

Lesson 1: Hierarchy of Being and Human Dignity

PURPOSE

To understand how their dignity is the basis for human rights.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. Understand the powers humans share with animals and other living beings, and recognize the powers to think and choose as specifically human powers.
2. Understand human dignity as the universal, intrinsic and inalienable value of human persons.
3. Understand that human dignity is the foundation of human rights and that human rights are universal.

MATERIALS & RESOURCES

- Introductory Questionnaire
- [Video](#): Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- Preamble of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- Mary Ann Glendon: Is the Universal Declaration “Western”?
- Supplementary Lesson

VOCABULARY

- Human dignity: the universal, intrinsic, and inalienable value of human persons
- Universal: every person has dignity
- Intrinsic: it is within each person, simply because they are human
- Inalienable: dignity cannot be given or taken away from a person
- Power: the ability of a living being to do something on its own
- Power to Think: the human ability to know and connect ideas about oneself, others, and the world
- Power to Choose: the human ability to knowingly select between options

PRELIMINARY ACTIVITY

Ask the students to fill out the [Introductory Questionnaire](#) in the class. If you consider it helpful, comment on some of the questions at the beginning of the lesson to highlight some of the most critical issues the course deals with. Gather the student questionnaires to see if student opinions change from the beginning and the end of the course.

PROCEDURE

Step 1: Introduce the purpose of the course. Ask students what they expect to learn in the course.

Explain that the course will primarily deal with the following questions:

Who am I?

What am I capable of?

What can I become?

In academic courses, the students are mostly learning about the world around them. In this course, they have the opportunity to learn about themselves. Knowing oneself is the first step in determining how to live a good life, how to have authentic friendships, how to deal with problems, and how to give and receive respect.

Knowing oneself is the basis of understanding what one is capable of and what one can become. If someone can achieve excellence in what they do, they can become excellent as a person. To be able

to do this effectively, people need to be able to treat themselves and those around them properly and to be able to recognize justice and injustice, working on a social level to strive for a free and just society. One purpose of this class is to learn how to become excellent and how to strive for excellence together with other people. During the course of the following lessons, the students will learn what this means.

Step 2: [If the students have not completed HDC Grade 9, use the [Supplementary Lesson](#) available at the end of the Lesson to provide a quick overview on hierarchy of being.] Draw an empty [Hierarchy of Being table](#). Review the vocabulary definition of Power: the ability of a living being to do something on its own. Ask students to recall:

- A) Three powers that all living beings share
- B) Three powers which only animals and humans share
- C) Two powers unique to humans

Fill in the table as students provide correct answers.

The correctly filled [Hierarchy of Being table](#) should look like the one below:

	Plants	Animals	Humans
POWERS			
Eat	x	x	x
Grow	x	x	x
Reproduce	x	x	x
Move from place to place on their own		x	x
Use the senses		x	x
Feel emotions		x	x
Think			x
Choose			x

Highlight that the powers to think and to choose are specifically human powers and write the definitions of those powers on the board:

Power to Think: the human ability to know and connect ideas about oneself, others, and the world
Power to Choose: the human ability to knowingly select between options

Ask the students to consider whether there is something else that distinguishes humans from all other beings, apart from the powers to think and choose. Explain that you are not referring to a power, but a special value of human beings.

This special value is called human dignity. This dignity makes each person worthy of respect, gives them certain rights, but also responsibilities; it demands that all people behave in a certain way to nurture and protect this dignity. Write the definition of human dignity and its three characteristics on the board:

Human dignity: the universal, intrinsic, and inalienable value of human persons

Universal: every person has dignity

Intrinsic: it is within each person, simply because they are human

Inalienable: dignity cannot be given or taken away from a person

Step 3: The topic this lesson will focus on is that of human rights. A proper notion of human dignity is essential to understanding what human rights are. Modern human rights are founded upon the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The UDHR was one of the foundational documents for the modern protection of human rights, and was adopted in 1948, after the horrors of World War II. To this day, the document stands as a challenge to protect and uphold the human rights of all people around the world.

Play the [video](#) Universal Declaration of Human Rights for the students to learn more about the genesis of the Declaration.

Give students the [Preamble of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) and read the first two paragraphs aloud as a class. Highlight that the first sentence of the Preamble of the UDHR explains that human dignity is the foundation of human rights. It states that the “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world”.

The fact that universal, intrinsic, and inalienable human dignity is the foundation of human rights is recognized by the Preamble of the UDHR which says that human dignity is inherent (or intrinsic) to the human person and that it is the foundation of human rights. All human beings, “all members of the human family” have this dignity. It is not given to them by anyone, not even an international community such as the UN; all people have it by virtue of being human.

Explain that it's a common misconception that human rights grant human dignity. This is a flawed understanding as this would mean that if some Member State or if the UN itself decided not to give certain rights to human persons, they would lose their human dignity. Each person possesses intrinsic dignity, which is to be recognized and respected by both the national and international community. However, people had human dignity, before the modern human rights project was established and these rights were codified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Emphasize this important distinction for students, by writing it on the board:

Human rights are a legal reflection of the preexisting reality of each person's inherent dignity.

The second paragraph of the Preamble of the UDHR explains that “disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind”. By this, the document refers to the two World Wars, which, at the time of its adoption, were still fresh in the memory of its authors, and of the global community. World War I and World War II resulted in mass murders and gross human rights atrocities, among them the extermination camps of the Nazi regime.

Step 4: Divide the students into groups and ask them to read the text by [Mary Ann Glendon: Is the Universal Declaration “Western”?](#) and answer the questions associated with the text. As the title of the text implies, the article addresses the common objection that the UDHR is a Western product.

After the groups finish their discussions, ask them to share their conclusions with the rest of the class and lead the class discussion using the Answer Key provided with the text as a guide.

Step 5: Summarize. Review the three powers which all living beings share, the three which only humans and animals share, and the fact that the powers to think and to choose are specifically human powers. Recall the definition of human dignity and its three characteristics. Highlight that human dignity is the foundation of human rights, and that this is the reason why the UDHR is truly universal.

Preamble of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Adopted and proclaimed by General Assembly resolution 217 A (III) of 10 December 1948.

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,

Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law,

Whereas it is essential to promote the development of friendly relations between nations,

Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

Whereas Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in cooperation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms,

Whereas a common understanding of these rights and freedoms is of the greatest importance for the full realization of this pledge,

Now, Therefore THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY proclaims THIS UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.

Mary Ann Glendon: Is the Universal Declaration “Western”?¹

Contrary to what is often suggested, the participation by developing countries in the framing of the Declaration was by no means negligible. At the U.N.’s founding conference in San Francisco in 1945, it was chiefly the smaller or less-developed nations who were responsible for the prominent position of human rights in the U.N. Charter. Within the eighteen-member Human Rights Commission, China’s Peng-chun Chang, Lebanon’s Charles Malik, the Philippines’ Carlos Romulo, and Chile’s Hernàn Santa Cruz were among the most influential and active members. It is sometimes said that the educational backgrounds or professional experiences of widely traveled men like Chang and Malik “westernized” them, but their performance in the Human Rights Commission suggests something rather different. Not only did each contribute significant insights from their own culture, but each possessed an exceptional ability to understand other cultures, and to “translate” concepts from one frame of reference to another. Those skills, which can hardly be acquired without substantial exposure to traditions other than one’s own, are indispensable for effective cross-cultural collaboration and were key to the adoption of the Declaration without a single dissenting vote in 1948.

The Declaration itself was based on extensive comparative study. The first draft, prepared by the U.N. Secretariat, was accompanied by a 408-page document showing the relationship of each article to provisions of the world’s existing and proposed constitutions and declarations. When the Human Rights Commission’s second draft was submitted to U.N. members for comment, responses were received from a group of nations that included Brazil, Egypt, India, Mexico, and Pakistan, South Africa, Sweden, and the United States.

Among the fifty-eight Member States represented on the U.N. General Assembly’s committee which reviewed the near-final draft in the fall of 1948, there was even greater cultural and ideological diversity. This Committee was chaired by Charles Malik. It included six members from Asia, four from the African continent (Egypt, Ethiopia, Liberia, and South Africa), plus the large Latin American contingent. Six of the “European” members belonged to the communist bloc; Islamic culture was strong in eleven; and four had large Buddhist populations. Over the course of more than a hundred meetings, the members of this large committee went over every word of the draft. Each country’s representatives were given, and most of them enthusiastically seized the opportunity to participate. At the end of this process, Charles Malik could justly say of the Universal Declaration that “All effective cultures in the world had a creative hand in the shaping of the document [...].”

¹ International Law: Foundation of Human Rights – The Unfinished Business by Mary Ann Glendon, in: *Recovering Self-Evident Truths: Catholic Perspectives of American Law*, edited by Michael A. Scaperlanda, Teresa Stanton Collett.

It was, of course, true that much of the world's population was not represented in the U.N. in 1948. Large parts of Africa and Asia in particular remained under colonial rule.

The defeated Axis powers, Japan, Germany and their allies, were excluded. On the other hand, subsequent actions by the non-represented countries suggest that cultural "diversity" has been greatly exaggerated where basic human goods are concerned. Most new nations adopted constitutions resembling the Universal Declaration as soon as they gained independence. Later, nearly all of these countries ratified the two 1966 Covenants based on the Declaration. In 1993, virtually all countries in the world participated in the adoption of the Vienna Human Rights Declaration which reaffirms the Universal Declaration. It is hard to dismiss this overwhelming endorsement of the principles of the Declaration as a mere vestige of the colonial mentality.

It is unlikely that any other political document in history has ever drawn from such diverse sources, or received the same worldwide, sustained consideration and scrutiny as the Declaration underwent over its two years of preparation.

But what of the second objection mentioned above—the fact that several key ideas in the Declaration were initially described as rights in early modern Europe? After surveying leading philosophers and religious thinkers the world over, the UNESCO group discovered to its surprise that a few basic practical concepts of humane conduct were so widely shared that they "may be viewed as implicit in man's nature as a member of society." Freedom, dignity, tolerance, and neighborliness, they found, were highly prized in many cultural and religious traditions.

Nevertheless, the elaboration of these concepts as "rights" was a relatively modern, and European, phenomenon. So, does that give human rights a genetic taint that prevents them from being "universal"? Surely, their origin ought not to be decisive. The question should be not who had the idea first, but whether the idea is a good one; not where the idea was born, but whether it is conducive to human flourishing. Moreover, if a legal-political idea originated in one country but was widely adopted and internalized elsewhere, for how long and in what sense does it still "belong" to its country of origin? Do not all vibrant, living cultures constantly borrow from one another? As the Chinese member of the first Human Rights Commission, P.C. Chang, observed long ago, "Culturally, there are many 'Easts' and many 'West's'; and they are by no means all necessarily irreconcilable."

The Declaration's framers, however, never envisioned that its "common standard of achievement" would or should produce completely uniform practices. P. C. Chang stressed that point in his 9 December 1948 speech to the General Assembly urging adoption of the Declaration.

He deplored that colonial powers had tried to impose on other peoples a standardized way of thinking and a single way of life. That sort of uniformity could only be achieved, he said, by force or at the expense of truth. It could never last. Chang

and his colleagues on the drafting committee expected the Declaration's rights would be inculcated in various ways, and that over time the corpus of human rights would be enriched by these varied experiences.

QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:

Explain how the process of drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights went and how different cultures were included in the drafting process?

What happened with the countries that were not present in the drafting process? How did they approach the Universal Declaration of Human Rights?

Are there some moral principles widely shared by all cultures? Is the question where some idea first emerged decisive for calling it "Western" or "Eastern"?

Should the Declaration be implemented in the same way everywhere?

Answer Key for the teacher

1. **Explain how the process of drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights went and how different cultures were included in the drafting process?** Glendon describes a bit about the drafting process, and which countries were involved in that process:

“Contrary to what is often suggested, the participation by developing countries in the framing of the Declaration was by no means negligible. At the U.N. ’s founding conference in San Francisco in 1945, it was chiefly the smaller or less-developed nations who were responsible for the prominent position of human rights in the U.N. Charter. Within the eighteen-member Human Rights Commission, China’s Peng-chun Chang, Lebanon’s Charles Malik, the Philippines’ Carlos Romulo, and Chile’s Hernàn Santa Cruz were among the most influential and active members. It is sometimes said that the educational backgrounds or professional experiences of widely traveled men like Chang and Malik “westernized” them, but their performance in the Human Rights Commission suggests something rather different. Not only did each contribute significant insights from his own culture, but each possessed an exceptional ability to understand other cultures, and to “translate” concepts from one frame of reference to another. Those skills, which can hardly be acquired without substantial exposure to traditions other than one’s own, are indispensable for effective cross-cultural collaboration and were key to the adoption of the Declaration without a single dissenting vote in 1948.”

“The Declaration itself was based on extensive comparative study. The first draft, prepared by the U.N. Secretariat, was accompanied by a 408-page document showing the relationship of each article to provisions of the world’s existing and proposed constitutions and declarations. When the Human Rights Commission’s second draft was submitted to U.N. members for comment, responses were received from a group of nations that included Brazil, Egypt, India, Mexico, and Pakistan, South Africa, Sweden, and the United States.”

“Among the fifty-eight Member States represented on the U.N. General Assembly’s committee which reviewed the near-final draft in the fall of 1948, there was even greater cultural and ideological diversity. This Committee was chaired by Charles Malik. It included six members from Asia, four from the African continent (Egypt, Ethiopia, Liberia, and South Africa), plus the large Latin American contingent. Six of the “European” members belonged to the communist bloc; Islamic culture was strong in eleven; and four had large Buddhist populations. Over the course of more than a hundred meetings, the members of this large committee went over every word of the draft. Each country’s representatives were given, and most of them enthusiastically seized the opportunity to participate. At the end of this process, Charles Malik could justly say of the Universal Declaration that “All effective cultures in the world had a creative hand in the shaping of the document.”

2. **What happened with the countries that were not present in the drafting process? How did they approach the Universal Declaration of Human Rights?** Glendon addresses the reactions of those countries that were not involved in the drafting process of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

“It was, of course, true that much of the world’s population was not represented in the U.N. in 1948. Large parts of Africa and Asia in particular remained under colonial rule. The defeated Axis powers, Japan, Germany and their allies, were excluded. On the other hand, subsequent actions by the non-represented countries suggest that cultural “diversity” has been greatly exaggerated where basic human goods are concerned. Most new nations adopted constitutions resembling the Universal Declaration as soon as they gained independence. Later, nearly all of these countries ratified the two 1966 Covenants based on the Declaration. In 1993, virtually all countries in the world participated in the adoption of the Vienna Human Rights Declaration which reaffirms the Universal Declaration. It is hard to dismiss this overwhelming endorsement of the principles of the Declaration as a mere vestige of the colonial mentality. It is unlikely that any other political document in history has ever drawn from such diverse sources.”

3. **Are there some moral principles widely shared by all cultures? Is the question where some idea first emerged decisive for calling it “Western” or “Eastern”?** Glendon addresses the question of whether there are some moral principles that are shared by all cultures:

“But what of the second objection mentioned above—the fact that several key ideas in the Declaration were initially described as rights in early modern Europe? After surveying leading philosophers and religious thinkers the world over, the UNESCO group discovered to its surprise that a few basic practical concepts of humane conduct were so widely shared that they “may be viewed as implicit in man’s nature as a member of society.” Freedom, dignity, tolerance, and neighborliness, they found, were highly prized in many cultural and religious traditions.

Nevertheless, the elaboration of these concepts as “rights” was a relatively modern, and European, phenomenon. So, does that give human rights a genetic taint that prevents them from being “universal”? Surely, their origin ought not to be decisive. The question should be not who had the idea first, but whether the idea is a good one; not where the idea was born, but whether it is conducive to human flourishing. Moreover, if a legal-political idea originated in one country but was widely adopted and internalized elsewhere, for how long and in what sense does it still “belong” to its country of origin? Do not all vibrant, living cultures constantly borrow from one another? As the Chinese member of the first Human Rights Commission, P.C. Chang, observed long ago, “Culturally, there are many ‘Easts’ and many ‘West’s’; and they are by no means all necessarily irreconcilable.”

4. **Should the Declaration be implemented in the same way everywhere?** Glendon speaks about some details regarding the implementation of the declaration in different countries:

“The Declaration’s framers, however, never envisioned that its “common standard of achievement” would or should produce completely uniform practices. P. C. Chang stressed that point in his 9 December 1948 speech to the General Assembly urging adoption of the Declaration. He deplored that colonial powers had tried to impose on other peoples a standardized way of thinking and a single way of life. That sort of uniformity could only be achieved, he said, by force or at the expense of truth. It could never last. Chang and his colleagues on the drafting committee expected the Declaration’s rights would be inculturated in various ways, and that over time the corpus of human rights would be enriched by these varied experiences.”

Supplementary Lesson [Overview of Hierarchy of Being]

1. Explain that the core concept the students will explore in this curriculum is called human dignity. Only humans have a special value called human dignity. This dignity makes them worthy of respect and gives them certain rights, but also responsibilities; and demands that all people behave in a certain way to nurture and protect this dignity. The word “human” in “human dignity” means that all humans have it and that they have it simply by being human. Even though people differ in many ways, they all possess human dignity regardless of any differences. It is important to note that no one gives people human dignity – it is not granted by the society, political community, family, etc. Every person has it simply by being human and no one can take this value away from people. Human dignity does not exist in degrees – one cannot say that some people have more or less than others – each person is equal in dignity.

2. Explain that all living beings have powers to eat, grow and reproduce. Non-living beings like rocks can be divided into pieces by an outside force (e.g. if someone smashes them) but this is quite different from reproduction in living beings. Reproduction means creating a new member of one’s species. When the rock is smashed, nothing new is created, but only the existing piece is divided into smaller pieces. Power to eat means that living beings are able to take in nutrients from the environment in order to sustain themselves. With the sufficient intake of nutrients and by receiving the needed support from the environment (e.g. warmth, parental support, etc.), living beings can grow and develop. Notice that the support from the environment helps living beings to grow, but it does not generate this growth. The growth is generated “from within” and each living being grows and develops following specific instructions coded for by their genes. These genes provide instructions and direction for growth.

Animals and humans share three extra powers which plants do not have. First, this is the power to use the senses, such as smell, touch, sight, sound and taste. With the senses, animals and humans gather information from the environment. Senses are the powers which help humans and animals to gather different kinds of information from the outside world or within ourselves. This is done through sensory organs (e.g. nose, eyes, ears, etc.) which means senses are connected to our bodies. Plants too receive stimuli from the environment (e.g. the flower being directed towards sunlight) but it is hard to say that they *sense* it, i.e. that they *perceive* the stimulus when being exposed to it. The third is the already mentioned power to move from one place to another. Obviously, someone could move the plant from one place to another, but the plants cannot do that by themselves without outside help. Of course, sometimes plant seeds disseminate, but this is not the same as moving on one’s own. The seed is usually taken to another place by the wind or by an animal, and not by the plant itself. Then, after the seed is taken to another place, a new plant grows. On the other hand, animals and humans can move on their own, which means they do have this power.

Power to feel emotions is connected to the power to use the senses, both internal and external ones. After gathering information through the senses, through emotions animals and humans can experience reactions to the things that affect them. For example, an animal can see a predator approaching which can trigger the emotion of fear. A human person can hear someone making fun of him or her, and feel the emotion of sadness. On the other hand, when plants receive stimuli from the environment, they do not experience it emotionally. If someone cuts a tree, the tree does not feel pain.

Finally, humans alone have the power to think and choose. Plants and animals do not share this power. Animals, and especially higher animals like chimpanzees, do have some form of cognition and decision-making. However, this is always strictly connected to the basic survival instincts. For example, an animal can learn how to escape different mazes or use tools in order to reach food. A dog can learn how to respond to basic commands such as “sit”, “stay”, “go”. However, these are not, strictly speaking, the powers to think and choose. Humans are not just able to use more complex tools to reach food, but they can also decide to temporarily give up on food to pursue higher goals. Humans alone can think about complex concepts, such as solving a math problem, making new inventions, inventing jokes, or creatively expressing themselves through art. Humans are also fundamentally free from their environment. Whenever an animal is exposed to the same stimulus from the environment for a prolonged period of time, it will develop the same response to this stimulus (e.g. when exposed to pain, it will run away or attack back). But, humans can freely decide how to respond to stimuli. For example, when someone hits us, we can decide neither to flee nor to fight back, but to forgive the person and try to reconcile with them.