

# Administration of the VOLUNTEER TEACHER

By William A. Draves

The increased recognition of the volunteer teacher in adult education today has highlighted the need for good administration of the volunteer instructor. A dynamic and barely tapped force in organizations, volunteer instructors can energize new organizations, revitalize old ones, boost ongoing programs, and contribute far more than the "costs" of administration.

Numbers-wise, the volunteer teacher is an important element in the adult learning scene. Some 13 per cent of the participants in adult education courses each year take at least one course sponsored by a non-profit community organization, according to an Office of Education study.<sup>1</sup> And 78 per cent of the people teaching these courses were volunteers. *Over a half-million people serve as volunteer instructors each year.*

The following concerns were formulated after a three year experience working with volunteer instructors offering classes to the general public. The premise for the article rests with the concept that the volunteer teacher functions optimally in a structure relatively free from constraints where s/he is an independent and creative entity rather than a sophisticated envelope stuffer.

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## THE UNIQUENESS OF THE VOLUNTEER TEACHER

Why people volunteer to teach, or volunteer to do anything for that matter, is a perpetual question. The reason does not lie in any socio-economic analysis of volunteerism. Volunteer teachers come from various backgrounds. There are professionals, housewives, people working at manual labor jobs, unemployed, twelve year olds, elderly and high school drop outs. While education programs may direct their publicity to reach selected audiences, all kinds of people are responsive to volunteering to teach others.

The uniqueness of the volunteer teacher stems from the desire to share knowledge. People do not volunteer to teach in order to help others, in the main, but out of the need to share knowledge. Though some people surely do volunteer in the traditional sense with a feeling of compassion or responsibility for helping others, this is not the basic motivation. The motivation for most people comes from within, and is expressed in a desire to share knowledge because it is self-enriching and fulfilling.

Two contrasting phenomena explain the motivation. One is the tremendous increase in wealth of knowledge that individuals possess today. A majority of people today know something that someone else would like to learn, and that knowledge extends far beyond traditional subject matter into hobbies, practical skills, points of view, physical skills, experiences, experiments and old-fashioned

wisdom. We have never seen such an abundance of individual skills, knowledge and experiences before. Understandings that the average citizen here takes for granted would make him or her an expert in many other countries. Indeed, within our own society, many people take for granted talents they have (such as ethnic cooking) that others consider valuable.

At the same time, however, the avenues for transferring ideas, skills, or experiences are becoming scarce. A hundred years ago people offered what they knew during barn raisings, quilting bees, in the extended family, with an apprentice, and in bumping up against each other. Twenty years ago people taught informally in churches, from parents to children, in clubs and organizations, in youth groups, with neighbors. Today participation in organizations is not as prevalent. Adults are not the same models that they were even ten years ago. Frequent moving lends impermanence to affiliations. And so as these knowledges pile up, the opportunities to release them are decreasing. These two forces have combined to create the impetus and need for people to want to share their talents with others in a teaching/learning situation.

What that means for the administrator is that people are volunteering out of a healthy self-interest. They are not do-gooders or schmaltzy change-the-world types. A working assumption for the administrator is that the class learning situation is benefiting the teacher as well as the participants. The administrator should take into account that critical fact in recruiting teachers, publicizing for them, and maintaining good group experiences.

Some other characteristics of the volunteer teacher are the following:

- \* *Volunteer teachers possess a great deal of content knowledge, or information about the subject matter, but often are not acquainted with process orientation or with the proper teaching of adults. Some volunteers, of course, are naturally or experientially oriented to good group process, and may even be more effective teachers than those "schooled" in technique. Lack of process orientation seems to be a particular problem with those people teaching technical subjects, and surprisingly, academic topics.*
- \* *Volunteer teachers do not have much time, even though teaching takes a lot of time. Volunteers have just about*

enough time to prepare for a class and give it. Volunteer instruction takes a great deal of time and thought in preparation.

- \* *The involvement of the volunteer teacher is likely to be a short term one, around one year or so. Of course, there are always volunteers who are mainstays and "old reliables", but many people will see their association as being a limited one and feel satisfied with that.*
- \* *There is a great deal of commitment and enthusiasm among volunteer teachers. They are excited by the idea of teaching for free.*
- \* *The reward for teaching is internal. External rewards such as money or certificates do not exist for the volunteer teacher, but there are internal rewards such as satisfaction from doing a class well, assisting someone else, and fulfilling the need to share knowledge.*
- \* *There is the need to accomplish something. Adults, for better or worse, are stuck with both a time consciousness that places a value on the best use of one's time and a perception of situations as problems to be solved. Thus the adult volunteer teacher wants the class to be a good use of his or her time and to help solve a problem, namely, helping others to learn.*
- \* *There is a need to be accepted as a teacher. Without formal training, a title, or external rewards, the volunteer teacher has less than a confident image of him or herself as an instructor. Regardless of merit or competency, the volunteer has to have assurance at some point that she/he is doing a satisfactory job. This is most frequently and convincingly provided by the participants in the class.*

WORKING WITH THE VOLUNTEER TEACHER

In order to properly administer a program utilizing volunteer teachers, it is essential to understand the volunteers' limitations and potential problems. The good administration of a program can turn some of these handicaps around into valuable assets and minimize the others so as to make the volunteer teacher as productive as a paid instructor, and probably more effective in a few areas.

There are, of course, the ten commandments of working with volunteers. They apply to teachers as well as to other volunteers:

1. Continued participation depends upon rewards;
2. Volunteers must see the relationship of the job they do, however small, to the total effort;
3. Volunteers must be made to feel the importance of their contribution;
4. The first efforts of a volunteer must be simple enough to insure success;
5. Volunteers must have opportunities to grow and learn;
6. Volunteers must be encouraged to make as many decisions as possible;
7. Volunteers work best in a friendly, warm atmosphere, where their efforts are obviously needed and appreciated;
8. Volunteers must not be taken for granted;
9. Keep volunteers informed about developments in the organization;
10. Care enough about volunteers to learn about their strengths.<sup>2</sup>

But there are challenges that apply particularly to those teaching. For instance, volunteer teachers have skills they are not aware of. The average person has many talents that people would like to learn. S/he does not realize that s/he has those abilities or that other people would be interested in learning them. Persons who have not served as teachers find it difficult to conceive of themselves in that role, says one educator. "A businessman often doesn't stop to think that he might make a good teacher. The plumber who didn't complete high school may know that he's a good plumber, but any kind of teaching has an aura of advanced formal education about it."<sup>3</sup>

Finding out what skills a person possesses and which are marketable is a tricky process. One administrator recruits teachers this way:

*The "ten minute quiz" is a fast and fun way of getting volunteer teachers. As an administrator, I know what people want to learn and what classes will be popular or at least potentially viable. When someone approaches me and says,*

*"Your program is great! I only wish I had something to contribute," I start by asking what that person does for a living, what his hobbies are, what he does in his spare time. As soon as I find something that might go, I make up a course title on the spot.*

*For example, a middle aged woman walked into our office and asked me to speak to her AAUW chapter. After telling me how much she admired the program and wished she had something to offer, she mentioned she was working. What kind of job? Real Estate. My response was that a course on "Buying a House" would get 10-15 eager people. A young woman came to one of our meetings. Her job? Interior decorating. "Budget Interior Decorating" for people trying to get some tips on improving their home without spending much money would get at least 20 people. As soon as you mention one subject they catch on and can come up with others.*

The technique is the reverse of the usual approach to volunteerism. The listing of organizational needs and asking if anyone can type or teach basic English provides the person with an excuse for not volunteering, and leaves the impression that s/he is merely filling a hole. Instead, the administrator starts with a person's skill bank and then matches it with the need. Rather than filling a hole, the volunteer has created something.

People with white collar jobs or a college degree are not the only ones who have talents to offer. Those without formal education or interesting jobs also are a valuable source of knowledge, often possessing skills the educated white collar person does not have. The volunteer recruiter mentioned above relates:

*A couple of years back two men came into my office, one asking about the classes we had to offer. The other man was short, with a stubble of a beard and went into a high-school-back-of-the-classroom slouch when he found out we were something like a school. After answering the first man's questions, I tried to engage the other man. At first he said, "You know, school just went in one side of my head and out the other." But after finding out his occupation, which was a short order cook, and a little more about him, I told him there were people who could get a*

job if they knew something about fast food cooking. After awhile, he was sitting on the edge of his chair claiming, "Not anybody can fry an egg you know. It's a skill. You don't want your yolk broke, or the edges burned." And the man was willing to teach.

Another fundamental problem with volunteers is one common to all teachers - they have a tendency to teach as if they were in school. Volunteer teachers are unacquainted with andragogy, or how adults learn, and have little knowledge of good process techniques. Their only teaching models are schools or college, both of which are poor ones to follow for the informal teaching of adults.

The administrator needs to brief the teachers on methods of instruction. Because of the school model, a person teaching an academic subject will have a tendency to preach the subject, giving lectures and assigning more readings than the participants will have time to read. For technical subjects there may be no model at all and teachers will want some hints on how to proceed. The volunteer teacher needs to know that s/he does not have to use a blackboard or give a lecture in order to have an effective learning situation.

A peculiar problem with voluntary learning situations is that the criteria for a successful class is very high, much higher than a formal school setting. Because there are no external rewards, and because it is so easy for participants not to come back the next week, the class must be truly worthwhile. Unfortunately, the attitudes of both the teacher and participants reinforce the high standard, which of course is most difficult to achieve. A volunteer teacher should be informed the class may not go as well as s/he expects it to, and that does not mean the class is a failure.

This leads into another problem in dealing with volunteer teachers - how to deal with failure. In the learning situation which we are discussing, a non-credited, more or less informal learning situation, the drop out rate is very high. People drop out for many reasons, not all of which are bad. Some people may drop out because they have learned all they have come to learn, and others may drop out because the subject matter was not quite what they were looking for. This is a legitimate drop out and volunteer instructors should be aware of this. Others will drop out because of a lack of self-motivation or extenuating circumstances, but this too does not necessarily mean that

the teacher is to blame. For a class that has seemingly failed, it is important for the administrator to get in touch with the teacher to find out why the class may have failed, and to ask the teacher to try again.

#### A SCHEMA FOR ADMINISTERING THE VOLUNTEER TEACHER

The following is a sample schema for administering a session of classes utilizing volunteer teachers. Of prime concern in administering such a session is that the volunteer teacher feel in control of the class in terms of both content and process. Because the person has volunteered out of his or her own need for sharing knowledge, and also has some enthusiasm and commitment, the volunteer feels constrained by a previously arranged situation. Let the volunteer take the class and run it. What is taught or talked out, and how the learning situation is structured, is up to the volunteer instructor and the participants.

Logistics should be done for volunteer teachers if possible. The place should be lined up and other problems worked out, such as who is to open up the building, is there space enough for everybody, chairs, supplies, etc. Again, because of the interest in their class and time constraints, don't confuse teachers with other issues, such as, how do we run this organization? Organizational matters should be left up to the staff, other volunteers, committees, or board of directors. A few key teachers who have taught for a time and show an interest in these matters could be sought to help out.

With these things in mind, the following represents a sample schema for a typical ten week class session.

Weeks -4 to -2: The administrator should seek out volunteer instructors and brief them. The orientation should include a statement of the organization, what to expect and teaching tips. The teacher should have a general but clear concept of the organization, its purposes, goals, and method of operation. A description of what the teacher can expect is most helpful. For example, what kind of people will be coming? How many registrants do you usually get? What are the participants looking for?

Good teaching tips are often appreciated by many instructors, especially those volunteering for the first time. The orientation can be done casually or formally. The information could be given informally over the phone or in person. A

pamphlet mailed to teachers or an information session for all instructors are examples of a structured orientation.

Weeks -2 to 0. The administrator concentrates on registering participants and working out logistics in terms of time, place, supplies and equipment needed. Logistical work should be completed before the first class begins.

Week 1. Critical Point. The administrator should see or call each teacher as soon as possible after the first session and ask, "How did it go?" The first session is usually the most important one, as the teacher will be getting over primary tension, s/he will see how many people showed up, and participants will find out whether or not they are really interested in the class. Any problems or insecurities that develop need to be corrected shortly after the first meeting. The follow up call is both a debugging mechanism and a morale support for the teacher.

Weeks 4 - 7. The administrator who has some time or wants to do a particularly good job may want to sponsor a workshop on good teaching (optional). The workshop should be short, one week night or a half day on the weekend, and feature the philosophy of facilitating and tips on techniques. These could include how to lead a discussion, role playing, learning games, or a discussion of problem situations.

Weeks 7 - 10. Critical Point. By this time the class has either gone well or poorly, and the teacher has some ideas about the class and what might go better next time. This is a time when the administrator should hold a social gathering to offer some thanks to the teachers and give them a chance to get to know other teachers and participants in an informal atmosphere. A constant element in volunteerism is the desire for social interaction with other people, and this desire can be satisfied (in order to keep your volunteers) and also used as a support building session. The gathering should be informal and not fancy, with some food and drink and a chance to talk and get to know others. Serious discussions should be done informally but not discouraged. The good administrator will roam around, key in on discussions, take mental notes, and solicit further help.

Weeks 10 to +2. Critical Point. After the classes are over, the administrator still has some work to do. S/he must call each teacher for the following - comments, thank you, and re-enlistment. Comments on

the class plus suggestions and criticisms on the administration of the classes should be sought. "What did we do that we should change next time?" "What criticisms do you have on the operation?" The administrator should express a short but explicit "thank you" to the volunteer teacher. Although the teacher obviously got a lot out of the class, most appreciate an acknowledgement of their contributions. And finally, with the last class still in mind, the volunteer will be in the best frame of mind to agree to teach again. If the class failed, the administrator will be in the best position to convince the person to try again. If the class was a success, it is the most opportune time to encourage another good happening to occur.

The volunteer instructor offers knowledge, enthusiasm, a touch of common wisdom, and a great deal of warmth and community in a learning situation. While understanding their unique characteristics and how to deal with the problems of the volunteer teacher, the administrator can utilize this wealth of human talent to the optimum for both learning and organizational benefit.

#### Footnotes

1. Evelyn R. Kay, "Adult Education in Community Organizations 1972," Office of Education (Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1974), p. 22.
2. Julia Abrahamson, "Who Volunteers and Why? in Working With Volunteers (Washington, D.C., Adult Education Association of the U. S. A., 1956), pp. 10-12.
3. Jane Lichtman, Bring Your Own Bag, A Report on Free Universities, (Washington, D. C., American Association for Higher Education, 1973), p. 34.