

# Volunteers as Aides in Literacy Programs

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Literacy Specialists face so many demands that we often cry out for “day-stretchers” to get all of the work done in the given twenty-four hours. While not a panacea for all personnel shortages, volunteers can lighten the load—if you know some techniques for working with them. In this article, the author outlines some of the motivations for volunteering, some benefits and pitfalls, and some proactive steps to make that relationship mutually beneficial.

## Introduction

For years we’ve said that translation provides The Book, while literacy provides the readers for The Book. However, fieldworkers are often stretched too thin as they strive to meet the demands of local communities, governments, and our own administration to produce trained nationals and the materials necessary to maintain a literacy program to complement the translation. Realistically, too few literacy specialists are being trained in our training schools to provide a skilled person for every program needing one. As we focus more on empowerment of local people, it is especially crucial that we look to volunteers in the local community to fulfill some of the needs. The benefits are twofold: (1) volunteers provide added manpower; and (2) they are trained in the various aspects of the literacy program as they participate as volunteers.

We often perceive “volunteers” as people who have extra time on their hands and are looking for a way to spend that time. This is not always the case. In my experience—both in a field situation and a secular setting—many volunteers are actually very busy in their careers or numerous other activities. A main difference, however, between volunteers in our home countries and those in the countries in which we are working is the economic factor. People who volunteer in many of our home countries generally have a relatively secure economic base. On the other hand, the volunteers with whom we work in our field assignments often are barely making a living on a subsistence farm or underpaid employment. In the language group I was working with, the teachers didn’t receive a salary for various reasons.<sup>1</sup> These teachers were very good and basically had the verbal (but not monetary) support of the community. Although they weren’t paid in “cash money,” being a teacher had other benefits. They were committed as far as they could be, but the necessity of making a garden or doing house repairs, or a death in the community often pulled them away from the classroom.

Although I don’t have research to support it, I suspect that volunteers carry a heavy load in many of our locations. Wherever we use volunteers there are some concerns that are general and some others that are culture specific. I will attempt to outline some of the general motivations for volunteering,

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<sup>1</sup> Later the government started helping with salaries in some locations, but this caused many problems.

some benefits and pitfalls, and some proactive steps you can take to make that relationship mutually beneficial.

## Motivations

A volunteer is someone who donates his or her time, with the understanding that they will not be paid for their services. People volunteer for many different reasons, not all of which are altruistic, nor really voluntary. For example, while there may not be a *salary* connected with the service being offered, there may still be other benefits, such as prestige, travel, or other perks, which could be considered a type of remuneration. As far as volunteers not voluntarily serving in the U.S., some schools and universities require volunteer community service as part of the coursework. Students coming under those circumstances may or may not have a helpful attitude.

Sandra Kerka outlines several different psychological motivations for volunteering.<sup>2</sup>

- **Affiliation:** The need to associate with others that includes a sense of belonging, including intimacy and membership in a family or group
- **Variety:** The need for varied experiences in life; the need to avoid boredom
- **Self-esteem:** The need to feel useful, capable, and/or important, including a sense of status either within a group or with an individual
- **Altruism:** The need for self-giving and self-sacrifice
- **Achievement:** The need to reach important goals
- **Growth:** The need to develop one's own abilities or to improve one's situation in life

In simpler terms, these motivations may be observed as a desire to meet new people, to acquire training or work experience, to become involved in (or give back to) the community, to fulfill school requirements, or to use life experiences to help others. Whatever the motivations, we need to realize that they are not static; they may change with time or circumstances. Additionally, people may have more than one underlying motivation that prompts them to offer their services.<sup>3</sup>

In many of the places where we work, however, the local people are still struggling to meet *basic* needs. Consequently, there is little energy left to consider helping in a literacy program unless they can readily see personal benefits. Many of these communities already have people who voluntarily offer assistance, such as serving in the church, preparing burial sites, helping in a neighbor's garden or in house-building. However, these services are often considered community or familial responsibilities. In the PNG village where we lived, there was a "Community Work Day" once a month where volunteers worked on various projects to improve their community. In many cases, however, when it comes to literacy, community participation may be perceived as a lower priority. Literacy, for many, is something "new" or from outsiders and in many cases has not been established as a community value or tradition. While a community-owned and operated literacy program is our goal, the reality is that attainment of such a goal may be elusive for a while. However, if the community can view volunteering with the literacy program as an opportunity for learning, there may be more participation. In fact, learning is a crucial factor in volunteers' satisfaction with their experience, and satisfied participants are more likely to remain committed.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Kerka, Sandra, 1998, ERIC Digest: 423428.

<sup>3</sup> I readily admit that these motivations are based on a Western paradigm. Perhaps they are quite different in the area in which you work. I welcome your comments on how this is observed in your work environment.

<sup>4</sup> Kerka (ibid.).

## Some benefits

One of the main benefits of involving volunteers in the literacy program is the inside connection that this affords with the community. No better advocate in the community can exist than someone who is integrally involved in the operation of the program. As volunteers work on the inside and see firsthand the benefits to the community, they will more likely have the interest of the literacy program at heart when they talk with their family or friends or at community meetings.

Volunteers can assist in numerous ways, not the least of which is allowing the teachers to attend to matters requiring their specific expertise, such as conferencing with learners or planning lessons or activities. Besides the main benefit mentioned in the previous paragraph, here are some others I can list from my experience of working with volunteers.

- Volunteers can enable teachers to better meet the specific needs of their learners.
- Volunteers can provide extra attention for shy or quieter learners.
- Volunteers can nurture the less-confident learners.
- Volunteers can keep the class going while the teacher is involved in individual conferencing.
- A volunteer can be another model for the learners.

I realize that in many different cultures (e.g., one where cooperative learning is the cultural norm), these benefits might not apply. However, I believe that others would become apparent as volunteers are integrated into the program. Each time we engage volunteers, the benefits are widespread.

In the village setting in PNG, volunteers assisted the literacy program in many ways. Most of them required some level of training or orientation. Here are some specific tasks for volunteers.

- Literacy surveys
- Material production
  - Gathering material (e.g., storytellers)
  - Editing
  - Checking the language
  - Testing the materials (text and illustrations)
  - Producing the materials
  - Illustrating the materials
- Materials distribution
- Teaching or serving as teaching assistants
- Writer's workshops—organizing, facilitating, being community liaison

Volunteers can assist the teacher in many ways. The following list of volunteer roles is rather general in nature and may apply more to a Western style classroom, but with some tweaking to fit the local cultural situation, they may be useful.

- As role models and mentors
- As group facilitators
- As monitors (during tests, etc.)

- As tutors
- In role plays
- To give individualized instruction, as needed
- To give feedback to learners
- To give encouragement

## Some pitfalls to avoid

You have an advantage over most programs if you're fortunate enough to have people in the area who are willing and committed volunteers with an acceptable motivation. Lack of monetary resources often forces literacy programs to have an all-volunteer (or mostly-volunteer) staff. On the surface this looks like a gift, but the gift may turn out to be a Pandora's box as the various actors in the literacy program begin working together. In training literacy workers—often beginning as volunteers—keep in mind some caveats to the wonders of a volunteer-run program.

**Using familiar methods.** Volunteers are often not pedagogically trained, so they may want to practice the teaching methods with which they were taught. This tendency can be lessened, however, with appropriate training. Once they have been trained and have demonstrated their abilities, they can be effectively used in a classroom setting. However, it would still be prudent to monitor that person for a while to be sure they don't revert to the old practices.<sup>5</sup>

**Time requirement.** It does take time to make the best use of a volunteer's help. It takes time to train, to orient them to the classroom procedure, to monitor, to answer questions, etc. In the production of materials, it may be necessary to explain the procedure and monitor for quality control. However, the ultimate benefit to the program will become evident as the volunteer becomes proficient at the assigned tasks.

**Skill level.** Another consideration is the skill level of the volunteer. A person may be willing to help, but have no clue as to what is involved. That person may not understand what goes into teaching someone else. For example, if someone wants to help in the class but has not fully grasped some of the principles of reading and writing themselves, this could be a detriment rather than a help. However, if that person has successfully mastered a sufficient level of literacy to help someone at a lower level, they *can* be helpful, especially in working one-on-one with struggling learners. A volunteer who has not yet completely mastered all of the principles can still be of help. If classroom assistance doesn't seem suitable, they can help in things like material production, organizing for special projects, etc.

**Social and political implications.** Choosing volunteers can have social or political implications. For example, how can a politically powerful person in the village with weak word attack skills be utilized as a volunteer? On the other hand, another highly-motivated volunteer may have little influence in the community but is a fluent reader and shows an aptitude for explaining things to others. The implications of such choices will differ from area to area. The decision must be a local one.

**Personal agenda.** Some volunteers may come with a particular agenda of their own, without a commitment to truly help you accomplish the goals of literacy. Their motivations may not be apparent during the screening process, but can be very disruptive to a program.

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<sup>5</sup> I recognize that in certain circumstances the local people may insist on the familiar methods, even though they may be pedagogically inferior.

## Orientation/training

For a volunteer to be effective in a literacy program, he or she needs to be informed and prepared for the role they will be expected to fill. They need to know the goals of the program, become familiar with the procedures (and trained, as necessary), and observe and participate (as appropriate) in the activity in which they will be involved. They also need to know what is expected of them: what specific tasks they are to perform, whom they ask for help, and any other pertinent information that will better equip them for the job.

## Recruitment/screening

The method for recruitment will vary from one location to the next. However, people who have completed the literacy program's course of instruction are often willing volunteers. They have experienced the range of struggles and emotions that come from learning a new skill and can be empathetic with beginning learners.

Here are some basic skills required of a literacy program volunteer.

- The volunteer must have adequate literacy skills to be able to help learners.
- The volunteer should be committed to giving *regular* assistance, not just when it is convenient or for their advantage.
- The volunteer should be teachable.
- The volunteer should be compliant with the teaching methodology and goals of the literacy program.
- The volunteer must be committed to the value of literacy and see their role in helping to achieve an acceptable level of literacy in the community.

If a potential volunteer's literacy skills are less than desired but their motivation to help is very high, they can assist in things like organizing for writers' workshops, material production, and various housekeeping tasks, such as distributing and collecting materials for each class. An added benefit is that they are exposed to the lessons, and may learn vicariously or decide to join as a student.

## Volunteers aren't for everyone

Be aware that some instructors may not want volunteers. For positive relationships between instructor and volunteer to develop, the teacher must first recognize and accept the need for volunteer help. If a teacher is not comfortable with another pair of eyes, ears, and hands in the classroom, there might be friction. One of the main objections I hear about using volunteers is that it takes so much time. It *does* take time to develop that positive relationship—time to give orientation or training, time to answer questions, time to monitor, time to give feedback, and more.

In placing volunteers, consider the age and gender roles, especially within the local context. Is it appropriate for women to teach men? Should a man serve as a volunteer with a single female instructor? Is it okay for a younger volunteer to assist an older student? All of these and other concerns related to these issues must be considered.

## Retention

Once a person has volunteered, the next job is to keep them. Following is a compilation of suggestions for maintaining a good relationship with a volunteer helper, gleaned from several

volunteers with many years of experience. These may need to be adjusted to the particular situation, however, because they do come from experiences in the U.S.

- Always have meaningful work for the volunteer to do. (If they are assisting in the classroom, plan for it in the lesson plan.)
- Be positive, affirming.
- Set regular or specific times the volunteer will be needed (e.g., once a week, mornings only, etc.).
- Begin and end on time. (This is important in a time-oriented society, but may have less importance in other cultures.)
- Show appreciation—in appropriate ways.
- Suit the task to the person (skill, temperament, etc.).
- If the volunteer is working in a classroom, give them contact with the students if they want it (e.g., not only “busy” work).
- Treat them as a co-worker, making them feel as if they belong, asking for opinions.
- Give clear instructions and adequate materials to do what you want them to do.
- Give feedback on how they are doing.
- Establish clear two-way communication from the start.

## Summary

A resource that is often unnoticed and under utilized is the local volunteer. Although some concerns may be often overlooked in using volunteers in a program, the benefits to the community and the program are many. At first engaging volunteers may seem time-consuming and troublesome, but, with an understanding of potential problems and proper management, the efforts will produce local members of the community who have experienced the benefits firsthand and become advocates for the program. ■