

Feeling By Doing...



Imagine yourself faced with the task of having to tell other people how another group of people might feel. Seems easy? Then imagine yourself faced with the same task, however this time the feelings you have to tell others about are feelings so distant from anything you might normally experience. This is actually the task, which more than our 30 instructors in the project Young Refugees face on an average period of one weekend a month.

What is Young Refugees?

Young Refugees is a project that aims to make young people (aged 12 - 18 years) aware of what kind of emotional experiences refugees might have encountered during their escape. **Young Refugees** is a live role-play game that goes on continuously for about 24 hours. It consists of more than 14 different sequences set within one big theatrical frame. The main "goal" of the game is to get from country "A" - in our case Somalia - to country "B" - Denmark - where the participants should try to get asylum.

Sounds easy? Well... It's not!

To make the game as realistic as possible, the 24 hours are filled with annoying people (bureaucratic office clerks, rough border patrols etc.) and challenging scenarios. Imagine yourself in a situation, where an arrogant officer at the border burns the papers you have worked hard to get in a previous sequence. How would you react? Would you protest, knowing that this man is in a position to decide the destiny of your character?

By acting out situations like these with the participants they themselves get to feel the anger, frustration, humiliation and hopelessness refugees might feel and thereby gain a better understanding of refugees' often traumatising escapes.

Buying the Game

The participants in the game are mainly young people from public or boarding schools. Sometimes the schools contact us to give the pupils an extraordinary experience. Sometimes they contact us because they are working on the theme of refugees or related topics. In addition, we have had participants from the scouts, from trade union branches etc. We have no restrictions on who we come to, though it sometimes takes some minor changes in the game to adapt it for the needs of a

particular group.

As we – the instructors – work for the Red Cross we charge our "customers" only for our transport. As the maker of the game has the copyright on the material, the customer has to buy the book describing **Young Refugees**. This is an inexpensive but very important part of the background information needed in the customer's preparation of the game.

Logistics

To make everything work out as we want it to, many things have to be coordinated, including: the routes the participants shall take; locations for the sequences; copying materials; amount of food needed; transporting instructors and briefing teachers.

In an average game we involve:

- 50 participants (school children, scouts...)
- 4 teachers
- 2 gamemasters
- 14 trained instructors

The participants are split into groups of 6 and for the rest of the game they work together as a family, helping each other no matter what happens to them.

The teachers are not actually in the game. Their primary role is "behind the scenes". They help drive us around, prepare food for us and the participants and help us look after participants who – for some reason (physical or emotional) – have decided not to continue in the game.

The Plan

To help instructors and teachers keep track of the game they are all given a personal timetable. This timetable is a plan of the game broken down into as little as 15 minutes intervals. This makes sure that everybody always knows when to be where and with whom.



by Michael Schollert



Here is an example:

Time	Sequence	Allan	Brian	Christina	Diana	Eric
13.00	Introduction	Family lecture	Geography lecture	Introduction		Political lecture
14.00	Office sequence	Office 3	Customs office	Office 9	Office 3	Customs office
16.15	First escape		Guide		Black marketeer	
17.30	Check Point (border)	Guard		Guard		Guard
18.15	Refugee Camp	Helper	Food delivery	Nurse		Chief of camp

How We Do It

Because all instructors and gamemasters are volunteers from the Danish Red Cross Youth and we therefore have to take into account that people work or go to school, a game is normally run during a weekend. The participants arrive at our starting point Saturday at 1.00 pm. There they are given the rules of the role-play. During this session we stress several times that this role play is acting. There is no violence, no real hatred - just **acting!** It is **not** personal – it is **our** role against **their** role. At the same time they are given four short lectures about Somalia – background information needed for the game - and are then divided into their new families where they get new identities, passports and a “case” which explains why they want to get out of Somalia.

The next 21 hours we - the instructors - do everything possible to induce stress, to frustrate them, to irritate them, to give them hope - and then take it away from them again... All of this is done to provoke emotions within the participants that they are not used to.

"How dare you?"...

... you might ask us! Admitted! It is a dangerous area to work in. We work with people, we provoke them, we do not give them much food, they do not get much sleep, they do not know what is happening next and they experience a lot of physical and emotional stress.

To make sure that the participants are alright and that we do not "lose" anybody by wearing them out physically or getting too close to them emotionally, an instructor playing one role or another constantly follows them. The instructors blend in as bureaucratic office personnel, corrupt "helpers", black marketeers, nice refugee camp personnel, a delegation from the UN and the Danish police. All of these roles are a natural part in different sequences. And they are all roles our instructors are trained to be able to fulfil. While playing these roles they are very aware of the physical and emotional state of the participants" Can we go further?" "Has he/she had enough?" "Do they understand what is going on?"

When a family – according to the timetable – is passed on from one instructor in one sequence to another instructor

in the following sequence, information concerning the family's “state” is passed on as well. That way everybody in direct contact with the participants always knows who they have to look after and is aware of the family dynamics.

Educating Instructors

Our instructors – who are not necessarily members of the Red Cross before they start – form a group of people with nothing else in common but the eagerness to do something different and in the same breath give others a learning experience beyond their expectations. To prepare them for the game, the instructors are taught the basics of youth psychology, pedagogical methods, theatrical means, how to solve conflicts, communication skills and body language - amongst many other things.

This is done during a very concentrated weekend, prior to their first game. Besides the theoretical part of the course they have to go through parts of the game – as participants – themselves. This way we make sure they get a good idea of what it is they are imposing on others.

After the course they are supervised during (at least) two role plays. This is done to help them feel safe in their work, knowing there is an experienced instructor there to guide them.

The course that the instructors attend is made and run by experienced instructors. These instructors are volunteers who have been in the project for years and who have participated in several games recently. The teaching instructors are hand-picked by the **Young Refugees'** coordination group to make sure the information the new instructors get is tested, well-founded and as up-to-date as possible. In addition to this, the teaching instructors are able to answer almost every possible question concerning the game and the means we use.

All the materials we use in the course – such as “How to” papers, guidelines for playing a role, how to prepare a sequence etc. – are made by ourselves. This way we make sure that the new instructors are given relevant and useful information - information they can use the moment they are “in the field”.



Traumas?

At the end of every game we have one of the most important parts of the game: the evaluation – or debriefing as you might call it.

To make sure nobody leaves the game without knowing why we did as we did and to make sure no psychological damage is done, we talk about the whole game, about the instructors' roles, about the participants' reactions and the feelings they are left with. We urge them to talk about what they experienced during the game. We get them to write the three most important feelings they had throughout the game and we then use that as a starting point for telling them "Why we chose the method we did!"

Before we begin what we call the big evaluation, the participants get to eat real breakfast in their family groups. They are no longer in their roles and they get to tell exactly what they want about their experiences. With them is an instructor who listens to them and "guides" them to tell more to make sure we "take the top off" of what they have done. During this time the instructor subtly turns the conversation to be about the ten - then the three - most important feelings they had. When all the families have written this down we begin the evaluation that involves all the participants. We go through every sequence in the game explaining why we did as we did - and then how it relates to real life!

This big evaluation lasts for about 1/2 hours - and this is usually the part that leaves the participants upset about the refugee situation. We are used to seeing pictures of refugees (almost to the point where we do not pay them any attention any more), hearing about them and we are aware of the fact that they are a part of the world we live in. But suddenly they are not just faces or "somebody". Suddenly the participants get a very real indication of how they (the refugees) might feel - and that lifts the refugees from being "somebody" to being "human beings in distress". A very important change in the participants attitude towards and concept of refugees.

Though they are tired when we reach Sunday we know from the looks on their faces that we have made a difference. To these participants the term "refugee" will never be the same.

Aftermath

After a while we often get feedback from the participants or from their teachers. Summing up this feedback, we are told that the participants have obtained a more nuanced attitude in their relation to other people. This new attitude is often reflected in the way they participate in discussions concerning refugees, tolerance in society and on the matter of being different in general.

Following this it is very important for us to stress that we do *not* tell people what to think! We merely give them experiences that gives them the opportunity to see themselves and the people they normally are within situations so fundamentally different – yet safe – from what they are used to. By doing this we hopefully give them a chance to broaden their minds.

Some Background Information

- *Young Refugees* is made by Steen Cnops Rasmussen - a Danish master of music and drama.
- The development started in 1991 and is based on interviews with, and real live scenarios told by, refugees seeking asylum in Denmark. The interviews were done by Steen who paid special attention to the asylum seekers from the eastern part of Africa.
- *Young Refugees* has been run by the Danish Red Cross Youth since 1994.
- Danish instructors have helped establish the project in Norway (1997) and in Iceland (1999) where local Red Cross members are running it.

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