

Evaluating the Refugee for 50 Minutes Interactive Exhibit as a Teaching Tool

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Introduction:

This study examines whether an academic service learning activity, “Refugee for 50 Minutes: From Syria to Germany” interactive exhibit, actually makes a difference in participants’ perceptions. The exhibit is run by students and is designed to teach university community and community members at large about the topic of refugees. This exhibit began about eight years ago with a much greater emphasis on the refugee experience, particularly those in the refugee camps. Over time, however, the exhibit began to address issues such as the legal definitions of refugees and migrants, the rights of refugees under existing international law, admission of refugees to countries, and resettlement of refugees. The exhibit has become much more relevant in light of the 2015 refugee “crisis” in Europe and the 2016 US elections with its emphasis on the issue of refugees and migrants. In addition, the changing political climate has created a “hostile” environment in which political leaders on a regular basis characterize the refugees as a national security threat to the US in particular but to the developed world in general (in particular Great Britain, some of the Western European countries such as Denmark, Austria, Italy, and Eastern European countries, in particular Hungary).

In light of the new attention on refugees and migrants, numerous articles and books have been written to teach about these subjects. There are, however, very few simulations and/or other “hands-on” experiences to teach students about the refugee experience. This exhibit, in that sense, provides an excellent opportunity for students to learn about these issues and more importantly, to teach about these issues. Because of this, it is important to examine whether this project actually works. Do participants of this “Refugee for 50 Minutes: From Syria to Germany” actually learn more about the legal definition and rights of refugees, about the refugee

experience and importantly, are they more willing to accept refugees in their communities. This study posits a positive answer to all three of these questions.

Description of the Exhibit:

The focus here is not whether simulations work, rather whether or not this particular exhibit works. Therefore, this section will attempt to provide an overview of the exhibit.

The primary goals of the exhibit are:

- to raise awareness about the legal definition of refugees (as opposed to migrants);
- to understand why is it important to follow the rule of law in regard to both migrants and refugees;
- to understand legal rights of migrants and refugees;
- to explore the refugee experience beginning with why they leave and through their journey;
- to determine the legal basis for refugee status determination;
- to understand the admission process;
- to understand resettlement and problems refugees face in their new environment;
- to promote a civil and informed discussion about the topic of migrants and refugees.

To address these issues, the exhibit used what the United Nations High Commission for Refugees refers to as the Eastern Mediterranean route (namely the route the Syrian refugees used to go to Europe in 2015). Participants begin as a Syrian citizen and as war approaches are forced to make decisions. Overtime they have to leave their homes and become IDP (internally displaced persons) or cross the border and become refugees. To facilitate this, at each “stage” of the journey, they are given six choices and a dice. The dice determines their fate. It also adds diversity to the experiences because seldom do two individuals or groups have a similar journey. In addition, they learn that not everyone leaves Syria, and of those who leave Syria, not everyone goes to Germany. There are numerous options at each stage of the journey and refugees interact with not only their existing local conditions, but also in other countries in terms of whether or not

they are welcome as refugees and the openness of borders to refugees. More importantly, some of the refugees may never make it out. From being abducted by the military or the rebels and forced to fight, or stepping on a landmine, or drowning in the Mediterranean Sea, one's journey may end abruptly.

As the exhibit began to evolve, students wrote country profiles and refugee profiles on each of the countries involved. These data enabled the participants to better understand refugee choices during the journey. For instance, high unemployment rates in Greece, Macedonia and Serbia made these countries less attractive for refugees as potential resettlement locations. Also, hostility from the political elite and brutality at the border made Hungary even less of an ideal location for resettlement.

Moreover, the exhibit began to address the issue of migrants versus refugees more directly, particularly in light of 2016 US elections. The original emphasis was on teaching about the 1951 Refugee Convention and the additional 167 Protocol, with particular attention to the legal basis upon which refugee status determination is based. For those who crossed the border (usually in Turkey) and those who entered Austria or Germany illegally, the issue of refugee status determination emerged. In these cases, the participants must apply the law to specific situations. Here, they were asked to determine if a person can be a refugee or not. Here the audience learns about the difficulties that refugees face in re-asserting their identities as well as the challenges that this poses for those making these determinations. Over time, however, it became a bit more troubling because it sounded as though refugees are protected and migrants are not. To remedy that, additional displays were created to make sure the participants understand the differences between refugees and migrants and also understand that migrants are protected under standard Human Rights laws and their dignity cannot be violated.

Finally, the issues of resettlement are addressed in the final part. How are refugees integrated into Germany (or America for that fact)? There are certainly some obstacles: cultural, social, religious, economic, and other problems that refugees encounter. Here, we focus on some local examples where refugee populations have successfully integrated, such as the Hmong population in Wisconsin and Minnesota as well as the Somali refugees in Minnesota.

Model:

In order to assess the exhibit, there was a close examination of the multiple goals of the exhibit, i.e., raise awareness about the refugees, being able to distinguish between refugees and migrants and so on. As such, the survey includes specific questions about each of the stated goals of the exhibit. Second, there was an interest in whether general perceptions regarding attributes of refugees would change. Here we focused not on familiarity with legal concepts, but whether or not participants began to view the refugees less of a threat to their community and country. Finally, a question was used about spatial preferences as they relate to refugees. Essentially, most people want to see refugees resettled, but where: at their home, community, country or abroad? A question used by Amnesty International in a multi-country survey was used to find participants' comfort zone spatially as it related to refugees.

Thirteen different hypotheses were formulated to assess the exhibit. In each case, it is predicted that the participants did indeed experience some change and that moreover the change would be towards more familiarity and more acceptance of refugees. Finally, the acceptance of a geographically closer space for refugees was assessed. The direction of the change would be negative because more familiarity and acceptance was choice number 1 and less familiarity and acceptance was number 5. Therefore, we expected that the numbers for the post-test would be lower than the numbers for the pre-test.

Methodology:

This study utilizes a pre-test post-test experiment using a survey (see appendix 2). The exhibit took place on Nov. 5, 2019 on the campus on the University of Wisconsin Superior. The participants were University students, staff and faculty, local high school students, and community members at large. About 165 people participated in the survey. Surveys were administered before and after participation in the exhibit.

Findings:

The results from a one-tailed t-test paired data are provided in Appendix 3. Results indicate that on every question, there was a statistically significant difference in the means before and after the exhibit. In addition, the means before and after each question indicate that the mean shifted downwards, which is also what was predicted. The evidence supports the notion that this exhibit did indeed changed the opinion of the audience towards refugees. Most importantly, on the question of preference for the location of refugees, after the exhibit, most people accepted having refugees closer to them.

The findings also are interesting regarding a couple of issues. First, the participants began at the lower average score for familiarity with the legal definition of refugees and the refugee experience than whether or not refugees will be beneficial. But despite that, the average shift on the questions of familiarity was one entire point towards greater awareness. On the issue of benefits of the refugees, however, most of the movements in average were less than 0.5 point on the scale. National security still does matter as the highest post-test average was on the question of whether or not refugees will make the US safe. Second, despite their lack of familiarity with the legal definitions, the lowest scores for both the pre-test and post-test were on

two topics: the right to seek refuge from persecution and the role of the US government. The greatest agreement on average were on the issues of right to seek refuge and that US government should do more to help refugees. Interesting that their national security concerns did not affect their views towards the right of refugees to seek safety and demand for more action from the US government.

Conclusion:

The first question asked if this exhibit teaches members of our community about refugees and migrants, and the results were affirmative. The results indicated that the changes in knowledge and attitudes were statistically significant from the pre-test to post-test. The “Refugee for 50 Minutes: From Syria to Germany” contributed to participants’ views about the refugees and garnered greater positive views of them.

This was a very preliminary study. The next step in the process is to collect more data and to examine the evidence to see if it confirms the findings. Rather than add the data to the existing pool, however, each data set will be separated by University semester to ensure the original data does not affect the findings. In 2020, the exhibit will take place in 6 different places (and sometimes outside of the university setting) and with a more divergent audience in terms of age and occupation. It will be interesting to see if future surveys will confirm the findings despite the differences.

Finally, this finding is important because of the times and the emergence of refugees and migrants as a “hot button” issue. Indeed, recent data on global migration and refugees suggests that this topic is far from being resolved and will continue for the near future. In light of that, it would be interesting to engage some of the participants in a discussion about what to do about

the refugees and migrants and examine if there is a qualitative difference in terms of the overall conversation regarding refugees and migrants.

Appendix 1:

PRE-TEST

Please enter your own personal code: _____

Part I: On a scale of 1 to 5 on the right side of the chart, please indicate your preferences:

	1	2	3	4	5	
I am familiar with the legal definition of a refugee.						1 – Extremely familiar 2 – Moderately familiar 3 – Somewhat familiar 4 – Slightly familiar 5 – Not at all familiar
I am familiar with the distinction between a refugee and a migrant.						
I am familiar with why people flee their home countries.						
I am familiar with the kinds of difficulties refugees face during their journey.						
I am familiar with the kinds of obstacles refugees face when they resettle in a new country.						
I am familiar with the legal basis upon which someone can be accepted or denied to stay in a country.						

Part II:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
People should be able to take refuge in other countries to escape from war or persecution.					
Our government should do more to help refugees fleeing war or persecution					
Refugees will benefit our economy.					
Refugees will keep our country safe.					
Refugees will integrate into our nation.					

Part III:

Choose the first one on the list that you find that you find acceptable. If resources were not a factor, would you let people fleeing war or persecution live _____?

1. in your household
2. in your neighborhood
3. in your city, town or village
4. in your country
5. in another country

Part IV:

How many refugees do you **think** are allowed to enter the US every year? _____

How many refugees are **actually** allowed to enter the US every year? _____

How many refugees **should** be allowed to enter the US every year? _____

Part V:

Age: younger than 24 years 24+ years

Status: a. Community member b. University student c. University Staff/faculty
 Gender identity: _____

POST-TEST

Please enter your own personal code: _____

Part I: On a scale of 1 to 5 on the right side of the chart, please indicate your preferences:

	1	2	3	4	5	
I am familiar with the legal definition of a refugee.						1 – Extremely familiar 2 – Moderately familiar 3 – Somewhat familiar 4 – Slightly familiar 5 – Not at all familiar
I am familiar with the distinction between a refugee and a migrant.						
I am familiar with why people flee their home countries.						
I am familiar with the kinds of difficulties refugees face during their journey.						
I am familiar with the kinds of obstacles refugees face when they resettle in a new country.						
I am familiar with the legal basis upon which someone can be accepted or denied to stay in a country.						

Part II:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
People should be able to take refuge in other countries to escape from war or persecution.					
Our government should do more to help refugees fleeing war or persecution					
Refugees will benefit our economy.					
Refugees will keep our country safe.					
Refugees will integrate into our nation.					

Part III:

Choose the first one on the list that you find that you find acceptable. If resources were not a factor, would you let people fleeing war or persecution live _____?

1. in your household
2. in your neighborhood
3. in your city, town or village
4. in your country
5. in another country

APPENDIX 2: FINDINGS

Question	p-value	Mean/Standard Deviation Pre-test	Mean/Standard Deviation Post-test
I am familiar with the legal definition of a refugee.	5.04297E-14	2,844/1.058	1.946/1.262
I am familiar with the distinction between a refugee and a migrant.	6.952E-12	2.813/1.199	1.916/1.328
I am familiar with why people flee their home countries.	8.28E-11	2.620/1.199	1.940/1.324
I am familiar with the kinds of difficulties refugees face during their journey.	6.58E-13	2.844/1.098	1.910/1.352
I am familiar with the kinds of obstacles refugees face when they resettle in a new country.	2.75E-14	2.934/1.147	1.922/1.313
I am familiar with the legal basis upon which someone can be accepted or denied to stay in a country.	1.28E-11	3.096/1.291	2.079/1.220
People should be able to take refuge in other countries to escape from war or persecution.	4.2E-07	1.778/0.795	1.497/0.735
Our government should do more to help refugees fleeing war or persecution	3.1E-10	1.958/0.874	1.605/0.791
Refugees will benefit our economy.	1.38E-09	2.473/0.897	2.066/0.945
Refugees will keep our country safe.	1.36E-14	2.868/0.875	2.299/1.003
Refugees will integrate into our nation.	1.8E-10	2.335/0.826	1.952/0.884
Choose the first one on the list that you find that you find acceptable. If resources were not a factor, would you let people fleeing war or persecution live _____?	1.89E-07	2.689/1.083	2.411/1.070