

Fiona Duguid, Karsten Mündel & David Schugurensky (Eds.): Volunteer Work, Informal Learning and Social Action. Sense Publishers. 2013. pp. 258.

Reviewed by Hajnalka Fényes

The book deals with the relationship between voluntary work and informal learning. It consists of eleven chapters: the discussion of the theoretical framework and the review of the literature on the major Canadian and international trends of studying the phenomenon of volunteering are followed by eight qualitative case study analyses. The final chapter discusses the major results and draws the conclusions.

The subject of the book is important and topical as there is a significant gap in the literature, academic explorations on the relationship between informal learning and volunteering have so far been scarce. Although a vast corpus tackles formal education, paid work, the motivations behind voluntary work, the impact of volunteering, the informal learning that takes place during voluntary work have not been discussed thoroughly. In the knowledge based society, where life long learning is essential, formal and informal learning through volunteering has become an important way of learning too.

Volunteering is a special type of work and informal learning is a special type of learning. The book examines the relationship between these two activities. The definition of volunteering has become broader, including both - traditional and new - volunteering types (this will be discussed later on). The concept of informal learning embraces self directed learning, incidental learning and learning through socialization, and it is related to some extent to experimental learning as well. The chapter addresses the problems concerning the definitions of the concept of volunteering and informal learning. The book introduces a new phenomenon, namely that learning, either formal or informal, is one possible motivation for volunteering which had not been examined in detail so far.

Chapter two, written by [Susan Stowe](#), presents a quantitative analysis about the Canadian and international trends of volunteering and informal learning. The author states: “volunteering has become an increasingly large part of the provision of social goods and services, and volunteers are the primary providers of the state-defined public services” ([p. 37](#)). Nowadays, voluntary activity is increasingly taking place within formal organizations in Canada. The authors examine the features of voluntary activity by age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, number of children, employment status, educational level, income and by the number of years living in Canada. They examine the types of organizations chosen for volunteering and the

reasons behind volunteering as well. In the second part, the authors deal with informal learning and volunteering, the learnt content and attitudes.

The third chapter, written by [Kunle Akinbola, Fiona Duguid and Martha Viveros](#), deals with volunteers at the Canadian Red Cross. This activity is considered as traditional type of volunteering: here the helping attitude is fundamental and usually takes place on a long term basis. Based on qualitative interviews, the authors examine the types of knowledge and skills volunteers acquire. They also discuss how volunteers learn and who is likely to benefit from this activity (the volunteer or/and the organization or/and the recipients or/and the whole community). According to the findings, the motivation of the younger Red Cross volunteers involve learning skills and knowledge what can be used in paid work later on, however, retired people are usually motivated by keeping themselves active. The volunteers learn several skills: emergency and first aid, disaster procedures, communication skills, team-work, leadership skills and they also acquire deeper knowledge about poverty. Their learning is usually tacit (not intentional and not conscious), incidental and experimental.

Chapter four written by [Adam Perry](#), deals with volunteer “labourer-teachers” in the Frontier College. The term “labourers” applies to newly arrived immigrants whose teachers are mostly Canadian college students (during the summer break). The students are specialized on agriculture and they mutually learn from each other with the immigrants. The Mexican and Caribbean immigrants learn basic literacy skills and English and the students learn Spanish and skills for agricultural work from the immigrants.

In chapter five the authors, [Bonnie Slade, Yang Cathy Luo and Daniel Schugurensky](#), address the issue of a newly developed form of volunteering, namely when highly educated immigrant volunteers, hoping to get a paid job later on, aim to gain work experience in Canada and to learn the language. They also want to learn about Canadian culture, to build a social network and to improve their communication skills. Their learning is mostly informal and tacit. The authors argue that this type of volunteering redraws the borderlines of “volunteerism” as participants act under labour market pressures that requires Canadian work experience, therefore volunteering is not freely chosen, and their attitude is not altruistic. In this case, the beneficiaries of volunteering are the volunteers themselves even if only 29% of them volunteered in a field related to their original profession.

In chapter six the authors ([Fiona Duguid, Karsten Mündel and Daniel Schugurensky](#)) deal with volunteers in housing cooperatives: in these mini-democracies, volunteers learn skills related to self-governance and democracy by

doing. This way of learning is usually tacit: they learn through mistakes, they learn from each other, in face to face conversation.

Chapter seven written by [Behrang Foroughi and Erica Mccollum](#) deals with tenant volunteers at the Toronto Community Housing Corporation. In this democratic organization they learn how to be good citizens through taking part in decision making. They acquire management and budget allocation skills. The volunteers' motivation is to improve their community. Their learning is informal and tacit, they learn leadership skills, how to build a community, they learn political efficacy and participatory management.

In chapter eight, written by [Daniel Schugurensky](#), an interesting phenomenon, participatory budgeting is discussed. This is a form of civic engagement, a collective decision making process where volunteers together decide how to spend part of the public budget. Again, this is a case where volunteers learn democracy by doing. They learn attitudes and values, skills and practices and instrumental knowledge on politics, municipal budgets and citizens' rights. Their way of learning is again tacit, invisible and unconscious.

Based on 42 qualitative semi-structured interviews, chapter nine written by [Karsten Mündel and Daniel Schugurensky](#) analyzes volunteering in a community based organization. Here volunteers learn instrumental skills, process skills, knowledge on particular issues, and they also do dispositional learning and political and civic learning. The way of their learning is mostly informal, learning by doing, tacit learning and learning through conflicts.

Chapter ten, "the case of the Frente Civico", written by [Kate Rogers and Megan Haggerty](#), deals with an interesting type of volunteering: it analyses participation in a social movement based on eight interviews. The social movement learning is a collective learning, the social engagement with others is important in learning. The volunteers learn skills, special issues, strategies for action, critical thinking and finally "to learn hope" in that social change is possible, and small groups can have powerful effect on the world. Their learning is non-formal, informal and experimental too, and the types of their informal learning are: self-directed learning, incidental learning and tacit learning.

In my opinion the most interesting part of the book is that one of the case studies address the question of new forms of volunteering. The motivations of the new immigrants to Canada are to acquire work experience and to learn English in order to increase their employability prospects on the paid job market. Some groups (immigrants, young people and college graduates), not possessing prior work experience in the country, face difficulties entering the labor market, and volunteering is a strategy for them "to get their foot in the door". The rest of the case studies discuss traditional forms of volunteering. The question is why there is only

one chapter (chapter five) about new forms of volunteering. Moreover, I also find it problematic that only one chapter is based on quantitative research (the case studies are based on semi-structured and focus group interviews).

The authors discuss three types of volunteering: working in voluntary organizations which provide social services (Chapter 3–5), representing local communities (Chapter 6–8) and finally community development and mobilizing for social change (Chapter 9–10). Four chapters conclude that the volunteers' motivation is to improve their own community which they learn by “doing democracy” (Chapter 6–9). In my opinion one or two case studies on this issue would have been enough as the findings are quite redundant with regards to the questions of informal learning.

All in all – despite the above criticisms – I highly recommend the book to PhD students and researchers in the field of education research and sociology. The relationship between volunteering and informal learning is a significant and rarely discussed issue in the literature. The detailed discussion of the sub-themes are interesting, the qualitative case studies are competently and persuasively conducted and the results are significant and valuable.