

The importance of volunteer work for successful children's and adult literacy programs in US Public Libraries – a view from outside

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Abstract:

There is a wide range of possible activities for people who want to volunteer in US public libraries. Among all these opportunities – library literacy programs are one of the most important programs that are staffed by volunteers. After giving a short overview on the history and the current situation of promoting literacy through public libraries for community members of all ages and backgrounds (immigrants as well as native-born Americans), this paper describes the results of a qualitative study. The study is based on a combination of field research and problem-centered interviews with volunteers and librarians (volunteer coordinators) – held in public libraries in 11 US states – and will be discussed with focus on literacy aspects. US public library literacy programs and their volunteers – seen through the eyes of a German researcher: What are the motivations of volunteer tutors to help people to read and write? Is there a connection between the literacy volunteers' backgrounds and their chosen fields of activity in the library? What are the reasons why particularly a public library is a good place for immigrants or illiterates who are looking for help?

Keywords: literacy programs, volunteering, public libraries, USA

Introduction

Research interest in library volunteering in the US goes back to an internship at the Public Library in Nashville, Tennessee in 2004. Among many other impressions and gains in knowledge, the different and diversified ways library volunteers can enrich the services of a public library was the most remarkable discovery. Why does it work so well in the US? After studying a lot about this fascinating topic and getting more and more curious, the logical conclusion was to focus on the relationship between theory and praxis. This was the main trigger for organizing two US Public Library interview trips which were conducted in 2009 and 2010. Some of the findings from these interviews will be discussed further below with a focus on library literacy programs. These programs are among the most important programs that are staffed by public library volunteers as “libraries are uniquely situated to promote literacy and reading. It is a part of their mission (Farmer & Stricevic, 2011, p.3.).”

One important reason why the Americans love their public libraries is “the fact that the American public library has been strongly identified with the concept of equal educational opportunity (Wiegand, 2015, p.2.)”. As reading “is the catalyst for learning”, and as lifelong learning is indispensable, “reading stands as a profound necessity (Agee, 2005, p.249.)”.

US public libraries have been providing adult literacy programs to immigrants by teaching English since the 1860s (Medina, 2013, p.36.). Apart from these ESL (English as a Second Language) classes (Hanselmann & Dellinger, 2016, p. 12.; Hilyard, 2004, p.18.), they also provide tutoring programs for native-born Americans who are unable to read and write. Although the number of those who are illiterate has declined immensely within the last century (NCES, 2002), there is still a need for these adult literacy tutoring programs. Adults illiterates (or with low literacy skills) need particular help, because they “are employed less often, earn less money if they are employed, participate less in community affairs, [...] and lack the ability to assist and support their children in school (Weibel, 2007, p.11.).”

Boosted by the gifts of Andrew Carnegie, the “1890s saw the opening of children’s rooms in major libraries across the nation (Seymour & Layne, 1979, p.23.)” for specific activities. Storytelling “as the best way to fire the imagination of children [...] seems largely responsible for the renewed popularity of the reading alcove as a regular feature of children’s rooms [...] for story hour use (Van Slyck, 1995, p.186.).” The creation of various forms of story time is “perhaps the greatest success of children’s librarianship (McDowell, 2007, p.229)” in the USA and “still remains one of public libraries’ core services (Ghoting & Martin-Diaz, 2013, p.xi.)”. Another type of children’s program that is offered in almost all US public libraries is summer reading which was created for elementary school age children to encourage them to read during summer vacation (Bertin, 2004, p.5.). A characteristic of this program is the involvement of teen volunteers (Fiore, 2005, p.49.).

Qualitative study

Problem-centered interviews with volunteers and their coordinators were be conducted in 31 US public libraries of different sizes and types in 11 US states (Hörning, 2015, p.146.). Among the 102 interviewees were 59 volunteers, 34 volunteer coordinators and 9 members of library friends groups. Roughly one third of the volunteers and more than half of the coordinators were involved in various children’s and/or adult literacy programs like volunteer tutoring programs in reading, ESL classes, storytime, summer reading programs or book discussion groups.

The volunteers (male/female, and aged between mid-teens and mid-eighties) were asked about their volunteer experiences in other facilities or institutions before they came to the public library, and what they thought were the main differences between volunteering in a library and volunteering in those other facilities or institutions. The volunteers were asked also about their background (family, education, profession, hobbies, crucial experiences), and if there could be a connection to their volunteer motivation and to their chosen field of activity in the library. Another point of interest in the interviews was tutor training.

Findings

In the following paragraphs, all these aspects will be discussed with a focus on the literacy volunteers’ points of view. Motivational aspects and the role of community involvement by the volunteer coordinators will also be discussed.

Volunteer experiences before coming to the library

An overwhelming majority of the public library literacy volunteers interviewed had already had volunteer experiences in other facilities or institutions before they came to the library. Below are some of their responses to this line of inquiry in the interviews (more interview details see Hörning, 2015, pp.156. & 337).

“I had one volunteer job, [...] working with little kids after school. They would come to this facility, and I would read with them, and take a walk and things like that.”

“Girl Scouts and in our church – Sunday school class and that kind of things. [...] And in college I was an ESL teacher.”

“I was volunteering in college. [...] I took a sign language course. I volunteered at the [...] school for the deaf.”

“I have been volunteering for several museums for already many years. [...] I helped in a recreation center for older adults. I helped people who didn’t have any place to go.”

“It goes all the way back to when I was about 12 years old. Yeah, an appreciation for books! So I started there, I managed books [...] for the Boy and Girl Scouts.”

“I taught English in elementary school for Spanish speaking children.”

“I volunteered at school to tutor small children [...] who had difficulties learning to read.”

The majority of the interviewed literacy volunteers mentioned prior volunteer experiences in schools and included activities such as tutoring younger students (both teen and adult volunteers) or within organizations like boy/girl scouts. One volunteer mentioned volunteer experiences as a street worker and an email mentor.

Differences to the previous facilities/institutions

When the literacy volunteers discussed the differences between their voluntary work in a public library and in those other facilities or institutions, they dwelt on specifics, meaningfulness and the purpose of public libraries in general.

“Well, the library is different because you’re working with books. [...] I like books. [...] The books are more interesting; [...] you can educate yourself, [...] over and over. So this is a learning experience.”

„Compared to my prior experiences it’s less regimented, it’s more open, there is more contact and the staff here and the board highly recognize the volunteer efforts. They appreciate it. [...] They make me feel good and welcome.”

“I like being in the library, in these structures.”

How rewarding it is to hold a book in your hand, to open it up and [...] suddenly you’re exposed to an adventure that never [...] could you imagine. But a book provides it to you. And just to be with people to offer that love to books. You walk in a library and it has a different feeling than when you walk in a museum. And it’s not that it smells or feels smart. But it’s just different. Sort of like going into a church.”

“The people in the library – [...] they’re wonderful!”

“[...] just to be with people to offer that love to books. You walk in a library and it has a different feeling than when you walk in a museum. [...] Sort of like going into a church.” (Volunteer book discussion group leader)

“I love to read, so I like more to volunteer in a library!”

“I like the libraries in general. The feel of a library. The kind of people that work in a library.”

“The library keeps volunteers very nicely. I volunteer for several other organizations. And in some of them they are bothered to know your name, or what you are doing or why you are doing. So it’s nice to be appreciated!”

“I would say – my love of reading [...]! So the library is my favorite place to volunteer.”

“[...] you feel so appreciated. [...] Oh you’re here, how are you?”

“I like the libraries in general. The feel of a library. The kind of people that work in a library.” (Adult literacy volunteer)

As these statements clearly indicate, it is not a coincidence that these literacy volunteers have finally chosen a public library as their favorite place to volunteer. Their volunteering is closely related to their passion, interests, skills and knowledge.

Training

Volunteers who were attending a volunteer tutor program said that the training was very important and useful. In smaller facilities the training of the volunteer tutors is more informal, while in the larger library system the training for the tutors is mostly centralized.

“[...] they offered tutor training, which was for about four days for three hours each day. They told us how to do it. How to talk to the students. Because it’s different talking and teaching an adult rather than a child.” (Adult literacy volunteer tutor)

“We had a training program [...] and talked about how do you teach kids to read. And then I was assigned some students to tutor with.” (Children’s literacy volunteer tutor)

“Well, the training is very good, and it goes over a lot of things. And it teaches you how to interact with people plus all kind of things you should be training them.” (Adult literacy volunteer tutor)

Library and community

The literacy volunteers who were interviewed clearly realize the enormous value of the public library for the community:

“I love this library because I feel that it is such an important part of this community. And when you see how many love the library because [...] we are providing a service that no one else fulfills.”

“It’s great for the town and it’s great for us. [...] I think when you volunteer it makes you feeling as a part of the community. It gives you a real connection to the people.”

“[...] making a contribution to the community, it enhances your life so much! [...] I’ve always loved to read [...] so I thought combining my love of books and being able to be here.”

“I love this library because I feel that it is such an important part of this community. [...] you see how many love the library because [...] we are providing a service that no one else fulfills.” (Volunteer book club leader)

When asked about the influence of literacy volunteers on the relationship of the public library with the community, the volunteer coordinators felt that their influence is important. Many of them mentioned that volunteers act as advocates for the library.

“It’s important [...]. I think it helps in promoting the library. Because the volunteers are spokespersons. Spokespersons for the library. They do their work here and then they go out and talk about it.”

“I think it’s good. There is someone else to talk about the library. [...] I just think it’s a good way – it’s another way to get us out into the community.”

“I think we rely a lot on our volunteers. I think it’s very good [...] for the library. Most of these volunteers become very good advocates for the library.”

“I’m very fortunate with the volunteers I have right now. All of them do show a very strong commitment to service.”

Literacy volunteers’ educational backgrounds

Almost all of the literacy volunteers had a college education and the most frequently mentioned subjects they had studied were English, English literature and education. The subjects from arts, business, science, journalism, speech, public administration, and library science were mentioned once in each case.

Literacy volunteers’ professional backgrounds

Teaching was the most frequently mentioned profession of the literacy volunteers. Artist and secretary were mentioned twice and writer, social worker, financial management, school nurse, technical writer and school librarian were mentioned once. Teen volunteers interviewed (mostly involved in summer reading programs) planned to become a kindergarten teacher, a librarian, a psychologist and a chef.

Literacy volunteers and their hobbies

The literacy volunteers had a wide range of interests. Hobbies mentioned included playing an instrument, singing in a choir, painting, scrapbooking, photography, genealogy, hiking, gardening, yoga or swimming. Without exception, all of the volunteers said they loved to read. For the majority of them, reading was their favorite hobby.

Motivation and/or crucial experiences

The literacy volunteers were asked if they had crucial experiences in their past life concerning libraries, books, reading, and/or volunteering.

“I didn’t have books as I was growing up. But I had a library card! So I had access to the library, and an appreciation for what books can provide. They can be escape as well as get information!”

And I like to share that with other people! I don't know if people read as much as they should. So it's nice to encourage kids to read."

"I just love libraries! My mother took me to the public library as a child. [...] And so my mother really motivated me to love books and to love libraries. I think that's probably why I volunteer in a public library."

"My family did not volunteer. But [where] I grew up, we had a beautiful public library. [...] I have such happy memories as a child of the libraries."

"My father's sisters [...] were very very much involved in church. So they did a lot of volunteer work for the church. Wonderful women. And they all lived more than 90 years!"

"One of my strongest memories and most emotional memories: [I went] on the bus to the library. And I remember [a librarian] was showing me books about Indians [...]. I was fascinated by the pictures. [...] And that was when I was four! [...] And this good experience was probably the reason why I was so available for volunteering [in the library]."

"I grew up across the street [...] from the library. [...] I really lived in that library. Because I always loved to read. So this is just a continuation."

A volunteer tutor who comes to the library to teach illiterate adults in one-on-one sessions during his lunch break had crucial experience. When he was young he studied abroad for two years and appreciated that there were people who helped him (in their free time) to understand, to read and to write in a foreign language. So now he wants to give back!

"I didn't have books as I was growing up. But I had a library card! So I had [...] an appreciation for what books can provide. They can be escape as well as get information. And I like to share that with other people. I don't know if people read as much as they should. So it's nice to encourage kids to read." (Children's literacy volunteer)

When the literacy volunteers were asked about their main motivation for volunteering many of them said how deeply moved they are by their students' life stories, and for this reason they feel highly motivated to help these people.

"I think the adults are really committed to learning to read and write. I mean some of them are in their fifties and sixties - and they don't have read and write. And they are embarrassed and ashamed, for one reason or another. [...] It's very easy to want to help them, and feel really dedicated to. [...] They can't read subway signs or menus or recipes or the newspaper or anything. So anything that I do for them is better than what they came in here with! I love it! I've never been happier during any other job!"

"We have a mission, we have a goal, and our goal is to promote literacy. We are helping the library in that sense that we want people to read. We want show them to value books. [...] I think that's what I enjoy about this."

"The motivation for me to volunteer for this library is that it is a community service that that is free for everybody [...]. [Volunteering in the library] is rewarding, it's fun, it's a challenge, and we enjoy it, it's wonderful!"

Whereas adult literacy volunteers bring in their experiences, teen volunteers want to gain experiences.

"I love little kids and they are just like fun to be around to help them and like watch their imaginations grow and their curiosity." (wants to become a kindergarten teacher)

"I will be a pharmacist – so I'll have [...] to be able to work with people, and volunteering at the library helps to do that!"

"I think the adults are really committed to learning to read and write. [...] It's very easy to want to help them, and feel really dedicated to. [...] They can't read subway signs or menus or recipes or the newspaper or anything. So anything that I do for them is better than what they came in here with!" (Adult literacy volunteer)

What do the volunteer coordinators think about the motivation of their literacy volunteers? It's obvious that they see there is always a connection between a volunteer's motivation and his or her individual life situation and/or life experience.

"The younger people [...] they say, see – I have a wonderful job; I got a college education because I could read. And now I want to help someone else!"

"My thought is that volunteers enrich the experiences and have a potential of not only helping you with tasks that [...] must be done. But they can bring a whole new level of experience [...] enrichment to the library."

"Middle aged people say I know how tough it must be! [...] Some of the stories I've heard had been people who come in and said: 'I didn't have realized until I was an adult that my grandparents or my father couldn't read. And never knew that, and when I found it out I thought I want to help somebody else!'"

"What I found is that the volunteers – what they are interested in, whether their hobbies or what their profession was – they want to still continue to give that through the library!"

"[...] the older people say, I have some skills – it's more about that – I have some skills, I'm a retired teacher or this or that, and I want to help someone [...]."

Interactions between literacy volunteer's background, motivation, library and community

The figure below shows the interactions between the literacy volunteers' backgrounds and their motivations for volunteering in their public library. Most of the interviewees have positive, even formative childhood memories of a public library. They grew up with books. They love to read. Later, quite a few of them studied English, became teachers, and reading is their favorite hobby. Because of their prior volunteer experiences, they have very clear ideas about the fields of volunteering in the public library. They want to give back to the community, want to bring in their skills and knowledge, want share their passion, want to be involved, they like to work with people, and for all these reasons they feel highly motivated.

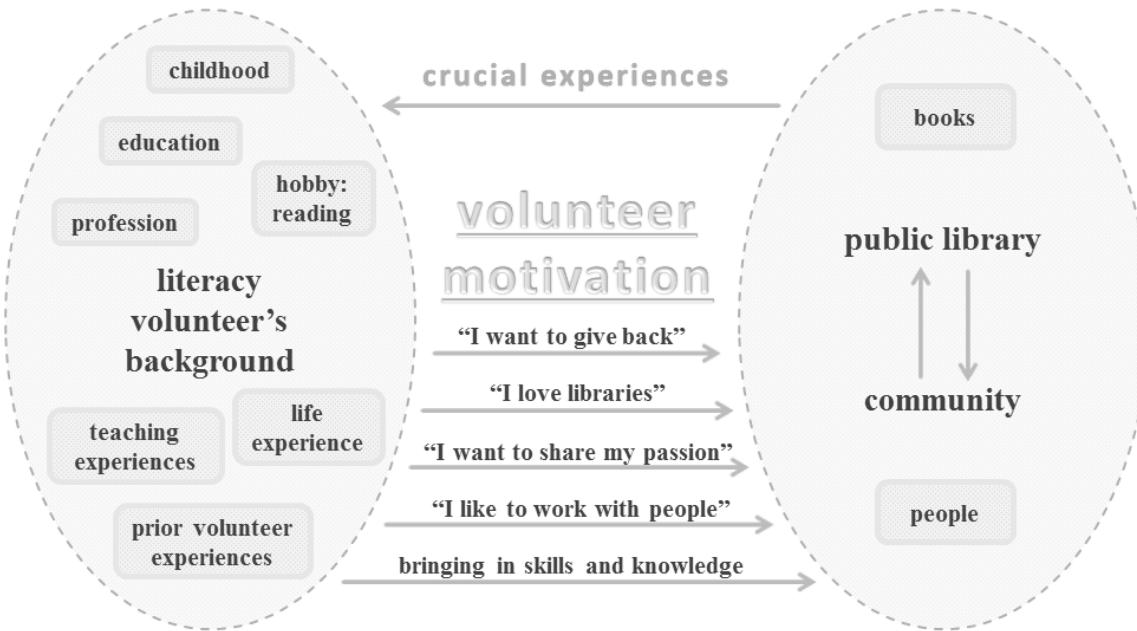


Figure 1: Interactions between literacy volunteer's background, motivation, library and community

Conclusion

Literacy programs with volunteer involvement, located in public libraries, have a long tradition in the USA. There is a wide range of volunteer opportunities in US public libraries. Literacy programs are among the most important programs that are staffed by volunteers. The results of this qualitative study show that volunteers who decide to become literacy volunteers have similar reasons for deciding to volunteer. They like public libraries more than other places for volunteering, they love books and reading (often shaped by formative childhood experiences), and they often have a teaching background (either in their profession or in a former volunteer job or both). Furthermore, they like to work with people and have a strong commitment to their community. Many of the literacy volunteers' statements concerning their motivation for volunteering in the library are remarkably passionate. Hence, a public library seems to be a good place for immigrants or illiterates who are looking for help to seek assistance.

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