



## Teachers Teaching Refugee Children via Skype with Koen Timmers

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**Vicki:** So, I'm here at the National State Teachers of the Year Conference here in D.C., and a friend of mine, Joe Fatheree @josephfatheree, who is a Global Teacher Prize Finalist, told me about this amazing person, Koen Timmers @zelfstudie, who is a teacher from Belgium, who's a Top 50 Global Teacher Prize Finalist recently.

Now, Koen, you're real big on collaboration. Could you describe for us one of the examples of the projects that you've done collaboratively?

**Koen:** Yeah. So, one project I've been running is the **Human Differences Project**. That was about two months ago, and that project is about collaboration on a global scale. In this project, we had fifty different schools over thirty-seven countries across six continents who participated. And it was a student-centered project, so the students had to do all the research, the thinking, discussion, brainstorming. They had to present and share their findings during each week about several topics.

This project was basically about, "How are people different in their own classroom, in their own country? Why do countries decide to build walls? How do conflicts start?" And also about finding solutions, like how to build bridges instead of walls. And we also did an anti-bullying campaign and also about gender

equality. And the students? Well, they really amazed us. Some of the students, they began to dance. They went to interview people on the street. The Nigerians students, they even composed their own song. The students from Egypt, they even came to school during holidays, so we had some pretty amazing outcomes during the project.

**Vicki:** Wow. So how did you connect with the fifty schools?

**Koen:** Yeah. So, I'm also an MIE –that's a Microsoft Expert Educator – and that's a wonderful community of about 3,000 different educators. And once you're in the community, it's pretty easy to set up global projects, actually. It took me a few days to find about fifty different schools over a lot of countries that were willing to participate.

**Vicki:** Now you also have another project, Project Kakuma. Tell us a little about that.

**Koen:** Yeah. So, two years ago I had a very emotional skype call with Moses. Moses is an outreach assistant in the Kakuma refugee camp, and this refugee camp houses 200,000 refugees who fled from war and hunger in Sudan, Burundi, Somalia, etc. And I promised to help him increase the level of education in the camp by having regular skype calls with them – with refugee kids, actually. During my first call with them, I realized that I was kind of naïve, thinking that having a skype call with the refugees was going to be like having a skype call with my friends and family. They told me that they have very little resources in the school. They have 30 schools, and each classroom houses up to 200 refugees.

So, imagine 175 students taking a look at one laptop screen while I'm teaching them. But, apart from that fact, the project became an instant success. They requested skype lessons on a daily basis, and so I had to find global educators willing to participate. And, at this moment, 100 educators from around 40 different countries are participating. They are teaching them on a daily basis.

**Vicki:** So how can we help?

**Koen:** Well, basically, you can support the project by also volunteering to teach the refugees. We have a lot of teachers from the U.S. and from Asia. All continents, basically.

**Vicki:** You have a website or a place we can go to volunteer?

**Koen:** Yeah... [projectkakuma.com](http://projectkakuma.com)

**Vicki:** It just amazes me what you're doing. So, they're teaching a variety of subjects?

**Koen:** Yeah.

**Vicki:** Many different topics?

**Koen:** We are teaching them maths, science, English, even art. Most people, they really love the fact that we are offering free knowledge and we are teaching them. But basically, we also bring empathy into the global classrooms. Most people forget about the students involved from all kinds of different countries, who are now offered the right perspective into what it's like to be a refugee. But also, they talk about

habits, religion, culture, about sport. They basically have fun. And so, we fight against misinformation, against polarization, and yeah... That's also very valuable, I think.

**Vicki:** As you've collaborated – because you've done a lot of collaboration now – what do you think the biggest mistake that you've made with collaborating in the classroom is?

**Koen:** Well... Don't overdo it.

**Vicki:** (laughs) Been there. Wish I hadn't. (laughs)

**Koen:** Most people, when you advocate or you present about collaboration, they think it's all about collaboration. They forget to instruct. Because collaboration takes a lot of time, and I think you need to shift between every approach. Sometimes you need to instruct your students. Sometimes you need to shift to flipped learning. Then you have to collaborate. And then you have to do learning by doing in maker space... So I guess that a teacher as a pedagogical engineer who decides which approach is the best at that time, for that subject, for that topic, etc.

**Vicki:** I love that... “pedagogical engineer”... That's a great way to think about teachers, isn't it?

**Koen:** Yeah, I think so. Yeah.

**Vicki:** Yeah. Awesome. So, you have a CARE! model.

**Koen:** So I think that teachers have the responsibility to do different things, and it's not only about offering knowledge. It's about also... The “C” from CARE! is about **collaboration**, but it's also about guiding. (**ADVISING**) In most cases when students graduate, there's a large gap for them. I think teachers also have to make sure how they can keep on learning – the lifelong learning concept, that's it. In my case, I don't want my students to be limited to my knowledge as well. I want them to learn from each other, but also from experts on social media, from their friends. We have to point them in the right direction and teach them that not every resource is a reliable. We have to fight against fake news as well. Yeah. I think that's also the duty of the teacher. Yeah. Not only offering knowledge, and that's it. Instructing in that sense.

**Vicki:** So give us the “R” and the “E” and the exclamation point for CARE!.

**Koen:** So in the CARE the “R” is for **real problem solving**. Well, I believe in project-based learning, and in many cases -- and I didn't mention this before, but I'm a computer science teacher – and in most cases, people teach about the computer. I think we need meaningful subjects, and we need real problems to solve. You can use a computer for data as well. I already explained about the “E” -- the **empathy**. The explanation point is that most frameworks, most people who talk about their framework, think that it fits in every case and every scenario. And I think it doesn't. We all teach different subjects, different ages, and in different schools. They all have different financial resources, so I think in some cases, blended learning works. And in some cases, teachers have to fill the gap themselves, and they have to figure out what their students basically need, I think.

**Vicki:** Teachers, we've learned some remarkable things. Please check the Shownotes for links. I know and hope that some of you will help teach the refugees with Project Kakuma. Please let me know if you do, because I think this is a project worth following. And it's also – can you think of a better way to spend

our time volunteering and helping? So, Koen Timmers, thank you so much for being on, and thank you for your leadership on the worldwide stage that you now have.

**Koen:** Thank you so much.