

Summary – The story in short

A conversation class run by university students and aimed at refugees and asylum seekers; café style with around 20 volunteers and 50 clients. The class included a meal.

Aims/Objectives - Why, Where?

This is a group of students who are keen to explore ways they can help refugees. The class is on a Saturday lunchtime so doesn't conflict with other classes for either students or refugees. The location is a community building near the university, with one large room, a kitchen, and a small area where some students can play with children. The meal is very helpful as some of the client group are destitute.

The Project - How, Who, When?

This project has been set up by the student group in response to the needs of asylum seekers and refugees and aims to combine language learning with the need to make friends and learn about life in UK. For this reason, the students make the classes very informal and ask the clients (refugees and asylum seekers) to say what they want to learn about. Because none of the students have had ESOL training, they mainly get their materials from the internet. The refugees are very multi level so you have people with basic literacy needs, pre-entry English to doctors and graduates who double up as volunteers in the class. Everyone sits around tables with a variety of worksheets, though there is a set subject (this week it is 'directions'). The better able people are doing map reading and discussing equivalent getting lost and asking directions in their own countries. At some of the other tables there are maps but it's hard to communicate unless an interpreter can be found.

The meal and cups of tea are a brilliant part of everything. Volunteer refugees are cooking rice and one meat dish (halal), one veggie.

Results/Evaluation

This is a great atmosphere but the lack of training and the random student-led nature of the lessons mean that not too much actual learning goes on especially at some tables. However, maybe that is not the main point!

Sustainability

This project depends on the students and as such it tends to die for several months over the summer. They also need to fundraise for the meals and cost of hall, however, they are managing well so far.

Lessons Learnt

I discussed the class with the leaders and they told me the problems about finding materials and working with lower levels. We did a training session which was very helpful, so they said, and they are trying to find new ways of working with lower levels. Also, the need for signposting

was identified, as well as the need to get more plugged into other services in Leeds.

Influencing agenda

Timetables, day of week, the attractiveness of the students giving the class (mainly female – refugees were nearly all male!), good ways that tables can be adjusted for layout purposes.

International links

They come from scores of countries, Afghanistan, Iran, Many places in Africa, middle east etc etc.