

Reardon Revisited: The Evolution of a Peace and Human Rights Educator

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In April 2009, Professor Betty Reardon delivered *Human Rights Learning: Pedagogies and Politics of Peace*,⁴ as the keynote address of the UNESCO Chair for Peace Education at the University of Puerto Rico. This presentation linking the fields of peace education and human rights learning and articulating their significance for education locally and globally has become a staple reading in many university syllabi.

In the decade since that seminal address, Professor Reardon has continued to develop her thinking on these subjects, which she has expressed in subsequent writings as well as in a January 2019 interview at Columbia University.⁵ In particular, she has refined and extended her views of what constitutes “comprehensive human rights education” and its role in peace education, offered new insights into the application of human rights to the problematic of contemporary universities, and added new dimensions to her concepts of pedagogy for change.

Comprehensive human rights education

Characteristic of a scholar who has repeatedly encouraged other educators that “every experience and every encounter ... you reflect on, ... you will be able to learn from...,”⁶ Betty Reardon continues to question and evolve her own thinking, even as she enters this year on her tenth decade.

Nowhere is the evolution of her thinking more evident than in her widening understanding of what constitutes human rights education. In her 2009 address in Puerto Rico, she drew sharp contrasts between human rights education (HRE) and human rights learn-

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4 Reardon, B. A. (2010). *Human Rights Learning: Pedagogies and Politics of Peace*. San Juan, Puerto Rico: UNESCO Chair for Peace Education, University of Puerto Rico. <https://www.peace-ed-campaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Cátedra-UNESCO-Betty-Reardon.pdf>. See also Reardon, B. A. (2015). Retrospective Reflection on ‘Human Rights Learning: Pedagogies and Politics of Peace’ (2008). In B. A. Reardon and D. T. Snauwaert (Eds.), *Betty A. Reardon: A Pioneer for Education in Peace and Human Rights*, (pp. 145-164).

5 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

6 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

ing (HRL). She faulted HRE for being “largely content-based” in contrast to the “engaged pedagogy” and “active and reflective involvement of the learner” that she saw in HRL. She argued that both peace education and HRL were by their very nature critical, i.e., “probingly analytic and evaluative,” whereas “such examination and challenge of prevailing social and personal values is still largely missing from standard, formal human rights education, precluding it from being peace education.”⁷

However, in her 2014 retrospective reflections on her 2009 address, Reardon acknowledged that her previous statements mirrored:

... adversarial stances being taken at the time among practitioners of various approaches to HRE as they encountered each other in planning for the next phase of development to follow the UN Decade for Human Rights Education.⁸

Although this heated debate between HRE and HRL might appear as mere semantics to people outside the field, it constituted fundamental conceptual differences between those who approached HRE from a more traditional learning environment and those who advocated and practiced Freirean methods in both formal and informal education. This controversy is reflected in the titles of two major UN initiatives in that period, The UN Decade for Human Rights **Education**, 1995-2004 and the UN International Year of Human Rights **Learning**, 2009, distinctions for which Reardon’s 2009 address offered a conceptual justification. To further complicate the issue, however, the ultimate title of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training, adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 2011, perhaps reflects an attempt to compromise this controversy, but also introduces *training* as a wholly new term in the formulation. Many educators found the official use of these related terms perplexing. Today *human rights education* is the wording of preference used by the UN and its agencies, although the phrase now designates a more inclusive understanding of the field.

In *Human Rights and the Renewal of the University*,⁹ only three years after her 2009 Puerto Rico address, Reardon had already moved to a new holistic conception of both HRE and HRL and added the new term, *human rights training* (HRT), presenting all three as necessary, complementary components. She has called past controversies over *education* and *learning* “specious and dysfunctional”¹⁰ and included a *mea culpa* for her own possible role in reinforcing this division. As she has said of this debate in the recent interview, “It isn’t either/or. It’s both/and.” ... [HRE and HRL] “are interrelated and interdependent ... they are a whole.”¹¹

In *Human Rights and the Renewal of the University*, Reardon provided clear definitions for these three components and explained how each is necessary to a holistic understanding of what she called “comprehensive human rights education.” In this new understanding that encompasses HRE, HRL, and HRT, she distinguishes HRE as centered on a specific body of knowledge, the cognitive content base:

7 Reardon and Snauwaert, 147-8.

8 Reardon and Snauwaert, 146.

9 Reardon, B. A. (2015). Retrospective Reflection on “Human Rights and the Renewal of the University” (2012). In B. A. Reardon and D. T. Snauwaert (Eds.), Betty A. Reardon: A Pioneer for Education in Peace and Human Rights, (pp. 165-180).

10 Reardon and Snauwaert, 146.

11 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

... substantive analytic human rights education is citizenship education directed toward external application of the knowledge and skills in realms of social and political action in the extramural society.¹²

She recommends HRE as an “essential component of education for global citizenship that should be in the education of all school and undergraduate programs”¹³ but points out that such an analytic and problem-solving approach seldom involves direct action.

On the other hand, HRL goes beyond problem analysis to deal with the problematic and how it relates to the life of the individual learner. As described by Reardon, HRL emphasizes a reflective processes directed toward “affective learning objectives, the internalization of values and attitudes, [and] the normative formation of ethical persons.”¹⁴ She made a clear distinction between the formative approach of HRE, which draws its content outside the learner and the transformative approach of HRL, which derives from within the learner.

Describing this transformational learning, Reardon stressed the primacy of individual ethical reasoning, in contrast to unthinking acceptance of authoritative moral imperatives:¹⁵ “I think at best we can do our work in HRE in such a way as to lead the learner to begin to inquire into their own value system.”¹⁶ She points to the Freirean principle that there is a “fundamental human right to think. Not just to absorb, not to learn in the sense of taking in more data, ...but to begin to think about things, which is more complex.”¹⁷

By contrast, HRT prepares the learner for direct action, emphasizing strategies and skills to overcome specific injustices and work for social change. It is “behavioral, strategic and target directed.”¹⁸

Reardon argues that such comprehensive HRE, including “the interpretive/analytic of human rights education, the critical/ethical of human rights learning, and the strategic/practical of human rights training,”¹⁹ makes possible holistic HRE that is appropriate and available to any segment of a community. Indeed, this integrated understanding of *human rights education* is arguably in line with recent conceptualizations of the term among practitioners and implied by its use in current UN documents. When asked whether a new term is needed to encompass this more comprehensive understanding of HRE, HRL, and HRT, Reardon typically proposes a collaborative exploration in which educators should come together to find a concept that could “synthesize [these disparate aspects of HRE] into something that would show that they are integral to each other.”²⁰

Human rights and the problematic of contemporary universities

In recent years, Dr. Reardon has also reflected a great deal on the role of the university in society and the relationship between human rights learning and higher education. She observes a need for transformative change within universities and calls for “comprehensive human rights education developed within a holistic human rights framework [of education,

12 Reardon and Snauwaert, 177.

13 Reardon and Snauwaert, 176.

14 Reardon and Snauwaert, 177.

15 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

16 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

17 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

18 Reardon and Snauwaert, 177.

19 Reardon and Snauwaert, 177.

20 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

learning and training] that informs the mission of the undertaking...”²¹ Although not expressed in such terms, one could argue that she is calling for a rights-based approach to university education: holistic human rights education within a learning environment that is developed and operated according to human rights principles and directed towards the realization and advancement of human rights within the society at large.

Reardon has argued that many universities are now part of a corporate structure and laments the fact that technical capacity has been prioritized over liberal arts education. She posits that human rights may be the most effective way “to renew the traditional mission of the university as provider of authentic knowledge and relevant learning in the service of the development of persons and the societies in which they live their lives.”²² While acknowledging the value of technology and technical capacity, she argues that in order to make “basic human decisions,” one must also learn about the human experience and multiple ways of expressing and developing human experience.²³ Part of this process, she argues, is a sincere willingness to engage in dialogue and learn from others, without necessarily trying to change their opinions.²⁴ Indeed, she argues that any reform process dedicated to the creation of a human rights university must be informed by multiple experiences, perspectives and forms of expression.

Dr. Reardon put this belief into practice when she was invited to teach an intensive course and to help conceptualize a human rights university at Klagenfurt University of Austria in 2010. She reflects that she was not as an outsider “ethically capacitated” to undertake the design, and suggested that the process should start with the students, so she dedicated the course she was teaching at that time to this endeavor.²⁵ As she recalls, “the students insisted that everybody was part of the experience and everybody should have something to say about how the institution is structured, how it facilitates or is an obstacle to their work or lives, how they relate to the other parts of the university, what parts of human rights education they might need to be effective agents of change in that university.”²⁶ Her comprehensive HRE approach to inclusive participation derived from the student’s model of a human rights university.²⁷ She argues that “above all, a human rights university would be a learning community...” an environment “in which learning is maximized and enriched by education *of* the participants, *for* the participants and *by* the participants.”²⁸ For Reardon, university reform necessarily means regarding everyone who interacts with the institution as a “participant” and an agent of change, students and staff, as well as faculty members and administrators.²⁹ This participatory approach is essential to any rights-based approach to institutional reform and management, which must be inclusive transparent, accountable, and non-discriminatory.

21 Renewal of the University, 177

22 Human Rights and the Renewal of the University, 169

23 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

24 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

25 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

26 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

27 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

28 Human Rights and the Renewal of the University, 169

29 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

Reardon also argues that a human rights university necessitates a willingness on the part of community members to acknowledge their contributions to problematic, hierarchical power structures. She observes that when engaging in human rights education, educators must be aware that they are unavoidably part of these structures and should acknowledge to learners their respective roles within and responsibility to challenge them.³⁰ Moreover, she argues that a failure to do is a forfeiture of individual integrity and amounts to moralizing rather than confronting the harder ethical struggle.³¹ She also encourages human rights educators to reflect continuously upon and learn from each experience and encounter as well as “never fail to entertain the possibility that you are wrong.”³² Reardon optimistically states that a university system would not stand if it did not include usable social structures, including institutions of redress, trade unions, and student organizations. These possible agents of change are often in contention with the larger institutions of which they are a part and when such contention follows a constructive and transparent course, these agents can play crucial roles in negotiating transformative change.³³

The critical bridge between human rights and peace

During the interview, Reardon also shared some pivotal human rights learning moments for her personally, beginning when she discovered the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), on its 10th anniversary in 1958. She remembers feeling “ticked off” by not having learned about this document in the U.S. public education system or at her college.³⁴ She realized that she had the responsibility as a high school educator to teach human rights. She used the UDHR as a guideline to raise questions about what was going on in the world in whatever she was teaching.

Ultimately, in formulating her concept of comprehensive peace education, human rights became an essential component, the primary tools for the “definition and diagnosis of what comprises violence, experientially as well as conceptually.”³⁵ She also posits that human rights advanced the consideration of law as an instrument of peace, as human rights are norms and standards that are enshrined in international law.³⁶ Reflecting on the relationship between human rights, peace, and education, Reardon notes:

Things don’t just come out of whole cloth...They gestate, go through evolution. The Declaration ... ultimately produced the two Covenants and then whole generations of rights. They were generated out of the problematic. And would keep on generating so long as there was the problem. Human rights provided me with an area where I could teach those kinds of concepts. Human rights are such a wonderful tool for showing positive development. Too many people think peace is just a concept: you’ll never get there. But when you look at things in an evolutionary way, human rights is a wonderful tool for showing positive development. That was a real breakthrough!³⁷

30 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

31 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

32 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

33 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

34 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

35 Reardon and Snauwaert, 153.

36 Personal communication with Betty Reardon on 2/14/2019.

37 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

In reflecting further about the relationship between peace and human rights education, she recalls that her earlier work with both individuals engaged with human rights as well as those working on peace and conflict issues often seemed disconnected, for they were often on parallel, but separate paths “using different language and concepts.”³⁸ However, Reardon has since come to regard human rights as a constitutive element of positive peace and key to peace education.³⁹ Yet, one might argue that as important as human rights may be to peace education, it should not be subsumed into peace education. Human rights education is essential in its own right. Moreover, one might argue that the value of human rights is not simply in that it advances “the consideration of the law as an instrument of peace.” Human rights legally enshrines certain obligations by governments, specifically to respect, protect and fulfill human rights standards.

Her reflections on the relationship between peace, human rights and education have precipitated and continue to inform evolving and valuable discussions among peace and human rights educators regarding the conceptualization of these fields. This is arguably another one of her valuable contributions and prompts further questions that cannot be fully addressed in this article, including: Does Reardon regard human rights education as a tool for peace or as a valuable field in its own right? What can be learned from a comparative analysis of human rights education and peace education at this current stage? Should we celebrate the inclusion of peace education within human rights education and human rights education inclusion within peace education? Or does it confuse and dilute the efforts of each? What might affect the benefits and drawbacks of this relationship?

Ethics of human rights education and training

In her 2009 UNESCO Chair lecture, Reardon drew a distinction between morality and ethics. She expressed her fears about the promotion of human rights devolving into moralizing, dictating to others from a presumed position of authority what they should think and do in the absence of individual critical reflection. During the 2019 interview, Reardon acknowledges “[I]t is perfectly acceptable to study moral standards if you were studying comparative religions or comparative studies,” but she emphasizes that this learning would not develop “any of the capacities or skills or knowledge or understandings that would be helpful in the general pattern of relationships What we really need is people having the capacity to reason ethically and to understand the reasons why they have a normative, ethical position on certain issues.”⁴⁰

Reardon further expands on the pedagogical process of interconnecting human rights and ethical reasoning:

The premise I start with is ... the Preamble of the UDHR as a fundamental, ethical base for my social and political thinking, and I therefore very often use these standards, as well as other principles that come from philosophy rather than from religion. I think - we learn there are inner values that guide our behaviors, but we have to understand that it only works when they are shared in common by others.... I get a

38 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

39 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

40 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

little worried when people speak about certain issues as moral issues. That seems to muddy the water more than clarify them. I would like to see the study of ethics, the development of the capacity [for ethical thinking] to be part of social education for all our citizens.⁴¹

Reardon also warns human rights educators against presuming that they should aim to foster attitudinal shifts in their students. She says flatly, “...we can’t do that. Only the learners themselves can change their inner perceptions. Educators can provide opportunities for reflections and invitations to examine thinking.” At first glance, this assertion may seem controversial given that one of the key elements of human rights education focuses on attitudes and values,⁴² albeit one that necessitates further clarification, reflection and critique. Reardon pushes educators to challenge their own position of moralizing and suggests that the most effective HRE work is to:

...lead the learner to begin to inquire into their own value systems. To give them enough ethical muscle and the emotional support of knowing it’s a struggle ... so that at some point they can even challenge their values and understand that at some point this kind of process will be controversial. And as an educator one has to be prepared not only for controversy first within a group of students, but then in the larger community.⁴³

In other words, Reardon argues that the goal is not to promote a particular attitudinal shift, but rather foster a willingness to challenge one’s own perspectives and values and have an openness to change. I would argue that this inner work is the ethical base for the outer social and political work.

Continuing the discussion of some ethical challenges of human rights education, Reardon posits that human rights educators cannot facilitate the emotive power of human rights learning without “triggering” discomfort in some learners. However, she cautions that educators must be aware of the social and political developmental stages of their students and emphasizes that it is unlikely that anyone is helped to come to “critical awareness of reality traumatically.”

Transformative civil and constructive discourse and learning

Reardon delineates the pedagogy of civil and civic engagement: “Whether one is in dialogue with a problem or a person who is an agent of the problem [or] have an opposition stance, we have to move from winning the point to learning from the opponent why, how, everything that goes into their position. To fully understand.”⁴⁴ She contends that the challenge is not to have either opponent digging into a position and/or feeling like one must concede to the other.

Reardon’s interview conveys a deeply held sincerity about learning from another person’s point of view. She is not just teaching about a process; she is urgently clarifying both the exciting aspects of learning another perspective and the transformative growth

41 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

42 See for example UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training, Article 2.

43 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

44 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

that could make both parties learners. She speaks of this powerful relational exchange: “The process is really a learning EXPERIENCE, not just getting information about the other person’s position. It opens up your own learning about your own position. It might challenge it. You might change it, but you also might strengthen your position as well as learn something about how to talk to people...”⁴⁵

In Reardon’s book *Educating for Human Dignity* (2010), she uplifts the power of human dignity as a core value whose primary expression lies in treating all individuals with respect, to which she adds, “[N]o matter how despicable you think their position is.”⁴⁶ She points to the need for respect and civility in the current polarized social and political context in the United States:

I talk about things like civil disputation, which means essentially [that] every person that you encounter ... is a human being, endowed with everything it says in the Preamble and all those rights in the Declaration, and you have to keep that in your mind. And hope that ultimately they’ll come to see that about you, too. And as educators we have a great opportunity to do this in dealing with controversial issues.⁴⁷

Among the most difficult of these controversial dialogues is what Reardon refers to as the “pedagogy of the privileged.” She raises the uncomfortable truth that human rights educators cannot avoid being part of the problematic power structures:

All of us who live and work in this society are part of that construct ... so you have to understand that you are not only connected, but part of it. We all need to reflect on how we are complicit with the systems...We need to understand we have restraints, but that we also have opportunities and we need to look for those opportunities and not just fights against those restraints.⁴⁸

She then proposes a two-step learning process for how educators can be agents for change within their own institutional positions. First, she recommends that when working in a confrontational situation, both sides take a step back. With space between them, they can inquire together, “Where do these structures come from, who built them, why, and to whose advantage did they work from the beginning, and how has that changed over time and then look forward?”⁴⁹ This is the point, Reardon says where “the instructional opposition” is evident and we can see things differently. The second step is to leave things in the past reflective for now and say we are now going to look ahead. She then recommends saying, “If you have one position and I have another position, where is it that we would like to be and what kind of future do we want to live in and have our kids live in. What kinds of institutions will make this possible?”⁵⁰ We try to envision new options and gradually return to the current context and ask how consistent this new design is with what we have now and how can it be changed. Reardon then says that individuals should prioritize the commonalities of the future order that is needed and realize that you do not have to give up who you are, but that such dialogue involves a give and take. Hence, she describes the process

45 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

46 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

47 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

48 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

49 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

50 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

of first joining together the past and future and then negotiating in the present of what can be done to create social change for the greater good of society.

Reardon acknowledges that to begin the possibility of change, we need to identify the usable parts in systems and use them as our base. Only then can we “begin the possibility of change.”⁵¹ In addition, she feels that we need to better understand our institutions and systems: “The hierarchy of human value that organizes every institution... with a few on top with lots of power and others at various levels with less and less access to resources and decision-making powers. According to the conceptualization that I have done on gender, that is a highly gendered thing.”⁵² Reardon sees a great opportunity to understand deeply the “hierarchy of human value” because “the whole notion of human rights is the antithesis to that hierarchy.”⁵³ She believes that taking on issues, such as the global climate crisis, must address this hierarchy and “start at every level to dismantle it and pull people into this process of making politics constructive learning. That is what human rights is all about. It is about politics for human fulfillment.”⁵⁴

Throughout her 90 years of life, Betty Reardon has embraced a holistic approach to peace and human rights education, learning and training but has never ceased to reflect upon and refine her vision. Her commitment to practice the principles of reflective learning she advocates is admirably evident during the 2019 interview where she laughingly corrects herself, replacing “should” with “could” and at one point remarking, “Oh, I’m moralizing aren’t I?” She continues to inspire educators to follow her own example: “[R]eflect, reflect, reflect...learn, learn, learn!”⁵⁵

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51 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

52 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

53 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

54 Reardon, B. (2019, January 30th). Personal interview.

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