"Can volunteer work help me get a job in my field?": On learning, immigration and labour markets

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Abstract

Often times, new immigrants to Canada are encouraged to perform volunteer work in order to gain sufficient 'Canadian experience' to improve their access to the Canadian labour market. Many of these immigrants experience the paradox of "“occupational skidding.” Canadian immigration policy makes a priority in attracting highly educated and highly skilled immigrants to Canada, but they end up working in a different field to which they have training, talent and expertise. This leads to a lose-lose-lose situation, as it is a net loss for the country of origin, for Canada, and for the migrants themselves.

This case study is part of a larger research on the connections between informal learning and volunteer work, which in turn is part of the WALL (Work and Lifelong Learning) research project. It was conducted in partnership with *A Commitment to Training and Employment for Women* (ACTEW). The methodology for data collection included interviews and focus groups with 45 immigrants from 17 different countries. It also included a focus group with representatives from social agencies serving new immigrants. This paper focusses on the learning dimension of the volunteer experience. It examines what was learned through the volunteer placements, how that learning was acquired, and what impact the learning had on their ability to find paid employment appropriate to their education and work experience. Particular attention was paid to issues of de-skilling, up-skilling and re-skilling.

Introduction

Each year, thousands of immigrants encounter daunting barriers in their attempts to find jobs that are meaningful and appropriate to their qualifications, training and work experience Among these barriers are the non-recognition of foreign credentials, linguistic difficulties, limited networks, and lack of ‘Canadian experience’. To overcome some of these challenges, a common strategy that is both facilitated by community agencies and solicited by individuals is to do volunteer work (Teo 2004, Couton 2002). Although there are many studies on voluntary work in Canada, little is known yet about the extent, modes and effectiveness of volunteers’ acquisition of new skills, knowledge, attitudes and values, and the relationship between formal, nonformal and informal learning in this process. This study examined the connections between informal learning and volunteer work among immigrants who volunteered to improve access to the labour market. The focus on recent immigrants is particularly relevant given analyses suggesting that lack of recognition of their credentials and prior learning now costs Canadian society about $15 billion annually (Reitz, 2001a). This paper will provide a context, describe the study and provide a preliminary discussion of the findings drawing on data from the National Survey of Learning and Work (Livingstone et al., 2004).

Context

The explicit goal of Canadian immigration policy is to attract the 'best and the brightest' (Government of Canada, 2002). Approximately 200,000 immigrants come to Canada every year classified into three broad categories: Economic Class (skilled workers, business immigrants,

live-in caregivers, provincial nominees and their spouses), Family Class (spouses, partners, children, parents and grandparents of existing Canadian citizens) and Protected Persons (refugees). The largest category (about 60% of all immigrants) belongs to the Economic Class (CIC, 2004). All skilled workers are assessed through a "Point System" in which points are awarded for education, work experience, age, English and French language facility, arranged employment in Canada, and the educational qualifications of their partner or spouse. The result of this selection process has been the creation of a large pool of highly educated newcomers. According to the 2001 Census, 40% of immigrants aged 25-54 who came to Canada during the 1990s had a university degree, compared to 23% Canadian-born of the same age group (Statistics Canada, 2003a).

In a recent speech, federal Minister of Immigration and Citizenship Joe Volpe noted that Canadian companies are wasting a valuable resource the country has worked hard to build up by not recognizing the skills and work experience of skilled immigrants, who are earning a living, but are underused (Laidlaw, 2005). Indeed, available research indicates that immigrant education and experience is consistently undervalued in Canada (Alboim & The Maytree Foundation, 2002; Reitz, 2001b; Li, 2001; Basran & Li, 1998; Boyd & Thomas, 2002). The links between immigration status, unemployment, poverty and racial origin in Canada have been researched and it has been shown that there is a racialized and gendered labour market where people of colour, particularly women, are over-represented in low paid occupations in low income sectors (Ornstein, 2000; Galabuzi, 2001; Kunz et al., 2000; Jackson, 2002). According to the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada (LSIC), although 76% of new immigrants have at least one type of international credential, 70% experienced barriers in gaining access to the Canadian labour market at an appropriate level (Statistics Canada, 2003b). The biggest barrier to finding appropriate employment for immigrant professionals was the lack of Canadian work experience (Statistics Canada, 2003b). The survey also revealed that immigrants experience "occupational skidding" (Kofman, 1999), as six out of ten immigrants who were employed at the time of the survey were not working in the profession or occupation in which they were educated and experienced (Statistics Canada, 2003b). Moreover, a survey of internationally trained engineers from more than 60 countries carried out in 2004 showed that 54% of the sample was unemployed, 30% were in survival and non-engineering jobs, and 16% were employed in engineering-related jobs (Dang, 2005).

Volunteering among Immigrants to Canada

There is a limited academic literature on the volunteer work of immigrants in Canada. Most of the writing on this topic has been produced by community organizations who deliver programs for immigrants. Although some researchers have investigated the role of volunteering in improving job prospects (Devlin, 2001) and the relationship between volunteering and the labour market (Vaillancourt, 1994), very few studies have specifically dealt with the issue of immigrants who volunteer for Canadian work experience, and even less on the learning dimension of this process.

In the last two decades, Statistics Canada has undertaken three large national surveys on volunteerism. The last one (Statistics Canada, 2001), which was the only one that collected data on the volunteer activities of new immigrants, reported an increase in volunteering for the purposes of finding paid employment, and that a significant number of immigrant volunteers (30%) believed that volunteering would increase their chances of finding suitable employment.

For many new immigrants, volunteerism is understood as work that is freely chosen, not financially compensated and undertaken in order to increase employability. This conceptualization deviates from standard definitions that only consider volunteer work if it is based on altruism and benefits the community (Lukka & Ellis, 2001; Graff, 2004). Immigrants in search of Canadian work experience do not fit into this "commonsense" notion of volunteer work and hence their experiences are often ignored in the literature on volunteerism (Oesterle et al, 2004; Reed & Selbee, 2001; Handy & Srinivasan, 2004).

Background: Volunteer workers and the economy

Voluntary work has been the hallmark of Canadian society (Brown et al, 2000). Canadians engage in a wide range of volunteer activities in their communities. According to the last available data, 6.5 million Canadians (27% of the population aged 15 and older) volunteered their services through groups or organizations. This figure does not include those who volunteer on their own, and not through an organization (8 out of 10 Canadians, or 77% of the population).

Although 27% is an impressive rate, it represents a decline from 1997, when 7.5 million people (31% of the population) reported to volunteer. Overall, voluntary work is freely chosen, although about 7% of those who volunteer fulfill a requirement of an educational institution, an employer or a government agency (e.g. mandatory community service).

The economic value of volunteer contributions has only recently been documented, and the emerging findings cannot be trivialized. A recent study of 22 OECD countries estimates that volunteer contributions (made by approximately 28% of the population) were equivalent to 10.6 million full-time jobs and their value added amounted to $840 billion, representing 3.5% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of those countries (Salamon et al. 1999). In Canada, Statistics Canada reports that volunteer work contributes the equivalent of close to 600,000 full-time jobs per year, which represents 11% of the total labour contribution, and an addition of about $13 billion to the national economy. Moreover, volunteers contribute significant amounts to the economy in out-of-pocket expenses ($841 million in the late 1980s) that are not reimbursed (Hall, McKeown and Roberts 2001; Livingstone 2001, Quarter 1994, Ross and Shillington 1990, Duchesne 1989).

There are many reasons why people choose to volunteer, ranging from feelings of personal connection or obligation to an organization to the desire for personal or professional selfdevelopment, or the need to maintain social connections. According to Statistics Canada, the reason most often cited is to help a cause they believe in (95%). Approximately 81% volunteer because they want to put their skills and experience into use, 69% because they are personally affected by the cause the organization supports, 57% because they see it as an opportunity to explore their own strengths; and 23% because they wanted to improve their job opportunities.

These reasons vary by factors such as age, employment status and immigration. For instance, 55% of young volunteers (aged 15-24) and 30% of volunteer immigrants do so to improve their job opportunities (versus 16% for non-youth volunteers and 23% for volunteers overall). In today's economy, volunteering is increasingly viewed as a way to enhance job opportunities, particularly among unemployed. While in 1997 approximately half of those unemployed surveyed (54%) held this belief, by 2000 the percentage increased to almost two-thirds of the sample (62%). The connection between volunteering and successful search for employment is most noticeable among young people (aged 15-24) who are looking for work: more than three quarters (78%) stated that volunteering would assist them in finding a job. Employed volunteers (particularly younger ones) report that volunteering provides them with

the opportunity to learn skills that they can use in their jobs (Hall, McKeown and Roberts 2001). Immigrants tend to volunteer less than Canadian-born people (18% v. 31% in 1997), and those who do it to improve their job prospects tend to use it as a strategy to gain the "Canadian experience" so desired by employers. One of the reasons that explain the lower participation of immigrants in voluntary activities is that they do not know how to become involved and that they have limited social networks (Brouwer, 1999; (Canadian Heritage, 1994; Training and Development Associates, 1998). Paradoxically, at the same time that immigrants are becoming more and more qualified, they are less likely to find a job in their intended occupation. Between 1969 and 1971, about 61% of immigrants who came to Canada between had jobs in their intended occupation. After 1976, only 47% of the men and 26% of the women had jobs in their intended occupations after one year (Training and Development Associates, 1998). This raises questions about recognition of credentials and prior learning, but also about economic waste, as Canadian society is losing (and this has been estimated in billions of dollars) the potential contribution of those immigrants. For this particular study, a key issue is to what extent the voluntary work done by immigrants to gain access to the labour market is appropriate and relevant for this purpose, and what policies and programs could help to improve this experience for both immigrants and future employers.

Likewise, informal learning acquired through volunteer work in co-operative housing and in community development projects is not usually recognized explicitly neither by the organization or by the volunteers themselves. An examination of the processes and outcomes of that learning could provide them with some strategies to complement it with non-formal training programs (making training of volunteers more effective and relevant), and to develop some mechanisms for assessment and recognition (making this learning transferable to other settings).

The Study

The "Informal Learning of Volunteer Workers" study is one of thirteen in a larger project entitled "Changing Working Conditions and Lifelong Learning in the New Economy", coordinated by the Centre for the Study of Education and Work of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. The main concern of the larger project is an exploration of the current forms, contents, and outcomes of organized educational, training and informal learning activities in Canada's 'new economy".

Our study was conducted in partnership with *A Commitment to Training and Employment for Women* (ACTEW), a non-governmental organization that delivers employment and training services to women. The first draft of the interview guide was reviewed in a focus group with 15 representatives from community-based agencies. After the interview guide was finalized, 38 semi-structured interviews were conducted with volunteers who were recruited through referral from ACTEW member agencies, other community organizations and snowball sampling. After the individual interviews were transcribed and analyzed, a focus group with seven Chinese immigrant volunteers was conducted to further explore specific areas.

In total, we interviewed 30 women and 15 men from 17 different countries. They came to Canada as independent applicants, members of family class, as well as refugees. Almost all participants (96%) had completed at least one university degree and had on average 10 years of professional work experience prior to immigrating to Canada. Professions of the participants included medicine, engineering, business administration, teaching (grade school as well as university), psychology and information technology.

The volunteer work placements were brokered either through a community-based agency (usually through an employment assistance program) or negotiated on their own. The site of volunteer work included the non-profit (82%), for-profit (16%) and public sectors (2%). All volunteered to improve access to the labour market. Specific reasons reported by participants included "to gain Canadian work experience" (47%); to improve understanding and use of English, especially work related language (36%); to learn about "Canadian culture" (22%); to get a job (20%), to network (18%); to be in a "real" Canadian workplace (16%); to meet people (11%), to have something to do (9%); and to get involved in Canadian society (7%). Those who indicated that "it was something to do" had arrived in Canada as refugees and had not yet been granted a work permit. In the quotes below names were changed to protect anonymity.

Summary of Findings – Informal Learning

Data from the National Survey of Learning and Work (Livingstone et al., 2004), a national survey conducted with over 10,000 people (1,713 immigrants and 8,929 Canadian-born) documented that there was substantial learning obtained through volunteer work placements. Table 1 details the questions asked about specific learning areas and the responses of three groups of respondents: immigrants who had been in Canada less than five years, immigrants who had been in Canada for six to ten years and an average of all Canadian-born respondents.

Table 1: National Survey of Learning and Work: Learning in Volunteer Placements

Learning Area	Immigrants 0-5 years in Canada	Immigrants 6-10 years in Canada	Canadian-born average
Computers	47.7%	45.8%	24.9%
Organizational or managerial skills	52.4%	45.0%	35.4%
Budgeting or financial management	34.6%	23.7%	23.9%
Teamwork, problem solving or communication skills	72.4%	72.9%	58.6%
Interpersonal skills	59.6%	81.4%	56.1%
Health and well being	40.4%	55.9%	45.0%
Learning about new equipment	58.1%	57.6%	29.6%
Language skills	59.0%	55.0%	16.6%
Increased knowledge about social, political or environmental issues	47.1%	49.2%	41.7%

Participants in our sample indicated that the informal learning from the volunteer work placements to be more significant than the formal job-related training they received. Among the most important learning acquired during the volunteer experience were communication skills / English language (40%), the value of networking (36%), knowledge of Canadian workplace practices (25%), adapting to and understanding "Canadian culture" (16%), increased self-confidence (16%) and working in a diverse workforce (13%). Very few participants mentioned

technical or "hard" skills developed specifically from the volunteer work placement, like a new computer program or how to use a cash register. Most participants referred to soft skills:

> I think the volunteer experience helped me most to adjust myself to the Canadian workplace culture. It helped me to improve soft skills, such as the way I to deal with the manager and also how to be a team member, working together for a project (Maria).

The responses in our study such as the importance of communication skills and English language facility support the findings of the National Survey of Learning and Work (Livingstone et al., 2004). Overall, the findings from our study highlight the importance of context-related learning for new immigrants to Canada. It was considered extremely valuable for immigrants to have access to Canadian workplaces to learn about the work practices and culture. The National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating showed that the motivation for 81 per cent of volunteers was to use their skills (Statistics Canada, 2001). In our sample, although 96 per cent of participants had at least one post-secondary degree and relevant work experience, they experienced great difficulty in having their credentials recognized by employers. An important motivation for their volunteer work was to find a way to have their credentials validated by a Canadian employer in order to facilitate a move into their former professions.

Participants reported that in the volunteer placement most of the learning was acquired through informal contacts with others, including discussions with other volunteers and staff members, observations and unofficial mentoring. Even when the volunteer position involved working primarily on their own (e.g. computer programming, contacting people over the telephone), participants still indicated that the most valuable input to their learning process was the time spent informally with others:

> Although I spent less time with other people, I think I learned more from those times. I have 10 years of work experience so (the volunteer tasks) are not difficult. The information that the other employees passed on to me, that information really made a difference (Isabel).

Summary of Findings – Link to the Labour Market

Data from the National Survey of Learning and Work (Livingstone et al., 2004) indicated that 57.9 per cent of immigrants who had been in Canada six to ten years and 44.7 per cent of immigrants who had been in Canada for less than 5 years volunteered to improve their job opportunities. This compares to an average of 24.5 per cent for the Canadian-born respondents to the same questions in the survey. These finding suggest that volunteering to improve access to the labour market is an important strategy for immigrants to Canada. More than half (52.5%) of immigrants surveyed who had been in Canada five years of less indicated that the volunteer-related informal learning had been "very helpful" in finding or changing jobs (only 9.4 per cent of Canadian-born responses fell in this category).

Most participants in our sample felt that what they learned through their volunteer placements was valuable and helpful to them in their job search in Canada. A large majority (91%) indicated that they would volunteer again for "Canadian work experience" and seven per cent would do it again but with some changes (not for so long, more closely matched to their profession). Only one participant would not volunteer again for the purposes of gaining

"Canadian work experience". In relation to the outcomes of the volunteer experience, at the time of the interviews only 13% of participants were in a job that matched their skills and experience. The rest were unemployed (42%) or underemployed (44%). The last category includes those who were working in their own fields but at a much lower level (and pay) than their qualifications, as well as in low-skilled, low-paid contingent jobs. Underemployed skilled immigrants experience a double jeopardy when trying to find an appropriate job in their professions. Not only their skills become outdated in light of changes in their fields, but they also suffer a deskilling process with respect to their original capacities. Half of the women and one quarter of the men fit into this category.

Table 2: Labour Market Position of Participants by Region and Sex

Region	Number and Sex of Participants	Matched to Skill, Education and Experience	Underemployed	Unemployed
Africa (Congo, Kenya, Zimbabwe)	3 women		1	2
	3 men	1		2
Eastern Europe (Albania, Bosnia, Russia, Ukraine)	3 women		1	2
	1 man		1	
Middle East (Iran)	1 woman		1	
North America (USA)	1 woman			1
South America (Brazil, Colombia)	3 women		3	
South Asia (Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka)	3 women		2	1
	2 men		2	
South East Asia (China, Indonesia and Korea)	16 women	3	8	5
	9 men	2	1	6
Totals	30 women	3 (10%)	16 (53%)	11 (37%)
	15 men	3 (20%)	4 (27%)	8 (53%)
Grand Total	45 participants	6 (13%)	20 (44%)	19 (42%)

One of the main goals of volunteering to obtain "Canadian work experience" is to secure paid employment in an area that is matched to the participant's education and experience. One participant felt that because "everybody fears to give a job to a newcomer" it was easier for immigrants to get volunteer work than suitable paid employment. It was pointed out by several participants, however, that it is critically important for an immigrant to get volunteer work in their area of expertise. In our group of participants, only 29% did a volunteer work related to their professions. The rest (71%) volunteered in jobs unrelated to their profession. For example, a woman engineer from Russia did a 5 month volunteer placement doing data entry at the Ontario Ministry of Labour. A male accountant from Indonesia volunteered at a community organization helping out in the computer room. A male engineer from China volunteered at a community organization teaching children crafts, and a woman doctor from Bangladesh was volunteering at a community organization doing administrative work. While 69 per cent of

volunteer placements took place in community organizations, only 16 per cent of participants had a background in social services.

Conclusions

This study aimed at exploring the learning dimension of volunteer work done by immigrants seeking "Canadian experience" to gain access to the labour market. Because of barriers such as non-recognition of international credentials, devaluation of international work experience and insufficient networks, many immigrant professionals work in survival jobs in the service and manufacturing industries. In these settings, it is not possible for them to use their skills and experience, which with the passing of the time diminishes or becomes obsolete. One strategy pursued by those who can afford it (thanks to savings or to financial support from a family member) was to work for free in their field, but this was seldom attainable due to restrictions in the labour market.

Our preliminary findings indicate that informal learning is very important in voluntary work for immigrants. Participants in this study valued their informal learning about "Canadian culture" and communication so much that they rated their volunteer experiences very positively despite the fact that only 13% of participants found employment matched to their education, skills and experience.

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