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Shibao Guo

University of Calgary, Canada

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Recommended Citation

Guo, Shibao (2007). "Immigrants as Active Citizens: Learning in Social Action," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2007/papers/45>

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Immigrants as Active Citizens: Learning in Social Action

Shibao Guo
University of Calgary, Canada

Abstract: Despite the fact that immigration has played an important role in transforming Canada into an ethno-culturally diverse and economically prosperous nation, immigrants themselves are often criticized as passive citizens. This study attempts to deconstruct this myth by investigating the volunteering experience of Chinese immigrants in Vancouver.

Introduction

Canada is an immigrant society. Although immigration has played an important role in transforming Canada into an ethno-culturally diverse and economically prosperous nation, immigrants themselves are often criticized as passive citizens. Some critics argue that immigrants do not participate in civic life as actively as native-born Canadians. Some go even further, stating that immigrants only take, but do not give. This study aims to deconstruct this myth by investigating: (1) the volunteering experience of Chinese immigrants in Vancouver, and (2) the learning that occurs through volunteering. It examines the relationship between volunteer work, informal learning, and social action. It is hoped that findings will advance our extant knowledge about informal learning and participation of immigrants as active citizens.

Theoretical Framework

This study was informed by two theoretical constructs: (i) adult education for social change, and (ii) learning in social action. The role of adult education for social change and community development has been addressed by a number of adult educators (Lindeman, 1926; Freire, 1970; Welton, 1995; Foley, 1999; Cunningham, 2000). As early as in the 1920s, Lindeman deliberated on the social role of adult education (Brookfield, 1987). He viewed adult education as an agency of social progress and the most reliable instrument for social actionists. An early Canadian example of community development was the Antigonish Movement led by Moses Coady and Jimmy Tompkins (Welton, 2001). After Lindeman and Coady, critical adult educators such as Freire (1970) and Cunningham (2001) further advanced the role of adult education for social transformation and emancipatory learning. Freire (1970) argues that adult education is an important tool to raise people's critical consciousness through action and cultural reflection, or praxis. Cunningham (2000) regards social movements and social learning as a major source of alternative knowledge production. Community development is an important site where such learning can take place. Furthermore, as Foley (1999) points out, emancipatory learning is largely informal and often incidental, "it is tacit, embedded in action and is often not recognised as learning" (p. 3).

Research shows that most Canadian adults are spending much more time in informal learning activities on their own than in non-formal education courses (Livingstone, 1999). However, they are often not recognized. Hence, they are a hidden iceberg. According to Livingstone, informal learning can be divided into explicit informal learning which is intentional and tacit learning which occurs through everyday

activities. Volunteering has been identified by many researchers as a powerful source of informal learning (Elsdon, 1995; Livingstone, 1999; Schugurensky & Mündel, 2005). Livingstone (1999) maintains that more informal learning occurs in community based volunteer work than it does in paid work situations. People volunteer for a range of reasons, from altruism to learning new skills for career advancement. According to Schugurensky and Mündel (2005), the informal learning that occurred through volunteering falls into five categories: instrumental skills, process skills, factual knowledge on particular issues, dispositional learning, and political and civic learning. Furthermore, Elsdon (1995) maintains that the most important and valuable learning that occurred was the unpremeditated learning, including confidence, empowerment, making constructive relationships, organizational learning, ability and willingness to shoulder responsibility. He further states that “strong and effective voluntary organizations make for a fuller and more participative democracy in local public life” (p.79) because they are about individual learning and change, about empowerment to fulfill one’s potential, about mutual caring, and about active citizenship at every level. Likewise, Foley (1999) maintains that the most significant and empowering informal learning occurs through people’s experience in their emancipatory struggle or social action.

Research Design

This study adopted semi-structured interviews which allowed me to talk to immigrants in detail about their motivations for volunteering, the range of activities volunteers were involved in, the various forms of learning achieved, and the rewards of volunteering. The reason for choosing SUCCESS (United Chinese Community Enrichment Services Society) in Vancouver as a research site has two folds: 1) This organization was founded in 1973 as a result of the failure of government agencies and mainstream organizations to provide accessible social services for newly-arrived Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong. It provides a wide range of programs and services for immigrants as well as advocates on behalf of immigrants. In particular, it has created a home and a community to which immigrants felt they belonged. Currently it has a membership of 20,000 and a base of 9,000 volunteers. The large pool of volunteers provided a rich source of participants for this project. 2) As a researcher, my past affiliation with SUCCESS as a member and my involvement as a volunteer will help me understand volunteers’ experience in depth.

All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. I analyzed my data as I went along in order to adjust my interview strategies, and to discover important persons and events which might provide new lead. For the analysis of the research, a four-stage process was developed: (i) identifying main points, (ii) searching for salient themes and recurring patterns, (iii) grouping common themes and patterns into related categories, and (iv) comparing all major categories with reference to the major theories in the field to form new perspectives. The four-stage process assured that there was frequent interplay between the data and theory.

Research Findings and Discussion

A total of thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted for this study, including two board members, five administrative staff, and twenty-three volunteers. A preliminary analysis of the data reveals that SUCCESS volunteers came from different walks of life who had volunteered for SUCCESS from two months to thirty years. They

performed a number of activities, including office work, organizing special events and activities, teaching a course, and providing leadership. Volunteers participated for a variety of reasons, from altruism to learning new skills. Most of the participants shared common experience as immigrants to Canada and they encountered similar barriers in their process of settlement and adaptation. It is these exact barriers and struggles that motivated immigrants to take collective actions in providing mutual support. Hence, volunteering becomes an important site for social action.

Motivations to Volunteer

Research shows that new immigrants to Canada face multifaceted barriers in the process of settlement and adaptation. On a daily basis, in navigating the complex path that citizenship requires, they face difficulties with cultural adjustment, language, lack of information, isolation, lack of family support, and lack of social networks. On a systemic basis, they encounter barriers in unemployment and underemployment, downward social mobility, systemic racism, lack of recognition of foreign credentials, and perceived lack of Canadian work experience (Guo, 2005; Guo & DeVoretz, 2006). Research also shows that in overcoming such barriers, immigrants often turn inwards to their own ethnic communities for support (Ley et al. 1994). This led to the founding of SUCCESS in 1973 in response to the failure of government agencies and mainstream organizations to provide accessible social services for newly-arrived Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong. It is also for the same reason that many immigrants turned to volunteering for mutual support.

First, our conversations with Chinese volunteers confirmed the above findings about barriers facing immigrants. Many of them discussed their daily struggle in accessing information and services in housing, education, health care, and social services. In particular, many of my respondents highlighted issues related to employment, which was seen by one of the respondents as “the biggest problem for new immigrants.” She further commented:

“That’s the first thing to solve. ...in their own country, maybe they are a doctor or a nurse or an accountant. But after they come to Canada and they are not recognized for it. And they have to pass the exam... Even they pass the exam and they have no local experience and they are not recognized. And they can’t find a job actually. So I think it’s the big problem” (Annette).

This issue mentioned above was referred to as the denigration and devaluation of immigrants’ foreign credentials and prior work experience. Very often immigrant professionals are caught up in a “double jeopardy.” In the first place, non-recognition of foreign credentials prevents them from accessing professional jobs in Canada and acquiring Canadian work experience, which subsequently makes it difficult for them to be qualified for professional jobs.

Employment discrimination has had devastating impact on the self-esteem of Chinese immigrants in Vancouver. Some of them felt “useless;” many lost their self-esteem. One immigrant noted: “Usually in China we have a job... We feel useful ...useful to society. ...and we come here and ...we saw that we are useless, yeah. You know ...the most difficult part is I lost my confidence, yeah” (David).

Most volunteers at SUCCESS share common experience as immigrants, which prompted them to take collective actions in overcoming barriers in a new society. They wanted to help others who were in the same difficult situation they had been when they

first arrived. One volunteer commented: “Because of my own experience as somebody who moved to Vancouver, to Canada and I thought that way I can help and share” (Maggie). Another said: “it’s nice to help people because when we first came here... other people also help us ...so when we have a chance we can, we can help others” (Chester). Many who had used SUCCESS’s services as newcomers wanted to “give back” specifically to the organization. One volunteer described a very close and committed relationship to SUCCESS, where he felt a responsibility to serve the organization in whatever way was needed – he referred to himself as a “life member”. In fact, mutual help was one of the founding philosophies of the organization, as indicated in its Chinese name “Overseas Chinese Mutual Help Society.”

Another key motivation to volunteer was to learn new skills, either for career preparation or for personal growth, and to apply skills they had previously learned. A few stated that they decided to volunteer specifically to improve their English language skills. Many volunteers expressed that through volunteering with SUCCESS they built a social network in which they could speak their own language and interact with people from their own community. Some said that volunteering gave them a sense of belonging and ownership within their community.

Some stated that volunteers gained a sense of purpose and achievement through volunteering, which helped especially new immigrants to rebuild the self-esteem they had lost due to a feeling of uselessness. Building self-esteem was also a reason that housewives and seniors got involved. Some volunteers, all of whom women, said that volunteering enabled them to get out of the house for part of the day but still being able to fulfill their other roles such as caregiver to children or taking care of the house. Some students volunteered to fill a service requirement at school, but many volunteered for more than the required hours because they enjoyed helping or gained valuable skills.

Benefits of Volunteering

Volunteers explained that being involved at SUCCESS improved their interpersonal skills, giving them better public speaking skills and better communication skills in general. For many, “Volunteerism is a learning process... learning through experience” (David). One hotline volunteer said that he had developed his listening skills, and was better at having compassion, empathy and understanding for the lives of others. Many participants felt that volunteering helped them to improve their English language skills. In addition, some volunteers learned basic Cantonese or Mandarin. One volunteer found he is “more fluent in English and more articulate” (Joseph). Both staff and volunteers spoke of leadership development as a key benefit, especially for youth. One participant highlighted the importance of team work.

A very common benefit of volunteering was how it helped people in their search for a job or in their career development. Volunteering at SUCCESS helped them gain references as well as work experience. Work experience included getting a sense of the local work environment, as well as establishing the volunteer’s value in contributing to the community. One volunteer stated that his work at SUCCESS had increased his work speed and efficiency. Some volunteers found jobs with the Public Service Commission because of their experience working in a community organization. A few volunteers noted that through being at SUCCESS they had access to employment listings and job leads. One made a special note about applying existing knowledge and skills useful for

volunteer role, and another stated that volunteering helped to keep her skills, especially computer skills, current. References were especially important for new immigrants, since as one participant stated, “in the beginning no one trust us” (David). Many appreciated the trust that SUCCESS put in their ability to assist the organization.

Another key benefit of volunteering was the growth of their support network that is especially important for new immigrants. Through volunteering, many enlarged their social circles and made new friends, as one participant put it, “I meet people. Make friends, yeah. I’m able to, not only to meet the people but have relationships with them. This one is really important” (Joseph W.). The theme of SUCCESS being like a family was mentioned by many participants. One volunteer emphasized how everyone at SUCCESS is warm and friendly, and how it feels like a family to her, as she stated “I’m very happy to be here, to be the volunteer, yeah, because ...they treat you like a family” (Hilda). The sense of being part of a community and of feeling useful to society was especially important to those who were unemployed and had experienced a loss of self-esteem and self-confidence on their arrival in Canada. One interviewee stated, after moving to Vancouver “...life has changed to another style. I just feel depressed, upset. Now I feel better. So I really get, benefit from that. Ah, maybe I just feel...I’m useful again. Not useless as I feel before. Is that funny?” (Catherine)

Many volunteers spoke of the satisfaction of helping others and seeing them happy, or contributing to the community. Here is a sample of what they said: “I’m so happy to see that the people they are smiling coming oh thank you so much I get a job now.” (Sandy). “I go to SUCCESS once a week to do the volunteer works. I, I feel warm, I feel, I feel the society still acknowledge me. That’s, that’s the most, most of benefit I get.” (Chester) “And you know, to stand up there on the stage to address like ten thousand people and you know, I think I’ve done, SUCCESS has done something right.” (Raymond) “...something to look forward to each week. And the second thing is, well the students are very happy to follow me” (William). Another said that one of the best things about volunteering is how well volunteers are treated and how their contributions are recognized. Someone referred volunteering as “a win, win situation” (Raymond) for immigrants individually and for SUCCESS as an organization.

Social Contributions

All staff and board members who were interviewed spoke highly of the social contributions of volunteers. They were seen as an integral part of the SUCCESS team and “the most important part of SUCCESS.” Volunteers played an instrumental role in the daily operation of the organization. They provided the manpower for many of the labour intensive tasks such as fundraising and organizing large events, but also provided a human side of the organization to clients. They were able to spend time with clients that staff may not have the time to. Over the years, with the help of volunteers, SUCCESS has been able to provide services to many more clients than it would have otherwise, particularly to those who needed the most. One staff noted “they [volunteers] contribute their time, their professionalism, their knowledge” (Kenny), and SUCCESS can not exist with the support of volunteers. Another staff commented that their actions brought “a lot of encouragement and empowerment” (Shirley).

Volunteers also helped create a stronger community and a home where immigrants felt they belonged. Through community involvement the sense of belonging

is stronger, as one board member noted “that sense of belonging is a very important part of it” (Maggie). Because SUCCESS also referred volunteers to many other outside organizations, volunteers actually helped SUCCESS reach out to other communities by sitting on committees or participating in certain activities, “So it’s providing some kind of a linkage with the larger community and building bridges that way” (Lilian).

Volunteers, however, should not be seen as cheap labour, it is important that volunteers themselves be seen as members of the community who benefit from the organization. It is also important for SUCCESS to create space and build facilities to make sure that volunteers gain skills and knowledge in their volunteer roles that will be useful to them in other areas of their lives, and to provide them the opportunity to gain a sense of satisfaction from their contributions.

According to Maggie Ip, founding Chair of SUCCESS, from the inception of SUCCESS volunteer development was part of the original mutual-help philosophy. People who have been helped by the organization and have used the programs and services can then come back and contribute their time to helping other newer immigrants, thereby contributing to the cycle of mutual and ongoing support, building a sense of community, and building bridges with other communities and external organizations.

Implications and Conclusion

This study was set out to examine the learning dimension of the volunteer experience of Chinese immigrants in Vancouver. It reveals that volunteering is a powerful source of informal learning. It helped immigrants navigate the complex paths that citizenship requires. Through volunteering, immigrants learned new skills and knowledge, gained Canadian work experience, and enlarged their social network. Furthermore, volunteers played an instrumental role in creating a stronger community where immigrants felt belong. Their common experience as immigrants motivated them to take collective actions and mutual support in overcoming barriers concerning their settlement and adaptation in a new society. The study advanced our extant knowledge about the participation of immigrants as active citizens of our society and how they fulfilled their responsibilities as new citizens. It sheds light on the central role that immigrant community organizations have played in providing accessible community-based adult education for immigrants. It shows that community based organizations like SUCCESS, are important sites for emancipatory learning and social actions.

Acknowledgements: The author wishes to thank Zenobia Jamal at the University of Alberta for her capable research assistance. The financial support of SSHRC is also noted with appreciation.

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