DIRECT SERVICE TO REFUGEES IN HAMPTON ROADS: learning by helping

by

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# ABSTRUCT

The differences between refugees’ dreams before and after coming to the United States of America is often shocking. One might ask, “Isn’t America the country of the refugees?” The United States is the largest nation built by refugees and immigrants, yet recently resettled refugees or “new Americans” struggle in multiple and overlapping ways to reach successful resettlement. Some of the challenges they face are inherent to resettlement, others come from the socialization process, and the interplay of human beings as they exist together. Language is the natural struggle that any internationally-relocated person experiences. In this metropolitan area of Hampton Roads, around 200 refugees settle annually based on data adopted from Virginia Department of Social Services. As an Iraqi international student who is an immigrant in this same area, I reach out to the refugees and the immigrants through teaching English classes every Friday in Newport News to help them learn the language faster and getting introduced to the American culture.

# MY JOURNEY TO REFUGEE STUDIES

In the spring of 2016, I took a class called “Refugee Studies” at Old Dominion University (ODU) in Norfolk, VA, which was the first class I had taken in the master’s program. This class opened my eyes to refugee issues. As an immigrant, I felt so depressed for the refugees when I saw most of the countries closing their doors towards them and seeing them as a threat (Anzaldúa). This class pushed me to work and help refugees and immigrants as much as I can because I am one of them. I decided to continue doing research into refugee’s studies, with particular interest in the experiences and needs women refugees. I concentrated on refugees in Hampton Roads because I live in the same area, which made it easier to reach out and help them. In the spring of 2017, the moment I heard ODU was offering a service-class in the Women’s Studies Department on refugees, I registered for it without hesitation. The theme of the class was “learning by helping” I thought this class would suit me best due to the background knowledge I have from my previous refugee class, my research interests, and the passion I have for supporting refugees. Furthermore, being fluent in Kurdish and understanding both Farsi and Arabic made me a good resource for the class.

# STANDPOINT THEORY

My own position as an immigrant is integrally woven into this research and its applied dimensions. I have been in the United States for seven years. I am an asylum seeker and I understand how refugees feel as they resettle into a new area. It took me a long while to find my way in a new society which was so different from my hometown and culture. I still remember the help I received from others, which allowed me to reach successful resettlement. This is why I want to be available and operate as a navigator and resource for new refugees as much as I can. I understand the struggles they have been through during their transition to Western culture as well as the struggles they have while resettling in the United States specifically.

# EDUCATIONAL GUIDANCE

I started my work with the Commonwealth Catholic Charities (CCC) organization in the spring of 2017. My position was working with families for the first half of the semester and then teaching an English class at CCC for the second half of the semester. I was able to visit refugee families in order to understand their necessary needs. This included things like finding transportation, discerning and filling out important forms, making appointments, etc. Whenever new refugees introduce themselves to me, my first goal is to be an educational guide for them. The first question I ask them is, "What is your educational background?” so that I may show them the opportunities they will have here. Most of the Syrian and Iraqi refugees come with a bachelor's degree. If there is not a navigator to assist them in seeking educational opportunities, they will continue to work as an employee in a store or in a mall instead of potentially acquiring a better job in a professional area. Hauck et al. shed light on the effects of English language proficiency towards refugees in central Virginia, they discuss refugees’ happiness to immigrate in the United States and also how language difficulties have affected them to find education and employment in the new life in the United States.

# LANGUAGE SCHOOL

In my direct service to refugees, as both an organizational volunteer and a translator, I found that the majority of the refugees I come in contact with are hindered by language barriers. They do not know the English language, or they know only basic English. Because of this, it is often very hard for refugees to find a proper job that can better provide for their daily needs (Ahsan et al.). However, the group of Iraqi refugees with college degrees fully understand the English language. Despite this, it is important to highlight that not all refugees from different countries have college degrees. Due to their lack of English proficiency, refugees face difficulties such as finding jobs, understanding apartment rules and regulations, understanding cultural behaviors, etc. After my professor established a service learning class for ODU, American students began to learn more about different cultures and allowed them to help refugees at the same time, the class was learning by helping. I was one of the first students to participate in the class, where I learned a lot about the reality of life that refugees face here. It is a completely different perspective for someone to personally experience an issue rather than reading about it in classroom. Soon after the first semester was over, my professor and a few students gathered to discuss the most important priorities for refugees. What can we do to better serve them and, at the same time, to reduce the huge workload on CCC? Moreover, how can we think about how we apply the plan we create among refugees? After our deep observations throughout the first semester, we decided that providing a long-term plan for learning English is the highest priority humanitarian work we can do for them. As I mentioned above, the language program offered by CCC in Newport News is not sufficient because the 3-month duration is simply not long enough to learn the English language. The refugees complain that they do not understand the instructor because the instructor is American, and they need translation during the class in order to fully understand the lessons. When I was assisting an American teacher at CCC for the first semester, I realized how happy the students were to see me in the class. Because I know Kurdish very well and comprehend Arabic and Farsi, I was able to help them understand the class much better than before when there was no interpreter in the room. It was so clear that the eagerness they have to learn the English language came from their motivation to get jobs more easily with this vital skill. As Ying Zhen discusses, the importance of English proficiency among recent immigrants in the United States allows them to get employed sooner. After we decided to provide an English class, we faced challenges in finding a convenient place for refugees and an affordable place for us to handle the price. We asked CCC’s main office to give us a model apartment which they have as a sample for prospective tenants. Fortunately, they were happy to give us one hour and a half every Friday to use the apartment in order to teach English. It has now been three semesters that we have conducted our English class in that apartment with our special curriculum. I am very pleased to have founded a specialized English class curriculum for refugees as both a volunteer for CCC and an ODU ambassador. I feel that all of our adult students are now a part of my own life. Every Friday, I am eager to go to Newport News and teach them English and speak with them, sometimes in their native language(s). Nothing stops me from doing this humanitarian work. I feel that it is mandatory for me to be there every week because they want me to be there; I help them refine their English skills while at also explaining American culture to them so they will better mediate with the culture shock that comes with resettlement.

Last semester, my husband’s schedule conflicted with my schedule, meaning that no one would be at home to take care of my one-year-old child. I decided to take her with me to the class so I would not miss the opportunity to work with the refugees again. When I went there and taught while having a small baby, I symbolized motivation for them as well. They always tell me that they are proud to see me every week; to be there full of energy while I teach as I am holding a small baby. My plan is to continue doing this work as long as I live in this area. I hold the greatest motivation to continue doing this work is because I am homesick as well as an asylum seeker. Therefore, I feel their pain and I know how important it is to have someone to advocate for you in this exile.

Every Friday, for an hour and a half, I teach with one of my colleagues. We have about 12-14 adult women students every week, mostly from Syria and Afghanistan. Each week, we introduce new topics to the class and conduct small conversations related to that week’s topic. For example, last week, our topic was about job interviews, and our vocabularies were covering job titles available in Hampton Roads such as cashier, housekeeper, cleaner, waiter, etc. Also, small conversation tips were taught on how to talk at a job interview. In this sense, we try to provide details on certain topics and allow the students to discuss them in a way that benefits their daily lives and future well-being.

# GOALS OF THE ENGLISH CLASS

Our first goal for this class is to offer a free opportunity to learn English. I believe a priority for refugees in the United States is learning English. As I mentioned previously, refugees can go to CCC’s English class only for the first three months of their arrival. However, most of the time they cannot attend these classes due to transportation issues. For refugees, it takes some time to be familiar with the schedule of the poor transportation in Hampton Roads. It also takes time in order to acquire a driving license. In addition to this, CCC’s English class does not provide an interpreter to make the class easier for non-native speakers. Based on my observation in CCC classes, I have realized that it is very hard for new students to learn in class without a translator. In our class, besides teaching, my colleague and I both translate in Arabic, Farsi and Kurdish. I have heard from our students many times that without translation they do not want to come back to the class because it is too difficult to understand the lessons.

Our second goal, as members of the Women’s Studies Department, is to create a social environment to see each other and share emotional feelings with other ethnicities. The hardest struggle refugees face soon after their resettlement is homesickness. By coming to the classes and seeing multi-ethnic people and folks of other ethnicities, they encourage each other to tolerate the same problems they face.

The purpose of teaching English to the refugees is learning about the refugees themselves and seeing other ethnicities inside the United States, learning by helping. This is a good opportunity for American students to see other ethnicities and races that used to live thousands of miles away from Hampton Roads. Also, it is a great opportunity to learn about different cultures and religious traditions that they may be unfamiliar with.

# SUMMARY

These projects demonstrate my belief in scholar-activism. As a graduate of the Women’s Studies department, I believe that knowledge must be applied to improve the human condition. In the larger scale of refugee resettlement needs, our language class is a tiny oasis that supports a fraction of the crisis. Yet, what we envision and realize collectively each week makes concrete the larger vision for peace, community harmony, and the full potential of human beings.

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