

## **“Peer to Peer Interactive Learning”: the Human Rights Debate Club**

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“I feel insulted when people equate Islam with violence,” a Muslim student said in a May 2008 session of the Human Rights Debate Club. “But isn’t it part of the freedom of expression,” another interjected, “to express criticism against Islamic terrorism.” “Not if this criticism incites hate or takes the form of racial intolerance,” a third countered, “this is expressly forbidden in the relevant human rights documents.”

Welcome to the Human Rights Debate Club, a peer-to-peer interactive learning experience that was first organized at the University of Graz in 2007 and has, since then, turned more than 60 students from disciplines ranging from theology and linguistics to environmental studies and (predominantly) law into active and critical members of the ‘big debate club’: the democracy we live in.

Going back to an idea of Wolfgang Benedek, Professor of International Law at the University of Graz, the Human Rights Debate Club is an innovative and interdisciplinary international law teaching technique which provides a setting for moderated discussions on topical human rights issues. Each session of the Debate Club, which takes place on eight evenings during the summer semester, is devoted to a particular topic in the form of a question. The 2008 topics (they are updated each semester) include, inter alia: ‘Are states allowed to use torture in extreme situations?’ ‘Does the right to privacy limit state attempts to fight crime online?’ ‘Are human rights universal?’ ‘Should you be allowed to negate genocides?’ And, of course, ‘Should religions be immune from critique?’ – the question the students two paragraphs earlier were intensively debating.

The Human Rights Debate Club at the University of Graz follows a unique approach in combining written statements and short oral presentations with a lively discussion led by a moderator, who is joined by human rights experts and special guests that are invited for some of the sessions. Two weeks before each session students receive a 10-15 page supporting document that contains an introduction into the topic, essential legal documents and different (controversial) takes on the issue from various sources including scientific articles and journals. Each lesson focuses on a central question that delineates the main theme. The students are invited to submit short statements (<250 words) which help the moderator to structure the discussion and identify the most controversial aspects of the topic. Each session starts with a short thematic introduction by the moderator, who then calls upon some of the students who have submitted statements to present their arguments. This sets the stage for controversial discussions – again, see our three students from above.

The Human Rights Debate Club enriches the curriculum of all faculties of the University of Graz. This ‘melting pot’ character is one of its particularly interesting features and allows the participants to learn from each other on a peer-to-peer level. Students from non-legal backgrounds follow a different approach to human rights issues than law students, who traditionally favour the recourse to international legal sources to support their opinion. As the

Debate Club progresses, the increased interdisciplinarity of all students becomes evident. A June 2007 session saw a law student (whose first statement in March 2007 had highlighted the importance of legal reasoning for solving human rights-related ‘hard cases’) end a statement with emphasizing that “you can’t just look at the law. What counts are the realities on the ground.” Quod erat demonstrandum.

A particularly important feature of the Human Rights Debate Club is its ability to create empathy and support engagement – two qualities which do not (and cannot) usually rank among the primary study objectives of traditional university courses. A number of former Debate Club students have been inspired to take up voluntary work with civil society organizations. The Debate Club also helps students to improve their drafting, writing and presentations skills, takes away their fear of speaking in public and forces them to critically assess the opinions they hold on human right issues and to defend them in front of an audience.

The Human Rights Debate Club is not the only example of innovative international law teaching techniques used at the University of Graz. With the Refugee Law Clinic, preparatory courses for Model United Nations Competitions and law moot courts, such as the Telders International Law Competition, the Institute of International Law and International Relations convincingly illustrates its deep commitment to excellence, innovation and creativity in international law teaching.

Clearly, human rights need to be taught with an eye to the realities on the ground. Reading cases, perusing books and writing exams is not enough: Human rights need to be filled with life. Not even a thorough reading of the commentary to Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which enshrines, inter alia, the right to freedom of religion, can provide students with the sensibility they develop, and the insights they acquire, when discussing its meaning with a Muslim student.

The value added that the Human Rights Debate Clubs brings is thus clear: its interdisciplinary approach supports creative thinking; its set-up allows for intensive discussions and insightful contributions; and the topics covered enhance human rights awareness.

On a broader scale, the Human Rights Debate Club also makes an important contribution to the development of students into critical and active members of the community, who are aware of their rights and of the rights of others and are prepared and willing to stand up for them. After all, discussing and internalizing the meaning of human rights is an essential precondition for respecting, protecting and implementing them. We have known since Ludwig Wittgenstein that “the limits of my language indicate the limits of my world”. With regard to human rights, the Human Rights Debate Club does its best to push these limits a bit further.