

The Centre for Holocaust Education and Scholarship
Universe of Obligation
Teaching Strategy #3



Universe of Obligation

Overview

The activities below will help students reflect on the idea of a “universe of obligation,” or the individuals and groups toward whom obligations are owed, to whom rules apply, and whose injuries call for amends. In this exercise, students will consider their own universes of obligation, as well as those of groups and nations to which they belong.

This lesson is part of Facing History and Ourselves Universal Declaration of Human Rights collection and part of a series of lessons about the declaration. Use this lesson at the beginning of a study of the UDHR to engage students in a conversation about how individuals and nations define their responsibilities towards other peoples.

Context

In the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust, individuals, groups, and nations began re-evaluate the responsibility they felt toward others. The horrors of World War II, the new and frightening power of the atomic bomb, and the Nazi genocide of Jews and of others deemed unworthy to live shocked the conscience of people all over the world in 1945. As First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt said, "In the end...we are 'One World' and that which injures any one of us, injures all of us." [1]

After the war, diplomats and politicians created not only the United Nations as an international organization, but also the Nuremberg Trials, the Genocide Convention, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the hope of preventing future atrocities. Each of these initiatives aimed to redefine the responsibilities of all governments and individuals toward other people in the world; they required a shift in the way people and nations understand what sociologist Helen Fein calls their "universe of obligation." Fein defines this important concept as the circle of individuals and groups "toward whom obligations are owed, to whom rules apply, and whose injuries call for [amends]." [2] Her ideas refer specifically to how nations perceive their responsibilities to citizens.

Sources

[1] Eleanor Roosevelt, My Day, December 22, 1945, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project Website, George Washington University, <http://tinyurl.com/63lslu>, accessed October 24, 2008.

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[2] Margot Stern Strom. Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior Resource Book. (Brookline: Facing History and Ourselves, 1994), 56.

Materials

[Universe of Obligation activity sheet](#)

Activities

Like nations, individuals develop their own universes of obligation and responsibility.

- Who is in your "universe of responsibility?"
- What individuals and groups might you include?
- Where would your universe of obligation begin? Where might it end?
- Under what conditions might your universe of responsibility shift?
- In whose universe of responsibility do you reside?
- How do individuals, groups, and nations demonstrate their universes of obligation or responsibility?