**Training in Learning Communities**

# UNIT 4

VOLUNTEERING
IN LEARNING COMMUNITIES

CREA
COMMUNITY OF
RESEARCH ON
EXCELLENCE
FOR ALL

STEP4SEAS

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# VOLUNTEERING IN LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Learning Communities count on the active participation of many people who contribute their time, courage and effort in carrying out Successful Educational Actions and making centre dreams come true (Sánchez Aroca, 1999). Volunteering is an important part of a lot of day-to-day activities and adds to the experience of everyone by providing intellectual and cultural resources which are tangible and distinct but not always overt.

This unit details the role of volunteering in Learning Communities. Firstly, the volunteer role is profiled and the areas in which they participate and how they can contribute in each area are detailed. Later in the unit, practical aspects of the management and coordination of volunteers are addressed.

## 4.1. Who are volunteers, how do they collaborate with the Learning Community and what do they contribute?

Many people believe that in order to become a volunteer in a classroom it is beneficial or necessary to either have experience or receive training. This is even more the case if the volunteer is participating in specialist or secondary school-level classes where, for example, the subject is maths or English. With regards to Learning Communities, it is just the opposite. Anybody can participate as a volunteer and it is unnecessary to have work experience or be educated to any particular level. A female engineer, a young person who left school early, a university student and an illiterate grandmother can all be volunteers. As has been noted previously, the more availability there is for interactions with a diversity of individuals, the better the learning opportunities are for pupils because if volunteers come in from a variety of contexts and cultural backgrounds, they are also able to share a diversity of beliefs and skills using a variety of languages. Such interactions increase opportunities for all types of learning including cognitive skills, interaction skills and specialist subject knowledge.

Therefore, in Learning Communities, everybody is encouraged to cooperate in increasing not only the numbers of adult model volunteers but also the diversity of them. Common profiles of volunteer workers are:

- parents: immigrants or otherwise with or without a standard education, either in work or unemployed,

- other relatives, for example, grandparents, uncles and cousins,

- former students of the education centre,

- residents of the local district,

- members of district associations,

- other professionals from local companies and organisations,

- university students and graduates,

- retired teachers, both men and women,

- relatives and friends of the centre staff,

- local volunteers from other groups and those who have heard of the project from other sources, for example a website or a voluntary listing.

Some Learning Communities have a limited number of volunteers, others have over a hundred. However, the core requirements for becoming a volunteer are to be excited about the potential of the students and about the aim of the Learning Community to motivate and encourage them to have the best possible education just as we would want for our own children.

Learning Communities have lofty dreams. There is so much to be achieved that there are many ways of contributing to help make them possible. Volunteers are involved in a wide variety of tasks which range from supporting the teaching staff in the Interactive Groups to making photocopies for classroom activities, or from accompanying students on school outings to participating in Mixed Committees, to name but a few.

Volunteers do not replace teaching staff or others with distinct responsibilities. Volunteers play a unique role aimed at contributing increased opportunities for diverse interactions in teaching and learning processes. For example, in the classroom as activities are in progress, teachers often consult the volunteers for their participation in deciding how to improve the implementation and outcomes of Successful Educational Actions. Nevertheless, the teachers continue to be responsible for the smooth running of the class and therefore make the ultimate decisions regarding, for example, activity contents and classroom dynamics. This is the same on trips or camps. The number of required teachers remains the same and the volunteers simply make running the trips easier as well as helping families feel confident their children are being well looked after.

There are also other activities which are fostered thanks to the volunteers alone, for example particular training for relatives or specific workshops. But

even in this case, no-one is replacing the professionals. On the contrary, in many instances, such activities result in a need to source further human and material resources.

We must also outline the importance of prioritising actions such as Successful Educational Actions which are established by the Learning Community as a whole. For example, the availability of volunteers does not mean that higher class levels are created or that the student body is segregated but it does allow for the reinforcement of inclusion in the classroom with interventions such as the Interactive Groups (García-Carrión & Díez-Palomar, 2015; Tellado & Saba, 2010; Valls & Kyriakides, 2013). If, for example, one of the priorities is improvement in languages and mathematics, or painting and decorating the school walls, it is important to source volunteers to help achieve these goals. As stated previously, it is not a matter of sourcing experts in mathematics or wall painting, but to have people who convey high hopes and confidence in their expectations for improvement in maths or who are excited about helping to paint a wall. In certain cases, a volunteer worker who has specialised knowledge may generate a new activity. This occurred with a volunteer chess champion in one particular Learning Community. When the player became a volunteer, the education centre decided to start chess workshops twice a week in the afternoons. This was not an activity planned from the very beginning but it fitted with the centre's learning dreams of increasing the number of available activities. In general, however, volunteer workers are at the service of activities which have been prioritised in the standard areas such as the Interactive Groups or Tutored Library in order to help promote adherence to the Learning Community's established guidelines and processes.

Below is a list of some of the areas in which volunteers often participate. It is not a complete list and of course it depends on how the centre organises volunteer participation according to their priorities. Also, a volunteer may participate in one or several areas.

### Interactive Groups:

Volunteers assist in motivating the group. The teacher assigns an activity to them in which every fifteen to twenty minutes the group changes. The volunteer's primary task is to support the students and encourage interaction.

### Dialogical Literary Gatherings:

Volunteers participate as an ordinary member in Dialogical Literary Gatherings. They contribute their ideas and opinions in exactly the same way as the other participants. They can also chair the session or support other participants. They can also assist in looking for books on the recommended booklist.

### Mixed Committees:

Volunteers participate in Mixed Committees formed for decision-making and developing interventions in all aspects concerning the day-to-day life of the community. This means volunteers participate in various steps of the project, for example the dream, the selection of priorities and so on.

### Tutored Library:

They support the student body in school tasks, reading, solving doubts, encouraging help amongst peers, and managing the area and the activities that take place.

### Family Education:

Volunteers participate in activities for training relatives sharing their knowledge and skills with other families in various proposed activities.

### Other activities:

Volunteers participate in other areas of the school such as the morning welcome class or lunch or by supporting outdoors activities, for example by accompanying students to the swimming pool or helping with other sporting activities and games.

Volunteers also participate in and contribute to temporary or long-term school projects, for example the management of school TV and radio or helping with dressmaking for a local carnival and so on.

### Volunteers' contributions to the school

Volunteers contribute with their time and effort but, most importantly, they also contribute with enthusiasm, cultural intelligence, high expectations and the fact that they provide examples of positive role models and intergenerational relationships. These contributions are essential when starting from the principle that diversity in interactions is highly valued in the learning processes which are offered to every child.

As stated earlier, the cultural intelligence of those who freely cooperate helps to improve many learning situations. For example, on many occasions, mothers who never finished primary school are able to effectively manage relationships between the children and can perhaps explain things more clearly and simply.

A year six primary school pupil explains here how a volunteer helps them in their learning:

'*It's the way she speaks. She was funny and we laughed. And when we did not understand something, she said it in a different way and we could understand her much better … because at times perhaps we do not understand the book, but we do understand her.*'

Another pupil comments on what he likes about a very distinctive volunteer:

'*The father of a classmate called Julián is in a wheel-chair… his viewpoints are very different from ours and that is precisely what I like about him, he is very funny. He gives examples, you know? … to make it amusing. I am always listening out for the  example Felipe gives … He can make people listen. He can also give us things to help us out… pens for instance, and he says: I have so many pens … then in class, they tell us, 'Imagine' … but, of course, there are people that have difficulties imagining, and that helps them. Volunteers are sometimes far more experienced than teachers are. Also, most volunteers have their children at school and know how to treat us.*'

Because they are people with whom the children can identify, volunteers often act as positive role models. For example, in one particular Spanish Learning Community, a Moroccan mother dressed in *hijab* started to participate as a volunteer in English class. Besides cooperating in English (she was fluent as she had lived in England), she also challenged stereotypes about women in *hijabs* and, in particular, she strengthened the idea that women and Muslim girls have great potential as academics. This was important for the whole group but especially for the daughters of Moroccan immigrants, although she was not a mother of any of the girls.

There is also the role model provided by a former pupil who successfully finished school and continued on to pre-university studies and professional training and, because of this, is well known in the area. The fact that these people are at the centre, participating in activities like staff, changes the experience of many young people and helps them to link the two worlds of 'inside' and 'outside' school and consolidate them into reality. In this sense, it could also be said that volunteers contribute to making school meaningful.

At times, volunteers are excellent sources of knowledge in specific fields such as particular languages, history, economics or chess. From the point of view of dialogic learning and therefore also an egalitarian perspective, this knowledge and these skills can be placed within students' reach inside and outside the classroom. For example, in one particular Learning Community in Catalonia, a Moroccan mother who, besides being a volunteer worker in the centre's Interactive Groups, contributed her excellent skill of her command of the French language. In that particular Learning Community's village, French was an important language for

tourism because of its proximity to France and so she was able to volunteer to give French lessons to students and families.

## 4.2.   Coordination and management of volunteering

Whenever a step is taken regarding the participation of volunteers in the centre, many related practical queries arise. Decisions need to be made surrounding, for example, how the centre will elicit the interest of people to volunteer, how many volunteers are required, what kind of commitment should be asked of them and how the volunteers should subsequently be trained and coordinated.

### *Recruiting volunteers: an invitation to participate*

The most common way of recruiting volunteers is to invite them to participate and cooperate through asking student families and key individuals in the community to spread the word. Often, the proposal arises in casual conversation at a meeting or at school or, in short, anywhere. Sometimes, people start to participate once they have taken part in another activity or in Family Education. The local people and student families decide to participate as volunteers in their Learning Community when they feel ready to start and this happens when they feel that their opinion is valued and considered. If, for example, the only reason they are contacted is to be told that their child had a fight with another student, they will not be motivated to participate but when it is clear that there is an opportunity to contribute to the life of the centre and its activities, then they are likely to feel it is the right time to become involved and be a volunteer.

It should be clarified here that participation and volunteering is both an option and an opportunity, never an obligation. It is not necessary for everyone in the local area to participate in centre activities. Participation must be a voluntary decision. If somebody is not motivated, it is preferable that they do not volunteer and that they feel able to say so. Equally, if there are several parents, grandparents, brothers or sisters of students who have shown interest in cooperating, this must be celebrated and valued without any expectation that they will definitely participate. Emphasising concerns about low participation and conveying pessimism only serves to discourage people who are already participating and may lead them to reduce their levels of participation. Discrediting, either implicitly or explicitly, people who do not participate also does not contribute to a positive or enthusiastic atmosphere. Some people will participate at a later stage or when their personal work circumstances allow. Some people feel they cannot contribute anything or perhaps feel that the centre is too far away. Sometimes, as mentioned previously, a person considers giving their time to the community having participated in a course such as a Family Education course. In all cases, participation and the invitation to participate in Learning Communities is done using the positive language of transformation.

There are centres which send out formal or public invitations to recruit volunteers in the form of letters or leaflets to student families. Other centres submit a request via established relationships with groups in the locality such as a retired people's association, for example. Some Learning Communities have a Relationships Mixed Committee whose role is to strengthen channels of collaboration. Other centres may send out an e-mail or arrange meetings with local groups and propose, among other things, the possibility of collaboration. Some primary education centres also arrange volunteering opportunities for students from their sister secondary school. This enables older students to give volunteering hours to others outside of school time in the evenings.

There is also the possibility of collaborating with universities and university students. Some Learning Communities, either individually or jointly, are in contact with a university department which manages areas like collaborative projects, work experience or volunteering. Sometimes volunteers come from the faculty of education. At other times, volunteers come from faculties of other fields. For example, one particular centre received forty university student volunteers who were studying subjects such as mathematics, engineering, biology, philology and history.

As stated previously, the higher the diversity in the body of volunteers, the better. Student families and local people are indispensable. If families from only one cultural background participate and there is a group of families who are not participating, perhaps from a particular cultural minority, then this group should be considered as being precisely the people who can help the project progress. Therefore, the Learning Community should aim at encouraging or enabling their participation with due concern for not coercing them into doing so. Along similar lines, if the students of a particular centre rarely have contact with university students, it could be very rewarding for them to establish relationships in these areas, especially if they have things in common (e.g. they belong to the same cultural minority).

| **An experience of volunteering participation** |
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| Serradell, O. (2015). Aisha, From Being Invisible to Becoming a Promoter of Social Change. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *21*(10), 906-912. |

### *Coordination of volunteering*

Every Learning Community decides on how best to coordinate and manage volunteering. Sometimes this role falls to a teacher, a student relative or other volunteer. At other times, volunteering is managed by a particular Mixed Committee. This Mixed Committee is in charge of the organisation of the volunteers.

It organises all aspects of their participation including, among other things, the distribution of the workload across Interactive Groups, coordinating tasks, sourcing new volunteers whenever necessary and announcing new projects.

Participation as a volunteer in the centre is optional and, as previously mentioned, requires flexibility on the part of the centre. For example, a volunteer may start a new job which prevents them from being able to continue, or affects their participation on a particular day. However, such things do not pose a serious problem in a non-bureaucratic system which assesses the viability of projects and searches for solutions. What is in fact very common is that people who began by volunteering for one task, start to increase their participation in other activities and they also encourage others to start taking part too.

Flexibility and freedom are not incompatible with commitment and maintaining responsibility. There are Learning Communities which do ask for some kind of obligation from their volunteers and some ask for the volunteers to uphold particular ethical principles or to agree to contracts of cooperation which clearly outline what their duties and commitments are as volunteers. Such agreements however are always compiled as a result of a consensus in the Learning Community. An example of a possible entry in an agreement document is:

*'It is important for everyone for activities to begin when expected. This is why volunteers are asked to please be punctual. Without your presence, the activity cannot take place. If you cannot come, please let the school know as soon as you can. If you know of someone who can replace you, please let us know.*

Volunteers are also asked to remember the following:

*'They cannot mention to other families and/or people they know inside and outside of the school anything about any child in particular, about what goes on in the classroom (what the child is like, what he/she does, if he/she makes mistakes, if it is hard for him or her, if he or she learns quickly or not and so on).'*

In particular, volunteers are requested to respect the privacy of the children. Lack of respect is completely out of the question. This applies equally to any form of aggression, violence or harassment which conflicts with integrity. One example states: '*Be firm and do not allow any offence against you or others.'*

Everyone who comes to the education centre as a volunteer does it due to enthusiasm and a commitment to working towards a common aim alongside teachers. For this reason there are, in general, no problems with volunteering. Even so, there are mechanisms available which include establishing ethical principles and a volunteer contract in order to prevent any potential problems.

Other frequent concerns regarding volunteers which are raised by staff and management of education centres surround the *legal issues* of incorporating

volunteers into the education centre and the classrooms. Learning Communities which have been operating for some time have used various alternatives for managing such matters. Some of them chose to insure any potential risk to which volunteers could be exposed via the Parents Association of the education centre. This Association often has a civil liability insurance to cover the people involved in centre activities where there is also a line covering civil liability insurance for volunteers.

### *Training of volunteers*

As stated previously, anyone can become a volunteer, from those who cannot read and write to those who have a university degree. They all make a valuable contribution since providing diversity in interactions for students is the goal. Besides which, there are a multitude of activities for involvement at the centre which require a wide variety of skills. Quite simply, the only requirement that the volunteer must meet is that of commitment to being excited about participating in a Learning Community.

Training for volunteers depends on the education centres themselves. There are centres in which the Volunteers Mixed Committee plans training of the volunteers as part of their duties. In other education centres, the teacher who shares an activity space with a volunteer will clarify their duties to them and assist them in achieving them. On other occasions, a yearly training conference is held, for example at the start of the school year. Therefore, the subject of volunteer training is a decision to be taken by each individual education community.

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**To find out more:**

Tellado, I. & Sava, S. (2010). The Role of Non-Expert Adult Guidance in the Dialogic Construction of Knowledge. Revista de Psicodidáctica, 15 (2), 163-176

Valls, R. & Kyriakides, L. (2013). The power of Interactive Groups: how diversity of adults volunteering in classroom groups can promote inclusion and success for children of vulnerable minority ethnic populations. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 43* (1), 17-33.

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