

Interdisciplinary Book Panel Discussions

Recommended Level of Instruction:

This format can be used in any course at any level, but ideally works best in an upper-level course (towards the end of the semester) as it allows students to draw from the entirety of the course content covered, as well as, ideally, other relevant courses. This lesson was designed for an upper-level theory of human rights course with 45 students. However, the format is incredibly adaptable so long as relevant readings are chosen. The necessary background for this specific assignment and book selections is a general familiarity with debates within human rights theory and, ideally, some familiarity with the selected texts.

Keywords:

Human Rights Theory; Literature

Learning Objectives:

Students will be able to identify human rights topics in an additional reading, integrate course materials with this additional reading, and engage in a conversation/presentation with others who read the same book and peers who did not read the book, explaining the core ideas and developing connections between course material and the additional text. Students will develop and demonstrate these skills in both written and oral communication.

Reading(s)/ Material(s):

Course Text (specific to the course I taught, Theory of Human Rights, but any text can be made to fit with this assignment): Hayden, Patrick, ed. 2001. *The Philosophy of Human Rights*. St. Paul, MN: Paragon House.

Additional Texts:

- Dorfman, Ariel. 1994. *Death and the Maiden*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Hiskes, Richard P. 2009. *The Human Right to a Green Future: Environmental Rights and Intergenerational Justice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Levin, Ira. [1970] 2010. *This Perfect Day*. New York: Pegasus Books.

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- Mathabane, Mark. [1986] 1998. *Kaffir Boy: The True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in Apartheid South Africa*. New York: Free Press.
- Satrapi, Marjane. 2007. *The Complete Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon.

Synopsis of Material:

The Hayden text that I used for my course is a collection of various writings on the theory of human rights that cover a variety of human rights topics and includes western and non-western perspectives. The additional readings are an interdisciplinary selection of texts to highlight how philosophical concepts from human rights can show up in a variety of texts, including a play, a work of traditional theory, a novel, a memoir, and a graphic novel.

In the play *Death and the Maiden*, Dorfman addresses issues of truth, justice, and reconciliation in the wake of the fall of a dictatorial regime (in an unnamed Latin American country) and the human rights abuses it perpetrated. TRIGGER WARNING: the play addresses the issue of rape as a form of torture.

Hiskes's *The Human Right to a Greener Future* presents a work of contemporary political theory that constructs an argument for a universal human right to a clean environment. This argument draws on the concepts of particularism and every country's interest in supporting future generations to argue for environmental human rights.

Levin's novel, *This Perfect Day*, posits a dystopian world where people have all of their basic needs completely cared for by the all-knowing UniComp, but they lack basic free will. When the main character becomes aware of the level of control society asserts over the individuals, he escapes to a "hidden" free city only to find that freedom comes with its own set of costs—namely poverty, disease, and discrimination.

Mathabane's memoir of his life growing up as a black South African living under apartheid, details the atrocities committed under apartheid and his eventual escape from South Africa. Here we

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have a first-hand account of life under apartheid, and the human rights abuses that were common in this system.

Satrapi's *The Complete Persepolis* is the collection of the entirety of Satrapi's illustrated personal journey. In it she illustrates her memoir of her childhood growing up in Tehran during the Islamic Revolution, her time abroad for school, as well as her travails as she returns to and again leaves Iran. Religion, culture, revolution, women's rights, and human rights generally are all prevalent in this intimate look into Satrapi's own life.

Recommended Background Information:

Beyond a basic familiarity with human rights theory, some contextual information on the topics covered in the additional books would be ideal. There is no specific information that an instructor must have to succeed in this project, but some familiarity with Latin American human rights abuses under various dictators, South African apartheid, and Iran would be beneficial, in particular.

Discussion Questions/Activity:

This activity involves allowing students a free space to make interdisciplinary connections between course material and a reading that they do on their own. The basic set up is that the class is divided into five roughly equal groups depending on class size (I had a class of 45, and 9 students assigned per text). I had the students fill out their preferences for the additional texts and then distributed them to try to maximize students' receiving their first or second choice. Each book was assigned one class day. On that day, the students who read the assigned book came in having written a short paper (2-3 pages) connecting their additional book to the course material. The papers allow students to think through their connections before the panel discussion to enrich the quality of discussion, as well as ensure at least a minimal level of preparedness for the discussion. Students on the

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panel sat in front of and facing the class. The instructor leads the panel discussion with questions, either directed at specific students on the panel, for every student on the panel, or general questions for anyone on the panel to discuss. It is highly encouraged to also allow students in the class who did not read the books to ask questions as well. Participation points can be given for students who ask questions of the panel. This exercise is designed to broaden the topics covered, and add a variety of material to the course, while not requiring students to read five additional books. In this way, the students during their panel session are educating their peers regarding the human rights material and implications in the books that they read.

Possible alterations to this activity include having more or fewer books to adjust for class size, to have other professors moderate the panels, or to have a student—either part of the panel or not—serve as a moderator.

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