

The Informal Learning of Volunteer Workers

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Objectives

This study aims at uncovering and examining the forms, contents and outcomes of volunteers' learning processes, in the context of the new economy. It follows up on one of the key findings of the NALL survey in which we documented a much stronger association between community volunteer work time and community-related informal learning than between paid employment time and job-related informal learning. This supports the hypothesis that greater discretionary control or self-management can lead to fuller use of work-related skills and knowledge (NALL 1998). If informal learning tends to be more intense in voluntary work than in paid work, it is imperative to further explore whether this is a fact across the board or only in some types of voluntary work, and to determine the implications of this for training policies and programs, and for the assessment and recognition of informal learning. 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.

Methodology

The study will look at volunteer work in three different areas: a) volunteering to gain experience to improve access to the labour market (with a focus on immigrants and women); b) volunteering as part of the ethos and modus operandi of an organization (housing co-operatives); and c) volunteering for the betterment of society at large (volunteering in community development projects). This strategy would allow us to compare three 'ideal types' of voluntary work: instrumental, institutionalized, and altruistic. Our community partners for these settings are three umbrella organizations: Advocates for Community-Based Training and Education for Women (ACTEW), the Ontario Region of the Cooperative Housing Federation of Canada (OCHFC) and the Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition (OHCC).

The methodology includes interviews, questionnaires and focus groups, with a participatory research orientation. It also includes specific questions on volunteer work in the general national

survey on informal learning. Some will be similar to the previous NALL survey (to confirm or disconfirm those findings) and some will be new, in order to further the knowledge of this topic. Gender, race, class, age, language and immigration status will be key variables in examining the relationships between informal learning and voluntary work. Special attention will be paid to the learning experiences of disabled volunteer workers. To ensure comparability with the other studies of the larger project (with which we share a knowledge-power theoretical model), this study will concentrate on three main issues: a) volunteering and informal learning processes, contents and outcomes; b) recent changes in social and economic conditions that affect the nature of learning in voluntary work; and c) differences among social groups in relation to learning and voluntary work, with an emphasis on the conditions of disadvantaged groups. In addition to the survey (N=?), the sample size for the qualitative part of the study will be as follows: interviews: N=150 (50 per group); focus groups: N=60 (6 focus groups of 10 persons each; 3 to be conducted at the beginning of the process, and the other 3 after the interviews are analyzed.

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).

Canadian volunteers engage in a range of volunteer activities. This includes organizing or supervising events (57%), providing care or support (21%), and teaching/coaching (23%). The rate of volunteering is higher for youth (29% for those aged 15-24) and mid-adults (30% for those aged 35-54). Volunteerism tends to increase with the level of education, whereby those with a high school education were 19% compared to 39% for those with university degrees (p.33). Likewise, volunteerism is higher among those who have strong religious ties, among women, and among married people.

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 self-development, 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).

Informal learning and volunteer work in Canada

We already know that people acquire a variety of skills from volunteer work. Respondents to our national survey on informal learning (NALL 1998) who were involved in organized community work reported that they have gained interpersonal skills (62%), communication skills (58%), social skills (51%), organizing skills (43%) 38% fundraising skills (28%) and other technical skills (24%). These figures confirm the findings of Statistics Canada’s recent studies, which

report that 79% of volunteers have gained interpersonal skills (e.g. understanding people better, learning how to motivate people, coping with difficult situations), 68% have gained communication skills (e.g. public speaking, writing, conducting meetings, public relations), 63% have increased knowledge in a particular subject (e.g. environment, health, gender issues, politics, the law) and 57% have gained managerial and organizational skills. To a lesser degree, people also acquire fundraising skills (42%) and technical/office skills such as computers, bookkeeping, and cataloguing (33%) (Hall, McKeown and Roberts 2001). Additionally, volunteer organizations report that volunteering “can aid in learning the language, and it can help develop or showcase marketable skills and/or make contacts which can lead to employment” (Canadian Heritage, 1994; Port, 2001).

In the proposed study we want to illuminate the processes that lead to the acquisition of these and other skills (and also values and attitudes) in different contexts of voluntary work, the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that inform these dynamics, and the connections between informal learning in voluntary activities and the economy. We expect that these findings will generate concrete recommendations for educational, training, immigration and employment policies in Canada, on the one hand, and for the internal development of the voluntary sector, on the other.

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