

Training Methodologies

Learning Human Rights On-line

The Internet offers many new possibilities for learning but, especially in the field of Human Rights Education, there are only few learning experiences specifically designed for the Internet and for its main target group, young people. Human Rights Education Associates (HREA) wants to fill this gap and is currently developing, together with the Council of Europe, on-line tutorials introducing different human rights topics. Frank Elbers, responsible at HREA for the development of on-line learning materials, describes what they offer, how they function and where they are available.



by Frank Elbers



The 21st century is destined to become the century of the Internet and human rights. As just one example, my organisation, Human Rights Education Associates (HREA), receives daily e-mail requests from high school students, youth, activists and concerned citizens from all over the world asking for basic information about human rights violations and protection.

Beginning in the 1970s, various intergovernmental organisations like the Council of Europe and UNESCO (the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) realised the importance of preventing human rights abuses through educating ordinary citizens about their rights and responsibilities. Subsequent guidelines and recommendations were used by educators and NGOs to introduce human rights into schools and universities. These initiatives eventually evolved into the field of "human rights education". Today a vast number of curricula, lesson plans, textbooks and training manuals about human rights have been developed for primary and secondary schools and for non-formal educational settings.

However, the human rights education field as a whole has not kept up with the rapid development of the Internet and the new possibilities that this medium offers. At the moment numerous educational materials can be downloaded from the Web, but few learning experiences are specifically designed for the Internet. Some United Nations agencies and a number of universities in North America offer on-line human rights courses; examples are the "Teaching Human Rights Online" initiative of the Urban Morgan Institute for Human Rights at University of Cincinnati

(<http://oz.uc.edu/thro>)

and the UN CyberSchoolBus Human Rights Module (<http://www.un.org/Pubs/CyberSchoolBus/human-rights/index.html>).

However, none of these are specifically designed for high school, college and university students, or youth in general. Young people are not only a main target group for human rights education but are also very frequent users of the Internet.

In an attempt to fill this gap, HREA, in partnership with the Council of Europe, is currently developing self-guided, on-line tutorials that introduce different human rights topics. These tutorials will be available in 2002. Topics are:

- 1) the European system of human rights protection (specifically the European Convention on Human Rights and the work of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg);
- 2) the rights of refugees and displaced persons;
- 3) the rights of prisoners and detainees;
- 4) women's human rights.

Through a combination of text, images/photos, multiple-choice questions, case studies and audio and video fragments, web visitors can learn more about one of these human rights issues in about 1_ hours. The tutorials are specifically designed for those who want to acquire a basic knowledge of human rights, including activists, university students, and upper-secondary school students. By offering these tutorials free of charge, anyone with access to e-mail or the World Wide Web will have the opportunity to learn about basic human rights concepts, law and protection mechanisms. Each tutorial addresses four questions:

- ▶▶ What are the main issues framing this human rights area?
- ▶▶ What are the relevant international and regional declarations, covenants, codes and treaties that apply? How can one determine if one's national laws and practices are in conformity with these laws and codes?
- ▶▶ What methods can be used to analyse the civil, political, social, economic, and cultural conditions of a vulnerable group in your country or community?
- ▶▶ What can be done to improve the human rights situation of this group?

The tutorials are being designed in such a way that they take advantage of the unique capabilities of the Internet. Interactive multiple choice questions interspersed throughout the tutorials help learners to check if they understand the main concepts. Furthermore, case studies allow users to apply the knowledge and reasoning skills that they have learned.

All tutorials will also include an “action” component to help ensure that learners feel empowered and enabled to defend and promote human rights in their communities. At the end of each tutorial visitors will find additional resources and contact information for key human rights organisations. There is also an option to give feedback on the tutorials, to sign up to receive regular information about the relevant human rights issue, and to share concerns with peers using an on-line bulletin board.

One of the interesting advantages of Internet technology over conventional learning materials is that different media can be integrated. We are developing audio-fragments that will add a dramatic dimension to the predominantly cognitive approach of the tutorials. The tutorial on the rights of refugees, for instance, will include the hypothetical story of a refugee who applies for asylum and the barriers and hostilities she has to face. A border official tells his part of the story and so does a human rights activist who helps the refugee to gain the status of asylum seeker. Each of the three narrators adds a new and different perspective, thus giving “multiple perspectives” that encourages the user to apply critical thinking skills.

Several clear challenges have emerged during the design phase of the tutorials. The first is how to transform traditional text into a format that suits the audiovisual and interactive capacities of the Internet. Another set of challenges involves how to design the tutorials for users that will collectively

have a range of comfort and ability levels when it comes to computers and use of the Internet. In a related vein, users will be logging in from computers and Web servers with different degrees of capability and speed. Thus, the tutorial designs must somehow service the range of users that are anticipated, without sacrificing some of the more sophisticated interactions that the technology allows.

The four interactive and self-guided tutorials will be available on the HREA web site for anyone who is interested to gain a more in-depth understanding of human rights monitoring and protection. We believe that these tutorials will be a unique and worthwhile contribution to the human rights education field.

Based on the results of this initial effort, additional tutorials may be developed in other human rights areas. If demand is sufficient, HREA also intends to seek further support to offer the tutorials in several languages and to make the tutorials available on CD-ROM. In the meantime, you can judge for yourself on our progress
<http://www.hrea.org/learn/>

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Eleanor Roosevelt with the text of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

