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Start Early: Teaching Students about Volunteering, Not Simply Doing It

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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The subject of what children and teenagers know about volunteering – and what we can do about educating them differently – keeps cropping up for me. Carol Weisman’s new book, [Raising Charitable Children](#), does a wonderful job of discussing the issue. Then, two weeks ago, I gave a short talk at the annual summer camp of [Spark the Wave](#), a youth-led organization devoted to “empower teens to be better volunteers.” I opened my presentation by asking the group of 14- to 17-year-olds, “what’s a volunteer?” No surprise – their responses were as narrow and limited as you would expect, centering largely on “helping people in need.”

There have been remarkably few elementary or high school curriculum materials to 1) first educate *teachers* about the subject, and then, 2) help them teach their students about the historical and current role of community involvement by citizens. I am not talking about encouraging young people to *do* volunteering, which is certainly happening quite a bit. The problem is often that this exhortation (sometimes even a controversial requirement) to volunteer is not put into any meaningful context.

What Could Be Taught?

Here are a few of my ideas for incorporating an awareness of volunteering as a natural part of student learning. (Please share yours.)

Citizen Action is “Volunteering” - A huge step forward would be simply identifying citizen action as “volunteering” when discussed in the classroom. For example, in the United States and elsewhere, history and social studies curriculum teach about “movements” – the peace movement, the civil rights movement, etc. What’s a “movement”? It’s the cumulative effect of the efforts of countless citizens on behalf of a cause; in activities such as protest marches, lobbying government officials,

speeches to change public opinion, etc.; done above and beyond what people do to earn a living. In other words: it's the impact of *volunteers*.

It would be illuminating to comment that *no one gets paid to rebel*. Every revolution begins both with the action of one person and with the support of people willing to risk all for their beliefs: *volunteers*. It might also be nice if teachers noted that the "right to assemble" and the other rights such as free speech are integral to lawful citizen action, even if it is aimed at changing the status quo and involves protest.

Famous Volunteers - I would love to place colorful identification stickers on any children's library biography book that describes the life and accomplishments of someone famous who, at least at some stage, did their work as a volunteer. For the US, my list would start with Benjamin Franklin (who really is the father of all things volunteer in colonial America) and such notables as Paul Revere, Clara Barton, Sojourner Truth, and Margaret Sanger, and go on to include hundreds more. I suspect the same could be said for pioneers in every country.

The Nonprofit Sector - Another subject largely missing from most curricula is the nonprofit sector in general. I never heard a single syllable about nonprofit organizations all the way from Kindergarten through graduate school. Twenty years ago I did a survey of 300 elementary school children for United Way of America, to see what they knew about the United Way. Common responses? "It's an airline." "It's where countries of the world come together." Branding confusion aside, most young people only recognize for-profit businesses and government.

Do you have curriculum content ideas? Share them with the rest of us at the end of this Hot Topic.

Who Should Educate the Educators?

Curriculum change must come from teachers inside the school system but, as the people with the most at stake in changing student understanding of the role of volunteering in our society, volunteer management practitioners can be vocal advocates. I can see three ways to have an impact on educators: one-by-one, district-by-district, and through the Schools of Education.

One-by-One

Do you have any teachers as volunteers in your program now? How about relatives of teachers? Friends? The point is to sit down and talk to teachers as individuals about what, if anything, they teach to their students about volunteering and what learning materials they would love to have. From such conversations, a number of possible strategies may emerge, probably through the support of a Volunteer Center or DOVIA. The first step would probably be a steering committee of teachers interested in this, who would work for change from *inside* the schools and request/demand the materials they need to teach about volunteering effectively.

District-by-District

Approach key personnel at the school district level:

- The curriculum development department
- The history or social studies department
- The teacher in-service training staff
- Those who are running the “community service” program for students
- School librarians

You are trying to open one door to find a collaborative partner who will advocate for teaching about volunteering. But don't start this if you are not willing to stay the course and help produce the curriculum materials – another reason why this is a collective effort for a DOVIA or Volunteer Center.

Schools of Education

Here is where we might find an academic interested in actually writing some teacher's guides, developing online resources, and producing audio-visual materials about volunteering and its impact. If someone with a PhD and on the faculty of a teacher-education university proposed this subject, his or her colleagues will listen. So might funders. Then we'll have to work on getting the professor to accept advice from us. (The challenges never end!)

Learning by Experience

Almost thirty years ago, the Kellogg Foundation funded Ivan Scheier's National Information Center on Volunteerism to develop an elementary school curriculum about volunteering. The problem was that it had to be purchased for a few hundred dollars (it was a big box of materials) and few in the education community understood its value or championed the cause. Twenty years ago, a local DOVIA in Pennsylvania worked on a project for their own school system, for which they created slides and lesson plans for teachers to use in the 4th to 6th grades (Energize even sold the set in our catalog for a few years). But again, we learned that it's hard to “superimpose” curriculum materials into the schools from the outside.

- *Do you know of any school programs teaching about volunteering? How did they start? How might they spread?*
- *What ideas do you have for what could be taught?*
- *What do you think of the idea of approaching volunteers in your program who are teachers and see what they would be interested in doing about such curricula?*
- *What role might youth organizations have either in educating their young members about volunteering or in being advocates for the schools to teach this subject?*

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Submitted on 25 August 2006 by Rhonda Lorch, Lorch and Associates, Consultant and Trainer, Winnipeg MB Canada

With funding from the Canadian Volunteer Initiative, we have launched a small project in Gimli, Manitoba that educates and mentors youth on many aspects of active citizenship. In addition to volunteerism, this program teaches kids about being active in their communities through philanthropy, community development, politics, activism etc.

Along with the education is a practical application aspect where kids put their new found knowledge to work in a community project that addresses one of their community concerns (environment, job creation, affordable housing etc). The local high school has been very supportive of our efforts. We are only able to accommodate 10-12 kids in the program because of funding limitations but I think that the model could be modified and expanded to be used in the classroom.

Submitted on 18 August 2006 by Maya Shehayeb, Rotaract Club of Aley, President, Aley Lebanon

After some community service that we have done in Lebanon in the past month - where human disasters were taking place - we have noticed that community development and effective responses to crisis all depends on NGOs and volunteers. However, volunteering is very limited in Lebanon. Educational programs do not have such awareness programs, which have aroused low commitment to the community.

A call for action must be done, through first raising awareness of volunteerism, adding an incentive to voluntary work, and creating an environment where they can feel the sense of belonging.

Submitted on 9 August 2006 by Amber Smith, M.E.3, Inc., Administrative Officer, Raleigh, NC USA

We have seen this problem as well, and are developing what we feel will be a promising new program to help teach students about volunteering, as well as empower students to do good in their communities: A "Volunteer Curriculum"!

The idea behind this is that we will develop a fun, hands-on elective for schools that students can take to learn about the process of volunteering, resources in their communities, how to create and conduct their own service projects, etc. We are hopeful that this will encourage them to see how fun and fulfilling volunteering can be, while exposing them and their peers to service and the importance of helping others.

Submitted on 8 August 2006 by David Warshaw, Vistas Volunteer Management Solutions, Principal, Ho-Ho-Kus, NJ USA I'm surprised no one has raised the issue of volunteerism as a graduation requirement -- a growing US trend where students must volunteer a certain number of hours to get their diploma. Typically in High School, this trend -- although well-meaning -- often leads to ticket-punching, low-impact and certainly not very educational efforts. Too often, school faculty/administration don't create context for this activity, thereby missing the "teachable moment" of which others are speaking.

This also puts a burden on volunteer centers and nonprofits, who are asked to find student placements, often for short-term, unskilled assignments, when their capacity to manage their regular volunteer force may be taxed.

New Jersey, my home state, is moving into the mandated volunteer game with 30 high schools designated as pilots for the 2006-2007 school year. Of course, there is no money in the budget. There is also little recognition of those schools that have been doing a good job for many years... and there are some excellent examples.

What solutions? Some are discussed by Susan and other responders. More effort on the part of nonprofit managers or volunteers (sorry, it does seem like more work) to think through how student volunteers can be used in their organization, then being proactive about reaching out to school faculty and administration. This could be an area where enlightened self-interest can create opportunities for the students, the school and the nonprofit.

Submitted on 8 August 2006 by Maximo, Habitat for Humanity, Cisneros, San Jose Costa Rica

We, in Habitat for Humanity Latin America / Caribbean area, have a GREAT 7 minutes video (bilingual: English Spanish) about elementary kids from a school in Mexico city (Eton School) that decided they wanted to help a needy family with a house... If anybody is interested we can share it :-)

Submitted on 7 August 2006 by Rita Hennessy, National Park Service, Community Outreach Specialist, Harpers Ferry, WV USA

In an effort to teach volunteerism and sustain and grow the current volunteer base of the Appalachian Trail (5000+ providing 200,000+ hours) we created a new professional development program for teachers (K-12) promoting environmental activism and healthy lifestyles by using the Appalachian Trail as an educational resource. Modeled after the highly successful Forest for Every Classroom program in Vermont

The pilot TTEC Summer Institute in July 2006 was attended by eight teams of teachers and trail volunteers from eight states. Preliminary analysis from PEER Associates, FFEC's long-time evaluator, suggests that many of the Institute's goals were met or exceeded. Comments like the following were common: "[As a result of this institute] I see more diverse use in the AT. Now I see it as a place to get the community involved... It is an educational opportunity and an environmental tool!"

Excited about this initial success, we plan to implement this program regionally starting in 2007, by developing community support teams to sustain capacity at the local level. The program's first year will target 40 educators and 1,000 students in eight communities along the Trail.

The 2002 Independent Sector report, "Engaging Youth in Lifelong Service," states, "Adults who began volunteering as youth are twice as likely to give time as they grow older," while the recent Corporation for National and Community Service report, "Youth Helping America," suggests that volunteering is a learned social behavior. As a teaching strategy that promotes volunteerism by

linking curriculum with community service, service-learning will promote civic engagement in Trail communities, ultimately sustaining volunteer management of the Appalachian Trail. This model could also have significance for the 200,000 miles of trail in America today, much of it on public land, including the 23 National Scenic, Historic, and Recreation Trails.

Submitted on 4 August 2006 by Silvia M. Landers, Centro Boliviano de Filantropia y President/CEO, Santa Cruz BOLIVIA

For the past nine years the Bolivian National Volunteer Center - CEBOFIL - (www.cebofil.org) has introduced service-learning practices in public and private schools and universities. The methodology and curriculum outreaches and includes deans, teachers, school principals, parents, and the students -- teaching them, setting up focus groups, seminars, programs, projects that talk about social responsibility linked to volunteering, linked to strengthening democracy, linked to civic education, linked to solidarity and strengthening the third sector with support from the Inter-American Foundation and the W.K.Kellogg Foundation.

We have had such great response to this program that we promoted and built coalition and expanded the practice with Argentina and the Dominican Republic under the program sponsored by the IDB (Inter-American Development Bank) PASO JOVEN (Participacion Solidaria - JOVEN) http://www.clayss.org.ar/paso_joven/. At this point the experiences are being translated into English to be applied and used in the English speaking countries of the Caribbean with a tailored design to respond to their own reality.

Volunteering is a practise found in all communities and countries worldwide, only that the terms of reference are not always similar.

Thank you for the topic, we found it very interesting and would be available to share more information.

Submitted on 4 August 2006 by J Rust

I wholeheartedly agree that more needs to go into teaching about volunteering. However, I feel that those who use volunteers need to do a better job of communicating the outcome of the project before, after and during the activity. Kids will not see it as helping another person but as a job if we do not let them know why they are doing the project. Also what the impact of the project will have on the person they are helping. This is something which needs to be done more with the volunteers no matter their age so they feel valued.

Having been a Director of Volunteers for 11 years I saw the difference it made in the program when time was taken to share the information. There was much more dedication exhibited by the volunteers.

If we show the teachers of the children how to share the information I am sure they will have more tools to help with reinforcement.

Submitted on 3 August 2006 by Kevin Hackett, Oklahoma Cooperative Extension, NW District 4-H Youth Development Specialist Enid, OK USA

The 4-H Youth Development program of the Cooperative Extension System that is in every state tied to Land Grant Universities and US Dep. of Aging does a good job of teaching and involving youth 9-19 years of age in volunteer and community service activities. Most states heavily involve adults to administer the program at the county and local level. They are managed and supervised by paid professional staff. Though it varies by state they have excellent materials they use to educate and train youth in related areas.

Submitted on 3 August 2006 by Sybil Williams, Cancer Society, Volunteer Services Coordinator, Manawatu New Zealand

These are great ideas and unfortunately I think become necessary as in some cases the art of volunteering is lost. Some not taught at the knee as modeled in the home as once was.

I have also been involved in introducing the idea of volunteering to international students: what it means to volunteer, the history of it, reasons why, etc. This has been a different 'culture' for many to think about. As in their country, if it is done, they don't know about it. One thing though with this involvement is they are encouraged and supported in finding a placement to participate in volunteering.

Submitted on 3 August 2006 by Jeremy Foreman, Hands on Hands On Ogeechee, Georgia

I am so glad that you are addressing what students are learning ABOUT volunteerism in schools. With my former life being devoted to technology education (teaching about technology, not educational technology which uses technology as a tool), this form of issue education melds well with my philosophy of education.

I think when you put the volunteer activity in context (historically and otherwise -- relating to the individuals' experiences), the students are far more apt to integrate the act as part of the problem solving process/higher order thinking. I met with my school system superintendent at the close of the school year to discuss how my Hands On program might work with her teachers and students. She is giving me a 1/2 day in-service for civics teachers only in a few weeks! We are going to brainstorm how THEY will include the subject of volunteerism in their classrooms, and how WE will work together to start Youth Action Centers in their schools.

The long-term goal is to have a student organization in each of our 4 middle schools and 3 high schools that recruits, manages and trains volunteers for student created volunteer/civic engagement projects. They will become the experts on their respective campuses that other student groups will look to for project management assistance and peer training. Hands On Ogeechee will actually provide the initial training to the student and place "community coaches" with each school to assist the faculty sponsor and students with the work they do. I would LOVE to write this up as an AmeriCorps position for the spring and perhaps find some Learn & Serve money as well.

I'll keep you posted on the progress here in Southeast Georgia!

Submitted on 2 August 2006 by Dave Gynn, Coleman Professional Services, Volunteer Coordinator, Kent, Ohio USA Nothing could be more valuable to our curriculum than providing opportunities for community involvement and learning about the importance of volunteering. Unfortunately, if it is not on the state tests, it will not be incorporated in the curriculum. Teachers and administrators are under tremendous pressure for students to do well on the tests.

Submitted on 2 August 2006 by Rob Jackson, Volunteering England, Regional Volunteering Development Manager, Grantham England

Here in England, *The Citizenship Foundation* has been doing some work for awhile with 11-16 year olds through the citizenship aspect of the national curriculum under the brand of G-Nation (<http://www.g-nation.org.uk>). This looks at all aspects of young people's engagement with charities etc. and includes volunteering.

I recently attended a presentation at a conference where The Citizenship Foundation briefed about a new development aimed at primary schools (5-11 year olds). This will be called Go-Givers and will launch next spring with lots of materials available for teachers to use in class that are built around the curriculum.

Submitted on 1 August 2006 by Hilary Roberts, PLNJ Inc., Keyport/NJ USA

In NJ, the Coalition for Service Learning and the Service Learning Center at the local Community College provide students with a wide range of volunteer opportunities but much more could be done to expand resources and general skills to include a train the trainer session for educators incorporating service learning into their classrooms.

Here are some ideas:

- add community service workshops to every summer reading list handed out to youth.
- offer a train the trainer workshop for educators at every conference on volunteerism and formally invite school districts.
- create a service learning team within the scope of every association/membership supporting the field of non profit
- partner with libraries to educate
- partner with corporate volunteer teams to advocate
- create adopt-an-agency programs that focus on one charity each month. Invite speakers, coordinate an agency-specific program and have students write about their experience for the local newspaper
- non profits can develop a Youth Board that pools talent from area high school students

I do believe the ideas aren't hard to develop. What is important is that we approach teen volunteering and faculty education as a partnership. If we want education and engagement, we need to open the door, welcome the audience and proudly share the journey.

***Submitted on 1 August 2006 by Debbie Usiskin, Norwood
Head of Volunteering Services, London United Kingdom***

Working with young volunteers has enabled me to see first hand the improvements that they can make in their academic work, which comes from the confidence that they have gained doing something that they are good at, and for which they receive praise and thanks.

Over the last 4 years I have developed and been involved in delivering a 3 day interactive experiential programme to Year 9 students (aged 13-14) which helps them to identify their core values, which in turn helps them to identify how they can put in to practice the active citizenship part of the Year 10 onwards school curriculum.

The programme has received praise from teachers, students and participating organisations, it has been fun and of benefit to all.

I am more than happy to share what we have done, as well as how it has worked and what we think could be improved on and am sure that Susan will pass on my contact details through the site. (You can contact Debbie at: debbie.usiskin@norwood.org.uk.)

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