

INTEGRATING THE VOLUNTEER ROLE INTO THE COLLEGE CURRICULUM: AN EXPERIMENT

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Can the volunteer role be integrated into the college curriculum so that college, student, client, and community all benefit? And if so, how?

The purpose of this paper is to report on an experiment in which Freshman students in a woman's college worked as volunteers in various social agencies in the Boston metropolitan area as an integral part of a course in sociology called Urban Communities. The main objective of this experiment was to expose the entering college student to the life and problems of the urban community through an actual field work experience in the role of volunteer. In the attempt to accomplish this objective, the course was expected to provide volunteer help to social agencies requesting such help, to place the student's knowledge and attitudes about a community in proper perspective, to create enough interest in the problems of an urban environment so as to effect future community involvement, to contribute to the student's personal growth and maturity, and to give the student an opportunity to explore career interests. No specific hypotheses were tested in this first experiment, since the intention was to observe the various dimensions of an inductive approach to learning whereby the student would be gradually led from the empirical world of the community to the theoretical and conceptual world of the classroom. The traditional approach is to begin with the theory in the classroom and then apply it to the world outside. Although the idea of "field work" is not an uncommon practice in the social sciences, what is unique is the utilization of a "natural" role such as that of volunteer to aid in the achievement of knowledge.

The decision to use the volunteer role in this experiment was made because it appeared to present several advantages from both the administrative and pedagogical points of view. First of all, placing students in social agencies would be a relatively easy task to accomplish in a city where the demand was high for college student volunteers. In addition, an already established agency would provide the necessary degree of structure for volunteer participation since the organizational staff would assume at least initial responsibility for assigning, orienting, and supervising the students. A second advantage of the volunteer role was that college students facing a new situation for the first time would feel comfortable in the volunteer role, especially if they had previously participated in volunteer work and came from socio-economic backgrounds in which volunteering was a tradition. Third, since most social agencies are located either in or near the central city or its depressed neighbor-

hoods, the volunteer assignment would provide students with an opportunity to go into parts of the city with which they were not likely to be familiar. At the same time, affiliation with an agency would be less likely to induce resentment by the indigenous neighborhood population than if students lacked such affiliation; moreover, they would go where they were wanted. Fourth, the volunteer role had the advantage of sustaining the students' interest. For one thing, it was task-oriented: students had something to do rather than merely observe what was going on. For another, it was action-oriented to a greater or less degree, requiring students to make decisions on their own as to how they would solve the social problems confronting them.

Twenty-five Freshman students were randomly selected according to their career interests for each of the two semesters in which the course was offered from all those incoming Freshman students responding during the previous summer to an invitation to take the course. The total percentage of these interested students constituted 65 percent of the entire Freshman class.

Students were assigned to agencies which included settlement houses, hospitals, government agencies, and a few miscellaneous social action programs, some of which were part of the anti-poverty program. The presence of a student volunteer clearinghouse in the college served to reduce the effort needed to locate agencies recruiting college student volunteers, and placing two or more students in the same agency was an efficient way of handling this problem. However, it was still necessary to make telephone calls to the selected agencies to explain the purpose of the course and to elicit their cooperation in offering students the kinds of experiences which would give them the broadest possible view of the urban community, yet at the same time offer the agencies the maximum possible utilization of the students' talents and energy. Needless to say, the promise of non-dropout volunteers brought an enthusiastic response from the agencies contacted.

Besides their volunteer participation (one morning or one afternoon a week for approximately two to three hours), students attended classes for two class periods each week, read five books on the various aspects of urban sociology, toured the city and its periphery in a three-hour guided bus tour, took a mid-term and final examination, and wrote a term paper on a topic concerning the urban community which derived from their volunteer participation. They were also required to keep a weekly log of their experiences as volunteers—to record what they saw, heard, and felt, whether or not this seemed to be directly related to the urban community. These logs, examinations, and term papers, together with a questionnaire administered on an anonymous basis at the end of the semester and the instructor's personal observations and interviews with the individual students, provided the data on which the following summary of the findings and conclusions of this experiment is based.

The most significant finding in the course was that the field work exper-

ience was an exciting, necessary, and different way of learning. Students indicated that they felt that the best way to learn about the community was to relate field work to class work. There was not one student who did not feel that the field work was an important and integral part of the course. They felt it gave them an opportunity to see and understand the urban community in a way that class lectures and assigned readings did not. Actual contact with and involvement in community life made the knowledge gained in the classroom more meaningful.

The particular volunteer assignment was an important determinant in the extent of the student's enthusiasm for the course. However, even those students who were either indifferent or dissatisfied with their particular assignments (about one-fifth) thought that the idea of the volunteer role was a strong feature of the course. In addition, for the Freshman student the urban community was defined mainly as a slum. Those students who worked in the slum areas or with culturally disadvantaged individuals or groups in the various settings expressed the greatest degree of satisfaction with the course, while those who were located in the downtown business area or who had routine and unchallenging tasks or limited interpersonal relationships with people having problems felt less satisfied.

Despite certain recognized shortcomings in the placement process, did the course accomplish its objectives? Did students learn about the life and problems of the urban community? This study indicates that they did learn. The fact that the various aspects of the course—the volunteer role, the class lectures, the discussion periods, the bus tours, the reading assignments, the independent study projects—were all integrated into one total experience makes it difficult to state unequivocally that they learned more than they would if even one of these elements were missing. For one thing, there was no discernible difference in the quality of the examinations from previous classes in which traditional lecture and discussion procedures were followed without a field work requirement. For another, no two instructors would be likely to agree on just what ought to be learned in a course in urban sociology even if they agreed that something was learned. Although evaluation of the pedagogical merits of field work might require a controlled experiment, the fact remains that the students stated emphatically that their volunteer involvement should be an integral part of instruction. Far from becoming expert urbanologists, they nonetheless showed a substantial progression toward a rational perspective about the city and the people who lived in it. Even within the period of one semester they felt that their attitudes about the city and its people had changed in the direction of greater understanding and tolerance. However, there was no evidence to indicate that they had made any changes in career decisions since entering the course.

Thus, while the degree and nature of the knowledge gained by the stud-

ents and the exact contribution which the volunteer role made to the academic goals set for the course must await more systematic study than the research procedures used here revealed in forming the above conclusions, there is far less question as to the emotional impact of the volunteer experience on the student. A first-hand view of the neighborhoods and life in the inner city and the interpersonal relationships developed in the course of volunteering constituted a deeply stirring experience for these college students. They expressed over and over again in their personal logs such words as *shocked*, *amazed*, *surprised*, *afraid*, and *excited* on the one hand, and *very satisfied*, *thrilled*, *rewarding*, and *worthwhile* on the other. They attributed their changing attitudes to exposure to poverty and neglect, ethnicity, race, and urban blight. Their own impressions were that they had derived strong personal benefits in the form of growth and maturity, freedom and excitement.

Another interesting observation may be noted. It was not until the initial shock was over that these college students began to write or speak of wanting to help the person or persons whom they had been recruited to help. What seemed to occur was a movement from a self-oriented to an other-oriented position and that, despite earlier expressed desires to take the course to learn about the city, they appeared to use this experience to meet personal and emotional needs. It may well be that a variety of motivating forces were operative simultaneously which the present research effort was unable to determine.

In any case, this finding constituted an important consideration in reaching the conclusion that the specific content of the course might be less important than providing the novice college student with the opportunity to invade the inner city, relate to different groups, and to do so within a goal-oriented structure such as that provided by voluntary participation rather than through mere observation or other kind of field work assignment. What was clearly evident from the experiment was that learning at the college level requires some socialization prerequisites when students of high or middle socio-economic backgrounds are confronted for the first time with the social problems of poverty, race, and deprivation. There may indeed be a kind of conditioning or emotional "readiness" which must be cultivated similar to that found in the elementary school stage when the first-grade child is about to begin reading. In this respect the volunteer role related to the course as described above appeared to serve this "readiness" function by favorably predisposing the novice college student to academic study through an emotional experience not provided for in the conventional college curriculum. This conclusion points to the failure of college-level pedagogy to consider adequately the needs of the large majority of college students—those who come from environments which have been relatively free of social problems. In a sense their particular kind of deprivation is not unlike that of their lower socio-economic counterparts residing in the urban ghettos: both have experienced a denial of

certain kinds of learning experiences and social relationships by virtue of their residential locations.

What were the implications of the experiment for the further involvement of college students in changing their society? The students in this course evidently achieved a sufficient degree of confidence that they might be able to change the undesirable aspects of what they had learned about the urban community. Many students expressed the strong conviction that changes were badly needed. They stated that they would continue their work in the agencies after the course had ended if their schedules would permit even though they were not required to do so, and almost all stated that they planned to continue to be involved in volunteer work after graduation from college. It might thus be possible to conclude that they had internalized the volunteer role as a constructive approach to the solution of social problems. There was no anger or disillusionment expressed that changes could not be made in the future given both the continuation of volunteering and the acquisition of further knowledge. This conclusion indicates that volunteer work which is not integrated into a course (most volunteering) may have a different impact on both the present and future behavior of college students than when it is thus integrated, an observation which clearly calls for further research. It may be that students in the course-related volunteer role view the role in less change-oriented terms than do students in the non-course-related volunteer role.

A final word concerning recommendations. Some of these have to do with the discipline of sociology itself and others with the volunteer role. With respect to sociology, the principal conclusion drawn from this experiment was that it would be more desirable to introduce the volunteer role in an introductory course where students could concentrate on learning the basic sociological concepts through their volunteer experience without also having to cover the vast amount of substantive knowledge included in the standard urban sociology course as it is usually offered in the space of one semester. The principal conclusion drawn concerning the volunteer role was that students should have full knowledge about the approach to be used in the course so that they might assume all the obligations of the role, including the willingness and even enthusiasm to want to contribute to the solution of urban problems. The principal responsibility thus falls on the instructor to see that his students have both meaningful and academically sound experiences but also to insure that the cooperating agencies are not exploited in any way.