

Volunteering of Students of Helping Professions in Pandemic Times at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Health Care, CPU in Nitra, Slovakia

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Abstract:

Volunteering is an essential part of any modern society. In times of crisis, the need for assistance is greater than ever. Solidarity between people during the coronavirus pandemic increases when we come to realise that the consequences of the crisis are directly influenced by our responsibility, togetherness, and willingness to help each other. Students of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Health Care, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra also participated in volunteering activities. Students of health departments performed their activities in faculty hospitals; students of Social Work and Psychol-

ogy performed their activities in social services facilities, centers for families with children, community centers, hospices, civic associations, and wherever assistance was needed. Students learned how, where, when, and to whom to lend a helping hand in the subject Service Learning. Service Learning is a way of teaching and learning in which theoretical training is linked to the acquisition of practical experience. The added value of service learning is that in addition to one's own development, it allows helping others in their natural environment through a created activity. Service Learning activities respond to the needs of education (schools), practice (organizations) and self-development (students).

Introduction

The word *volunteering* originates in the Latin word *voluntarius*, which means voluntary; also, Italian *volonteroso* means willing, aspiring, enthusiastic. In the past, *charity* dominated; it referred to various activities motivated by love for a neighbor and an effort to help a human, humanity, the world, etc.; it was simply an act of good for the benefit of others who had no close family ties with a person. In this context, we can also mention the word close to volunteering, and it is *altruism*. **Altruism** is a system of a person's value orientations such as thinking, feeling, dealing, desire to help others without expecting financial or other compensation. It is about dedication as a characteristic feature, an attitude that puts the benefit of others above their own interests manifested by practical action. In altruism, it is the selfless nature of interpersonal relationships, love for the well-being of others, manifested in thinking, feeling, and acting that consider other people. The concept of altruism was introduced by A. Comte.

One of the more modern forms of assistance is *philanthropy*, which seeks to solve society's problems by promoting education and innovation and developing people's abilities to be able to help themselves and not be reliant on alms. It seeks to support people's abilities to help them start a process that will help them have a better quality of life. Ideally, it seeks to selectively solve society's problems so that they are fairer and better.

At present, we encounter concepts such as *prosocial behavior*, which is characterized by acts and deeds performed in favor of another person without expecting any reward (material or financial) or social consent. Such acts of conduct

have the character of providing selfless assistance where no reward or reciprocation of assistance is expected in the future.

Furthermore, we draw attention to a significant and indispensable activity in *charity*, a more traditional combination of selfless assistance and charity, emphasizing helping a neighbor and helping people in need. In common perception, it seeks to alleviate immediate suffering, misery, and distress of people. It is charitable assistance to people, especially the old, the sick, the poor, the abandoned, and all those who cannot help themselves in their situation.

Volunteering is an activity performed for the benefit of others by free choice in free time and without any right to reward. In Slovakia, everyone can volunteer in various fields, such as: social fields; humanitarian and human rights organizations; cultural areas; environmental protection; sports; education activities. In Slovakia, the legislation and status of a volunteer, and legal relations in the exercise of volunteering activities are regulated by the Act No. 406/2011 Coll. on volunteering and on amendments to certain laws.

We draw attention to the European Parliament's report on the contribution of volunteering to economic and social cohesion, stating that volunteering:

- *represents an economic benefit* (according to the UN estimates, the economic benefit of non-profit institutions represents 5% of GDP on average, while even a slight estimate of the time devoted to volunteering represents more than a quarter of this value),
- *is an important driver of the development of civil society and strengthening of solidarity,*
- *has a high level of added value:* for each Euro invested by organizations in support of volun-

teers, an average of 3 to 8 Euros have returned to them,

- is extremely *important for the development of social capital*,
- *can lead to significant savings in public services*,
- *is beneficial for the personal and social development of volunteers* and has a positive impact in a community, for example on interpersonal relationships,
- *leads to the direct involvement of citizens in local development* and, thus, can play an important role in promoting civil society and democracy, and
- can have a positive impact on human health and all age groups can benefit from this positive impact and can help prevent physical and mental illnesses.

The Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Government of the Slovak Republic for the Development of Civil Society, together with the representatives of relevant Departments of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic and its contributory and budgetary organizations; non-governmental non-profit organizations; primary and secondary schools and academia is part of the working group for the purpose of creating the *Concept Paper on Children and Youth Volunteering Training and Education*. The main objective of the concept is *to integrate volunteering education and training in both formal and informal education at all levels of education*.

Volunteers are people with big hearts who do not hesitate to help wherever they are needed. They are one of the main pillars of selfless assistance and participate in all the necessary activities. They are specially trained for individual activities. Volunteers are those who make us manage to do great things. We are grateful that there are still many people, young people among students, who opt for this selfless and amazing way of life volunteering is.

Basic information on the course of volunteering at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Health Care, CPU in Nitra

Students as volunteers in practice

Volunteers are an integral part in our country, especially in crisis situations such as the pan-

demical caused by Covid 19 lasting since 2020. Students – young people in helping professions provide their free time, energy, experience, skills, and empathy. Our volunteers are also crucial in building trust with communities. Through their work and engagement, they improve the quality of life of others while growing personally and gaining life experience.

When the Earth stopped in March 2020, there was silence – traffic was suspended, movement of people was restricted, working from home was initiated, and distance learning was established.

The pandemic has affected every person in our society.

It is time we ask ourselves about the negative and positive effects of Covid 19.

Negative effects of Covid 19:

- it has limited our freedom in social contacts,
- it has caused a lack of movement,
- it has weakened mental health,
- it has caused fear, fear of proximity, suspiciousness, denunciation, distrust, criticism, dissatisfaction, etc.,
- some people have lost their jobs, entrepreneurs have had to close their businesses, family crises (breakups), and
- in many cases, it has caused the loss of loved ones, friends, acquaintances, etc.

Positive effects of Covid 19:

People started to have more time for themselves and for their loved ones. There have been major changes in attitudes towards LIFE itself.

- strengthening family ties,
- becoming aware of the importance of each of us (isolated neighbors, homeless people, socially disadvantaged families, and all living on this planet...),
- we have learned to face changes in all areas of life,
- we have learned responsibility towards ourselves and others, more acts of kindness,
- more space for self-education, various hobbies, etc., and
- we have showed and learned more compassion, empathy, love, unconditional help – which resulted in more action in volunteering activities.

Objective and methods

The main objective was to map volunteering activities at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Health Care, CPU in Nitra, to determine the sequence of steps in incorporating volunteering into the curriculum of Social Work and Psychology – to create a plan, and to indicate possible risks in the implementation of volunteering activities and their elimination.

In social science, 2 basic approaches to research are defined: quantitative and qualitative. We have chosen the qualitative approach which requires: a very good orientation in the problem; more time and patience in data collection, and especially in its analysis, and evaluation and interpretation. To carry out the qualitative survey, we used: mapping; education; exploration of various possibilities and selection of the most suitable one; comparison; observation; interviews and counseling in the creation and implementation of service-learning projects in focus groups; evaluation; description.

We decided to use the qualitative approach for the following reasons: its exploration and inductive nature; it seeks a more thorough view of the studied issues; understanding and orientation; it reveals new facts; creates space for new possibilities of action; takes into account an holistic approach; works above all with words; requires empathy; and also an individual approach; prefers understanding in uniqueness; the information is subjective; and investigation of the problem is in-depth.

The sampling was purposeful; the sample consisted of students of Social Work and Psychology of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Health Care, CPU in Nitra, all years of Bachelor's and Master's Studies (NB: because it is an optional specific subject; it is chosen only by students who have an eminent interest).

Implementation of the objective: The first step was to map volunteering activities:

Beginnings of volunteering at the Institute of Romology Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences and Health Care, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra

In 2013, the Institute of Romology Studies started to organize collections with the help of students of Social Work and Social Services.

The following were collected: clothing,

footwear, school supplies, hygiene supplies, non-perishable foods, blankets and duvets.

For whom they were intended: community centers, crisis centers, maternity centers, social services facilities, and centers for families with children.

Wherever assistance was needed as part of an agreement between facilities and students: for example, students produced their own products on their own initiative: organized a Christmas punch and cabbage soup fair; baked cookies; used voluntary donations they received to buy thick socks for homeless people in the streets and shelters, etc.; school supplies for children from centers for families with children, community centers, socially disadvantaged families, etc.

Current state of volunteering at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Health Care

We wanted students who participated in volunteering activities to receive certain benefit in their own studies too. We decided to offer students an optional three-credit subject.

The second step of the survey plan was to get more information in learning – how to be a good volunteer, and management in this area:

To do this, it was necessary to train an educator who would pass on the acquired knowledge on the issue. PhDr. Katarina Vankova, PhD. acquired the necessary knowledge to create an optional subject (completion of the educator's course: Service Learning Teacher Training, UMB Banska Bystrica by doc. PhDr. Alzbeta Brozmanova Gregorova, PhD., in 2019), and with support of the management of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Health Care, the Dean Doc. PhDr. Rastislav Rosinsky, PhD., and approved by the Scientific Board, Service Learning 1 and Service Learning 2, as optional three-credit subjects, were included in the curriculum. Thus, we all who are selflessly keen to help joined together.

The third step of the survey plan was the development of the optional subjects Service Learning 1 and 2, which includes: how teaching will be carried out; who and where will provide consultations on the subject; recommended literature; specific subject syllabi; finally, assessment requirements:

How to be a good volunteer – we teach in Service Learning 1

Students' interest in the optional subject Service Learning is great which can be seen in the number of students enrolled at the time of the pandemic:

- Winter semester: 2020/2021 – 36 students,
- Summer semester: 2020/2021 – 65 students,
- Winter semester: 2021/2022 – 93 students.

Composition of students by departments, institutes, of all years:

- Department of Social Work,
- Institute of Romology Studies,
- Department of Psychology.

We believe that the number of students interested in the optional subject will increase every year. It should be remembered that at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Health Care, CPU in Nitra, we have students who study nursing, and clinical disciplines and emergency medicine – they perform their activities in hospitals and wherever medical assistance is needed; they are part of teams that perform important tasks in the first line of health care provision.

The fourth step was creation of the optional subjects and their inclusion in the curriculum:

SERVICE LEARNING

is learning to professionally provide an adequately necessary and beneficial service in the form of various activities processed into a project for a particular community.

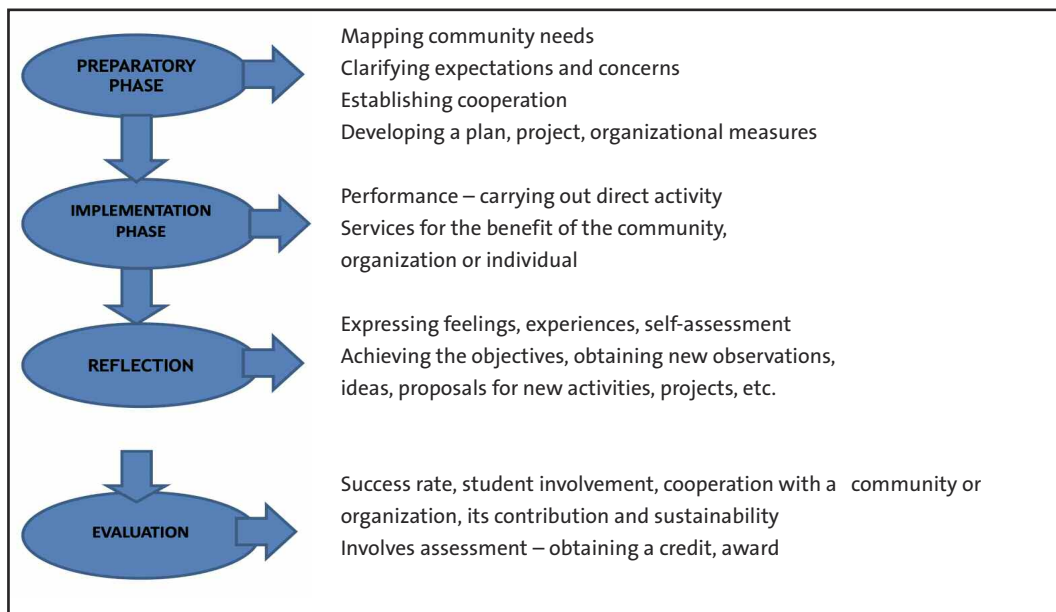
In Service Learning 1, we provide students with knowledge (13-week semester) on:

basic information about service learning; target groups; team formation and team cooperation important data about partner organizations and characteristics of their clients; and we draw attention to the *Volunteer Code of Ethics*, the importance of mapping and evaluating the needs of communities and their analysis. We emphasize the relationship between service-learning needs and strategies, and we teach their planning, budgeting, fundraising, promotion, and evaluation of a service-learning activity. Teaching also includes effective communication focused on resolving possible conflicts. Students are informed about possible risks and their elimination in the imple-

mentation of service-learning activities in the field, as well as the examples of good practice in the implementation of volunteering activities. The outcome is the development and presentation of their own volunteering activity project for which students receive 3 credits. But more importantly, they acquire deep theoretical knowledge through teaching which they can verify in practice in the next semester when implementing their project in a selected facility.

In Service learning 2, the service-learning project implementation is performed in the following semester (13-week semester). The outcome is the project implementation in the field, the provision of documentation, promotion, and treated photo gallery; students get three credits for the outcome, but basically, they gain more – they gain precious experience that moves them on their life path further.

A more detailed description of each service-learning step:



The fifth step in the plan was to indicate possible various risks that may arise in the field so that students can avoid them in time:

It is also appropriate to state possible risks posed by people from a community where students/volunteers tend to perform their own service-learning project:

- *people may not want to talk:* in this case, it is necessary to use the icebreaking method, for example to talk about one's own experiences, etc.,
- *some people may talk a lot and not give space to others:* in this case, it is appropriate to agree on the rules of discussion in advance, for example to define the time limit of seven minutes for a monologue, and
- *some people may not want to talk at all:* in this case, it is important to accept their attitude at that point – they may just want to be involved; however, it is especially necessary to pay attention to the reasons for their silence and create space for them because they may not want to interrupt someone else's speech, etc.

In the field, we may also encounter possible risks posed by a volunteer that need to be avoided, such as:

- *an unprofessional approach* that stems from a breach of the ethical rules by a volunteer,
- *creating chaos* in a community, team, or organization,
- *uselessness* caused by poorly chosen activity and insufficient mapping of the needs of a community or organization,
- *dissatisfaction* that stems from the lack of planning, organization of individual steps of an activity, not obtaining financial sources – a donor for the budget in the project necessary for the performance of the action,
- *an unnoticed change in the community* that is related to the ongoing dynamics of a community or organization,
- *lack of communication* between a provider and a recipient of the service, resulting in a rejection by a community or organization,
- *belated discovery that a selected activity does not match a volunteer's expertise*, and
- *omitting one of the community groups, a community or organization leader.*

Nature of elimination of possible risks in the field:

- building on what we already know, what we have learned,
- choosing the right community for one's own activity,

- mapping community or organization needs,
- establishing contacts, remembering a leader, manager or director of a community, organization,
- planning an activity – developing a service-learning project, following the teachers' instructions,
- an agreement on the implementation of the activity – with community leaders (appropriate date, creation of space, etc.),
- complying with all acquired theoretical knowledge throughout the whole 13-week semester of the optional subject Service Learning 1,
- Service Learning 2 in the next 13-week semester – implementing the steps that a student – volunteer has planned,
- implementing the project planned and approved in SL1, for which students – volunteers received a credit, and
- students/volunteers have the possibility to choose a Supervisor in the project implementation in the field (teachers who participated in teaching the optional subject Service Learning: doc. PhDr. Rastislav Rosinsky, PhD.; PhDr. Katarina Vankova, PhD.; PhDr. Jana Uhlarikova, PhD.; and PhDr. Katarina Minarovicova, PhD.).

Evaluation

We have achieved the objective. We have created the new optional subject which is currently attractive and attractive for students. The subject consists of two parts: in the first part, students learn theory and develop their own project; the second part includes the implementation of their own project in the field. We are proud of all the students who have been involved in volunteering activities under the optional subject in crisis situations such as the Covid-19 pandemic, and thus, they work and assist in different places in society wherever the situation is the most acute, and students are most needed. Students acquire multiple experiences by which they shape their established attitudes; can realize their potential in the form of their own projects; gain a desire for further knowledge; and thus acquire important responsibility, compassion, empathy, and dignity that are so necessary for the performance of social work in social services in our society.

Discussion

The whole course of mapping and creation, and the implementation were difficult, but the result was ultimately worth it, which is also evidenced by the number of volunteering activities carried out according to the defined rules. The uplifting thing is that there is a great deal of interest from the students in this optional subject, and there have been many activities carried out in the development of their own projects, even though the optional subject has only been taught since 2020, in distance education due to the pandemic measures. The students had difficult conditions to find a facility in their own area as part of the implementation of their own project, but in the end, everything was managed with the assistance of the subject supervisors.

Implementation of service-learning projects in the field during the pandemic.

Based on the volunteer agreements during the pandemic, our students implemented their learning projects:

Where learning projects were implemented most often: centers for families with children, community centers, social services facilities, primary schools, civic associations — assistance to animals, asylum centers, and hospices.

The most common activities in learning projects: the environmental field related to education, ergotherapeutic activities, tutoring in English and other subjects of primary school, various types of social assistance for the sick, the disabled, etc.

The students who completed the optional subject Service Learning 1 and 2 acquired:

- SELF-CONFIDENCE
- RESPONSIBILITY
- SELF-REALISATION
- SELF-REFLECTION
- EXPERIENCE
- SHAPING OF ESTABLISHED ATTITUDES
- DESIRE FOR KNOWLEDGE
- POSSIBILITY OF FUTURE EMPLOYMENT

Recommendations for practice

Based on our own experience, we can recommend to educational facilities, such as primary, secondary, and higher education institutions, to introduce a subject that will focus on teaching volunteering in theory and then implement it in

practice in a certain pre-selected target group. We offer supervision in the application of this issue in both theory and practice.

Conclusions

Volunteering is beneficial if it is beneficial for everyone involved – volunteers, clients, and society. Our students/volunteers are aware of the Universal Declaration on Volunteering adopted by the International Association for Volunteer Effort (2001, the Netherlands). Furthermore, students/volunteers also follow the very principles of the Declaration.

We sincerely wish all students/volunteers the wisdom, desire for further knowledge, and light and love in their hearts, so that their selfless assistance to clients is an example to others.

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