EDUCATION-LINE

Unpaid work, informal learning and volunteer cultures

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Introduction

Although many studies on voluntary work in Canada have been undertaken (Hall, Barr, Easwaramoorthy, Sokolowski, & Salamon, 2005; Hall, McKeown, & Roberts, 2001), little is known yet about the learning dimension of volunteer work. The research literature on the extent, modes and effectiveness of volunteers' acquisition of new skills, knowledge, attitudes and values, and on the relationship between formal, non-formal and informal learning in this process, is scarce.

Two factors may explain the scant attention paid in the past to this issue. First, unpaid work (such as household work and volunteer work) is seldom considered as 'real work' by policy-makers and even by large sectors of the population, and therefore the mainstream literature on labour force training tends to focus on paid labour, often within the formal sector of the economy. Second, the field of informal learning has been at the margins of educational research, partly because such learning is not formalized and hence is more difficult to research (Livingstone 2002; Brown, 2000; Colley, Hodkinson, & Malcom, 2004; Foley, 1999; Eraut, 2000). Indeed, most studies on education and work focus on formal and non-formal education.

However, this is slowly changing. On the one hand, the feminist and nonprofit literatures have provided much evidence of the economic contributions of unpaid work, and policy-makers, researchers and the population at large are taking notice than non-market activities are important to the economy (Waring 1988; Statistics Canada. 1994; Hall et al. 2001). On the other hand, the recent sociology of education literature has shown evidence of the impact of informal learning in people's educational journeys, and that most of the learning connected to volunteer work falls into the category of informal learning (Livingstone 1999). As a result, the topic is capturing more attention from educational researchers.

Also scarce is research that highlights learning dimensions of different volunteer' cultures'. We

are using 'culture' in the sense of patterns, traits, and products considered as the expression of a particular period, class, community, or population. In this paper we attempt to rectify this gap by beginning a discussion on different volunteer cultures. Our entry point into this is the methodology that emerged from doing research with volunteers. This includes the culture of individual volunteers, the culture of volunteer organisations, and the culture of research in general.

Background to the research study

The 'Informal Learning of Volunteers' is one of thirteen projects within the Canadian research network 'Work and Lifelong Learning in the New Economy'. This Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) funded project is part of the Initiative for the New Economy (INE)(1). Among the thirteen projects of the network, eleven focus on paid work, and only two investigate unpaid work. This study examines the connections between informal learning and unpaid work among five different case studies of volunteers. In this paper we report findings related to three of these case studies. The first case study included residents of housing co-operatives (n=40) who serve as committee and board members of the co-ops in which they live. The second case study included immigrants (n=45) in search of 'Canadian work experience'. The third case study included volunteers who work in local development through a variety of 'healthy communities' initiatives (n=40).

We have previously published separate papers on these three case studies (Mundel, Duguid, & Schugurensky, 2004; Mundel & Schugurensky, 2005; Slade, Luo, & Schugurensky, 2005). In this paper we take a broader view on the three cases, setting them in the Canadian context, connecting them with a discussion on volunteer cultures, and discussing some issues related to research design and to the dissemination of research findings.

Volunteerism and Learning: The Canadian Context

The societal impact of volunteer work is substantial. The Canadian National Survey on Giving, Volunteering, and Participation (NSGVP) reported that in the year 2000, volunteer work in Canada amounted to approximately one billion hours (Hall et al, 2001). This represented the equivalent of 549,000 full-time jobs, 11% of the total labour contribution, and an addition of about $13 billion to the national economy (Hall et al, 2001, p 32). Two complementary surveys (Statistics Canada, 2004a; 2004b) found that non-profit and voluntary organizations draw on two billion volunteer hours per year - which is equivalent to one million full-time jobs- and that volunteer work account for nearly 20 per cent of the total value of gross domestic product. Moreover, volunteers contribute significant amounts to the economy in out-of-pocket expenses ($841 million in the late 1980s) that are not reimbursed (Hall et al., 2001; Quarter, Mook & Richmond, 2002). The recognition of the economic and social contribution of volunteer work, compounded with the new awareness of the impressive nature and scope of this contribution, are helping to recognise that volunteer work is indeed 'real work'.

Studies seldom report learning as a possible primary motivation for volunteering (Percy, Barnes, Graddon, & Machell, 1988). For instance, in Canada, the most cited reasons for volunteering are, in decreasing order, 'helping a worthy cause', 'use skills and experiences', 'be personally affected by a cause supported by the organization, 'explore own strengths', 'fulfill religious obligations', and 'because my friends volunteer' (Hall et al. 2001). The absence of references to learning as a motivation for volunteering is probably due to the fact that surveys on this topic do not tend to include learning as a possible response item. However, a related response item that may include learning is 'to improve job opportunities'. Although many surveys show that volunteers do acquire knowledge and skills from volunteering, for the most part learning is a peripheral theme in the field of studies on volunteerism. To a large extent, this is because volunteering is usually seen as the business of doing, and learning is often seen as a more passive/reflective activity (Cox, 2002) or as the result of a structured curriculum. The few studies that focus on volunteering and learning note a strong association between the mission of the volunteers' organization and the content of what is learned (Elsdon, 1995; Ilsley, 1990; Percy et al., 1988). A recent study has shown that there is a stronger association between community volunteer work time and community-related informal learning, on the one hand, than between paid employment time and job-related informal learning, on the other (Livingstone, 1999).

It is pertinent to point out that Canada is one of the most multicultural societies in the world. Indeed, millions of people from more than 200 different cultural and ethnic backgrounds now reside in Canada. Today, about 18% of the population were born outside of Canada. This constitutes the highest immigration rates in the world after Australia. Most immigrants are settling in Canada's major urban centres, and presently approximately half of the residents of Toronto were born abroad. Toronto is one of the most diverse cities in the world with a population of 2.5 million people from 169 countries; there are more than 100 languages spoken in Toronto (City of Toronto, 2006). Both our research group members and our participants reflected this cultural diversity. For the purposes of doing research in a culturally diverse city with multiple cultures of volunteerism, and with culturally different community partners we needed to be creative and thoughtful. Developing methodological designs that reflected all of these cultural expressions was challenging and fascinating.

Culture and research design

It was important for us to ground our research in the work of community-based organizations (2). For each case study, we collaborated with a relevant community partner. The Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition (OHCC) was the partner for the community development case. For the co-operative housing study, we partnered with the Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto (CHFT). For the immigrant volunteer study, we partnered with A Commitment to Training and Employment for Women (ACTEW). For each case study we faced the challenge of adapting the interview guide to their particular volunteer cultures. This challenge was somewhat mitigated by the fact that several members of our team had worked with our

partners before, and had a good understanding of issues faced by volunteers in each location.

Within each case study we collectively developed a research plan, which included aims and goals, how to recruit volunteers for participation and methods of data collection. We decided we would use focus groups and in-depth semi-structured interviews in order to try to get to the heart of volunteers' feeling, motivations, learning and outcomes. A draft interview guide was created for each case study and submitted to the community partners for feedback. We then conducted focus groups with our community partners and other relevant stakeholders to refine the interview guide. After the interview guide was revised, we conducted one or two pilot interviews to further refine the interview guide. We proceeded with the interviews after this iterative process of consultation and collaboration.

Through this design process we engaged in a number of co-creative strategies. While each stakeholder in the process came with different motives and varying goals, we were able to work together to design a research study with multiple case studies that directly aligned with and transcended the individual rationales. We were able to co-design an interview guide that considered sequence of the questions, the length, the format and the goals.

To illustrate this process we use the case study of the housing co-operatives volunteers. We asked volunteers to discuss their motivations for joining the co-op, whether they felt appreciated, the sense of value they got from their volunteer work and learning, and whether they felt their learning was recognized by other institutions. We found that due to the tacit nature of most volunteer learning, we needed to employ specific probes in the interview to elicit detailed descriptions of learning. Hence, through the course of the interviews, 32 indicators of learning in housing co-ops emerged.

In the case of immigrant volunteers, we took into account the demographic significance of the Chinese population in Toronto (China has been the top source country of immigrants to Canada since 1998). Hence, we decided to complement the interviews with a focus group exclusively with recent Chinese immigrants who were volunteering in order to access the Canadian labour market. This focus group was conducted in Mandarin and English.

In the case of the community development volunteers, in several cases we noticed the difficulty to trace a clear dividing line between volunteer and paid activities. Indeed, in some cases people reported to do a particular community development work during the day as paid employment in a government or non-governmental agency, and as volunteer work during the evenings and weekends. Likewise, some participants reported that during some months of the year they may obtain some funding to do the work through a grant, and once the grant was over they would continue on a volunteer basis until new funding was available again. This type of volunteer profile led us to adapt our questions to their particular realities.

Each of the three case studies was located in different social locations, meaning the

community partners organisations. We began to see patterns of volunteer cultures forming out of the community-based organisation. Emerging from the research we have categorized 'profiles' or cultures of volunteers based on Mundel and Schugurensky's model (2005) developed from the same data. While each community partner organisation has its own particular culture of volunteerism, these boundaries were not firm and fast, and there were overlaps between the different cultures of volunteers.

The first case study, the healthy community volunteers, correspond most closely to the most typical understanding of volunteerism, which consists of work that is freely chosen, unremunerated, and of benefit to the community. In other words, this is the altruistic volunteer who is primarily motivated to work out of a desire to promote the wellbeing of a community, with little or no self-interested motivation.

The housing co-operative members are largely related to the profile of the socially-coerced volunteer. Although their volunteering is to some extent freely chosen, it is largely done because it is expected by the community in which they live. Within the co-operative sector in general, volunteering is understood as participation, and in housing co-operatives this is part of the ethos of the organization. It is assumed that the effective functioning of co-ops depends on the volunteer efforts of its members. Housing co-operatives are member controlled, and the members who live in a co-op are the ones responsible for running it. Each member has a vote and every year members elect a Board of Directors from the membership (Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto, 2006). The Canadian co-op housing movement emphasizes participation, and members are strongly encouraged to volunteer their time to assist on formal or informal basis with the co-op's ongoing operations (Goldblatt, 2000).

The third case study responds to the profile of the intern volunteer. These volunteers work in an unpaid or poorly paid capacity in order to gain entry into the labour market. Intern volunteers typically have been youth without job experience trying to set a foot in a particular industry or service. This category increasingly includes immigrant volunteers who do volunteer work because their previous international work experience and educational credentials were not recognised in Canada. There is no overt coercion of people into this volunteering activity, but the labour market is structured in such a way that it is very difficult to access anything without the so-called 'Canadian experience'. Interestingly enough, in a departure from traditional volunteer work, in many cases this type of volunteer work takes place in the for-profit sector, which calls the question as to what extent this is really volunteer work and to what extent this is labour exploitation (Mundel & Schugurensky, 2005).

Here we have presented two layers of culture represented in the research. First is the culture the individual volunteers brought to the study in terms of ethnicity, language, ability, gender or race. The second, one that emerged from conducting the study, is the culture of volunteers. This represents the intentions, motivations, benefits or outcomes of the volunteers themselves and for the community-based organisations. The set of issues pertain to the culture of research in the academy.

Spreading the word: academic and non-traditional venues

The WALL Research Network is located within academia. There is a strong mandate from the funder, SSHRC, to disseminate research findings in particular ways, typically conference presentations and publications in academic journals. One of the strengths of the WALL project has been its emphasis on partnering with community organizations for all stages of research. When doing collaborative research in communities and with community organizations as partners, an important matter is the dissemination of findings, follow-up and reporting. Traditional dissemination venues are often not open to community organizers, nor do they necessarily speak to the community's problems, barriers or needs.

The academic culture of research requires us to disseminate findings through particular channels. This we have accomplished. We have presented preliminary research findings at a number of academic conferences. However, in doing research that is partnered with community-based organisations, we needed to also work with them to discuss and report findings, observations and to develop recommendations and plans for action. The academic culture of research does not necessarily demand this of researchers; yet, the follow-up, dialogue and development of next steps is a crucial part of community-based research culture.

Therefore, we presented at conferences and seminars organized by our partners. We have also written short articles that have been published in journals and newsletters produced by our partners. We have also found some innovative ways to share our research findings in a serendipitous way. For example, a Chinese journalist who hosts a community television show read our call for Chinese immigrant volunteers to participate in a focus group. She expressed interest in the topic and requested permission to film the focus group. Once we secured consent from the participants, we agreed and the session was recorded. As a result, a film documentary on this issue was produced. In this way, the focus group became not only a session for information gathering and exchange of ideas and suggestions among participants, but also doubled as a dissemination tool to the wider Chinese community in Toronto.

The Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto (CHFT) also published an article on the preliminary findings in one of their newsletters, and we developed specific recommendations for CHFT and for the individual co-operatives to help them to further the learning potential of their volunteers.

Summary

The goal of this study is to contribute to a better understanding of the learning dimension of volunteer work. This is still an incipient area for research, partly because both the study of unpaid work and of informal learning is marginal in the area of education and work. In this paper we highlighted multiple meanings of culture and how they impacted methodology:

individual volunteer culture, community-based culture of volunteerism, and the culture of research in the academy.

We reported on three case studies that correspond to different volunteer cultures. In the case of housing co-operatives, volunteering is an explicit expectation for the management and governance of the organisation. In the case of new immigrants, volunteering is largely coerced by the labour market of the host society. In the third case, volunteering is aimed at promoting social and ecological change. The organisations within which formal volunteering takes place can be quite different from one another, which in turn affects the learning and learning potential of the volunteer experience.

This research only skims the surface in terms of the many cultural influences in volunteering and informal learning. In closing, in this paper we had to address three main challenges. The first was to find methodological strategies to elicit the informal learning of volunteer workers. The second was to develop strategies that related to the multiple meanings of culture. The third was to bridge the gap between town and gown, to connect the logic of academic culture to the more urgent practical needs of our community partners.

Notes

1. The P.I. is David Livingstone. More information can be obtained from http://wall.oise. utoronto.ca].

2. We want to thank CHFT, ACTEW and Healthy Communities Coalition for collaborating with us on these case studies.

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