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Do No Harm: Volunteerism as Professional Development for Faculty

The benefits of service learning and volunteerism for university faculty and students has been a topic of interest and implementation for many institutions of higher education across the country in recent years. This article describes the personal reflections of one faculty member's experiences, as personal and professional development, in volunteering in third world countries.

Implications for university faculty involvement in volunteerism and service learning at the local and international level are given.

The fruit of Silence is Prayer
The fruit of Prayer is Faith
The fruit of Faith is Love
The fruit of Love is Service
The fruit of Service is Peace

—Mother Teresa

Calcutta, India, Summer, 1996

Walking through the gates of Shishu Bhavan, the orphanage for abandoned children in Calcutta, India, run by the Missionaries of Charity, I saw this quote on the wall: "At the end of our lives, we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received, how much money we have made or how many great things we have done. We will be judged by 'I was hungry and you gave me to eat. I was naked and you clothed me. I was homeless and you took me in.'"

Many feelings flooded through me as I continued into the main building. What I saw took my breath away: a large, dark room filled with green metal baby cribs, four babies to a bed, babies with tuberculosis in the same crib as babies without tuberculosis. I also saw a small room with what the sisters called, "our sick and dying babies." In the small entryway were about fifty young children between the ages of two and six. Within seconds of entering, I was immediately surrounded by

crying children, each wanting to be held. I picked up one child, comforted her, and then reached for another.

That is how I began volunteering with the Missionaries of Charity in the summer of 1996. During the first couple of days I was overwhelmed by the stench of sick, dying, and dirty children, the crying, the lack of toys and educational programs. It all reminded me of the back wards of the Wassaic Institution in New York State where I volunteered in the 1970s. But this was 1996. I wondered, "How could this be happening? With all we know about child development, education, and health, how could children be grouped together, four to a crib, without toys, without developmental programs?" Then, one day during my first week, as I was holding a little girl, I asked one of the sisters what the child's name was, and she answered, "Selina, after Sister Selina who found her abandoned in a garbage dump in Howrah, the City of Joy." It was then that I realized that this orphanage, as basic as it was, was far better than life on the streets of Calcutta or in the rat infested garbage dumps. It was at that moment that I learned to suspend judgment, to leave behind my western values on health, education, and child care, and that it wasn't always about doing but about being there. During that summer I went on to experience further the meaning of volunteering in a third world country.

On the Border of Burma, Summer 1997 and 1999

Six months before I arrived in Wangko refugee camp on the border of Burma, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), the ruling junta in Burma, had crossed the border and burned down the camp. The Karen refugees living in bamboo huts fled into the hills to escape death, capture, and rape. When I arrived in June, I saw a camp of homes rebuilt from the dwindling supply of local bamboo. I learned that many of the refugees had been living in this camp for over fifteen years. They lived daily with the fear of continued SLORC raids on the camp, of intimidation by Thai soldiers, insufficient food rations, and limited access to the outside world. I spent the summer in the "school for the mentally retarded." The children with disabilities lay on the floor of a hut. As in Calcutta, I saw no teachers, materials, or programs, and I was overwhelmed once again by the inequities between services in my world and services in this camp. Yet, the similarities between these two worlds lead me to feel that what was needed in both were compassion, care, and humanitarianism.

This short, personal article is about my own growth. It is about the process I experienced as I came to identify myself as a higher institution professor involved with local and international volunteer work.

The concept of helping is not new to one raised in an Irish American Catholic family. In fact, I grew up feeling that helping other people would be a worthy purpose for my life. Christians, however, do not have the corner on volunteerism or service; in fact, most religions value the importance of helping others. For example, Judaism states, "Naked a man comes into the world and naked he leaves it, after all is said and done he leaves nothing except the good deeds he leaves behind." Islam requires that 5 percent of one's income to go to help the poor; Buddhism's eight-fold path encompasses doing good to others.

Caveats in Volunteerism and Service Learning

Early in my own volunteering experience, I began to question the idea of helping because of the state in which it may leave those who were helped. Silverstein (1974, p. 107) captures the potential harm of the helper in the following poem:

> Agatha Fry, she made a pie, And Christopher John, helped bake it.
> Christopher John, he mowed the lawn, And Agatha Fry helped rake it.
> Zachary Zagg took out the rug, And Jennifer Joy, helped shake it.
> And Jennifer Joy, she made a toy, And Zachary Zagg helped break it.
> And some kind of help, Is the kind of help, That helping is all about.
> And some kind of help, Is the kind of help, We all can do without.

John McKnight, in *The Careless Society: Community and Its Counterfeits* (1995), describes the problem inherent in benevolence. The following highlights this dilemma:

> There is a problem with our dedication to service as the ultimate Christian ideal. After all, the Crusaders thought they were servants of Christ; we doubt that today (p. 176).

Furthermore, the missionaries who went to Africa and Asia thought they were servants of Christ, but many today doubt even that. In fact, some had used the concept of service and Christianity to conquer, rule, and dominate others in Christ's name. McKnight suggests that they had it backwards. He suggests that a person cannot use the Christian imperatives of mission of service to dominate and control. In part due to "McCarthyism, Vietnam, and the Watergate, we know that modern crusaders, conquistadors, and missionaries can be bad servants. The current good servants seem clearly to help, care, and cure rather than conquer, exploit, and control. Our good servants are doctors, teachers, psychologists, social workers, professors, lawyers, counselors—the professionals who serve" (p. 177). McKnights' thesis continues with the warning that good service does not entail lordship.

The question for me as an educator became, "How do I foster service learning programs that encourage the development of servants?" As I develop and implement service learning in higher education I believe I have the opportunity to foster caring human beings—ones who recognize the differences between lordship and servanthood.

I believe that a life of integrity is the most fundamental source of personal worth. For me, there is intrinsic value that comes from service, from helping other people in a meaningful way. One important source of this is my work. I feel I am making a difference.

Victor Frankl (1984) focused on the need for meaning and purpose in our lives, something that transcends our own lives and taps the best energies within us. George Bernard Shaw puts it another way: "This is the true joy in life...being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one. That being a force of Nature, instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die. For the harder I work the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me. It's a sort of splendid torch

which I've got to hold up for the moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations" (as cited in Covey, 1989, p. 299).

It has been through my experience with volunteering, in tandem with reading the works of great humanitarians such as Aung San Suu Kyi, Mother Teresa, Victor Frankl, Elie Weisel, Burton Blatt, and John McKnight, that I am developing increased service learning opportunities for students in the graduate early intervention program at the University of Alaska Anchorage.

The following section describes the underlying principles that I believe are inherent in service learning and volunteerism. These principles are the basis for the graduate programs in which I am involved.

- Do no harm. Seek to understand before you seek to be understood. Walk gently, taking care not to harm others as you help.
- Respect each person. Remember that you are a guest in someone else's life, and do not impose changes on them that they have not requested.
- Be kind. Be kind and caring, not controlling and exploitive. Be thoughtful. Believe in the inherent capacity of every human being.

The Volunteerism and Teaching Connection

Integrating lessons learned during volunteering led me to embed service learning projects into several courses in the graduate program of early intervention/early childhood special education at the University of Alaska Anchorage. In fact, all graduate courses offered in this program now have service learning experiences. One example is the course, "Families: Building Parent Professional Partnerships," in which the volunteer/service learning experience provided students with the opportunity to learn directly from a family, rather than from reading or attending lectures about families. Through this in-depth experience with a family that has a child with a disability, students acquired an understanding of the elements of family-centered service delivery and knowledge of how existing systems and policies can be made more responsive to family concerns and priorities. Students were connected with a family through the local Parent Resource Center. The major goal of this experience was to learn from and support the family. Students were asked to maintain a log of time spent with the family throughout the year, and to include a brief description of and brief reflection on each activity. Types of activities students completed were:

- an initial visit with the family;
- ongoing contact with the family (weekly) or on a schedule that met the family's needs;
- attending a physician appointment;
- attending an individual educational program meeting;
- observing the child in a setting where services are being provided;
- having a meal with the family; and
- attending a birthday party or family outing.

In the second phase of the semester, students completed two activities: to identify an aspect of the experience with the family and write a reaction paper discussing their perspective on this experience; and to facilitate a class discussion about the experience discussed in the paper. With the family, students identified activities and goals to be accomplished during the semester. Some of the activities in which students have participated include: providing five hours of respite care a week; volunteering in a child's preschool classroom; and assisting the family in applying, through Medicaid, for wheelchair funding.

Examples of students' reflections on volunteering and service learning as part of the graduate program in early intervention/early childhood special education are contained in the following paragraphs.

> In my work at the Newborn Intensive Care Unit (NICU), I volunteered to hold and comfort premature infants. This gave me an opportunity to find out what kind of care premature newborns needed and to find ways to provide simple human contact with hospital-bound babies. I learned a lot about how parents interact with their children, what different cultures find to be important in the care of newborns, and how infants thrive on touch and basic nurturing. Caring for and/or helping others comes from a heart-felt compassion for people, especially those in need. It's a desire to give of oneself, without expecting anything in return (D. L., personal communication, 1999).

> At the NICU, I contribute to children and families on a very intimate level; after all, these babies and families are so vulnerable. I also feel like I will be a better parent, person, and educator in relating with my child and children I teach and their families. Often in elementary and even preschool, we get wrapped up in every day business and forget the families are key to the success in reaching children, even when families have some dysfunction. Being empathetic, patient, and understanding helps me be a better person and educator. Having a service volunteering experience in as many areas as possible helps us keep in human touch with one another. Remembering families as a unit keeps everyone involved and increases the chances of successful learning and growing experiences for all involved (C. Z., personal communication, August 1999).

Volunteerism as Professional Development

When asked to contribute an article to *Metropolitan Universities* on the ways volunteering in third world countries informs my practice, I was somewhat reluctant and questioned my contribution. I worked in Calcutta, Thailand, and with the homeless in Anchorage for my own benefit. I was not concerned about the extent to which volunteering would advance my professional career. Initially, the choice to volunteer in such a dramatic way was fueled by my inner desire to feed my soul, contribute to life in a meaningful way, and to give back.

As I write this article several thoughts are unsettled. I remember when it was the norm for all students in a college to be involved in community or volunteer work. As an undergraduate, I volunteered in sheltered workshops, summer camps, and other projects. Those activities were not a part of my formal coursework, nor were they required for any degree, yet I count them among the most valuable experiences in my life at that time. The feeling I had when I looked back on those experiences was that I was able to explore, investigate, and try without parameters, requirements, or college expectations. I loved those experiences; they fueled my passion and desire to make a difference in the lives of children with disabilities. It was witnessing the maltreatment in institutions of persons with disabilities that later fueled my work as an advocate in the deinstitutionalization movement.

I believe that if an activity is to be categorized as volunteering, it must be internally motivating to the individual. If volunteering is to become a method of faculty development, it must be initiated and pursued by the individual faculty member, not the institution. If a faculty member is interested and motivated to engage in volunteering, then by the very nature of volunteering, the faculty member would "develop." In that sense, volunteering can serve as a vehicle for development.

Considerations for Institutions of Higher Education

How might institutions of higher education support faculty to engage in volunteerism and service learning? How might faculty volunteerism be structured?

It would be easy to agree with Zelda Gamson's claim that "most of the commitment to community service on the part of colleges and university is lip service" (as cited in Sagaria and Burrows, 1998, p. 40). Sagaria and Burrows (1998) suggest that there is an incongruence between universities' perceived interest in community service and the actual community service conducted, and that "this involvement gap, along with faculty members' relatively high level of perceived service involvement, may reflect the decentralized nature of teaching in higher education and higher education's traditional reliance on individual interest and effort to carry out service activities." In general, the authors suggest that community service activities are occurring because faculty members, individually or in groups, are committed to these activities rather than because there is an institutional support for these activities.

During the 1990s, higher education has rediscovered the importance and value of service learning. These values include citizenship development, civic responsibility, and other principles of a free and democratic society. Hartman and Roberts, elsewhere in this journal issue, suggest that underlying the increase in service learning activities in universities today is the desire to advance educational reform and use experiential forms of study to further understanding among the peoples of the world and help to "inculcate the ideals of world citizenship among the students we teach"(Overview, p. 7).

Institutions of higher education in general, and metropolitan universities specifically, can assume a leadership role in supporting faculty development to engage in service learning and volunteerism. Some ways this might happen include:

- *Clarify institution values and beliefs.* If we believe, as Berry (Berry and Chisholm,1999) suggests, that "higher education must be criti-

cally engaged in the needs of communities, nations, and the world: not least because it may just be the last, best hope that communities, nations, and the world have for considering what, why, and how they do things" (p.10), we would consider reflecting on the values inherent in service learning.

- *Develop service learning centers on campus.* These centers would function as a vehicle for faculty seminar exchanges, grant writing, community connections, and joint project proposals at the local and international level.
- *Evaluate promotion and tenure guidelines.* In what ways would faculty involvement in service learning at the local or international levels be recognized as valuable and hence be reflected on the traditional workload agreements of teaching, research, and service?
- *Support faculty currently engaged in local or international service learning.* The concept of "going with your strengths" might serve institutions of higher education well as they consider community service learning or internationalizing their curriculum.
- *Ensure values are linked to the service learning activities and outcomes.* If, as Hartman and Roberts (Overview, p. 9) suggest in their introduction, there is a "critical need to understand the relationship between involved citizenship and a good society; between volunteerism and self understanding and personal growth; between observation and involvement and understanding; and between moral and ethical development and experiencing how others interpret the world," the metropolitan university administration, faculty, and students must evaluate the activities and their impact on the local community members involved.

Summary

In closing, I wish to offer alternative questions: How can higher education foster a sense of caring, compassion, and humanitarism? Is providing university-initiated volunteer or service learning projects a way to foster compassion? Certainly, all would approve increased university support for and fostering of acts of caring by faculty and students. Humanitarian acts, whether under the category of volunteerism or service learning, are worthy of support by administration and university governance. The following quotes, the first by Robert Kennedy and the latter by Mother Teresa, speak to this sentiment:

> It is from the numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal or acts to improve the lot of others or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from million different centers of energy those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance (Robert F. Kennedy, 1966).

> We can do no great things; we can do small things with great love (Mother Teresa, 1996).

Suggested Readings

Berry, H. A., and L. A. Chisholm, *Service-Learning in Higher Education around the World: An Initial Look* (New York: The International Partnership for Service Learning, 1999).

Covey, S., *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1989).

Frankl, V., *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984).

Gamson, Z. F., "Higher Education and Rebuilding Civic Life," *Change 29* (1, 1997): 11-13.

McKnight, J., *The Careless Society: Community and its Counterfeits* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995).

Sagaria, M. A., and P. Burrows, "Internal Meanings and Markers of College and University Community Service," *Metropolitan Universities 9* (3, 1998): 29-43.

Silverstein, S., *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (New York: Harper Collins, 1974).

Mother Teresa, *A Simple Path* (New York: Random House, 1995).