Establishing a Multi-genre Language Curriculum in the Samos Refugee Camp, Greece
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Goal: To provide a seminar-style, creative writing and literature academic course for refugee students 15-17 years old with a working knowledge of English. This course is modeled after Bard College’s Language and Thinking humanities curriculum, a program that utilizes multiple types of literature, encourages different writing styles, and is a requirement of all undergraduate students. The structure of this class serves to stimulate young refugees' creative growth, personal expression, and English literacy, thus preparing them for possible futures in enrolling in accredited schools of higher learning.

Background: The refugee camp in the city of Vathi, Samos was converted from a military detention center to an asylum processing center after 2011 when war and terrorism began to displace millions of people. Two years ago, when Eliza Cornwell and Sam Reed applied for and were awarded a Davis Project for Peace to develop an English language curriculum for refugees on the island, about 2,200 people were living in the camp and few lived outside the camp’s barriers. According to UNHCR statistics, there are now close to 4,100 people living within the confines of the camp, which was designed to accommodate only 740 people. According to data compiled by Samos Volunteers, one of the resident NGOs on the island, there are close to 1,500 people living in makeshift tents outside of the camp; this area is referred to as “the jungle” by volunteers and refugees. Many refugees seek futures beyond Greece in economically-sound countries in Europe and North America.

Though the camp is officially a closed location, the sheer number of refugees living within and outside the barriers of the facilities render the camp’s barriers porous, disregarded by authorities and refugees alike. Refugees therefore are afforded access to nearby beaches, the town’s waterfront and central square, and the schools managed by two small NGOs: Samos Volunteers and Still I Rise.

During the summer of 2018, I spent a month volunteering at the refugee camp in Samos. While there, I worked with Samos Volunteers. This NGO and its fluctuating community of about 20 international volunteers and 30 refugee volunteers is perhaps the most active group on the island. Until recently, Samos Volunteers was the only provider of non-food items in the camp, as well as adult educational programs. Sam and Eliza’s curriculum can be seen in the English courses currently offered at Samos Volunteers’ Alpha Centre as well as the library system operating in the camp. However, refugee children, who make up more than a quarter of the camp population and a quarter of whom are unaccompanied, continue to live without sufficient access to quality and accredited education. Although the Greek government mandated in 2016 that every refugee child should attend Greek school, there are fewer than 20 refugee children on Samos enrolled in school. Greek authorities have created numerous obstacles that prevent children from attending school, and UNICEF and UNHCR have attempted but failed to improve the situation. Therefore, in the summer of 2018 volunteers from Samos Volunteers formed a new NGO, Still I Rise, and established the Mazi youth center for minors between the ages of 12 and 17. Today, there are about 200 students who voluntarily attend the center. Although Mazi is not an accredited school, Still I Rise coordinators hope to model the center as though it were one. The center is open five days a week and provides an array of classes as well as breakfast and lunch for each student. In addition, Mazi provides to its students counseling services, extracurricular activities like theater and visual arts, and informative workshops such as sexual education. Already, Mazi is recognized by both the local school board and UNHCR. They hope to hire professional, long-term faculty at the school and are in the process of developing a detailed and consistent academic curriculum.

Project Objectives: Building on the work of former volunteers such as Eliza and Sam, and partnering with Still I Rise, my project focuses on fostering refugees’ ability to articulate their ideas and to communicate with others. In addition to having tutored English to Hungarian, Arabic, and Spanish speakers for the past three years, I have recently acquired the TESOL certification. As an enrolled student in the Bard College Masters of Arts in Teaching graduate program who has already taken numerous courses in education and a graduating undergraduate in Middle Eastern Studies and a speaker of the Arabic language, I believe I am ideally suited to embark on this project.
My project will be implemented in partnership with Still I Rise at their Mazi school, as this facility is just a ten minute walk from the camp. The course will be instructed in English, as opposed to Greek, to students who speak Farsi, French, Arabic, Aramaic, and, depending on who is living in the camp this summer, other languages. Firstly, Mazi hosts refugee translators that will help me to effectively communicate to all students. Secondly, while knowing Greek can benefit refugees in their pursuits to seek asylum, most refugees’ knowledge of English exceeds their knowledge of Greek. In addition, English has greater utility throughout many countries within the European Union (EU); most refugees seek to settle in an EU country beyond Greece and some are interested in pursuing higher education, which often requires a sufficient knowledge of English.

Given the lack of educational programs for refugees, this program, offered to students ages 15-17 who hold a working knowledge of English, will provide a space that is both educational and imaginative, allowing students a physical and emotional departure from the monotonous life within the overcrowded camp. I have decided to offer the course to students ages 15-17, partly due to the fact that offering the course to a larger age group would be impossible to instruct by myself. I also chose this age group because I want to convene students who are of similar age, capability, and maturity. This course, unlike other English language courses, incorporates a variety of different genres and caters to different learning styles in an effort to be inclusive to all students. The primary learning objectives of this course are to help students strengthen their writing, reading, and speaking skills, which will benefit them well beyond the course itself. It will also serve as an expressive outlet for students, as they each work on developing their unique writing voice and style in the classroom's nurturing and supportive environment. The selected literature will include texts from Middle Eastern, Francophone African, and Central Asian authors. Most of the selected readings, such as Khalil Gibran's *The Prophet* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, are often included in English as a Second Language (ESL) course syllabi.

In tandem with assignments, the class will also teach students how to use cloud-based file storage and proper digital media management. Providing refugees with technological literacy, both professional and personal, grants them two opportunities: it enables them to store information that might otherwise exist only on their cellular devices and two; it equips them with the skills for possible future employment.

Through peer review exercises and feedback from the instructor, students will work on their writing throughout the three months of instruction. Grammar lessons and new vocabulary will be incorporated in these exercises. By encouraging students to read aloud the selected literature as well as to share their own writing, the class will work towards an improved ability to speak clearly, personally, and with confidence. I will hold regular office hours every week for those who might require individual focus, or for those who simply wish to share their thoughts or suggestions.

Not only will the grammar textbooks, short stories and novels be kept by Mazi following Summer 2019, the syllabus for this course is also designed to extend beyond the three months I intend to work at Mazi, allowing other volunteers with Still I Rise to continue the course following my departure. The syllabus could be recycled as is, added to, or replaced with all new literature while maintaining the core progression of genres and using the same grammar and vocabulary textbooks.

Most of the projects that are implemented by Samos Volunteers and recently Still I Rise were first started by individual volunteers and were later continued and even improved upon. Indeed, these NGOs depend on the innovative work of individuals to inaugurate new projects and the efforts of later volunteers to continue them. My project, as the Mazi youth center expands to hire permanent faculty members, will lay the groundwork for an English language curriculum that encourages self-expression, improves linguistic ability, and is most importantly sensitive to all students who wish to take the course.

**Conclusion:** Thank you for considering this project for the Davis Projects for Peace. I am committed to implementing a new academic program with the Mazi school that will not only benefit refugees during the summer of 2019: I am confident that this project will also serve as a template for future endeavors on the island and will improve refugee students’ access to a quality education on Samos for years to come.