

AESOP'S FABLES REVISITED: VOLUNTEERING THROUGH INFORMAL LIFELONG LEARNING

Maria Theodosopoulou

ASPETE- School of Pedagogical and Technological Education, Greece

E-mail: mara_th@yahoo.com

Vana Papalois

Researcher, Greece

E-mail: v.papalois@btinternet.com

Abstract

Volunteering is an expression of active citizenship, which occurs in many sectors. It is a value which should be developed from an early age through formal and informal learning. Nevertheless, not enough emphasis is given to it in educational institutes, and it is a value mostly 'learned by example'. The European Commission has designated 2011 as European Year of Volunteering aiming to raise awareness of its significance and encourage the development of facilitating environments.

Teaching of volunteering can start from an early age using short stories, easily understood by children. Aesop's fables have been educating generations since antiquity. The directness of the stories, the presentation of difficult and complex situations in allegoric way, the demonstration of thoughts, feelings and decision choices, actions and consequences grasp the interest of the reader and offer food for thoughts for a series of life lessons. Three of these fables are analysed by using the idiolectic definition (ID) tool. It is an alternative qualitative tool, which can be used in interdisciplinary research, for analysis of texts. Pinpointing key points of the tales can be used as a basis for highlighting to young people fundamental concepts and as a starting point for dialogue and reflection.

Key words: *cultural catalysts, idiolect definition, informal learning, life skills, volunteering.*

Introduction

If formal education is considered to be the tip of the iceberg of the lifelong learning process, informal learning is at its heart. Informal learning permeates every activity, even formal education, and takes many forms and happens everywhere. On the other hand, not enough research attention has been directed to it, and its validation is still difficult to establish (Livingstone, 2001). One of informal learning's features is its dynamic time and intergenerational element. It involves people of different ages, such as parents and grandparents, who help children understand and make sense of the world, as well as younger generations helping the older connect more efficiently to modern living and working conditions.

Informal learning's significance lies also in the fact that it is close knit with bonding at a continuity level. The knowledge that one acquires either through self directed learning or with the help of others, can be applied to any other aspect, educational, working place or leisure time. Therefore, it serves many purposes, such as personal fulfillment, intellectual and physical stimulation, community building, networks of support and solidarity. According to it informal adult learning is a factor which can contribute to the achievement of indicators, such as use of public libraries and museums, better relationships among people of different backgrounds, civic participation in the local area, participation in regular volunteering (DIUS, 2009).

Renewed Interest in Volunteering

At its core volunteering is an old idea **embodying the values of kindness, altruism, solidarity**. Although it is generally accepted as a value, during this decade it is brought back to the limelight. The United Nations had declared 2001 as International Year of Volunteers, while 2011 is the European Year of Volunteering. The recent economic crisis has contributed to viewing volunteering as a strategy for achieving social cohesion, reducing marginalization and updating people's skills.

As it is a concept, which still evolves, not everybody understands it the same way and, therefore, it is differently exercised in countries, regions, continents. In Europe, the Member States have their own definitions (GHK, 2010; UNV, 2009). In a survey of European policies Hal, Meijs, Steenbergen (2004) find that common grounds regarding volunteering is that it is non obligatory, unpaid, and of benefit to others. The European Volunteer Centre (2009; 2006; 2007) stresses the fact that the concept no longer implies an obligation, an activity of rich directed to poor or a patronizing attitude, but rather an expression of active citizenship that is relevant to all. However, the resisting mentalities that a volunteer has little to gain from it, or that young people can not afford it or do not have what it takes to offer, or that only older people have time to spare for it are preventing reasons of wider participation. At organizational and policy levels, possible barriers are the promotion of volunteering in a language that people is difficult to understand, people not participating in decision making, few training opportunities for volunteers, lack of strong local volunteering infrastructure and not well developed legal frameworks (Kerr et al, 2001). Therefore, it is obvious that volunteering is a concept in transition, whose infrastructure still does not fully reflect people's needs for creating programmes "owned" by the participants, suitable for their environments.

Volunteering encourages civic participation and engagement, mainly at a community level. It aligns people around common goals, fostering interaction and the development of networks and promoting change (Meier & Stutzer, 2008; Putnam, 2001; Axelrod, 2000). Young people are introduced to this concept in the subject of active citizenship along with other notions, such as rights and responsibilities, active participation, democratic behaviour, understanding social and political structures and addressing injustices (Kerins, 2010).

Publicity, press, family, friends and work contacts encourage people to sign up and emphasize the helping factor, the social responsibility or recreation opportunities that volunteering involves. Volunteers can undertake various roles, such as leaders and facilitators of groups, outreach workers, volunteer champions and digital mentors. Through these roles they deliver learning through more flexible ways, advocate learning.

An example of combining volunteering with informal learning is mentoring. Rhodes (2002) describes community-based and school-based mentoring programs of adolescents, such as the Big Brothers Big Sisters of America and states (2002:40) that "by acting as a sounding board and providing a model for effective communication, mentors can help adolescents better understand, more clearly express, and more effectively control both their positive and their negative emotions". These interventions intend to project positive role models and focus on positive development patterns and mentees' competencies, instead of focusing on preventing specific disorders (Lerner, 2000; Larson, 2000). Relevant research shows that adolescents who have adult role models, support from three or more adults have an easier transition to adulthood, better social skills, improved listening and dialogue skills, better parent-child relationship, less aggression, better academic performance (Taylor et al, 1999; Daloz, 1999; Roth et al, 1998).

Participation in volunteer programmes needs to be recognised also as a learning environment, which can provide learning opportunities for volunteers to further build their skills (CEV, 2007b). Therefore, both volunteers and volunteer centres, enterprises, business should be aware of the non financial benefits for volunteers in terms of skills development.

For example, participation in mentoring could include training of volunteers regarding the components, realistic expectations and limits of the mentoring programme, effective communication strategies, interpersonal skills, motivation. Volunteer mentors could learn how to create a positive communication climate by 'reading' situations, developing a repertoire of skills and selecting the appropriate one for the situations they deal with, develop active listening skills that enable them to assess other people's needs, identify and ways to bolster healthy self esteem or handle conflict through a better understanding of its dynamics, effective conflict resolution strategies (English, 1999; Geddes, 1995).

The Idiolect Definition Tool

Cultural catalysts are messages that withstand time and place, are repeated in different ways and are part of the socialization process. They are a society's traditional teachings of common sense that take the form of artwork, literature, tales, proverbs, talks, songs. These cultural catalysts give informal lifelong lessons, as they appeal to people of different ages, educational and cultural backgrounds and they facilitate informal learning through inviting a dialogue with the reader.

A qualitative tool for analyzing this dialogue process is Idiolect Definition (ID) (Theodosopoulou, Papalois-Theodosopoulou, 2011). Beside the definition of words explained in a dictionary, people attach their own meaning to words, giving them in this way a new perspective, which is based on their own unique individual experience. ID represents exactly this new meaning which accompanies a word and which is associated with a speaker's or a group's individual experience. This ID is clarified through a line of argument that the speaker uses and which follows the line of a virtual dialectic process, present also in monologue. That is, a person has to justify the associations he makes with a word.

Two questions guide the Idiolect Definition approach:

- a) What's New and stays with you?
- b) How does the New come to you?

Through careful reading the reader using the ID tries to answer those two questions in relation to the theme under discussion. To answer the first one the reader searches for the new meaning of a word. This new and unexpected meaning might add to the reader's knowledge, feelings or action level. The second question searches for the explicit or implicit arguments, which the speaker uses as stepping stones to clarify the ID. This argumentation might take the format of 'not A, but B, ... so...therefore', terms such as 'always', 'never', repetition, paraphrases, metaphors, personifications, rhetorical questions etc. Answers to these questions are supported by textual evidence and this in turn can be used as a basis for dialogue with other readers. The reader-analyst does not need to have any previous experience in language mechanisms, but follow the natural language mechanism.

Using Aesop's Fables to Teach Volunteering

Aesop's fables have nature as their setting, people as their main characters, as well as personifications of the inanimate world and animals. They use dialogue within the characters, but they also intend to start a dialogue with the reader or listener, as the interactions between the characters of a fable guide to life lessons, which, in turn, are the beginning for self reflection. Three of Aesop's fables are analysed using the research tool of Idiolect Definition, to serve as a starting point for informal teaching about the different notions of volunteering.

The Lion and the Mouse

Once when a Lion was asleep a little Mouse began running up and down upon him; this soon

wakened the Lion, who placed his huge paw upon him, and opened his big jaws to swallow him. "Pardon, O King," cried the little Mouse; "forgive me this time, I shall never forget it: who knows but what I may be able to do you a turn some of these days?" the Lion was so tickled at the idea of the Mouse being able to help him, that he lifted up his paw and let him go. Some time after the Lion was caught in a trap, and the hunters, who desired to carry him alive to the King, tied him to a tree while they went in search of a wagon to carry him on. Just then the little Mouse happened to pass by, and seeing the sad plight in which the Lion was, went up to him and soon gnawed away the ropes that bound the King of the Beasts. "Was I not right?" said the little Mouse.

Little friends may prove great friends

In this fable volunteering takes the shape of solidarity. The question which puzzles and intrigues the Lion –and the reader- is "who knows but what I may be able to do you a turn?". It is a question, which approaches life as a cycle, in which we all have our highs and lows, and we all need each others' help at some point. The good that you do, returns to you. In this fable volunteering to help is not only a promise made to ourselves and others, when we are in a difficult situation. The important thing is to remember your own difficult times and how others helped you overcome these and do your part for others, when they are in need. The Mouse did not make an empty promise, in order to get rid of the danger in front of him. The promise came from the firm belief that nobody is immune to difficulties or completely self sufficient.

The two characters of the tale bear no similar characteristics. In fact, they may even have many differences. Lion shares nothing in common with the mouse. The one is the king of the animals, is big, fierce, strong, the hunter, while the other is small, usually the prey. The mouse seems like a nuisance and a co-existence of the two seems not possible, or even, not pleasant from the side of the strongest. Nevertheless, each one offers according to his abilities and should be aware of what he has to offer by knowing his skills, acknowledging his assets and making the most out of them. It shows that offering does not have only one dimension. Its many faces mean that there is room for everybody to find out how he can be valuable to a cause. Therefore, it is a matter that concerns us all and not only those who can afford more.

Androcles

A slave named Androcles once escaped from his master and fled to the forest. As he was wandering about there he came upon a Lion lying down moaning and groaning. At first he turned to flee, but finding that the Lion did not pursue him, he turned back and went up to him. As he came near, the Lion put out his paw, which was all swollen and bleeding, and Androcles found that a huge thorn had got into it, and was causing all the pain. He pulled out the thorn and bound up the paw of the Lion, who was soon able to rise and lick the hand of Androcles like a dog. Then the Lion took Androcles to his cave, and every day used to bring him meat from which to live. But shortly afterwards both Androcles and the Lion were captured, and the slave was sentenced to be thrown to the Lion, after the latter had been kept without food for several days. The Emperor and all his Court came to see the spectacle, and Androcles was led out into the middle of the arena. Soon the Lion was let loose from his den, and rushed bounding and roaring towards his victim. But as soon as he came near to Androcles he recognised his friend, and fawned upon him, and licked his hands like a friendly dog. The Emperor, surprised at this, summoned Androcles to him, who told him the whole story. Whereupon the slave was pardoned and freed, and the Lion let loose to his native forest.

Gratitude is the sign of noble souls.

The response to fear is the new and unexpected element of this fable. Androcles is afraid of the lion, when he first sees him. It is the fear of the unknown or of stereotypes that often holds

people from approaching and helping others. Androcles, however, tested his fear by observing better the situation and the behaviour of the object of his fear, the lion. He volunteered to help somebody in need, not expecting an immediate reward. Even his personal difficulties, having just escaped away from his master, did not stand in the way for him giving a helping hand.

It means that solidarity is not an 'on-off' situation. We do not help others only during times which are convenient to us. Being eager to help others comes from an inner will and an understanding that we all have needs and as important our needs seem to us, just as important others feel their needs. It shows how we all need to find room in our hearts and our busy schedules to care for others, even if that means we might need to make some adjustments in our way of living.

Aesop makes livelier this notion by reversing the situation in the second half of the fable. It shows the mighty and hungry lion moving beyond the instinct of survival to feeling close to somebody else. Aesop, similarly to the contemporary notion of volunteering, approaches solidarity not as a duty, which may be practiced for a limited amount of time. It focuses instead, on the bond between people, the sacrifice -whether of time or needs- and the inner satisfaction.

The Fox and the Mosquitoes

A Fox after crossing a river got its tail entangled in a bush, and could not move. A number of Mosquitoes seeing its plight settled upon it and enjoyed a good meal undisturbed by its tail. A hedgehog strolling by took pity upon the Fox and went up to him: "You are in a bad way, neighbour", said the hedgehog; "shall I relieve you by driving off those Mosquitoes who are sucking your blood?"

"Thank you, Master Hedgehog", said the Fox, "but I would rather not".

"Why, how is that?" asked the hedgehog.

"Well, you see," was the answer, "these Mosquitoes have had their fill; if you drive these away, others will come with fresh appetite and bleed me to death."

In the third tale the reader is surprised by the unexpected refusal of the Fox to accept the help which is offered. The offer of the Hedgehog was kind and came out of pity. Still, it was an offer that could offer relief to the Fox. Aesop wants to make a distinction between temporary and help that is of value. It shows that the obvious solution is not always the best solution and that an efficient helping way does not come from above. Volunteering that is based only on good will is not adequate. Its value comes from taking into consideration the real needs of the target group, and giving them the opportunity to be involved in decision making.

Discussion

Informal learning is a key aspect for transmitting life lessons and cultivating enabling attitudes, such as volunteering. Literature texts are cultural catalysts, which can be approached not only as recreational material, but also as a vault for raising awareness, clarifying concepts, teaching complex notions to younger generations and building life skills. Old texts are seen through modern eyes to follow components that endure through time. In this perspective informal learning does not focus only on how values are portrayed, but also on how they can be transferred in different settings. The stories in Aesop's fables are a good starting point as they encourage people to move beyond stereotypes and see behind appearances into recognising the connections of fundamental facts with real life situations and promote self reflection.

Aesop's fables have been analysed using the Idiolect Definition tool to show how the text can give the opportunity to discuss and explain in simple language modern notions of volunteering and promoting self reflection. Idiolect definition tool offers any reader a two-step

map for analysing texts and highlighting key points and using them either for self directed learning or for teaching informally others. At a parallel and supplementary way to formal education, informal learning could take place in a more conscious way and more research could be targeted at studying the different ways a concept is approached by formal and informal learning.

Conclusions

Aristotle stated that happiness is tied to the successful performance of moral duties (Meier & Stutzer, 2008), and contemporary research has also associated positive mood states with helping behaviour (Anik et al, 2009; Wang & Graddy, 2008; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). Volunteering has a personal, a community and a social impact. It brings joy, it is challenging, it opens the person to new perspectives, it brings out the intrinsic motivation, it develops emotional intelligence and it is an overall learning experience. People learn about it usually through success stories or promoting campaigns and events, which capture the attention of the public. Still, more attention could be paid to volunteering in the perspective of informal lifelong learning through an intergenerational and intercultural focus. This approach brings forward the richness of social capital through time and culture regarding volunteering by focusing not on the individual, but on a collaborative basis of interaction, supporting exchange of ideas between people and cultures and viewing cultural heritage as a learning thesaurus.

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Maria Theodosopoulou	Dr, Researcher, ASPETE- School of Pedagogical and Technological Education, 30 Kerkyras Street, Athens, Greece. E-mail: mara_th@yahoo.com
Vana Papalois	Ph.D., Post Doc, Researcher, Greece. E-mail: v.papalois@btinternet.com