

REFLECTING ON REFUGEE SIMULATIONS AS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE EMPATHY AND CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this reflective practice was to explore an unexpected revelation that I did not feel qualified to teach about the lived experiences of refugees. As a communication studies instructor at the community college and university level, I feel confident when teaching about various elements of culture and skills related to cross-cultural communication. Nevertheless, I lacked knowledge about the struggles that refugees face as they escape persecution in their homelands in hopes of rehoming somewhere safe. Due to this lack of understanding of this unique people group, I also felt inadequately prepared to design and implement experiential lessons on this topic. After participating in an immersive refugee simulation, I had new insights into the lived experiences of refugees. Furthermore, I reflected on how this experience changed my pre-conceived notions and how I might implement experiential lessons, like the refugee simulations, in my classes to improve empathy and cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: reflection, Dewey, experiential learning, refugee simulation

PURPOSE

There are over 80 million refugees globally (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2021a). As the number of refugees increases steadily in the United States, it is more important than ever for individuals to learn how to empathize and communicate in culturally appropriate ways with this people group. However, these skills are not typically taught in educational institutions. After attending a refugee simulation, I had an unexpected revelation that this immersion exercise would be an innovative solution to improve compassion and multicultural communication in the classroom. This reflective practice examines insights from this experiential learning opportunity and expands on the benefits of refugee simulations to enhance students' empathy and cross-cultural communication.

Background

According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (1951), a refugee is someone who leaves their country because they fear persecution or need to escape the effects of natural or human-made disasters (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1951). As a result of this displacement, refugees often experience a "lack of knowledge of the environment, cultural practices, and language [which] can easily lead to difficulties in integration, to misunderstandings and isolation, and often entails a vulnerable position and dependence on others" (Kristjánsdóttir & Skaptadóttir, 2019, p. 1). In other words, refugees are in crisis, and when they enter a host country, refugees may have additional trauma as they experience culture shock and stress while acclimating to a new life.

Education is key to helping refugees integrate into their new homes. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), education is a fundamental human right, and it protects, empowers, and enlightens refugees (2021b). Unfortunately, refugees face unique obstacles in their educational journey as they may be academically underprepared and struggle with adjusting to the norms of a new culture. In order to make the acclimation process smoother for new refugee students, academic institutions, including faculty, staff, administrators, and students, need to be educated on empathy and cross-cultural communication. Unfortunately, this type of training is infrequently offered.

Over the last 12 years, I have been teaching communication studies courses, including intercultural communication. Although this course gives students some helpful information on how to communicate with individuals from various cultures, I have not offered specific guidance on cultivating empathy and appropriately communicating with the refugee population. I justified excluding this critical topic from my curriculum because I did not fully understand the plight of the refugee, and the textbooks and articles that I read did not fully address this group.

This last summer, I was presented with a unique opportunity to participate in a refugee simulation, an immersive experiential learning session designed for groups to learn empathy for refugees (World Relief, 2020). According to World Relief, “Participants are grouped into families from various countries before going through a mock interview by UN Officials, a feeding station, a medical screening clinic, and a language acquisition class. Families must pass interviews at each of these stations on their journey to freedom” (World Relief, 2020, para. 2). Simulation participants get to see what refugees have to go through in order to escape horrible situations in their homeland. Taking several hours to “walk in the shoes” of a refugee does not give participants a complete understanding of what refugees undergo throughout this rehoming process. However, participant reactions to the refugee simulation activities suggest that this activity is an effective tool for demonstrating the complexities of the refugee experience and for enhancing empathy (George, 2017).

Reflective Theory

My reflective approach is based on John Dewey’s model of reflective thinking. Dewey is regarded as the founder of reflection, and he posited that reflection is an “active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and further conclusions to which it leads” (Dewey, 1933/1989, p. 118). In a learning context, Dewey asserts that reflection is a deliberate and active process that leads to personal knowledge and growth.

Since reflective thinking can help individuals make sense of events that cause uncertainty or a sense of disequilibrium, Dewey designed a five-step process for reflective thinking. By utilizing Dewey’s seminal work on reflective thinking (see Figure 1), I identified an uncertainty or problem, defined the problem, analyzed why the problem occurred, came up with solutions to the problem, and tested the solution (Dewey, 1922/1983). The intended outcome for this reflection was twofold. First, I wanted to learn about refugees’ lived experiences to enhance my empathy and improve my communication skills. Second, I wanted to improve my teaching by including refugee simulations as experiential learning opportunities in my classes so my students could also reap the benefits of this immersion experience.

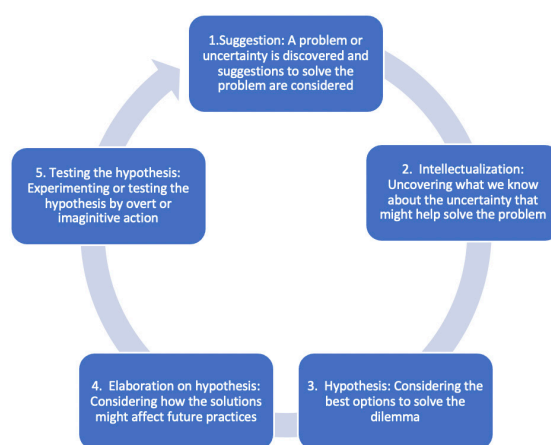


Figure 1. Dewey's (1933/1989) Five Phases of Individual Reflection

PROBLEM

My educational background gave me the skills to teach students about communication theories and practices. Still, when it came time to discuss communication with the refugee population, I did

not feel qualified. In the past, I could step into any classroom and share the knowledge I had learned in books and my studies. I could also utilize my own experiences to enhance the class concepts with relevant personal examples. However, due to my positionality, my life experiences relating to the refugee population were limited. In class, I could talk about my former students who were refugees. However, the problem was that I did not experience their journey and could not personally relate to their struggles. Therefore, I did not feel qualified to teach others about the refugee experience in my classes.

Positionality

Teachers who want to use reflection to improve their teaching practices must begin to identify, explore, and consider their stereotypes, biases, and attitudes since teachers' positionality impacts what and how they teach (McGee Banks & Banks, 1995). A teacher's positionality relates to their identity, including their race, class, religion, gender, sexuality, and how those elements of identity affect the social and political context (Cedillo & Bratta, 2019). In the classroom, my identity impacts how I relate with students as well as what and how I teach. As a white female from an upper-middle-class home, I am very privileged. I had support from my family and financial resources to pursue a career in teaching. As part of the dominant culture, I did not face many obstacles in my academic pursuits. As a result of my positionality, I can relate to students who come from similar backgrounds. However, my lived experiences may differ from those of many students. For example, I have never experienced persecution nor was forced to leave my home country due to disasters. After taking part in a refugee simulation, my sense of disequilibrium became a revelation (Dewey, 1933/1989). I had a new understanding of refugees' experiences and, as a result, felt more prepared to include curriculum on this topic in my intercultural and cross-cultural communication courses.

Working Ideas

An essential part of the reflective practice process is considering what might contribute to an uncertainty one experiences in their discipline (Greenberger, 2020). This step involves utilizing professional experience and personal intuition to determine the potential causes for the problem

(Greenberger, 2020). Then, practitioners should analyze these working ideas to see how they are similar and dissimilar (Greenberger, working paper). Prior to my involvement in the refugee simulation, I did not feel qualified to teach about refugees in my classes for two reasons. First, I did not know about the lived experiences of this people group. Second, I did not know how to share this information in a way that would impact students.

Lacking Knowledge about the Lived Experiences of Refugees

As a student, I had taken several courses related to communication between cultures. These courses helped me appreciate the diversity in our world and celebrate the unique groups of people that live here. I learned about the social norms and customs of individuals from various geographic locations. When I graduated, I felt like I had the skills to share this information in a classroom setting.

After several years of teaching, I was blessed to have a refugee student in my class. As we got to know each other better, he shared some details about his journey to America and his struggles in school. I realized that my training in cross-cultural communication did not fully prepare me to aid this particular student. I lacked knowledge about his lived experiences and the barriers that he faced in his educational journey. In order to best serve him and other refugee students, I needed to learn more about the plight of the refugee.

Lacking Knowledge about how to Teach Students about Communication with Refugees

Not only did I lack knowledge about the lived experiences of the refugee population, but I was also ill-prepared to teach my students about communication with this people group. I wanted to utilize an active learning exercise to improve empathy and cross-cultural communication. A simple PowerPoint and class discussion would not be sufficient to teach students about the lived experiences of refugees. A guest lecture would inform students but might not enhance their empathy for refugees. I struggled to create a lesson that would allow students to express their pre-conceived beliefs on this topic and use their critical thinking skills to reexamine those beliefs (Kurpis & Hunter, 2017).

Differentiating the Working Ideas

After determining what might have contributed to the fact that I did not feel qualified to teach my students about communication with the refugee population, I analyzed these working ideas and assessed their similarities and differences (Greenberger, working paper). I discovered that both working ideas focused on my lack of knowledge. I did not know about the lived experiences of these individuals, and I did not know how to teach students about communication with this particular group. However, these working ideas had one thing in common: I could challenge myself to learn more about refugees and explore different active teaching designs to create a lesson that might allow students to experience some of what refugees endure in their rehoming process.

REFLECTIVE-NARRATIVE

After identifying the problem—that I did not feel qualified to teach my students about the refugee population—I took part in a refugee simulation. This activity, also known as an event (Greenberger, 2020), is an essential component of the reflective practice. By describing this event in a reflective-narrative format, I can share details, context, and personal thoughts (Greenberger et al., 2021).

Temporality (Prologue)

The backstory began when I enrolled in college courses intending to become a college communication studies instructor. I took classes that fulfilled my degree programs, including intercultural communication. These courses covered the cultural norms of various countries and often topics such as food etiquette or non-verbal communication. I do not remember much, if any, information directly relating to communication with the refugee population. As a result, I graduated college and began my teaching career with very little knowledge regarding the lived experiences of this unique population. Furthermore, I was not taught how to instruct other students about this topic to enhance empathy.

This summer, I was asked to teach a cross-cultural communication course at a nearby university. Before starting the class, I learned that a company in town helps refugees acclimate to new lives in the United States. This company holds refugee simulations to help others experience the process that refugees go through when they leave

their homelands. I spoke with the director and signed up my cross-cultural communication class for the simulation. My goal was that these students and I could immerse ourselves in an experiential learning opportunity that might enhance our empathy towards refugees and improve our cross-cultural communication skills.

Sociality (Participants or Characters in the Reflective-Narrative)

The participants in the refugee simulation consisted of 11 students and me, and there were five simulation facilitators. The student participants are enrolled in an accelerated learning undergraduate program at a local university. These students are all working adults who attend night classes.

Prior to the event, the students were not told much about what to expect at this simulation. This lack of information was intentional, as the immersion exercise is designed to imitate a real-life experience, and refugees are unaware of many details pertaining to their resettlement in a new host country. Due to a certain level of secrecy about the event, the participants were a little apprehensive. However, several students said they were excited about this experiential learning opportunity.

Situation (Setting)

The refugee simulation that I attended was held on the second floor of an office building. There was one larger conference-style room that had long tables and about 15 chairs. The chairs were all facing the front of the room, which had a projector screen. There were also several smaller rooms off the main hallway. Many posters and signs related to refugees, and the current work this organization was doing to help this people group hung on the office walls.

Plot

The event began with a brief introduction of the facilitator. He had a short presentation to inform the participants about refugees, including how many refugees are currently residing in the United States, what countries they came from, and why they may be leaving their homelands. The facilitator also asked the student participants to consider any pre-conceived notions that they held of refugees before this activity.

Following the overview, the class was separated into smaller groups or “families” from various countries. Each family was given a script

and several minutes to familiarize themselves with their cultural backgrounds and family stories. Each student was asked to play the role of a family member and was expected to stay in character throughout the simulation.

Three stations were set up in the office building, and the small groups were rotated between each station. The first station was a mock interview with the United Nations (UN). At this station, families were questioned about what precipitated their decision to leave their homeland. The second station held a medical screening station, and families were queried about their pre-existing conditions. They were checked for any illnesses so they would not endanger people in the host countries. The last station was for language acquisition. At this station, the leader only spoke to the participants in a different language to mimic what it must be like for refugees to learn a new language. She attempted to teach participants the alphabet and some basic phrases.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the refugee simulation included four stations (see Figure 2). At the fourth station, participants worked closely together to build a shelter while wearing clothing acquired from former refugees. Since many refugee families stay in makeshift shelters at refugee camps for years, this station offered participants an opportunity to see the living conditions for many refugees. However, since this activity involved close contact with other participants, this station has been removed until COVID-19 social distancing restrictions are lifted.



Figure 2. Refugee Simulation Stations

Note: Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were four stations. Currently, the simulation included only the first three stations.

After the participants rotated through the three stations, they were brought back into the conference room to debrief their experience. The facilitator asked everyone to share how they felt as they played the role of a refugee for an hour and a half. We were also asked how our perceptions of refugees changed as a result of this immersion activity and what we would do with this new awareness.

EVALUATION OF IDEAS

Reflective practice begins with identifying an uncertainty or problem, defining the problem, and then analyzing why the problem occurred (Dewey, 1922/1983). The problem that I encountered was that I did not feel qualified to teach students in my communication courses about the lived experiences of refugees. I discovered two reasons, or working ideas, of why I faced this dilemma. First, I lacked knowledge about what refugees experience as they leave their homelands due to persecution or crisis searching for a haven. Second, I lacked knowledge about how to share this information with my students in a way that would enhance their empathy and ability to communicate with this group of individuals. The next step in the reflection process is to evaluate the working ideas by identifying their strengths and weaknesses and providing literature and theories that support the evaluation (Greenberger, 2020).

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Working Ideas

One reason I did not feel qualified to teach about refugees in my communication classes was that I did not fully understand the lived experiences of this people group. The literature supports this working idea. According to Aldiabat et al. (2021), individuals—whether practitioners in health care settings, food service workers, or teachers—often lack knowledge about refugees' cultural backgrounds and lived experiences, leading to a feeling of wariness when relating with this people group. Ultimately, only those that have experienced phenomena, such as the fear of persecution or other natural disasters, can fully understand and relate with those who share similar experiences (Mapp, 2008). Moreover, many educators are inadequately prepared to teach diverse students, like refugees, and higher education institutions may not offer adequate training (Gay, 2002). Therefore, those who come in contact with refugees cannot fully understand or relate to the lived experiences of another people group unless they have shared the same experiences.

As a communication studies instructor, I have had the pleasure of working with several refugee students. I heard stories about their cultural backgrounds, and I learned about some of the struggles these students experienced in their homelands. Although hearing their stories gave

me a sense of sympathy for the struggles that they endured, I could not empathize with these students because I could not relate to their lived experiences. Due to my positionality, I had never experienced the magnitude of hardships that these individuals faced. I could not “walk a mile in their shoes” because I did not have any reference for what that journey would even entail.

Another reason that I did not feel qualified to teach my communication students about the refugee culture was that I did not know how to create an assignment or activity that would be meaningful enough to improve empathy and cross-cultural communication. As someone who strives to be a charismatic teacher, I try to utilize active learning opportunities in my classroom to enhance student engagement and intrinsic motivation (Anderson, 2021; Lin & Huang, 2014). According to Roberts (2003), it is more challenging for teachers to plan experiential learning activities than to plan for traditional lessons. He states, “Of critical importance, the teacher must recognize the surroundings that are conducive to experiences that lead to growth (Roberts, 2003). However, my lack of knowledge about the lived experiences of refugees impacted my ability to design a meaningful and experiential learning opportunity that would enhance my students’ empathy toward this people group and change their pre-conceived notions about the refugee population.

Experiential Learning Theory to Support Refugee Simulations

Along with his reflective thinking model, Dewey was also recognized for his experiential learning theory (Dewey, 1986). This theory is grounded on the belief that knowledge is socially constructed and based on experiences. According to Dewey (1986), there are four main components of experiential learning. Students have a concrete experience, reflect on that experience, make new meaning from the experience, then act on what they have learned. Dewey posited that learning occurs in the reflection stage of the experiential learning model (Dewey, 1986).

Many scholars have built upon Dewey’s original work on experiential education, including Kolb and Kolb (2005), who highlighted six components of the experiential learning theory. First, learning is a process, and instructors need to

switch the focus from the outcomes to the learning process (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Second, learning occurs when students express their pre-conceived beliefs on a topic and use critical thinking skills to reexamine those beliefs (Kurpis & Hunter, 2017). Third, an important part of the learning process is the conflicts that arise between our experiences and thinking outside the box to create theories that explain these experiences (Sinaga & Artati, 2017). Fourth, the learning process should go beyond just cognitive thinking and include the whole person (Sinaga & Artati, 2017). Fifth, students can look at theories and better understand them by looking at them through the lens of their own experiences (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Sixth, learning is the process of creating meaning, and social interactions enhance learning (Sinaga & Artati, 2017).

DECISION

According to Dewey (1922/1983), there are five steps in reflective practice. First, I identified an uncertainty or problem. Then, I analyzed why the problem occurred. The next step is to develop solutions to the problem (Dewey, 1922/1983).

I faced a problem as I taught communication courses when I realized that I did not feel qualified to teach about the subject of refugees in my classes. I realized there were two main reasons for this lack of confidence in teaching this subject. First, I did not know about the lived experiences of this cultural group. Second, due to my lack of knowledge about the refugee population, I could not create an engaging lesson or activity to teach my students about this topic. In order to resolve this problem, I decided that there was one solution. Ultimately, I needed to immerse myself in learning about the refugee culture so that I could learn more about their lived experiences. Then, I needed to take what I had learned and design an experiential lesson to improve students’ empathy and cross-cultural communication skills when interacting with refugees (see Figure 3).

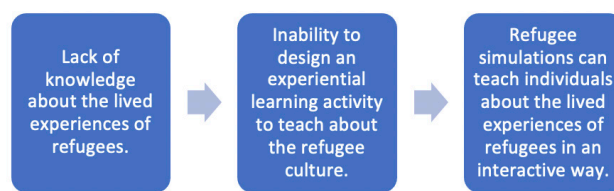


Figure 3. Working Ideas Leading to the Decision

Since a growing number of refugees are fleeing their home countries due to fear of persecution or other natural disasters (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2021a), organizations like World Relief have begun offering refugee simulations. These simulations are designed to teach students about the process refugees go through as they rehome to the United States by inviting participants to immerse themselves in refugee experiences, such as adopting identities of actual refugee families as they complete stages of the refugee application process (George, 2017). This activity was the perfect solution to my dilemma. Through this activity, I could learn more about the persecution that refugees endure and the struggles that refugees face as they strive to rehome into the United States.

As a professor in communication studies, it is my responsibility to facilitate learning experiences that engage students. In experiential learning, the teacher should not be in charge of dispensing knowledge, but they should take on the role of the leader of group activities (Dewey, 1986). These experiential learning opportunities help students engage with the course material and create meaning through a social process where they can interact with others and their environment. The experiential learning model supports using a refugee simulation as a teaching tool to enhance empathy and cross-cultural communication skills. This immersion activity is designed to put student learning first. The focus is on the process of learning both about the lived experiences of refugees and ultimately learning to feel empathy toward this people group. In this simulation, students are also asked to share some of their pre-conceived notions about refugees, and then students are given the opportunity to reexamine those beliefs. The refugee simulation is also an effective experiential learning activity because participants may feel a sense of disequilibrium as they realize the struggles refugees face. As students see how drastically different refugees' lives are from our own, their feelings can be unsettling. However, this feeling of uncertainty can create a massive opportunity for personal growth and understanding of others. After the simulation, educators can facilitate discussion to wrap up the learning process and aid students in creating new meaning from this activity.

Informal Experiment

When I took part in the refugee simulation, I got a chance to experience a moment in the life of a refugee. I felt disoriented, scared, confused, and uncertain as I visited the various stations at World Relief. However, I knew that these feelings were temporary. Logically, I knew that this was an activity and that I would be heading back to the comfort of my home after this immersion experience was complete. I understood that the responses given in interviews did not mean the difference between life and death for my family or me. I felt relieved.

This sense of relief soon turned to grief. I had a deeper understanding of refugees' challenges navigating the complexities of rehoming into the United States. This sense of grief grew into empathy.

Now that I had an idea of what refugees endure as they try to escape the persecution of their homelands, I could now start to imagine myself in their position. I could put myself into the role of the mother, who would do anything to save her children, even if it meant trekking across the world in search of a safe haven. I could put myself into the position of a daughter whose parents might not survive the horrible living conditions at refugee camps. I could envision my husband and six children begging for a better life. Refugee simulations are experiential learning opportunities that can improve empathy and cross-cultural communication.

REFLECTIVE CRITIQUE

Reflective thinking includes analyzing and making judgments about an event in order to transform pre-conceived notions and beliefs. This type of critical thinking can impact decision-making about current or future events as well as inform others who might encounter similar situations (Greenberger, 2020). Those who participate in reflective thinking assess what they know, what they need to know, and how to bridge the divide.

Before I participated in a refugee simulation, I was unaware of the struggles refugees face as they attempt to rehome safely. I had a basic understanding of their persecution due to their race, religion, or sexual orientation. However, my knowledge was limited, and I did not view the statistics and facts in textbooks and scholarly articles as real people

and real families. I had detached emotions because I could not relate to their struggles.

Once I had the opportunity to engage in the refugee simulation and reflect on the experience, I could empathize with refugees. This immersion activity challenged and changed my beliefs and perceptions of this people group. Furthermore, I had a new appreciation for organizations like World Relief, which are working to help refugees rehome and adjust to their new lives.

Along with a better understanding of the lived experiences of refugees, this reflection helped me discover that I could utilize this immersion activity with my communication students. I can implement refugee simulations into my course curriculum to help my students challenge their own biases. Then, they can reflect on their own experience and, hopefully, feel a new sense of empathy, improving their cross-cultural communication skills.

Recommendations for Further Research

As the refugee population grows, it is important to continue researching ways to improve intercultural communication and empathy with this people group and other cultures. In the future, it would be valuable for researchers to examine how refugee simulations, and other experiential learning opportunities, can be utilized in organizational and educational settings to improve empathy and intercultural communication. Furthermore, research should include reflection guides as tools to assist individuals as they process their learning experiences.

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