

StudentVolunteer.ie: Students, systems and stakeholders for social change

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Abstract

This practice paper charts the two-year journey to the launch of StudentVolunteer.ie, an online student civic engagement platform in Ireland. As one of the first national student volunteering platforms worldwide, StudentVolunteer.ie matches students with volunteering opportunities towards impact and change for communities. Civic education through volunteering at third level is aimed at young people and involves building their awareness on ethics, social justice, human rights, sustainability and global citizenship. Students consistently express an appetite to create social change and to be involved in their communities. The centralised StudentVolunteer.ie system and design was informed by expert stakeholders from Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and civic society organisations (CSOs). The platform aims to play a vital role in supporting students to come to terms with the social problems they encounter, guiding student reflection and learning, not just simply placing students in community, as Holdsworth and Quinn (2012) warn against the danger of volunteering reproducing an uncritical status quo that perpetuates social injustice. This paper demonstrates how StudentVolunteer.ie was realised as a social change initiative through stakeholder partnership, embedded in institutional systems and promoted to maximise student engagement.

Main text

1.1. Introduction

This practice paper charts the two-year journey to the launch of StudentVolunteer.ie, an online student civic engagement platform in Ireland. As one of the first national student volunteering platforms worldwide, StudentVolunteer.ie matches students with volunteering opportunities towards impact and change for communities. Civic education through volunteering at third level is aimed at young people and involves building their awareness on ethics, social justice, human rights, sustainability and global citizenship. Higher education students engage with local and international communities through structured campus initiatives for learning opportunities (Yarwood, 2005; Thompson, Clark, Walker & Whyatt, 2013). These activities are

often driven from the civic or social mission of higher education (Boland, 2014). Coupled with the growth of higher education internationalisation agendas, there is an increasing interest in the curricular and extra-curricular programmes that may nurture global citizenship and cultural understanding within students (Schwarz, 2015; Khoo, 2011; Cermak, et al., 2011; Evert, 2015; McBride, Lough, & Sherraden, 2012; Crossman & Clarke, 2010). Community partners working with StudentVolunteer.ie host students in all of these thematic areas plus arts and culture, exposing students to democratic, community development and the non-profit sector.

Students consistently express an appetite to create social change and to be involved in their communities. However, research indicates that a lack of time and other structural barriers to engagement and an inability to access meaningful episodic community volunteering roles (Brewis, Russell, & Holdsworth, 2010). Students are particularly vulnerable to nonparticipation, or a perceived apathy, as they often study away from home in new communities and engagement pushes them outside their immediate social and academic circles (Holdsworth & Brewis, 2014). Therefore, the StudentVolunteer.ie system functionality and design was informed by expert stakeholders from Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and civic society organisations (CSOs).

1.2. Literature Review – Critique of Student Volunteering

Hodkinson (2004) pays careful attention to power in educational research, calling on research to emanate from a rich mix of data, including researcher standpoint and prior knowledge to improve policy and practice, provide better understanding of aspects of education, and disrupt the assumptions and thinking of the powerful” (p. 24). Therefore even through extra-curricular engagement, universities have a role to play in critical transformative education (Bamber & Hankin, 2011). Tilley and Taylor (2013) through narrative research question a hidden curriculum, where they argue institutional practices support inequities that persist in schools. Even the language used in student volunteering guides and leaflets are under scrutiny as Doerr’s (2013) discourse analysis of study abroad textbooks found problematic positioning concluding, “Educators need to be aware of this danger of learning by-doing (re)producing relations of power, especially in the context of intercultural learning” (2013, p. 239).

Palacios (2010) seeks to achieve educational outcomes and improve international volunteering programmes championed at higher education. Palacios (2010) specifically calls on universities, “I invite volunteers and academics,” to engage with his designed conceptual model and move away from a helping framework towards one of intercultural learning and understanding (p. 871). Internationalisation programmes within universities that relegate to good intentions fail to engage students in the complexities of international socio-political interdependencies (Santoro, 2014; Cermak, et al., 2011). In positioning students as the helpers, with knowledge and skills to bring, they are creating paternalistic and salvationist relationships which oversimplify relationships between the global south and north (Andreotti, 2012). Bamber and Hankin (2011) argue that domestic volunteering can echo the experiences of international volunteering in producing learning encounters with stereotypes and personal values. Tiessen and Heron (2012) are also concerned with “how stereotypes of the other, whether intentionally or unintentionally, get recreated and sustained over time” (p.54).

Eyler (2011) centres ethics and power dynamics within ISL (international service learning) in a continuous discussion on developing students learning from superficial detached participation to meaningful

engagement that addresses root causes. Ultimately emerging critiques of student volunteering research seeks to turn the tide of previous research that measures the effectiveness of student help and the impact on the student (Morais & Ogden, 2011; McBride, Lough & Sherraden, 2012). Instead Palacios (2010) offers a space to critique if help should even be the framework for university internationalisation programmes, as a site of student volunteering, as it is possibly inappropriate and neo-colonial.

Holdsworth and Quinn (2012) research with UK student volunteers is in congruence, as volunteers were found to accept the status quo, reproductive volunteering, and not be able to engage with the social issues and social justice, deconstructive volunteering. Cermak, et al. (2011) argue that students return from ISTs with a sense of dissonance between their newfound desire to make social change and their lack of understanding of how to take action. In their findings Cermak, et al. (2011) explain that students indicate that their primary means for social change is to raise awareness through engagement of friends and family in the experiences abroad and other service-oriented activities rather than and in opposition to, activism.

“Our study shows that we cannot simply hope for the best from service programs to inspire students to develop change-making strategies. There are social forces at work that are imbued in the service culture that are, either intentionally or unintentionally, inhibiting the examination or experimentation with other forms of civic engagement activities.” (Cermak, et al., 2011, p. 17). Students held they had a lack of experience and opportunity with activism, with the researchers ultimately calling for activist literature and training to be a component of international service trips to mobilise these students to social justice needs (Cermak, et al., 2011).

2.1 Research Questions and Approach

With the instrumental purpose of this paper, the research questions concentrate on an investigation of the journey of StudentVolunteer.ie:

- 1- What are the factors that led to the establishment of StudentVolunteer.ie?
- 2- What lessons can be learned from the journey of StudentVolunteer.ie related to student volunteering as a social change initiative?
- 3- To what extent was stakeholder partnership and embedding Student Volunteer.ie into institutional systems contributed to a platform that can maximize student engagement?

Research that measure students’ motivations to volunteer, global citizenship levels and scales for international volunteering impacts as well as local volunteering impacts are prolific examples of the postpositivist paradigm (Morais & Ogden, 2011; McBride, Lough & Sherraden, 2012; Sax, Astin, & Avalos, 1999; Astin & Sax, 1998; Rehberg, 2005; Lough, 2011; Handy, Hustinx, Cnaan & Kang, 2009; Gage III & Thapa, 2012; Holdsworth, 2010).

Interpretivists argue that in order to best understand the world, reality, the actions of people, or the operations of institutions it is necessary to first interpret and make sense of the world from the eyes of those within that particular space and time (Hammersley, 2012). Reality is subjectively lived and to be interpreted. Through interviews and participant-observation Palacios (2010) is concerned about the

perceptions, beliefs and attitudes of those students engaged in the programme and the host community group, KOTO. Some interpretations of interpretivism are aligned with action research and have a focus on improving professional practice (Hammersley, 2005).

Qualitative research methods are exploratory and are not seeking to find generalisations (Waikayi, Fearon, Morris, & McLaughlin, 2012). The subjective view of participants within qualitative research methods is the focus and in particular their lived experience, perspective and understanding is sought (Silverman, 2006). Denscombe (2014) argues the role of social research is to interpret experiences, fully aware that the personal experience of the researcher shapes the outcome. Generalisation of findings is not the objective of these paradigms as there is a genuine belief that the world is always changing and in flux (Bettis and Gregson, 2001).

As a practice research study, the use of documentary analysis- including minutes of StudentVolunteer.ie Steering Group meetings, key papers and documentation along with the Web site design phases as it evolved were employed to gather the practice research data. It is also important to acknowledge that one of the paper authors is on the StudentVolunteer.ie Steering Group, which provides both an insider perspective and also ease of access to the documentation required to present this practice paper. The second author is external to the StudentVolunteer.ie process but internal to the Irish university system in which the platform operates. This provides some balance between more subjective and objective presentation of the findings of the data as the journey in establishing the platform is documented in this paper.

3.1 The Result: StudentVolunteer.ie

The online platform is a centralised space for information, connecting students to local and national programmes and organisations. Students can see their fellow students engaged, thereby creating a normalising effort to address social inequalities, human rights, marginalisation, environmental degradation, disability rights, and mental health campaigns. Voluntary work is an opportunity for students to realise a wide range of benefits personally and professionally. Uniquely StudentVolunteer.ie does more than match students to civic opportunities, it prompts student learning to reflect beyond the surface level of social challenges and problems. The platform aims to play a vital role in supporting students to come to terms with the social problems they encounter, guiding student reflection and learning, not just simply placing students in community, as Holdsworth and Quinn (2012) warn against the danger of volunteering reproducing an uncritical status quo that perpetuates social injustice. Students are challenged to see the social challenges in their communities and reimagine social constructs through social change through the online portfolio tools and resources. This paper demonstrates how StudentVolunteer.ie was realised as a social change initiative through stakeholder partnership, embedded in institutional systems and promoted to maximise student engagement.

Why is there a need for a distinctive student-driven platform? In Ireland, a national consortium of volunteer centres, Volunteer Ireland, offers an online platform, i-VOL, to enable registered volunteers to enter an online portal space to pursue volunteering opportunities, described as an easy process: "Click. Connect. Volunteer." (Volunteer Ireland, 2017). In fact, the i-VOL system offers potential volunteers opportunities based on key criteria: geographic location, cause (such as arts, mental health, sport, environment and conservation) and activity (such as advocacy, fundraising, board or committee work, tutoring, shop/retail, short or seasonal). While this system has proven an effective one for volunteers across Ireland,

StudentVolunteer.ie wanted to start with the student body extra-curricular activities including student unions, student societies, students sports clubs and peer mentoring programmes. Bringing students on the journey from campus based initiatives to community based projects StudentVolunteer.ie brings the centrality of social change to volunteer opportunities. By focusing on social change, this allows students the opportunity and the platform to explore the ideas of ethics, social justice, human rights, sustainability and global citizenship through reflective online spaces. Students typically begin volunteering in safe social spaces on campus and bridge wider community issues to the campus through student led programmes (Tansey, 2012). Moreover, the StudentVolunteer.ie platform was designed to offer an online reflective learning space for students. It is not simply a matching service, but also an opportunity for prospective student volunteers to consider why they want to volunteer and to help navigate their motivations to complementary volunteer opportunities.

Another key feature of the StudentVolunteer.ie site is the tailored nature of the platform for each participating institution. While it is a centralised platform, each institution can customise the information, the events, news items and even some of the branding so students can feel they are remaining as part of their own institution's community. The StudentVolunteer.ie tagline remains the same on each of the customised site: "StudentVolunteer.ie enables students to have the opportunity to: enrich your personal development and employability skills, have a fun experience, meet new people, and give back to your community." The volunteer opportunities and indeed the other items are tailored for each institution to attempt to maximize the potential of prospective student volunteers becoming regular student volunteers.

Higher Education partners with Campus Engage, the national network of all the Irish universities to promote civic and community engagement, established StudentVolunteer.ie after a long process that involved participating university staff and civic society organisations (CSO). Since its initial launch in 2016, universities and other higher education institutions across Ireland have recognised its value as an educational tool for both students, but also for faculty/staff to identify and articulate the benefit of volunteering to all those on campus. "It is the first student portal of its kind and aims to enhance students' awareness of their roles and responsibilities when it comes to fighting homelessness, social exclusion and helping members of our aging population" (Murphy 2016). It is this social justice, social change model of volunteering that both the universities and the CSOs wish to foster in student volunteers. The documentation related to the establishment of the platforms suggests that this is likely the first formal volunteering experience for many students, and it is important to ensure the experience is positive and will motivate them to continue to want to volunteer throughout their lives.

The platform aims to play a vital role in supporting students to come to terms with the social problems they encounter, guiding student reflection and learning, not just simply placing students in community, as Holdsworth and Quinn (2012) warn against the danger of volunteering reproducing an uncritical status quo that perpetuates social injustice. As volunteers new to both an organisation in which they are undertaking a placement and new to volunteering in general, it can then be challenging to question or look critically at the experience. StudentVolunteer.ie offers both critical reflection exercises to complete and also discussion boards with peers and higher education staff to work through some of the complexities they may encounter. As an added incentive to complete the reflection, students can obtain a StudentVolunteer.ie certificate, an achievement that demonstrates their participation. The StudentVolunteer.ie process, which includes a reflection, is described as:

“Questions in the reflection application represent questions that real world employers will ask in an interview. For example, what are the skills you have and demonstrate with an example of how you have used your skill?, When have you worked in a team?, etc. Not only can you draw on examples from your studies but you can also draw on examples from volunteering” (StudentVolunteer.ie, 2017).

Therefore, the data would suggest that the design of StudentVolunteer.ie is to allow students another avenue for real-life learning, while also aligning with a neo-liberal and instrumental agenda of employability. Yet further reflection questions point towards deepening students understanding of macro social issues:

“What are the aims of the activity (activities) you volunteered with? What are some of the opportunities or limits presented by these aims?

Outline the impact of the activity (activities). For example, the activity may have an impact on the university, your fellow students, local, national or international community.

Describe how your volunteering activity changed your outlook on community engagement?

When you graduate do you think you will continue to volunteer – if so, why? ”
(StudentVolunteer.ie, 2017).

Starting from the individual the learner student is prompted to consider the impact of engagement and continued participation. Alongside this employability and active citizenship agenda, the design and impetus for initiating StudentVolunteer.ie was to provide a concrete initiative that aligns with the Campus Engage Charter for Civic and Community Engagement (Campus Engage, 2014). In 2014, twenty-two higher education institutions in Ireland, signed the agreement, showing their commitment to civic education and service to the community. Section three of the Charter explicitly mentions volunteering: “We will promote civic and community engagement through a variety of community-based learning, community-based research, public scholarship and volunteering activities and seek to align these with the overall teaching, research and outreach missions of our institutions” (Ibid.). With this commitment to civic education, StudentVolunteer.ie is designed and responds to this Charter by creating a centralised, accessible and student-friendly platform to make volunteering as easy as possible.

In the first six months, StudentVolunteer.ie had over 2,700 students registered on the site and over 1,450 are active students on the system, that is, they applied for at least one volunteer position. With an embedded volunteer management role in all of the universities in Ireland, StudentVolunteer.ie provides an infrastructure that is designed for the student volunteer in mind. Students want to make a difference, be part of social change and volunteering is a positive conduit for this energy. Setting the right tone for volunteering with students in potentially their first volunteering experience will translate into active, reflective and lifelong volunteers as alumni.

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