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Student volunteer experiences are ubiquitous within higher education contexts. Despite this, there is further scope for understanding the qualitatively different ways students experience volunteering. To achieve this an explicit focus on understanding volunteer experiences from the students' perspective and the relationship these experiences have with student learning is vital. This paper used a phenomenographic research approach to present the experiences of seven students involved in an interdisciplinary volunteer program in a community literature festival. The findings revealed experiences ranging from authentic learning to more sophisticated and amplified student experiences. While all students in this study found volunteering to be beneficial, we argue that differentiation of volunteer opportunities for students strengthens the provision for rich student learning through volunteering and the potential for students to be active in social change activities through volunteering.

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Student volunteer experiences are ubiquitous within higher education contexts. Despite this, there is further scope for understanding the qualitatively different ways students experience volunteering. To achieve this an explicit focus on understanding volunteer experiences from the students' perspective and the relationship these experiences have with student learning is vital. This paper used a phenomenographic research approach to present the experiences of seven students involved in an interdisciplinary volunteer program in a community literature festival. The findings revealed experiences ranging from authentic learning to more sophisticated and amplified student experiences. While all students in this study found volunteering to be beneficial, we argue that differentiation of volunteer opportunities for students strengthens the provision for rich student learning through volunteering and the potential for students to be active in social change activities through volunteering.

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Amplifying Student Learning through Volunteering

Introduction

The act of volunteering has been defined as an activity that occurs within organisations without remuneration (Bussell & Forbes 2002; Hustinx, Handy & Cnaan 2012). Volunteering in its truest form is not outcomes-focused; rather, it is focused on the volunteers' experience (Kezar & Rhoads 2001). The development of global outcomes, including global citizenship and active civic responsibility, permeates the ideology of volunteering, as volunteering offers an attractive way for students to build their social and personal capital (Einfeld & Collins 2008). This paper explores the experiences of seven university students who volunteered at a community literature festival that took place at a primary school in Brisbane, Australia. Students were involved in the delivery of literacy-focused activities to a range of diverse learners.

While there are a myriad of volunteer experiences offered in higher education, there are diverse reasons why students volunteer, and motivation to volunteer (MTV) differs from student to student (Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen 1991). Volunteers can have diverse motives – for example, wanting to make a difference and increasing employability outcomes (Rehberg 2005) – and these motives can conflict. Broadly, three types of MTV have been described within the literature: altruistic, utilitarian (Cnaan et al. 1991) and social (Cappellari & Turati 2004). Altruistic motives, commonly referred to as values-based motives, include assisting others, supporting known causes or service based on religious beliefs (Cnaan et al. 1991). Utilitarian motivation involves the development of new skills, professional experience, and engagement in activities designed to benefit future paid employment (Cappellari et al. 2004). The third MTV category involves the building and capitalisation of social motives, including volunteering with friends, making new social contacts or volunteering due to social pressures (Cappellari et al. 2004). In a study focusing on university undergraduates and cross-cultural volunteering, Handy et al. (2010) found that students were more likely to volunteer when volunteering was associated with altruistic motives, rather than any other motivation type. While the students did not discount other MTV categories, most student volunteers displayed motivation to volunteer even when they recognised personal cost to themselves in assisting others (Handy et al. 2010).

Socio-political and socio-cultural implications affect volunteers' motivations to volunteer, and reflect societal characteristics of volunteering (Hustinx, Cnaan, Brudney, Pessi, & Yamauchi 2010; Volunteering Queensland 2013). Students who are solely motivated to volunteer to add to their resume are more likely to be episodic volunteer contributors and tend to participate less. Conversely, students who embrace altruistic MTV invest more hours and participate more frequently (Handy et al. 2010). Attaching volunteer opportunities to a values-based platform has been identified as a way to bolster students' engagement in volunteering within university programs (McCabe et al. 2007).

Volunteering has been referred to as a signalling device (Katz &Rosenberg 2005): volunteers signal their suitability for employment to future employers through their volunteer experiences. While the act of volunteering is not remunerated or, generally speaking, outcomes-focused, the positioning of student volunteer experiences within the rhetoric of volunteering in higher-education institutions is interesting. Volunteer opportunities are pitched as benefiting students in outcomes-focused ways, such as increased employment options. This is in contrast to motivations that involve a focus on actively contributing value to the communities in which they are volunteering (Holdsworth & Quinn 2010). The positioning of students as beneficiaries and not

contributors can be problematic, as students may not be seen as a valuable resource in their own right. This also further limits potential contributions student can make to society through volunteering.

A recent call in higher education has been for universities to create Citizen Scholars: students who possess more than discipline knowledge and who are also "active and engaged citizens" (Arvanitakis & Hornsby 2016, p.11). The Citizen Scholar is someone who can identify and rectify power imbalances in society through innovative solutions and is invested in the creation of an equitable society (Arvanitakis & Hornsby 2016). Because it exposes students to diverse environments where they can play an active role, volunteering is one way of promoting such engagement within the wider society.

There have also been calls to ensure that the intellectual dimension of student volunteering (Holdsworth et al. 2010) within higher-education institutions is upheld, with strong links between curriculum and volunteering experiences intersecting to produce tangible learning outcomes. The act of volunteering within higher education offers more than a feel-good activity; rather, volunteering can be a vehicle to challenge awareness of social inequities, facilitate awareness beyond the university's reach and challenge studnets' existing ways of knowing (Holdsworth et al. 2010). What is imperative for the success of volunteering in higher education is the need to align higher-education institutional strategic imperatives with students' expectations to ensure that volunteering experiences are meaningful for students (Holdsworth & Brewis 2014). There is a recognised gap within the literature documenting university students' volunteering experiences within Australia (Paull et al., 2014), to which this research contributes.

Research design

A phenomenographic research approach was adopted to explore the different ways the students experienced volunteering in a community literature festival. Using a second-order perspective and non-dualistic ontology, phenomenography explores phenomena through participants' experiences (Marton 1981). The ways of experiencing reflect a relationship between the phenomenon being experienced and the experiencer (Akerlind 2005), and this approach recognises that there will be logical and related ways of experiencing (Akerlind 2005). Phenomenography focuses on the collective experience, rather than the individual; thus the collective transcripts cannot be understood in isolation. They are parts of a whole to be understood as interrelated. It is this interrelationship that is of key importance in phenomenography. In phenomenographic research, focusing on the variation in participants' experiences allows categories of description to emerge (Marton & Booth 1997). These finite categories are then represented in the outcome space, showing that a relationship between what is experienced and who experiences it leads to different ways of engaging with phenomena (Marton & Booth 1997).

The phenomenographic outcome space should ensure that each category reveals something distinctive about the ways of understanding a phenomenon, that the categories are logically related and that the variation in experience is reflected by as few categories as possible (Akerlind 2005; Marton & Booth 1997). A phenomenographic research design was employed in this study as it focuses on the different ways the students experienced the community literature festival volunteer opportunity.

The fundamental research question in this study was:

What are the qualitatively different ways university students experience volunteering when involved in an interdisciplinary volunteer activity as part of their university course?

Research context

The community literature festival was held in 2015, with in excess of 1,100 children attending the event onsite at a large urban primary school in Brisbane, Queensland. Student volunteers chose from involvement spanning one, two, or three days' program attendance. Throughout the festival volunteers were assigned a class of children and delivered literacy-focused activities. Students were also involved in author presentations and workshops. The activities were wide-ranging over the three days and students were invited to align their interests with the activities provided throughout the festival period. Two student groups were involved with the festival: library and information science (LIS) students from the Science and Engineering Faculty and education pre-service teachers from the Faculty of Education. This offered an interdisciplinary approach to the volunteering experience.

Participants

Phenomenography uses purposive sampling to recruit participants who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation. All nine students who volunteered at the community literature festival were invited to take part in the research; of these students, seven agreed to take part in the study. Four were undergraduate Education students ranged from second year to final year. The remaining three students were master's students in the Information Science degree, all majoring in library and information studies. Ethical clearance for the research was given by the University Ethical Committee (Ethics number: 1500000681).

Data collection and analysis

Phenomenography focuses on the level of participant understanding to discern patterns of understanding and describe the differences in how people understand or ascribe meaning to their experiences (Barnard, McCosker :& Gerber 1999). Two group interviews were held to collect data; students chose which session they attended. The group interviews consisted of open-ended questions that allowed participants to focus on the elements of the experience that were the most important to them (Marton 1986). While the participants were able to guide the interview to the most important aspects of the experience, the researchers used some set questions to provide context to the interviews and asked follow-up questions to clarify their understanding of participants' experiences (Akerlind 2005).

Following the group interviews, the researchers had the data transcribed. They then jointly analysed the data using the steps outlined by Marton and Booth (1997). A first whole reading of the transcripts was undertaken to identify meanings and how students experienced volunteering (Marton et al. 1997). A comparison of responses that took into consideration the research question revealed similarities and differences that resulted in the construction of draft categories. These draft categories were then tested against the transcripts through iterative discussions between the researchers. As part of this discussion the researchers intentionally looked for non-dominant ways of understanding to find structure in the outcome space (Larsson & Holmstrom 2007). Through an iterative data-analysis process, the researchers identified three ways these students experienced volunteering (Marton et al., 1997). These categories are outlined in Table 1. Two broad categories, learning by doing and learning and contributing, were identified. Beneath these a further three sub-categories were identified.

Category	Sub-category	Experience of volunteering	Motivation (dimension of variation)	Student quotes
LEARNING BY DOING	**A. Authentic and reciprocal learning**	Beneficial due to school exposure, practical skills and knowledge.	Solely utilitarian.	*I think you need as much exposure as possible, especially in education.*
		Main benefits were learning how a classroom operates.	Utilitarian, with some altruistic.	*You get to see it in practice, what we're actually learning.*
		Beneficial as students learnt practical skills, expanded their knowledge base and also social connections.	Combination of utilitarianism, social and altruistic motives.	*One of the big benefits is that it was cross-faculty…talking with some of those students was very beneficial because you got to see a different side of things.*
LEARNING AND CONTRIBUTING	**B. Demonstrating my knowledge**	Beneficial as students could not only learn from doing and learn from others, they could also demonstrate their knowledge.	Building social and personal capital with some elements of altruism as well.	*I really like helping people… it gave me a good time to reflect on where that line is between teaching and helping, 'cause often it kind of moves.*
	C. Amplification of knowledge	Beneficial not only in what students could learn from the experience, but in how they could contribute further to the festival's success.	Mainly altruistic with the knowledge that students could also build social and personal capital.	*You've got those skill sets and I've got these and maybe they can be used in some way.*

Table 1. Categories of description and the motivation of volunteers

Category 1: Learning by doing

Sub-category A: Authentic and reciprocal learning

Students who experienced volunteering as a form of authentic and reciprocal learning were focused on the aspects of the experience that would help them in their future career and expand their knowledge around interest areas formed while studying: *"I needed some more experience for my resume when I finish"; "It interested me because it's literacy and I have a passion for literacy"*. Learning mainly occurred through taking part in activities: *"It's very practical and it's very hands-on…and you're just learning constantly"*. However, there was also an element of learning from others, with the focus on learning from school staff via observation: *"I was in the iPad classroom and I learnt some things, which was really helpful"*.

While students were learning practical skills and expanding their knowledge through volunteering, they also enhanced their opportunities to learn through engagement with fellow volunteers" "*Education (as a university student) is becoming so much more online, it's very easy to be insular…and not actually experience as much face to face, but you need to see what happens in the real world"*. They sought to capitalise on the social aspect of volunteering by broadening their student and professional networks" *"You can learn all your theory and then when you go and see things that actually happen in practice you feel a much better appreciation of the challenges people face"*. As well as engaging practically with the volunteering experiences, students also shifted their focus to identifying moments to learn through engagement with staff and other students.

The students in this category ranged from having no prior volunteer experience to a small amount of prior experience. While the levels of experience may have differed, all students came to the festival with the belief that volunteering was both a chance to learn practical skills transferable to assessable fieldwork or the workplace – *"I'm doing education so I need more time with children"* – and a viable way to expand their personal learning network. These students also expressed increased impetus to participate when volunteering could be tied to assessment.

Category 2: Learning and contributing

Student volunteer experiences in this category demonstrate a shift in approach from the previous category, where volunteers engaged in the practical and social opportunities afforded by volunteering, to volunteers aligning their abilities as a way to enhance the event. This is outlined in the sub-categories below.

Sub-category B: Demonstrating my knowledge

The second sub-category included students who experienced volunteering as a way to demonstrate their knowledge as well as contribute to the festival. Volunteering was experienced both as a way to learn (through doing and from others) and as application of skills learnt during their course: "*So I am a writer and I can actually help with those kinds of technical aspects of writing"*. Students who took this approach tended to have a fairly substantial history of volunteering, but were strategic in what volunteer activities they engaged with. The students wanted to be involved, and

identified times when they could have contributed more to the activities: "*We sat there and watched, [and] it would have been nice to have a more active role in those sessions".*

Sub-category C: Amplification of knowledge

The final category for how students experienced volunteering was as a way to amplify their knowledge and experience. Students' learning in this category encompassed all the aspects of the previous categories; however, the students also recognised that they could add value to the festival. They recognised that as well as learning, they could be teaching and contributing to the festival through their own skills and knowledge. These students were already committed volunteers in other organisations such as church groups or their own children's schools: *"That's what I see as my passion is, to serve others".* It should be noted that these students were also the least motivated by their volunteering being linked to assessment: *"It would be a bonus…'cause I don't mind volunteering".* These students gained a more holistic sense of benefit from the volunteer experience, including thinking more conceptually about how the community festival itself could be maximised through their involvement.

Discussion

The expansion of volunteering as not only being concerned with building graduate skills and employability but also as providing a learning experience for students is evident in the *National Volunteering Strategy* within Australia (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet [DPMC] 2011). Volunteering is also an important way to increase civic responsibility amongst students (Hébert & Hauf 2015). This research focused on the different ways students experienced volunteering in a community literature festival, and how this related to their university learning. Using the theoretical framework of motivation to volunteer, this research has sought to provide examples of the varying motivations that higher-education students have for volunteering.

We suggest that institutions need to enhance their understanding of student volunteering to adequately support and validate volunteer experiences. Through volunteering students not only learnt, they also engaged with a community to which they had not previously been exposed. When universities focus too heavily on creating graduate outcomes, they lose the opportunity to foster in students a sense of engagement with, and investment in, the wider society (Arvanitakis & Hornsby 2016). Through volunteering, the students became invested in a literacy festival and saw first-hand how this program benefited the school and wider community in breaking down inequities in literacy levels for children from diverse contexts. This opportunity may inspire students to make similar change happen in other communities in their future careers. In the course of fostering student abilities and engagement through this experience, participation also enabled students to broaden their personal networks and actively break down interdisciplinary barriers. When students connected with their altruistic motivation to volunteer, their experiences in the festival aligned with their personal interests and ambitions for engaging with their community. The volunteer experience offered an opportunity for students to build social and personal capital while connecting with their altruistic motivations as well.

While learning took place amongst all students, the experiences of the higher-order sub-category (C) proved particularly beneficial. For tertiary educators seeking to improve student learning, the question that arises is: *How do we ensure that future students are able to replicate these experiences?* Compelling students to volunteer as a university requirement did not appear to be a strong motivator for student engagement in this research. Our findings align with Holdsworth and

Brewis (2014): making volunteering personal, and not a must-do universal requirement, creates space for differentiation of activities and learning experiences. As the categories of description grew more complex, it was clear that for some students engaging with volunteering is an expression of their personal selves and is deeply connected to the reason behind their decision to volunteer.

Connecting with student motivations

Students who had altruistic motives or saw volunteering as a way to build social and personal capital described positive learning experiences. While research has shown that volunteering is beneficial when applying for graduate jobs (Clark, Marsden, Whyatt, Thompson & Walker 2015), more work needs to be done to help students understand the value of volunteering outside statements transferrable to their resumes. Appealing to students' altruistic motives creates a connection between motivation and experience through which opportunities for learning can be optimised. Building citizenship capabilities and engaging in social awareness through volunteering – in this case, related to disparities in literacy levels for young children – created a sense of shared experience for students on which they can now draw as they progress in their careers.

Emphasising only volunteer experiences in which students learn from the real world limits the impact of their own social and personal selves and the contributions they make to community experiences. It was clear that the students in this experience had a desire to give back to the real world by drawing upon their own knowledge and experiences, particularly in areas they were passionate about. Reflection on volunteer experiences ensures explicit mapping back to learning and curriculum; more broadly, it provides an opportunity to tune into the promotion of citizenship and social change, and fosters deep learning across interdisciplinary contexts. Reflection opportunities need to be supported by intentional curriculum design that values student volunteer experiences as a valid learning opportunity, rather than considering the volunteering opportunity as one line on graduating students' resumes.

Cross-faculty possibilities

Cross-faculty volunteering opportunities offer rich learning experiences for students. This festival showed the beginning of this type of learning; however, it could have been maximised through a more strategic approach. While students learnt informally from each other during breaks and in the classrooms, there was scope for more intentional reflection on the cross-faculty engagement. The students recognised that working with cross-faculty students "*gives you a different perspective on things"*. For instance, the LIS students were interested in classroom management, something that is not explicitly covered in their course, but which they may find themselves doing in their library careers. Education students gained knowledge from watching the LIS students run literacy activities and discussing literacy outreach programs, while LIS students were able to demonstrate to education students the value of a relationship with a public library for them as teachers. The opportunity to work across faculties and disciplines is significant as an enabler of volunteering experiences.

Further maximisation of learning could have involved more strategic pairing of students from the two disciplines to share knowledge and ideas before, during and after the event. This collaboration could then have been the basis for students developing and expanding their personal learning network. Within LIS and educational settings, working with community professionals and engaging in the building of professional networks is a highly valued part of professional practice (AITSL 2011; Cooke 2012). Volunteering experiences, which support these collaborations, offer

impetus for significant long-term professional links outside of university. Further research into the partnerships established through opportunities such as these would be beneficial.

It should be noted that the students in this study experienced a heightened sense of belonging to their university and to each other through their cross-faculty volunteer experiences: *"That's the great benefit from having cross-faculties…being a student and mixing with other faculties is part of your experience, you're not just an education student, you're a department student'.* Participants identified opportunities for building social and personal capital through their volunteer experiences as valuable: "*this might sound simple but I really like the idea that we have our purple shirts on and we felt like, you know, someone important, a volunteer".*

Maximising learning through volunteer opportunities

Previous studies have explored whether students' grades improve as a result of volunteering, or service learning, as it is sometimes called (Hébert & Hauf 2015). In their study Hébert and Hauf found that while students who participated in volunteering did not achieve higher grades than those who did not, there was evidence that they had deeper understanding of course concepts (2015). While this study was focused on volunteer experiences, rather than academic performance, as it was not tied to a particular unit, our results echo these. Experiences in the higher-order category (C) deepened the students' knowledge about concepts they had been exposed to throughout their studies, leading to a greater understanding of overall course concepts.

The students had a willingness to use their own unique skills, developed in or outside of educational settings, and to share knowledge and learn from each other throughout the festival: "*I felt we could have been used more actually"*. While volunteering made students feel valued – *"you felt important"* – they wanted the experience to be more collaborative. Currently literacy activities are designed by university personnel; however, it was clear from student feedback that ownership over this and other facets of the festival would have made for a richer learning experience. Equally this is an important insight when working with partner organisations, as the focus is usually on what the volunteer can do *on the ground*, when it is clear there are more activities to which student volunteers can contribute. Enabling students to be part of the conceptualisation of activities and experiences creates space for innovation and fosters students' abilities to be active and engaged in their learning.

Previous research has shown that those who volunteer for altruistic reasons are more likely to devote more time and effort to an event (Handy et al. 2010); this was echoed in our findings. While we recommend an appeal to students' altruistic motives to engage them in deeper learning, this must be done cautiously. While students are concerned about taking on extra responsibilities, if they can see a clear alignment to their learning or interest areas they are willing to engage: *"I'm not going to volunteer for everything, but to definitely volunteer for things that are important to me"*. While extra-curricular activities, including volunteering, can be beneficial for future employment, taking on too many outside commitments has been shown to negatively affect students' grades (Thompson, Clark, Walker & Whyatt 2013).

Students felt volunteering should be more than assessment-driven and was an opportunity to serve a larger community, with their learning a further advantage, rather than the sole reason to participate. The findings of this research have highlighted learning dimensions from authentic and reciprocal learning, where the benefits for them have a focus on skill-building and practical skill acquisition, to having an opportunity to demonstrate their learning and learn from others. This can extend through to amplification of their learning, where students realise they can be of value to the

volunteer experience and contribute in ways that align with their motivation to volunteer. Volunteer experiences should be conceptualised as part of systemic opportunities within curriculum design for students to engage in rich learning experiences. Volunteer experiences create connections between students and their peers, and between them and the wider community. They can also be a vehicle for students' expression of their personal selves. Valuing volunteering experiences as part of holistic curriculum design can create conditions for amplified student learning experiences within higher-education institutions.

Limitations and conclusion

In this article we argued that volunteer experiences in a community literature festival provided significant learning opportunities for higher-education students. A limitation of the study includes the small scale of the research. While we collected rich data from the participants, a larger sample size may have revealed greater depth in the variation among experiences. While group interviews were expedient and convenient for busy students, a limitation might be that group interviews could lead to bias amongst the responses.

The limitations of assessing the efficacy of volunteering experiences are retrospective, and subjective evaluations are a limitation of this research. Phenomenography attends to the collective experience of a phenomenon; and this methodology reveals the ways these students experienced this community literature festival. The student representations are not offered as evidence of evaluated objective outcomes. Demonstrating impact through volunteer experiences after the fact is problematic; however, these findings offer a window into student volunteer experiences in higher education.

The phenomenographic research design enabled a focus on the variation in student experiences of volunteering. There are a number of future threads of inquiry. These include exploring the cross-faculty partnership between LIS and education students and maximising student volunteer opportunities through an understanding of students' motivations to volunteer. The question of how to fully engage students and ensure that diverse learning opportunities can be provided through volunteer experiences must remain at the forefront for university educators and partner organisations.

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