

Editorial

Not Without Value

Two years ago I wrote an editorial concerning the recent commercialization of education (Buck, 2000). Several readers responded. Most indicated that the editorial "resonated" with them, as it typified what was happening in many places. Indeed, a recent article by the popular writer Kohn (2002) echoes many of the points I made. Two readers, however, stated that my editorial, although good food for thought, was largely a lamentation against change, as the "new reality" of a globalized, market-type system for education was here to stay. The upshot was that people like me should quit trying to fight it and just get used to this sort of change.

During the interval between receiving those communications and writing this editorial, many colleagues both in the university and in schools have informed me that there seems to be a drastic decline in volunteerism among educators. Besides an apparent reluctance to volunteer for extracurricular activities such as organizing concerts or coaching sports teams, membership and participation in educational societies is also in general decline. An international group of which I have been a member for over 20 years reports that several chapters throughout the world have closed during the last two years because of low membership. It is reported further that this trend not only continues, but also appears to be on the increase. Is the decline of volunteerism in education something to be concerned about, or is it yet another manifestation of the "new reality"?

When I asked this question of particular university and school administrators, the usual response was along the lines of, "What do you mean by a decline? We have a flourishing volunteer teaching program staffed by preservice teachers." On examination, however, it is clear that these so-called volunteer programs are designed to coerce preservice teachers into participating. Although nothing is written stating that individuals must participate, failure to "volunteer" will mean that those individuals will not receive letters for their employment portfolios, the implication being that nonparticipants will be impaired in their quest for relevant employment. This is a subtle, yet clear implementation of coercion in the form of a negative reinforcer: escaping from something noxious by engaging in the desired activity. Fleischauer and Fleischauer (1994) describe a similar program in the United States where preservice teachers receive college credit for "volunteering" at least 60 hours of time tutoring. Again there is confusion between *volunteering*, where one undertakes a service of his or her own free will, and *coercion*, where one is compelled to undertake a task (Webster's, 1983).

As far as educational societies are concerned, when I ask individuals why they ceased being members or why they will not become members, the responses usually embody the theme of "community service of this sort does not help promotion or tenure, as the only activities that count are research, teaching, and grants," or "with all the other expenses in my life, I can't afford to add

another." In other words, to some individuals there appears to be no appreciation for engaging in volunteer work related to education, because there does not appear to be anything of value to the potential volunteer. To be fair, the lack of motivation to volunteer is not because substantial rewards are lacking. Rather, the motivation not to volunteer occurs in the form of escape from a "noxious stimulus," a criticism in their annual review. One can almost hear the following: "So you have volunteered some of your time to serve in an educational society. That's fine, but you should have more refereed publications, and you know that your teaching could improve because your student evaluations are not all perfect. If you want tenure/promotion/a merit increment, then you had better concentrate on what this institution values." Although few administrators would be likely to be so blunt, the message is clearly understood even if it is stated diplomatically. In education, volunteering is often poorly valued, and it is taken for granted (Butler & Grier, 2000).

Kohn (1999), who assails the trend to mercantilism in education, has also spoken out against the use of "rewards" as motivators. Kohn contends that they are actually bribes, and that their use will lead to expectation of subsequent bribes. His position is disputed by Cameron and Pierce (1996), and the debate continues the lively argument between the behavioristic view that motivation is largely a function of environmental contingencies, and the varieties of cognitivism and humanism that maintain that motivation is a function of internal processes of the individual (Cameron, 2001; Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001). Although the academic discussion about the merits of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is undoubtedly healthy, does it address the root cause of the decline in volunteering in education or merely the symptoms?

Whether we approve of "rewards" or not, most individuals in Western society expect at least some sort of positive recognition or some manifestation of appreciation for work done, whether it is paid for or volunteered. Most of us can recall our parents and other caregivers informing us that unless we said thank you when something was provided to us or done for us, then at the very least it was unlikely that such kindness would be repeated.

To be sure, most volunteers do not contribute their time and effort because of the prospect of praise, a nice certificate or plaque, or a free meal. These tokens are rarely perceived as being worthwhile motivators by most adults. The motivation to volunteer is usually intrinsic. Nonetheless, some form of acknowledgment of services rendered does indicate to individuals that their efforts are appreciated. This simple social convention, learned at an early age, is often forgotten in the adult world. When volunteers are either taken for granted or are recognized only patronizingly, the result is often a withdrawal of service. For example, a colleague who teaches in a junior high school coached wrestling and karate on a volunteer basis for many years. The only expectation he had was that the administration would acknowledge his contribution orally at the awards ceremony at the end of each school year. This situation changed with the arrival of a new school administration. At the end of the school year, each teacher received a letter informing him or her of the number of nominal hours they had volunteered. The last sentence of the letter stated that if they were to increase their number of volunteer hours by at least

a minimum amount next year, then they would be eligible for one free ticket to a banquet put on by the trustees. The ticket would go to the staff member with the greatest number of volunteer hours. The others would either have to pay for their tickets or not attend the banquet.

The letter was interpreted by my colleague, and by most teachers on his staff, as a criticism as well as an insult. In this case it was not the principle of "reward" or recognition that was disputed, but the way it was offered and the lack of general appreciation. My colleague's response, as well as those of many of his fellow staff members, was to curtail his volunteering. This led to the administration resurrecting a negative reinforcer, namely, that anyone not volunteering would receive a criticism on his or her next evaluation. This "motivator" did not result in my colleague increasing his volunteer hours at school. The misuse of rewards did not ruin his desire to volunteer, however. He now volunteers his time coaching the same sports, but in nonprofit sports clubs that are not associated with his school. The only "reward" he desires and receives is his name listed by the door as one of the instructors.

Another way to discourage volunteers is either to exploit them or to use them to exploit others. While gathering research on school architecture in western Canada, I discovered an enormous collection of school building plans in a large archive in Alberta. The collection was not catalogued, and the archive offered to let me peruse the collection if I would volunteer to do the cataloguing. I readily agreed to do this not only because I would be gathering desired research material, but also because I believed that I would be helping future researchers in their quests for information. The cataloguing took much more time than I had anticipated and extended beyond my data-gathering. Yet I persevered until one day, in an indiscreet moment, one of the managers said that if there were more volunteers like me, then the archives could save even more money by not having to hire two people. It was then stated that the archive already saved a considerable sum by not hiring one person because of my volunteering. I was enraged by this admission, as I felt deceived and used as a means of denying someone a livelihood. After expressing my disgust and contempt, I immediately ceased volunteering. Not long after, however, I received an unpleasant letter that criticized my lack of "work ethic" and contained a statement that I had better finish my "job." Through this peculiar form of expression, the letter conveyed the message that my work was valuable, yet the only way that the sentiment was expressed was through a crude attempt to motivate me with threats of consequences should I not continue. Nowhere was it stated that the work I had done had made a contribution or was appreciated.

These two examples are neither unique nor rare. Such incidents do not mean that elaborate token systems and rewards are required for educational volunteerism. It is apparent, however, that if the trend of declining volunteering is to be reversed, then administrators must be clear on the difference between volunteering and coercion under the guise of volunteering. Moreover, although Kohn (1999) makes the point that rewards are poor motivators, this does not mean that simple recognition and appreciation for volunteering should be dispensed with. A genuine and sensible use of appreciation is essen-

tial (Tingley, 2001; Wu & Carter, 2001)—that is, if educators and educational institutions value volunteerism.

If indeed coercion, exploitation, and being taken for granted are a part of the “new reality” in education, then the mercantilism will reap what it sows. Instead of benefiting from willing volunteers, services will end up having to be paid for, either through contractual arrangements with staff or as a pay-for-service system. In the final analysis it is critical that an underlying principle of human nature be kept in mind: that no one wishes to be considered without value.

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