

Student volunteering and the active community: issues and opportunities for teaching and learning in sociology

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Abstract

Student volunteering is currently being promoted through the Higher Education Active Community Fund, which runs to August 2004 and may be extended further. This development of higher education's 'third mission' has strong links with the government's agenda for citizenship and the active community. This initiative appears to have taken little account of debates concerning both the ideological bases of volunteering, in particular the contested nature of citizenship and social capital, and the practicalities of students volunteering. In an increasingly instrumental climate for higher education this represents a possible strategic flaw. The merits of integrating volunteering activity into the curriculum are discussed through comparison with service-learning in the USA, and illustrations of present practice from a number of UK universities. In conclusion, a case is made for more open and widespread dialogues between higher education institutions, the voluntary sector and policy-makers in exploring service-learning and its role in the curriculum and the community.

Keywords

higher education
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Introduction

This paper offers reflections on how student volunteering can be introduced into the sociology curriculum and be assessed as part of student learning on par with other modules.¹ It considers the timeliness of such activity, in the light of governmental concern with fostering the 'active community' and the introduction from 2002 of the Higher Education Active Community Fund (HEACF). Connection is made between these developments and the contested concept of 'social capital'. Finally, using evidence from staff and student seminars on volunteering, the paper concludes with some pointers for future action for those wishing to adapt volunteering experience to their own teaching and learning practice.

Higher Education Active Community Fund

In its paper on the Active Community Fund (HEACF Ref: 01/65, November 2001) HEFCE announced an allocation of up to £27 million to English higher education institutions and outlined guidelines for detailed plans and proposals it wished to see in place before handing over the funds. The intention is to create 14,000 more volunteering opportunities (for students and staff) and to establish closer links between higher education institutions and local communities, in particular the voluntary and community sector.

The funding applies to all higher education institutions in England. It avoids competitive bidding by allocating funding pro rata to student numbers; thus the largest universities such as Oxford receive £500,000 and the smallest institutions less than £20,000. Universities and colleges had until 25 January 2002 to come up with firm spending plans, covering the three years of the scheme, which finishes in August 2004.

The HEACF document summarizes the purpose of the volunteering as follows:

Volunteering will help both staff and students gain new perspectives and enable them to develop their employment skills while enhancing the quality of life in disadvantaged sections of the community.

Volunteering is not restricted to the gaining of skills, however. It is noted that volunteering 'helps to promote a fairer, more cohesive society' and that it 'helps build bridges between communities and local organizations such as higher education institutions' while students gain 'new perspectives'.

The document therefore presents volunteering as having a number of dimensions: instrumental acquisition of skills, 'perspective' change for students, combating poverty and disadvantage, delivering social justice and developing social capital for students, universities and communities. This is a tall order, with multiple and possibly competing objectives, and this paper will critically assess whether and how student volunteering can make a difference.

The background

Increasingly there is talk of a 'third mission' for universities, one that is distinct from the established roles of research and teaching, and one that connects universities with the communities, cities and regions in which they are located, and from which they drew their initial impetus and support.

In the United States, public service has long been incorporated into the mission of universities. For example, the University of Illinois speaks of the university having 'a special obligation to take its expertise in real-world concerns to the citizen-shareholders of the university' (<http://www.uillinois.edu/report/third.html>).

Nyden et al. (1997), writing of their experience in pioneering community-based research at Loyola University in Chicago, argue that the rediscovery of the mission of service can be related to uncertainties in the economy and to pressures to cut costs and use existing resources more effectively. These pressures, they see, are focusing universities on demonstrating 'how they contribute to society in general and to their local communities in particular ... this is particularly the case with public universities that annually must justify appropriations approved by state legislatures' (Nyden et al. 1997: 15).

In the UK the focus on public service is less single-minded and tinged with a heavy dose of entrepreneurialism. David Blunkett, then Secretary of State for Education, in his letter to HEFCE of 29 November 2000 about funding for higher education in the period 2001-02, made particular mention of links with industry and community. Here he defined the 'third mission' for universities as being 'to work with industry and the wider community alongside their teaching and research' (<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/NEWS/HEFCE/2000/funding.htm>).

In particular, as the letter made clear, there are at least three strands to the implementation of this mission. The first is the Higher Education Reach-Out to Business and the Community (HEROBC) programme, to be incorporated into a wider Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) with funding also from the Department of Trade and Industry Office of Science and Technology (OST). The second is the encouragement of volunteering, to support and assist voluntary and community organizations. Volunteering is promoted as being 'intrinsically beneficial to all concerned, and integral to the development of generic skills among students as well as higher education's wider responsibilities to local communities.'

- 2 For example, through the Science Enterprise Challenge, 13 Science Enterprise Centres have been established, after competitive bidding, in universities around the UK. These centres focus on three main areas of activity:
- Teaching of enterprise and entrepreneurship to science and technology students;
 - Making ideas and know-how available to business to support competitiveness and wealth creation;
 - Encouraging the growth of new businesses by supporting start-ups, including spin-out companies based on innovative ideas developed by students and faculty within the universities. (<http://www.cmi.cam.ac.uk/ncn/science-enterprise.html>)

The third strand is work experience and the development of vocational and work-based modules within non-vocational degree courses. Links with business and entrepreneurship are particularly stressed for social sciences and arts faculties (presumably on the grounds that they are less well represented in work experience than science and technology); employability and careers are also stressed.

The university response has been to agree that the third mission is part of what universities do. Professor Floud, then President of Universities UK, declared in a speech on 15 November 2001 that universities

reach into their communities, getting their hands dirty by combating social exclusion and improving cultural understanding in their regions. The world is changing and universities are changing as well. In places as diverse as Middlesborough and Tower Hamlets, university staff lead regeneration companies, act as governors of schools and colleges, and are active in community groups. Their expertise is called on by their Regional Development Agencies and local businesses, they train all of the nation's health professionals, and they enhance the culture and well-being in their regions. Universities have been doing these things for many years, but there is now a clear recognition that this work should be explicitly funded and encouraged. And there has been an increasing expectation within the policy community and the general population, that universities should contribute to the regions in which they are based. (<http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/speeches/show.asp?sp=44>)

Behind the various forms of the third mission lies a broader question, about the role of universities in today's world. The debate here visualizes the third mission as contributing to the local and national economy, and Leydesdorff and Etzkowitz (1996) posit the model of the 'triple helix' to describe the links between universities, governments and industry. The question can then be asked, what combination of societal pressures is creating the drive towards the third mission, and does this function impact negatively on the traditional functions of the university - teaching and research? Martin and Etzkowitz (2000) suggest that as knowledge becomes more central to development of the economy, universities will become even more important in knowledge creation, knowledge transfer and knowledge exploitation, though specialization may well occur as they adapt to entrepreneurial pressures.

Their conclusion is that 'the situation has become much more similar to that prevailing in the late nineteenth century, with many universities taking up again the third mission of contributing to technology transfer, innovation, the economy and society more generally' (Martin and Etzkowitz 2000: 19).

Up to the present time, the main thrust of the third mission has been to emphasize knowledge transfer through the promotion of scientific and technological innovation with the business sector.² The HEACE, however, represents a new and distinctive form of the third mission, closer to the American ideal of service to the community through its emphasis on volunteering. We shall explore below how well this development of the mission fits with educational practice, and discuss the challenges it faces if it is to become embedded in university priorities.

Volunteering and higher education

Volunteering has long been part of student experience in higher education, from the establishment of University Settlements in the late nineteenth century, (some of which continue to the present as at Edinburgh and Birmingham). Today's volunteering is facilitated through student community action in a wide range of universities. Many of these volunteering schemes are coordinated through Student Volunteering UK (<http://www.studentvol.org.uk>) which provides training and support, as well as representation at national level with government.

While volunteering is an established activity for students in their free time outside the curriculum, until recently there have been few opportunities in the UK for volunteering to become part of accredited learning within a degree programme. This contrasts strongly with the USA where service-learning (learning through community service) has become an established part of the curriculum. According to Lisman, in 1998 there were 520 campus members of the National Campus Compact, involving 5,000 faculty and 500,000 students. (Lisman 1998: 24). By 2003 this had grown to a membership of over 900 colleges and universities in the Campus Compact, and the involvement of over 8,500 faculty members (www.compact.org/membership/growth.html).

What is service-learning?

Lisman (1998) defines service-learning, or academically based community service as 'a form of learning in which students engage in community service as part of academic course work'. There are three key elements:

- Service experiences are connected with learning outcomes;
- There is an opportunity for teacher-guided reflection on the service experience;
- Student learning involves keeping journals of experience.

Lisman reports that service-learning 'is re-energizing teaching and developing strong partnerships between colleges and communities' (Lisman 1998: 24).

Service-learning encompasses a wide variety of programmes in the United States, and Eyler and Giles (1999: 5) use a typology created by Sigmon (1996) based on whether the 'service' or the 'learning' element is emphasized.

The final category, 'where the two foci are in balance, and study and action are explicitly integrated' describes the model which Eyler and Giles (1999) practise, with the hyphen symbolizing 'the central role of reflection in the process of learning through community experience' (Eyler and Giles 1999: 4). It is also the model which the writers of this paper practise in their institutions and which is described below.

Eyler and Giles' research was conducted in the USA using extensive survey data (1,500 students from 20 colleges and universities, 1,100 of whom were involved in service-learning) and intensive interviews (67 students at 6 colleges before and after the service semester).

They note that:

Service-LEARNING	Learning goals primary; service outcomes secondary
SERVICE-learning	Service outcomes primary; learning goals secondary
Service learning	Service and learning goals separate
SERVICE-LEARNING	Service and learning goals of equal weight; each enhances the other for all participants

Table 1.1: A service and learning typology.

Although the effects of service-learning on students that we found in our studies were often significant, they are not large. They are, however, rather consistent. Service-learning makes a difference, and within the group who experience these programs, higher-quality service-learning makes a bigger difference. (Eyler and Giles 1999: xvii)

Some of these effects included:

- A majority of service-learning students reported that they learned more and were motivated to work harder than in regular classes;
- A majority reported a deeper understanding of subject matter, and being able to apply material learned in class to real problems;
- High quality placements (responsibilities and challenging work) resulted in reports of more student learning;
- Where service-learning was well integrated through classroom focus and reflection, students were more likely to demonstrate greater issue knowledge, and give more complex analysis of problems.

By contrast, service-learning that was not linked to course objectives and classroom discussion (SERVICE-learning) was unlikely to lead to a greater understanding of social issues.

The American Sociological Association has contributed a volume to the series of monographs published by the American Association for Higher Education linking service-learning with academic disciplines (Ostrow et al. 1999). Three sample syllabi are included in the Appendix to the book, which show the variety of courses offered, ranging from a community research workshop, through a course titled 'Reading a Community; the City as a Text' to a community involvement project assessed through reflective assignments.

The sociologists who have contributed chapters critically engage with service-learning issues. Marullo sees service-learning as having its roots in the Chicago School tradition of engagement with social problems in the surrounding community and argues that this produces a 'better theoretical and conceptual understanding of the discipline', while providing students with the 'sociological imagination that enables them to link the individual biographies of the people with whom they work with the larger social forces that have affected them' (Marullo 1999: 12).

Strand, however, points out some of the pitfalls. Service-learning might promote individualistic thinking about social problems and behaviour and encourage 'reliance on personal experience rather than systematic analysis as a basis for knowing, and reinforcing rather than challenging stereotypical views of different social groups' (Strand 1999: 31). Sociology as a discipline, therefore, has an essential role in ensuring that service-learning does not neglect the underlying structural causes of social problems. Strand advocates that students should be encouraged to work with action groups working for social transformation such as environmental organizations, women's groups, trade unions, etc. Participatory action research is also seen as a radical form for service-learning, where community groups are empowered through democratic participation with students (Porpora 1999: 124).

For many American academics, the ultimate goal for service-learning is social change, or at the very least, educating students who will be agents of change (Lempert 1995) and for this reason, it is seen as an important part of developing citizenship, a goal which does not appear to be as contentious as it is in this country. The section below considers the rather different background to volunteering and service-learning in the UK and notes some of the problems of associating this with an uncritical approach to citizenship.

Volunteering and citizenship

With New Labour there has been an upsurge of interest in active citizenship and volunteering deriving from communitarian and social capital ideas. However, it is worth noting that government involvement with volunteering is nothing new. Sheard (1995) points out that from post-war Britain onwards (and especially since the 1960s) the government of the day has always had an influence on volunteering, based on its perceptions of social problems and concerns. 'In fact, one might almost say that successive governments have seen in volunteering a panacea for whatever society's current ills happen to be' (Sheard 1995: 116).

In the 1960s voluntary work was seen as a safe and constructive outlet for the otherwise destructive energies of youth and a number of 'young volunteer' organizations were created, e.g. Community Service Volunteers and Task Force. Some disillusionment followed - volunteers were seen as 'papering over the cracks' of the Welfare State without addressing the root causes of poverty, alienation, etc. And recruiting large numbers of inexperienced young people was not an effective way of solving social problems - training and skills were needed.

These latter criticisms led to the setting up of the Voluntary Services Unit in the Home Office, the Volunteer Centre UK and a national network of volunteer bureaux as well as the creation of hundreds of paid posts to support and manage volunteering in statutory and voluntary organizations throughout the UK. The Labour government of the 1970s was not too keen on volunteering - and there was conflict with the trade unions over the issue of unpaid labour (an issue which still causes student volunteers some concern in their reflections).

However, the Thatcher government elected in 1979 was very keen on voluntary work. After the riots in the 1980s in Brixton, Bristol, Liverpool, and Birmingham (Campbell 1993) a raft of measures was launched

including programmes to encourage unemployed people to do volunteering. At this time volunteering was linked to unemployment, despite the numerous research studies that showed volunteering had a very beneficial effect on only a small proportion of the population, and for the majority it was irrelevant (Davis Smith et al. 1998).

In the 1990s unemployment decreased and the key issues affecting volunteering were community care, the new 'contract culture' and 'active citizenship'. A number of initiatives were launched. The Law Society sponsored a project in education for citizenship on legal rights and responsibilities in a democratic society which led to the establishment of the Citizenship Foundation in 1989. John Major felt volunteering would encourage people to be good neighbours and to take civic responsibility. The Institute for Citizenship was founded in 1992 as an independent charity by the then Speaker of the House of Commons (www.citizen.org.uk/about.html), developing a programme called ACT! (Active Citizenship Today!) to equip young people from the ages of 11-18 with the knowledge and skills to become proactive in effecting change in their communities and their own lives.

Those active in the voluntary sector were none too impressed - they did not appreciate being used by a right-wing government which, while paying lip service to volunteering, was actually drastically cutting the funds for public spending and tightening the benefit rules making it harder for some people, including the unemployed, to volunteer.

The Millennium Volunteers programme, introduced in 1999, aimed to involve 16-24-year-olds in a broad range of voluntary activities and offered recognition for the completion of 100 or 200 hours sustained volunteering. The evaluation to date reports that significant steps have been made towards achieving the aim of opening up volunteering to a broad cross-section of the community (Davis Smith, Ellis and Howlett 2002).

Under New Labour, volunteering is linked with citizenship. According to the 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey, active participation is a good indicator of 'healthy and well-functioning communities' (Attwood et al. 2003: 75). However, the same survey notes that volunteering, as an indicator of 'good' (i.e. engaged) citizenship varies according to socio-economic factors, with white and Asian people being more likely to raise or handle money than black people, and white people being the most likely to be group leaders or committee members, or even providers of transport (Attwood et al. 2003: 101). Citizenship is not, therefore, a blanket term for inclusion and equality - in practice, it is experienced differently according to positioning within the social structure.

Partly as an effort to combat low participation among young people generally, and unequal participation by different socio-economic and ethnic groups, citizenship education has now entered the school curriculum, with the overarching aim of linking the three strands of 'values, community participation and political literacy' (Annette 1999: 86). Citizenship through volunteering is likely to make the transition into higher education, if we follow the example of the USA where service-learning is now embedded. At this point we can note, however, that sociology departments in the UK are likely to adopt a much more critical approach to citizenship than their American colleagues and to regard with suspicion any service-learning

programmes which do not include critical engagement with the structural elements of inequality within which community groups are situated.

In the UK, the voluntary sector (where most service-learning is conducted) has been more interested in relating the sector generally, and volunteering in particular, to issues of social capital rather than citizenship. Yet social capital is also a contested concept.

Social capital and student volunteering

Putnam's (1995, 2000) popularizing of the term 'social capital' has found its way into official thinking about how to create the 'healthy' community through active participation in social activities, which help build up the fabric of civil society. The term 'social capital' is employed as a means of explaining how mutually supportive social interactions help build an environment of trust, leading to the creation of a bank of resources that can be used to support a whole variety of organizations and initiatives and serve a succession of different functions. As Robert Putnam defines it, social capital 'refers to connections among individuals - social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them' (Deakin 2001: 71).

Social and political scientists such as Coleman (1988) argue that the development of social relations between and among individual actors produces a critical mass that can contribute in a variety of ways to social structure and cohesion. As a sociological concept, Coleman places social capital amongst those theories that attempt to bridge the gap between over-deterministic structural explanations and more atomized explanations that view social phenomena simply as the outcome of individually driven actions. By stressing agency, it explains how 'people can make society' and stands in contrast to a deterministic tradition in which society stamps its mark on the individual. According to this view, the process whereby social capital is produced is embedded in relations of trust, systems of mutual obligation and shared norms. Social capital, then, may be a by-product or unintended consequence of mutual activities such as volunteering.

Social capital has strong links to citizenship. Putnam (1993) has echoed de Tocqueville in suggesting that social capital has the power to 'make democracy work' and that societies with high levels of social capital experience a host of economic, political and social benefits. He argues that communities which can develop a strong network of interrelationships and engagement will benefit from reduced crime, lower rates of teenage pregnancy, etc. He argues that bridging capital - linking stronger communities with greater resources and more social capital to weaker communities - will also bring benefits. This means poorer communities need to access those with power to champion their needs. This could be city hall - or the universities, for instance. So social capital is seen as an essential element in building and maintaining a healthy civil society - a project seen as crucial in Western societies, facing massive non-engagement by citizens in their governance (e.g. in the UK more young people in 2001 apparently voted in *Big Brother* than voted in the General Election).

Putnam sets an agenda for recreating the levels of civic engagement by 2010 for Americans coming of age to match that of their grandparents at the same age.

One specific test of our success will be whether we can restore electoral turnout to that of the 1960s, but our goal must be to increase participation and deliberation in other, more substantive and fine-grained ways, too - from team sports to choirs and from organized altruism to grassroots social movements. (Putnam 2000: 404)

Putnam's commentary leaves a negative and distinctly conservative image of declining participation and an associated drop in 'social capital' and active citizenship, somewhat reminiscent of the pessimism associated with the fears of the past concerning the decline of community. On the other hand he makes some very optimistic claims for the benefits that can arise for individuals' health and well-being from 'membership and involvement', so that in terms of life satisfaction, attending a club meeting regularly is the equivalent of 'more than doubling your income' (Putnam 2000: 333).

Putnam's views have been criticized, both with respect to the overemphasis placed upon the decline in community and social solidarity and for the uncritical stress placed upon the positive outcomes of increased levels of interaction. Burns and Taylor (1998), for instance, take a less pessimistic view of the decline in community links and social capital in the West, arguing that the weaker though more extensive networks associated with modern living may generate greater benefits than the more restricted tighter-knit relationships traditionally associated with community and family (and with the USA of the 1950s). Rotolo's (1999) study of participation in a range of voluntary associations from 1974 to 1994 notes there was an initial decline in this period, but the overall trend is actually increasing or stable levels of volunteering. The current pattern of participation, he suggests, is sufficient to create greater levels of trust, increased socialization between neighbours and political activity, i.e. to facilitate social capital.

Field's (2003) exploration of the concept identifies the uncritical 'warm glow' which dominates the literature. The benefits to the individual and social groups which accrue from increased interaction and networking are stressed, while the reinforcement of inequalities and legitimization of many forms of anti-social behaviour by strong group norms and pressures are downplayed. This more critical perspective is reflected in Bourdieu's (1986) view that cultural and symbolic capital is unequally accumulated and used to perpetuate elites, for instance those who accumulate social capital through the education system and use it to maintain their privileged position in society. Thus social capital like financial capital may be divisive and self-serving (Bourdieu, in Richardson 1986).

Social capital is in danger of becoming a panacea, to solve all the current problems of Western democracies. Portes (1998) drew attention to negative consequences arising from the networks and social structures associated with social capital. These include the limitations on access to opportunities afforded by what may often be restricted networks, with social controlling functions acting as constraints and the exclusion of outsiders from activities, as well as the general emphasis placed upon 'conformity' for network members. Volunteering activity itself has a history of

status and privilege and in more recent times has been found to reproduce the class and gender hierarchies and inequalities of the wider society (Odendahl and O'Neill 1994; Gill and Mawby 1990). The 1997 National Survey of Volunteering (Davis Smith 1998) found that young people were under-represented in volunteering and unemployed people showed low levels of participation because of the continuance of government barriers arising from regulations governing benefits and availability for work. Volunteering activity in general is increasingly resembling the nature of paid employment, both with respect to increasing formality and professionalism (Ilsley 1990).

The world of students and volunteering is not immune from such complexities. The established tradition of students' carrying out extra-curricular voluntary work has suffered in recent years from a number of broader economic and social changes. Universities, particularly the 'new universities', no longer exclusively recruit from an elite of A-level school leavers, good on exam technique but short on real-world experience. School leavers today are more likely to have already tasted voluntary work, although this may well have been of the 'conscripted' variety, which can leave them with a negative view of volunteering as 'boring'. It is important that the new citizenship curriculum creates opportunities for community service which are experienced as life-enhancing and enjoyable. However, mature students are already likely to have had more experience of voluntary work, and to be more positive about it. There is evidence that volunteering offers young people a source of social contact, enjoyment and satisfaction (Ellis 2002).

Volunteering generally is increasingly being undertaken for instrumental rather than altruistic reasons (Institute for Volunteering Research 1997) with many volunteers more interested in learning skills, finding a pathway to employment and experiencing personal fulfilment, than in undertaking an activity to 'do good'. These trends fit in with an institutional interest in developing generic skills in students. A major problem is that increased financial pressures means that many students now have to work to make ends meet, leaving less time for volunteering. University modules that accredit such paid work experience and enhance CVs are likely to be especially attractive. Volunteering opportunities which also are part of accreditation or assessment are more likely to prompt students to volunteer than voluntary activity which is done in leisure time outside the curriculum.

Barriers to student volunteering also exist within the voluntary sector itself. Although forever short of volunteers, voluntary organizations are increasingly required to offer training to recruits which, if it is of high quality, will be expensive in terms of time, resources and staff. As a result, such organizations may be apprehensive about taking on students who cannot commit themselves for long periods of time. It is also fair to say that those volunteering for instrumental reasons - to gain entry to employment - can also be expensive to voluntary organizations. If they find work, then their volunteering life is cut short. Service-learning programmes therefore need to be developed with sensitivity to the needs of the partners who provide the placements. Otherwise the social capital developed will be lopsided and beneficial only to the students, and placements will subsequently dry up.

Research has shown that community groups do experience long-term benefits from service-learning, if it is conducted through careful negotiation to meet their needs (Hall, Hall and Lockley 2000). For individual students, service-learning can also increase their skills and employability and give them major benefits persisting long after graduation (Hall and Hall 2002).

Service-learning in sociology departments in the UK: some examples

Spurred on by the realization that voluntary sector organizations are fertile learning environments, obstacles to student volunteering have been negotiated with some success in a number of HE departments. This has been achieved by developing schemes that accredit student volunteering activity as part of the academic curriculum.

At Liverpool University, Liverpool Hope University College and Wolverhampton University, this started some years ago by giving final-year students the option of conducting an applied piece of social research with a voluntary organization, equivalent to a final-year dissertation. More recently, first- and second-year students have been offered volunteering modules where they carry out what may be routine or more skilled and challenging work for local voluntary agencies. At Wolverhampton, for instance, progression is built into the programme with the possibility, via the Student Link scheme, for sociology students to keep a foot in a voluntary organization for all three years of their studies, gaining academic credit as they move through their degree programme. Frequently, students also build a portfolio of training experience and external accreditation, in parallel with their college-based studies.

Assessment in the various programmes covers both the planning and negotiating of the placement followed by experiential learning assessed through learning logs, essays or reports and presentations all of which contain personal reflection and subject-specific analysis.

This pedagogy of experiential learning is based on the work of a variety of theorists such as Kolb whose definition of learning was 'the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience' (Kolb 1984: 39). Learning journals allow students to both 'reflect-in-action' and 'reflect-on-action' (Schön 1987) and encourage 'deep' learning which aims to be transformative rather than the reproduction of facts (Gibbs 1992).

The curricula in all three institutions share many common elements, including

- Formulation of a learning agreement;
- Focus on experiential learning;
- Use of learning logs or journals and diaries to record student activity and reflection;
- Emphasis upon the acquisition of skills and personal insight;
- Credit given for reflection on the experience (rather than performance of the activity itself);
- Essays which require students to apply sociological theories to their experiences.

Experience to date suggests that embedding voluntary service in the curriculum and relating it to mainstream academic concepts and theories makes it attractive to committed students and safeguards it from being just another work-experience exercise, or a soft option. Building academic knowledge in this way has proved particularly attractive to non-traditional students and has potential as a broadening access strategy. In the social sciences, in particular, another benefit is that apparently routine volunteering experiences, such as helping in a charity shop, enable a degree of objectivity and detachment, which can provide intellectually stimulating and novel learning opportunities when it comes to writing up.

Problems do exist in embedding volunteering within the sociology curriculum. There is often a tension between theoretical work and applied research, for instance, with the latter being seen as the 'poor cousin' lacking the credentials (and RAE recognition) of so-called 'pure' research. It is important that academic links to the discipline should not be lost in the excitement of doing 'real work in the community'. Applied work has a tangible and beneficial effect if it is located within the discipline, testing sociological knowledge against the lived experience of undertaking project work aimed at benefiting the community.

Again, there can be tension for tutors between encouraging and supporting students in their placements, and practising a sociological agenda of critical appraisal of the organization providing the placement. There is a need to create confidence in the module and in the value of what the students are doing, while at the same time encouraging students to be critically aware of the organization, any faults it may have in delivering its goals, and its role in alleviating social problems or challenging social injustice.

Example A

Several students from Wolverhampton embarked on a task to coordinate a programme of community-based events across the city to celebrate International Women's Week, and publicize these via a published programme, local radio interviews, newspaper articles and a website. The skills of networking, chairing meetings, minute-taking, task allocation, programme planning, marketing and website design were developed and used to good effect, thus providing evidence of a wide range of skills in a 'real life' setting (with obvious relevance to employability). The students were combining Women's Studies with Sociology in their degree studies and used the opportunity to apply feminist sociology in their final-year project work. Having taken advantage of the volunteering pathway during three years of study, this project provided a challenge which enabled them to reflect on their learning throughout. This kind of applied work benefits subject-based knowledge, providing much material to reflect upon within both personal and sociological contexts. Academic feminism is not isolated. 'Academic feminism does not aim to replace all other forms of activism, or pretend to be entirely sufficient in itself, but it has a place within what should be recognised as a range of feminist activity' (Warwick and Auchmuty 1995: 187). Women have long been associated with volunteering and community action, and the opportunities for women students to broaden their studies in this way are high.

Example B

On 20 March 2002 the Student Union at Liverpool University was filled with activity as primary-school children from four schools in Liverpool took part in 'Play Day', entirely organized and run by student volunteers from Liverpool Student Community Action. From raising the finance, booking artists in circus skills and African drumming, making arrangements for transport with the schools, scrounging supplies and leading many of the activities themselves, the students took responsibility for working together to make the day a success. The reward was to know that the children had enjoyed their activities, it had introduced them to new possibilities, and for the schools it had been a contact with the university that had not existed before. For some first-year students from Liverpool University, and second-year students from Liverpool Hope, it was also the conclusion of 30 hours of voluntary action that they had agreed to perform for their module in Voluntary Service Learning. As with Wolverhampton it was a demonstration of skills, and an activity that would later be reflected in their learning logs, as they described issues they faced, how they handled them, and what they had learned from the experience.

Example C

One Liverpool Hope student, a member of a Somali family living in Toxteth, participated in a drop-in centre for local youth, and took responsibility for teaching IT skills to disaffected young men. He noted in an interview that volunteering is now central to his life, 'It's part of me now ... and it allows me to put something back into the community', while at the same time it provides supporting evidence on his CV. He regarded the second-level module as 'completely different. It let you interact with real people in real life situations ... You can sit in a lecture hall and talk about disabled people, disadvantaged people but until you actually interact and talk with people, you will never see it from their point of view. I thought it was amazing. You allowed us to go out there and learn for ourselves' (Hall 2003). Interestingly, perhaps because of his Islamic commitment, the student also referred to the experience as 'so deep, it was a spiritual experience really'. This indicates that one of the future directions for research will be explore how service-learning relates to values - does it confirm existing value orientations, or does it actually change values?

HEACF: opportunity and challenge

While the HEACF represents a new source of support for volunteering in higher education by both students and staff, we do share concerns that it may not be as successful as it could be in producing the desired outcomes. The short history of its implementation so far does not fill us with confidence that those involved in establishing the fund understand the difficulties of building up partnerships with the local voluntary sector, or are concerned to learn from past experience and avoid known difficulties.

Our (admittedly unsystematic) evidence is that these issues are also not properly understood by university management. Writing as staff with experience in fostering student volunteering and community-based learning, we have had great difficulty in finding out how the planning and

bidding process for the HEACF has been carried out in our own institutions. The exclusion of academics with relevant experience from the process of preparing the bids is not a good sign. Although we have some indications of the scope of our institutional bids, they have been completed at a senior administrative level divorced from teaching staff.

As a result, there is a concern that existing good practice may be ignored. The consultation process from HEFCE made it clear that this method had been chosen for two main reasons, to avoid the 'bidding fatigue' that affects each new initiative in higher education, and to ensure that every institution has the funding to make progress on volunteering. However, this approach on an institutional basis provides little or no support for networking between institutions as each produces its own plan for funding in isolation.

The target of 14,000 volunteering opportunities across the higher education sector is not particularly demanding, but the suspicion remains that measurement of effect will be in terms of the number of student placements rather than the quality of those placements. In contrast, the findings from Eyler and Giles (1999) are that service-learning has a better outcome for students when the placements are well integrated into the curriculum and well supported.

Finally, all involved in student volunteering do need to listen to the partners in volunteering, the voluntary sector organizations that provide the opportunities for students to engage in volunteering, whether this is Victim Support, Volunteer Reading Help, Citizens' Advice Bureaux, Barnardos, or Student Community Action with projects for the homeless or play days for local children. All these organizations need to provide training for volunteers, often a lengthy process, before students are able to meet clients of the organizations, and all want longer-term placements than a one-semester module.

For many students, the engagement they get with volunteering is such that they choose to continue even after their module finishes. For others, it is a relatively brief spell of community-based learning. The challenge will be to embed such volunteering opportunities into the curriculum so that a continuous relationship can be built up between departments and voluntary organizations, and so that, as at Wolverhampton and Liverpool, there can be a progressive choice for students in community-based service-learning across the three years of their undergraduate experience.

Although perhaps not a minefield, the government is asking higher education institutions to venture boldly into the complex and enigmatic world of volunteering and the voluntary sector. This is being undertaken with a mixed ideological agenda encompassing citizenship alongside vocational training, as well as meeting the shortfall in volunteering. With the HEACF initiative it may be best to proceed with caution and not make promises that cannot be delivered or sustained in the long term. We feel this would best be achieved by linking initiatives to the curriculum and building upon existing voluntary sector practices and experiences. The complexities of establishing successful partnerships, discussed above, should also be taken into account and robust systems of support, planning, monitoring and achievement need to be constituted and maintained. There is an

3 To this end, with C-SAP funding, the authors have set up a network of those supporting student voluntary action in the sociology curriculum. The idea is to share information on good practices and common problems, to create a resource list for those wishing to implement this 'third mission' activity, and to collect systematic evidence on the impact of student volunteering. All interested in participating in such a network are invited to contact any of the authors.

urgent need to generate hard data about the benefits and effectiveness of the HEACF initiative, beyond the routine monitoring called for in the HEFCE allocation. There is also need for HEACF research into the current state of volunteering in universities and into the growing phenomenon of community action and student volunteering.³ The authors welcome the recent indications from HEFCE that this 'third mission' activity is likely to continue to be funded for a limited period after 2004, albeit on a much reduced scale, and perhaps this is an opportunity for some of this work to be carried out.

Exciting possibilities are here, and the authors remain optimistic. Given the right emphasis, it is possible that at last, student volunteering and community action will no longer be seen as the 'poor relation' of academia. Recognition of the challenges that volunteering offers students, the opportunities for reflective learning, and its contribution to teaching and learning is long overdue.

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