

UDHR 'Generations of Rights' Classification

Recommended Level of Instruction: This lesson was designed for an Introduction to human rights course, however it may be used to introduce a human rights component to a course. The goal is to introduce students to human rights through the concept of the three 'generations of rights' using the 30 articles of the UDHR for classification purposes. Students do not need any background on human rights. Actually, this lesson is most effective for introducing students to human rights, especially before they have much exposure to the specifics of the UDHR or the concept of the three generations of rights.

Keywords: UDHR, comparative perspectives, introduction to human rights, Theory of human rights, generations of rights, classifications of human rights.

Learning Objectives:

Students will be able to classify various human rights into the three generations and assess the relevance, and difficulties, of this classification. They will also be able to identify types of rights as written in legally oriented language.

Material/Readings:

The UDHR ([online](#)) or if pressed for time in class a sampling of the Articles printed hardcopy for the class (yet if sampling make sure to include some from all three generations of rights in the UDHR (1st Articles 3-21; 2nd Articles 22-27; 3rd Articles 28-30).

Supplementary reading: some intro college level reading on what human rights are, for example use Goodhart, Michael. *Human Rights: Theory and Practice*, Edition 1 or 2, Chapter 1.

Synopsis of Material:

The UDHR is one of the first and foremost attempts at international human rights law. The UDHR foregrounds many international human rights treaties written since the Declaration was ratified in 1948. Intriguing tidbit: According to Guinness World Records the UDHR is the most translated "Document" of all time--450 languages by 2014.

Goodhart, Chapter 1 is an accessible introduction to what human rights are. It is more focused on the political dimensions of human rights, but does an adequate job of addressing the interdisciplinary aspects of human rights.

Recommended Background Information:

Before beginning the activity instructor should mention that Karel Vasak coined the concept of "generations" of rights in the 1970s and his classification was not in chronological or theoretical order. The generations were meant as a classification tool and have 'stuck' for better or for worse. Instructor should briefly define what the generations are: 1st Political and Civil; 2nd Economic, Social and Cultural; 3rd Group rights, solidarity, communal, minority groups. Instructor will want to give some examples of where specific rights fall into which generation, such as right to free speech, healthcare, and right to form a union, but not give away too many of them or the activity will suffer. Instructor also should note that the 3rd generation of rights is the most controversial and least institutionalized in international or domestic law. Instructor might also want to mention that the drafters of the UDHR purposely did not include any philosophical justification of the human rights they decided to include in their list. They wanted to keep the rights above debates on philosophy and keep them more universal than philosophy allows—however, ironically there has been extensive debate about the lack of philosophical backing ever since stemming from this decision.

Discussion Questions/Activity:

Divide students into groups of three or four. Give them copies of the UDHR or a sampling of selected rights as mentioned above. Then have them complete the assignment below:

Human Rights Categorization Assignment

Types of Human Rights: Broadly Conceived.

1. Political and civil rights.
2. Economic, social and cultural.
3. Group rights: solidarity, communal, minority groups.

In an attempt to build critical thinking skills, ask students to put the number of the 'type' of human right listed above 1, 2, 3, next to each human rights listed in the UDHR.

After collecting student answers from each group, then unveil and discuss what scholars have, at least in general, considered the classification of rights into generations.

As you expose where rights fall into the classification, have a discussion of various rights as deemed important to the instructor. Students will likely be surprised that there are so many political and civil rights all in a row when classification is provided. Some follow up discussion questions:

Why might Articles 3-21 be considered political and civil rights?

Why might Articles 22-27 be considered economic, cultural, and social?

Why might Articles 27-30 be considered group, solidarity, communal, minority rights?

Would any of these rights fit into two generations?

Why?

What are the advantages and disadvantages to the 'generations of rights' classification?

Discuss as long as productive.

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