

Reconceptualising volunteer training as a transformative, collective process

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Abstract

Within charity organisations focusing on health and social issues in England volunteers often perform complex roles supporting vulnerable groups of people. Training has long been recognised as an important part of the volunteer process, however few studies have examined the learning experienced by volunteers within such training. This study will draw upon sociocultural theories of learning to fill the current gap in research on learning within this context. Using a multiple case study this research intends to explore volunteer training as more than the transmission of fixed knowledge and skills, and aims to reconceptualise it as learning through participation and negotiation in practices that enables individual and collective transformation.

Paper

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Introduction

This paper sets out the area of interest for my PhD study, which aims to explore the training of volunteers within health and social focused charities in England. The paper begins by outlining the role of volunteers within these charities and the practical necessity of training, as well as the challenges it presents. The perceived importance of training to volunteers and on their motivation to continue volunteering is also considered.

The paper will go on to detail some previous studies that have focused on volunteer training. Limitations of evaluation studies that follow a cognitive view of learning will be discussed and an example of a study providing a wider view of training, which explores the personal learning experiences of volunteers in context, will be examined.

Following this a theoretical framework will be presented which intends to conceptualise learning as a two way process between the learner and their environment, which can result in tensions, contradictions and ultimately transformations. The research design of the study will then be outlined, which draws upon this framework in order to gain insight into the learning experiences of volunteers within health and social focused charities. Finally the intended contributed to knowledge will be summarised.

Background

The voluntary sector has historically played an important role in supporting the provision of UK health and social care services, and in England 21% of people volunteer at least once a month in a health, disability or social welfare organisation (Cabinet Office, 2013). These volunteers often perform complex roles including improving patient experiences, building closer relationships between services and communities and supporting integrated care (Naylor et al 2013, p.1). In order to effectively carry out these roles, training is considered vital to the volunteer process. This is particularly important when working with children and vulnerable adults (Evans, 2011, p.167), for example in the areas of child protection (Tunstall and Malin, 2011), helplines for elderly populations (O'Shea, 2006; Mui et al. 2013), befriending people suffering from long term mental illness (Bradshaw and Haddock, 1998), providing emergency services for homeless people (Cloke et al. 2007).

Without training there is even a danger that volunteers could do more harm than good (Wasik, 1998; Siu and Whyte, 2009) and providing both initial and ongoing training helps to create an inclusive volunteer programme (Rochester et al. 2010, p.203). However training volunteers to support vulnerable groups of people can often involve challenging and even upsetting subject matter. In some circumstances training can be so overwhelming for volunteers that it creates high levels of anxiety, reduces effectiveness and can even result in volunteers leaving their roles (Hutchison and Quartaro, 1993, p.94).

Volunteering is described as an individualistic activity that requires different levels of training and support (Wardell et al. 2000, p.247), and it is often promoted as a way of gaining skills (National Youth Agency, 2007, p.21) and employment training (ILO, 2011, p.4). Training can range from continuous training-learning processes to more informal learning (Rossing, 1988, p.40). Training is usually carried out within the charity itself, although it can also be provided by volunteer centres and in collaborations with universities (Hutchison and Quartaro, 1993). Training is specific to the needs of each charity and is not standardised across the sector, although there may be standardised topics covered such as data protection or communication skills. Therefore this is different to learning within educational institutions where there are recognized levels of competence and a standard curriculum. This also makes 'training' as a general term problematic in this context as it can mean different things to different organisations and individuals. Some researchers have addressed this problem by labelling training in this context as non-formal learning and concentrating more on informal learning through volunteer work (e.g. Schugurensky and Mündel, 2005; Duguid et al. 2013). However, this presents a rather narrow view of training, which is also reflected in the wider literature on adult education (Holst, 2009, p.320).

For volunteers, opportunities for training can be an important factor in their motivation to start and to continue volunteering. Self-development and learning contributes to one of the six motivational functions for volunteering proposed by Clary et al. (1998), which is the function 'understanding'. Another relevant function concerns career-related benefits, such as preparing for a new career or maintaining career-relevant skills through volunteering (Clary et al. 1998, p.1518). In their study on older volunteers in the USA, Tang et al. (2010) found that providing adequate training and ongoing support was directly associated with increased volunteer commitment, and O'Higgins (2013) found that training was one of the key factors in volunteer retention within a national youth work organisation in Ireland.

Previous studies

The learning that takes place within volunteer training is a relatively under researched area. A number of evaluation studies have been completed where the performance of volunteers is measured before and after training, however the learning or experiences that may take place in between is unexplored. For example Rayner and Marshall (2003) evaluated whether the performance of six volunteers in a UK based aphasia group and the performance of aphasic participants they were supporting improved after volunteers undertook training. Evaluation methods included a repeated measures questionnaire and conversation rating scale. Although the results showed significant improvements in both the questionnaire scores and conversation ratings, competence was shown to begin to decline as the gap grew between training which was unexplained by the study (Rayner and Marshall, 2003, p.161). Furthermore by solely focusing on improved competence the study takes a cognitive view of learning, which does not take into account the context within which the training was taking place. The volunteers were also positioned as passive learners rather than a source of new ideas and skills (Haigh, 2007, p.96) and the wider benefits of training for them and the organisation were unexplored.

The benefits of training to youth development volunteers and also their preferred training delivery and topics were evaluated in an American based study by Fox et al. (2009). Benefits included gaining knowledge about the organisation and the issue being addressed (youth development) and it was

claimed that the benefits of training went beyond the volunteers to the youth and adults they worked alongside (Fox et al. 2009, p.4). This kind of wider awareness raising has been described as integral to learning and training in the charity sector (Akingbola et al. 2013, p.68).

There are a small number of studies that focus on the personal learning experiences of volunteers within training. In her study on the training of UK Rape Crisis volunteers, Rath (2008, p.30) described “the complex, transformative processes” that were experienced during training. This manifested itself through career changes, changes in personal relationships and political awareness (*ibid.* p.23). The training did not just take place within formal sessions, but was described as continuing after each session with volunteers meeting in the pub and discussing each training session. This peer support and social interaction within the training group was an important source of development for volunteers. By exploring the experiences of volunteers during training Rath was also able to identify some existing tensions. For example during the training sessions some of the volunteers were described as self-monitoring their responses to present themselves as more acceptable to the organisation (*ibid.* p.30).

This short review of the literature outlines the limitations of existing research within the area of volunteer training in health and social focused charities and highlights how exploring the experiences of volunteers during training can provide an insight into their learning.

Theoretical framework

This study intends to explore volunteer training and the learning experiences of volunteers in three health and social charities within England. By drawing upon a sociocultural perspective, in particular activity theory, learning will be viewed as embedded in the context of the charities rather than an individual cognitive process (Haigh, 2007, p.96):

“...development and learning are not seen as products of solitary, self-contained individuals endowed with internal machinery of cognitive skills that only await the right conditions to unfold. Instead, they are seen as existing in the flux of individuals relating to their world, driven by relational processes and their unfolding logic, and therefore as not being constrained by rigidly imposed, pre-programmed scripts or rules.” (Stetsenko, 2008, p.477)

Activity theory is based upon the original work of Vygotsky, which proposed that interaction between individual humans and their environment is mediated through the use of tools or signs, and Leontiev who widened this idea from individual to collective activity. Engeström later included the wider social and cultural aspects into a collective activity (Mwanza, 2001, para. 8), which has been developed and applied to adult learning (e.g. Fitzsimons, 2003), workplace learning (e.g. Engeström, 2001) and training (LaCroix, 2014).

The unit of analysis within activity theory is the historically evolving collective activity system (Engeström, 2000a, p.964). Described as “a group of people who share a common object and motive over time” (Russell, 2002, p.67) an activity system could be an appropriate framework to help analyse a volunteer training group within a charity. An activity system includes subjects (participants of the activity), object (motivation of activity), tools, the community (which shares the same object), the division of labour between the members of this community, and the rules regulating the activity (Engeström, 1990, p.172). Within this theory learning is a two way process that not only develops

and changes the subjects of the activity but also the community or activity system that they are participating within. Such changes occur through the existence and subsequent resolution of contradictions and tensions within an activity system or between multiple activity systems. For example, Fenwick describes the contradiction within an organisation between “the emphasis on competency and control and injunctions for innovation involving risk and experimentation.” (Fenwick, 2010, p.109)

The resolution of such contradictions transforms not just the subjects but the whole activity system (Engeström, 1999a, p.7), which can be destructive but also expansive where “the community learns to widen its object and possibilities for action by re-designing its own activity” (Engeström, 2009, p.25). This expansion of the object is theorised to require a new kind of learning process, both conceptually and in practice, known as expansive learning (Engeström, 2000a, p.967). Expansive learning provides a framework to analyse “the interplay of the *object* under construction, the mediating *artifacts*, and the different *perspectives* of the participants in a progression of collectively achieved actions” (Engeström, 2008, p.168). These different perspectives or voices are rooted in different communities and practices that coexist within the same collective activity system (*ibid.* p.129). Consideration of different voices could be particularly applicable in the practice of volunteer training, where volunteers come together from different backgrounds and have different levels of knowledge and experience. This multivoicedness, along with layers of historically accumulated tools, rules, and patterns of division of labour within an activity system, both drives activity forward and is a source of tension and contradiction (*ibid.* p.27).

The concept of expansive learning has been suggested as particularly relevant for studying more non-traditional modes of learning. This is because expansive learning focuses less on the one-way movement of incompetence to competence, and allows the exploration of horizontal movement where new practices are collaboratively negotiated and created (Engeström, 2010, p.74). Therefore this could be a useful framework to help gain further insight into the learning of volunteers within training. However Engeström (1999b, p.13) emphasised that expansive learning is not common and can be difficult to identify, and advised using the expansive learning framework to analyse smaller cycles of innovative learning that might be seen as potentially expansive (Engeström, 2008, p.132).

The proposed study

Drawing upon the theoretical framework outlined above, the proposed study intends to explore the learning experienced by volunteers who are being trained to perform service-providing roles within health and social focused charities in England. An embedded multiple case study design will allow an in depth study of three charities, and learning within volunteer training will be examined within a real-life context (Yin, 2009, p. 18).

All cases have been selected through a purposeful sample that contains the following features of interest to the study: all volunteers perform service-providing roles, support vulnerable groups of people (as defined by the Department of Health, 2000, p.9) and undertake initial and ongoing volunteer training. They are also based within charities registered with the Charity Commission, engaged in health and social related activities and based in North West England. Differences between cases include training delivery, volunteer roles, charity focus, and charity size (one city-based, one regional and one national charity).

The research will focus on the initial training provided to volunteers in health and social focused charities and will use multiple qualitative methods. The use of multiple methods intend to triangulate results and increase trustworthiness, particularly the credibility of my account (Bryman, 2012, p.390). The unit of analysis will be the volunteer training group and will include volunteers who are currently or have previously attended training. The reason for including volunteers who have previously attended training is to avoid narrow sampling by including “people who are not central to the phenomenon, but are neighbors to it” in order to obtain contrasting and comparative information to increase understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.34). The charities will be the context of each case. Within each case will be embedded cases focusing on individual volunteers, as the learner (the subject) is the central, driving character in defining activity in an activity system (Jonassen and Rohrer-Murphy, 1999, p.64) and the design aims to explore both individual and collective learning.

This study follows ethical guidance from the University of Manchester and ethical approval has been granted.

Contribution to knowledge

This study hopes to explore the currently under researched area of volunteer training, which is considered to have much learning potential but is not often considered within educational research. It is proposed at a time when volunteering is being encouraged through some government policies while simultaneously funding cuts and increased service demand are impacting on the voluntary sector.

Drawing upon activity theory will enable training to be examined from the perspective of volunteers within the organisational context and to challenge the existing narrow view of training. Activity theory and the concept of expansive learning have been previously applied to analyses of learning in non-traditional settings (Engeström and Sannino, 2010, p.3) and this study intends to apply and potentially develop this theory further in a new area. Using a theory that has been applied to a range of learning situations intends to produce findings that are widely comparable (Roth, 2012, p.256) and hopes to contribute to existing research on adult learning, workplace learning and specifically learning within voluntary organisations.

The analysis aims to go beyond using the theoretical terminology descriptively, and to provide analytic insights (Chaiklin 2007, p.187) into the practice of volunteer training. Drawing upon the concept of expansive learning in order to help explain the learning experienced by volunteers also aims to be of practical use to health and social charities in future development of training programmes.

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