

# Using Competing Visions of Human Rights in an International IB World School

William J. Tolley

The growth of programs and interest in teaching about human rights helps reinforce the relevance of social studies to students, education reformers, and other school constituents, some of whom remain unconvinced of the role of social studies in the core curriculum.

Whether or not one agrees with that skepticism, the doubts need to be addressed. I found that the *Competing Visions of Human Rights* teaching unit, developed by Brown University's Choices Program, provides a superb tool both for innovating classroom instruction on key human rights issues and for reinvigorating the teaching of broader social studies courses like "crusty old history."

The unit (which I used in iBook format) is broken into six chapters—providing a brief history of human rights, examples of human rights in practice, specific case studies in human rights, options for U.S. policy which provide the positions for the final debate, and two full chapters of supplementary and activity resources. Also, the text is peppered with scholarly references and expert testimonials, backed by excellent secondary research, and includes relevant primary documents for analysis. The colorful arpillera tapestries from the era of Pinochet's Chile and the collected Twitter updates from the 2009 Green Revolution in Iran were particularly appealing to my students. These resources also provide excellent extension activity possibilities for all types of learners.<sup>1</sup>

## Implementing Competing Visions

At the International Baccalaureate school in Curitiba, Brazil, where I teach, I use *Competing Visions of Human Rights* in three key capacities:

1. As a key introductory unit in our International Studies elective course (in conjunction with Choices's *United Nations: Challenges and Change*).
2. As a fulcrum for merging understanding of the key events of the Cold War, Decolonization and Democracy movements in the second half of the 20th Century as covered in the IB World History of the 20th Century course.
3. As an introductory resource for students choosing to write the required IB Extended Essay in Human Rights.

The IB mission to "encourage students across the world to become active, compassionate and lifelong learners who understand that other people, with their differences, can also be right"<sup>2</sup> aligns perfectly with the objective of

the Choices's Program. Choices's goal is to educate students in their participatory role as citizens through respectful deliberation in which students assume roles and positions that may not be their own. Philosophically, the two programs are in sync. However, since the focus of Choices unit deliberations tend to be on options for U.S. policy, we adapted the units to suit the perspective of an international citizenry, inadvertently increasing the takeaways in terms of developing a cosmopolitan worldview. Luckily, other than the debate options, the materials and content of *Competing Visions* all lend themselves easily to an international and comparative perspective—effective alterations and extensions were easy to design.

In my History and International Studies courses my student leaders and I decided to take the following steps in order to have our cake and eat it too.<sup>3</sup> For the opening week of the unit, we developed a pre-debate film festival in which the groups watched clips from the films *The Pianist* and *The Killing Fields* and the documentaries *Burma VJ* and *Ônibus 174*.<sup>4</sup> Our intent was to invest student participants in the personal narratives of Holocaust survivor Władysław Szpilman, journalist and Cambodian-escapee Dith Pran, the monks and videographers of the Saffron Revolution and the desperate bus-hijacker of Rio de Janeiro, Sandro



do Nascimento. After watching these clips, student interest was dramatically increased.

We next proceeded through the *Competing Visions of Human Rights* largely as it was designed. This allowed our group to both analyze previously highlighted international case studies and come to a consensus on a vision for human rights from the perspective of representatives of the United States. This consensus, however, was not formed easily. The four options available to students are:

1. For the United States to *lead the world to freedom*;

## 21st Century/Modern Learning Alterations

Choices recently began converting their units into the iBooks format (enhancing already strong sets of materials and making them even more appealing for tech-ready students and teachers). I chose to use the iBooks Textbook edition of *Competing Visions of Human Rights* because the unit provides 125 pages (depending upon how you hold your iPad) of the same kinds of resources that Choices has always offered—videos, music, poems, art—with some important distinctions. The key difference is that these additional resources are no longer referred to with URLs for students and teachers to explore on desktops and laptops but are directly embedded in the key platform, the student's iPad. Scholars' videos pop up on the page, YouTube links to civil rights songs can be instantly expanded on the screen, and artwork and photos can be immediately displayed in full color. This iBooks Textbook edition also benefits from all the perks of an iPad, including easy navigation between chapters and pages, tap and type note-taking and annotation capacities.

Of course, 21st Century Learning is not about implementing an iBook or flipping a lecture, but about student creation and curiosity. Choices Program lessons have always been designed to do this, now they do it with seamless technology integration.

1. Students "flip" acquisition of background knowledge by watching the embedded videos at home. They are encouraged/instructed to identify relevant and trustworthy additional sources of information to share with their small groups and the class. Sharing can be done in class, or via social media like Facebook (with a dedicated class group) or Twitter (via a distinct hashtag like #ischr2013).
2. Students collaborate to curate and assess their sources at permanent or temporary workstations. In our course, we seat students in groups at tables of 4-6 students, each equipped with a small whiteboard for brainstorming, debating, and presenting ideas. Using mobile devices to film and photograph these sessions, preparing them for sharing, curation, and later use is an essential part of the process.
3. Students create interactive blog posts highlighting their interpretation and analysis of human rights case studies with embedded multimedia and links to their curated sources.
4. Students publicize their work in order to find a relevant and authentic audience for their voices. Class and student blogs, Youtube channels and curation tools like Paper.li and Scoop.it all serve well for these projects.
  - a. Paper.li: <http://paper.li/>
  - b. Scoop.it: [www.scoop.it/](http://www.scoop.it/)

2. For the United States to *work with the international community*;
3. For the United States to *act only when U.S. interests are directly involved*;
4. For the United States to *focus "our" efforts at home*.

Impassioned debates from the assigned points of view ensued, citing both the case studies from Choices ("Should we let the Pinochets of the world continue to get away with it?" "If it's in our best interests, yes!") and the personal narratives from the film festival ("Imagine if we had acted sooner during the Holocaust!" "It wasn't our problem!"). In the end, the participants finally agreed (some begrudgingly) to act only when U.S. interests were directly threatened. In a group of invested young human rights advocates, this was clearly not a reflection of their true feelings, illustrating the unit's capacity to superimpose differing outlooks onto those of the deliberation participants.

We then complicated perspectives on the issue by distilling the national debate to a simple proposition. We carried out an initial transitional deliberation modeled after procedures designed by the Deliberating in a Democracy program.<sup>5</sup> During this stage, students were asked over the course of two days to determine the position of the United Nations via the proposition question: Should the United Nations endorse the U.S. reforms (i.e., Option 3, to act only when U.S. interests are involved) toward its position on human rights? Participants were again assigned an initial position, but this time with the aim of understanding contradictory positions, thereby consolidating their own, personal positions on the issue at hand. This was accomplished by listening to, summarizing and discussing the compelling points of both sides of the argument prior to writing a brief reflection in which each participant stated



## Deliberation Addition

### *Resources for Transforming Choices Lessons into Model United Nations Simulations*

1. **Deliberating in a Democracy:** An international project developed to "promote the teaching and learning of democratic principles and the skills of civic deliberation among a new generation in the United States, Eastern Europe, Russia, and Azerbaijan." Now expanded into South America. Excellent resources for planning and facilitating deliberations on controversial issues. [www.did.deliberating.org/](http://www.did.deliberating.org/)
2. **UNA-USA:** The United Nations Association of the USA provides detailed guidance and resources for planning and running United Nations simulations. [www.unausa.org/global-classrooms-model-un](http://www.unausa.org/global-classrooms-model-un)
3. **Mock Model United Nations, The Movie** ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=aBh\\_RaX0gvs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aBh_RaX0gvs)): Filmed simulation provided by Project Connect. They offer other valuable resources at: <http://project-connect.ca/resources.php#coaches>
4. **The United Nations Debates the Role of the USA:** Adaptation of the Deliberating in a Democracy format to work with *Competing Visions of Human Rights* as preparation for a Model United Nations simulation. PDF: [https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B\\_iJULc1pVTeNC1sTHdyNndMbIE/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B_iJULc1pVTeNC1sTHdyNndMbIE/edit?usp=sharing)
5. **Position paper template:** Adapted to streamline the process for students and teachers new to the MUN experience: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1c07BTH8v7cKu6qpZhSolyzoBNUxZubbYpZ6xqEwKJxg/edit?usp=sharing>
6. "Simulating the Human Rights Council: Five Neat Solutions to Try." Useful article from Best Delegate (<http://bestdelegate.com/>) on how to design a Human Rights Council simulation.

## Student Curated United Nations Research Starter Kit (In addition to the already thorough list of resources provided in the Choices iBook.)

- American Model United Nations Handbook [www.amun.org/amun\\_handbook.php](http://www.amun.org/amun_handbook.php)
- Amnesty International [www.amnestyusa.org](http://www.amnestyusa.org)
- Arab League (Official) [www.arableagueonline.org/arableague/index\\_en.jsp](http://www.arableagueonline.org/arableague/index_en.jsp)
- Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN—Official) [www.asean.or.id](http://www.asean.or.id)
- BBC World Service [www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice)
- BBC Country Profiles [news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/country\\_profiles/default.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/country_profiles/default.stm)
- Brookings Institution [www.brookings.edu](http://www.brookings.edu)
- Carter Center [www.cartercenter.org](http://www.cartercenter.org)
- CIA World Factbook <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>
- Council on Foreign Relations [www.cfr.org/index.php](http://www.cfr.org/index.php)
- EU Observer (News about the European Union) [www.euobserver.com/](http://www.euobserver.com/)
- EuroGuide (Guide to the European Union, United Kingdom) [www.euroguide.org/](http://www.euroguide.org/)
- Embassy, the Electronic Embassy [www.embassy.org/](http://www.embassy.org/) (find links to embassies in Washington, DC)
- European Union Online (Official) [europa.eu.int/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/index_en.htm)
- Foreign Affairs [www.foreignaffairs.org/](http://www.foreignaffairs.org/)
- Foreign Ministries, links from the US Institute of Peace [www.usip.org/library/formin.html](http://www.usip.org/library/formin.html)
- Foreign Policy [www.foreignpolicy.com/](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/)
- Foreign Policy in Focus [www.fpif.org/](http://www.fpif.org/)
- Freedom House [www.freedomhouse.org/](http://www.freedomhouse.org/)
- Global Issues [www.globalissues.org/](http://www.globalissues.org/)
- Global Policy Forum [www.globalpolicy.org/](http://www.globalpolicy.org/)
- Global Security [www.globalsecurity.org/](http://www.globalsecurity.org/)
- Human Rights Watch [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)
- International Crisis Group [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org)
- Missions to the UN (with links to missions' websites) [www.un.int/index-en/webs.html](http://www.un.int/index-en/webs.html)
- North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO—Official) [www.nato.int](http://www.nato.int)
- Organization of American States (OAS—Official) [www.oas.org/](http://www.oas.org/)
- Stockholm International Peace Research Institute military databases [www.sipri.org/contents/webmaster/databases](http://www.sipri.org/contents/webmaster/databases)
- United Nations Association Model UN Preparation Guide [www.unausa.org/modelun](http://www.unausa.org/modelun)
- United Nations (Official) [www.un.org/english/](http://www.un.org/english/)
- United Nations Basic Facts [www.un.org/aboutun/basicfacts/](http://www.un.org/aboutun/basicfacts/)
- United Nations Charter [www.un.org/aboutun/charter/](http://www.un.org/aboutun/charter/)
- United Nations Chronicle [www.un.org/Pubs/chronicle/index.html](http://www.un.org/Pubs/chronicle/index.html)
- United Nations Cyber School Bus, Model UN Headquarters [www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/modelun/index.asp](http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/modelun/index.asp)
- United Nations Development Program Human Development Report [hdr.undp.org/](http://hdr.undp.org/)
- United Nations Documentation Center [www.un.org/documents/](http://www.un.org/documents/)
- United Nations News (Official) [www.un.org/News/](http://www.un.org/News/)
- United Nations News (Yahoo!) [dailynews.yahoo.com/fc/World/United\\_Nations/](http://dailynews.yahoo.com/fc/World/United_Nations/)
- United Nations Secretary-General [www.un.org/sg/](http://www.un.org/sg/)
- United Nations System [www.unsystem.org](http://www.unsystem.org)
- United Nations Television and Video [www.un.org/av/tv/](http://www.un.org/av/tv/)
- UN Watch (NGO) [www.unwatch.org/](http://www.unwatch.org/)
- US Mission to the United Nations [www.un.int/usa/](http://www.un.int/usa/)
- US Department of State (Official) [www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov)
- US Department of State Background Notes [www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/)
- World Bank (Official) [www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)
- World Wide Web Virtual Library (WWWVL) International Affairs Resources [www.etown.edu/vl/](http://www.etown.edu/vl/)

his or her own position. At the end of two sessions, our discussants had crafted positions, but most were more conflicted than ever.<sup>6</sup>

With student perspectives complicated through several viewpoints already, we finally broadened the scope of the discussion to a United Nations debate over the decision of the United States. Students assumed roles as delegates in either the Human Rights Council, the Security Council or the General Assembly, depending on the class and how the participants wanted to address the issue. We then broached the subject for a final time as representatives of various nations, simultaneously assuming *both national and international* perspectives, milking

*Competing Visions of Human Rights* for as much perspectival mileage as we could. The entire process formed a human rights unit taking approximately three weeks of class time that provided a framework for debate and high-level analysis in both our International Studies and History courses that was well worth the time invested.

### Student Takeaways

When you talk to teachers who use Choices in their classroom, no matter how they deploy the materials, they tell you that these units are among their students' favorite parts of the course, the easiest to "sell." More than a few of these teachers will also admit (sometimes enthusi-

astically, sometimes begrudgingly) to becoming superfluous during the unit as students take ownership of their learning by vigorously assuming their assigned roles. In adapting *Competing Visions of Human Rights* for an international school, my student leaders and I hoped to enrich this experience by layering an already complex and rich curriculum with even more perspectival sophistication. In addressing personal, national, international and contradictory perspectives we feel we accomplished this goal.

When reflecting on their experience, students in Model UN-centered International Studies electives were immediately appreciative. There was a widespread sentiment that at many MUN

conferences style takes precedence over substance and our MUNers felt that the human rights iBooks Textbook (especially in conjunction with the Choices United Nations unit) gave them the knowledge and context they needed to elevate the debate both in the elective and at conferences. And there must have been something to their assessment as this year was the first in which the fledgling MUN program at our small school was acknowledged with committee awards and the selection of one of our students as a committee chair for next year's Brazil Model United Nations (BRAMUN) conference. The recognized students credited the impact of our human rights unit on the development of their skills in research, analysis and debate.

The most common comment from students in the World History of the 20th Century course was that the human rights unit lent relevance to their study of history, synthesizing their explorations of conflict, resistance and democratization with both current (Iran, 2009) and historical (Pinochet's Chile) examples. Students also highlighted how the unit allowed them to discern and understand the long-term implications of historical events. Most appreciative were the students working on Extended Essays in Human Rights and Philosophy (in this case, focusing on feminism and women's rights) who saw the text as a sound base for starting a study of human rights, and as a useful repository for source materials. Most significantly, perhaps, these students appreciated the model the Choices format provides for developing, through reasoned research, analysis and deliberation, a meaningful "RQ" (research question) both for their Extended Essays and their Internal Assessment research papers in History.

In general, my students and I appreciated the wide variety and geographic distribution of the case studies. More than one Brazilian student had her eyes opened by the Brazilian health care case—when the Brazilian government, in keeping with its constitution, moved to guarantee free and universal access

to HIV/AIDS treatment. The government's threat to produce generic copies of patented antiretrovirals locally if multinational drug companies did not keep prices for these drugs low, created a serious trade dispute between Brazil and the United States.

One student with an already complex point of view gushed, "I LOVED the section about Brazilian healthcare. That's something I had always overlooked and it really spoke to me as a dual citizen." I also heard students reiterate a comment that has formed a chorus to my deployment of Choices units for the past six years in both the United States and Brazil: they trust the material because multiple points of view are fairly presented and made open to questioning and debate. Because of this trust, students are willing to engage the issues and each other and find they don't mind "the work" at all. In the final analysis, we felt that by opening *Competing Visions of Human Rights*

to even more competing visions, the authenticity of an already trustworthy experience was enhanced even further for all involved. 🌟

#### Notes

1. Throughout our units we extended activities to integrate technology with clear purpose to the greatest extent possible. Please see sidebar on p.145 for further suggestions and resources for such expansions.
2. See [www.ibo.org/mission/](http://www.ibo.org/mission/), and [www.choices.edu/about/](http://www.choices.edu/about/).
3. I would like to acknowledge the critical participation of these student leaders: Natasha Moro Alvarez, Barbara Migon Contin, Isabela Karam, Jessica Kenny, Alice Lima, and Taciana Pereira.
4. The first two films are likely familiar to most readers, but the third is a gripping documentary about the hijacking of a metro bus in Rio de Janeiro and an examination of the personal and socio-economic causes of the hijacker's actions ([www.imdb.com/title/tt0340468/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0340468/)).
5. Please see sidebar on p.146.
6. Please see p.146 for the resources we used throughout this process and the MUN simulation.

**WILLIAM J. TOLLEY**, a teaching fellow with the Choices Program, is the Learning and Innovation Coach and head of history at the International School of Curitiba, Brazil.

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