



policy and practice

Transforming the world and themselves: the learning experiences of volunteers being trained within health and social care charities in England

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This paper presents early findings from research that aims to explore the learning experiences of volunteers being trained within health and social care charities in England. An approach to training based on cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) is proposed, which conceptualises learning as a form of transformation, for both volunteers and their wider environments.

key words volunteering • charity • training • cultural historical activity theory

Introduction

This paper presents early findings from research that I am conducting, which began in September 2013 and is due to be completed in September 2016. The research aims to explore the learning of volunteers who are being trained to perform service-providing roles in health and social care charities in England in order to gain a better understanding of and insight into the learning that occurs within this context and how it can be supported.

In this paper I introduce the area of volunteer training as currently under-researched and propose the use of cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) as a framework that can contribute to insights into learning within this context. CHAT views learning as a form of individual and collective transformation and this paper argues that such transformations are possible within volunteer training. Findings from my research so far are discussed using CHAT to provide further insight into how individual and collective transformation is possible within health and social care charities based in England. The development of a shared objective, embedded within values and regulated by rules, is explained as driving forward the activity of training. Encouraging and engaging multiple voices within training activity are identified as a potential source of transformation, and also conflict. Although analysis of the research is ongoing, overall findings indicate that approaching volunteer training as a transformational process can create wider benefits for organisations, volunteers and their communities.

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Background: volunteers and training

Training has long been recognised as a contributing factor for continued volunteer motivation (Hidalgo and Moreno, 2009; Tang et al, 2010; O'Higgins, 2013) and is often compulsory for the three million people who regularly volunteer across health and social care in England (Naylor et al, 2013). Voluntary organisations within this field have been classified internationally as organisations that engage in health-related activities, and organisations that provide human and social services to a community or target population (Salamon and Anheier, 1996). This population is likely to include vulnerable groups of people who are experiencing complex and multi-layered issues. For example, Boyle et al (2007) argue that living with chronic illness and/or disability, as well as experiencing adverse life events and social circumstances, can make people vulnerable to developing mental health problems. Therefore, training is an important part of effectively preparing volunteers to support people using the services of health and social care voluntary organisations. It has even been argued that, without training, volunteers might do more harm than good (Siu and Whyte, 2009); and providing both initial and ongoing training is seen as helpful in creating an inclusive volunteer programme (Rochester et al, 2010).

A small number of studies have revealed the professional and personal development that volunteer training can provide, along with wider awareness raising (eg, Rath, 2008), which has been described as fundamental to learning and training in voluntary organisations (Akingbola et al, 2013). However, in general, studies concerning learning in volunteer training have tended to either evaluate the performance of volunteers before and after training (eg, Rayner and Marshall, 2003), or focus on informal learning through the volunteer role (eg, Duguid et al, 2013). So far, few studies have explored the learning experienced by volunteers within the actual process of training. More importantly, by focusing solely on improved competence, such studies fail to consider the context within which training takes place, or the experiences that volunteers bring, resulting in the positioning of volunteers as passive learners rather than a source of new ideas and skills (Haigh, 2007). This positioning equally ignores the possible transformations of training for volunteers and organisations.

This paper aims to address this gap in research by drawing on social theories of learning and in particular CHAT. CHAT has been widely applied to educational research, where it is recognised as offering much potential due to its focus on development and learning, and its ability to encompass the whole system of activity, including the participants and communities within it (Roth and Lee, 2007). The next section explains CHAT in further detail, particularly focusing on how the theory conceptualises learning. Early findings from my research are then discussed within this framework.

The CHAT framework

CHAT is an interdisciplinary approach to studying human learning and development in collective activity (Cole, 2010). At the heart of CHAT is the dialectical relationship between the subject and the object of activity. The object is the collective purpose of that activity, shared by all participants, or subjects. Participants may have their own goals within the activity, but it is the presence of a shared, collective motivation that drives the activity forward.

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Working towards this object can have a transformative effect on both the individual subject and the wider environment. Stetsenko (2008) draws on CHAT to explain how learning occurs when individuals act on meaningful life pursuits through collective activity and, in this process, gain knowledge about the world and themselves. In this continuous process, individuals and the world are both transformed. This approach challenges the idea of passive subjects merely reacting or adapting to their environment and positions them as active agents able to change themselves and therefore their environment. In this framework, learners are ‘activists’ committed to social change (Vianna et al, 2014). This dialectical approach and the potential for transformation also allow learning to be viewed as an ongoing and dynamic process, mediated by social and cultural factors, rather than an individual cognitive process.

CHAT conceptualises activity as being organised and performed through a division of labour, which is a useful concept for exploring learning within an organisation, specifically, in this study, a charity. How subjects are positioned in this division of labour creates a multiplicity of positions and perspectives, both dynamic and interdependent. The ‘multi-voicedness’ of subjects and their different histories, along with layers of historically accumulated artefacts and rules, drive activity forward and can also act as a source of tension and contradiction (Roth and Lee, 2007).

In summary, CHAT has particular value for shedding light on how practical processes, individual volunteers and their wider communities might be transformed through collective activity, such as training. The potential for transformation enables the conceptualisation of learning as a dynamic and ongoing process, and knowledge as ‘a dynamical phenomenon that needs to be performed and enacted, rather than stored and then retrieved from some space “in the mind”’ (Stetsenko and Arievidtch, 2004: 68). This approach challenges the idea of passive individuals merely reacting or adapting to their environment and ‘banking’ information (eg, Freire, 1970), and positions them as active agents able to change their environment and themselves. However, it is acknowledged in CHAT that aspects such as division of labour, rules and values also play a role in regulating activity and may affect the extent to which learners are able to engage, interact and enact change within their environment. Nevertheless, the ethos of volunteering potentially echoes ideas in this approach, where, for example, volunteers engage in charities as a way to make a difference locally and in wider society. CHAT is therefore applied in this study to help answer the following question: in what ways are both collective and individual transformation possible within volunteer training in health and social care charities?

Approach to the study

A multiple case study using qualitative methods allowed for the exploration of volunteer training within three charity organisations. All cases were selected through a purposive sample, containing the following features of interest to the study – all volunteers:

- performed service-providing roles;
- supported vulnerable groups of people (as defined by the Department of Health, 2000);
- participated in initial and ongoing volunteer training.

Also, all three charities were registered with the Charity Commission, engaged in health and social care-related activities and were based in North West England. Differences between the cases in terms of charity size, charity focus, volunteer numbers and volunteer roles and are shown in Table 1. Information on charity size and volunteer numbers was sourced from the Charity Commission's website and charities were categorised in size according to previous categorisations by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (Clark et al, 2012). The research is anonymised to protect the identities of participants and names used are pseudonyms.

Table 1: Case studies

Charity size	Charity focus	Approximate number of volunteers within the charity	Volunteer roles
Large: national	Stroke	4,828	Variety of activities supporting stroke survivors, including communication support, group support and ambassadors
Medium: regional	HIV	136	Variety of activities, including facilitating group spaces, peer support and events
Small: city-wide	Sexual violence	50	Helpline and counsellors

Sources: Charity Commission website; Clark et al (2012)

A multiple case study was considered appropriate for this research as it allowed an in-depth study of a number of charities, and volunteer training was examined within its real-life context. Multiple case studies are considered to produce more robust findings than single case studies; and exploring volunteer training in three different charities aimed to increase transferability of findings (Yin, 2009).

Data were collected from each case sequentially from the period May 2014 to April 2015, using observations of volunteer training sessions, focus groups and semi-structured interviews with volunteers and staff involved in delivering training. These combined qualitative methods helped to capture individual perspectives within volunteer training, as well as an understanding of the training environment. Use of multiple methods also enabled the triangulation of data and increased the trustworthiness and credibility of my account and findings (Bryman, 2012).

Discussion of the findings

As the research is still ongoing, this section presents preliminary findings. Emerging themes from data across all the cases have been identified to address the question posed earlier. The discussion of the findings, reflecting themes from CHAT, considers the collective object that drives the activity of training forward, and the possible transformations within this activity.

Training was provided to volunteers in multiple ways within each of the three cases. This included formal training sessions led by a trainer, and more informal training such as shadowing, volunteer meetings and online learning materials. All training

was based within each charity, and led mainly by staff members whose roles included some training responsibility.

In what ways are both collective and individual transformation possible within volunteer training in health and social care charities?

Working towards a shared object

Drawing on CHAT, the object that drove forward the training activity in all three cases was the societal challenge that each charity addressed – stroke, HIV and sexual violence respectively. In the interviews and focus groups, volunteers talked about being motivated to engage in training by their desire to tackle these challenges:

‘I like the idea of gaining new skills in order to improve my capabilities of spreading the word about stroke and to become better at it, in the hope that it will prevent some strokes occurring. And in the hope it will improve the life of some people who have perhaps suffered from stroke. So I want to be better at that and I will become involved in any training that will lead to that end.’ (David, stroke volunteer)

For David, as well as other volunteers, the motivation to address the charity’s cause drove forward his engagement in training. This echoes previous research, which identifies training as an activity that can link together the individual aspirations of volunteers and the mission of the organisation (Pynes, 1997, in Akingbola et al, 2013). As volunteers act on these motives they are able to transform the world and, through this process, transform themselves (Stetsenko, 2008). This collective and individual transformation was identified in this study through the confidence that volunteers expressed in feeling able to raise awareness of the charity’s cause, which they achieved both within and outside the volunteer role. Stroke volunteers felt that they were able to share their growing knowledge about healthy eating and the importance of blood pressure checks in ways that could “gently influence” family and friends. Helpline and HIV volunteers had used skills such as active listening in their workplaces and other voluntary work. As Sophia, a helpline volunteer, said in the focus group: “I mean, you couldn’t be on the helpline without the training, but it also changed the way I think about the world.... This training made me feel like it was ok to talk about sexual violence properly.” This kind of awareness raising has previously been described as integral to learning and training in voluntary organisations (Akingbola et al, 2013) and challenges the idea of passive individuals merely reacting and adapting to their environment or to practical needs within an organisation.

Gaining knowledge about the cause of the charity and being able to share and discuss this knowledge within training settings also encouraged self-reflection among volunteers, which Alex described as an essential part of training volunteers:

‘It’s quite rare in life that we have those opportunities to reflect on our own assumptions and judgements, so actually making sure there’s enough time for discussion and group reflection within the sessions and people reflecting on what they’ve learned. I think that’s a really important part of the reflection

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cycle actually, in terms of changing attitudes and challenging myths...’ (Alex, HIV volunteer trainer)

Training provided a space for volunteers to reflect on and discuss the specific cause of the charity, in a way that they felt less able to do in other areas of their lives. Referring to sexual violence, helpline volunteer Rebekah said: “You just don’t talk about it in day-to-day life normally. It’s never discussed and I think just constantly being aware of the reason that we’re learning about it.” Providing this space for reflection and discussion enabled the individual transformation of volunteers as they gained confidence and knowledge of the charity’s cause. At the same time, this growth and development of volunteers provided opportunities for collective transformation, as volunteers felt able to share and promote their knowledge and understanding more widely.

Protecting the object of training through rules

The previous subsection explained how the shared object of addressing the charity’s cause drove forward the activity of training. Such objects are embedded within values and all three charities used an initial application process, and two an interview process, to help ensure that the values of prospective volunteers were aligned with those of the charity. However, it was during the training activity that these values and objectives could be observed and discussed in detail. Michael, an HIV volunteer, explained how training provided an opportunity for volunteers to check ways that their aspirations and values aligned with the organisation:

‘So I think that comes from the training itself, it really steers you as to how invested you are within that role and whether that role’s right for you. I think part comes from having that interview but I think the training really encapsulates that, as being more comprehensive, understanding what your role entails, what is expected of you as a volunteer but also what the organisation is doing as a whole to support service users.’ (Michael, HIV volunteer)

Across the cases, challenges occurred if volunteers did not share the charity’s goals and values. For example, Alex, an HIV volunteer trainer, described a situation where a volunteer was demonstrating stigmatising attitudes towards people living with HIV within a training session:

‘I was very concerned and basically decided that we couldn’t offer them a volunteering opportunity because of the attitudes they had demonstrated within the training, and even when they were offered information to change that attitude they still were persisting with the same attitude.’ (Alex, HIV volunteer trainer)

This quote describes a tension between this volunteer’s attitude and their resistance to changing it, and the values of the charity embedded in the object of activity. The tension could only be resolved by the volunteer leaving the training session and ultimately the charity. While this situation was not necessarily transformative for the

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individual concerned, its occurrence enabled insights into the values and boundaries needed to sustain educative processes for others.

Having clear rules that protected the values of the charity, and the linked object, was also particularly important when considering other volunteers who had personal experiences of the cause that the charity addressed. As Klara, a helpline trainer, explained:

‘[C]an you imagine anything more hideous than [that being your experience, wanting to give something back and doing the training and hearing a judgement being made by another volunteer and that not being challenged? You know, it’s really really important for everybody that we do it.’ (Klara, helpline trainer)

Therefore, while it was useful for volunteers to discuss their different experiences and perspectives in what volunteers described as the “safe space” of the training room, it was also important that any views contrary to the values of the charity were clearly challenged by trainers to maintain that secure space. Across the cases, training was viewed as an ideal time to address these sorts of challenges, and through both large and small group discussions volunteers were able to develop a shared understanding of the charity, the object or priorities it addressed and the volunteering role. The importance of this space for discussion, rather than handouts to be read individually, was emphasised by Klara:

‘[W]e don’t let people just take the handouts and go and read it for themselves. That isn’t good enough; we really want the opportunity to really kind of talk through some of the judgements that people might have ... I guess we just know that if we deliver it in a group there’s a shared understanding by the end of the day and there’s a shared awareness and there’s a shared experience that people have....’ (Klara, helpline trainer)

This shared understanding was important for volunteers to learn how to perform their roles, as well as learning to be wider representatives of the charity. Training provided an opportunity not just to communicate values and key messages, but also to discuss them and reflect on them with volunteers. However, if that safe and secure training space is not sustained, possibilities for transformative learning could be lost.

Making room for multiple voices

The protective rules for training activities might imply exclusiveness; however, it is important to emphasise that volunteers within each charity came from diverse backgrounds and often had professional or personal experience of the charity’s cause. Training provided an opportunity to share these experiences with charity staff and other volunteers. These experiences became a learning resource for the training group and were seen as valuable in performing the volunteer role. David, a stroke volunteer who had never experienced a stroke himself, explained how useful it was for him to hear experiences from volunteers directly affected by stroke:

‘I use all these things [other people’s experiences] because for me that’s new knowledge, that’s good diamond knowledge that you can pass on to people and – perhaps help them to understand. That maybe I couldn’t do if I couldn’t find the right words or the right situation.’ (David, stroke volunteer)

Other ways in which the different voices of people using the charity’s services were brought into training activity included role plays, case studies and guest speakers bringing varied perspectives. Understanding the perspective of service users was essential to the volunteer role, as Glenn, a stroke volunteer, explained in the focus group: “They’ve [volunteers] actually got to go and do this, almost tasting it in their mouth. Knowing what people have gone through.” Therefore, learning in the training group was purposely mediated by the different experiences and perspectives of volunteers brought into the collective activity of training.

However, staff and some volunteers within the study recognised that, while previous experience relating to the cause of the charity could be a useful resource, it could also become a barrier to learning. For example, Gillian, a staff member involved in training stroke volunteers, emphasised the value of their personal experience in supporting stroke survivors, but also highlighted the potential tensions it could cause: “[Volunteers] have to remember that that’s their experience and that person they’re supporting could have a very different experience.” Effectively failing to recognise this would become a block on individuals’ development, and also on wider transformative potential.

In contrast, acknowledging potential experience-based barriers illustrated important transformative developments from training, as some volunteers highlighted, discussing personal experience of such tensions. For example, Alaia, an HIV volunteer, had an arts background but described it as “a complete disaster” when she tried to draw on this background in a training role-play activity. This experience highlighted to Alaia the importance of the specific context in which the training was taking place: “In that moment I realised – oh it’s not that easy as I thought! Like I should be more careful with that. That was my main challenge.”

These examples of drawing on previous experiences show that volunteers do not come into training as ‘blank slates’, as described by Cole (1996), but that they provide a dynamic and sometimes conflicting range of positions and perspectives. This ‘multi-voicedness’ within training, then, has the potential to drive learning forward, but can also create tensions that constrain opportunities for learning. Acknowledging and overcoming them, however, is a part of the transformative process.

Wider implications

This study drew on the CHAT framework in order to explore how collective and individual transformation is possible within volunteer training in health and social care charities. Findings to date suggest that reflecting more widely on the processes of volunteer training is particularly important given recent policy emphases on voluntary activities to fill gaps in services, coupled with dominant practical, skills-based approaches to volunteer training. Three main aspects of the CHAT framework were highlighted through the findings:

- a shared object for the activity of training;
- rules that protect this object and regulate the activity;
- the multiple voices that contribute to this object and participate in the activity.

This concluding discussion highlights CHAT as a valuable framework that enables deeper insights into the activity of volunteer training. The cases illustrated show that meaningful learning emerges from approaching volunteer training as a broader, developmental and transformational process with benefits for organisations and individuals that extend beyond the immediate needs of their volunteer situation. Such a transformational approach also fits with the ethos and tradition of volunteering to enact social change.

Drawing on the CHAT framework also highlights the importance of the social and historical context within which training takes place and therefore lessons from one context cannot be assumed to transfer readily to another context. However, it is argued that approaching training as a collective activity, where volunteers engage together in learning with a shared object, could offer a valuable model for exploring volunteer learning across a wider range of settings. In particular, it is vital to acknowledge that volunteers come into training with their own histories and experiences, and these multiple voices can become valuable learning resources for the training group, as well as creating a source of tension. Alongside volunteer strengths, such tensions, barriers and also protective boundaries need recognition for transformational processes to ensue.

This paper has presented findings from an ongoing study, and further analysis is required to fully synthesise findings across all three case study sites. However, even at this stage, the paper has presented valuable examples of the benefits of a more holistic approach to volunteer training, which acknowledges the importance of what learners bring both individually and collectively to enhance their own and others' learning.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [ES/J500094/1]

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