

The Human Factor: Volunteers in Libraries

by Philip Harvey

Here are two ways of talking about the same subject, volunteers in libraries. In the first part, Philip Harvey identifies issues in volunteerism by recourse to ten types of volunteer. This was the introductory paper he gave at the Adelaide Conference of ANZTLA in July 2013 at a panel on volunteers. The second part is an edited summary of an online conversation between members of the Association in June 2013 held on the ANZTLA-Forum. The conversation was edited by Philip Harvey and subsequently posted on the Forum.



I
A useful way of illustrating the advantages and disadvantages of volunteerism is to describe in Dickensian fashion different types of volunteer. This synopsis is in no way comprehensive, as the Universe has a talent for throwing up precisely the sorts of person who are your dream come true or, alternately, the Volunteer from Hell. Let me simply warn you, resemblances between the descriptions here and any person either living or dead are not an accident. You will also notice that none of these volunteers are gender specific, or as they say, the names are gender neutral.

Types of Volunteer (Positive):

1. Evelyn Experienced. This person is more precious than diamonds. They are a trained librarian with many years of experience. Evelyn wants to use the talents that have been given. They are a readymade colleague, knowing when to advise and when to get on with it. A glow of life shines in their face. They teach by example and never make a fuss. Two heads are better than one.

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2. **Phil Informed.** This volunteer brings the other thing, besides skills, that is invaluable in your library – knowledge. No amount of reference or online information can substitute for the human mind. Phil has a lifetime of education that Phil knows how to put to good use. Phil has the figures at his fingertips. This person saves any amount of walking and talking.
3. **Norm No-Nonsense.** This person gets the idea pretty readily and goes to work without further delay. For them, the clock means what its says, so a full day’s work is a God-given gift. Norm by name, but not normal by nature. Norms’ every action seems pre-ordained to further the cause. Whatever others are getting up to, Norm knows that being there is a commitment. Norm has the right response for every occasion.
4. **Terry Takes-Instruction.** Books may not have been Terry’s first calling, but this is a volunteer with an aptitude for learning. You do not have to guess what they are doing next. Their ears receive the free flow of instruction and everything else follows. Terry sees no reason to think of alternative methods which Terry then freely adopts.
5. **Ronny Reliable.** Only grave developments or an earthquake would stop Ronny arriving at work two minutes before starting time, every time. Ronny is fleet-of-foot, even if only in the metaphorical sense. Ronny never rings in with excuses, forgets what day it is, has some urgent business out-of-town, takes up a better offer, or falls in with the wrong crowd. Interestingly, Ronny is usually the best person to organise the Christmas party or serve the drinks.

Types of Volunteer (Negative):

1. **Chris Control.** Some people need to be in total control, even when they volunteer. Chris wants everything their way. This means a perfectly well-ordered library can be turned into a living hell. Chris subverts authority, questions why things are done as they are, and will even advise how things can be improved according to the Chris Control Method.
2. **Andy Acquaintance.** Andy came recommended by a member of staff, being a friend of a relative of said staff member. Andy is a perfectly charming person and even has a certificate as a barista, but when it comes to libraries is clueless. At mention of the word ‘circulation’ their eyes glaze over. It turns out that Andy is at a loose end and whistles a tune with the line “Any port in a storm”.
3. **Hayden Helpless.** Not unlike Andy Acquaintance, Hayden needs something (Anything!) for the CV. Hayden came with credentials but not in libraries and not in social skills. Computers cause quailing, and even shelving is bewildering



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with all those decimal points to contend with. Hayden was not made for libraries, which is why they are in a ‘trial period’.

4. **Teddy Talkative.** This person could be described as a professional volunteer, eager to help the general social cause. The first warning sign was Teddy’s affirmations about how much they like books, and how they have read books their whole lives, and how they had always dreamt of owning a bookshop. Talk is their great gift, which they use from Day One in the library. Helpful in breaking the ice with patrons, it is unhelpful when directed at the staff, not just in tea break, but the rest of the working day.
5. **Desi Double.** This person is willing to work, but has to have everything explained twice. They ask questions that were asked last week. Desi epitomises one of the inherent dangers of volunteerism. In the time it takes to repeat the instructions, you could have done the job yourself. Sometimes the workload actually increases just by introducing Desi into the work force. Instead of solving the question of how to manage essential jobs, you are trying to solve the question of how to manage Desi Double.

II

Volunteers in Libraries

Moira Bryant (Camden Theological Library) wondered how many theological libraries benefit from the support of student volunteers in order to provide longer opening hours than can be provided by the library staff. She wished to know what roles they fill and how this is reconciled with the ALIA guidelines on the use of volunteers.

Lynn Pryor (SPATS) responded by saying she thought the person or committee which drafted the ALIA statement has never been in the position of needing to consider the use of volunteer staffing. She agreed that a library service requires some trained staff management, but there are many tasks which a volunteer can undertake with minimal instruction and supervision. She believed a statement such as this from ALIA can only provide guidelines, not be prescriptive. Lynn then stated that many of our theological libraries could not have survived without their many volunteers, as most theological institutions exist on a minimal budget. We know that the library is usually/often the area where budgets are axed before any other programs of the college are considered for cuts. In her work in the Pacific she finds that the library services would not exist without volunteer help. Part of her task is to encourage the powers that be in these institutions to consider ways to improve their library services to their students. Unfortunately the holders of the purse strings often have no concept of the important role of the library for the students, not to mention the faculty. It is also unfortunate that many faculty do not expect their students to use the library but simply to



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absorb what they teach and not explore a subject any further. If the essential role of the information services is not understood from the top, the funding is not made available and there is no alternative but to engage volunteers to provide even a minimal service. As for the role of student volunteers used after hours, in Lynn’s experience, such people have needed only to be able to assist with loans if necessary and generally oversee the library. Even if some remuneration is offered, the required tasks are still minimal - perhaps some shelving.

Philip Harvey (Carmelite Library) offered a different reading of the ALIA statement. He felt that ALIA is not dismissing or downplaying the role of volunteers in libraries, which would not be in anyone’s interests. ALIA, however, has a priority, which is to represent and protect the paid workforce of librarians and it is on this basis that the statement is worded. We only have to see the damage being done in England when people in government think libraries can be run solely by volunteer support, to appreciate the meaning behind ALIA’s position. It is not just ALIA’s position but its role to maintain proper standards.

Blan McDonagh (Luther Seminary) agreed with Philip that it is important to protect the paid roles in libraries, that they have been hard won over the years. It is also a justice issue: students generally are struggling financially.

Claire Burrige (Behan Library, Christchurch) ruminated that the ALIA guidelines only mention public libraries by type, and it may be that their concern is to make sure an appropriate level of service is maintained by a government funded service. But we all live in the real world and work in many different types and sizes of library. She ventured to say volunteer staffing is a useful, if not essential, part of the make-up of many of our smaller libraries. However, Claire began by saying that this is an issue very close to home. She herself is the volunteer staff in her library and in fact the only staff member. If she wasn’t here to run the library for students then the course administrator would have a book shelf full of books and a notebook to organise them. She backed up Lynn’s view that without volunteer help some libraries wouldn’t function at all. Claire made the point that volunteer doesn’t always equate with unqualified. She studied at Victoria University and worked in public libraries for many years, but at the moment due to family commitments has chosen not to take paid work but to give her time to an organisation she believes in. Her library skills are being stretched (she had never done cataloguing before starting there) but is enjoying the challenge. Claire said it would be nice to be in the library every day to open it up and interact more with students, but we all cope.

Blan McDonagh said that if, like Claire, an individual is prepared to offer their services voluntarily, it may be that they feel themselves to be remunerated in other ways, as Claire obviously does. However, as far as her library is concerned, they would prefer to pay casual rates and would avoid using volunteers to replace paid staff. Issues



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about security and safety would probably prevent this, even if other considerations did not.

Lorraine Mitchell (Whitley College Library) said she has student assistants, so not quite volunteers as they are on a bursary, but they have no library training or experience and do tasks that she would train a volunteer for if needed. Lorraine included in these tasks shelving, circulation, book processing, covering, shelf checking, assistance to patrons, and staffing the library to enable longer opening hours.

Meredith Tsai (Sydney Missionary & Bible College) values volunteers immensely. They have three regular retirees who come weekly and really add value to the services. They ensure all books are processed, covered and mended. They have also been trained to operate the circulation system. They complement our professional staff and also engage well with the student body. Meredith made the distinction with student volunteers, who are different. There are about fifteen students on library duty for one hour per week as part of their student responsibilities. Their job is shelving. All volunteers are trained and their roles are clearly defined. She then clarified that the use of student volunteers to provide longer hours is something the library has moved away from. As the library has become an increasingly valuable collection with expensive hardware, to leave the library manned by volunteers is not a situation they embrace. The other issue is duty of care to patrons. She believes it is too great a responsibility to expect volunteer students to handle all the various issues that may occur, ranging from OH&S to dealing with unwelcome visitors.

Wendy Davis (Adelaide Theological Library) reported there are two dedicated volunteers who assist at their place. One generally does serials acquisition, shelving and other random tasks. The other generally does project work. Currently he is working on the Rare Books collection. Like Blan at Luther, ATL prefers to pay casual rates to help keep the library open on Saturdays.

Annette McGrath (Queensland Theological College) has had honorary library assistants (students) who were paid by gift two nights a week, so not quite volunteers but not paid as staff either. This was reconciled as a temporary measure until the library could afford a paid library assistant. Annette also has a volunteer librarian who works 15 hours a week, mostly cataloguing, end-processing books, and circulation. This volunteer works early in the day to meet the needs of the students who arrive before lectures. The volunteer librarian is qualified and Annette agreed with Claire Burridge that volunteer doesn’t always equal unqualified. She is volunteering because it suits her not to have paid employment at the moment and because she wants to serve the College. It is also a good arrangement for her because instead of being an over-55 applying for jobs in order to receive Centrelink benefits, she can volunteer at an approved organization and receive the benefit without having to apply for jobs she doesn’t want. This last semester they paid our volunteer for her



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petrol costs as a token gift towards the quite substantial work she does. Annette sees a potential conflict with the ALIA guidelines but small colleges often need volunteers to function, so what else can they do? Annette would never move to a situation where the library is staffed by only volunteers, especially unqualified volunteers and hopefully that is what the ALIA guidelines are guarding against.

Sandra Fitzgerald (Wesley Institute, NSW) says they used volunteers in the past, however one was a retired librarian and the others were doing library courses. With one person Sandra helped supervise their course work, which was useful to both parties as they gained hands-on experience and their work was useful to the library. Sandra would feel uncomfortable leaving volunteers to work in evenings for reasons of their own safety and OH&S.

Jon Jeffrey (Softlink, Brisbane) warned that he might be off the topic a little, but he thought the “use of volunteers” issue is much wider than just in the library world. He understands that major Queensland hospitals would have difficulties providing the existing levels of service if all the unpaid volunteers evaporated.

Philip Harvey added that the Queensland hospital situation reminds us in turn that our society not only promotes volunteerism, it has made itself dependent on volunteer work. This is in turn related to the casualisation of the workforce generally. Planners can find ways of justifying short-term employment, part-time employment, and volunteer support, especially if it assists with the bottom line. In the end, reliance on such a labour force can lead to a diminution of good outcomes and a reduction in the quality and standard of the work, whether in a library, a hospital, or other workplace.

Jan Barwick (Prison Library Services, Department for Correctional Services South Australia) added to Philip’s and Jon’s comments on government’s using volunteers. Jan is currently volunteering in various city and suburban prison libraries. A Library Projects Officer was employed for 12 months to begin the process of upgrading the nine libraries across South Australian prisons but that position has disappeared with the major budget cuts across all SA government sectors and the libraries now depend entirely on volunteers, under the leadership of the DCS Volunteer Unit and the education coordinators in each prison. They have a dozen or so volunteers working in the city libraries with more in the country prisons. All up, around 120 volunteers do a multitude of tasks in South Australian prisons, including transporting prisoners, education, arts and crafts.

Susan Phillips (St Mark’s National Theological Centre) has up to eight volunteers in the library: a retired professional cataloguer (essential), three working on the Rare Book Room (a variety of tasks, all skilled, not essential but important to maintain this fine collection) and 2-3 shelvers and odd jobs people (low average skill but adds greatly to the library’s ability to provide adequate service to patrons). One volunteer with physical disabilities checks for duplicates in the donations and does other basic computing tasks.



Susan says they couldn't do without them, they love being valued and useful, and contributing to the College in a meaningful way and are worth every hour spent training them. They would have to pay for another part-time librarian at least if we did not have them. The volunteers at St Mark's don't do front desk work and they can't be on their own in the building, due to insurance.

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