

THE IMPORTANCE OF VOLUNTEERING IN PROFESSIONAL ORIENTATION; SPREADING THE KNOWLEDGE AND COMPETENCIES AMONG VOLUNTEERS

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Volunteering has many benefits. Volunteering develops human potential and quality of everyday life, increases human solidarity and gives answers to many important challenges of society. Volunteering can bring benefits to volunteers, organizations, communities, clients, and whole society. The aim of this presentation is to describe two specific groups of benefits – benefits in the area of professional development and professional orientation. It is based on empirical findings from two researches on volunteering and author's experiences with the specific form of volunteering – service learning.

1. VOLUNTEERING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT – THE RESEARCH FINDINGS FROM RECENT SLOVAK RESEARCH

The recent representative research “Volunteering in Slovakia – Research Reflection” was carried out in 2011 with the support of the European Union. One part of the research was focused on benefits of volunteering for volunteers. Research findings showed that volunteering brought many benefits to personal life and development of volunteers. On the other side, experiences gained through volunteering are still not perceived as usable in professional life and development:

- Volunteering is the way to reach better a better working position only for 31.7 % of volunteers;
- Only 35.1 % of volunteers participating in the research stated that experience from volunteering helped them in professional life and development; this means that volunteering experience helped them to gain a job, to start with enterprise, and/or to gain better job position;
- Only 16% of formal volunteers have from organization some certificate about knowledge and skills which they gain trough volunteering;
- More than half of volunteers (58.6%) didn't mention experience from volunteering in their CVs, 32.5% mentioned them only generally, and only 9% of them named

specific knowledge and skills gained through volunteering also in their CVs. (Vlašičová, 2012)

The presented research findings refer to some important features of volunteering in Slovakia. Many Slovak volunteers still do not perceive volunteering as an activity that can enrich also their professional life. We can search for reasons on the side of volunteer organizations – they often don't speak to volunteers about benefits of volunteering, they do not inspire or motivate them to use skills and experience reached through volunteering also in other areas of their life. However, we can find the reasons also on the side of volunteers who don't think their volunteer experience is useable in professional life because employers in Slovakia still do not perceive volunteering as a value.

2. VOLUNTEERING AND PROFESSIONAL ORIENTATION IN HELPING PROFESSIONS – RESEARCH FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH IN 2007

Research findings from the second research (Brozmanová Gregorová, 2007) show the other side of the connection between volunteering and professional life. In higher education in the area of helping professions, volunteering can be perceived as a form of practice. One of the base functions of practice is the development of professional competences of students. It does not only enrich the development of knowledge and skills, it also forms attitudes towards the future profession. Students can through volunteering in the area of future profession interiorize the values and the norms of profession. They start with the process of identification with their future profession or they can find out that they don't want to work in that profession in the future. Through volunteering, students can gain better orientation on how the profession looks like in practice, real experience with the conditions of clients and social environment. They can also understand more deeply their future job and the character of work. Such a volunteering can create new space for forming the relationship with profession and for professional orientation.

There are many empirical findings regarding the influence of volunteering on students in different areas. One area is also professional orientation:

- Melchior (1999) stated that more than 40% students active in volunteering indicated that their participation in volunteering helped them think more and learn more about their future profession;
- The report of National Commission on Service-learning in the USA in 2001 resumed findings from researches focused on the influence of volunteering programs on students in four areas – one of them being professional orientation (Fiske, 2001);
- According to the publication “*At the Glace: What We Know about The Effects of Service Learning on College Students, Faculty, Institutions and Communities*” (2001) the participation in volunteer programs has a positive effect on the development of professional orientation;
- Fenzel and Leary (1997) argued that volunteer activities of students have effect on planning of their career after the graduation;
- Keen and Keen (1998) found out that participation of students in volunteering influenced process of their professional career;
- Smedick (1996) documented the influence of volunteer activities during study on the future professional carrier of graduates.

The empirical findings of the research carried out in 2007 as a part of dissertation “*Volunteering as a part of higher education of social workers and social educators*” also documented connection between volunteering of students and their professional orientation.

All students who participated in volunteer activities during their study declared the interest to work in that profession after the graduation.

We can find out the connection between experience with target group during volunteering activities and the planning of future work with target group only in one case. It was related to experience with work with drug users. 10 students were working with this group during their university study and 9 of them wanted to continue to work with this target group also in the future. Volunteer experiences with other target groups didn't have any influence on planning of the future work with these groups.

Students who carried out volunteer activities during their study were more active, more aware about their future profession in the comparison with students who didn't volunteer. For example, in the last 12 months they:

- talked more frequently about their future profession with their friends, family members, teachers, and professionals;
- read more frequently the materials about their future profession;
- tried more frequently the activities related to their future profession;
- looked more frequently for jobs in their future profession;
- thought more frequently about the different aspects of their future profession such as life style, loans, necessary education or specific courses, other steps needed to prepare properly for the job, the relations between courses in schools and future job, etc.

The research findings showed that social workers and other helping professions perceived volunteering as a form of practice. It definitely has an important formative and orientation function in the carrier development of students. Trough volunteering experience, students can better understand the practice of their future profession and develop their professional orientation.

3. VOLUNTEERING AND PROFESSIONAL ORIENTATION – EXPERIENCE FROM SERVICE-LEARNING

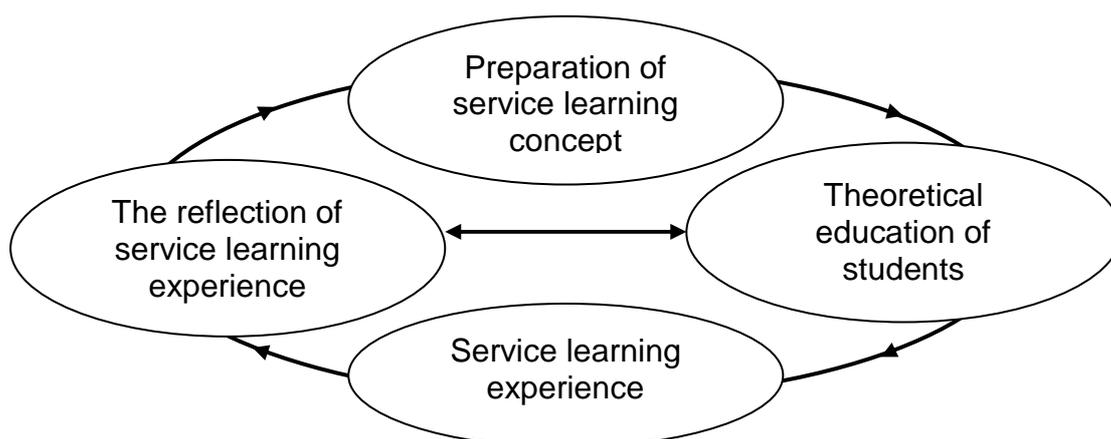
The connection between volunteering and professional orientation was mapped through experiences with service-learning activities of students as well.

At the Faculty of Education of Matej Bel University, we are developing volunteer activities for students already since 1998. Our aim is to increase the involvement of students in volunteering during their study, to apply their experience in education, and to develop their social responsibility.

We are developing various volunteer opportunities for students and in this area we are cooperating closely with the Volunteer Centre located at the university. One option is service learning, which is the part of study content in some courses. I would like to present some of my experience with service learning carried out within the course called “*Work with Roma Community*”.

Currently, there are many definitions of service learning. However, what they have in common is that service learning is a teaching strategy that integrates meaningful volunteering within community into education and reflection of such experience. Service-learning consists of four elements.

Service Learning Model:



In 2009, we received an offer from the organization “Friends of the Earth” to participate on the project “Roma Volunteering”. The aim of the project was to develop knowledge and skills of young Roma boys and girls in through volunteering. The project had two target groups: one group consisted of active girls and boys in the age of 13 - 17 years coming from a separate Roma community living near Banská Bystrica. The second group consisted of the students of our faculty who attended the course “*Work with Roma community*”. We offered the participation in project as a service-learning activity.

Both groups attended together specific voluntary activities. The role of the students was to support young Roma people in their volunteering. After the course, young Roma boys and girls prepared with the support of students leisure-time activities for younger Roma children from their community. They called it – “*Big World of Fun – Báro Svito Bašave!*”. They invited small children from community and school and carried out four activities: painting on T-shirts, self-defense, the first aid and a presentation on the life of Roma community. After the implementation, both groups evaluated the project.

These are some examples of the students’ reflections:

- "Now I know Roma community not only from books, but also from reality"
- "I have changed my opinion on Roma community"
- "I have gained a lot of new experience"
- "I have realized that education is very important for young Roma people"
- "I have realized that for some young Roma people it is necessary to get support outside their community and family"
- "I have a good that I have helped other people."

Some students still volunteer in this Roma community. They help young Roma boys and girls with preparation to school.

These reflections shows that experience with specific target group can change knowledge and attitudes of students and this is also one of the preconditions for the development of their professional orientation.

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