

What every volunteer needs: a mix of information, training and education

NATIONAL VOLUNTEER SKILLS CENTRE Volunteering Australia 2008

Abstract

Supporting volunteers to learn and develop their skills is a core part of the *National Standards for Involving Volunteers in Not for Profit Organisations*, with Standard 5 stating 'an organisation that involves volunteers shall ensure that all volunteers obtain the knowledge, skills, feedback on work and the recognition needed to effectively carry out their responsibilities.' Volunteering Australia, through the National Volunteer Skills Centre project makes available a variety of materials for use by volunteers and volunteering involving organisations. These materials, at no cost to the user, are in the form of information sheets, training documents, 'how to' subject guides and toolkits - directional text for trainers/managers, and research papers. Materials housed on the Volunteering Australia website are available to download so that the learner/trainer works from the print copy, and where required, modifiable templates for download (Microsoft word and/or excel) are also made available.

This paper discusses current volunteer learning methods and training delivery practices and identifies some of the trends that have the potential for facilitating greater uptake by the sector.

Current volunteer training delivery practices

Supporting the learning and development needs of volunteers responds to various needs. It can be provided for instructional purposes (enabling volunteers to do their work); knowledge building (enhancing what exists or developing knowledge) in support of a cause; and recognition of the contribution volunteers make to their organisations and the community at large.

The value and necessity of training for volunteers is widely accepted. Both the 2006 and 2007 *National Survey of Volunteering Issues* found that training for volunteer roles was common across not for profit organisations (92% in both 2006 and 2007). Additionally, volunteers themselves value and recognise the benefits of engaging in activities to develop their skills, with findings from the *2006 National Survey of Volunteering Issues* showing 81% of volunteers surveyed stating that they would personally appreciate having their work recognised by being given opportunities to develop and learn.

The Commission on the Future of Volunteering argues the need for 'volunteering literacy' which they define as:

fostering a widespread understanding of what a volunteer is: a realistic appreciation of the transformative impact it can have on people, be they individuals, groups or communities; and a resolute acceptance that it needs appropriate and sufficient resources in order to flourish. (2008 p.2).

The Commission laments that the training available in the UK has gaps, in particular training for employees working with volunteers, managers of volunteers, government policy makers, and funding bodies of services for volunteer involving organisations. While some of these gaps exist in Australia, steps have been taken to address the existence of silos (by the generation of the Active Volunteering Certificates) and training of managers of volunteers (currently being undertaken by Volunteering Australia). However training/building knowledge of government policy makers and funding bodies as well as training of employees working with volunteers still need to be addressed.

Volunteers routinely receive training that may be delivered in a number of ways such as:

- Face to face training workshops and seminars - this training can be accredited or non accredited and is the most common form of delivery.
- Self-paced, off campus (i.e. at home or the workplace) and in the learner's own time (To our knowledge there are no interactive online volunteer training programs currently in Australia).
- Education – based on research evidence. Depending on the source, this may be delivered to the volunteer, through audio or in print.

It is important to acknowledge that training is only one way in which people gain knowledge, develop new skills and enhance existing ones. Some of the alternative pathways to learning include:

- Information – in the form of brochures, induction material, speeches at volunteer events, telephone, physical and/or website/email contact with volunteer national, state peak centres and volunteer regional centres.
- Attending conferences, networking and mentoring relationships
- Audio is fairly rare but would include the podcasts such as those available on ABC radio which provides listeners the opportunity of downloading programs to their computer so they listen in their own time. A recent example is *Vita Activa*, interviews with Dr Melanie Oppenheimer, University of Western Sydney, on volunteering. This series also allowed people to contribute their stories and thoughts about volunteering. Due to its popularity, this series will be repeated in 2008.
- Print – it is not uncommon for managers of volunteers to distil research findings in volunteer program newsletters and annual reports.

Accredited volunteer training

Research conducted by Thompson Goodall (2001) recommended the establishment of a nationally accredited training scheme for volunteers, and argued that:

... the need for a more formal approach (ie accredited training) was recognised. The main benefits acknowledged by the sector are improved quality and consistency of training ... and the recognition of volunteers' knowledge and experience. This latter benefit may encourage some people to become involved in volunteering, as well as benefit people seeking career advancement. (p. vii)

The National Volunteer Skills Centre (NVSC) funded by the Department of Families, Housing and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs has three key goals:

- To support volunteers and organisations to build their skills and knowledge;
- To strengthen networks and encourage collaboration and the sharing of information;
- To reduce the duplication of resources and the costs associated with skills development and training.

To meet these goals three accredited certificate courses, Certificates I, II and III in Active Volunteering were developed. The training materials were all posted on the Volunteering Australia (VA) website. This free downloading allows volunteers and managers/trainers to use materials for both accredited and non accredited training.

Any organisation or trainer can access the materials, however, to deliver the certificates as accredited training, organisations must be Registered Training Organisations who have obtained a license agreement with Volunteering Australia. At the time of writing, these Certificates are being considered for inclusion in the National Community Services Training Package. This will facilitate access by all RTOs to the Active Volunteering Course.

Review of these certificates through four triangulating case studies concludes that the accrued impacts are –

For Volunteers

- Improved personal well-being and morale;
- Greater appreciation of the value of volunteering;
- Improved skills that will enhance employment prospects;
- Increased interest in learning.

For RTOs / Volunteer-involving organisations

- Increased loyalty of volunteers;
- Enhanced organisational profile;
- Increased organisational accountability;

- Increased ability to work with different volunteer cohorts.

For the community

- Improved communication and relationships - eg. between youth and adults;
- Societal benefits resulting from improvements in service delivery and Occupational Health and Safety, and in areas such as school-community linkages and environmental sustainability. (McDonald 2007, p.2)

Is that all that is needed?

It might be assumed that once the certificate courses in Active Volunteering were developed and made available, thus achieving the outcome of providing nationally accredited training to volunteers, the goal is reached and that is the end of the story. However it is not that simple. We know that:

- managers who take on the role of trainers/educators may have little knowledge of the way adults learn. Also they may have little knowledge about how to structure lessons so that the content provides the goals they are seeking
- access to broadband and/or computers with the capacity/software to enable the downloading of materials
- the lack of time that managers/trainers have to devote to evaluating their current training programs and plan for the future
- knowledge of training opportunities, trainers, materials etc continues to need promotion.

Anecdotal information from the enquiries to Volunteering Australia still includes surprise from some people about the range of resources available on the VA website. In and of itself, that people are not aware of what VA has to offer is not the issue, rather the issue is that if people are unaware of what already exists they will spend time and effort, usually when they are already time poor, 'reinventing the wheel' that is, developing basic materials that are already in existence, rather than building and customising those materials for their specific needs.

Further, education pedagogy is constantly evolving. As Farrell argues (2004):

Change in education systems is always in pursuit of one or more of the following goals:

- Improvement of access to educational opportunities
- Enhancement of quality in terms of both standards achieved and the learning process
- Improvement of efficiencies such as increased productivity, greater return on invested capital and cost reduction or containment. (p.6)

With 34% of Australian adults volunteering annually (ABS 2007) it is necessary to explore and implement methods that will enhance volunteer learning and training needs.

Recognition of Prior Learning for Volunteers (RPL)

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a rigorous process which requires evidence of current competency, against defined standards, and places the obligation upon the learner to assemble the evidence. The potential of RPL to enhance volunteer training is enormous with immediate benefits such as - heightened feelings of self-worth for the volunteer; a more detailed recognition of skills/knowledge that could benefit the work of the organisation; providing managers/trainers the basis to build specialised training. Volunteering Australia's toolkit *Recognition of Prior Learning Toolkit* takes learners through the steps required to:

- Understand what Recognition of Prior Learning is, and its place within the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system;
- Understand what competency based learning is and why it is important;
- Gather the evidence required to have existing skills and knowledge recognised by RTOs through the RPL process;
- Understand the types of evidence which RTOs will accept as sufficient and convincing demonstration of existing competency.

The information and templates in this toolkit are generic and can be applied to all the skill sets or 'competencies' within the VET system.

Further research expands on the potential use of RPL in the volunteer sector and makes five recommendations:

Recommendation 1

Expand the *conversation* regarding *RPL for Volunteers*. At this time, RPL is a topic which is not widely understood by volunteer-involving organisations and volunteers. Even where there is a high level of understanding, the novelty/innovation of the VA concept is not fully appreciated.

Recommendation 2

Explain to the *RPL for Volunteers* audience that the process is mostly about recognition and may, if a volunteer so chooses, lead on to achieving a qualification.

Recommendation 3

Demonstrate that *RPL for Volunteers* can be implemented without excessive load upon the management of the volunteer-involving organisation

Recommendation 4

Demonstrate that *RPL for Volunteers* can be facilitated by innovation which reduces load and anxieties upon the candidate volunteer, but preserves the integrity of the RPL outcome.

Recommendation 5

Ensure understanding that whilst the Certificates in Active Volunteering will have a prominent place in an *RPL for Volunteers* initiative, potential target

qualifications include all endorsed qualifications for which RPL is part of the process. (Lewis 2008 p. 3).

Not for profit organisations have a role to play in taking up the opportunity RPL offers and it is beneficial for both organisation and volunteer, as knowledge of past experience/learning can highlight the range of skills available to the organisation.

Virtual education/e learning

The evolution of virtual education (also referred to as distance education) has challenged our understanding of the teaching delivery. Professor James Taylor (2000) stated that delivery of distance education has undergone distinct stages, from a concentration of print materials, to video and audio, to online interactive delivery via the internet. In the 1990s online learning exploded onto the Australian university scene. And while caution was urged by some researchers who argued that the rhetoric of the benefits needed to match evidence, a number of universities rushed to embrace online delivery which to their detriment cost universities, both in Australia and overseas, many millions of dollars (Pratt 2003). Regardless of such early problems in the tertiary sector, virtual education/e learning has continued to evolve. Bowman and Kearns (2007) state:

... we believe these attributes set important parameters for the evolving role of e-learning in education, training, industry and communities, and for future directions.

More personal Technology has enable more individualised approaches to learning to be progressed with increase regard to individual need. Personalised learning is now more feasible.

More social Learning together in networks and communities with people connected to each other for learning enhances the quality of learning, the generation of new knowledge, and learning outcomes overall.

More flexible New technologies enable learning anywhere/anytime to be a realistic objective.(p. 10)

As well as the cost of introducing virtual education there is also the issue of change with both teacher and student resistant to moving away from the classroom face to face experience to a 'faceless' experience (Franco 2008).

Regardless of problems, the pace of virtual education has gathered momentum. Spark (2000, p. 1) found that the TAFE Virtual Campus through their use of online learning has resulted in the following benefits:

- Flexible learning – allowing students to study at their own pace and in their own time and also to enrol and get their results online
- Greater delivery options – offers teachers wider options and resources
- Access to new markets – improving communications with students, not only those enrolled online but also offers an alternative form of communication between all students
- Customised training – offering customised training courses to staff to enable them to upgrade their skills, again offering flexibility of time and place.

In Australia Volunteering Victoria is in the process of introducing an interactive virtual non accredited training program imported from the USA.

Blended delivery

One of the variations within virtual education is *blended delivery*. This is a combination of face to face teaching experience and online instruction. The interaction between trainer and student may also include tele-conferencing and/or video-conferencing. Quite simply, blended learning combines a range of teaching/learning methods in the one course. Such a course may be attractive to volunteers/managers of volunteers in remote areas, who perhaps undertake a large percentage of the training using online tools, such as online tutorials and discussion forums but also attend a very small number of seminars/conferences for face to face training.

Social networking

Defined in its simplest form, social networking is a way of linking people to each other. There are a number of social networking websites. According to one such site My Learning Space (2008) a recent survey by the US National Schools Board Association found that 59% of students (aged 9-17 years) who use social networking discuss education-related topics such as future study; learning outside school; careers or jobs; politics, ideas, religion or morals; and school work. During the recent federal election in 2007, politicians took advantage of social networking websites in their attempts to reach young voters.

MySpace have launched Impact - a website that offers social networking to not for profit organisations and politicians. Organisations can promote their services, raise awareness about issues, promote their events and connect with each other. As social networking is still so very new in this country, it would appear that it has the potential to offer organisations and volunteers the opportunity to raise awareness of volunteering, volunteering opportunities and possibly raise the 'volunteering literacy' expounded by the Commission for the Future of Volunteering (2007).

Also, while social networking would appear to be a resource for the young, there is some argument that older people are increasing their use and understanding of internet and computer technology. For instance grey nomads will visit internet cafes and libraries when they visit rural and remote towns in order to use the internet to connect to their families. Also, U3A Online is a virtual university offering learners information such as how to set up a U3A wiki. To assume interactive online learning is the realm of the young would be to underestimate the willingness and interest in learning new technologies by all age groups.

Volunteering WA has included organisational details on Facebook and MySpace as a promotional and networking method. This is a trial for 6 months and will measure traffic to Volunteering WA and interest from a new source of potential users, particularly younger people.

Digital divide

There is a note of warning attached to virtual education. The digital divide is a term that describes the social implications of unequal access to information and communications technology. This has ramifications for not for profit organisations

endeavouring to include people who were once viewed as clients but increasingly taking up volunteering opportunities. In particular this includes people with disabilities, women, people suffering mental illness, people on low incomes, unemployed people, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, people of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage and people who live in rural and remote areas (Australian Institute of Social Research, 2006).

Conclusion

This paper touches on some of the potential problems and opportunities which might arise by the use of expanding modern forms of training delivery and assessment. Further research into their use to enhance and expand the 'volunteering literacy' in this country is needed to unlock learning opportunities for the volunteers and people involved in volunteering.

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