

2024

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Recommended Citation

Geracoulis, M. (2024). Making Curricular Space for Critical Media Literacy and Human Rights Education in the United States. *International Journal of Human Rights Education*, 8(1). Retrieved from <https://repository.usfca.edu/ijhre/vol8/iss1/8>

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International Journal of Human Rights Education

Volume 8, 2024

<https://repository.usfca.edu/ijhre>

Pedagogy, Community, and Praxis Commentary

Making Curricular Space for Critical Media Literacy and Human Rights Education in the United States

Mischa Geracoulis^{*}

Abstract

This essay draws from a study conducted as part of graduate thesis work at George Mason University. The thesis examined the purpose of human rights education and critical media literacy, and the international inducements to include these subjects in the national education systems of United Nations (UN) member states. It compared the United States (U.S.) educational system to those of other, similarly developed UN member states that have successfully implemented human rights education and critical media literacy into their national education. The comparison revealed a lack of implementation in the U.S. despite its member state status and agreement to do so. The study also looked at decades-long appeals from U.S. educators and scholars to embed these subjects into curricula, and the impact this education may have on protecting and advancing democracy. Based on the findings, a new undergraduate college course was designed. The essay that follows describes the structure, design, learning objectives, and expected outcomes of the course.

Keywords: critical media literacy, human rights education, civics, democracy, social justice, citizenship

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Introduction

According to the firmly established 1992 definition, media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act through all forms of communication (Aufderheide, 1993), including mass communication and media, popular culture, and digital technologies. Incorporating Paulo Freire's pedagogical work (Freire, 2000), critical media literacy takes media literacy further by teaching learners to interrogate and challenge dominant power dynamics, themes, and narratives (Kellner & Share, 2007). Because human rights education is meant to foster conscientious world citizens, ready and able to steward more peaceful, just, and inclusive societies (Tibbitts, 2017), the two disciplines together may be understood as a form of intellectual, moral, and social self-defense against divisiveness and disinformation in a nation rife with political and media hostilities, and economic, educational, and digital inequities.

With political extremism on the rise in the United States, agencies ranging from the international to the United States Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (2022) have warned that democracies around the world, including the United States, are in danger. Larger, more existential crises, such as climate chaos, war, and pandemics only compound the situation. These factors set the stage for research that led to the design of an interdisciplinary undergraduate course that combines critical media literacy and human rights education. Realizing the negative impacts that miseducation and disinformation have on sociopolitical stability, economics, and public health, this study sought for educational intervention, beginning with basic assumptions about the institutions of media and education.

The first assumption is that media and education are public goods, and in theory if not practice, available to all members of society. The second is that media and education are society's primary ways of obtaining and exchanging information. Ideally, learners of any age are equally and equitably informed and prepared for responsible, engaged citizenship. Far from being mutually exclusive, both media and education can either progress or obstruct human rights and democracy; hence, education and media communications

are central to civic engagement, democratic governance, and to solving some of the 21st century's most pressing problems. The study assumes that societies functioning on human and civil rights principles and justice-oriented objectives equate to more equal, equitable socioeconomic opportunities that include quality education and contemporary literacies.

Several key facts further inform the rationale for this project. In 2022, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) warned that the world had entered a new era of polarization and extremism perpetuated by widespread media illiteracy and misuse. Their annual *World Press Freedom Index*, which assesses press freedom in 180 nations, and ranks them according to five indicators—political, economic, sociocultural, legal, and safety—showed that the United States had dropped from 17th position in 2002 to 42nd position in 2022 and 45th in 2023 (RSF, 2023). If press freedom is a hallmark of democracy and vice-versa, then a compromised press compromises democracy. Without independent, pluralistic, accessible information, citizens are deprived of the knowledge and skills needed to participate in fair civic debate, and to hold their government to account.

Dr. Sylvie Briand, Director of the Department of Global Infectious Hazard Preparedness at the World Health Organization (WHO), made similar public statements on the globalized “infodemic” that surged with COVID-19. The term “infodemic” captures the enormity of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation that floods through online spaces and throughout the public sphere (WHO, 2021). To clarify, misinformation is false information that is unwittingly passed on; meaning the sender is unaware that the information is incorrect. Disinformation is an intentional spreading of false information, and malinformation is factual information that is removed from its original context and disseminated in such a way as to purposely cause confusion or harm (Media Defence, 2023). The infodemic, asserted Briand, proliferates largely unchecked in environments in which critical thinking, norms-centered discourse, human and civil rights, and media literacy skills are lacking and/or underprioritized in national educational systems (WHO, 2022).

Factoring into the development of the course is the nearly worldwide migration patterns that show few signs of slowing down. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, at the end of 2022 the number of people worldwide forcibly displaced from their homes was 89.3 million (UNHCR, 2001-2024). The sources of mass migration include war and violence, climate catastrophe, poverty, and public health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Approximately 40 percent of those displaced are under the age of 18 (UNHCR, 2001-2024), pointing to interrupted and/or inadequate education for many school-age persons. This matters on multiple levels, not the least of which is that some of those displaced individuals inevitably land in U.S. classrooms as “third culture kids,” that is, children reared in a culture different from that of their parents’ or their own place of birth (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Depending on the circumstances leading to third culture kids’ relocation, they may arrive in their new schools with some degree of trauma. Educators and student peers alike need a more thorough and critical understanding of these causes and effects. A critical literacies and rights-based educational foundation can assist students, educators, and practitioners to better engage in multiple realities, including those within marginalized and resettlement communities, as well as in a democracy (Bajaj, 2015).

Migrants and displaced persons depend heavily on mobile devices and applications for communication and information, further indicating the importance of critical media and information literacy and knowledge of rights (Bruinenberg, et al, 2021). Considering Russia’s war on Ukraine that began in early 2022, protracted conflicts in the Middle East, Central Asia and on the African continent, increasingly extreme and frequent weather events, economic turmoil, and transnational corporate decisions that prioritize the few above the many, international and internal migration and displacement will likely continue. Accordingly, the demand for education and critical literacies will also continue.

This study assumes that educating citizens and residents of any nation in human rights education (HRE) and critical media literacy (CML) may aid in advancing civics and citizenship education, empowering learners with the

knowledge and skills to engage in community action and civic duties, and to demand transparency in government. The learning outcomes and long-term potential of both human rights education and critical media literacy highlight the value of these subjects in national educational systems, and explain the decades-long appeals from educators and scholars to include them in U.S. curricula. As a noteworthy aside, this exploration into HRE and CML uncovered appeals from scholars of civics and citizenship education. The case for embedding contemporary civics learning into U.S. curricula at all levels reveals learning objectives and outcomes similar to that of HRE and CML, and have factored into the content and construction the course.

International educational standards

The United Nations (UN) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) have long issued international standard-setting instruments on education. Considered “soft laws,” these declarations, charters, conventions, recommended directives, and normative frameworks are not legally binding. Nonetheless, member states are expected to enforce them through their national systems (UNESCO, 2024a).

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) upholds that the relationship between human rights and democracy is mutually reinforcing, and contributes to a just society (OHCHR, 1996-2024a-b). In an effort to oblige countries to adopt a human rights framework, the UN World Programme for Human Rights Education drafted the *Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training* which was adopted in 2011, instructing governments on how to provide and institutionalize human rights education within national education systems. This includes public and private schools, colleges, and universities; formal and informal sectors; vocational training, teacher education, continuing professional development education; and public awareness education (Cargas, 2020). As with the assertion by the UN World Programme’s training manual that critical human rights education is integral to solving our world’s most pressing and ongoing crises (2011), UNESCO’s *Media and Information*

Literacy Curriculum for Educators and Learners contends the same with regards to critical media literacy. For citizens to fully participate in a rights-based democracy and address many of the issues facing humanity today, they must be explicitly educated and equipped to interrogate media messaging and information (Grizzle, et al., 2021).

UN guidelines on HRE and CML tie into a fundamental rationale for the course proposed in this article. They assert that when institutions, policies, laws, and societies are grounded in human rights, a democracy is better held in check, opportunities are more equally available across societal stratospheres, and that socioeconomic equity is more achievable. The premise of critical media literacy is to engage with media through an analytical lens, identifying systems and structures of power, ideologies, and images of groups and individuals that ultimately produce what becomes public or common knowledge and assumed to be true in culture and society. Media education expert David Buckingham argued in *Media Education Manifesto* (2019) that simply knowing how to access or send information or to use a digital device is a bare minimum as compared to an in-depth understanding of what stories are told, who gets represented in media, how media are produced, and to what end.

In the United States—a UN member nation—education is decentralized, and curricula are primarily set by state and regional school and college boards. After examining the directives put forth by the United Nations World Programme for Human Rights Education, UNESCO, and other UN departments that seek to induce UN member states to include HRE and CML in their national educational programming, this study found that the United States educational system has incongruencies between agreements “on paper” versus enactment of prescribed approaches and curricula.

The study compared the United States to other similarly developed UN member nations, such as Finland and the United Kingdom, that have successfully implemented HRE and CML into their national curricula. Contemplating the longstanding appeals from U.S. educators and scholars, this study continues those appeals, and provides an intervention in the form

of the course. A literature review showed that no one degree-seeking program or college course specifically combines and teaches critical media literacy and human rights education. Of the approximately 5,000 colleges and universities across the United States, less than ten offer stand-alone bachelor or master degrees in human rights (Halperin, 2020). Some form of media literacy may be found as a minor track within communication and journalism programs, as an online certificate program, an elective course, or optional professional development workshop (Butler, 2020). Aspects of critical media literacy and human rights education may be seen embedded in degree-seeking programs that concentrate in law, peace, security, or justice studies (Bajaj, 2015). These efforts, however, are too few and far between to adequately accomplish the educational goals set forth by the United Nations or those called for by U.S. educators, scholars, and proponents of human rights education, critical media literacy, and civics.

Background

Curricula update appeals are not new. In the past, national educational changes have occurred in response to events such as those during and after the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, and the 9/11 attacks in the United States. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic, January 6th 2021 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, and subsequent actions like voter suppression and restrictions, gerrymandering, reversal of *Roe v. Wade*, and the rise of artificial intelligence have sparked educational appeals anew (McCartney, 2019). These events reassert the value of critical media literacy and human rights education for cultivating an informed, engaged democratic citizenry and next generation of innovative problem solvers and leaders who are equipped to take on the crises facing our planet.

Sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic, UNESCO's Global Education Cooperation Mechanism was launched as a further push toward learning that involves critical media literacy and human rights education. As part of the UN's sustainable goals, "Education 2030" established additional inducements for member states to "transform" their national educational systems. The thematic focus on digital learning asks member states to teach responsible

digital citizenship, including online well-being, privacy, and security. Other themes focus on areas such as inclusive, equitable education, gender rights, and environmental sustainability (UNESCO, 2024b). Embedding critical media literacy and human rights education into U.S. curricula would help the country reach its commitment to these newer, as well as previous, educational goals.

Increasingly, corporate consolidation dominates the media and education landscape. Media ownership consolidation that has curtailed and eliminated many local reporter jobs, news stations and publications is counterproductive to democratic principles (Pickard, 2019). According to research by the Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, Hussman School of Journalism and Media at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, “[M]ore than 200 of the nation’s 3,143 counties and equivalents have no newspaper and no alternative source of credible and comprehensive information on critical issues” (Abernathy, 2020). What’s more, our nation’s students and the general public are largely unaware that giant corporations, hedge funds, and private equity groups own most media, decide on what gets reported, and impact what gets taught in U.S. classrooms.

A Course on Critical Media Literacy and Human Rights Education

Conceptual framework for the course

Because this course is designed to be interdisciplinary and introductory, it presupposes that students’ knowledge of the core subjects may be minimal. Each of the core disciplines—media and information, critical theories, human rights education, and journalistic ethics—easily stands on its own, and is worthy of study beyond one semester. On the surface, this presents as a potential limitation to the course objectives. However, because each subject shares learning goals and outcomes and approaches to literacy, introducing them as intersecting may lay the groundwork for students’ further interdisciplinary pursuits.

Ascertaining the similarities in learning goals and outcomes between the two subjects, this introductory, interdisciplinary, 16-week, seminar style, three-credit course is aimed at first and second-year college undergraduate students. The course could serve as an undergraduate general requirement, or it could work into degree programs focused on communication, journalism, ethnic and gender studies, education, social justice, public policy, history, and/or writing.

The course could feasibly be adjusted for high school learning, as well as worked into basic adult learning in civics, social studies, and English language arts. Because learning objectives of both critical media literacy and human rights education align with the Common Core State Standards Initiative (2011), and with relevant state anchor standards in English language arts and literacy, reading, writing, speaking, social studies, and history, curricula implementation is wholly plausible.

The course construction borrows from the educational framework published in the 2011 UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training manual. Teaching *about*, *through*, and *for* human rights provided the foundation upon which the course is designed, marking intersections among human rights education, critical media literacy, and ethics. Designed to foster an appreciation and understanding of human rights, teaching and learning *about* human rights as expressed in the UN Declaration of Universal Human Rights, as well as *for* (in support of) rights, and *through* rights is the rights-based pedagogy that links to critical thinking and democracy. This rights-based pedagogy incorporates human and civil rights attitudes and values, and can empower learners with the agency to take responsible, respectful action in civil society (OHCHR, 1996-2024b).

Table I. Course framework

Theoretical element	Teaching method	----->	----->
	<i>ABOUT</i>	<i>THROUGH</i>	<i>FOR</i>
<i>human rights education</i>	providing information on human rights to help with understanding fundamental principles, values, and means for their defense	teaching and learning in ways that are respectful of the rights of all participants in the educational process	empowering individuals to access and exercise their rights, as well as uphold the rights of others

<i>critical media literacy</i>	acquiring necessary knowledge and skills to interpret media messaging	analyses of means of media production, representation, language, audience, distribution, funding, and power structures	instilling intellectual, moral, and social self-defense, and conscientious communication
<i>journalism ethics</i>	Understanding main differences between law and ethics: laws are minimal standards of conduct; ethics are maximal	calls for higher order and critical thinking, higher level moral determination, and multiperspectivity	making decisions in ethical dilemmas that rise above baseline legally permissible conduct
<i>critical pedagogy</i>	employs inquiry, self-reflection, and authentic dialogue	teaching and learning is happening simultaneously	creating opportunities to recognize dynamics of power and equity, and to act on that recognition for self-development and that of others

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Course learning objectives

The purpose of this course is to provide students with knowledge and competencies to:

- understand international human rights concepts, and their compatibility with education and media policies and democratic practices in the United States;
- apply self-reflective practices to written and verbal communication, making connections between disciplinary knowledge and civic life
- demonstrate understanding and ability to deconstruct and create media messages;
- examine diversity of values, identities, and individual agency in various contexts with particular attention given to who or what is not being represented, and who has the right to be included and belong;
- examine propaganda tactics, and discern fact from opinion and fiction;
- synthesize lateral reading, critical and comparative thinking, and analytical skills to examine ethical dilemmas, power structures, civic duties, rights, and responsibilities.

Practical application synopsis

Designated High Impact Educational Practices, such as critical analysis, writing, class discussions, small group discussions, pair-sharing, experiential learning, peer and instructor feedback, and public demonstration of learning (Kuh, 2008) will be accomplished in this course as explained throughout the syllabus and week-by-week outline of assignments. All readings and media will be provided to students at no cost. Those materials, along with class discussions and assignments, will be grounded in historical theories, yet applicable to contemporary contexts. Abstract concepts will be explored in tandem with current events and media to help bridge to modern day relevance.

The syllabus introduces the topic for the week, which may be accomplished in one three-hour class meeting, or in two one hour-and-half class meetings per week. Classes may take place in person or online, synchronously or asynchronously through the use of a learning management system. Each class session is enriched by video, images, film clips, podcasts, and guest speakers. The syllabus' weekly calendar divides in-class learning from assignments to be done outside of class time. Larger assignments are meant to be explained during appointed class meetings. Further instructions for those assignments would be provided through handouts, online links, or attachments in the learning management system. Student progress shall be assessed by their participation, assignments, and projects.

Weekly discussions require full student participation, and account for 20 percent of the final grade. Employing multimodal learning strategies, students will be expected to engage with assigned readings on each week's or the following week's topics, which will be supplied as online documents or handouts. Topical podcast episodes, videos, and web-based learning activities would be linked and accessible through the learning management system, or through web addresses provided on the syllabus. The aims of these modal variations are to help quicken and deepen learning.

Four, short reflection papers, assigned at intervals throughout the semester and pertaining to the material leading up to the assignment date will make up 20 percent of the overall grade. A larger, mid-semester writing

assignment worth 30 percent and meant to encourage students to dive deeply into their topic through critical thinking and analysis provides an opportunity for students to express original thought and demonstrate academic writing skills.

The final “culture jamming” project, also worth 30 percent, may be assigned individually or as teamwork. It will ask students to analyze and respond to a message or signage that may be prevalent or commonly known in a community, among certain groups, or broader society. The message might be commercial, consumeristic, or political in nature, part of political canvassing, an advertising campaign, public service announcement, or a sign or symbol that can be critically interpreted or decoded, and reconstructed. The student will alter the original message to create something new, formulating a different or contrary statement. The last class calls for students to display their culture jam projects for peer feedback and discussion by way of a gallery walk—either online or in-person.

The final project reaches the top of Bloom’s Taxonomy pyramid, activating creation (Armstrong, 2010). As media producers, each student will send an original message that exemplifies a command of their chosen subject, interrogation of the structures that have supported it, deconstruction of its messaging, and ultimately, creation of a new message that confronts a problem, dilemma, or injustice, and advocates for something else. The critical lens employed through the final project and throughout the course in its entirety, is meant to help students see the world differently, and feel empowered by a greater sense of personal and collective agency (Bajaj, 2018), increased civic mindedness and concern for the social contract, and fresh ideas for working towards a world founded on rights, equity, and justice.

The purpose of this course derives from the premise that the future of democracy, human rights, and crises intervention rests heavily with the students of today. Concurring with those scholars, educators, and practitioners who have long advocated for providing students with the knowledge and skills necessary to understand the complexities and responsibilities of negotiating societies led by governments that profess equality, justice, and liberty for all, the proposed course offers a practical tool.

As scholar and cultural critic Henry Giroux (2022) has argued, democracy, rights, and freedoms, in and of themselves, are uncertain. They require a critically educated and engaged citizenry willing to commit and uphold the ethos of the common good. In that regard, the course's learning outcomes expect to equip learners with a new skillset useful for navigating a pluralistic yet polarized civil and global society, and critically engaging on issues that affect the entire planet, such as climate change, public health, and regional conflicts.

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