

2015 FYP FORUM HIGHLIGHTS

1st Prize

Volunteer Work – Who Does It Really Help?

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In this city, most, if not all, students have experiences in volunteer work. Are the youngsters in our city very altruistic and moral? Does volunteer work by the students really help the service recipients, or the student volunteers themselves? These were the questions in my mind when I was working on my final year project.

I conducted participant observation by joining various volunteer work as a student volunteer myself. I did not focus on any particular type of volunteer work because I did not want to limit my observation; rather, I wanted to explore volunteer work of different nature and in different settings.



Salina and Susan (also an undergraduate student of our Department) participating in volunteer work

I began with the motivations of student volunteers. Multiple motivations were found. There were three aspects: the altruistic and value-based motives, the utilitarian motives and the social motives. I would like to highlight that student volunteers tended to internalize a mission associated with their identity as university students, elites, and privileged group in society, when they were helping in volunteer work. Meanwhile, it was wrong to assume that university students volunteered for resume building, since the competitive environment in Hong Kong required career-centered experiences like internship or overseas exchange for resume building.

The volunteering “culture” among university students was also discussed. It was found that volunteer work was record and recognition oriented. Student volunteers were keen in keeping records through taking photos with service recipients and collecting the certificates issued by voluntary organizations. Also, volunteer work had become a form of serious leisure in contrast to ordinary entertainment like singing karaoke or watching movies. The project-based approach was very popular

among university student volunteers, and there was a fascination with non-local volunteer work. According to these observations, I proposed a hierarchy of volunteer work in the eyes of university students. At the bottom of the hierarchy was the one-off or sporadic local volunteer work which was treated as serious form of leisure. At the top was the non-local volunteer project.

It was not difficult to come to the conclusion that volunteer work indeed helped the student volunteers more

than the service recipients. The altruistic aura was a myth. More than that, volunteer work meant a lot more. It was volunteers' response to an optimistic future. Being the privileged group, volunteer work was where university students could be altruistic and relieve their sense of guilt. Meanwhile, it was also their response to the pessimistic future. When they graduated and entered society, reality was what discouraged dreams and ideals. University life was the time when these youngsters could express and fulfil their dreams of making the world a better place through volunteer work.



Salina and Connie (also an undergraduate student of our Department) worked as a volunteer in the multiculturalism workshop.