracy, and participation (Freire 1970, 1985; Magendzo-Kolstrein and Toledo-Jofré 2015), class activities should humanize students by supporting their ability to think and feel for themselves. Because every individual has their own life story and experience that shapes their perspective and way of interpreting the world, the first task of teachers is to get to know their students. That way, teachers will be equipped with an understanding of their students’ worldview and be able to use it when explaining information to facilitate connections to the material.

A key assumption of HRE is that the world is socially constructed. Human rights educators seek to use this understanding to empower students to get involved in their communities and make a positive difference. The belief is that if people grasp how social inequalities in the world are not natural, but the result of human action, they will recognize that they can create social change (Mujica 2002). Therefore, human rights approaches do not support the status quo and intend to counteract any disposition of indifference to injustices that students may have upon entering the classroom.

Educators, who work from a human rights standpoint, realize that they must not only know about human rights but also act in accordance with them, so that they can influence the classroom environment to be a fair, just, respectful, and tolerant space (Beltrán Lara

2006). Teachers should elevate their students' self-esteem and not belittle them with, for example, harsh sarcasm, insensitive jokes, or put downs (Mujica 2002). While there is undeniable power imbalance in the classroom, teachers should try to demystify the perception that they are all-knowing and must not abuse their authority. In a classroom underpinned by human rights principles, teachers are ready to learn from their students and implement dialogical strategies to minimize hierarchical structures that often prevent openness and honesty in discussions (Freire 1970).

This framework is a guide for theoretical and practical applications *in* and *for* human rights education across all educational levels and subjects. In fact, advocates of HRE argue that it should be infused in all subjects versus simply having a course dedicated to the subject matter (Stone 2002). The next section demonstrates how a HRE perspective can shape a college-level, introductory sociology course with respect to course themes, methodological approaches, and the classroom environment.

INTEGRATING HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION INTO A SOCIOLOGY COURSE

Framing Sociology Curriculum with a Human Rights Perspective

There is a standard set of course topics that most introductory sociology courses cover. They include the sociological perspective, methods, culture, socialization, and social interaction. These themes provide the basis for understanding a variety of other common topics such as social stratification, race and ethnicity, sexuality and gender, deviance, family, religion, education, health, groups and organizations, and the media among others. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the foundation topics and show how they can be conveyed considering a human rights viewpoint. This section argues, in particular, that a human rights-based approach in sociology education has the potential to fulfill “the promise” (Mills 1959) of sociology not only in terms of thinking (i.e. making connections between history and biography within society using the sociological imagination) but also with regard to living (i.e. living a biography, being shaped by society, and contributing to the betterment of the world).

Most instructors would likely agree that what we hope will stick with students long after completing the course is a sociological perspective, which is the capacity to see common patterns in the behaviors and interactions of certain types of people (Berger 1963). In order to develop this perspective, instructors might show various statistics that reveal how particular categories of people make similar choices, have comparable attitudes, or behave in the same ways. Students are usually easily able to see how social factors, such as age, race, class, gender, and religion, among others, are important analytical

variables in social research. And they will typically recognize the power that society has over people and how what we usually consider to be solely personal choices are not so individually determined after all. For many students, this understanding might be astounding but not necessarily transformative.

If educators intertwine a human rights lens with a sociological perspective, students are led to have a greater appreciation of the uniqueness of each individual and their human agency. At the same time, they are guided to grasp how people with particular characteristics, such as race, class, and gender, might have similar experiences but that no matter their backgrounds, they share vulnerabilities as human beings. This idea of humanity's common vulnerabilities is a key idea in human rights advocacy (Brunsmas 2010). Noting that we all are subject to social forces and experience the influence of social institutions, albeit in different ways, promotes a sense of unity. With this knowledge, students might gain a deeper sense of solidarity and act with more empathy toward others, thereby making this world a more peaceful place.

As an example, a student-led examination of the varying effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on different communities will clearly reveal disparities. The professor's job is to then encourage critique of the pervasive sexism, classism, and racism that exacerbate the inequalities experienced in the Coronavirus context, while guiding students to recognize the collective ways that societies must work together to not only beat the virus but also overcome the pain and devastation left behind in its path. In accordance with human rights education, such a discussion should foment reflection on shared traumas and the need for more compassion.

Given sociology's historical, heavy reliance on survey research, instructors might spend the majority of methodological discussions on positivism and quantitative strategies. Beginning students often enter the classroom with the idea that objectivity is the gold standard for social research, so the notion that they can supposedly achieve unbiased results through certain technical procedures is not overwhelmingly exciting. What usually peaks students' interest, however, are debates about whether objectivity can really ever be accomplished at all. By calling students to question this issue, professors promote their intellectual curiosity and critical thinking skills, which, indeed, is aligned with a human rights-based approach. However, students may still go on to ignore human influence when conducting sociological research.

When a human rights perspective shapes curriculum related to social research methods, students learn qualitative methodological approaches that center subjectivity and intersubjectivity and are not made to feel that they are less useful than quantitative procedures. A tenet of human rights education is that the social world, and all knowledge of it, is socially constructed. Being forthcoming about this worldview opens a

path for students to consider how intersubjective engagement matters in research processes. A major contribution of a human rights framework to the topic of research methodology is the appreciation of different ways of knowing, particularly those that may be different from traditional Western styles (Falcón and Jacob 2011). By recognizing that people's interpretations of their experiences and communities are critical to developing an understanding of them, students may be more capable of conducting research that humanizes.

A methodological lesson would not be complete without attention given to research ethics. The ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, justice, informed consent, integrity, and confidentiality are clearly aligned with a human rights framework, but most sociology instructors likely do not do enough to help students make this explicit connection. Instructors should thus convey the following links: 1) The respect for persons principle is directly tied to a human rights emphasis on the respect for human dignity; 2) The concept of beneficence is based upon the central human rights principle of doing no harm; 3) Gaining informed consent and conducting research with integrity require upholding the human rights values of openness and honesty; 4) The ability of individuals to choose whether to participate in a study is grounded in a human rights acknowledgement of personal autonomy and self-determination; and 5) protecting the confidentiality of research participants is consistent with the right to privacy.

The topic of culture in introductory sociology courses focuses on the distinct material objects and ways of life, including thinking and behaving, that correspond to a particular group of people. Students are introduced to basic concepts of culture, including values, beliefs, norms, which can serve as a springboard for discussing human rights as widely agreed upon norms along the core principles of a human rights perspective. Other important terms usually taught entail cultural relativism and ethnocentrism, which help students to be more mindful of how they judge other cultures. While this sociological mindfulness may foster tolerance, it does not automatically encourage students to support policies that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. When the theme of culture is permeated with a human rights emphasis on multiculturalism, however, students may be more likely to recognize the benefits that everyone receives from the innovation and creativity that can be generated from a pluralistic society and, thus, back efforts to create structural arrangements that ensure an inclusive and just society for all.

The theme of socialization is rooted in a social psychological outlook that considers how social interaction and experiences shape personalities. Students learn that the self is formed through taking the role of the other (Mead 1934), which entails considering how others view us. From this perspective, the self does not exist at birth but rather develops with increasing social experience. Developing this capacity is

thoroughly social, which means that the various agents of socialization, such as the family, school, peer groups, and the mass media, play an important role in the process.

Upon gaining this perspective, students may begin to self-analyze and try to explain their own personalities in light of their experiences growing up. While this self-reflection is consistent with HRE, opportunities for transformation open when students recognize how they may need to change their actions to support the full development of others' personalities. Therefore, instructors should encourage students to examine how their own behaviors may be harmful to the personality and identity development of others. They may want to encourage students to question their level of patience for, acceptance of, and respect for others, particularly those who may look, feel, and act differently than them. HRE education challenges us to think critically about our own behaviors, which can be a painful process. Yet, there is relief in knowing that people are free to evolve and become who they want to be, which is also promoted in HRE. Indeed, learning and developing the self is a life-long process.

Social interaction is a foundational topic because of its importance in reality construction. The focus is often on how social structures guide individuals' interpretations of everyday life. The terms, "status" and "roles," are key concepts for knowing who individuals are, what you can expect from them, and how you should interact with them. A purely sociological discussion of these concepts may go as far as fostering reflection on how statuses and roles change over time, influence identities, and shape social experiences. However, framing the topic with the first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that states, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights," sets students up to grasp that all individuals deserve to be treated with respect no matter their statuses or roles. Sociological analyses of social problems help students to see that people do not remain equal (Mignolo 2009). Racism, for example, strips Black people of their equality. For example, the writers of the US Declaration of Independence crafted the statement, "All men are created equal," while at the same time upholding slavery. With these considerations, engagement with this topic can clarify the need to address social inequities and promote humane treatment of all people.

As previously noted, this theme involves the idea that reality is constructed through social interaction. Traditional sociology grounded in realism emphasizes that social structures, including roles, are objective things that are beyond human influence. Nevertheless, a constructionist view asserts that the social world and its structures are linguistically created through dialogue and, therefore, can be changed (Murphy 1993). When sociology students recognize that they not only have a hand in making social structures but are part of them, they gain a sense of hope

that social systems can be revolutionized and feel empowered to be participate in the process. Moreover, they develop a sense of social responsibility to be part of the solution. However, this optimism does not necessarily provide them with a clear view of their role in creating social change.

Students may get ideas for how they can contribute to collective action by listening to the stories of elders. The oral tradition, particularly storytelling, is common across most cultures and useful for transmitting local knowledge, values, and lessons to the next generation. Therefore, this mode of communication is important for educating *about, through, and for* human rights (United Nations 2011). Writing on the intersection of human rights and personal narratives, Schaffer and Smith (2004) argue that “life narratives have become one of the most potent vehicles for advancing human rights claims” (p. 1). These narratives should thus be considered to be a valuable component of a human rights-infused sociology curriculum, which is consistent with Article 5.3 of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training that states, “Human rights education and training should embrace and enrich, as well as draw inspiration from, the diversity of civilizations, religions, cultures and traditions of different countries, as it is reflected in the universality of human rights” (United Nations 2011, p. 4).

When HRE is embedded in sociology curriculum, students see how social problems are human rights abuses (Bonds 2012) and take note of how they can use their strengths and talents in a variety of ways to transform oppressive structures. A sociological lens guides students in seeing the importance of developing policies, legal frameworks, and practices to promote a world where human rights are respected, but a human rights perspective is what helps them to understand that this work should not be left solely to lawyers and policy makers. All told, they recognize that everyone has a role to play in creating a free and just society. Therefore, the integration of HRE and sociology foments social responsibility.

Transforming Pedagogy and Classroom Conditions with Human Rights Principles

This section approaches human rights pedagogy and classroom conditions as two sides of the same coin, given that teaching methods shape the class environment and vice versa. Recognizing that there exists an extensive body of resources on these topics (Magendzo 2003; Mujica 2002), I will focus on how common HRE practices may support the implementation of a transformative sociology curriculum. Specifically, I will discuss strategies for promoting critical reflection, dialogue, a sense of community, and participation.

A human rights approach takes into account the human capacity to think and feel. Freire’s (1970, 1973, 1985) writings have been

particularly significant in promoting teaching strategies that stem from this understanding, specifically engaging students in critical reflection. This technique involves first validating students' life experiences and then encouraging them to see their limits, in order to see beyond them and be able to consider other viewpoints. The role of the instructor is to encourage students to identify and question their assumptions and ideas and, then, explore how they relate to the theories and ideas being discussed in the class. By guiding students in making connections between their beliefs, experiences, and the curriculum, students will more likely feel that the course is relevant to their lives.

Sociology curriculum lends itself well to reflective activity. With minimal prompting, students are able to imagine how society shapes their choices and actions. However, without human rights principles guiding the process, reflection may not be critical. This issue occurs when, for example, students make sense of their experiences with respect to course concepts, but they dismiss other experiences that are not like theirs. A student might say, for instance, "I grew up poor, and I worked hard to get to where I am today, so I don't know why other poor people can't do the same." Educators must, therefore, be cautious when students fall short of taking a critical, sociological stance when they reflect on their lives and challenge them to consider different experiences and perspectives.

Critical reflection is essential for dialogue, which is a "process of coming to an understanding" (Gadamer 1975: 385) through intersubjective engagement based on mutual respect (Murphy 2014). The point is to "enter the realities of others" (Murphy 2014: 42), and this action requires sincerity, openness, and reciprocity. Genuine dialogue involves recognizing one another's full humanity, accepting difference, and treating one another as subjects, not objects (Buber 1970).

Sociological issues often make good topics for debate and discussion. For dialogue to occur, however, special effort needs to be made to uphold human rights values of respect, honesty, pluralism, tolerance, non-discrimination, freedom, justice, fairness, and responsibility. In order to promote these values, professors may want to begin the class by establishing them as key standards for student engagement. Better yet would be to allow students to identify what they value in discussions. Typically, students will identify values that are related to human rights, but, if not, instructors may facilitate their brainstorming of values to reach this end. Displaying the values in the classroom may serve as a helpful visual reminder to sustain a dialogical mode when, for example, a student dominates the discussion, heated disagreement ensues, or disrespectful comments are made.

Fostering dialogue can help to establish a sense of community in the classroom. In a college course, especially with first- or second-year students, there is likely to be a lack of familiarity among peers. Building

community in the class means countering the individualistic and competitive tendencies that students have because of the broader culture. A first step toward breaking these barriers to developing a sense of a community may be ensuring that all students know that they can succeed in the class. After all, students are largely concerned with their grades and personal success. However, if they believe that everyone has the capacity to succeed, they may be more likely to support one another in a process of collective learning.

An activity that I have found to be useful for building community is allowing students class time to converse with their peers one-on-one about any topic of interest to them. Specifically, I will have students pair up, discuss anything they would like for a few minutes, switch pairs, and repeat. Connecting this activity with the topic of social interaction, I will ask students to reflect on how their behaviors may have changed with each discussion partner. Although there is usually always a couple of students who say that their social selves remained constant across all discussions, most students will recognize honestly how their perception of the other students shaped how they interacted with them.

Most classes, I will incorporate this activity a couple of weeks into the semester, and there usually is a drastic difference when comparing the class dynamics before and afterwards. For example, after the activity, students are usually more talkative before class starts and discussions are livelier with more distinct voices being included. From a human rights perspective, this activity can help students to not only appreciate their differences but also acknowledge their similarities. In one case, two students from different walks of life, who had never spoken prior to this activity, developed a bond over their passion for Star Wars and continued to engage with one another over the semester. One of them had even said that the activity was the first time that he had spoken with another college student on campus. Therefore, this activity contributed to their humanization.

Dialogue requires participation through which individuals may be able to engage with one another as equals and holistically (Buber 1970). What is important for instructors to be mindful of is that many students may not be used to being expected to actively participate because they may be accustomed to primarily the banking model of education (Freire 1970). Educators should, therefore, be clear and upfront about their expectations for students to participate. In fact, students typically appreciate when professors are open about their pedagogies and what they hope to accomplish when employing teaching methods.

Encouraging students' participation in their learning is more than an effective pedagogical practice. This strategy is important in supporting students in exercising their right to participate freely in public affairs. Accordingly, creating democratic conditions that facilitate

participation is a goal in a classroom grounded in HRE principles. Promoting critical reflection and dialogue support the creation of a democratic classroom because these activities involve the open sharing of multiple viewpoints and respect for different contributions.

A democratic classroom requires there to be trust between the instructor and students. Developing this trust may take time. However, one way to advance the building of trust more quickly is by instructors showing their students their vulnerabilities and sharing insight into their lives. After all, instructors are in the position to humanize themselves for their students. Students are, in fact, curious about their professors as people and yearn to relate to them. When instructors ask their students to share their reflections, instructors should use this opportunity to do the same as a way to foster relationships (hooks 1994).

The issue of power is always a concern when it comes to constructing a democratic classroom, especially given that the instructor always has grading power over students. Nevertheless, there are fruitful ways to promote power sharing and minimize teacher authority. One of them is in terms of decision making about curriculum. Given the wide range of social issues that may be covered in a sociology course, students could be encouraged to pick topics that are of interest to them to discuss. Although instructors are usually expected to have the syllabus prepared for the first day of class, sociology professors have the opportunity to create a curricular framework using broad sociological themes and allow for students to decide what subthemes they want to include. With current events often being referred to in class discussions, this flexible approach to syllabus creation will allow for the integration of contemporary concerns and recent happenings that are relevant to students' lives.

A democratic and trusting environment does not necessarily mean a comfortable one. In fact, professors fail their students when they call for their classroom to be a "safe space," especially when conversations are to be focused on issues relating to race. "Safe spaces" shield white students from being exposed as racists and protects their feelings by disregarding Black students' experiences and delegitimizing their voices (Leonardo and Porter 2010). Leonardo and Porter (2010) emphasize the nonexistence of "safe spaces" for students of color in race dialogue, given the marginalization of their views and dismissal of their experiences. Aligned with a human rights framework, they promote a pedagogy of fear that uses disruption and dialogue as "humanizing violence" (p. 154) to turn present anxiety and concern into courage and risk-taking that facilitate an environment for growth, mutual recognition, and appreciation for similarities and differences. Along similar lines, Professor Loretta Ross is a proponent of fostering a "call in," instead of a "call out," culture in the classroom and beyond. When there is disagreement and someone says something harmful, she advocates for

the use of respectful, private conversation to create a teaching and learning moment to address the harm, offer a different perspective, and allow for evolution (Bennett 2020).

The transformative possibilities that open when using a human-rights based approach to guide the curriculum, pedagogy, and classroom environment of college-level introductory sociology courses are promising. However, there are a variety of constraints that need to be considered. To conclude, the last section will recognize some limitations that professors may encounter in their work to make their sociology course more aligned with HRE as well as offer some prospects to overcome them.

CONCLUSION

The political climate over the last several years has likely affected the teaching experiences of most sociology professors. With the rise of anti-scientific attitudes, anti-democratic politics, and suspicion of university professors indoctrinating young minds, discussing what are often considered to be “controversial topics” has not gotten any easier. Although this paper focused on foundational themes in introductory sociology courses, some of the more meaningful topics for today’s students are issues related to race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, religion, immigration, the environment, health, and education. Many of these themes have gained the reputation of being “divisive,” which may make professors feel hesitant to approach them with their students.

A HRE framework, however, encourages instructors to not fear tension that may arise in discussions and, instead, use dialogue to work through it. Tension, in fact, comes with the territory of human rights, particularly in trying to balance individual with collective rights (Magendzo and Donoso 2001). While professors are expected to take a neutral stance on social issues, students generally are interested in their views. A HRE framework recognizes that not only being impartial is unachievable but that taking such a stance supports the status quo and is thus harmful to underrepresented and marginalized students. Human rights advocates stand for justice, liberation, non-discrimination, equity, inclusion, and equality. Therefore, by integrating HRE into a sociology course, instructors have these human rights values to point to for explaining their stances.

The racialized history of sociology explains how white, male scholars, through their dominance of the discipline, marginalized sociologists of color in producing the sociological canon, which includes writings by predominately white men with Western viewpoints (Brunsmas and Padilla Wyse 2019). This Eurocentric history also ignores imperialism and colonialism (Go 2013). What is problematic is how sociological scholarship and courses continue to elevate the Eurocentric white male perspective and erase Non-Western viewpoints. Specifically,

not integrating and centering the perspectives of women, people of color, and indigenous groups sustains a hidden curriculum that teaches students that other ways of knowing do not matter (Falcón and Jacob 2011). Therefore, professors should engage in the process of divestment in white sociology by crafting carefully their syllabi and assigned readings to ensure that the material includes diverse outlooks (Brunsma and Padilla Wyse 2019). Taking this idea further, Go (2013) argues that sociology should be grounded in relational theories from a postcolonial perspective that capture the connections between colonizers and the colonized and their histories, in order to overcome the field's "imperialistic unconscious" (p. 49) and stop its promotion of Global North dominance. Employing a HRE lens will help to guide the construction of a course in which all students can see reflections of themselves and their communities without being othered and relegated to the periphery.

Certainly, we cannot ignore that the classroom is situated within a larger institution and shaped by its structures. Dialogue, for example, may be easy to accomplish in a small class but is likely to be a major challenge for many instructors, who are faced with upwards of 100 students or more in their introductory-level sociology courses. Just learning students' names in such classes is hard enough let alone ensuring that every voice is heard in a discussion. Nonetheless, a HRE perspective encourages professors to use their creative capacity to promote dialogue in unique ways. Aside from breaking the class into small groups for conversation purposes, professors can promote dialogue through writing assignments or discussion boards that call for peer reactions. Providing students with the chance to write down their responses to prompts and giving them the opportunity to read their organized thoughts aloud to the class is a way to encourage the sharing of distinct views, particularly for students who get the confidence that they need to speak in front of a group when they are permitted time to prepare their opinions in writing first (hooks 1994).

Forms of assessment may also be influenced by institutional constraints, including, again, class size. While open-ended essays may be more aligned with a pedagogy for liberation, the ability to grade 100 plus essays in a timely manner may be nearly impossible to achieve, especially for instructors teaching several other sections without teaching assistants. Group reflections may be an effective compromise that will allow instructors to manage their workload, while using assessments that correspond to their HRE-based teaching methods. Producing a group reflection provides the opportunity for students to engage in dialogue, build community, and work democratically together. These reflection assignments should not only demand that students think critically about course material but also their class participation. Doing so cooperatively may foster greater accountability.

While there are certainly additional limitations to consider when integrating HRE into introductory sociology courses, the hope is that this paper has provided sufficient initial ideas to spark curricular, pedagogical, and class environmental changes that, if implemented, will be more likely to guarantee student transformation. Colleges and universities are believed to have the potential to be the “great equalizers” in terms of minimizing socioeconomic disparities. Yet, higher education, particularly in the United States, has yet to take full advantage of HRE as a basis for promoting equity and liberation. Perhaps sociology courses are an arena where a trend toward HRE can begin.

REFERENCES

- Beltrán Lara, María de Lourdes. 2006. "Educación en Derechos Humanos." *Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas*. Retrieved October 15 (<http://ru.juridicas.unam.mx/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/11379/educacion-en-derechos-humanos.pdf?sequence=13&isAllowed=y>).
- Bennett, Jessica. 2020. "What if Instead of Calling People Out, We Called Them In?" *The New York Times*. Retrieved February 15, 2022 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/19/style/loretta-ross-smith-college-cancel-culture.html>).
- Berger, Peter L. 1963. *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.
- Bonds, Eric. 2013. "Grappling with Structure, Social Construction, and Morality: Towards a Human Rights Approach to Social Problems Instruction." *Societies Without Borders* 8(1): 137-162.
- Brunnsma, David L. 2010. "We Are the Ones We've Been Waiting For: Human Rights and Us/US." *Societies Without Borders* 5(1): 1-20.
- Brunnsma, David L., and Jennifer Padilla Wyse. 2019. "The Possessive Investment in White Sociology." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 5(1): 1-10.
- Buber, Martin. 1970. *I and Thou*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Falcón, Sylvanna M. and Michelle M. Jacob. "Human Rights Pedagogies in the Classroom: Social Justice, US Indigenous Communities and CSL Projects." *Societies Without Borders* 6(2): 23-50.
- Freire, Paulo. 1970. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (M. B., Ramos, Trans.). New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc.
- Freire, Paulo. 1973. *Education for Critical Consciousness*. New York, NY: The Seabury Press.
- Freire, Paulo. 1985. "Reflexión Crítica Sobre las Virtudes de la Educadora o del Educador." Paper presented at the Latin American Council on Adult Education Conference, June 21, Buenos Aires, Argentina. Retrieved November 1, 2020 (<http://www.tlps.com.ar/reflexion-critica-sobre-las-virtudes-de-la-educadora-o-el-educador-paulo-freire/>).
- Gadamer, Hans-George. 1975. *Truth and Method*. 2nd ed. Translated by J. Weinsheimer and D. Marshall. New York, NY: The Continuum Publishing Company.
- Go, Julian. 2013. "For a Postcolonial Sociology." *Theory and Society* 42(1): 25-55.
- Gómez Sánchez, Davinia. 2020. "Transforming Human Rights through Decolonial Lens." *The Age of Human Rights Journal* 15: 276-303.
- hooks, bell. 1994. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*.

- Leonardo, Zeus and Ronald K. Porter. 2010. "Pedagogy of Fear: Toward a Fanonian Theory of 'Safety' in Race Dialogue." *Race Ethnicity and Education* 13(2): 139-157.
- Magendzo, Abraham. 1993. "Bases para una concepción pedagógica para educar en y para los derechos humanos." San José, Costa Rica: IIDH/CRE.
- Magendzo, Abraham K. 2003. *Guía Conceptual*. Guatemala: IIDH.
- Magendzo-Kolstrein, Abraham and María Isabel Toledo-Jofré. 2015. "Educación en Derechos Humanos: Estrategia Pedagógica-Didáctica Centrada en la Controversia." *Revista Electrónica Educare* 19(3): 410-425.
- Magendzo, Abraham K. and Patricio Donoso. 2001. *La Educación en Derechos Humanos: Diseño Problemático*. Instituto Interamericano de Derechos Humanos.
- Mead, George H. 1934. *Mind, Self, and Society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Mignolo, Walter D. 2009. "Who Speaks for the 'Human' in Human Rights?" *Cadernos de Estudos Culturais* 3(5): 157-173.
- Mills, C. Wright. 1959. *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mujica, Rosa María. 2002. *La Metodología de la Educación en Derechos Humanos*. San José, Costa Rica: IIDH. Retrieved September 7, 2020 (http://www.dhnet.org.br/educar/mundo/a_pdf/mujica_metodologia_educacion.pdf).
- Murphy, John W. 1993. "Role Theory in View of Postmodernism and the "Author Effect." Pp. 381-392 in *Japanese and Western Phenomenology*, edited by P. Blosser, E. Shimomissé, L. Embree, and H. Kojima. Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Murphy, John W. 2014. *Community-Based Interventions: Philosophy and Action*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Mutua, Makau W. 1996. "The Ideology of Human Rights." *Virginia Journal of International Law* 36: 589-657.
- Rodino, Ana María. 1999. "La Educación en Valores Entendida como Educación en Derechos Humanos. Sus Desafíos Contemporáneos en América Latina." *Revista IIDH* 29:1-10.
- Rodino, Ana María. 2003. *Educación para la Vida en Democracia: Contenidos y Orientaciones Metodológicas*. San José, Costa Rica: IIDH.
- Schaffer, Kay and Sidonie Smith. 2004. *Human rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition*. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Stone, Adam. 2002. "Human Rights Education and Public Policy in The United States: Mapping the Road Ahead." *Human Rights Quarterly* 24(2): 537-557.
- Tibbitts, Felisa. 2002. "Nuevos Modelos de Educación en Derechos Humanos." *Dehuidela* 15: 75-80.
- United Nations. 1996. "Plan of Action for the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education, 1995-2004." Retrieved October 2, 2021 ([https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Education/Training/Compilation/Pages/PlanofActionfortheUnitedNationsDecadeforHumanRightsEducation,1995-2004\(1996\).aspx](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Education/Training/Compilation/Pages/PlanofActionfortheUnitedNationsDecadeforHumanRightsEducation,1995-2004(1996).aspx)).
- United Nations. 2004. "World Programme for Human Rights Education (2005-ongoing)." Retrieved February 5, 2022 (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/education/training/pages/programme.aspx>).
- United Nations. 2011. "United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training." Retrieved February 5, 2022 ([https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Education/Training/Compilation/Pages/UnitedNationsDeclarationonHumanRightsEducationandTraining\(2011\).aspx](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Education/Training/Compilation/Pages/UnitedNationsDeclarationonHumanRightsEducationandTraining(2011).aspx)).