

No Place for Hate® Activity Library

Using Art to Explore the Refugee Experience

Lesson Plan and Overview

Lesson Plan: We Were Strangers Too: Learning about Refugees through Art

Today's world is currently experiencing the worst refugee crisis since World War II. More than 65 million people have been forced from their homes and one in every 122 people worldwide is currently a refugee, internally displaced, or seeking asylum. Roughly 11 million people from Syria have left their homes in search of safety and assistance since the country's civil war began in 2011. The refugees have been fleeing civil war, persecution and terror—traveling at great lengths and great risk to survive. Instead of being met with compassion and open arms, many of today's refugees have encountered closed doors and hateful rhetoric. Understanding the important role of art to influence hearts and minds, ADL partnered with the Creative Action Network, a network of over 10,000 artists worldwide, to launch the *We Were Strangers Too* campaign. Artists use their talents to tell stories of refugees from around the world and across time.

Grade Level

Grades 6–8

Learning Objectives

- Students will learn about the current refugee crisis.
- Students will develop an understanding of and empathy for the refugee experience by reflecting on original art.
- Students will explore their thoughts and feelings about being a stranger in a new place and/or welcoming others who are considered to be a "stranger."

Materials Needed

- All or a selection of 17 pieces of art from *We Were Strangers Too* campaign (to be printed and/or projected). These can be found in the [PDF lesson plan](#).
- [10 Ways Youth Can Engage in Activism](#) (copies for students)

Words You Might Use

Discrimination: The denial of justice, resources and fair treatment of individuals and groups (often based on social identity), through employment, education, housing, banking, political rights, etc. Discrimination is an action that can follow prejudicial thinking.

Discrimination can be legally sanctioned (de jure) or can exist despite nondiscrimination laws or policies in place (de facto).

Inclusion: An environment and commitment to support, represent and embrace diverse social groups and identities; an environment where all people feel they belong.

Refugee: Someone who flees persecution, conflict or war.

Core Activity

First, talk with students about what it means to be a refugee and provide some background about the current refugee crisis. Explain that the word refugee means “someone who flees persecution (hostility and ill-treatment, especially because of race or political or religious beliefs), conflict or war.” Explain that the experience of being a refugee typically involves three parts: (1) forced abandonment of one’s home/country due to war, persecution, poverty, injustice and/or genocide, (2) the scary and dangerous journey to a new homeland, often having to rely on the generosity and compassion of strangers and (3) the fear, hope and anticipation of moving to a new place. Share the following information about the current refugee crisis:

- With 65 million people forcibly displaced from their homes, today the world faces the worst refugee crisis since World War II. Around the world, one in every 122 people is currently a refugee, internally displaced, or seeking asylum. There are refugees fleeing Syria, Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, Nigeria and dozens of other countries.
- In Syria specifically, millions of refugees have left their homes in search of safety and assistance since the country’s civil war began in 2011. The refugees have been fleeing civil war, persecution and terror—traveling at great lengths and great risk to survive. According to the U.N., 250,000 people have been killed, more than 6.5 million Syrians have been displaced by the war and 13.5 million people are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria. Hundreds of thousands have also made their way to Europe, often through a dangerous boat trip on the Mediterranean from Turkey to Greece, which has resulted in thousands of deaths.
- In 2015, international headlines carried a heartbreaking image of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi’s lifeless body lying face down in the waves. He drowned as his family desperately attempted to flee extreme violence in Syria. At least in part stirred to action by the heartbreaking photo, international leaders began announcing that their countries would take in more refugees.

(There is more information in the lesson plan or you can consult the regularly updated [International Rescue Committee](#), if time permits.)

Next, show students original art that illustrates the refugee crisis. Explain that ADL partnered with the Creative Action Network to launch a campaign called *We Were Strangers Too*, intended to motivate artists worldwide to create art that tells the story of refugees and the refugee crisis. In doing so, they acknowledged the important role imagery plays

in influencing hearts and minds. Create an art gallery of some or all of the 17 pieces of art (use images that are in the [lesson plan PDF](#)) or do a slide show of them projecting the art on the wall/screen. As students move around the room looking at the pictures or watching the projection, have them jot down responses to the following questions:

- *What's going on in this picture?*
- *What is the message of the picture? What is the artist trying to say?*
- *If you could ask the artist a question, what would you ask?*
- *What words or phrases come to mind?*

After viewing all of the images, have students choose one that is particularly meaningful or compelling to them. Have students stand next to the image and discuss it with others standing next to the one they chose, each sharing a few words or phrases about why it's meaningful to them. If time permits, reconvene the students and ask some to share their thoughts, feelings and observations from looking at the prints.

Finally, explain to students that part of the refugee experience is moving to a new and unfamiliar place and/or homeland. Engage students in a self-reflection activity to explore when they have felt like a "stranger" (e.g. new student in school, new to club or program, feeling different in some way) and other times when they welcomed someone who might be considered to be a "stranger." Have students turn and talk with a partner by responding to the following questions:

- *Did you ever feel like a stranger and if so, what was that like for you?*
- *What feelings did you have about being in a new place, space or group?*
- *Did you ever help someone feel welcome who would be considered a "stranger?"*
- *What did you do and how did you feel?*

Have students share both ways and then have a class discussion with students sharing what they discussed in their pairs. As an optional follow-up, have students turn their thoughts/feelings about being a stranger or welcoming someone into a short letter, poem or drawing.

Optional Follow-Up/ Going Further

Note: These additional activities can be done as follow-ups to the core activity and they can also serve as an additional NPFH activity if the core activity is completed first.

- Have students create poems out of the notes they took while looking at the images. They can review their notes and pull out 5-10 words/phrases, putting each on separate notecards or post-it notes that best capture their thoughts and feelings about the refugee crisis. Students can then rearrange the words/phrases as needed and add in a few additional words (if needed) to create a poem. Hang the poems around the school in common spaces and/or the school's website.
- Engage in an all-school read with the book *Refugee* which tells the story of three young people who are refugees; although separated by continents and decades, connections tie their stories together. Use [ADL's educator discussion guide](#) to have a discussion with students and implement at least one of the suggested extension activities. There is also a parent/family discussion guide which can be sent home to families (see below).
- Have all students create their own artwork that expresses their thoughts, feelings and perspective about the refugee crisis and/or the theme of being a stranger/welcoming a stranger. Students can use the *We Were Strangers Too* artwork (or real photos of the refugee crisis) as inspiration or they can create something completely new and different. Have them think broadly about what kind of artwork they want to create, whether it's a piece of visual art (drawing, photography, painting, collage, sculpture, graphic art) or performing art (music, song, dance, theater, spoken word, performance art). After students have completed their artwork, organize an art opening where parents and community members are invited to experience the artwork. You can also take photos or make a videos of each piece of art and create an online gallery (or video) of their work.
- With students, explore possible ideas for doing something about the refugee crisis and potential areas of advocacy or activism. Engage in a brainstorming session to get many ideas on the table and then refine the list and decide ideas that are do-able: at a class, school or community. Possible ideas could include a letter writing campaign to encourage elected officials to increase aid, holding a school/community education forum, find out what local or national organizations serving refugees may need assistance with, do a fundraiser and donate the funds to one of these organizations, etc. Use ADL's resource [10 Ways Youth Can Engage in Activism](#) to further explore ideas and then work on an action plan to bring their ideas to fruition.

Home Connection

Share ADL's Table Talk [Refugees, Reactions and World Response](#) with families.

If you do an all-school read on *Refugee* by Alan Gratz, you can provide families with ADL's [parent/family discussion guide](#) that accompanies the book.

How Activity Meets NPFH Requirements

All students will engage in discussions about what it means to be a refugee and will build understanding and empathy for people who are refugees through the use of art. Students will also explore and discuss what it means to be a “stranger” and the ways in which we can be welcoming to those who are new to a particular place, space or group.

Young people are powerful agents for change.

Our country has a long history of youth-led movements that brought about significant social change. Young people have advocated for child labor laws, voting rights, civil rights, school desegregation, immigration reform and LGBT rights. Through their actions, the world has changed. Because young people often have the desire, energy and idealism to do something about the injustice they see in the world, they are powerful agents for change.

Our work in education helps students examine implicit and overt forms of bias and discrimination and as a result, educators often feel a responsibility to provide students with the structure, opportunity and tools to do something about the injustice they see in the world. Transforming students' feelings of anger, sadness and hopelessness into concrete actions that can make the world better is a vital teaching opportunity. Voting is one way to get your voice heard but there are a myriad of ways young people can make a difference.

Below are ideas for bringing social activism into the classroom and outside of the school walls. These are lifelong skills and attitudes that teach students about citizenship and that there is something you can do when faced with injustice. The strategies can be acted upon individually, organized together as a group and young people can join with a larger effort that is taking place locally or nationally. The tactics also bring opportunities for students to read, write, research, think critically and talk with each other.

1. Educate others

As students learn about an issue they care about, their natural instinct is to share their new knowledge and insight with others. Encourage this by providing live and online opportunities for them to teach others, including their classmates, younger students and adults in their lives. This can include school assemblies, community forums, teach-ins, peer education programs and social media forums. Include opportunities to share the information in interesting ways (written, art, theatre, etc.) and they should also give other students the chance to explore their own thoughts and feelings about the topics. Youth who want to know more may be more likely to learn from another young person.

2. Advocate for legislation

Change comes about in a variety of ways and one of these is through legislative change. For example, the primary advocates for the DREAM Act have been young people known as the DREAMers, who have a personal investment in the issue. With your students, provide opportunities for them to learn about the history and impact of legislative change like the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Help them analyze proposed legislation in relation to their goals and assess the extent to which it will have an impact. They can study research that examines the extent to which legislation impacted injustice. Have students push for legislation by working with other groups with similar goals, building coalitions and writing letters to their legislators to advocate for specific local, state and federal laws.

3. Run for office

Student government provides a chance for students to have a positive impact in their school and learn about how government works on a small scale. It gives youth the experience to reflect on and consolidate their own positions on important school issues, learn how to communicate those positions, build relationships with others and become a good listener in understanding constituent (i.e. other students) needs. It is also good practice for the future in getting involved in politics. Elected positions are not the only way to get involved; students can also become involved in groups like the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), peer training or other task forces that are working to improve their school.

4. Demonstrate

Marching in the streets enables students to express themselves while meeting and connecting with other people who feel passionate about the same issues. Demonstrations and protests can be uplifting and empowering and can help students feel like they are part of a larger movement. In preparing to attend a demonstration or protest, have students consider what their goals are in attending the event and think through what message they want to convey. They can create posters, prepare songs or chants and practice symbolism that conveys their thoughts and feelings. They should consider whether they want to go individually or organize a group of students from their school to go together, make transportation arrangements and ensure that safety concerns are addressed.

5. Create a public awareness campaign that includes social media

There are many ways to develop or participate in a public awareness campaign. Educating people about an issue in order to inspire change can take place in school, in the community and online. Creating signs and posters using art and photography can be very effective as can videos and live speeches; these are all useful skills that young people can learn. In recent years, the use of social media to raise public awareness has been largely driven by young people and is a useful vehicle for raising issues and effecting change. The use of blogs, social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram and Tumblr, videos, memes and online petitions are just a few examples of how words travel fast online and can incite quick and effective action.

6. Do a survey about the issue and share the results

Understanding what people think and why is helpful in bringing about social change. Students can learn more about public opinions on issues by participating in surveys themselves and also reading about them. They can also create their own surveys. Using paper surveys or online surveys, students can gain insight into how other students in their school or the larger community feel about an issue. This is useful in organizing others and addressing their concerns and needs; at the same time it builds math, critical thinking and interpersonal skills.

7. Raise money

Raising money is a concrete way for students to contribute to community or national efforts to address injustice. From organizing a bake sale around a local issue to fundraising on a larger scale for a national concern like racial disparities in the criminal justice system, raising money helps students feel like they are part of something bigger and backs the cause. Fundraisers can include selling items, auctions, entertainment, sponsoring events and more.

8. Write a letter to a company

Students can reach out to companies or organizations that they feel have done something unfair or biased. This is a small act but can be an important experience for them in making a difference. For example, if students want to change the ways toy companies use gender role stereotypes to package and sell their toys or games, have them write letters to toy or video game companies and explain why they think their practices are biased. In crafting a well-written letter with evidence and a clear statement of what needs to change, students learn useful skills in persuasion and at the same time, it has made a difference.

9. Engage in community service

In addition to organizing and advocating on a large scale, students should be encouraged to engage in community service on issues they care about. For example, if they are concerned about the stereotypes and violence directed at homeless people, in addition to advocating for legislation or attending a demonstration, students can also donate their time to help out in a homeless shelter or soup kitchen. Serving the people who are directly impacted gives young people firsthand knowledge of the situation, deepens their understanding and builds empathy.

10. Get the press involved

Help students understand that bringing publicity to their issue amplifies the message, gets more people concerned and potentially has a greater impact. They can write a press release, do an interview, write an op-ed in their local paper or invite a reporter to see what they are doing and write something about it. This sharpens their own message and serves to bring that message to a larger group of people.