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Notes From The Field

Dissidents, Repression, and Human Rights: A Report on a Diversified Approach to Human Rights Education

By Alexander Dukalskis*

How do we teach about those who dissent from repressive political structures or take measures to defend fundamental human rights? There is ample social science material available to cover the “macro” perspective of human rights in terms of treaty commitment and compliance, state repression, and transnational advocacy groups (for a review, see Hafner-Burton, 2014). There is also no shortage of material about theories of human rights that can lead to fruitful and illuminating classroom discussions (e.g. Goodhart, 2016). However, when it comes to teaching about contemporary individuals who dissent from politically repressive regimes and/or who campaign to defend a particular human right or set of human rights, there is little self-styled social science literature or readily available curriculum upon which to draw. This field note reports on an attempt to consider, in a pedagogically diversified way, questions about repressive political structures, dissidents, and professionalized human rights work.

The class in question – *Dissidents and Human Rights Defenders* – drew on relatively disparate political science literatures pertaining to human rights, state repression, authoritarian regimes, and the Internet, as well as work by anthropologists, historians, journalists, and primary documents of international organizations. By collaborating with a locally based international non-profit organization that specializes in working with human rights defenders, this master’s-level class aimed to introduce students to the professional world of working with human

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rights defenders. While the coincidental location of this NGO in the same city as the author's university is not necessarily replicable in other institutions, this note nonetheless suggests ways that the model could be used in conjunction with other organizations like environmental rights groups, cultural rights organizations, or NGOs focused on gender rights.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to first clarify what a "human rights defender" is since it is not a well-known concept and is subject to much definitional debate (e.g. Nah et al. 2013). In 1999, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted the lengthily-titled Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups, and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which stipulated in Article 1 that: "Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels" (UNGA, 1999).

In 2004, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights published *Fact Sheet No. 29*, which elaborated on the themes of the 1999 UNGA resolution (UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2004). The document stipulated that "human rights defenders can be any person or group of persons working to promote human rights" (UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2004, p. 6). They can be paid or voluntary human rights advocates and are defined by their activity rather than their position. A journalist, for example, is not a human rights defender by profession, but a journalist who in particular highlights human rights issues may be considered one (UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2004, p. 7). The two key requirements are that human rights defenders accept the universality of human rights and act non-violently (UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2004, pp. 9-10). Naturally these stipulations stimulate debate about particular cases (e.g., Nelson Mandela in the case of the "nonviolent" clause), so the term "dissident" was intentionally included in the class title and content to open the possibility for exploring cases beyond the UN-accepted definition of human rights defender.

A Diversified Approach to Teaching Human Rights

The class – *Dissidents and Human Rights Defenders* – was conducted at University College Dublin (UCD) in Dublin, Ireland. It was a master’s level seminar in the university’s School of Politics and International Relations (SPIRe). Students were enrolled in a variety of master’s programs, including in human rights, international development, and international relations. Over the course of two years, more than 40 students enrolled in the class, coming from a variety of countries in Europe, North America, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The class was run in the spring semesters of 2017 and 2018 and was twelve weeks long with one two-hour session each week.

The partner NGO, Front Line Defenders, is a Dublin-based organization founded in 2001 “with the specific aim of protecting human rights defenders at risk (HRDs), people who work, non-violently, for any or all of the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (Front Line Defenders, 2018a). The organization works globally and has an extensive programmatic profile that includes emergency support, advocacy, training programs, online resources, public awareness raising, a rest and respite program, and a human rights defender annual award.

The syllabus was co-designed by the instructor and staff at Front Line Defenders over the course of several meetings and email exchanges during 2016. After the first attempt at running the class in spring of 2017, a debriefing meeting between the instructor and Front Line Defenders led to several changes designed to improve the class. These included adjustments to some thematic content, modifying assignments, and refining in-class activities, and were implemented in spring 2018.

Each week featured a different theme and, in most weeks, students read at least one piece of political science research, relevant material from Front Line Defenders, and a separate piece of professional, international organization, or NGO policy writing. The aim was to expose students to a range of material on the same theme to foster a multidimensional understanding. For example, the theme for the third

week of the semester is “Why Do State Violate Human Rights?”¹ In that week, the assigned reading was as follows:

- Davenport, Christian (2007) State Repression and the Tyrannical Peace. *Journal of Peace Research* 44(4): 485-504.
- Englehart, Neil A. (2009) State Capacity, State Failure, and Human Rights. *Journal of Peace Research* 46(2): 163-180.
- European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders (2008). Available at:
<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/16332-re01.eno8.pdf>
- Front Line Defenders – Strategic Plan:
<https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/strategic-plan>

Classroom time was divided into two segments of one hour each. In one segment, the instructor led a seminar discussion and/or facilitated small group discussion about the content of the academic article(s). The aim was to clarify the research, answer questions, and help students identify the strengths and weaknesses of the research design in a relatively standard “seminar style” discussion. In the other segment, a staff member from Front Line Defenders facilitated discussion and/or soft lecture about how the organization understands that theme. For example, for the theme “Why Do States Violate Human Rights?” the staff member was the organization’s executive director. Students were able to discuss with him the relative congruence between our political science understanding of why and how states behave in the human rights area and how Front Line Defenders approaches its work in specific cases and contexts.

In most weeks the staff member was different in order to ensure expertise on the given theme. Topics covered included freedom of expression and journalism, environmental rights and extractive industries, digital security and repression, international advocacy, and

¹ The full syllabus is available from the author upon request.

several others. Additional guests were invited as relevant. For instance, in the week on “International Advocacy for Human Rights Defenders” the founding director of Front Line Defenders as well as a former Irish diplomat discussed human rights advocacy – best/worst practices, illustrative stories, difficult dilemmas, and so on – from their different professional vantage points of advocate and diplomat, respectively.

Assignments attempted to develop proficiencies in both academic research and analysis as well as skills necessary to operate in the professionalized world of human rights NGOs. For the former, the major assignment was a 5,000-word research paper. For the latter, assignments included:

- Advocacy email designed to highlight the case of a human rights defender and to call a specific official to action,
- Application to an emergency small grant fund for human rights defenders,
- Security analysis of a specific context from the perspective of particular type of human rights defender, and
- Simulated Front Line Defenders board meeting in which students debated whether or not to take on a given case.

These assignments benefited from and were based on real case information from Front Line Defender’s work. For example, for the emergency small grant assignment, the parameters were based on a funding call available through the European Commission’s European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) for human rights defenders (EIDHR, 2017). Students were given a set of facts based on a case from Front Line Defender’s public database, but names and locations were changed. The simulated board meeting was a small group exercise outside of class in which students produced a written assessment of their deliberations and final decision. It was based on a difficult case that the organization debated over whether to adopt and students were not given the organization’s actual decision until after the assignment was completed.

The overall aim of the class was to facilitate a diversified approach to learning about human rights. The class included some simulated experiential learning (e.g. grant assignments), some seminar

discussion about social science research, and some problem-based learning (e.g. mock board deliberation). This model can be adapted and used in conjunction with other types of rights-based organizations or even those concerned with issues other than human rights.

Strengths, Weaknesses, and Discussion

The combined approach of academic and practice-oriented learning has strengths and weaknesses. The non-traditional format of this learning environment seeks to maintain and reinforce academic rigor while introducing complexity to existing social scientific understandings of human rights and promoting professional skills. Students engaged with human rights professionals who emphasized the complexities and grey areas of working in the human rights field. Such professionals regularly must make difficult choices and trade-offs that belie a simple image of human rights work as unambiguously wholesome and free of compromise. The interplay between scholarly research and professional human rights work sometimes reveals tensions and inconsistencies. Problematizing human rights advocacy in this way meant that students were exposed to a less-idealized version of a professional human rights career than they may have expected upon entering the class.

The class emphasized the interconnections between academic and professional knowledge, which is simultaneously a strength of the approach but also a challenge. For example, given that many influential research articles in the human rights area use both quantitative and qualitative methods (see Hafner-Burton & Ron 2009), a common challenge for educators is to present cutting-edge material if student's statistical skills or qualitative research methods knowledge are weak. Given that many NGOs also use both statistical and qualitative evidence to effect change (Moon, 2012) and that many common measures for human rights performance used in political science research are generated from NGO and government reports (Wood & Gibney, 2010; Cingranelli & Richards, 2010), it is important for human rights students to be sensitive to the interplay between NGO information and scholarship. The module could be improved in this area by giving more attention to basic political science research methods. Doing so would

not only help improve the final research paper but also may help the NGO analyze its own operations.

This leads to a potential modification and improvement of the model for educators who work in other human rights issue areas. Professional human rights workers frequently lack the time, or in some cases, the expertise to “take a step back” and analyze the data that they have for trends or patterns. If students could contribute to this task in a guided fashion, then they could not only learn about applying social science research methods to data but may also benefit the partner NGO. Unfortunately given the sensitive nature of the cases and information that Front Line Defenders deals with, doing so was not possible in this instance. However, for other human rights organizations, it may be possible for the students to actually contribute to the work of the organization by, for example, analyzing data, drafting reports, proposing grant ideas, and so on. This would facilitate better interplay between the academic and professional domains that the approach attempts to integrate.

Finally, it is worthwhile to reflect on how this model could be adapted other issue areas and/or organizations. The basic model could be transferred with the content changed to reflect the different issue area, but different themes could open the class to additional approaches. Other topical areas, such as environmental rights, could lend themselves more to field visits that would facilitate experiential learning. As mentioned above, issue areas in which the sensitivity of cases is less salient could open avenues for integrating student work into the organization’s activities. Lastly, a follow-on internship component for some high-performing students could be a possibility in some contexts.

Conclusion

This field note reported on a master’s level human rights class that combined social science scholarship with professional training and instruction. It described the aims and logistics of the class, presented samples of the material, and discussed some areas for improvement. There are advantages and disadvantages to teaching human rights in this way. The main advantage is a multidimensional understanding of the subject matter. Students are able to engage with theoretical and

conceptual issues through analyzing research while also applying such knowledge to practical problems and strategies of a human rights NGO. The main disadvantage is that students sometimes have difficulty coping with the complexity of integrating different kinds of knowledge generated from disparate sources using varying methods across multiple geographical contexts.

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