

Member Spotlight: Rosemary Blanchard

Rosemary Blanchard is Chair of the NCSS Human Rights Education Special Interest Community. As we observe the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Rosemary sat down with NCSS to discuss the importance of the declaration and its anniversary, the role of the Human Rights Education Community and the place of human rights education in social studies.



Why is the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights such an important moment for social studies classrooms?

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights arose out of the world's revulsion at the inhumanity carried out during World War II and the Holocaust. For one historical moment, the world shared a widespread aspiration to build a society or societies upon a foundation of universal humanity. In the brief period between the end of World War II and the start of the Korean Conflict, the United Nations was formed; the Nuremberg tribunals identified and applied universal principles of justice in a world court setting for "crimes against the peace" and "crimes against humanity" (a category of international wrongdoing delineated for the first time); and the Geneva Conventions expanded to identify standards for treatment of civilian populations in war, armed conflict and occupation of one nation by another.

For the first time, it was universally declared that all people share the right to be protected from assaults on their essential humanity, even when that assault is perpetrated by their own government under its own "laws".

Many of the aspirations and standards codified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights had long been recognized by the world's major religions and by both Enlightenment-based and Confucian-based theories of political ethics. The United States had recognized certain civil and political rights in our founding documents as applying to our own citizens and residents (although we often allowed exceptions for identifiably "different" marginalized groups). Yet this was the first time that all the major nations of the world established a universal, non-theological basis for the right to be treated like a human being. This was huge! The claim of shared humanity was not always recognized as a basis for how human beings should treat each other. It took something as horrifying as the Holocaust and the incredible destructive consequences of total warfare to bring humankind together to say "Enough!"

So, the standards by which we evaluate human societies changed radically in the immediate post-war period. The United States played a major role in these advances in humanitarian law and human rights. And yet, for too many years, social studies education in the United States largely skipped over this pivotal moment in U.S. and world history. Both textbooks and supplemental reading series tended to touch lightly on the human rights and humanitarian law explosion in the post-war period and instead jump to the Cold War, which was generally covered in exhaustive depth.

We need to stop withholding from our children the powerful stories that form a critical part of our history. This history tells the story of the world's people claiming their shared humanity. When children understand that their sense of self, their dignity, and aspirations are affirmed by the entire world, they also understand that their dignity is strengthened, not threatened, by including others in that circle of respect.

The 70th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights should be an occasion for celebration in our schools and classrooms. The entire world declared that every human being has fundamental rights. All of us have a right to be treated with dignity, respect, and care and that none of us can deny the human rights of another person without jeopardizing our own human rights.

What is "human rights education"— and why does NCSS have a community for it?

When NCSS adopted its [Human Rights Education position statement](#), it incorporated the definition of human rights education adopted by Human Rights Educators, USA (HRE USA, www.hreusa.org), a civil society organization (to which I belong). HRE USA defines human rights education as: "...a lifelong process of teaching and learning that helps individuals develop the knowledge, skills, and values to fully exercise and protect the human rights of themselves and others..." The goal is to teach students to examine their experiences from a human rights perspective. (See also www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/what_is_human_rights_education.)

We have an NCSS Human Rights Education Community to make the human rights aspects of social studies and civic education more manifest in the ways that social studies are perceived, discussed and taught. I was involved in establishing this Community in 2013 because a number of human rights educators were concerned that human rights was only minimally addressed in most social studies programs and standards. As NCSS was undertaking the development of what became the C3 Framework, there was no identified group within NCSS to influence the standards development process from an HRE perspective. This was a particularly critical omission in regard to standards addressing preparation for civic life.

Once the HRE Community was a part of NCSS, we appointed a representative to the House of Delegates. This made it possible for the HRE Community to propose that NCSS adopt a formal HRE position statement. Such a statement was extremely important because too often in seeking to expand HRE within a school district or within the state social studies standards, questions would be raised about the legitimacy of the subject of human rights within a social studies core. The NCSS HRE Community was able to draw upon experts in the field of human rights education from around the country and develop a comprehensive statement on the nature and

importance of human rights education, including humanitarian law education as well. Our statement was adopted by the NCSS Board of Directors in September 2014.

Nothing like this happened until there was an actual Human Rights Education Community inside the door, within NCSS to advocate and inform regarding this important field of social studies. Even since the statement was adopted, the HRE Community has found it important to track developments in other aspects of NCSS's programs and statements. By existing within NCSS and being able to comment as a community on earlier drafts of the NCSS Standards for Preparation of Social Studies Teachers, our HRE Community was able to persuade the working group developing the standards to make specific reference to human rights competencies (See Standard 5).

How is human rights education evolving in the social studies today?

One of the many ways in which human rights education is evolving is that schools and their students are being encouraged to look within their own practices and institutional structures and explore the fundamental concepts of human rights in communities within which students are situated. In the past, human rights or human rights abuse was often portrayed as something that happened in other, less democratic or less developed, countries. Classrooms rarely explored problems of equity, marginalization, or excessive force in law enforcement, for example, within the United States through a human rights lens. It was rare for students from marginalized communities to feel empowered to explore their own situation from a human rights perspective. That is changing now, quite dramatically.

The inquiry-based instructional model that NCSS has incorporated into the C3 Framework provides guidance to students to examine civic, social, legal and economic issues that affect their own communities, or that affect some groups within their community but not others.

Instructional resources exist now that can structure inquiry-based learning into projects that explore questions of social justice within the domestic environment. The move toward inquiry into the situated experience of students and their neighbors is reflected in Standard 5 of the NCSS Standards for Preparation of Social Studies Teachers,

“Candidates reflect and expand upon their social studies knowledge, inquiry skills, and civic dispositions to advance social justice and promote human rights through informed action in schools and/or communities.”

At the same time, I am concerned that in the current national and global climate in which conflicts between groups are often encouraged by divisive political leaders and hate-based violence seems to be on the rise, we may see a retreat from advances in human rights sensitive inquiry as teachers, and even students, may be intimidated into silence.

This is another reason why it is so important to draw attention to the 70-year history of the development of the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Our students, and their teachers, need to know that the traditions of respect for human rights and for the dignity of

all is as American as apple pie and that respect for the humanity of every person, on every side of every issue is a core principle for the maintenance of our democracy.

What are you currently reading?

That's a simple question with a complicated answer, because, like many serendipitous readers, I'm typically scattered over several books on a variety of subjects at the same time. I rarely finish one before I start another of a totally different sort, then I stubbornly insist on finishing them all...eventually. So lately, I've been reading:

Human Rights from Community: A Rights-Based Approach to Development (Oche Onazi, 2013) Edinburgh University Press Ltd. www.euppublishing.com, a study by Nigerian author and legal scholar Oche Onazi. Onazi examines a Nigerian case study to elaborate the importance of community within human rights discourse, especially within the developing world.

Considering Hate: Violence, Goodness, and Justice in American Culture and Politics (Kay Whitlock & Michael Bronski) Beacon Press, Boston. An examination of how "hate, and common, even ordinary forms of individual and group violence are excused and normalized in popular culture and political discussion," and an invitation to consider a different model of justice grounded in community wholeness.

The Way of Man, according to Hasidic Teaching, (Martin Buber, 1966) Citadel Press. And also a new translation by Bernard Mehlman and Gabriel Padawer (Jewish Light Press, 2012), Woodstock, VT. [I'm comparing the version Buber translated himself with this more recent translation.]

The Western Island – The Great Blasket (Robin Flower, 1944, 1992) Oxford University Press. A reminiscence of the traditional way of life in the Great Blasket Island, off the west coast of Ireland, in the first half of the 20th Century.

Letters from Jian Hui and other poems (Phyllis Hoge Thompson, 2001) Wildflower Press, Albuquerque, NM. Phyllis Hoge Thompson, poet and scholar, passed away in 2018 in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She was a friend and colleague.

What advice would you give a teacher trying to build a stronger human rights focus in their curriculum?

I would encourage a teacher to begin with an introduction to the fundamental principles of human rights. There are many good online free curricula that provide such an introduction. This provides students with a human rights vocabulary as they explore their world. Then, encourage students to write about and talk about issues close to home. Sometimes it helps if students complete an anonymous survey of their experiences of inclusion, acceptance, participation and safety in their neighborhood and in the school itself. The results can become the basis for dialogue within the class, or even school wide that applies a human rights focus to issues percolating right in front of everyone.

Another approach, again once students have connected with the fundamental concepts of human rights, is for students to undertake service learning activities within their community with debriefing seminars throughout the experience. Students can identify human rights issues embedded within situations like homelessness, troubled police-community interactions, disparate access to resources such as health care, public transportation, safe and affordable housing, etc. A human rights perspective provides an analytical vocabulary for understanding experience.

As students respond and react to events portrayed in the media, I would encourage them to employ the vocabulary of human rights. Instead of describing events in terms of personal reaction (“That’s so lame!”, “That’s not fair!”, “That’s just stupid!”), students can learn a more focused, critical vocabulary for analyzing the flow of policies and practices around them, and for proposing ways of addressing problems and changing the status quo.

What is one inquiry question about human rights that you want every student to ask who graduates from high school?

I would like every student to develop the habit of evaluating social, political, legal and economic outcomes at every level--personal, local, regional, national, global in terms of their implications for the wellbeing of diverse individuals and groups. Who is supported by this practice or policy? Who is marginalized? Does the distribution of these resources or application of these laws assume a zero sum outcome? Is inequity built into the operation of this program or the enforcement of this law? Can the objectives of this program be accomplished without throwing anybody or any group away? If human rights are grounded in a recognition of our common humanity, is anyone being left out of the definition of “humanity”? Now, let’s develop the practice of asking our students: “What one inquiry question about human rights are you taking with you as you prepare to assume your civic role in our society?” And let’s listen to what they say.

What has been a major benefit of your NCSS membership?

I’ve spent most of my adult life as a policy wonk, teaching at the university level, working with legislatures, courts, regulatory bodies to design, affect and implement policies. Over the years my frustration grew about the lack of familiarity with human rights principles and international humanitarian law standards within the larger population and even among top policymakers.

It became clear to me that any advance in public understanding of and respect for human rights was going to have to begin in the classroom. NCSS membership has brought me into direct contact with practicing social studies educators.

NCSS is the premier social studies gatekeeper in U.S. public education. NCSS cares for the whole field of social studies and its membership are the actual working educators who carry out the very policies that NCSS promotes. My hope has been that NCSS can be a vehicle for having an impact on how American people generally encounter the fundamental principles of human rights and develop an understanding of a respect for those principles. I feel that NCSS holds the key (or a key) to expanding awareness of human rights and extending the practices of human rights appropriate education within the diverse school systems of the United States.

I have learned so much about the field of social studies education from my participation in NCSS. My NCSS colleagues are very committed educators who work long hours with great skill to provide their students with a comprehensive understanding of their civic world and to help them develop the tools they will need to practice responsible civic involvement. I got involved with NCSS just as I was retiring from the last phase of my career(s) in law, policy and university education. It's been a pretty wild "retirement," because I'm busier than ever. But, I am extremely grateful to have become part of the NCSS family of social studies educators.