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BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEWS

A critical conversation about human rights and disciplinarity

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Reviewed by Kristina Eberbach
Columbia University, USA.

Kristina Eberbach: kre2104@columbia.edu

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Human Rights Education: Forging an Academic Discipline by Sarita Cargas offers a thought-provoking perspective for multiple global audiences, including those interested in human rights education (HRE) and academics teaching human rights but lacking familiarity with HRE literature. The text argues that human rights constitutes a discrete discipline and offers strategies for implementing HRE within higher education, focusing on education *about*, *through*, and *for* human rights and offering practical pedagogical suggestions. While the reader may wish for expanded treatment in some areas, the text stimulates a much needed conversation about the role of—and need for—HRE within higher education.

In Chapter 1, Cargas introduces HRE and provides a compelling argument for why HRE merits greater attention. Chapter 2 surveys tertiary HRE programs globally to identify patterns and ‘forge the path for systemic HRE’ (27). In particular, Cargas examines the extent to which programmes address three elements articulated in the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (United Nations, 2011): education *about*, *through*, and *for* human rights, (18-21, 40).

She finds that BA programmes show a notable degree of variance. For example, there is no single course required by more than one programme in the US and a wide-range of courses without ‘human rights’ in the title fulfil elective requirements. (29, 35). Importantly, Cargas finds that most programmes ignore pedagogical approaches, teacher attitudes, and activism (40-41). However, these conclusions are largely based on a review of programme websites and further conversations with programme leaders would be beneficial.

Notwithstanding programmatic variability, Cargas does find signs of emerging consensus in three areas. There is a recognition that human rights is ‘defined by the human rights regime’, that the ‘language of human rights is applicable to many kinds of problems’, and that ‘there is a pattern of universities in different countries focusing on human rights issues that are particular to their nation’ (40). She further argues that if human rights programmes were to ‘consistently incorporate the knowledge content from the existing consensus, supplement with recommendations from international documents, and root that in a critical pedagogy, HRE will mature into the more radical and effective academic program it should be’ (26).

In Chapter 3, Cargas expands on disciplinarity and human rights, asserting that in addition to ‘considerable agreement’ on foundational knowledge, human rights literature ‘argues that the curriculum must include an exploration of values, attitudes, and tools for action. No other field of study accomplishes this full agenda’ (46). She proposes four criteria of a discipline: a shared narrative of identity and community; common vocabulary and concepts; key questions for inquiry and a shared set of problems; and inquiry methods and interpretation strategies that determine what constitutes evidence (58, drawing from Buker, 2003). Cargas’ argument here is well-reasoned, but will likely benefit from an expanded treatment of these criteria, as well as comparison with other definitions of what constitutes a discipline.

Anticipating criticism, Cargas counters the argument that human rights is too *interdisciplinary* to be considered a discrete discipline and also addresses several ways in which she finds a *multidisciplinary* approach to HRE often problematic in practice. She concludes that recognizing human rights as a discipline is not only demonstrably warranted; it will also lead to more and better HRE within higher education (68).

In Chapter 4, Cargas identifies categories of advice for education *through* human rights based on several international documents (Flowers, 2000; United Nations, 2011, 2012; OSCE, 2012): teaching critical thinking; centering students’ rights; living the values of equality and nondiscrimination in the classroom; and, encouraging active learning (69). She suggests three methods for pursuing them. First, she calls for the explicit teaching of critical thinking, which would provide ‘a radical critical education in human rights’, partly because it would involve ‘decentering authority, questioning hegemonic knowledge, becoming inclusive, and transforming people’ (70). Second, observing that the cited documents do not primarily target higher education, Cargas draws on social justice education for implementation guidelines (see, for example, Hackman, 2005; Marshall and Klein, 2009; 80-83). Third, Cargas calls for active learning approaches, focusing on discussion.

Chapter 5 examines education *for* human rights. Cargas asserts there is consensus that HRE ‘should affect attitudes and values, and promoting normative values is not antithetical to critical thinking and a critical pedagogy of human rights’ (91). However, she does note the importance of basing one’s teaching on normative principles, particularly those backed by custom and law (91). Since the most strident objection to Cargas’ argument is likely to come from academics who would contest the idea of teaching norms and values, a more extended discussion of this argument would have been helpful. In addition, while the chapter does contain practical and useful recommendations for teaching *for* human rights, additional treatment would be useful, including greater reference to advice for dealing with unique challenges in the human rights classroom and more attention to skills beyond those of advocacy.

In Chapter 6, Cargas proposes student learning outcomes for nine core courses that could inform the requirements of a human rights programme and then discusses how an educator might incorporate education *about, through* and *for* human rights when designing individual courses.

The author concludes by returning to her core argument:

As a community of scholars of HRE, we have everything necessary to create a unique, academically sound discipline of human rights based in critical

pedagogy. We have the need, the right historical moment, and a solid foundation in extant programs, courses, books, and journals indicating that we meet disciplinary criteria requiring a strong community of scholars and a common vocabulary and set of concepts (136).

But, she acknowledges that more is needed—more HRE faculty, more new course-specific books, and more faculty willing to incorporate human rights into their courses (138).

This provocative exploration of HRE within higher education is an important contribution to the field, identifying strengths to build on as well as unmet needs. Academics should take seriously her argument that effective HRE promises systematic improvement as it cultivates a rights-aware and rights-respecting environment and nurtures graduates more prepared to meet human rights challenges (137).

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