

NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO SCHOOL FOR SKILLS DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF YOUNG VOLUNTEERS

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ABSTRACT

This contribution is based on a qualitative study we carried out in Switzerland and which aimed to explore the relationship between resources available in non-profit organizations and the involvement in learning of young volunteers. We conducted 40 interviews with young volunteers aged 16 to 25 years. The aims of our research were firstly to find out what influenced young people to engage in voluntary work. Secondly, to expand the understanding on how, when, and in what circumstances youth voluntary work could be a fruitful and a stimulating learning environment. And finally, to identify and to put a value to the learning outcomes acquired by young volunteers in order to facilitate the transition between their various spheres of activity (training, employment). We indeed wished to support young people in raising their awareness of the learning outcomes which they had achieved in order to connect these with a training or vocational project. The results of the research show that most associations devote special care to welcoming newcomers, set up more or less formalized pathways, and provide support and affordances that favour gradual integration into a community of practice. Young volunteers take advantage of these resources to engage in action, and therefore in learning. The challenge for them is then to become conscious of the wealth of the learning outcomes acquired from voluntary work in order to transfer them to others contexts, such as a training project or professional work.

INTRODUCTION

This article will present the results of a study we conducted for the Swiss Society for the Common Good (SGG/SSUP) two years ago which explored the opportunities of learning offered to young people by formal voluntary work. We will first give some information about the context, aims, target group and methodology of the research. Then, we will present the main results which are illustrated with some excerpts from interviews.

In Switzerland, around 33% of the permanent resident population aged 15 and over had at least one *formal or informal* volunteering activity in 2013 (Bundesamt für Statistik, 2015). *Formal or organized volunteering* is developed in an organization and *informal volunteering* is carried out individually outside of an organizational context. A volunteer is someone who undertakes community service work of his / her own free will without a wage.

The aims of our study were firstly to find out what influenced young people to engage in voluntary work. Secondly, to expand the understanding on how, when, and in what circumstances youth voluntary work may be a fruitful and a stimulating learning environment. Finally, to identify and to put a value to the learning outcomes acquired by young volunteers in order to facilitate the transition between their various spheres of activity (training, employment). We indeed wished to support young people in raising their awareness of the learning outcomes that they had achieved in order to connect these with a training or vocational project.

These are some of the questions we wanted to raise with our research in exploring the context of learning through volunteering activities:

- What are the mechanisms underlying the engagement and longer-term commitment of young people in volunteering activities?
- What is the learning process prevailing in non-profit organizations “employing” young volunteers, and what are the conditions needed in terms of resources and guidance so that this learning occurs?
- What is the nature of the (learning) outcomes developed through voluntary work?

Our main postulate is that voluntary work can be considered as work, even if it is not a paid work; it demands a subjective investment and is realized in a framework with rules and objectives. We thus consider work in a broad sense (Arendt, 1961), and our theoretical framework is focused on French research related to work (Clot, 2001, 2008; Dejours, 1993, 2001). Our research is anchored in a social perspective of learning, and is also inspired by the field of workplace learning (Billet, 2001, 2009; Tynjälä, 2008). The main idea of these authors is that not all places and practices offer equal possibilities to learn and to commit, which is why we interviewed young people from various non-profit organizations with various missions (sport, humanitarian, environmental, protection, cultural, event, entertainment, etc.). To construct the corpus of our qualitative and inductive approach, we have led 40 semi-structured interviews with young volunteers. We asked our partner the Swiss National Youth Council (SNYC) to help us to find participants aged between 16 and 25 who were either still at school, in vocational training or at university, possibly in transition or even in their early professional activity.

The first questions we asked were focused on the young volunteer’s career. It was a chronological and understanding perspective from the initial choice to do voluntary work to the end of the volunteering activity. Our questions were guided by the French author Simonet (2010), who describes the volunteer’s career in four periods: decision to engage, beginning of engagement, commitment and exit; or in other words, the reasons why volunteers chose to enter, stay and exit from an organization. The second types of questions aimed to identify the learning modes that happen in volunteering activities and also the conditions for learning in non-profit organizations. And finally, the third type of questions focused on the identification of learning outcomes, like skills, competences and new resources developed by volunteering activities.

The answers of the target group were analyzed in conjunction with Nvivo, a content analysis software.

YOUNG VOLUNTEER’S CAREER

Volunteering means both commitment and freedom. Unlike what happens at work or school, one can choose to stop at any time without consequences. Given that the choice to engage in voluntary work is free, that there is no formal ‘good mark’ as in school and no salary as at work, this environment has to be attractive from a young person’s point of view. This raises the question: why do young people stay and commit themselves to the activity? Considering the first phase of the volunteer’s career, we asked ourselves how young people engage in their activities and what the influencing factors for their choice were. In general, we observed that it is very often family and relatives, friends or the local network (neighbourhoods, village, school, and workplace) which act as triggers.

*This is one of my best friends who had two older sisters already in the Youth Organization*¹. (Joël, 19, commercial clerk, Countryside Youth Organization)

We can see very clearly that Joël already knew some people in the organization and that was probably a facilitation factor. Referring to the ethnographic studies of Renahy (2005) and

¹ Quotes from volunteers are translated from oral French.

Retière (2003), it seems that local network acts as a resource for the initial choice. Young people are tapping into the resources of the community and their close environment. Usually, the entry into the association is in continuity, not as a break in the young volunteers' original universe.

After having seen how young people engage, we looked at why they engaged. Firstly, it can be a strong interest in the mission or the main activity of the organization, as we can see from this excerpt of Vincent who had a real passion for media since he was a child:

Since I was little, I have been a fan of media, a radio TV enthusiast, to the point I was doing entertainment alone in my room when I was a kid. (Vincent, 20, student, Webradio)

Very often, young people wish to give back what they have received when they were kids and they feel beholden to society. Search for meaning is also one of the reasons to engage. Some are still teenagers or young adults and they are looking for fulfillment in their lives. Fred speaks about the routine of his life and his wish to do something more and meaningful:

I had reached a point in my life where apprenticeship is always the same, I had arrived in a kind of little routine between work, weekend, friends, job, and I didn't want to just add another string to my bow, but to do something more, that's it! (Fred, 20, apprentice, Gay association)

And finally, if it is generally not the main reason, some are happy to receive free tickets for a concert or for a basketball match. Of course, all these reasons to engage can combine with each other and are not mutually exclusive.

Once they are in the association, what makes young people continue to commit without being obliged to do so? The sense of belonging, good atmosphere and being in a warm and friendly environment plays an important role in young volunteers' commitment.

We made friends. I mean we are thirty firemen, so we are thirty friends. (Dario, 22, student, volunteer firefighter)

The vocabulary is very often linked to the family sphere, as we can see in the following excerpt:

We feel we belong to something special actually. I feel like it's a bit like my second family. I wouldn't have chosen all twenty of them as friends, but they are now all part of my life. (Barbara, 24, commercial clerk, Countryside Youth Organization)

Beyond this social and friendly aspect, there is often a cooperative functioning within a non-profit organization, so the group is used as a support for thinking and moving forward. Our results show that volunteering is a culture which allows young people to take responsibilities and to have access to concrete and new experiences which give them another status.

He said to me: "Hello Madame President" and that made me feel proud and touched, it warmed my heart. (Tiziana, 20, commercial clerk, Youth Parliament)

In addition to having challenges to overcome, it is also for many their first steps in adult life and a way to situate themselves into life and to face reality. Young volunteers are often proud of what they are doing; they can be someone else and implement new skills. Céline explains how she is taking part in an adult world as if she still cannot believe it. She is surprised and at the same time she is very proud of her achievement:

It's funny because I am the manager of the staff and there are people older than me, who are 30 and I'm almost the youngest at 23. It's really strange because I actually have quite a lot of responsibilities. It's really weird anyway to be managing a club (...). Anyway it's a place where a lot of people often go; actually it's one of the best concert halls in the town in my humble opinion. (Céline, 23, student, Event organization)

In contrast to the abstract side of school, some young volunteers appreciate the possibility to be "in true life" and to act on the world. Combined factors like exercising

responsibilities, being listened to and being able to give an opinion that will be taken into account, seem to generate the commitment of young volunteers. The nature of the activity which is proposed to young volunteers plays a very important role for learning opportunities as well as for the reasons to stay in the organization and to commit oneself to the activity. This is probably one of the core success factors for which voluntary work is a rich learning context.

LEARNING PROCESS

I just jumped in the deep end. (Jennifer, 20, student, WWF)

The second axis of our results concerns the learning process. The main learning modes we identified from the corpus were modelling and progressive participation in activities, on-the-job learning and reflexive learning. The first one, observation, is one of the oldest ways of learning. In the beginning of their activity, young people often have a peripheral position and their main activity is to observe the others. Then, by imitating more experienced volunteers, they are able to occupy a different role, and they take part more and more in the activities. This movement in participation, from peripheral to full participation, is described in Lave and Wenger' studies (1991) and is shown in the following excerpt:

In the beginning I watched, it was more the others who were doing and I could see what they were doing and little by little I was given responsibilities or it was me who could do it and it happened like that, I could use the example of what I had seen (Marie, 20, student, Amnesty International)

Quality of learning in an informal context is highly related to the opportunities offered by the environment. For Billett (2001), direct and indirect guidance constitutes a very important resource. We have identified who takes this role in terms of support. There is often a cooperative functioning within a non-profit organization, so the group is used as a support for thinking and moving forward. Non-profit organizations offer opportunities for learning with the use of group debriefing, as illustrated in this excerpt with the Scouts:

It's something we always try to do at Scouts. As soon as we have done special activities, we debrief to try to improve ourselves. (Clara, 22, student, Scouts)

Support can also take the form of individual feedback between an expert and a newcomer. It can be an identified person who takes the role of coach or tutor, as is shown in the excerpt where Emma is very closely guided in the beginning of her activity.

The person I took the position from really coached me a lot. First they told me what this association was, but after that who I can contact? How can I contact them? And he told me: "well we'll try to find out together". (Emma, 16, student, Health Prevention Association)

Senior or experienced volunteers play an important role, even if they are not specifically appointed to fill a role in supporting. Young volunteers very often refer to the experienced volunteers as "seniors".

Other resources concern the structural environment and the material available. One important resource is prescription to be understood in a broad sense: it relates to everything which volunteers can refer to, which guide them in their activities. This includes laws, manuals, codes, internal rules or files left available for them. It concerns everything that has already been thought of before; it's a kind of knowledge capitalization which avoids reinventing the wheel. It gives them a structure in which they know what their autonomy is, what they can or cannot do. Some organizations offer a specific infrastructure and equipment, for example a radio studio. This particular access to technical material affords development of specific technical skills.

In villages, other local organizations or structures often help smaller ones by offering experience, financial help or material support. Some non-profit organizations offer the

possibility to participate in formal training (outside of the organization): for example, the Certificate in Youth and Sports, which is a recognized certificate within Switzerland for coaching sport and outdoors activities with children.

Finally, some organizations plan a structured progression that we named “volunteer’s curriculum”. This means that the organization designed a structured progression and that there is a pedagogical intention behind it. This is especially seen in the Scouts when taking responsibility is planned gradually and naturally from the start:

Scouting is really the best school that I had because it works step by step. We begin at 14 with a small amount of responsibility to look after 10 people every Saturday for 3 hours and then we move up. (Max, 25, Head of a webradio)

TRANSFERABILITY INTO THE WORKPLACE

I learnt a lot and grew up a lot at the camps. Learning to live in a community, to accept differences. (Aurélie, 20, student, Christian youth camp)

Our research also included an interventional part. We organized portfolio workshops with the aim of enabling young people to promote their learning trajectories to potential employers by describing and identifying the skills and resources acquired through volunteer activities, such as *organizing a big event, coaching children during a camp, being responsible for the security of a festival, etc.*

Often, volunteers developed a lot of resources, skills and knowledge through their experience, but in an unconscious way. The objective for the portfolio workshops was then to raise their awareness of what they had learnt. The difficulty is that when one achieves something successfully, it may be by chance, and it may not always be understood how it was achieved (Lainé, 2006). To understand one's own mechanisms and reproduce one's success in different contexts, you have to be able to identify your skills. That is why we wished to help young people to be more conscious of their learning outcomes, and be able to explain their value clearly and with confidence. This was challenging, because the young people were at varying stages of consciousness of their own outcomes. For some of them it was very hard to verbalize their actions. We therefore tried to support them by offering a safe space where they were supported by peers. It is indeed easier to become conscious of an experience and to speak clearly about it if you have to explain it to others. We wanted them to realize what they were able to do after having completed the volunteering period in order to permit them to transfer these outcomes to another context.

To conclude, our results show that the impact of resources afforded by the non-profit organizations, coupled with the willingness of young people to engage in voluntary activities, combined to ensure that voluntary work can be an interesting way to learn and develop skills which are not necessarily taught at school. Therefore, youth voluntary work can be considered as an interesting interface of transition and development for young people. It is a space in-between, which is not salaried work, which is not thought of as a training course and which is much more than a hobby. Indeed, voluntary work provides access to construct experience, to act and to interact in a variety of situations, to socialize in different contexts and to cross boundaries. For all these reasons, youth voluntary work seems to be a valuable way to better understand how young people engage in activities and at the same time learn.

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