

Yunited Voicez: Evaluation

Refugee Youth Media Project 2009

A ChangeMakers Refugee Forum project in collaboration with Wellington Refugees As Survivors

Introduction

We developed a youth media project which aimed to build the skills and confidence of refugee-background youth; give them a way to express themselves and share a little of who they are.

Yunited Voicez was an overwhelming positive project for the young people and volunteers involved, and for our organisations. It was, however, hard work and we wouldn't necessarily do things the same way if we were to do them over.

We absolutely think that the time and energy was worth it and encourage any other youth or community organisation to tackle a similar project if they feel able. This document is intended as background reading for anyone intending to take on a similar project with refugee-background youth.

Our learning came from our experiences as project coordinators, from formal and informal evaluations with the volunteers we worked with and with the young people who completed the project. You can see the wonderful content the young people produced, including photos, short films and writing on yunitedvoicez.tumblr.com.

We're happy to answer any questions at all, please feel free to contact us:

Tessa Johnstone
tessa@crf.org.nz
ChangeMakers Refugee Forum

Samson Sahele
samson@wnras.org.nz
Wellington Refugees As Survivors



Yunited Voicez 2009 (left to right): Tessa, Angela, Makuei, Margaret, Reza, Abdalla, Abubakar and Samson

About Us



ChangeMakers Refugee Forum (CRF)

We are a refugee-based non-government organisation that is governed by former refugees. We bring together 13 refugee-background communities in the Wellington region. We are capacity builders, collaborators, brokers and advocates.

www.crf.org.nz



Refugees as Survivors (Wellington RAS)

Wellington's Refugees as Survivors provides refugees and migrants who have experience of torture and trauma with access to appropriate mental health services, in order to lessen the negative impact of these events on their lives and therefore assist in their resettlement and adjustment within New Zealand.

www.wellington-ras.org.nz

Project Outline

The overall aim of the project was to build the skills and confidence of refugee-background youth, using media and journalism as a tool.

We developed a 20-week programme which covered news and journalism basics, photography, film-making, writing, radio, and blogging, almost all of which was delivered with the support of skilled volunteers from the media industry.

For three hours each week, we gathered the group of young people, taught them the basics and then let them use the skills to tell the stories they wanted. The project was structured so we spent four weeks at a time learning about and creating stories using something in particular, for example, radio for four weeks, or TV for four weeks.

We wanted to give them a way to express themselves; create stories which would give a fuller picture of what refugee-background youth's lives were really like; and give the young people a look at journalism basics so they might consider it as a career.

We used over 20 volunteers (different volunteers for each medium), and resources borrowed from different organisations – a local IT firm for computer labs, a community radio station, and video cameras borrowed from the volunteers.

While the volunteers provided the equipment and the knowledge, it was our job as coordinators to shepherd the young people. Getting them to the right place at the right time, making sure they were well-fed and were able to get to the venue, and providing some consistency throughout the project, often working with them on personal issues (e.g. housing, mental health or family issues) outside the scope of the project.

While we set out with certain aims, and certainly achieved many, we achieved some unexpected outcomes as well.

Our key outcomes were:

- ■ ■ A group of seven, more confident, refugee-background young people who now have six new friends and are better connected to each other, and to organisations which can support them in other areas of their lives.
- ■ ■ A group of young people who each produced at least one piece of polished writing, a few really good photos, a radio feature, a group radio music show, a group short film and a blog.
- ■ ■ A group of young people who have greater media literacy, and some basic media skills in radio, film, photography, writing, social networking and blogging.
- ■ ■ The group has an ongoing means to express themselves online.



“Dear Yunited Voicez, I really appreciate being part of this team, you guys are so awesome in many ways. I thank you all from the bottom of my heart and I believe this is not the end of us even as this course is over. I will always have you as brothers and sisters in my heart. A big thank you to you all, well done!!”

- Yunited Voicez participant, written on the back of a postcard for a closing activity with the youth and project coordinators

- ❑❑ A group of volunteers – who work in the media industry – who have a better understanding of the lives of refugee-background youth, and of the issues that refugee communities face. The volunteers will potentially now report on refugee community issues, and with a better educated perspective.
- ❑❑ A body of interesting, rich creative work which the young people produced which celebrates their journeys, their interests and their aspirations and can be utilised to further promote understanding in the host community of refugee-background youth.
- ❑❑ An opportunity for a group of youth from refugee-background communities to say whatever they wanted, how they wanted.

The young people involved

Our organisations work with a wide range of refugee-background communities, so our group was diverse – we had members of the Sudanese, Afghan, Somali and Burmese community involved.

We capped the number of young people we could have on the project at 14, expecting to get about 10. Numbers went up and down for the first 10 weeks, between six and 12 young people, until the second half of the project, when it settled down to seven young people who regularly attended workshops.

Of the seven young people, three were still in high school, and of the other four, only one was in part-time study, and only two had part-time work. They were aged between 16 and 24.

The time they had been settled in New Zealand varied, ranging from 13 years to one year.

Their family and community support also varied – a couple were very cut off from their communities; and one or two were very involved with their communities, with great responsibilities to their family.

Something they had in common was that they were all somewhat isolated socially and were very keen to make new friends, and were also very motivated and eager learners.

Volunteers

We had over 20 volunteers for the project, sourced by word of mouth (we were lucky to already have a few media contacts to get us started). They worked for newspapers and magazines, radio stations, government departments, design companies or were freelancers. They ranged in age from 20 to 65, and most were from the host community, though we sourced a few from refugee-background communities.

The volunteers helped us develop the workshop plans – we felt it was important they did this with us so they knew what was going on and had ownership, and also so they could let us know what was and wasn't practical in delivering it, especially in regards to the resources available.

The volunteers' role in the workshops was to sometimes take an activity – for example, provide an introduction to the medium, eg. How we can use photography to tell stories, different styles of writing. When it came down to small group or individual work, volunteers worked to make sure a group completed a task, and one-on-one talking through ideas.



"I found that the young people I met at the workshops didn't approach life as victims but rather as regular teenagers using their background and wisdom to improve their personal circumstances." - Volunteer

We noticed that although the volunteers had a lot of valuable technical knowledge to impart, it was more basic stuff that meant a lot to the young people – talking with and getting to know new people, having the volunteers assure them that their stories were of value, and being encouraged to learn new skills.

The stories they told

The stories that the young people produced were very diverse. They ranged from 'My Life in New Zealand so far' - type stories, covering the journey, the culture shock and the future; to why short people can still be good rugby players, the so-called 'smacking' law, and profiles of hip hop artists in Wellington.

We tried to give them as much freedom as possible in deciding on the stories they wanted to tell; and the initial battle was actually convincing them they had good ideas and that their histories and opinions were of value.

Many people assumed that the majority of stories would be about the refugee or resettlement experience, but we learned during the project that this was not the case. The refugee and resettlement experience is not necessarily an identity; rather, it's everything else that defines them – their friends, family, the sports they play, the music they listen to, and their opinions about the world.



What worked really well

- ❑ The young people getting to know each other, and turning up because of each other, not for the workshop.
- ❑ Practical, hands-on activities; and only giving as much theory as necessary to get stuck in.
- ❑ The radio part – teaching them to use quite hi-tech equipment.
- ❑ Photography – they loved looking at other people's pictures, and loved going on a photo scavenger hunt – wish we'd spent more time on this!
- ❑ Challenging them to interview strangers – scary, but really good for their confidence and sense of professionalism.
- ❑ Getting them to write a 'Code of Conduct' together, which they then stapled into their notebooks. They seemed to take it seriously, which meant that for the most part, they turned up on time and were focused on the workshop.
- ❑ Having ESOL tutors for the writing sessions so they could correct some of their consistent English language mistakes – the young people who needed the help definitely appreciated it.
- ❑ Asking their opinion about different photos and stories and having group discussions about them.

"Wonderful, rewarding, well-organised, low stress. Great for Wellington Access Radio as we've got two new programme makers out of it and hopefully raised our station's profile among refugee youth." - Volunteer, Wellington Access Radio

- ❑ 'Assigning' volunteers to a certain person or group, so the volunteer had a clear role.
- ❑ Volunteers who came for more than three sessions and were able to build up relationships with the young people.
- ❑ Getting the young people to reflect on how 'refugees' and youth are portrayed in the media.
- ❑ Using social networking, and focusing on 'media' in a broad sense – it being about their voice, rather than about journalism.
- ❑ Celebrating and recognising their achievements at the end, and exhibiting the work for family and friends.

What didn't work so well

- ❑ Technology – there were quite a few hiccups with the online component because the computer labs we were using weren't quite fast/hi-tech enough.
- ❑ Some of the more 'conceptual' social networking stuff, e.g. Twitter. One young person involved signed up, had a look around, then immediately deleted his account, saying that it was 'pointless'. We couldn't disagree.
- ❑ Finding funding – although we had some encouraging responses from a couple of funders, in the end we didn't secure any extra money for the project. It definitely made it a bit harder than it should have been!
- ❑ The writing part of the project was probably the hardest because a. it required a lot of concentration and quiet time on their own and b. they were all working with English as a second language, which made the task quite challenging for them.
- ❑ Trying to teach journalism and news concepts, as opposed to just teaching them how to use the media (e.g. a dictaphone or a camera) and letting them do what they wanted, whether that be in traditional news style or guerilla-style reality doco!
- ❑ Volunteers hovering over young people, not sure what their role was and when to help and when to step back. Some volunteer training could have helped this.
- ❑ Transport for those coming in from Upper Hutt (there were four of them travelling an hour each way). Although we reimbursed them for the costs, they needed to have the money for one way until we could reimburse them. We initially only wanted to include people who lived in Wellington city, but were then reluctant to exclude people who wanted to and reckoned they could manage the trip. We could have considered shifting the project the Hutt, and car-pooling those based in town.

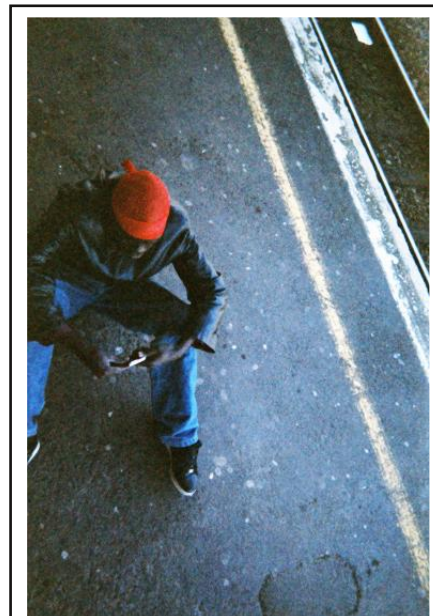


"I feel I have lost things that are important to me, because of these experiences. I've lost happiness, values, and people to spend time with." - Margaret, writing sessions, writing of coming to New Zealand

"I felt I had worth and I became an expert in my little garage, and raised my pocket money to a certain level. By the end of every month, I was almost earning as much as my Uncle who worked full time with the UNHCR." - Abdalla, writing sessions, on life at Kakuma Camp

Risks and limits

- ❑ Not being well-connected to other youth and community organisations and being unable to refer young people on when they have problems outside the scope of the project.
- ❑ The end – young people not moving on to other activities which continue to build on their confidence, and going back to isolation. The hardest question we got at the closing session was 'what happens next'?
- ❑ Funding – not having funding, nor a partner who can support you, makes things much harder than they need to be!
- ❑ Language – as this project is run in a community context, there is no guarantee of where the young people will be at with their language or education. The project needs to be flexible enough to cater for everyone's needs. Ideally there would also be some money available for interpreting when needed, and more ESOL support.
- ❑ Attendance and motivation – we were lucky to have a group of seven committed young people, but the fact is they have a lot going on in their lives – school, work, family, church, friends etc. - and you have to work hard to make it a priority for them. And sometimes, even if all those involved are feeling great about the project, you just get unlucky and have bad attendance! Just keep going. Get to know the young people and find out what motivates them, and what might be stopping them from committing 100 percent.



"Refugee faces aren't as invisible to me on the streets as they once were. I'm much more aware of our status as a multicultural nation." - Volunteer

Photo by Abdalla and friend

Some ideas

We developed the project to the best of our abilities, but inevitably there was learning to be had. In retrospect, we may have designed the project slightly differently. The following are some 'better' ideas than our originals:

Intensive holiday workshops

Organising weekly workshops – venue, attendance, volunteers, food, transport, as well as the workshop itself – is time-consuming and sometimes frustrating. I think if we had organised a series of intensive one-week workshops during the school holiday and semester breaks, we might have achieved the same result. In saying that, the young people we had involved in our project seemed to very much appreciate having something to come to every week, a routine which could not have been achieved with a series of intensive workshops. But if we had holiday workshops, it would have opened the project up to other people who were unable to attend during term time. Another issue with this would be volunteer time, as many have full-time jobs or families. Journalism students?

Partnering

I would highly recommend partnering with someone who has the resources needed: eg. Computers with hi-speed internet, dictaphones, cameras. Although we made some attempt to do this before the project started, it didn't work out. If we were to do it again we would approach journalism schools, and well-equipped community centres. If a willing partner could be found it would solve many logistical problems!

Organising workshops around story themes

As many struggled with story ideas, and as different people got excited about different mediums; I would consider running workshops around story themes instead of around mediums. There was little patience for learning theory before getting stuck in, so instead we would just pair up volunteers with young people and get them to teach them as they're developing the stories.

For example, you might have a workshop theme of 'Journeys', and have both writing and radio available to use. The young person could decide what angle they want to take, and they could then work with a volunteer quite intensively to create something. Other themes might be: 'Music', 'Hopes and Dreams', 'Family', 'School', 'Money', 'Who am I?'.

Volunteer briefings

Although we held one initial volunteer meeting before workshop development, and then informally covered some key stuff before the workshops, the volunteers could have benefited from a briefing together, immediately before the workshops began. Many were interested in the refugee experience and were keen to know about the young people who were involved, ie. where they were from, how long they had been in New Zealand; and wanted a bit more clarification on their role in the workshops.

Less time on one medium

If you do go down the track of concentrating on one medium for a series of workshops, limit it to three workshops. Four workshops, though it provided us with enough time to complete tasks, was a bit much to ask concentration-wise. By the fourth session, many were bored and just wanted to move on to the next thing.

One password

One password for all participants for the whole project! The amount of time we spent during the online sessions figuring out passwords, or which email address they had used as a login, was amazing! Avoid it if you can – write down which email addresses they use, and get them all to use the same password for their blogs etc.



"I asked one of the boys if he was nervous and he said 'Why should I be nervous? I'm standing on a peaceful street in a peaceful country.' I certainly won't forget that in a hurry." - Volunteer

Photo by Elly

Good luck!