

WHY THE UNITED NATIONS MATTERS TO US ALL

By Susan Hughes

GRADES:

9-12

DURATION:

4-5 CLASSES

KEY CONCEPTS AND ISSUES

With its broad-reaching mandate and its multiplicity of arms and interests, the United Nations (UN), which makes decisions that might seem distant and removed from individuals here in Canada, does affect us all personally. Students will discuss what it means to be a global citizen and reflect on the value of the UN as an international institution. How do actions and policies of the UN as an international institution affect you personally as individuals, Canadian citizens, and global citizens?

- Political Identity
- Concept of Personal Identity
- Concept of Canadian Identity
- Cause and Consequence
- Historical Significance

MATERIALS REQUIRED:

- Computers or devices with Internet access
- Materials needed for preparing presentations (notebooks, pens)

EXPECTATIONS/OUTCOMES

The overall expectations listed below serve as an entry point for teachers. Teachers are encouraged to make connections to specific expectations in their region and grade.



Students will:

- Analyze the goals, methods, and accomplishments of the UN that have contributed to the evolution of human rights in different regions since its creation
- Analyse rights and responsibilities of citizenship within a global context
- Explain how various individuals, groups, and events, including some major international events, contributed to the development of identities, citizenship, and heritage in Canada
- Assess the responsibility of governments and international bodies for the promotion and protection of human rights
- Communicate their ideas, arguments, and conclusions using various formats and styles, as appropriate for the audience and purpose.

CURRICULUM LINKS

- Canadian and World Studies/Canadian History (various)
- Law
- Civics and Citizenship/Politics in Action
- English Language Arts
- Equity, Diversity, and Social Justice

BACKGROUND

The United Nations was founded in 1945 after the destruction and horror of the Second World War and the Holocaust. The founders wanted to create an international organization that could prevent future catastrophes. The mandate of the UN was to assist nations in solving complex world problems and avoiding or resolving conflicts by encouraging constructive and open communication between nations. For example, today, in 2020, the UN has 193 member states, including Canada, that has been a member of the UN since the very beginning.

All member states have agreed on a set of rules laid out in the UN Charter that are organized into three main themes: peace and security, the protection and promotion of human rights, and human development. Three fundamental rules in the Charter are: all countries are equal; all countries must avoid using force or threatening to use force against another country; and



Headquarters of the United Nations in New York City, United States

all countries must try to settle their differences by peaceful means. The UN has four key documents: the UN Charter; the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the Convention on the Rights of the Child; and the Statute of the International Court of Justice.

The United Nations is an important institution with which most students will be familiar. But it may seem vast and confusing in structure and operation. Indeed, it is actually a system, or “family,” consisting of the UN itself—that is made up of six main organs (General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council, the International Court of Justice, and the UN Secretariat)—and the UN’s many programmes, funds, and specialized agencies, each with its own leadership and budget.

Although the United Nations was founded decades ago, students may still find it difficult to understand how this global body affects their daily lives. Yet in an increasingly interconnected world, the UN continues to play an important and visible role in responding to the concerns of global citizens—including students.

STEP ONE: TEACHER DIRECTED DISCUSSION

1. Explain to students that the United Nations (UN) is an international organization that plays a strong and important role in world affairs.
 - What are examples of ways its work—or the work of one of its affiliated agencies—affects people

around the world? (If necessary, provide a list of UN organizations or conventions for students to reference.) Responses might include the UN's work on environmental protection (air and water pollution, wildlife preservation) and climate change; global communication standards; human rights and freedoms; international air travel regulations; global public health initiatives; and more.

2. This year a UN food agency, the World Food Programme (WFP), won the Nobel Peace prize, worth about CDN\$1.4 million. According to the UN, aggravated by the control measures put in place because of the coronavirus pandemic, the current food crisis is the biggest the world has struggled with in 50 years. But with one in nine people globally without enough to eat, "[the] WFP's annual funding shortfall is widening to close to US\$5-billion," said Julie Marshall, the WFP's Canadian spokesperson. The Nobel committee commented: "The need for international solidarity and multilateral co-operation is more conspicuous than ever."

- Was the WFP a good choice for this prestigious prize, in your opinion? Explain your reasons.
- Will it draw attention to the food crisis and have the desired results?
- Should UN member states have a responsibility to assist all other nations in achieving food security?

STEP TWO: STUDENT-LED EXPLORATION

A recent UN survey with over 1 million respondents from all 193 member states about their expectations for global institutions like the UN and their priorities for the future showed the pandemic had highlighted the public's awareness of global inequalities.

- What were *your* main global concerns before the pandemic? How has the pandemic changed your sense of the world and/or your global priorities? What are they now, and why?
- Do you think the UN could play a more important role in the world post-pandemic? How could it have a positive effect on your own global concerns and priorities?

STEP THREE: FOCUS ON HUMAN RIGHTS

Students view several award-winning films of their choice created by youth for the [PLURAL+ Youth Video Festival](#)—which is a UN-sponsored initiative with videos focusing on themes of migration, diversity, and social inclusion—in the Children's Rights or Human Rights categories and record their reflections.

In small groups, students consider:

1. What are our fundamental rights?

- What are the fundamental rights that all Canadians should have?
- What are the fundamental rights that all human beings should have?
- Do your lists have any similarities or differences? Why?
- Why are rights sometimes denied? (Why are some groups sometimes marginalized or treated inequitably?)

2. Who is responsible for human rights?

- What role or responsibility do individuals have to protect human rights?
- Should individual governments take sole responsibility for the promotion and protection of human rights?
- Why do we need to create international bodies such as the UN to promote and protect human rights?
- Why do we need our rights and responsibilities enshrined in constitutions, laws, conventions, and declarations?

After the discussion, students share their thoughts in writing.

STEP FOUR: CULMINATING ACTIVITY

1. Preparing for the Activity: You and the UN

One of the key roles of the United Nations is to uphold and champion the rights of global citizens, especially through one of these five efforts that focuses on rights:

- United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights [1948]
- Geneva Conventions [1949]
- Convention on the Rights of the Child [1989]
- Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [2006]
- UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People [2007]

The UN also works to unite countries around the world in tackling the global climate emergency; to maintain peace and security globally; to deliver humanitarian aid; to promote sustainable development; and to uphold international law.

Discuss with students:

- What is the UN's role in the world?
- Are its actions important, in your opinion?
- How do the actions of the UN affect you directly?

2. Executing the Activity

Students view the [“What We Do” page](#) on the UN website and choose a section of interest to investigate more closely, especially to find how it affects them personally.

- What happened to prompt the creation of this section of the UN?
- What is one way in which a UN declaration or action arising from this concern has affected Canadians directly? (For example, did it change our views or

actions? How do you know?) Give examples to show change and/or continuity.

- What is one way in which it has affected you directly?

Students record their thoughts using text, audio, images, or video. They share their work with the class.

3. Final Critique/Reflection

- In what ways do you feel your work is successful?
- In what ways would you change your work to improve it?
- How does your work reflect your understanding of this section of the UN and its effect on Canada and on you personally?

OPTIONAL EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- The UN has a charter. A charter, or constitution, sets out in writing the basic principles and laws of a nation, state, or social group. It determines the powers and duties of the group and guarantees certain rights to the people in it. In small groups, review the UN's charter and then create a charter for your classroom and/or school. Discuss how you'll make final decisions on which rules to confirm.
- Each province and territory in Canada has its own human rights code. All human rights legislation must align with the Canadian Charter of Rights



UN Security Council Chamber in New York Headquarters

and Freedoms (1982), but protections can vary across jurisdictions. Have students research their province or territory's human rights code online and compare it to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Ask them to identify similarities, differences, and any additional protections that exist at the provincial or territorial level.

- In 2019, the United Nations launched a [book club](#) for children ages 6 to 12 to learn about the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Challenge students to analyze this initiative. Does it achieve its purpose? Does it also help young individual Canadians connect in a meaningful way with these goals, with other children around the world, and with the UN?
- The United Nations regularly publishes summaries highlighting key actions and initiatives to show how the organization impacts people around the world. Have students visit the UN website and search for recent updates or summary reports outlining its current priorities and actions. Ask them to review one or more examples and discuss: Why is a summary like this useful? Do you connect to this individually, as a Canadian, or as a global citizen? Who do you think decides what information is included, and why? What questions do you have after reviewing it?



The United Nations 75th Anniversary summary card

- Students can make posters, murals, or decorate classroom or hallway bulletin boards to celebrate United Nations Day, which is recognized annually on October 24. Students can share information about the significance of the UN to fellow students, highlighting its global efforts and successes, and making suggestions about how they can commemorate the day.
- The United Nations has a [Twitter account](#). So does the [UN Programme on Youth](#). Have students find and follow either or both of these Twitter accounts for two weeks or so. They can record the type of topics tweeted and retweeted. What purpose do these tweets and retweets fulfill? What is your personal response to what you learn from these tweets? What is your political response? If appropriate, tweet back the UN and record your experience.
- For a more intensive focus, set aside a full day for a model United Nations debate in your classroom. Choose a resolution that reflects a contemporary world problem. Students can represent UN General Assembly nations; they research to learn about the country and how it might react to the resolution and why. Students present their country's arguments during an organized debate. (There are several good resources to help structure the experience, including the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation's [socially based curriculum unit plan](#) which is available on their website.)

RESOURCES

Useful Twitter Accounts:

- [UN Twitter account](#)
- [UN Youth Twitter account](#)

General Websites:

- [United Nations](#)
- [UN75: 2020 and Beyond](#)—A Section of the UN's Website Dedicated to their 75th Anniversary
- [Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation](#)

- [Human Rights Watch](#)
- [Amnesty International Canada](#)
- [Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion](#)
- [Youth for Human Rights](#)
- [Government of Canada](#)—Canada's Approach to Advancing Human Rights

Video Documentaries:

- [PLURAL+](#) Youth Video Festival on Migration, Diversity, and Social Inclusion: videos created by youth that focus on subjects such as children's and human rights; sponsored by the [UN Alliance of Civilizations](#) and the [International Organization of Migration](#), along with a network of 50+ partner organizations around the globe

Children's books (for students ages 5 and up):

- *This Child, Every Child: A Book About the World's Children* by David J. Smith (Kids Can Press, 2011)
- *People Who Said No: Courage Against Oppression* by Laura Scandiffio (Annick Press, 2012)
- *We Are All Born Free: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Pictures* by Amnesty International (Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 2008)

ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

Student Evaluation Questions Specific to the Lesson Plan

Before (Pre-Implementation)

- Do students have a general understanding of their own rights and responsibilities as citizens of Canada?
- Do students have a general understanding of their own rights and responsibilities as global citizens?
- Do students have a clear general understanding of the organization of the UN, its goals, and methods?
- Do students have any prior understanding of the role of the UN in establishing international laws and conventions, especially in regard to promoting and protecting human rights?

- Are students familiar with the role of the UN in affecting society in positive ways, including how it affects themselves personally?

After (Post-Implementation)

- Students will describe their rights and responsibilities as citizens of Canada.
- Students will describe their reflections on their rights and responsibilities as global citizens.
- Students will reflect a clear general understanding of the organization of the UN, its goals, and its methods.
- Students will reflect on the role of the UN in establishing laws and conventions, especially in regard to promoting and protecting human rights.
- Students will show an understanding of the ways in which the UN positively affects society, including how it affects them personally.

Teacher Evaluation Questions

Before (Pre-implementation)

- Do you have a general understanding of your rights and responsibilities as citizens of Canada and as global citizens?
- Do you have a clear general understanding of the organization of the UN, its goals, and methods?
- Do you have any prior understanding of the role of the UN in establishing international laws and conventions, especially in regard to promoting and protecting human rights?
- Are you familiar with the role of the UN in affecting society in positive ways, including how it affects yourself personally?

After (Post-Implementation)

- Describe your rights and responsibilities as Canadian citizens and global citizens.
- Describe in general how the UN is organized, its goals, and its methods.
- Have a clear understanding of the importance of the UN in establishing international laws and conventions.
- Understand how and why the UN affects society and individuals in positive ways.

GENERAL RUBRIC

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Discussion	Student participated limitedly in the teacher-directed discussions	Student participated adequately in the teacher-directed discussions	Student participated actively in the teacher-directed discussions	Student participated exemplarily in the teacher-directed discussions
Content	Student demonstrated limited understanding of concepts, facts, and terms	Student demonstrated some understanding of concepts, facts, and terms	Student demonstrated considerable understanding of concepts, facts, and terms	Student demonstrated thorough understanding of concepts, facts, and terms
Written Work	Student's written reflections were confusing, poorly structured, and had many grammatical errors	Student's written reflections were generally clear and had some structure, but numerous grammatical errors	Student's written reflections were clear and well-structured, but had a few errors	Student's written reflections were very clear, well-organized, and had virtually no errors
Presentation	Student's presentation was confusing, lacked emphasis and energy, and resulted in no discussion	Student's presentation was generally clear, but lacked energy and emphasis, and resulted in little discussion	Student's presentation was clear, vibrantly presented, and resulted in a good discussion	Student's presentation was very clear, enthusiastically presented, and resulted in engaging discussion
Group Work	Students made a minimal contribution to the group; very little cooperation	Students made some contribution to the group, but cooperation was superficial	Students made a considerable contribution to the group, with a good level of cooperation	Students made a significant contribution to the group, with an excellent level of cooperation

SPECIFIC RUBRIC

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Step One	Student demonstrated a limited understanding of the role of the UN	Student demonstrated a basic understanding of the role of the UN	Student demonstrated a good understanding of the role of the UN	Student demonstrated a thorough understanding of the role of the UN
Step Two	Student contributed in a limited way to an exploration and discussion of their priorities and the potential of the UN's role post-pandemic	Student contributed adequately to an exploration and discussion of their priorities and the potential of the UN's role post-pandemic	Student contributed actively to an exploration and discussion of their priorities and the potential of the UN's role post-pandemic	Student contributed exemplarily to an exploration and discussion of their priorities and the potential of the UN's role post-pandemic
Step Three	Student's written work demonstrated a limited understanding of the struggles to establish universal respect for human rights and the reasons for enshrining human rights in laws and conventions	Student's written work provided some information reflecting an understanding of the struggles to establish universal respect for human rights and the reasons for enshrining human rights in laws and conventions	Student's written work provided good information reflecting an understanding of the struggles to establish universal respect for human rights and the reasons for enshrining human rights in laws and conventions	Student's written work provided thorough information reflecting an understanding of the struggles to establish universal respect for human rights and the reasons for enshrining human rights in laws and conventions
Step Four	Student's presentation demonstrated a limited ability to closely investigate a section of the UN, especially to reveal how it affects them personally	Student's presentation demonstrated an adequate ability to closely investigate a section of the UN, especially to reveal how it affects them personally	Student's presentation demonstrated a good ability to closely investigate a section of the UN, especially to reveal how it affects them personally	Student's presentation demonstrated a strong ability to closely investigate a section of the UN, especially to reveal how it affects them personally