

Presidents' Summit for America's Future

An Internet Dialogue: Thoughts on Literacy, Volunteers, and the Presidents' Summit

**Paul Clay, Marie T. Cora, Lauren Fredella, Paul Jurmo,
Andres Muro, Kevin G. Smith, Billy R. Upson**

INTRODUCTION

From April 30 to May 5, 1997 subscribers to the National Literacy Advocacy electronic list, moderated by Boston area adult literacy educator David J. Rosen, posted the exchanges that follow. They were in response to expressions of concern with public initiatives designed to recruit large numbers of volunteers to help solve problems of literacy in the United States.

The dialogue was stimulated by extensive media coverage on the issue. A proposal by the United States Department of Education to mobilize a Reading Corps of 1 million tutors in its America Reads Challenge, and the Presidents' Summit for America's Future held in Philadelphia in April 1997 that promised to reach 2 million at-risk children by the year 2000 fueled the dialogue. Helping children read, however, was not the exclusive concern of the participants in this discussion; in fact, they mostly talk about adult literacy and how best to meet its challenges.

The selected viewpoints expressed in this exchange were stimulated by Andres Muro, a coordinator of a literacy project at a community college in Texas, and included a volunteer in a literacy program in Arkansas (Billy R. Upson), the manager of a life skills program in South Carolina (Paul Clay), the director of an English As a Second Language/literacy program and volunteer coordinator in Georgia (Lauren Fredella), an assistant director for adult education at a university in Rhode Island (Marie T. Cora), the execu-

tive director of a Literacy Volunteers program in New York (Kevin G. Smith), and the executive director of a non-profit literacy research organization in New Jersey (Paul Jurmo).

The Journal of Volunteer Administration was made aware of these exchanges by AVA members Kathleen McCleskey and Susan Ellis. That the participants agreed to publication of their thoughtful, provocative, and open-ended comments is gratefully acknowledged.

THE DIALOGUE

ANDRES MURO

Coordinator of the El Paso Community College Literacy Center in El Paso, Texas. He has worked for more than 10 years in the field of English As a Second Language/literacy, and adult basic education. E-mail address: AndresM@nmail.epcc.edu

Whenever anyone talks about literacy initiatives we immediately begin making reference to volunteers and volunteerism. I am personally terribly offended by this. While most people consider literacy something anyone can do, I consider it a highly evolved paradigm with its own sub-paradigms, idiosyncracies, nuances, peculiarities and particularities.

When someone talks about improving the delivery of medical services, nobody mentions that by the year 2000 there will be 1 million volunteers taking care of patients. NASA doesn't talk about getting volunteers to help build the space shuttle. And when we address the need to

improve the work of air traffic controllers nobody makes reference to volunteers.

Please do not get me wrong: I think that there is room for volunteers in any field. I am totally in favor of having graduate students in education programs do volunteer work under close supervision. However, making the bulk of the field, or an entire initiative, dependent on volunteers is totally absurd.

The president of this country, who appears to have a somewhat progressive view on education, suggests solving literacy problems with a bunch of volunteers. Pleeeeee!!!!

BILLY R. UPSON

Volunteer at the Literacy Council of Bowie (Texas) and Miller Counties (Arkansas). Board member of The Volunteer Center, and also of Business Organized for a New Downtown in Texarkana, AR/TX. E-mail address: bru549@juno.com

Using Andres' reasoning, Mother Theresa could not help the sick, Martin Luther King and Gandhi could not attack social injustice, and Jesus Christ could not teach, heal, and help. None of these were "certified professionals" by their governments. Funny how these folks and the millions who work in churches, mosques, synagogues, as room parents in schools, on neighborhood watches, as candy strippers in hospitals, in hospice and AIDS programs, at homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and day care centers manage to get anything done without a "graduate student" to give them "close supervision."

Does anyone expect all adult education provided by "certified" teachers to vanish? Of course not! Can volunteers provide all that is needed in adult education? No! Even within volunteer organizations trained staff is absolutely vital to success and growth.

PAUL CLAY

Manager of the Life Skills program at United Ministries in Greenville, South Carolina, that is almost 90 percent volunteer staffed. E-mail address: PaulClay@worldnet.att.net

If we use your [Andres Muro's] analogy, then no one should be a parent until they complete a course of study and demonstrate proficiency in the field, and while I realize that you recognize the "need" for volunteers, you fail to recognize the opportunities presented to YOU right now. Speak to volunteer groups about the need, the work, and point them in a useful direction. Use your experience constructively to ensure that this new found wealth of a work force is used effectively.

ANDRES MURO

When I make reference to literacy, I am not referring to the relationship between a child and a devoted parent, even though your [Paul Clay's] reference is valid. In my first E-mail I was making reference to the understanding required to work with the under-educated, non-traditional, multicultural, poor, under-served and learning disabled and with migrants, resistors, and a host of other populations. In order to effectively serve these populations, a "literacist" (this, I think, is my own term) needs to have a great deal of understanding of linguistics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, pedagogy, etc.

Furthermore, while I do not have much difficulty helping my girlfriend's son with his homework, I do have a great deal of difficulty recruiting, retaining, and teaching migrant farm workers who are under-educated, may have some learning disabilities, cannot attend classes since they have to go to the fields every morning at 5:00 a.m., and so on and so forth. In order to serve farm workers, I have to understand their history, their culture, their migration patterns, and the laws that affect services for them. Furthermore, I often have to double up as a grant writer in order to procure funds, and become a politician in order to lobby for resources. Farm workers are only one example of the multitude of populations in need of literacy services. Recently our program received a grant from the Barbara Bush Foundation to work with deaf parents

and their children. This has been one of the most challenging populations I have ever encountered.

Again, please do not misunderstand me. I think there is plenty of room for volunteering in medicine, literacy, and other fields. However, these fields should not, not, not (a thousand times "not") depend on volunteers to survive.

BILLY R. UPSON

People do not misunderstand you; they understand that what you are saying is, "I know what is best, because I have been trained." I agree that "just anyone" cannot teach! A teacher must CARE. Most volunteers in the field of literacy do care. Most volunteers in literacy (all of them in our Council) have had training and the training is ongoing.

You really deserve the thanks of volunteers everywhere for voicing many of the objections that you and a very small number of your peers have to volunteers and specifically Literacy Councils. Thankfully, most adult educators have enough self-esteem and self-confidence that they do not feel threatened by the work of non-profit volunteer organizations. There is plenty of work for us all!

LAUREEN FREDELLA

Volunteer coordinator and director of an English As a Second Language/literacy program for adult learners that involves both volunteer and paid staff in Atlanta, Georgia. E-mail address: LFredella@aol.com

As coordinator of an ESL program that has a mixture of paid and volunteer staff, I have given considerable thought to this issue over the years.

Although I am constantly cautioning myself not to view volunteers from a deficit-model perspective, I must say that in reading the arguments in support of or limiting the use of volunteers in adult ed[ucation] programs I agree with those who think that literacy should not be a totally volunteer initiative. And while it is true that parents are the first teachers of

their children, adult learning is a different animal. Further, most parents hand over the teaching of their children to experts when their children go to school. Although the quality of K-12 education regularly comes under fire, I never hear anyone suggest that we put our children in a church basement with volunteers who have little or no preparation to do a challenging job like teaching.

For me, perhaps the most bothersome aspect of the instant linking of volunteers to any literacy initiative is that it reflects little more than lip service to the importance of educating adult learners. That our policy makers do not consider our work and our student population valuable enough to put funding behind such initiatives reflects a belief system which says that adult literacy isn't really that important. The key question is: How do we get policy makers to value our work and our learners so that the idea that anyone can teach adults doesn't underlie literacy efforts?

MARIE T. CORA

Assistant director for adult education, Swearer Center for Public Service at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. She works with part-time student staff members who run volunteer literacy projects in the greater Providence community. E-mail address: Marie_Cora@brown.edu.

This is in response to Andres Muro's E-mail posting of April 30 in which he appears troubled about volunteer involvement in literacy work and that seems to be sparked by the [Presidents'] summit [for America's Future].

Although I am pleased with the conversations and awareness-raising efforts begun at the summit this past weekend, there are many things that trouble me about it as well. One of the problems is that in many volunteer efforts (and this includes everything from Literacy Volunteers of America to AmeriCorps, from City Year to the Peace Corps) there doesn't seem to be a whole lot of emphasis on continuous support. Volunteer pro-

grams may offer initial training and education, but once the participants are placed in the field, the ongoing staff development opportunities appear few and far between.

In my experience directing a volunteer literacy program for the past five years, we have found that training and education up-front do relatively little for a volunteer in comparison to what a continuous education program does. We do provide several hours of pre-service preparation that includes exploring tenets of non-traditional education, generally getting to know the populations who attend programs (who they are, the history of adult ed[ucation] within the state, what services are provided, what is lacking, what the need is), some methods and materials, and particularly exploring the motivations and expectations of the volunteers themselves as well as their own experiences dealing with issues of language and literacy. But what has been most compelling for our education program are the weekly meetings that all volunteers must attend in addition to their contact hours. These meetings focus on teacher sharing and trouble-shooting, lesson planning and curriculum development, and larger discussions which explore everything from "why do I volunteer" to "how can we get ourselves and the learners involved in civic participation." By the way, my programs are all run by undergraduate college students, who may or may not be Ed[ucation] majors.

My point is that I DO support volunteers in most (all?) professions and, I guess, particularly literacy because we have an enormous amount of work to do and there is no way we can do it alone, and a whole lot of people out there are and can be helpful. What I find troubling is that I do not see enough ongoing educational and exploratory opportunities in volunteer programs. I wonder if the Clinton administration has given enough consideration to how they intend to support all 1 [2] million volunteers that they hope will become literacy practitioners.

KEVIN G. SMITH

Executive director, Literacy Volunteers of America-New York State, Inc., in Buffalo, New York. E-mail address: KSmith1@aol.com

I typically hesitate to respond to unsubstantiated, elitist protectionism for fear of sounding defensive. However, your [Andres Muro's] honesty is refreshing and consistent with the unstated "feelings" of many in the education field in response to another "call to volunteer arms" in lieu of a substantial financial investment. It is naive to think that the President or Secretary of Education will change their politically charged tune regarding volunteers. Don't you understand that the volunteer community isn't all that pleased inheriting the country's systemic problems either?

I consider my response in defending the role of volunteers in providing support for adult learners trying to improve their personal, social and economic condition through improved information processing skills a waste of precious time, resources and opportunity. Instead of fighting among ourselves we could be taking full advantage of the intent of the America Reads Challenge to promote the needs and essential role of adults. If educators chose to denigrate a willing and able resource rather than engaging volunteers in an appropriate support role, then they are choosing to waste resources in a field where there is far too little to begin with and, in doing so, cheat the students you purport to serve.

Volunteers can play an important role because they are successful, proficient information processors who have a lifetime of experiential learning to support their capacity. With good training and support, volunteers are an asset and resource. They know they are not reading teachers or learning disabilities specialists, yet many are relegated to serving adults with serious learning problems. Most would relish the opportunity to consult with and be guided by an "expert" BECAUSE IT WOULD HELP THE LEARNER. Unfortunately, many of those

high-need learners are being "deferred" to volunteer programs because their chances of being a positive program outcome statistic in six months of service is nil.

Given your opinion of the sophisticated and deep understanding professional educators require in order to "teach" literacy, I'd be very interested in your position on the role of parents in supporting the language development of their children. Clearly, the average parent isn't conscious of the "highly evolved paradigm with its own sub-paradigms, idiosyncracies, nuances, peculiarities and particularities" known to you as literacy. Yet, research tells us that they are THE essential purveyor of language and literacy. This mystery is no mystery at all. Parents, like volunteers, model good information processing skills and create language experiences and opportunities through which language is developed through trial and error.

If literacy isn't something that everyone can participate in and support, then we might as well all go into a new profession. Until we demystify literacy and learning, we will continue to send a message to parents, children and the community that they cannot "participate" in literacy and learning, and we will continue to have a large percentage of our population who are not literate. Do you get my point?

ANDRES MURO

I had no idea that I would be engaging people in such an exciting exchange. However, I am happy that it is taking place, regardless of whether you agree or disagree with my views. I am in favor of volunteers contributing to any field. In fact, I am certain that historically all fields have emerged as lay people performed needed tasks for free, either to contribute to society or for personal growth.

I am of the belief that in order to be an educator, a person should receive extensive training. Furthermore, educators should also be compensated accordingly. However, teaching is the lowest paid pro-

fession in this country; a teaching certificate can be obtained without much of a challenge. The reason for this is that many people think that anyone can teach. Therefore, why should we require people [to] receive extensive training and pay them a lot if they will be performing a task that any mother or any volunteer can do?

Obviously, if any mother, any volunteer, or any four-year college graduate with minimal training can teach, as has been suggested by many, half the adult population of the number one superpower in the world would not be semi-literate. Teaching is a highly complex task. I think it is time we realize this. Unfortunately, due to lack of funding, I witness how extremely under-served populations often are served by very helpful, yet very under-trained individuals.

PAUL JURMO

Executive director of Learning Partnerships in East Brunswick, New Jersey. Learning Partnerships promotes participatory, collaborative approaches to adult learning, program planning, and policy development. E-mail address: pjurmo@intac.com

One publication that looked at the pros and cons of uses of volunteers was *Pioneers and New Frontiers* written by Dianne Kangisser and published by the Business Council for Effective Literacy in 1985.

The report dispelled two persistent myths: (1) volunteerism is a panacea (if somehow enough volunteers could be recruited, the illiteracy problem would be solved), and (2) volunteers are cost-free or low-cost. In answer to (1) the author explained that even if the number of volunteers were tripled, this cadre would not be enough to reach the millions in need of services. In addition, volunteers have less time to donate now than in the past because of changing employment patterns resulting in a greater need to rely on paid staff. In answer to (2) the report says that while the use of volunteers (if you can find them) can be cost-effective, vol-

unteers must nevertheless be recruited, trained, supervised, supplied with teaching materials and otherwise "supported," all of which are costly.

Dianne concluded that the current delivery system is stretched thin and can go no further without additional resources; recruiting more volunteers will only add to the burden unless the system as a whole receives major new support. [As she says,] "Making headway will require an enor-

mous effort from the public and private sectors, a commitment of financial resources, and a social climate conducive to educational innovation and risk-taking."

ENDNOTE

The National Literacy Advocacy electronic list currently has 700 members. To subscribe (free) send an E-mail message to: majordomo@world.std.com saying: subscribe nla