

VOLUNTEERISM AND SERVICE-LEARNING IN THE U.S.

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Summary: This paper provides a general overview of the origins and development of volunteerism and service-learning in the U.S. It proposes that service-learning arose out of the American tradition of volunteerism and progressive education and has its theoretical and philosophical roots in the pragmatist, experimental epistemology and educational philosophy of John Dewey. The paper also explores the pedagogical principles and critiques of service-learning as well its current status in U.S. higher education.

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Sumário: O ensaio faculta uma perspectiva geral sobre o desenvolvimento do voluntariado nos Estados Unidos da América e oferece uma evolução na sua aplicação na área pedagógica. Propõe-se que o uso pedagógico resultou da tradição americana do voluntariado e do ensino progressista e radica-se, em termos conceptuais e filosóficos, no pragmatismo epistemológico e na filosofia da educação de John Dewey. O ensaio aborda ainda os princípios e a crítica da utilização pedagógica do voluntariado assim como a sua situação actual no ensino superior americano.

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Volunteerism has a long tradition in U.S. history, but the specific type of volunteerism known as service-learning, a pedagogical strategy that uses community service to foster the learning of facts and theories, is a fairly recent phenomenon. Experiential learning and an ethic of solidar-

ity and civic responsibility are core values of the service-learning pedagogy, which has its roots in American volunteerism, professional education (especially social work) and the doctrines of the Progressive Movement (ZIEREN and STODDARD, 2004), espe-

cially progressive education (ROCHE-LEAU, 2004). In order to understand the current emphasis on service-learning on American college campuses today we will first examine the trajectory of American volunteerism from the 19th to the 21st century.

VOLUNTEERISM IN 19TH CENTURY

According to John Bridgeland, who was president of USA Freedom Corps, an organization dedicated to promoting public service during the Bush administration, “Almost every president, dating back to George Washington, has talked about the need for citizens to volunteer their efforts and expertise to the nation” (NEUMAN 2009: 1). Nevertheless, despite these calls to action, before the early 19th century there were few formal initiatives dedicated to volunteer work in the U.S.

In the 1820s and 1830s, however, a Christian revival movement called The Second Great Awakening,¹ which espoused the belief that “heaven on earth” was possible and encouraged their followers to make it happen, provided the impetus for greater individual involvement in volunteer

service and led to major social reform movements as well as philanthropic initiatives that would prove foundational to contemporary American education and civic engagement.

As argued by Ellis and Campbell (2006: 353), volunteering is usually a response to identified current events, social problems, and community needs, with volunteers taking action before institutions and governments are willing to offer services. Unfettered by the restrictions of tradition, public statutes, or the need to make a profit, volunteers are often pioneers and experimenters. Early examples of this spirit of voluntarism, reform and efforts to build an informed and involved citizenry in U.S. include the founding of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), women’s involvement in the American Civil

¹ Between 1720 and 1740, took place in North America the so-called Great Awakening, a Protestant evangelical reaction against formalism and rationalism in religion. This movement had a strong Calvinist element,

with preachers emphasizing the fear of punishment and the notion of salvation through the grace of God rather than individual effort. Read more: <http://www.answers.com/topic/great-awakening#ixzz1F7g64Bsr>

War and the activities of the Settlement House Movement. Arising in the late 19th century, these projects led to significant transformations in American society. Using volunteers to meet the needs of a society undergoing major structural and ideological transitions, they transformed not only the lives of those who benefited from the services they provided, but also ideas and practices regarding gender, science, education, democracy and the role of citizens in shaping the life of communities. Their activities and ideas continue to inspire contemporary social and educational theories and practices.

The first YMCA in the United States, which opened in Boston in 1851, was founded by Captain Thomas Valentine Sullivan, an American seaman and missionary, who wanted to provide a “home away from home” for young sailors on shore leave. His efforts were supported financially by the memberships of merchants and artisans, and the programs offered were run almost exclusively by volunteers. Besides providing safe and affordable rooms to young men,² gymnasiums³ and auditoriums, the

² Included among those who lived in YMCA residences were journalists Andy Rooney and Dan Rather; black leaders Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.; and the Beat writer Jack Kerouac (<http://www.ymca.net/history/1800-1860s.html>).

YMCA also recruited volunteers that engaged in a large array of community services, aimed at finding solutions to emerging social needs. Among some of the early contributions to social causes credited to the YMCA is the creation the nation’s first-known English as a Second Language (ESL) class in 1856 and the deployment of about 5,000 volunteer surgeons, nurses and chaplains during the American Civil War (1861-65). Over the years, the program continued to expand in size and scope. Currently, the YMCA is one of the leading non-profit organizations in the U.S. providing services that range physical education classes and summer camps to supporting community diversity, promoting college education and assisting with national disasters, such as Haiti earthquake of 2010.

YMCA volunteers were not the only organization providing services to soldiers during the American Civil War. This conflict between Northern and Southern states also engaged scores of women who volunteered their time to sew supplies for the soldiers, care

³ The term “body building” was coined in the Boston’s YMCA in 1881 by staffer Robert J. Roberts coined and developed exercise classes that prefigured today’s fitness workouts. The modern game of basketball was also invented by a YMCA physical education teacher, James Naismith, in 1891 (<http://www.ymca.net/history/1800-1860s.html>).

for the injured and perform sanitation work. Although no formal nursing schools existed at the time, and women were banned by military and social rules from working in field hospitals, hundreds of women from the best families in the nation as well as from Catholic convents took it upon themselves to treat soldiers on both fronts. Among them, were the writer Louisa May Alcott, who became ill with typhoid fever soon after entering her brief service as a nurse, and Clara Barton, who later founded the Red Cross. Through their volunteer participation in the war, American women challenged existing concepts of femininity, legitimized nursing as a female profession, paved the way for the professionalization of the nursing field and opened up new avenues for women's involvement in public life.

After the American Civil War (1861-65) voluntary associations increased at unprecedented rate (SKOCPOL, 2003), while the country's economy experienced a period of remarkable expansion, marked by the extensive growth of industry and agriculture. This transformation created a great demand for labor, which was supplied by rural migrants and thousands of immigrants. As a result, by the end of the 19th century the country's population doubled in size and became increasingly urban, foreign and poor (Gale Encyclopedia of U.S. Eco-

nomic History 1999). These developments produced massive urban social problems, including, unemployment, low wages, unfair labor practices, squalid living conditions among the masses of new immigrants, trying to adapt to a new culture. To help integrate the new arrivals "settlement houses" sprang up in the major industrial cities of the Northeast of the United States, inspired by a similar movement, which had developed in London in 1884.

Settlement houses were privately supported institutions whose initial goal was to help the poor and the disadvantaged overcome poverty and marginalization, but instead of focusing on providing relief or assistance, in the U.S., the settlement house movement emphasized research and social reform. The concept of the settlement house appealed to young Americans who wished to understand the causes of poverty and work toward a more egalitarian society; it was especially attractive to educated women of means. Settlement houses proliferated rapidly and had transformative and lasting effect on American public policy, education, gender roles and the norms and mission of the social sciences.

The first settlement house was founded in New York City in 1886; by 1900, there were more than 100 settlement houses in America. Three-fourths of

settlement workers were well educated women. The most famous of these was Jane Adams, an American sociologist who founded the most famous of all settlement houses, Hull House, which opened in Chicago in 1889. Jane Adams was a trailblazer. As sociologist, author, public philosopher and founding member of the NAACP, Jane Adams became a leader in woman suffrage and world peace, becoming the first woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. Addams' leadership was also instrumental in developing a powerful network of women social reformers throughout the United States, who, as settlement workers, besides offering classes in English literacy, art and music, also established playgrounds, nurseries and kindergartens. In addition, they worked to improve housing conditions and sanitation, organized protests, offered job-training and labor searches, supported organized labor, fought against corrupt politicians, and worked to secure state laws regulating child labor, hours of work for women, and women's wages. Under Adams' direction, settlement workers were also heavily involved in research aimed at identifying the

causes of poverty and ways to eliminate it (Encyclopedia of American History 2006). Their efforts resulted in many reforms with long-lasting effect and many programs that exist today.⁴ Jane Adams' work in the pursuit of social justice and a better quality of life for the poor, through the use of research aimed at informing social policy, was instrumental in creating the field of modern, professional social work⁵ and applied sociology as well as establishing symbolic interactionism as the leading theoretical perspective in American sociology. She also set a foundation for what is now called community-based learning and umbrella of pedagogical methodologies, which includes service-learning.

Despite the outstanding achievements and legacies of the volunteer movement during the last half of the 19th century, depending on volunteer groups to provide needed social services and further democratic objectives is not without its pitfalls. As noted by de Tocqueville (1862: 360), "Private life in democratic times is so busy, so excited, so full of wishes and of work, that hardly any energy or leisure remains to each individual

⁴ To read more about the settlement house movement go to: <http://www.answers.com/topic/settlement-house-movement#ixzz1GRnPB6kq>

⁵ The first program to train social workers was established in 1898 at Columbia University, New York.

for public life.” Moreover, volunteer groups often exclusionary in membership and in the number and characteristics of those who receive their services (ELLIS and CAMPBELL, 2006). Aware of these limitations, by the beginning of the 20th century, social reformers were calling for greater involvement on the part of the government in providing for the social welfare of the population, organizing volunteer efforts and fostering civic responsibility. In 1906, for example, the philosopher William James called

for creation of a universal national service, which would become “the moral equivalent of war”⁶ in its function to unite the nation and “redeem the society from a dull existence built upon a ‘pleasure economy’ of insipid consumerism” (NEUMAN, 2009). But according to John Bridgeland (cited in NEUMAN, 2009), U.S. initiatives aimed at organizing effective national service programs were not put into practice until the New Deal era when President Franklin Roosevelt started the Civilian Conservation Corps.

EARLY 20TH CENTURY VOLUNTEERS

Nonetheless, by the beginning of the twentieth century, along with a private tradition of volunteerism, an embryonic public effort began to develop⁷ especially around key municipal needs such as fire protection. In addition, although many public services, such as social welfare and health care, continued to depend primarily on private voluntary efforts, those providing the services sought the sponsorship, support and commitment of the government. The idea of forming partnerships between voluntary associations, private businesses and government agencies appealed

to President Herbert Hoover who, despite his firm belief in individualism, attempted to create an “associative state” (HOOVER, 1922; HAWLEY, 1977), albeit without much success. The first few decades of the 20th century, saw the birth several volunteer organizations and movements. Many of the organizations and movements active during this period promoted economic and social justice, such as women’s suffrage or opposition to lynching, others sought to disempower and terrorize racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. The arrival of masses of non-Protestant immi-

⁶ To read the speech go to <http://www.des.emory.edu/mfp/moral.html>.

⁷ See <http://science.jrank.org/pages/11594/Volunteerism-U-S-Volunteerism-during-after-Civil-War.html>.

grants and the abolition of slavery and subsequent movement of Blacks out of the rural South led to the reactivation of organizations like the Ku Klux Klan (refounded in 1915) and the American Protective Association and anti-Catholic society. Among the social service organizations that were founded during this period were agencies that continue to operate to this day, like the Rotary Club, Kiwanis, Lions Club and the predecessor to the United Way.

With the expansion of public education and the push for professionalization and government takeover of social welfare that characterized this period, volunteer organizations began to lose ground. Increasingly, health and social welfare institutions required higher levels of expertise, and volunteers were replaced by paid professionals (STARR, 1982, PERROW, 1963). According to Hall (1999), by the late 1920s, even volunteering itself began to require trained expertise.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MODERN NATIONAL SERVICE MOVEMENT

Tragedy and need have a way of arousing people's desire and resolve to help others and when combined with government support volunteer efforts can have profoundly transformative effects. The disastrous impact of the Great Depression on the lives of American people created the context for the public sentiment and political resolve that helped launch the first wave of the national service movement called for by William James in 1906. In so doing, it changed not only the nature of volunteerism, but also norms about individual civic responsibility and the role of government. Under Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, the country experienced the first large-scale, nationwide, government effort to coordinate and support volunteerism, and provide a public-funded, social safety net.

One of the most popular programs of the New Deal was the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). Designed to take unemployed young men off the streets and provide relief for their families, during the nine years it was in operation (1933-1942) the CCC engaged about 2.5 million unmarried young men between the ages of 18 and 25 in a wide array of public projects. They received a stipend of \$30 a month, \$25 of which was sent directly to their parents. Under this program, volunteers planted nearly 3 billion trees, constructed more than 800 parks, and built of miles of public roadways. The nation's extensive list of state parks is part of its legacy.

The onset of World War II put an end to the CCC, as young men were called to the military, but not volunteerism. During the conflict thousands of vol-

unteers assisted with the war effort at home and on the frontlines.

At war's end, with the beginning of the Cold War and the Civil Rights movement volunteer work refocused on social and economic justice at home and abroad. The Peace Corps, established by executive order of President Kennedy on March 1, 1961, is emblematic of this era of intensive dedication to public causes, social change and concerns with America's role in the international arena. Five years after it was founded, the Peace Corps had more than 15,000 volunteers working in the field.⁸ Although the main goal of the Peace Corps was to spread a positive image of America to the developing world, it was hoped that it would also lead to better-informed and civically engaged citizens at home. Many Peace Corps volunteers were also involved in the domestic social movements such as civil rights, opposition to the Vietnam War and the fight for women's rights.

The second wave of the national service movement was launched by President Lyndon Johnson. In his first state of the union address, Johnson called for the creation of a "Great Society" and declared a "War on Poverty," thus paving the way for

new government-sponsored volunteer organizations. Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), the domestic equivalent to the Peace Corps was created during his administration. Under this program, college students were given educational loans in return for community service. The majority of the community service conducted by VISTA volunteers consisted, in large part, of social activism on behalf of marginalized groups.

Although the Great Society programs went a long way in helping protect civil rights and fighting poverty, they were severely criticized by political conservatives who perceived them as wasteful and potentially dangerous – a breeding ground for left-wing activists. This was especially true of Republican politicians (NEUMAN, 2009). Despite these criticisms, however, every president after Johnson, regardless of political party, contributed to the further development of national service by creating, combining or expanding government-sponsored volunteer programs. In the 1970s, for example, President Nixon merged VISTA with the Peace Corps and the National Senior Service programs, giving rise ACTION, a super agency designed to bring under one umbrella all of the federally funded volunteer programs, that had come to be expected as normal government-sponsored initiatives by most Americans.

⁸ See <http://www.peacecorps.gov/index.cfm?shell=about.history.decades>.

Although the agency fell apart in the early eighties, individual programs continued to focus on their specific goals. For VISTA, the emphasis was “literacy, substance abuse prevention and treatment, citizen participation, and community self-help,” (The History of AmeriCorps VISTA n.d.), reflecting a new set of needs and the ideology of the times.

In the 1990s there was a resurgence of national service initiatives, first with the development of the Commission on National and Community Service in 1990 by President George H. Bush, and, three years later, with the signing of the National Community Service Trust Act by President Clinton. This legislation brought the full range of domestic community service programs under the umbrella of one central organization – the Corporation for National and Community Service. At the same time, it created AmeriCorps by incorporating two existing national service programs: VISTA and NCCC, the National Ci-

vilian Community Corps. The new agency, consisting of a network of national service programs that engaged Americans in intensive service to meet the nation’s critical needs in education, public safety, health, and the environment became known as AmeriCorps VISTA. Throughout the 1990s, AmeriCorps VISTA worked to develop new and innovated programs to respond to a new set of needs and priorities. Its volunteers helped individuals transition from welfare to work and create low-income housing cooperatives. They also offered out-of-school activities for disadvantaged youth and helped people save money through the use Individual Development Accounts (IDAs)⁹ (The History of AmeriCorps VISTA n.d.). Other agencies, including those mentioned in this essay, were also doing their share. Despite this increase in organized volunteer work, however, or perhaps because of it, the 1990s were perceived by some as marking a decline in civic engagement.

THE CRISIS AND REBIRTH OF AMERICAN VOLUNTEERISM

In his inaugural address in 1961, newly-elected President John F. Kennedy famously called on Americans

to engage in volunteer service by telling them “Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do

⁹ IDAs are savings accounts designed to help people of modest means t save towards the purchase of a lifelong asset, such as a home. Deposits made by the owners of the

accounts are supplement by matching funds provided by a variety of private and public sources.

for your country.” Thirty-some years later, Robert Putnam, first in an article published in 1995 and later in his best-seller book *Bowling Alone*, claimed that Americans were not doing nearly enough. According to Putnam (2000) by the 1990s Americans had become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors, and democratic structures. Individualism ran rampant. Whereas in the past everyday Americans had been involved in a series of interlocking networks that connected them with others in their communities, now they were isolated. Even when they still practiced sports like bowling, they did it by themselves. Echoing de Tocqueville’s explanation more than a hundred years earlier, Putnam attributed the decline in what he called *social capital*, to changes in how we work, adding that transformations in age and family structure, women’s roles, suburban life, and the availability of television and computers were also to blame.

Although Putnam was not alone in making this claim, the popularity of his book put him at the epicenter of the debated over the alleged decline in civic engagement in the U.S. at the end of the 20th century. Whether or not his assessment was accurate is apparently more difficult to ascertain that one might expect (STOLLE and HOOGHE 2005). What is certain, however, is that there has been a reported

a turnaround in American volunteerism. In 2003, Putnam himself stated, “The levels of political consciousness and engagement are substantially higher than they were a year ago in the United States. In fact, they are probably higher now than they have been in at least three decades” (PUTNAM, 2003: 14). He attributed the change to the tragedy of 9/11.

Indeed, by January of 2002, in his state of the Union Address, President George W. Bush asked all Americans to devote two years or 4,000 hours to volunteer service during their lifetimes. In the same year, he also created the USA Freedom Corps, a White House office and coordinating council designed to encourage Americans to serve their communities and country, while proposing to expand AmeriCorps by 50 percent.

These strategies, or the sense of solidarity caused by the catastrophe, seemed to produce the desired results. A year after President Bush’s call to action, the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the U.S. Department of Labor reported that both the number of volunteers and the rate of volunteerism had risen significantly within a year’s time. During the 12 months that ended in September 2003, about 63.8 million had been engaged in volunteer work, an increase of 4 million over the previous year. The volunteer rate, that is, the percentage of individ-

uals who reported having engaged in volunteer service during the previous year, also rose from 27.4% in 2002 to 28.8 in 2003 (Corporation for National and Community Service).

But keeping people motivated to serve is not an easy task. "Getting the right kind of highly skilled recruits, who typically receive only a small stipend for their services, is a key problem with national service programs," stated James Perry, an Indiana University professor of public and environmental affairs and co-author of the book *Civic Service: What Difference Does It Make?* To address this problem, in 2003, President Bush created the President's Council on Service and Civic Participation and charged it to find ways to recognize the valuable contributions volunteers make to the nation, encourage sustained commitment to helping others, and help Americans develop a life-long habit of service. To achieve this, the President's Council has "partnered with more than 80 Leadership Organizations and more than 28,000 Certifying Organizations to bestow more than 1.5 million awards to the Nation's deserving volunteers," reports the website for the President's Volunteer Service Award.

Unfortunately, the results of these strategies did not lead to significant increases in volunteering. From 2003 to 2005 the number of volunteers in-

creased slightly, while the volunteer rate remained stable, but then it both measures began to decrease slightly (Corporation for National and Community Service), even as the economy was declining and more and more families were being affected by poverty, homelessness and other social problems.

Cognizant of the need to increase social supports, and inspired perhaps by his own history of service, on April 21, 2009, President Barack Obama signed the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, a piece of legislation which reauthorizes and expands the national service programs administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service. With its \$5.7 billion of appropriated funds, this national service bill tripled the size of the Clinton-era AmeriCorps program. In an interview for National Public Radio in 2009, James Perry expressed the feelings of the nation about the future of volunteerism in America: "We have a great opportunity now. We need to spend lots of public funds, and we need to put people to work. In short, the stars are aligned for national service" (NEUMAN, 2009). A year after the bill was signed, the Corporation for National and Community Service reported.

Volunteering is up, momentum is strong, and a new vision for service is taking effect. At a time of great need,

Americans are answering President Obama's call to serve. This landmark law is making America stronger by focusing service on key national issues; by expanding opportunities to

serve; by building the capacity of individuals, nonprofits, and communities; and by encouraging innovative approaches to solving problems.

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