

# Chapter 8

## Adult Informal Learning in Volunteering Contexts

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### ABSTRACT

*Volunteer work provides a rich context for adult informal learning. This chapter introduces the theory of informal learning and examines its application to volunteering contexts. It first reviews theoretical literature on informal learning, with a focus on Marsick and Watkins' model. It then reviews empirical research informal learning activities and outcomes in volunteering contexts. Volunteers acquire knowledge, skills, and insights related to their volunteer roles and the social causes involved. Volunteering fosters self-awareness and self-growth. Volunteering encourages the development of interpersonal skills, empathy, and commitment to social issues. The chapter discusses practical strategies for organizations to promote informal learning among volunteers, such as recognizing volunteering as a learning experience, encouraging reflective practice, and facilitating knowledge sharing. Future research should explore informal volunteering, effects on host communities, and the relationship between volunteer motivations and learning outcomes.*

### INTRODUCTION

Volunteer work is defined as “freely chosen and deliberate helping activities that extend over time, are engaged in without expectation of reward or other compensation and often through formal organizations, and that are performed on behalf of causes or individuals who desire assistance” (Snyder & Omoto, 2008, p. 3). It is estimated that every month, approximately 862.4 million individuals over the age

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-5812-2.ch008

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of 15 engage in volunteer work globally (UN Volunteers, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted the importance of volunteering and extended volunteer work to the virtual environment (Lachance, 2021; Turner et al., 2020). Volunteers create a range of positive impacts on themselves, the recipients of their services, the organizations they serve, and the well-being of society at large (Salamon et al., 2011). There is no doubt that individual benefits from volunteering and the impact could be long-lasting even after the end of the experience. However, volunteering is rarely conceptualized as a learning experience. The emphasis in volunteering is often placed on the service itself and the service recipients (Furco, 1996). The benefits of volunteering are usually byproducts or unintended consequences of other objectives (McGivney, 2006; Wilson & Musick, 1997). As a result, volunteers usually acquire tacit knowledge through their experience and find it difficult to identify particular learning activities and outcomes (Duguid, Mündel, & Schugurensky, 2013). From this perspective, learning is not conceptualized as structured, formal learning. Rather, an example would be a community gardening project where volunteers, including adults of various backgrounds, come together to cultivate a local garden. In this setting, participants engage in hands-on activities that foster collaboration, skill development, and knowledge sharing, resulting in learning about community gardening practices and teamwork. Thus, a potentially useful approach to support volunteers is to explore adult learning theories that deal with experiential, unstructured, and on-the-job learning. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the theory of informal learning and examine its application in the volunteering context. This chapter starts with informal learning theoretical research, with a focus on Marsick and Watkins' informal and incidental learning model. It is followed by a review of empirical studies that examined informal learning through volunteering. The chapter ends with practical implications for promoting adult informal learning in volunteering contexts and future research directions.

## **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON INFORMAL LEARNING**

The concept of informal learning has been extensively explored by Marsick and Watkins (2001, 2018), Livingstone (1999, 2001, 2006), Eraut (2000, 2011), and Schugueresky (2000) with application in different contexts. This section reviewed theoretical research on informal learning with a focus on Marsick and Watkins' model.

Marsick and Watkins (2015) defined informal and incidental learning by contrasting them with formal learning:

“Formal learning is typically institutionally sponsored, classroom-based, and highly structured. Informal learning, a category that includes incidental learning, may occur in institutions, but it is not typically classroom-based or highly structured, and

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