Stitched Together: Community Engagement for Undergraduate Student Learning in Supporting Refugee Women

Chanjuan Chen, Kent State University, USA
Kendra Lapolla, Kent State University, USA

Abstract

Refugees coming to the United States often find themselves isolated from their new community and struggle to feel at home. By overcoming language barriers and adjusting to a new culture, they slowly become accustomed to a new place. The purpose of this project was to help change the narrative for female refugees by welcoming them into a collaborative fashion workshop with undergraduate students. The project also aimed to build empathy in students and help them understand the women’s plight and circumstances. Once the students understood the refugees’ circumstances, they could become change agents in shifting public perception toward refugees. Students partnered with a nonprofit organization that offered support to refugee women to create sustainable fashion products in a workshop. The goal of the workshop was to provide them with community resources, increased self-confidence, and earning capacity. The qualitative research uses open-ended survey and focus group interviews for understanding the refugee and student participants’ experiences regarding the community-engaged learning project. Our research findings supported the community engagement objective with mutually beneficial exchanges of knowledge and resources, by providing refugee women hope for future livelihood and the students the opportunity to view and understand different perspectives.

Keywords: Community-engaged learning (CEL), refugee, upcycle, design

Introduction

Refugees coming to the United States often find themselves isolated from their new community and struggle to feel at home. By overcoming language barriers and adjusting to a new culture, they slowly become accustomed to a new place. One way to help refugees re-establish their livelihood in a new place is to develop their sense of self-reliance and provide them appropriate skills for potential work opportunities (Legrain, 2017). The purpose of this project was to help change the narrative for female refugees through a community-engaged learning activity. In this case, the refugees were welcomed into a collaborative fashion workshop with undergraduate students. The project also aimed to build empathy in students and help them understand the women’s plight and circumstances. Once the students understood the refugees’ circumstances, they could become change agents in shifting public perception toward refugees by providing them with entry-level sewing skills. During the fashion workshop, students designed upcycled products from donated fabrics and garments and shared their skills with refugee women from a nonprofit organization. The organization and local refugee women were then able to learn construction techniques to create fashion products. The process was mutually beneficial to all participants through the exchange of design, construction knowledge, and resources. Students had to be creative in finding approachable ways to teach the women how to make the upcycled products. This workshop became a dynamic opportunity for community building through the lens of fashion.

Once the project was complete, both students and refugee women were invited to share their experiences in a qualitative, open-ended survey and focus group interviews. All students
responded positively and appreciated collaborating with the refugee women. The refugee women also appreciated the workshop and were grateful to learn new skills that prepared them for future employment. The women not only commented that the students were friendly and easy to work with, but some also expressed that working with students gave them hope for their own futures.

**Literature Review**

**Empowerment of Refugees**

More than 65 million people around the world have been displaced from their homes by war, persecution, extreme violence, and similar factors (Blessinger & Sengupta, 2017). As defined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (USA for UNHCR, 2019), “A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence.” There are many difficulties involved when people are trying to relocate to a new home, include learning the local languages, getting an education, raising children, securing work, accessing services, and other cultural barriers (Núñez, 2014). In fact, only 1% of all adult refugees receive an education, making the prospect of a better life even harder (Blessinger & Sengupta, 2017).

Moreover, the barrier for refugee women becoming employed is greater than for refugee men. A study (Bloch, 2004) revealed that a disparity existed between the employment levels of refugee men and women in ethnic minorities as a whole, suggesting there is an extra “gender penalty” for women refugees. To support women refugees looking for work, governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and businesses provide many different services to help them obtain appropriate skills, job opportunities, as well as the right to work (Legrain, 2017). For example, the organization Refugee Sewing Society offers lessons in sewing, crocheting, knitting, and the English language. These classes are meant to aid in the refugees’ transition to life in the United States (Wiggins, 2018).

In the mission to empower refugee women, the nonprofit organization involved in this research study aims to support refugee women from Bhutan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan by offering bi-weekly sewing classes at a local community center. The nonprofit’s mission is to help refugee women nurture and enhance their talents so that they can earn extra income and develop marketable skills in sewing.

**Community-Engaged Learning (CEL)**

Community-engaged learning may be defined as “the combination of service activities and academic learning objectives, with the intent that the activity will benefit both the recipient and the provider (Hou, 2014, p. 2).” This style of learning benefits students by using their own community as the source and focus of learning, giving them opportunities to apply new skills and practice these skills in novel settings (Melaville et al., 2006). In fact, universities should be open to community needs and to society as a whole. Additionally, faculty members should be reflective researchers in the education process (Hou, 2014). Universities and colleges can find ways to better interact with their surrounding communities and form positive relationships.

Making the connection between learning and the real world is imperative for student success. Through community-engaged practices, students are able to apply abstract ideas to real-world problems while gaining theoretical insights from practice (O’Meara & Jaeger, 2006). Narsavage et al. (2003) conducted a community-based learning exercise in graduate nursing education. The results of their investigation showed that students expanded their comprehension
of their job as an asset to the community. Therefore, CEL can be a useful tool to provide a real-world experience for students and allow them to engage with significant local and global issues through hands-on practice.

While there has not been much research on community engagement related to sustainability for fashion students, the few findings show that these strategies can help students gain knowledge in sustainable fashion. This is helpful, as educating students about sustainability in the fashion industry has increased in importance. For example, Clarke-Sather (2016) developed a study regarding community engagement in motivating fashion merchandising and apparel design students to learn about sustainability. By working with a local Goodwill thrift store, both fashion merchandising and apparel design students showed mastery of sustainability concepts through their coursework.

**Mutually Beneficial Relationships**

As defined by the Carnegie Classification (2018), “Community engagement describes collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.” Mutually beneficial outcomes can include enhanced student learning while simultaneously addressing a community-identified need.

The knowledge exchange should go both ways. Community engagement may be utilized by universities and refugee groups through a variety of format experiences. Studies focus on the mutual benefits enjoyed by universities and refugees when working together. Dicklitch-Nelson (2013) stated that relationships between universities and communities can be mutually beneficial by empowering all parties, including students and community members, all while encouraging sustainability in the community. Butler (2005) challenged the notion that refugees are a “burden” on their host country’s resources by highlighting the mutually beneficial relationships between refugees and students in the United Kingdom. These relationships build on the power of refugee communities and demonstrate substantial advances for both students and refugees.

**Method**

Our goal was to use community engagement methods, such as community meetings, to support refugee women through a fashion workshop and learn from college students on how to reuse apparel and sew profitable products. All student participants in the study were interviewed during the process of creating workshop plans, designing upcycled products, and teaching refugee women. The refugee women were interviewed in a focus group regarding their experience of working with the students during the workshops. Pseudonyms were used in the article for each participant to protect their identities.

**Sample**

After approval from the university’s institutional review board, the community engagement project was introduced to college juniors and seniors in a sustainable apparel design studio course. Additionally, 12 refugee women from a local nonprofit organization were invited to collaborate with the students to create upcycled products to exhibit and sell to the public at a later date. This nonprofit organization supports refugee women by offering bi-weekly sewing classes at a local community center and aims to provide them with community resources, increase self-confidence, and boost their earning capacity.
For this study, the two groups for this target population were: 1) 12 refugee women from the local nonprofit organization who attended this collaborative fashion workshop; 2) 3 junior and 11 senior fashion design students enrolled in a sustainable apparel design studio course at a Midwest university who participated in the project. The 12 refugee women were from Bhutan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan and between the ages of 30 and 68. The 14 students ranged in age from 19 to 24 years old, and the group included 1 man and 13 women.

**Project Outline**

The motivation for using community-engaged learning was to teach refugee women skills that could be used in the future. The workshop was integrated into an existing course project for a sustainable apparel design studio course. This studio course was a three-credit elective course for fashion design students with basic fashion construction and illustration skills as well as an interest in sustainable design. All 14 students enrolled in this course agreed to participate in the study. The project lasted a total of four weeks, and the workshop was scheduled during the third week of the project period. Before the project started, lectures about the overall fashion industry and sustainable practices were given to students by the course instructor. Therefore, the students already had basic knowledge of sustainable practices in the fashion industry.

The students and women refugees met at the local community center where the organization provides their bi-weekly workshops. During the two-and-a-half-hour workshop, students taught the women how to construct garments or accessories. Students communicated their product ideas to the women with the aid of visuals, including design drawings and notes in a step-by-step process. At the end of the workshop, the women had not only learned how to create the specific product from the students, but they also had the opportunity to pick their fabrics and design the surface of their products. At the end of the workshop, student groups worked on the branding for the products by creating tags and logos while the women prepared to sell the products on the organization’s website and during local events. The documentation of all research, inspiration, sketches, teaching plans, tag designs, and on-site teaching were collected by the instructor for the project evaluation (figure 1).

![Figure 1. Examples of students’ and refugee women’ work from the project activities include the students’ initial design sketches (fig. 1a), a crossbody bag created from one refugee woman from the workshop (fig. 1b), and a tag design created by a student group (fig. 1c).](image-url)

*Designing*
The project was divided into three steps: designing, preparation, and workshop. To begin
the project, a concentrated lecture regarding upcycling was given to the students by the course
instructor. In the first week of the project, students did market research, sketching, and sampling
to come up with designs for garments and accessories. These designs were made from donated
denim jeans and saree garments based on the skill sets of the refugee women, as well as to
provide culturally acceptable materials. The students worked in groups of three or four to come
up with design ideas. Designs needed to be simple to sew and sellable to local markets. Some
design examples included aprons, handbags, bracelets, and kimonos made from secondhand
denim jeans and sarees. The instructor and a group of representatives for the refugee women then
selected one design from each student group.

Preparation

On the second week of the project, the students prepared a teaching plan based on the
design selections from the instructor and the refugee representatives. Wagner and Gansemer-
Topf (2005) found that students who learn by teaching others enhanced their knowledge of the
subject matter and inspired them to take initiative. In order to better communicate the design
ideas and provide clear instruction, student groups adopted different methods to prepare their
demonstrations. All students were required by the instructor to test their ideas as a finished
product. Then, they took different directions based on the instructor’s teaching plan. For example, one
group prepared step-by-step instructions while another group video recorded their cutting and
sewing process. By the end of the class, all student groups completed their teaching plans as well
as prepared all materials needed for the workshop.

Workshop

During the third week of the project, the students attended the workshop to work with the
refugee women and teach them how to construct their products. Because the date of the
workshop was set on a weekend, some students were unable to attend due to their personal
schedules. Therefore, the available students and refugee women were divided into five groups by
the researchers with two to three students and one refugee woman in each group.

Data Collection and Analysis

Once the project was completed, students who agreed to participate in this study were
asked about their learning experience in a qualitative, open-ended survey. Responses from 12 of
the 14 students were received and analyzed for learning outcomes and effectiveness of the
project. The survey was also tailored to the students who attended the workshop on the third
week, as well as those who were not able to attend the workshop but participated in the project
during the first two weeks. A sample of the questions asked include, “How do you feel about
teaching those in the community?” and “What have you learned from this upcycling exercise and
workshop?” In order to more fully understand the impact of a community-engaged learning
approaches for refugees, the women who took the workshop were invited to participate in a focus
group interview to share their experiences. Seven of the 12 women participated in the focus
group with audio recording used by the researchers.

All participants’ responses to the questions as well as comments made during the process
of working with each other were transcribed and analyzed using generative data analysis as
outlined by Sleeswijk Visser et al. (2005). This three-phase approach suggests (a) fixating on the
data, (b) searching and being surprised, and (c) finding patterns to create an overall view. First, the researchers fixated on the data by transcribing all audio data recorded from the interviews with the refugee women. Second, the researchers found emerging themes by looking through the transcripts and the student surveys, and similar themes were noted on Post-it Notes. Finally, the researchers discovered patterns in the data by defining reoccurring themes. While using this three-phase approach, Sleeswijk Visser et al. (2005) suggest laying out all information in a physical space using a large wall or board to illustrate emerging themes visually. Printed transcripts from the interviews and survey, as well as the Post-it Notes, were all displayed on a large table during the analysis process. The study did not focus on measuring the quality of each upcycled product; rather, it explored the effectiveness of community-engaged learning for both refugee and student participants.

Findings

The survey and interview data, which included transcripts and field notes, were organized into three main themes: (a) learning new skills benefits refugees, (b) the importance of working in a group for students, and (c) establishing new perspectives for both refugee women and students.

Learning New Skills Benefits Refugees

Analysis of the audio recording indicated that overall, the refugee women responded positively to the workshop. They were grateful to learn new skills to better prepare them for future employment. One woman said, “It helped us to be independent.” Another commented, “I like what I made, it’s a lovely bag and it will be a good thing to sell.” As indicated by Legrain (2017), refugees would benefit from working, and they also desire work as they want to start restoring their lives and become independent again. Maya (35 years old, from Bhutan) explained how participating in the sewing workshop helped her to learn new skills and therefore to be self-sufficient:

I’m very happy with this work. You have taught us good skills. It helped us to be independent. We can make this bracelets and other designs again. You have different groups with different designs, and we can learn about them. This helps us to stay independent. We can sell them, or we can give these as gifts to our family.

Some refugee participants discussed that practice is essential after learning the skill from the workshop. Atiya (40 years old, from Pakistan) commented, “It was a new way to learn about making things. I need to practice a little more before I can sell the bags.” Similarly, Tika, a 45-year-old refugee from Bhutan, explained further:

I was not expecting it to be so wonderful. I was thinking it would be stressful, the students are all very friendly and very young, I cannot believe it. It was a lovely bag. I will have to practice but it will be a nice thing to sell. It was not any mistake from the instruction, it is me. I need to have more confidence.

The Importance of Working in a Group for Students

As part of the project guidelines, students worked in groups throughout the project period. They not only worked in groups with their peers to come up with design ideas and
prepare for the workshop, but they also worked in groups with refugee women to construct their upcycled products. The analysis of the student survey revealed that the student participants valued working with other students as an essential skill to prepare for a future career. Teamwork has become standard procedure in most professional design environments. Professionals in the fashion industry have to work together to solve complicated problems that require multiple viewpoints and knowledge to provide better solutions (Hirsch & McKenna, 2008). For instance, one student said, “Group work is essential in the industry, so this was a good practice. My group worked well together.” It also instilled the value of teamwork and promoted clear communication. Another student said, “Working with other students gave me a different insight.”

Analysis of the data also revealed that students appreciated and learned from each other when working in a group with the refugee women during the workshop. Many commented that this was a new experience to design an upcycled product and teach others to construct them. For example, one student said, “I learned there are so many ways to upcycle and make new beautiful things and also how I can benefit others in the community from my design background.” Another commented, “I learned that upcycling is pretty difficult, but helped us understand how important design can really contribute to creating something that someone else really wants to make and sell,” and “Working with people with different background and level of English proficiency was a great experience.” As suggested by Stark and Lattuca (1997), the curriculum must encourage integration of students’ own thoughts about knowledge, behaviors, and attitudes included in the curriculum plan. Encouraging students to create designs for refugee women to create exemplified the integration of student knowledge and attitudes while also respecting group problem-solving methods and the cultural sensitivities of the refugee women.

Establishing New Perspectives for both Refugee Women and Students

Analysis of the data revealed that the student participants developed empathy through working with the refugee women. As noted by McDonagh and Thomas (2010), empathy can help designers gain insight and shared understanding of their target users. When asked how the students feel about teaching the workshop, a common theme was that the students realized the importance of creating easy and understandable construction processes for well-designed products. One student expressed her eagerness for making the product better by saying “I wished we could have made our design a little less complicated so the women could have finished sewing them.” Similarly, others commented, “If I did it again, I would simplify the group’s design so that it is easier for the women to make,” and “My favorite part was sewing the product and creating the presentation to be easy to understand.”

Other student participants also expressed that the project changed their perspective. One student said, “I learned that it’s not easy to be a teacher.” Another student stated that “I enjoyed this exercise; it allowed us to not only worry about our own work but benefit others as well.” Lastly, a student said, “I taught two women how to use the serger machine and they were so excited to use it.”

When asked about working with the students, the women commented that the students were friendly and easy to work with. A few women expressed that working with students from college gave them hope for the future. Bishnu, a 68-year-old refugee from Bhutan, commented, “Because the students are like my daughters, that’s why it was not hard to learn. They are little girls, that’s why we don’t feel scared or nothing, they are approachable.” As pointed out by Yohani & Larsen (2009), finding hope amidst the barriers and challenges of working with
refugee families is integral to community-based practice. A focus on hope could serve as a basis to begin exploring solutions.

Conclusion

For this research project, students designed upcycled products with donated fabrics and garments from a nonprofit organization and shared their skills with the local community. The nonprofit and local refugee women were able to learn construction techniques that enabled them to create local fashion products. This project culminated in an approach that was mutually beneficial to all parties through the exchange of design, construction knowledge, and resources. Findings indicated the project gave students experience in teamwork as well as new cultures. By interacting with refugee women, the experience increased the students' level of empathy for the women and their difficult circumstances. Additionally, the project afforded refugee women the opportunity to learn skills that enabled them to create local fashion products and gain hope for the future. The collaboration brought together educators, students, and refugee women through fashion and making.

This collaboration also promoted sustainability by creating products locally with secondhand garments to meet the needs of the community, which “cut transportation of goods, create jobs near markets and enable closer control of environmental standards (Fletcher & Grose, 2012).” Future work could be done to explore the growth in teamwork, students’ performance in upcycled designs, and market research, as well as further investigate refugee needs in vocational training and well-being.

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