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Exploring the Emerging Field of Online Tertiary Education for Refugees in Protracted Situations

Suzanne Reinhardt
Simon Fraser University (Canada)
snrein1016@hotmail.com

Abstract

"UNESCO believes that education is a human right for all throughout life and that access must be matched by quality." While this statement is a worthy ideal, it does not meet the needs of all populations, especially our most vulnerable. The refugee crisis has opened up new channels for education to find its place among the supports given to refugees, and that place may be distance education. Some budding research has taken place within the field of sociology, but educational technologists are just beginning to look into the needs of this population with only one study of note published. Several online programs have been implemented and studied within sociology, including Australian Catholic University's Thai-Burma Program, Borderless Higher Education for Refugees in Kenya and Jesuit Worldwide Learning, which currently has multiple sites worldwide. Looking forward, distance education is aligned to take its place as well. This study is a review of the literature and looks at possible paths for future research into online programs for refugees in protracted situations within the field of educational technology.

Key Words: Online learning, e-learning, refugee education, distance education, refugee tertiary education

Refugee Crisis and Education

The background of online learning in refugee camps begins with the refugee crisis. Unfortunately, the phrase "refugee crisis" has been used to such an extent that it no longer holds as much meaning or urgency as it necessarily demands. And while words do a poor job of expressing the pain and struggle of displaced people, there is indeed a refugee crisis the scale of which has not been seen previously (United Nations, n.d.). The United Nations High Commission for Refugees claims there are currently 65 million displaced people (including refugees) in as many as 130 nations (UNHCR, n.d.). The largest camp, to this date, is being built in Bangladesh. It will hold 400,000 people that are displaced as a consequence of ethnic cleansing in Myanmar (Beech, 2017). Seen from the outside, it is an overwhelming situation. Experiencing it as a lived situation, for most of us, is unimaginable.

While continuing the use of the word "crisis" risks removing the meaning from the term entirely, there is no other word that effectively describes the state of education for refugees. Once the attention of the international community strays and funds begin to dry up, education comes second to providing for the basic needs of the displaced. One possible option to ease this crisis would be online learning. In a complex, fund-starved situation, pursuing this path creates options for educating refugees.

A review of the research shows that the need is there, but the research within educational technology is sparse. Sociologists have done a noble amount of research in the area of education for refugees and have begun some research in the area of online learning; however, there has only been one study by Crea & Sparnon (2017) within the field of educational technology. This search for relevant articles included Google scholar search terms "refugee education", "refugee education online", "refugee distance education" and revealed no other relevant research. Related articles within

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sociology were examined for citations within the field of educational technology with no success. Educational technology could add its own strengths to online learning for this population, and articles published within in this area could benefit educational programs for refugees.

The following literature review begins broadly, addressing the ethical need for social justice within educational technology, notes the state of education in refugee camps and narrows to the benefits of both tertiary education, in general, and online learning more specifically. It then describes the major programs that have implemented this type of intervention and ends with a discussion and possible areas for future study.

Social Justice in Educational Technology

There has been a fairly recent call to attend to the need for social justice in educational technology research (Selwyn, 2010). Previously, the trajectory focusing on social issues has often been the purview of other disciplines within the social sciences such as sociology and political science. However, Selwyn encourages "critical thinking" about educational technology. He states, "the academic study of educational technology has grown to be dominated by an (often abstracted) interest in the processes of how people can learn with digital technology" (p. 66). He goes on to say it is imperative that, "researchers and writers [should be] showing a keener interest in the social, political, economic, cultural and historical contexts within which educational technology use (and non-use) is located" (p. 66). While Selwyn's claim was published over eight years prior to the writing of this text, the need has grown exponentially, and the corpus of social justice within educational technology is anemic at best.

A more recent piece of research that addresses the need for social justice work within education is by Gutiérrez and Jurow (2016). Using the framework of social design experimentation, the authors pursue research that has the express purpose of promoting the needs of underserved populations. The key to this approach is to address educational principles and opportunities to serve wider social and community issues as well as addressing the obstacles to equity and justice. Straight to the point, they argue, "what sets social design experimentation apart as an approach is that it seeks a design process that strives to be a part of the process of fundamental social transformation" (p. 566). The fundamental ideas are that underserved populations have their own unique paths through education based on the challenges of being a marginalized group, and that using social design experimentation can open up ways to work through these difficulties.

Another principle discussed by Gutiérrez and Jurow (2016) is that individuals – especially those who are the focus of social design experimentation – are part of a larger historical context. Understanding how their unequal place in society has shaped their lives, and how that knowledge can be used beneficially, uses inequity to solve the problem of itself (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016).

Higher Education in the Camps

At the same time that there is a need for more attention to be paid to social justice within educational technology, there is a parallel educational crisis within the field of sociology that deserves special attention. While refugee studies has a significant history, because of the increase of protracted refugee situations is a newer phenomenon (Zeus, 2011) and online learning is also a more recent educational advancement, the confluence of e-learning in refugee encampments has seen limited research. There have been few published journal articles within sociology of online learning in refugee situations (Crea, 2016; Crea & McFarland, 2015; MacLaren, 2012). Other sources of information from a sociological perspective include master's theses (Hakami, 2016) and commissioned reports

(Dahya, 2016). While there has been only one published study (Crea & Sparnon, 2017) within educational technology, there have also been few within sociology. However, educational technology has the opportunity to build on the literature that has been published up to this point, and this would be an ideal opening to include the strengths of educational technology in the research.

Article 26 of the United Nation's *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* states that education is a basic human right. This also holds equally true for refugees. Hakami (2016) very clearly states the consequence of these rights to refugees:

> "This study recognizes the essential importance of equality of opportunity when it comes to education, and sees improving access to higher education for refugees as an obligation for ensuring human rights and preventing a great loss of human potential" (p. 7).

The UN has also recently declared tertiary education an equal part of this fundamental right (UNHCR, 2012). Refugees have lost much of what makes life stable and purposeful. Attention to this emergency should be immediate and sustained until there is a satisfactory resolution. Dahya (2016) explains why this is important: "education is a human right with important implications for health, livelihood, and peace building in contexts of conflict and crisis" (p. 5). Education in refugee situations is a piece of multifaceted solution to a crisis with little realistic hope of a quick resolution.

Because the underlying purpose of refugee camps is of a temporary nature, and the end goal is often repatriation, education, and tertiary education in particular, has not been a priority in encampments (Hakami, 2016; MacLaren, 2012). Sadly though, many of the 22.5 million refugees worldwide will spend years in refugee camps (UNHCR, n.d.), hence the unfortunate need for the phrase "protracted refugee encampments." Protracted situations are defined by the UNHCR (MacLaren, p. 105) as "25,000 persons or more who have been in exile for five or more years in developing countries." Ongoing war and conflict, and generally unstable and unsafe political situations, make the likelihood of refugees returning to their home countries in a timely manner doubtful (MacLaren, 2012). Because most of the protracted refugee camps are in the global south (Dahya, 2016), that leaves this already vulnerable population in even more need of aid and support from the more privileged states.

Historically, education in refugee camps has been focused on the needs of children and primary and secondary education (Hakami, 2016; MacLaren, 2012). However, because refugees can now spend years and even decades in camps, providing higher education is becoming an urgent necessity. Since there is an obvious need for primary education for all refugees, the protracted status of many displaced people can transform a right to higher education into a lifesaving tool for the future. The concentration on primary education is a reflection of how refugee situations are originally intended to be temporary (Hakami, 2016). This perspective, unfortunately, does not reflect what is happening on the ground in refugee camps. Host countries resist integrating refugees into their populations due to fear of loss of jobs and resources for their citizens (Zeus, 2011), and this contributes to the elongated timeframe for refugees initially looking for a temporary haven. Hakami (2016) explains:

> "refugees end up in these situations because of a prolonged situation of violence, persecution and/or insecurity in their country of origin, and the unwillingness/inability of the host country to offer citizenship rights and facilitate integration into the host country" (p. 12).

If the illusion of temporariness is not addressed, then higher education will, understandably, not be a priority in the reality and future of refugee camps.

Benefits of Tertiary Education

Available evidence does not provide reason to be optimistic about a happy ending for refugees in protracted situations. While the many displaced have had to flee their homes because of fear for their lives and imminent physical harm, there is some hope that it is possible to provide them a foundation to build a future for themselves through education. Yet, there is opportunity to build a life through more than the traditional means of a well-paying job. Zeus (2011) says that education has an "important role in psychosocial, but also physical and cognitive protection" and "can play a role in helping communities understand and cope with their fate and can be a critical part of providing meaning in life" (p. 257). Hakami (2016) emphasizes that education can build psychological support which fosters higher functioning which then provides more foundational psychological support. Those are significant reasons to provide at least a bare minimum of higher education; more would be better.

The positive influences of education on the mental health of refugees is difficult to overstate. In situations where necessities such as food, clean water and basic physical safety are inconsistent at best (Crea & McFarland, 2015), the burden of the reality of living in –and often growing up in– protracted encampments requires a deep reservoir of internal strength. Education can help supplement that reservoir. El Jack (2010) quotes a student describing their educational experience in a refugee camp, "I began to see education as necessary for my survival in the world. Neither dust nor hunger nor disease would stop us" (p. 23). Building confidence as well as the development of critical thinking skills are two consequences of the pursuit of higher education (MacLaren, 2012).

Often the voices of the refugees themselves are unrepresented in research on these complex displacement situations. However, Hakami (2016) focuses on these voices and shows that refugees' futures are not simply informed by kismet, but rather they have the desire for agency and volition of their own. When given the chance, refugees speak of the opportunities that education can provide through work. But beyond that obvious benefit, Hakami notes that they also speak about how education can help them to fit more easily into a host culture, as well as allow them to give back to their home country if they return.

While refugee situations continue to stagnate, Hakami (2016) argues that education can be a means of resolving protracted situations. Hakami points out that better educated refugees can contribute to society whether that is upon their return home, in the host culture or in an entirely different placement. Education provides more opportunities to contribute to the workforce, thus reducing their need for financial and social support in their ultimate country of return or relocation. Educated immigrants contribute more to society in general, and have a positive impact on sectors such as the government, the physical health of the society and the economy (Hakami, 2016). Perhaps most importantly, the refugees believe that the skills that they develop through education will allow them more options in their future (Crea & McFarland, 2015).

Education provides multiple advantages for the refugees while they remain in the camps (Crea & McFarland, 2015). The refugees that have been through tertiary education are seen as role models for their fellow refugees (Crea & McFarland, 2015). In addition to being seen as contributing a positive influence to the camp, the educated see themselves as giving back (Hakami, 2016). They are not simply a disempowered group without a country that they can call home; they are part of a community that they are contributing to in a positive way. The educated can also find possible employment in the camps (Hakami, 2016) and education provides structure and support in a very unstructured and unstable environment.

Online Learning in the Camps

As previously noted, refugee situations were never intended to be long-term (Abdi, 2016; Dahya, 2016; MacLaren, 2012; Wright & Plasterer, 2010). If refugees are expected to be integrated elsewhere in short order, there is no need to create educational programs, and thus there is no focus on higher education (MacLaren, 2012). As a result, there is little to no funding, and if there is no funding then there are few programs and, as a consequence, there is no basis for a rich body of research. The ouroboros of unrealistic situational understanding and lack of supplementary resources simply perpetuates itself. Recently, however, there have been some online and blended tertiary programs that contribute to the research in this area. The following will discuss the programs and look carefully at the research that was written about each.

ACU Thai-Burma Program

The earliest program of higher education in a protracted refugee situation that used online learning was a blended program in a Thai-Myanmar (Burmese) border camp that began in 2002 (MacLaren, 2012). According to MacLaren, refugees had fled Myanmar because of intense political unrest that had been part of the, "longest-running civil war in the world" (p. 103). After considerable effort by the Refugee Tertiary Education Committee, in cooperation with Australian Catholic University, a previously successful online program was adapted to the situation in the Thai refugee camp, and enrolled its first 21 students. Of those students, 17 graduated with the program's diploma in Business Administration. The revised program later granted a certificate in Theology to 5 students in 2009. The program currently offers a diploma in Liberal Studies in conjunction with several U.S. and Canadian universities.

The area of online learning for refugees in protracted situations is so new that the bulk of current research takes the form of program assessment, examining the strengths to build on, and attempting to steer clear of program weaknesses. MacLaren's (2012) intention in this study was to look into the overall structure of the program, including how it originated, how graduates utilized the "common good" (part of the ACU's Catholic principles), focusing on the future, and how the program's successes can be used elsewhere in similar programs (p. 103).

The methodology of a later program review completed in 2009 by ACU, that focused on graduates of the program, deserves considerable respect for the attention it paid to the needs of the people being studied (MacLaren, 2012). This included an intentionally casual approach to gathering research (termed the "hanging out" method) used with vulnerable populations in qualitative research (MacLaren, 2012). This procedure was utilized because of the habit of researchers in the camps to use the students for their own research purposes, then leave little evidence that there was real concern for them as people.

One challenge with the most recent research on this program, which MacLaren (2012) describes, is the inability to find students for follow-up data collection because of the transient nature of refugee camps. In this case, 13 of the 18 students who completed the program contributed to the research. With a larger participant pool, the needs of the students could be more adequately understood and addressed.

Overall, the budding program had several successes. Because the language of instruction was English, all students improved both their academic English as well as their critical thinking skills. On a more personal level, participants felt increased confidence and awareness and understanding of the political environment from which they came. Some refugees were accepted into university programs, but most stayed on the border contributing labor and adding to the "common good" within the camp

(MacLaren, 2012). Unfortunately, while a few refugees may find relief elsewhere, the need for the camps, and the camps themselves remain intact.

Though this study may have some limitations, such as a lack of a significant participant pool in the later stages of program review, it appears that these may not be the major concern of ACU. A pilot program was implemented for a group of people that have lost the attention of the international community –which tends to fund and implement these endeavors. If there is progress toward implementing much needed effective educational foundations, then perhaps research rigor should come second.

Borderless Higher Education for Refugees

The second of three programs that included an online component was implemented in Kenya in 2014 (Abdi, 2016). This undertaking was a collaborative effort on behalf of several Canadian (York University and University of British Columbia) and Kenyan (Kenyatta University and Moi University) universities collectively calling the project Borderless Higher Education for Refugees (BHER). Life and education in the camps suffers from lack of resources, including teachers; so the program intended to address this need. If there were more teachers, then more students could be reached. In addition to providing more teachers in the camps, student teachers would receive academic credits that could transfer to universities for their future education elsewhere. Another goal was to introduce and encourage the use of "twenty-first century" teaching skills to improve the quality of education in the camps (p. 27). More important, teacher training with the refugees themselves moves the historically colonialized educational system to education that implements principles and values based on the pre-colonized culture.

This study, like the previous MacLaren (2012) work, was to look at the strengths and difficulties of this particular program, as well as the usefulness of what participants learned with regard to repatriation. With these goals in mind, the greatest strength of this study was the ability of the researcher to recognize and address the needs of the students. Abdi (2016) writes very poignantly about the purpose for this study and the effect it has had personally:

> The data used in this article draws on research conducted for my doctoral dissertation, which explores the role of education in post-conflict societies, such as that of Somalia, in bringing about sustainable peace and justice. As an educator and researcher who grew up in a relatively peaceful Somalia, I am haunted by questions about how education can be used as a vehicle to reimagine peace and unity in my homeland. (p. 22)

Abdi (2016) concluded by emphasizing the importance of adequate numbers of teachers, not only in refugee camps, but also in countries of origin to support an educated populace and the growth in a country affected by displacement. Abdi goes on to explicitly state that well-trained teachers are an essential part of supporting refugees. Another point includes designing a curriculum that focuses on the particular needs of refugees who will return to their home country and how they can best be served. Abdi also noted that technology, in this context, did not have as much success as anticipated. Technology use in similar programs should be used judiciously with the context and environment taken into careful consideration.

Jesuit Commons: Higher Education at the Margins

Additional programs were set up in Kenyan camps (called Dadaab and Kakuma) and another in Nairobi by the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) with several iterations (Wright & Plasterer, 2010). The first

was carried out in partnership with the University of South Africa. A second program began in 2010 through JRS with several Jesuit universities, and a final program in 2011, with Regis University. The problems with this program centered on the weaknesses of the infrastructure in the camps, mainly that the Internet was so slow that it was essentially unusable. Later changes made significant improvement to the Internet speed.

The major weakness of this study, as noted by Wright and Plasterer (2010), is the lack of including student voices. Instead of students, participants included people associated with non-profit organizations who worked within the educational structure of the camps. While Wright and Plasterer did not interview refugees, the researchers conducted orientation sessions for students immigrating to Canada, which included research reports written by the students. Some of the research was referenced in the current study. The researchers intentionally choose not to interview refugees because it protected the participants from feeling taken advantage of, which was a developing pattern with researchers in the camps. While participants were protected from feeling misused by researchers, Wright and Plasterer also noted the possible biased nature of the feedback from organizers rather than students. More of a focus on students, in spite of adding a layer of protective complexity, would be an obvious beneficial addition to the literature.

Perhaps the most thorough studies on online programs were performed by Thomas Crea on the Jesuit Commons: Higher Education at the Margins (JC:HEM) program (recently renamed Jesuit Worldwide Learning). Although it is somewhat unclear, the first in a series of studies appears to be a follow-up to the program that Wright and Plasterer (2010) examined in the Kenyan camp called Kakuma. Additional locations in the Malwai and Jordan (initially in Syria) were added to the 2010 – 2014 program. The focus of this study was to look at the effectiveness of the pilot project objectives as well as the perspectives of the students in the program (Crea & McFarland, 2015). The goals were to provide adequate Internet service and provide online tertiary and community service programs – with the expectation that students would graduate by the end of the pilot. Results indicated that the objectives were implemented and thus successful.

Crea and MacFarland (2015) took their research a step further by paying close attention to the importance of student voices within their research and engaged in a focus group at each site. The feedback was encouraging. One student noted the positive effect that being a student had on his identity as a refugee, “I’m also a human being; working hard and trying hard to achieve what I want to achieve; the first thing is change my attitude and be seen and treated as a human being” (p. 241).

While the program had several positive results, there were also challenges, and Crea and MacFarland (2015) extrapolated ideas from the research to form the next steps in building a strong program. These steps include: designing curriculum for the specific population of students especially in regard to how students would be able to further utilize their education; having related organizations come together to focus on creating opportunities beyond the program itself; and encouraging the greater academic community to participate in this and similar programs.

The last sentence in Crea and MacFarland’s (2015) article before the conclusion quietly notes an important area for possible future research: that instructors for the JC:HEM program should be provided with teacher training. One sentence is hardly enough to thoroughly understand the important initial step of preparing teachers for teaching online in refugee camps. More research should be done to understand the standards and methods of this training.

Crea’s 2016 follow-up study looked more closely at the research on the important perspectives of students’ experiences with tertiary education in the camps. It appears that the same group of participants was used in the 2016 Crea study as in the previous 2015 study. In the more recent work, Crea focused his research questions on the students’ quality of life related to their education and perceived benefits and challenges of the program.

Included in the study were both quantitative and qualitative data (Crea, 2016). Qualitatively, participants were administered the WHOQOL-BREF quality of life survey (Crea, 2016). The survey identifies four life areas including: physical health, psychological health, social relationships, and environment. The data indicated that the participants valued education because of the skills gained and, "feelings of empowerment, related to their expanded worldview" (Crea, 2016, p. 16). One of the greatest perceived benefits for the students was the support they could provide for their communities because as educated people they were held to a higher standard of respect within the community. Students appreciated the opportunity to have access to education, which they might not have had access to otherwise, as well as having a chance to learn English.

One area that needed specific attention for improvement was the obvious cultural bias toward the global north in the class materials, which were published in North America (Crea, 2016). Communication with instructors also tended to be inconsistent, and students had difficulties aligning the expectations of the instructor with the realities of living in refugee camps. Most important, students struggled because basic necessities of food and clean water were often lacking.

As is expected with any program review, there were weaknesses, and Crea (2016) made program recommendations based on several of those areas. One suggestion was to consider that the environment of each camp was so different that, to effectively address the needs of the students, the program would need to adjust to each camp as a unique individual learning environment. The Dzaleka participants in Malawi were burdened by a 50% decrease in food rations, yet the Kakuma camp had difficulties using transportation to navigate the immense landscape of the camp. The challenges presented for the students in each camp were different. Crea's other two recommendations included clearer program objectives and a continuing cycle of assessment and program improvement.

Crea's 2016 grant funded study by JWL acted as a program assessment. This makes identifying areas for future research somewhat difficult; however, Crea leaves us with a few intriguing notes in this respect. For example, it is suggested that a broader range of participants would be valuable, including participants from the larger refugee population rather than only participants who were selected as students by previous educational level as well as adjusting the participant pool for selection bias.

A third study was undertaken by Crea and Sparnon (2017) within the same previously noted program, which was also a program review. To pursue a thorough investigation of the JC:HEM program, this study examined the perspectives of faculty and program facilitators. Participants were interviewed and surveyed. The response from faculty indicated that communication and commitment to the students were areas of strength in the program, among others. Some of the challenges, as noted by the faculty, were lack of cohesion and weak communication within the program as well as a need for site-specific teaching materials. The ambiguity of negative and positive comments about communication might be a worthy path for future research.

According to Crea and Sparnon (2017), there were several strengths to the program from the perspective of the on-site facilitators including: a strengthened community in the camps, a positive overall effect on the students, additional skills and more cross-cultural understanding. Students also developed a more optimistic view of life. One of the on-site participants exemplified this hopefulness, "Education has also shown to help build the refugees' courage and hope for the future, as well as helped to reduce the trauma refugees have encountered prior to coming to the camps" (p. 13). Despite this, site facilitators identified a number of weaknesses: communication issues with the faculty, gender disparity among the students, weak internet reliability, a lack of textbook availably, few student opportunities after program completion, a lack of available spots for students, degrees that were not recognized in the host region and language issues.

While the concentration of the work here was on program assessment, Crea and Sparnon (2017) also point the way to future research. Crea and Sparnon suggest an expanded set of participants doing similar work outside of the specific group under study and continuing studies of a similar type to capture additional changes to the program. They also noted the importance of a larger response from the participant group to try to gain an understanding of all perspectives and to also address the conflicting communication responses that were previously noted.

Discussion

The theme that stood out overwhelmingly in the research was the need to apply site-specific context to the programs (Crea, 2016; Crea & Sparnon, 2017). Because Crea (2016) worked with three different refugee camps, he was able to identify differences and similarities in how each environment affected the outcomes of the program. What this research uncovered was that each site had its own unique challenges. Students in one camp might not be getting enough food, students in another site might be struggling to find work in their host countries, or some might experience the delay of textbooks. Each obstacle required a different solution. This was reveled, not just through Crea's work, but through comparing other relevant literature. Each refugee camp has different resources, each population has a different language, culture and gender dynamics and each camp was created because of its own specific reason for population displacement. There were some commonalities among programs, but most had specific challenges and strengths. Implementing each online program as an exact replica of other similar programs at different refugee camps would be a disservice to the students.

While the main idea that came through in the research was for programs to consider interventions directly related to the context and environment, there were additional ideas that deserve notice. One was the incongruency of teaching materials to the lives of the students (Abdi, 2016; Crea & MacFarland, 2015; Crea, 2016; Crea & Sparnon, 2017; MacLaren, 2012). Textbooks and teaching materials need to be more relevant to the environment rather than directed toward students in the global north. The path for students also needs to be more clearly thought-out and integrated into the programs (Crea, 2016; Crea & Sparnon, 2017; Wright & Plasterer, 2010). It was also repeatedly noted that education did have a positive impact on the community in the camps (Crea, 2016; Crea & Sparnon, 2015; MacLaren, 2012; Wright & Plasterer, 2010). Overall, attention to context in regard to teaching materials, program implementation and long-term goals for students, would benefit students both in their immediate situation and in the future as well.

Possible Areas for Future Study

There are several areas within this body of work that, if addressed, would provide a more well-rounded knowledge base and offer stronger educational programs for refugees. The obvious first area would be studies that are published and have undergone the process of peer review by researchers within the field of distance education and/or educational technology. Sociology has gifted us with some strong yet preliminary research in which to base future inquiry.

Most of the recommendations provided by the authors of these studies have been made from the perspective of sociologists. The next question is: where can educational technology contribute? There is an exciting opportunity to develop a solid structure of practices of online higher education for refugees based on evidence that is informed by previous research.

As mentioned earlier, a possible direction of interest is to examine how instructors are trained to teach this unique group of students. Crea and Sparnon (2017) have written about the perspectives that both students and instructors have about online learning for refugees in protracted situations

and lead the way toward future research. However, empirical work is needed that examines how teachers are trained for all the elements that come together in this situation, such as online andragogy, curriculum in context, inclusivity as well as cultural competence and working with second language students all need more concerted attention. Looking at online classes for refugees, in regard to teacher training, would be an appropriate next step.

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