Establishing a Multi-Genre Language Curriculum in the Samos Refugee Camp, Greece
Samos, Greece
Bard College
Eric Raimondi
United States of America

The original goals of this project were twofold. First, to provide a seminar-style, creative writing and literature academic course for refugee students 15-17 years old with a working knowledge of English. And second, through this course, to help students strengthen their writing, reading, and speaking skills as well as to provide a space for creative expression. In addition to the primary goals of my project, I was able to accomplish far more than what I had originally planned. Not only did I inaugurate a holistic language curriculum for the advanced English students, I also wrote and designed, through regular collaboration with the other English teachers and advanced students, two separate textbooks for basic and intermediate English levels. Every student in the basic and intermediate English classes, nearly 120 students right now, has been given the appropriate textbook and is theirs to keep. Both textbooks include translations in French, Farsi, and Arabic, which are the primary languages spoken by refugees on Samos. With funding from Projects for Peace, I have allocated a large sum of money to the organization, with which they will be able to provide textbooks for every basic and intermediate student for nearly an entire year.

There were no other sources in addition to the Projects for Peace program that funded this project. This idea was initially formed during Summer 2018, when I first volunteered to work with refugees on the island of Samos, at which time I recognized a need to improve refugees’ access to a well-formed and holistic education.

Quite simply, asylum seekers and refugees in Greece and all over the world have been deprived of education for considerable time, sometimes multiple years. This is the result of a lack of government and international organization assistance in the area of education. This summer alone, the population of the camp has soared, largely a result of Turkey’s new exclusionary policies towards Syrian refugees. According to UNHCR statistics, the population of the camp is approaching 5,000 in a facility that was designed to accommodate just 690 people. People have begun to sleep without proper resources, such as sleeping bags, tents, etc. In response to this challenged system, local governments have been forced to manage the issue and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), both large and small, have stepped in to address the issue. Exemplary of this consequence are small organizations like Still I Rise NGO, which is currently one of the largest, and in my opinion the best, providers of education on Samos.

Still I Rise NGO’s Mazi education center was selected as the preferred site for this project for a number of reasons. First, at the time of applying, I already had an existing relationship with the founders of the organization, so coordinating the project was logistically feasible. Second, the Mazi Center, like most NGOs on the island, is an operation that often welcomes individual projects. Third, I understood that English language education at Mazi would likely benefit from an English multi-genre language course.

Working at the Mazi Center proved to be a perfect location to implement this project. The flexible nature of the center’s curriculum allowed me to assign the readings and assignments that I planned for. In addition, the center’s staff was most supportive regarding student concerns. More importantly, even though I budgeted a fair sum of money for student materials such as notebooks, pens, printer paper, etc., the Mazi Center was able to cover all of these needs, leaving a fair amount of my spending money free for other spending.
While teaching the multi-genre language classes to both the 12-14 year old and 15-17 year old age groups, I recognized early on that implementing this project with the younger group would face major challenges. Perhaps it was the result of my own teaching style, but I found that the course I imagined to teach was not well suited for the younger age group. As a result, I reimagined my methods for this particular class halfway through my time on the island. With the older age group, however, I did not have the same concerns. Their age level was conversely well suited for the course. It was in this class that I witnessed the most impressive and thought-provoking work.

Regarding the original goals of my project, I did not encounter situations in which I had to communicate with other people that were not my students. However, regarding the designing and printing of the two textbooks, communicating with the other English teachers and the local printing house was usually challenging. With the English teachers, it was very difficult to satisfy everything each of them wanted to see in their class level’s textbook. Sometimes, their requests contradicted one another’s, thus complicating my task. With the local printing house, negotiating a fair price for the printing of the books and ensuring the quality of the books was difficult. While communicating with the printing house was not impossible, it was very time consuming.

For me, peace is the ability to live without disruption and to have the freedom to learn. Yet on Samos, most people are deprived of this basic human right. Through this project, refugee youth enjoyed a holistic language curriculum. Additionally, many of the advanced students in my language classes engaged in a process of cultivating peace by which they worked to improve the education of their fellow classmates in the basic and intermediate level classes. This project, in establishing a holistic language curriculum and helping to design and improve a sustainable and structured curriculum at the Mazi Center, has greatly improved the education of nearly 150 students. The multi genre language class for advanced students, for example, will be continued by another teacher after I leave. Second, the textbooks, which serve as curriculum stabilizers for the classes as well as a vital communication resource for the students who possess them, will continue to be printed and given to every student who enters a basic or intermediate English class.

Unsurprisingly, working on this project has changed the way I think about the world. Engaging with displaced children, getting to know them and the cultures that they come from, has reinforced my passion for this kind of work. I saw, firsthand, the effects of a stable and structured education on the lives of people in the most unstable and unstructured circumstances. It is because of this that I intend to continue using my time and energy to work with and advocate for displaced people throughout the world.

This project has shown me how many people’s basic human right to an education is not being satisfied. Yet through grassroots initiatives like this one, small strides can be made to improve the lives of refugees.
Top: With the two textbooks I wrote and designed for the Mazi Center.
Bottom left: Teaching the advanced English class.
Bottom right: Tutoring a student from one of the basic English classes.