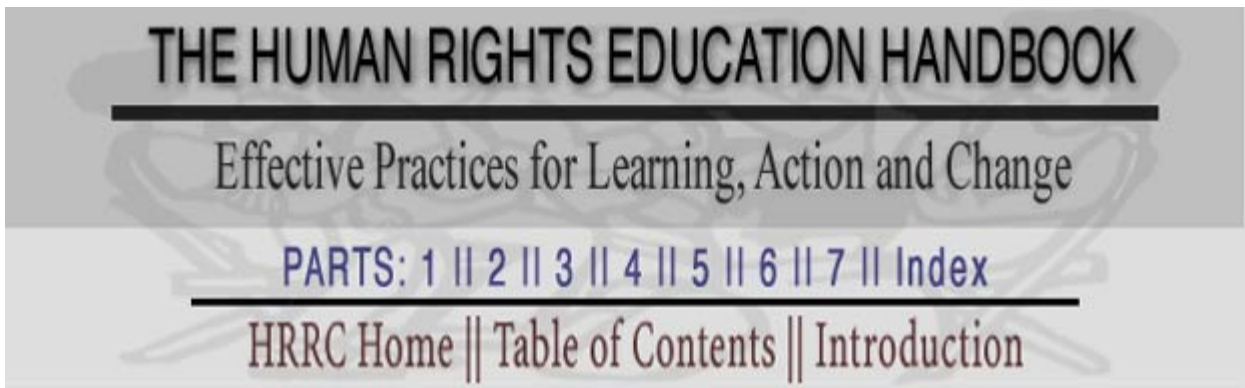


**The Human Rights Education Handbook:  
Effective Practices for Learning, Action and Change**

*Name of organisation:*

**Human Rights Center, University of Minnesota Law School**



## **Part III: C. How? Building Blocks for Human Rights Education**

*by Joel Tolman*

Jump to another section of Part III:



Every human rights education experience, whether a workshop, a march, a high school history lesson, or a presentation, can be put together out of the same basic parts. These Building Blocks for human rights education are blueprints for educators and advocates, ways to organize content and teaching strategies in order to ensure that meaningful learning and action result. In a brief presentation to a civic organization, the Building Blocks may only get a minute or two each, and individual blocks may be left out entirely. In a semester-long college course, weeks of class time can be given to each. Whatever the setting, these basic components can be integrated.

Educators often talk about three primary goals of human rights education: knowing about human rights, valuing human rights, and acting for human rights. The Building Blocks for human rights education described here take these goals as a starting point. They then expand on these goals, because human rights education involves far more than just these three components. It includes connecting, celebrating, thinking, building skills, and many other actions as well.

Educators should keep in mind two things about these Building Blocks. First, they are meant to be tools, not a set of directives. Like any tools, educators should use them selectively, where they make sense, rather than feeling they must accept or reject the entire model. Second, the Building Blocks are neither sequential nor independent. A single activity may strengthen several of these components. For example, while it is essential to build trust and community at the start,

community building, content learning, and action are interwoven throughout an education experience, not separated neatly into discrete parts. Most importantly, when the Building Blocks are used together, they make for the most effective human rights education. When individuals have knowledge, skills, commitment, and experience together, when learning involves information, action, and reflection, then education for human rights can truly take place.

While these Building Blocks are designed for all educational settings, they focus specifically on human rights work that blends education and action. In this sense, they may be particularly suited for the education of activists, individuals who wish to promote and defend the human rights of themselves and others. But based on what we know of effective education, experiential learning will help all students, not just activists, better internalize human rights education. Moreover, while not all participants in human rights education will join protests or write letters to political leaders, all can—and should—practice skills for upholding basic rights.

Building Block 1:  
**THINKING**

**GOAL:**  
To Build  
Knowledge and  
Understanding

Participants need a common core of knowledge and understanding in order to work together and be effective advocates for human rights. Certain facts are important to being an effective human rights advocate (e.g., a knowledge of fundamental human rights documents, a grasp of the history and development of the movement).

But an understanding of human rights also involves critical thinking, reasoning, and reflection. It involves understanding why, when, and where human rights are violated and protected; being able to apply a "human rights lens" to all sorts of situations; and being able to think through ethical challenges.

## What It Looks Like

A high school history class is beginning a unit on human rights. Their teacher covers one of the classroom walls with sheets of chart paper, and creates three parallel timelines running across them labeled "Personal," "National," and "Global." Students write important human rights events (e.g., both positive and negative experiences related to human rights, the assassination of Martin Luther King, the Holocaust) on pieces of paper and attach them to the appropriate timeline. Students step back from what they have created, asking questions of each other and discussing what each thought was important to include. They might also match these events with relevant articles of the UDHR (e.g., "started school" matched with Article 26). The teacher thus gains a much better sense of what students already know and designs the unit with the timeline in mind. The timeline stays up throughout the unit; students add events as they wish. At the end of the unit, students turn the timeline into a permanent illustrated mural in their classroom. See "Activity 10: Human Rights Timeline," p. 84.

## How to Use this Building Block

Ô **To bring together the participants' knowledge and experiences of the human rights framework.** Human rights education begins with an understanding of what participants already know and have experienced. This is vital in any educational environment, but particularly

important when participants have come from very different experiences, have not met each other or the instructors before, and are learning about things that touch them personally. In addition, facilitation-based education relies on the knowledge of everyone present, not just that of the instructor. Thus, getting everyone's background out on the table becomes vital to learning.

**Idea for Action:** "What Do We Need?": Conduct a written needs assessment on site or prior to arrival or adapt the survey in "Activity 18: Taking the Human Rights Temperature of Your School," p. 90.

- **To build a common understanding of basic human rights history and concepts.** Some ideas and information about human rights are so important that everyone should know them (e.g., the basic principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the history of international human rights law, and the process by which human rights-related issues are resolved). Others knowledge will also be vital to the particular educational setting. For example, learners will need to know about local law; about regional, national, or local human rights organizations; and about the rights of particular groups. Facilitators and participants should work together to identify the basic content that is most important to their situation, anticipating the needs of the group and being ready to meet them.

**Idea for Action:** "Activity 4: The Body of Human Rights," p. 80.

- **To connect the human rights framework to the experience, life, and future of each participant.** However important this basic human rights knowledge may be, it will not mean much to learners if they cannot link it to themselves. For this reason, human rights education focuses on the life stories and experiences of learners, working from the very start to connect abstract ideas and international law documents with things they already know first-hand. Human rights educators also place particular importance on the cultural heritage and identity of learners, linking universal rights to cultural traditions, norms, and languages. This process of making connections is only possible when educators have taken the step described above, asking participants to contribute their experience and knowledge to the learning process.

**Idea for Action:** "Activity 19: Telling Our Stories," p. 95.

- **To lay the base of knowledge necessary for the future learning.** The knowledge passed along in human rights education should be a starting point, preparing participants to take the next step on their own by giving them research and documentation skills, an overview of useful resources, and the ability to formulate their questions in human rights terms. Furthermore, knowledge of human rights can provide the understanding necessary to protect one's own rights and the rights of others, and serve as a knowledge base for the action skills learned in other parts of human rights education.

**Idea for Action:** "Resource Mapping": Working with a city or community map, participants can identify resources that will help them learn more about human rights.

- **To allow critical opportunities for reflection.** Also known as reviewing, processing, or debriefing, reflection allows participants time to think about, internalize, and react to the information they experience. Both personal and group reflection helps learners process new information. Human rights educators use journals, group conversations, one-on-one discussion, and other strategies to help learners process and articulate their thoughts and experiences.

*Idea for Action:* "Method 6: Discussion—Think-Pair-Share," p. 64.

- **To build skills for critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and decision-making.** Understanding human rights involves learning to think in new ways: to think through difficult problems, to make choices based on caring and ethical principles, to apply a human rights lens to many situations. For this reason, decision-making skills training, ethical dilemmas, and activities that build logical reasoning are all important parts of human rights education.

*Idea for Action:* "Human Rights in Literature": Encourage a group discussion of the ethical dilemmas posed by a novel, in which the group analyzes the motives of characters and tries to come to an ethically satisfying resolution to the dilemmas.

### **Critical Question for this Building Block:**

*What knowledge and understanding—information and new thinking skills— do you want all participants to gain from the learning experience?*

<b>Building Block 2: FEELING</b>	This Building Block addresses the vital emotional and personal aspects of human rights education. This involves two crucial components: 1) a focus on the values, beliefs, and emotions that motivate a person to care about and act for human rights; 2) the connections and shared culture that make for effective learning, and for a learning environment that respects human rights. All human rights education can take place in the context of a <i>learning community</i> , a setting where participants build connections and work together toward common goals for which all share responsibility. For activists in particular this Building Block provides important support to continue their work, avoid burnout, and develop collaborative networks once they leave the learning community.
<b>GOAL:</b> To Strengthen Commitment and Community	

Much of the work of building community and commitment occurs at the beginning and end of the educational experience. However, these aspects are too vital not to be a part of the entire learning experience.

## **What it Looks Like**

Preparing to launch a campaign on Torture, Amnesty International organizes a 4-day regional

training for activists who will take leadership roles in the campaign. Organizers recognize that hard issues will arise (e.g., links between torture and participants' experiences of domestic abuse, realizations brought on by contact with victims of torture, and potential burnout resulting from a tight schedule). With this in mind, a daily support circle is built into the schedule: each morning, participants divide into the same groups of six to discuss their experiences, vent stress, and relax. At the final support group, facilitators review the skills participants need in order to replicate the support groups outside the training, reviewing their basic elements: 1) setting ground rules; 2) allowing each participant time to talk without interruption; 3) sharing complements and concerns; 4) reading the emotional comfort of the group; etc..

## How to Use this Building Block

- **To motivate participants to be committed and sustained human rights workers.** Education can inspire and support people to defend human rights. The hopeful stories of activists and tragic accounts of human rights violations are both important in motivating learners. These motivating forces are also important in helping people care about human rights education: research clearly shows that people learn best when they are emotionally connected with the material.

*Ideas for Action:* "Activity 17: Perpetrator, Victim, Bystander, Healer," p. 90; "Activity 19: Telling Our Stories," p. 95.

- **To help participants value the human rights of themselves and others.** Human rights education helps people connect and commit to their basic rights. This involves making human rights personally significant, showing how the human rights framework has improved lives, demonstrating what happens when human rights are not protected, and many other strategies. One of the most important things educators can do to demonstrate the value of human rights is to make sure that educational experiences respect the human rights of learners.

*Idea for Action:* "Activity 23: Windows and Mirrors," p. 98.

- **To create a network of solidarity that lasts through and beyond the learning community.** Human rights education can build communities that both join people together while they are learning and also keep them connected after the learning experience is over. This community helps encourage effective education. According to recent research, people learn better when they feel they are part of a community that connects learners with one another. It also builds the ties that will help people sustain learning and stay involved with human rights long into the future. Shared traditions, casual opportunities to talk, activities that help people get to know each other, and time dedicated to building trust are all parts of human rights education.

*Idea for Action:* "Mailboxes": For a longer educational program, create a "mailbox" for each participant in a common area, where personal messages can be placed by any participant.

- **To build skills for coalition-building, group dynamics, and sustaining community.**

Communities built during human rights education are good and important, but are no substitute for strong support networks that sustain activists in the long-term. For this reason, human rights education often teaches people how to build and maintain communities: to establish networks of support, to organize people around human rights issues, to build their own human rights learning communities.

**Idea for Action:** "Building a Community Network": Each participant identifies human rights stakeholders in his or her home community and lists opportunities and obstacles to their involvement in human rights work.

- **To build skills for personal growth, healing, sustenance, and health.** Protecting human rights is hard and draining work, often resulting in burnout, depression, and guilt among activists. Simply hearing about human rights violations or recognizing that one's own rights have been violated can be emotionally challenging. Human rights education can prepare people and support them as they deal with this emotional and personal stress. People involved in human rights need opportunities to discuss and reflect on their emotional and psychological health and learn to balance human rights work with other parts of their lives. Perhaps more than other people, they need basic skills for coping with trauma affecting themselves and others.

**Idea for Action:** "Recognizing Emotions": Discuss the warning signs of anger and stress, helping participants to recognize their personal emotional "styles."

- **To celebrate the successes of the learning community and the human rights movement.** Human rights education should be fun and joyful. When a group accomplishes something or is learning about a victory for human rights, celebration is deserved and important. The end of an educational experience is a particularly important time for celebration.

**Idea for Action:** "Cultural Sharing": Encourage participants to bring objects, stories, etc., that are important to their home cultures, and organize a celebratory event to share them.

### **Critical Question for this Building Block:**

*How will the learning experience nurture the emotional and social well-being of participants, both personally and as a group?*

**Building Block 3:  
EQUIPPING**

**GOAL:  
To Fill the  
Toolbox**

Effective human rights education helps participants build the skills they need to act on behalf of their human rights and the rights of others. Many different sorts of skills are important in human rights education. Participants can learn how to frame issues in human rights terms, with specific reference to state obligations in international law; how to lobby individuals in positions of power; how to intervene when they see a human rights violation taking place; how to organize others; and how to teach others about human

rights. What skills are taught will depend on the situation, desires, and needs of the learners.

## What it Looks Like

Five-year-olds at a day care center are learning early lessons in human rights. Working with cartoon-like illustrations of faces, they learn to recognize the emotions of others—including those that show hurt feelings. They learn a simple five-step problem-solving method (understanding the problem, brainstorming solutions, discussing solutions, deciding on one, and implementing it) and practice it in conflict-solving class meetings—learning the first steps of peace-making.

By focusing on caring, the teacher helps them learn how to react if someone hurts them, how to stop someone from hurting another child, and how to comfort someone who is hurt. The teacher may never talk about the Universal Declaration, but she or he uses words like "rights," "caring," "fairness," and "responsibilities" regularly.

## How to Use this Building Block

- **To identify the human rights skills needed and desired by each participant.** How do human rights educators know what skills to teach? They ask the learners. A needs assessment that finds out the strengths and weaknesses of participants, what sort of work they do, and what they want to learn is a logical starting point for skills building. Such an assessment can also help educators identify and draw on the expertise that participants already have, helping them share those skills with others. Ideally, educators can conduct this assessment ahead of time.

*Idea for Action:* "Activity 20: The Tool Box," p. 95.

- **To teach skills for protecting and promoting one's own human rights.** Human rights begin at home, so human rights education often starts with a person's individual rights. How does a person know when his rights are violated? How can violations be prevented? How can a person intervene when her rights are violated? What recourse do people have under the law, and what resources can they turn to? Ideally, those educated in human rights will have the answers to all these questions at their finger-tips.

*Idea for Action:* "Sharing Problems, Sharing Solutions": Participants describe situations in which their rights have been threatened, share potential solutions, and then role play the solution they think most likely to be successful.

- **To build skills for educating others about their human rights.** The farthest-reaching way to teach human rights is to prepare others to teach. And since people learn the most when teaching others, this strategy also helps people better internalize human rights education. "Teaching the teachers" can mean many things: showing educators how to respect the human rights of their students, passing along information about effective learning approaches, role playing teaching situations, or teaching participants how to

facilitate any activity that the group uses.

**Idea for Action:** "Principles for a Human Rights Classroom": Working with the UDHR or the Convention on the Rights of the Child, participants brainstorm ideas on how educators can respect each right in their teaching.

- **To build skills for protecting and promoting the human rights of others.** Human rights education can teach a huge range of skills that help people defend human rights. Participants can practice advocacy and outreach strategies (e.g., letter-writing, public speaking, lobbying). They can improve their skills as community organizers, learning to build coalitions, create a grassroots constituency, inform people of their rights, and more. They can learn and practice skills that will help them intervene when they see human rights violations taking place. Particularly crucial, though often overlooked, are skills for research and documentation, which are vital in learning about human rights protections, building public knowledge about violations, and crafting strategies that reflect everyday realities. Any skills that helps people act for human rights is a valuable part of human rights education.

**Idea for Action:** "Think Quick for Human Rights": Participants are given the name of a group or type of individual (e.g., police officer, pre-school teacher, parent, senator) and have one minute to develop a clear argument for how they should/could support human rights in general or address a specific human rights issue, and then role play an encounter.

### **Critical Question for this Building Block:**

*What new skills will participants have built by the time the learning experience is over?*

Building Block 4:  
**TAKING  
ACTION**

**GOAL:**  
To Put Learning  
into Practice

An essential part of human rights learning is action: opportunities to put new lessons and skills into practice. Such practice is important because it builds more lasting and meaningful learning. It is also important because it turns education *about* human rights into education *for* human rights.

The action component of human rights learning can take many forms. At minimum, nearly every educational experience can involve some suggestions and strategies for getting involved in human rights work.

Ideally, however, action is a part of the agenda of the educational experience itself. Participants can engage in role plays, simulations, and scenarios which help them learn to apply ideas from the workshop. Participants can also craft action strategies they plan to use in their communities. Where possible, actual human rights work can be built into the education experience. This could take the form of community research, gathering first-hand data about situations, and documenting cases, as well as other forms of activism such as lobbying, mobilizing opinion and support, education, direct action, and formal legal steps.

## **What it Looks Like**

A month-long workshop has provided a new perspective to a group of women who have never known their rights before. They are eager to learn the boundaries of their new-found rights and to pass along this knowledge to others. As the workshop draws to a close, the agenda increasingly focuses on building the skills of advocacy. Even before they arrived for the workshop, participants were asked to describe in detail a human rights problem in their own communities that they wanted to address. Now they return to this problem repeatedly, first to analyze it in human rights terms, then to consider how to research and document the problem, how to research and document the problem, and how to assess the legal remedies available to address the problem. They then work with others to formulate and critique both short term and long term solutions. They strategize how to draw attention to the problem and build support: Who needs to be educated on this issue? Who are potential allies? What authorities need to be approached?

This preparation also includes practicing skills, such as researching how others have approached the problem, speaking about the problem to different groups, interviewing those with information about the problem, and documenting what they say. A crucial part of this preparation is self-examination—acknowledging doubts, fears, and conflicting responsibilities; setting both goals and limits; and recognizing support systems, which include the sponsoring organization and fellow participants.

Finally each woman develops a realistic action plan, including a sequential time line and a budget, so that when she returns to her home community, her course of action is already clear.

## How to Use this Building Block

- **To practice, apply, and repeat the skills and lessons learned in the workshop.** Experiential education involves three basic steps: learning a skill, applying it, and reflecting on the experience. Educators have learned that repetition in a safe environment, and in a variety of "real-life" situations, is important in building confidence and ability. For this reason, "doing" human rights is essential to really "learning" human rights.

**Idea for Action:** "Human Rights Homework": Ask that participants "try out" new skills, and then share their experiences with other participants. For example, they might interview or engage in a persuasive dialogue with a friend, family member, or stranger, and then report the results back to the group. They might research the prevalence, legal status, or history of a human rights problem and write a summary report or statement on the problem in their community. They might write a press release, draft legislation, present a brief speech, or roleplay a meeting with a community group to solicit their support.

- **To engage in actual human rights work, whether in the form of education, advocacy, intervention, or community building.** There need not be a clear place where education starts and action begins. Human rights education can, and often does, defend and uphold the rights of others. Participants in a workshop can join in the work of a local organization or plan an action in the community where they are learning. A march or protest can involve an educational component, as well as an activist one. A course in

human rights can involve an internship with a human rights organization.

**Idea for Action:** "Giving Back": Incorporate a "service-learning" experience into any extended human rights education program, thanking the community that hosted the program. Service learning involves turning any community service experience—a neighborhood cleanup, an educational workshop, volunteering at a shelter for the homeless—into an educational experience, using it as an opportunity to practice and reflect on the skills learned during the program.

- **To model respect for human rights and dignity within the learning community itself.** Human rights education must always respect human rights if it is to be honest, effective, and taken seriously. Educator-student, student-student, and participant-outsider interactions should all be rooted in human rights. Violations of human rights that do occur should be addressed quickly and carefully and integrated into the whole group's learning experience. Educational strategies that respect human rights are generally inclusive, learner-centered, respectful of diversity, and democratic. See Part IV, "Methodologies for Human Rights Education," p. 57, for teaching approaches that are compatible with human rights.

**Idea for Action:** "Process Observer": Designate one person per day or half-day to act as the "process observer." This person is responsible for observing how well the group works together and respects each other's rights, providing a spoken report on strengths and weaknesses at the end of the day.

- **To critique and refine the skills and ideas being shared in the workshop.** Incorporating action into human rights education provides a real test of the experience's effectiveness. Does the material being learned stand up in the real world? How can it be changed to better reflect reality? Human rights educators should be genuine co-learners, ready to make mistakes, be corrected, and improve their teaching based on real-world application. Educators should also do their best to create an environment where it is safe for participants to make mistakes and learn from them.

**Idea for Action:** "Bringing it Home": For every activity, ask participants "How would this activity need to change to fit your home community?" Repeat the activity with their suggestions incorporated.

- **To help participants create plans for action after they leave the learning experience.** How do participants hope to apply what they learned through human rights education? What new goals do they have, based on their new understanding of human rights? What are the steps toward achieving these goals? What obstacles will they face when they return home? What opportunities and allies will they have? By helping learners form answers to these questions, educators can help ensure that learning will last beyond the time a group spends together. Creating written action plans, either individually or as a group, is a natural conclusion to a human rights education experience.

**Idea for Action:** "One Lesson": At the end of the experience, or at the end of each day, ask each

participant to identify one idea that she will bring home and put to work in his community.

**Critical Question for this Building Block:**

*How will the status of human rights be improved as a result of learning experience?*