

Voluntary Work as a Lifelong Learning Process

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Introduction

The concept of lifelong learning surpasses a static view of education as being linked to a limited time in life and has established itself as an opportunity for individual learning curricula which also embraces old age. However, a scientific approach to education also needs to consider the social dimension, which entails the danger of lifelong learning becoming a means for the aggravation of social injustice (cf. Walther and Stauber, 1998). Education officials rarely commit themselves as to whether they intend to prevent education from turning into a competitive factor within a socially and economically heterogeneous market. Thus, education threatens to be forced into a secondary, supplying role in the antechamber to society's resources.

In the future, the primary impulse in lifelong learning should therefore lie in the furthering of a broader participation in society. The preparation for an active social involvement should not only be offered to a chosen few, however fair the process of their selection may have been. Education must adopt the task of social reform as its own. Such a perspective is offered by the social sphere of voluntary work.

Voluntary work exhibits characteristics of both education and work and serves as an integral part of people's daily lives. Voluntarism searches for ways of a co-operative, democratic coexistence and views the power-related flow of capital with indifference. Voluntary work also functions as an agent of civil agitation, which seeks to advertise regionalisation and the formation of global networks by its subsidiarity. Positioned along such crucial borderlines, voluntary work is excellently suited to attempt the implementation of a participatory model of education.

Clarification of the term

Before undertaking an in-depth discussion of the phenomenon, the criteria for defining the term of 'voluntary work' needs to be established. Voluntary work will have to be distinguished from both full-time and part-time work and from other activities belonging to the private sphere.

As a fundamental criterion for the differentiation between voluntary services and full-time or part-time work, the absence of monetary compensation has been cited, see for instance Badelt (1997: 359): "In the following study voluntary work is defined as a service which is not done for monetary payment" [this and all following translations mine].

Even this basic trait of non-payment is a problematic one, however, since volunteers do occasionally receive compensatory pay. Horch (1992: 149) draws attention to the fact that "the existence of compensatory payments, stipends or minimum wages shows that the criterion of 'the absence of monetary compensation' can only be a gradual one." Whether a taken sum can still be seen as financial compensation or whether it already serves as material gain is open to discussion.

Thus, for the purpose of a general distinction (as for each single case), a financial limit for each individual activity within the framework of voluntary work has to be defined, up to which payment can still be considered as merely compensatory. This financial limit may either be adapted to individual factors (such as the volunteer's income) or linked to a fixed sum.

For a more precise differentiation of voluntarism from other, equally unpaid activities belonging to the private sphere, further defining criteria have to be applied.

Engel's study (1994: 35) resorts to principles which are also suggested by Van Loon (1994), although Engel provides a more detailed analysis:

1. Non-payment - "No salary other than the reimbursement of actually incurred expenses is given."
2. Work serving the community - "Voluntary work is not confined to the private sphere of the volunteer but is directed at the community at large."
3. Organisation - "Voluntary work is performed within the framework of a formal organisation, the juridical structure of which would potentially allow employment of regular employees."

Family care can be assigned to the private sphere and thus is not directed at serving the community at large. Various criteria have been cited in the attempt to define family ties. Olk (1992: 20) uses the outdated term of 'blood-ties'. Neither does the approach adopted in Rauschenbach, Müller and Otto (1992) concur with the diversity of family ties, since in their study family help is seen as solely taking place within social relations defined by marriage or kinship. Badelt's term of 'shared household' (1997: 361) seems more appropriate:

"Publications on the subject tend not to use the term of 'voluntary work' when dealing with activities concerned with the needs of the members of one common household." Hence, life and work within one's own household cannot be considered voluntary work, albeit that some criteria overlap.

Self-help is equally self-directed, whereas the concept of voluntary work, which targets a larger community, implies receiving help from outside. One of the major characteristics of self-help is the helper's personal affliction: The prerequisite for membership in a self-help group is the participant's traumatic experience, which is shared by all other members of the same organisation. The range of care activities is thus limited to "people similarly affected" (cf. Rauschenbach, Müller and Otto, 1992).

With regard to the following two factors the definition of self-help is largely dependant on evaluation:

- (1) In some respects self-help coincides with voluntary work.
- (2) 'Being personally affected' can entail a merely potential affliction and the feeling of pity and commiseration.

The differentiation between *neighbourhood help* and voluntary work is decided by the criterion of organisation. Care person and the person in need are linked by a close spatial relationship. This spatial vicinity permits aid work without a supporting organisational framework (cf. Dechamps, 1989). With the establishment of an organisation aimed at supporting the whole community, neighbourly help is transformed into voluntary work.

Voluntary work likewise has to be distinguished from *local exchange and trading societies*. Such organisations are based on the principle of exchanging different kinds of labour. In order to establish objective criteria for the value of individual services, units of time or value are introduced. Here the criterion of the absence of pay can be applied, although no actual exchange of money takes place. Voluntary work, which is performed without the volunteer expecting a concomitant compensation, can be thus differentiated from local exchange and trading societies which specialise in the exchange of social services.

Relevant relations

Form, size and quality of a voluntary organisation are determined by various relations:

- (1) Social relations - Voluntary work is an expression of a community's social commitment and is subjected to various social and political forces. As a possible aim of setting up a voluntary aid organisation, Meyer et al. (1993: 24) cite the development of "informal, quasi natural" relations, which lead to social integration and a stable social network.
- (2) Relations involving the volunteers - The founding of a help organisation has to be conducted in accordance with the volunteers. Haslauer (1993: 81) calls for an "elimination of obstacles which interfere with the volunteers' needs. If the volunteers' interests are not met, this may lead to frustration and thus to tension, dissatisfaction and members' withdrawal." The attempt of giving voluntary organisations an up-to-date design implies that voluntary work is respected and appreciated.
- (3) Relations involving the organisations - It is in the organisation's interest to support the volunteers' activities so that their services comply with the organisation's quality standards. In its statutes on volunteers the German AIDS Fund (1996) states that "staff policy with its elements of choice and development must pertain to both regular and voluntary members alike."
- (4) Relations involving the clients - It seems clear that it is the clients who are most closely affected by the standard of quality applied. Hence it is the client who is most interested in a well-devised, duly functioning organisation.

In the following section various phenomena characterising the relations between society and voluntary work will be discussed. For the social context the areas of hidden unemployment, voluntary work as a social corrective and voluntarism and gender have been chosen. For the relations involving the volunteers, the topics of 'interests', 'complexity of volunteer motivation' and 'reasons for joining' will be analysed.

Social relations I: Hidden unemployment

Voluntary work is a substitute for regular employment. According to Notz (1989: 69), social conflicts can be avoided by enforcing voluntary social work, since it "grants occupation to the jobless." A case in point lies with the 40 to 60

year-old women who make up a large proportion of all areas of voluntary work. For this group a re-entry into the labour market after years of child-care is particularly difficult.

Since voluntary work serves as an important "substitute for unwanted unemployment" (Bendele, 1992: 80), policies of staff recruitment take advantage of the heightened demand for occupation caused by rising unemployment. Work has become an asset which is vital for a person's biography. Because of the immense importance of an occupation for their individual and social identity, people looking for a job do not insist on payment if their financial needs are in some way catered for.

High unemployment rates lead to a surplus of people willing to work, who due to existential strains agree to work for low pay. This generates an erosion of regular working conditions (cf. Rauschenbach, Müller and Otto, 1992), and Rabe-Kleberg (1992: 88) senses a "growing acceptance" of this fact. Viewed from this perspective, voluntary work becomes a "blemish of the labour market" (Rabe-Kleberg, 1992: 88).

Social relations II: Voluntary work as social corrective

The general decline in social services generates a rising demand for voluntary work. Tresenreuter (1994: 7) claims that we are witnessing times where "social and neighbourly relations and family ties are slowly dissolving" and where voluntary services have to step in as a corrective. Voluntary work can have a stimulating effect on the forming of social contacts. Zapotoczky et al. (1996: 102) refer to voluntarism's "integrative effect". Solinger (1996: 8) describes a "wide variety of initiatives and models", which "provide a new kind of community and solidarity" and which "prove that citizens are able and willing to live and work with and for each other".

Pöhr (1994: 35) interprets voluntary work as "a (possibly) effective counter balance to fears of centralism and inscrutable decision-making processes". Within a voluntary group it is not payment or an exchange of services, but shared experience and an intimate knowledge of each other which are important (cf. Ortmann, 1992). The organised character of voluntary work with its standardised levels of quality can influence the quality of family care. Becoming a member of a voluntary organisation means acquiring skills, exchanging information and knowledge and being protected against overwork (e.g. when nursing).

As a basic requirement for the formation of a future society, Elsen (1998: 22) names "the analysis of one's social environment and the identification with its historical, natural and socio-cultural characteristics." For Böhnisch (1992: 135) voluntarism is "a symbol for a society's interest in the welfare of the community". A volunteer's activities "concern us all and are merely mediated by the volunteer, i.e. they are transposed onto the level of public concerns."

Social relations III: Voluntarism and gender

While Meyer et al. (1993: 25) cautiously speak of the link between voluntarism and women's work as being "a delicate question", strong protests have been voiced such as the criticism that "the concept of 'femininity' serves as basis for an exploitative society" (Funk, 1996: 126) or that "the concept of 'motherhood' is used as a solution to all social evil" (Backes, 1987: 80). According to Schmidt (1987: 3) there is a "secret policy" which allots paid jobs to men and unpaid work to women. A "gender-specific division of labour, which makes men go out and take up regular employment and has women do housework, child care and the nursing of the ill and infirm" (Notz, 1989: 12) is deemed highly problematic.

Backes (1987: 80) is surprised at how "outmoded female ideals and family values are unashamedly brought into a connection with economy budgets, cuts in state services, unemployment and social crises." Since women's social work is vital for society, the discrepancy between counting on women's unpaid social services and failing to allot them any economic significance has frequently caused irritation. Society relies on women's constant "submission" (Funk, 1992: 126). A further accusation levelled at the social *status quo* results from the fact that the social sector is prone to receiving cuts in funding. Women suffer doubly from job-reductions in the social sector. "Isolating the social sector of employment" (Rabe-Kleberg, 1992: 93) or reducing the number of paid jobs leads to a decline of women's social status and to the loss of financial independence. Professional services turn into home care and thus to unpaid work mostly performed by women.

Three ways of counteracting this asymmetry can be envisaged:

- (a) Equal distribution of paid work and voluntary services among women and men.
- (b) Economic upgrading of voluntary services.
- (c) The taking-over of voluntary work by professional institutions.

Some studies envisage a development which cannot be afforded the status of a solution: They expect a decline in the quality of social services, a reduction of posts within the sector and thus a drastic deterioration of social welfare. In this scenario women have to leave the voluntary sector, since growing divorce-rates and the trend towards single parenthood necessitate regular employment for want of financial security (cf. Krüger, 1991).

Relations involving the volunteers I: Interests

The interest in the reasons for joining voluntary institutions is guided either by a functional or by an oppositional motivation: By analysing the volunteers' reasons for joining, conditions can be created which match the volunteers' expectations. Viewed from the organisation's perspective, a volunteer's motivation becomes a vital "tool for recruitment" (cf. Horch, 1992, Pachner, 1995). Groups opposed to voluntary work use their knowledge about volunteer motivation to unmask manipulation and exploitation.

The following statements are characteristic of a functionally motivated interest: In Badelt's view (1997: 360) it is important to "be aware of the existence of a wide range of motives so that the problems of volunteers can be better understood and non-pecuniary incentives, which encourage people to join voluntary organisations are offered." Similarly, Bono (1996: 56) foresees that "in their competition for voluntary workers, non-profit organisations will not be spared the effort of collecting information on the volunteers' expectations and of adapting to them in their management strategies." The German AIDS Fund (1996) for instance claims that regular employees and volunteers have the right to different modes of compensation that reflect their differing motivations.

Voluntarism's social and personal use are subjective factors and therefore cannot be judged objectively. By promoting and enforcing the various positive values attributed to voluntary work, voluntary institutions seek to enhance its economic value. The borderline between real needs and fictional constructs of prestige is difficult to ascertain.

This point is taken up by sceptics of voluntarism: For Riepl (1992) advertising the benefits of voluntary work involves the potential danger of manipulation and exploitation. This practice is also questioned by Notz (1989: 77): "The fact that female volunteers work for the satisfaction of their own needs makes them particularly vulnerable to exploitation." Because of a possible "misuse of volunteers through the state or aid institutions" (Dechamps, 1989: 31) it is important to analyse volunteer motivation and to question hidden ideologies.

Relations involving the volunteers II: Complexity of volunteer motivation

Most studies reject mono-causality when explaining volunteer motivation and instead opt for a complexity of reasons. Hetzel, Lemmen and Schorcht (1996) maintain that "the concept of 'honour' does not suffice to explain the multiplicity of motivations of 'the new volunteer'". Voluntary service does not necessarily arise out of altruistic motivation. Instead, a large number of different reasons can cause a person to seek voluntary employment (cf. Badelt, 1997).

Jakob (1993: 30) describes a frequent link between voluntarism and a person's biography: "Whether and how a person seeks admission to a voluntary organisation largely depends on his or her present biographical situation, past experience and expectations for the future." Jakob and Olk (1995: 19) mention that sometimes "dispositions originating in early childhood unfold in voluntary work."

Braun and Röhrig (1986) mention unconscious or hidden motivations such as the volunteer's own need for help/care or for a diversion from his or her own problems. As an example Dechamps (1989: 29) mentions the housewife who wants to help others, "but in doing so she also helps herself, since by volunteering she can escape her isolation." On the other hand, phenomena such as the 'empty-nest syndrome', the shock of retirement, partner conflicts or the loss of meaning are now being openly discussed and have thus lost much of their taboo character. Hence, tendencies of concealment and suppression are becoming less prominent. Wright (1996: 25) wants "motives such as fear, grief or loss of meaning, which often remain unconscious and are highly personal" to be taken more seriously. Wright (ibid.) maintains that it is not only "noble motives" such as solidarity, altruism or the quest for knowledge which turn people into devoted volunteers. Jakob (1993: 31) also mentions "crises and turning points in someone's life", from which voluntary organisations frequently 'profit'.

It therefore can be assumed that the relevance of a given motive for joining a voluntary group can change both interpersonally and for one volunteer within the course of a person's active volunteering period. Drawing from his own experience Baune (1996: 19) describes a change of motivation during his volunteering career: "My motivation for doing voluntary work has changed." Such an alteration can be brought about by changes in someone's biography. Thus, a further distinction has to be drawn between motives which lead to joining a voluntary association and motives responsible for staying on.

Relations involving the volunteers III: Reasons for joining

Altruism

According to Badelt (1997: 370), volunteers provide their work force because of a wish of "participating in a good thing, of providing help to people in emergency situations etc." The basic motivation lies "in furthering the well-being of another person" (Badelt *ibid.*). Motives aiming at the society at large are solidarity (Horch, 1992), the wish of serving the whole community (Riepl, 1992) and the urge to "'donate' oneself to society" (Pöhr, 1994: 147).

Dissatisfaction with professional help organisations

Voluntary work is a departure from "the selective logic of institutionalised service. It embodies the community's responsibility for the individual and thus for the entire society" (Münchmeier, 1992: 59). It seeks to help in cases of emergency and aims at a general improvement of living conditions (cf. Funk, 1992).

Solitude, sociability and social integration

"Meeting other people" (Wagner, 1990: 109) is a basic human interest. This social dimension is termed "common meaning" by Funk and Winter (1992: 526). Wendt (1996: 21) senses an "increased individualization" and the "disintegration of inter-human relations" in today's society. Critical situations which arise due to a lack of human contacts can be averted by voluntary work. This social context allows individuals to experience meanings essential to life, such as team spirit, friendship and sexual attraction.

Christian Charity

Wendt (1996: 59) stresses the "great importance of religiously motivated actions". He views religious faith as "something like a home" to a person's commitment to society and interprets social commitment and solidarity as the "active side to a person's faith". For Wagner (1990: 109), "faith and active charity" are the two central pillars of a religious life.

Meaning of life

Some "people are entirely taken up by voluntary work, making it their meaning of life (Badelt, 1997: 367)". Riepl (1992: 13) claims that "the deepest human needs" are catered for by volunteering, since it provides social appreciation and a meaning to life. For Funk and Winter (1992) voluntary work offers "support and an orientation in life".

Testing and developing personal skills

Similar to Notz (1989), Riepl (1992: 79) holds that the essential motive for voluntary work is to gather "a broad range of experience". Budowski et al. (1993: 64) describe the "opportunity of acquiring further training" and of "confronting and solving social problems" as part of that motivation. According to the theory of intrinsic value orientation, a voluntary worker's "job satisfaction is not created by positive results of the volunteer's actions i.e. the client's well-being, but by the activity in itself" (Haslauer, 1993: 30). For Funk and Winter (1992) it is also a place of creativity. The voluntary worker's skills and social competence are constantly undergoing a process of formation and testing. Baune (1996) describes voluntary work as an opportunity of developing one's personality.

Compensating for alienation

Meyer et al. (1993) describe the feeling of alienation involved in regular paid work. The cure for alienation caused by impersonal working conditions may be found not only in spare-time but also in the act of working itself. Social work contains a creative, artistic component. Social initiatives and self-organised projects turn into processes which contain "moments of self-realisation" (Rabe-Kleberg, 1992: 101).

Seeking for regular paid employment

Notz (1989: 26) estimates that "by far the greater number of unemployed female voluntary workers - not including those elderly women who are sufficiently provided for - hope to find regular paid employment within the framework of social work by starting off as voluntary workers." Voluntary work becomes a temporary "substitute career" (Rabe-Kleberg, 1992: 87). Voluntary work can be a way of entering regular employment. In this context Badelt (1997: 372) talks of the "investment character" of voluntary work. Thus, according to Rabe-Kleberg (1992: 88) voluntary work is a "social risk situation".

The feeling of being needed

Riepl (1992: 79) points out that in interviews voluntary workers frequently mention the "feeling of being needed". Drawing from his own experience, Baune (1996: 19) describes this kind of motivation as follows: "Voluntary work had to provide me with a high degree of self-affirmation. I was addicted to the feeling of being needed. I had a very strong feeling that in order to be a valuable person I had to do good." In her study, Riepl (1992) lists clients' affection, gratitude and appreciation, which in combination create the feeling of being needed.

Acquiring social status

Social status is both connected to various "input factors" (e.g. information) and "output factors" (e.g. influence, authority). Pöhr (1994: 149) describes how an important role within the community may be acquired by taking on a position in the educational system. Pöhr lists examples of interviews in which volunteers working for an educational institution describe their new position as follows: "Now I am somebody"; "When I attend a meeting, I always get mentioned in the opening address".

Grass roots

In a series of interviews with volunteers working within the sector of education, Pöhr (1994: 165) emphasises the aspects of "small-sized organisations" and "grass-roots initiatives", in which the community "is given a voice." Rabe-Kleberg (1992: 91) describes such organisations as "open and non-bureaucratic, with a wide range of possibilities and a low level of surveillance". According to Hongler (1998: 4), such groups may deal with ordinary problems of daily life, but they may also be involved in devising "utopian projects and concepts of a better life".

Survival strategy

In connection with a modest financial compensation and the supply of its infrastructure, voluntary work may also be interpreted as a "survival strategy" (cf. Rabe-Kleberg, 1992: 88). The voluntary worker perceives the organisation as a setting which allows him to experience a normal life routine such as meals, housing, social contacts and transportation.

Bourgeois class-consciousness

When getting involved in voluntary work, volunteers can acquire a way of perceiving class-difference. Volunteers act within a social structure which is dominated by a distance between the lower classes in need and the upper classes, who charitably provide support (cf. Notz, 1989; Ortmann, 1992).

Expecting similar treatment in times of need

Relying on the assumption that social rules remain stable within a community, one motivation for taking on voluntary work is the volunteers' expectation to be in need of the same social services sometime in the future. Local exchange and trading societies are based on the notion that "if I do something now, I will get something in return" and by organisational measures try to guarantee that services are actually supplied. In voluntary organisations, the hope of being able to take advantage of voluntary social services in times of need is not supported by a formal framework.

Consequences

Voluntarism's value for a lifelong learning process can be viewed from two perspectives: either from the position of learner theory or from an economic point of view.

Ascertaining voluntarism's relevance in the context of learner theory seems fairly simple. There is much to say in favour of voluntarism as a valuable field of learning. Learning within the framework of voluntary work is integrative, pragmatic and complex. Especially during retirement or any other phase potentially threatened by disintegration, volunteering can provide a closer contact with everyday life the intensity of which is determined by the helper's own needs. However, organisations and aid-providing centres which intend to offer volunteering as an opportunity for learning have to fulfil certain requirements. Previous to employment, potential volunteers ought to be given time for orientation in a trial phase. Offering professional counselling and the possibility of further education is equally important. Compensatory payment and social security are indispensable legal preconditions. Giving the volunteers a certain amount of freedom in their choice of action and a say in the decision-making process is vital for an organisation's functioning group dynamics. In future training programmes these factors will have to be taken more fully into consideration.

Evaluating voluntarism's relevance within the context of an economic approach is rather complex. The classical interpretation of an earner society relies on a clear-cut division between paid and unpaid employment and all but rejects unpaid voluntary work. Voluntarism tends to undermine certain fundamental principles of industrial law such as the right for pay and is thus seen as exploitative. The only accepted kind of voluntary work is a short and strictly defined period of practical training during which the trainee is introduced to working in the social sector. Changing voluntary work into regular paid employment is top of the agenda. Even volunteers' pioneering work would have to be replaced by regularly funded planning projects.

A different, more humane kind of economy would view the same problem in a different light. If traditionally unpaid services (such as housework) were economically acknowledged, it would become easier to accept organised voluntarism. Because of their high social relevance, periods spent in volunteering could become an integral part of the economic system. The re-evaluation of work would have to be followed by a just and stable redistribution of resources. In imitation of service-related payments such as child care benefits, voluntary work could be rewarded through public funds or transfer

services. Applying the principle of basic income, time could be made available for learning and voluntary work.

Voluntarism's consequences for social professions should not be wholly ignored. Even if voluntarism is separate from and supplementary to professional social work, one must be sensitive about a possible devaluation of social professions. The discussion centred on voluntarism as a possibility for acquiring skills and knowledge should therefore not be restricted to the social sector.

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