

INFORMAL LEARNING IN YOUTH VOLUNTEER WORK

Perspectives from the European Voluntary Service Programme

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Master's Thesis

Master's Programme in Development
and International Cooperation

Department of Education

University of Jyväskylä

Spring 2013

ABSTRACT

INFORMAL LEARNING IN YOUTH VOLUNTEER WORK: PERSPECTIVES FROM EUROPEAN VOLUNTARY SERVICE PROGRAMME.

Master's thesis. Supervisor: Dr. Elina Lehtomaki. University of Jyväskylä. Spring 2013. 87 pages.

The purpose of this study is to examine the link between volunteer work and informal learning among young people. Drawing on the concepts and theories of lifelong learning, informal learning and volunteer work, and building on past research, this thesis explores the case of the European Voluntary Service (EVS), an international volunteering scheme devised by European Commission for youth between 18 and 30 years of age. Through 10 qualitative interviews with former and current EVS volunteers, this study attempts to understand the nature and main features of informal learning in EVS as well as what young people believe they have learnt in the course of their volunteering.

The results show that volunteers acquire a wide range of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The learning is significant in relation to one's self, interpersonal and communications skills, learning about the world and developing instrumental skills. While volunteers' accounts of what they had acquired included stances of self-directed and incidental learning, the greater part of the learning corresponded to the concept of tacit learning. Overall, the study confirms the great potential of volunteering not only as an avenue for action and contributing to the greater good but also as a site for adult learning in developing self-reliant and capable individuals who can confront the challenges of our times.

Key words: volunteer work, informal learning, young people

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing this thesis would have not been possible without the support and help of so many individuals to whom I feel indebted. I begin by expressing my deep gratitude to the EVS volunteers who generously contributed their time, shared their stories and inspired me by their energy and enthusiasm. From the University of Jyväskylä, my special thanks go to my supervisor, Dr. Elina Lehtomäki, for her guidance and invaluable comments throughout the process of my research; and to Professor Jeremy Gould for his continuous encouragement and support. From the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), I thank Dr. Ulrike Hanemann, my internship supervisor, who involved me in the consultation processes on the topic of informal learning. I am also very grateful to Imke Behr and Jan Kairies, the assistant librarians at UIL, who went out of their way to help me use the resources of the documentation center and library.

I feel fortunate to have been surrounded by family and friends who continuously encouraged me throughout the process. I am particularly indebted to Khatereh Eghdamian and Jon Hartman for reading my thesis word by word and helping me improve the language. My sincere thanks go to my parents and my sister who have always believed in me and whose love has given me courage to dream higher and higher.

Finally, I offer my most humble and profound gratitude to all of the teachers and faculty members of the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) in Iran who, under the harshest conditions, continue to provide learning opportunities for those who are denied access to higher education. If it wasn't for you, this journey would have never started for me. Your sacrifice and devotion have been my source of inspiration to accomplish this work.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

EFA	Education for All
EU	European Union
EVS	European Voluntary Service
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NALL	New Approaches to Lifelong Learning
NLP	Neuro-linguistic programming
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
RVA	Recognition, Validation and Accreditation
UIL	UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WALL	Work and Lifelong Learning Network

Table of Contents

1	Introduction	7
1.1	My story.....	7
1.2	Learning: the part and parcel of life	8
1.3	Informal learning in international development	9
1.4	Research questions	11
1.5	Outline of the study	11
2	Understanding informal learning.....	13
2.1	From education to learning	13
2.2	Lifelong Learning	14
2.3	Typology of learning	15
2.3.1	Formal, non-formal and informal.....	15
2.3.2	Intended, incidental	16
2.4	Exploring informal learning	18
2.5	Informal education vs. informal learning	21
3	Volunteer work and learning: exploring connections	22
3.1	Volunteer work: A conceptualization of the field.....	22
3.2	What is volunteerism? What can be called volunteer work?.....	23
3.3	Informal learning and volunteer work.....	27
3.4	European Voluntary Service (EVS)	31
3.5	Learning in EVS	32
3.6	Youthpass	33
3.7	Why EVS?	34
4	Methodology.....	36

4.1 The background	36
4.2 The challenge of elicitation	37
4.3 Data collection	39
4.4 Interviewees	42
4.4 Data analysis	44
4.5 Methodological limitations	45
4.6 Ethical issues	46
5 Findings and analysis	48
5.1 The learning of EVS volunteers: An overview	48
5.2 What do EVS volunteer learn?	55
5.2.1 Learning about and in relation to one's self	55
5.2.2 Interpersonal learning	59
5.2.3 Learning about the world	63
5.2.4 Instrumental learning	65
5.2.5 Summary of the findings on volunteers' learning	66
6 Discussion and conclusion	68
6.1 Discussion	68
6.2 Future research	73
6.3 Conclusion	73
References	76
Appendices	87

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 My story

Early July 2009 in the peak of Tehran's summer, I was sitting in the lobby of the UNDP, waiting for my name to be called for an interview that without me knowing was going to shape my life in so many ways. The interview went quite well. I was told that they would let me know the results the next day. As I was leaving the room, my supervisor-to-be reminded me, "You understand that this is a full-time voluntary position, meaning there is no salary?" With my hand on the doorknob, I smiled and nodded. I knew the terms and was willing to take an unpaid job with the UN. As I was turning away, I heard her completing her sentence: "But I promise you'll learn a lot."

I volunteered with the UNDP for eight months. My supervisor was right; every single day was such a learning experience; a period in my life that I usually recall as "my intensive period of learning and growth". As I had expected, I learnt a lot about the UNDP and in particular, the unit I was working in. However, that was not all I learnt. I also learnt how to deal with people at work and realized how every individual in our workplace had a unique way of doing things. I learnt how to approach my colleagues when I needed something or when I had a request for which they had to take some time off their busy schedules to help me with. I learnt how to manage the balance between working independently and seeking help and guidance from my supervisors. In addition to interacting with people, my voluntary job also let me develop a range of professional skills from running a business meeting to facilitating a workshop, from writing formal letters addressed to some high-level bodies in government to drafting inter-office memos and informal work-related emails to colleagues in the next room. Above all these, what this period taught me the most was to know myself much better. I got to know what I like, where my interests and strengths lie, what makes me happy, and what makes me frustrated and agitated. On a professional level, it gave me a chance to rethink my professional goals and form a clearer vision of who I want to be. Eventually, it led to a series of career and life decisions, one of which was to pursue my current degree in Finland.

After sixteen years of formal schooling, what was interesting for me was how much I was learning about situations, not an abstract theory or a formula. I was learning from my

conversations with my colleagues during coffee or lunch time breaks, in weekly office meetings, from moments of hesitations and frustrations, and while reflecting about my days on the way home.

Looking back at this period, what astonishes me is the amount of knowledge and skills that I acquired. What saddens me is that we live in a world where a great part of such learning would often go unrecognized and unappreciated. I feel I was lucky that I had a supervisor who was the learning manager of the whole office and who let me see what I could take away from the whole experience. My time at the UNDP is not the only time I have volunteered full time. I have volunteered/done internships in India, Malaysia, Germany and Cambodia. Looking back at these diverse experiences, I recognize that some of the most important things that I have learnt about myself and the world around me happened during these periods. Over the years, I have tried to learn how to articulate and express my learning in words whenever there has been a need whether in university applications or job interviews.

It was from this personal background in informal learning that the idea of this thesis was born during my internship at UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) where I had the chance to attend the Expert Group Meeting on Developing UNESCO Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation (RVA) of Non-formal and Informal Learning in October 2011. The two-day meeting was held with the goal of “making visible and valuing individuals’ real competences, in order to progress in lifelong learning, in employment and in personal development” (UIL, 2011). It reminded me of my own volunteer experiences and arose a sense of wonderment about whether other young volunteers have had the same experiences as me and if volunteering, in addition to an arena of action, can be seen as a site for learning. Thus, my thesis work started from a point of personal curiosity. What has followed since then has been a learning experience in itself.

1.2 Learning: the part and parcel of life

Learning occurs in every situation that a person participates in. We learn at home, at school, at work, with friends, family, and so on. We acquire information, concepts, and patterns of reasoning. We learn about ourselves and the world around us.

It is an undeniable fact that schooling makes a great part of what we learn as individuals. However, a substantial part of what we learn about ourselves, the world and our relation to it also happens outside of these formal education structures. In fact, learning has always been an integral part of the everyday life. As Peter Jarvis discusses “learning is intrinsic to being” (Jarvis, 2010, p.63) and as Doyle (2001) phrases it, learning is “part and parcel” of our lives.

This thesis aims to explore the other subtle but ever-present form of learning; also known as *Informal Learning* in the current discourse in the field of Education. In doing so, I am looking at a specific area of everyday interactions, volunteer work, and I am focusing on the specific age group of young people.

1.3 Informal learning in international development

“Education is not only about making sure that all children can attend school. It is about setting young people up for life, by giving them opportunities to find decent work, earn a living, contribute to their communities and societies, and fulfill their potential”

-Irina Bokova, Forward to the UNESCO Global Monitoring Report 2012

While Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) only target provision of formal education- that is universal primary schooling for boys and girls till 2015, now more than ever the importance of non-formal and informal learning and their role in personal and social development is being recognized worldwide. The urgency for the recognition of these types of learning is identified particularly in the case of young people specifically in developing countries where the greater part of learning takes place informally and non-formally; for instance, through apprenticeships for those who work in the urban informal sector, or through farm-based and entrepreneurship training for those living in rural areas (UNESCO, 2012, p. 172).

The emergence of the concept of lifelong learning¹ has been an attempt to ensure that at the level of policy and practice, both the North and the South provide learning opportunities for all their citizens regardless of their age or their formal schooling status. In the 1990s, as the discourse of lifelong learning was reemerging in the North, *UNESCO World Conference Education for All (EFA)* in Jomtien, in 1990 based on the principles of lifelong learning,

¹ For more information on lifelong learning refer to chapter 2.

introduced a series of targets which became part of the development discourse of the South. In 2000, the Jomtien EFA goals were reaffirmed in the *EFA World Education Forum* in Dakar by 164 governments through the *Dakar Framework of Action* where once again they were framed in a lifelong learning context with a new EFA achievement target of 2015. Out of the six EFA goals, goal 3 focuses on learning needs of all adult and young people: “Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programmes” (UNESCO, 2000).

Criticism in recent years has been directed toward the way lifelong learning has developed as a discourse for the North; while, in developing countries the educational discourse has been dominated by EFA goals that are mainly confined to the provisions of basic education and formal schooling (Preece, 2009; Torres, 2002). Scholars like Torres have been advocating for development and education policy makers to acknowledge the important role of other forms of learning and to enhance this aspect of lifelong learning paradigm:

“We continue to learn basically through informal learning and this is a major area that needs to be enhanced within the lifelong learning paradigm....Both Jomtien and Dakar lack a holistic vision of learning and education, and they focus on the formal school system— Obviously this is not the appropriate framework for the development of the lifelong learning paradigm, both in concept and practice.” (Torres, 2002, p.5)

Acknowledging the significant role of non-formal and informal learning in addressing development issues globally, there has been a growing interest and emphasis on strategies to highlight these less visible types of learning and to find effective mechanisms for recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of their learning outcomes.

The *Belem Framework for Action*, adopted by the 144 member states of UNESCO at the *Sixth International Conference on Adult Education* (CONFINTEA VI) in December 2009 in Brazil, admits that “with regard to the recognition and accreditation of learning, both in-country mechanisms and international efforts place undue emphasis on formally accredited skills and competences, seldom including non-formal, informal and experiential learning” (UIL, 2010, p. 12). As the member states, through *Belem Framework for Action*, committed themselves to

develop and improve mechanisms for recognition of all forms of learning through equivalency frameworks, they also mandated UNESCO to develop guidelines for RVA of all learning outcomes including those acquired through non-formal and informal learning (ibid, p. 9).

Today, efforts in highlighting the value of all forms of learning including non-formal and informal are gaining more importance. The relationship between these types of learning are associated with themes such as “poverty reduction, job creation and employment, and social inclusion” (Tang, 2012,) making them even more relevant for addressing development issues. The publication of *UNESCO Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning* in 2012 along with the existing and emerging regional and national RVA guidelines such as *European Guidelines for Validating Non-formal and Informal Learning* (2009), makes the study of informal learning a timely topic. Although this thesis does not specifically deal with RVA of informal learning or its implications for poverty reduction or job creation, it takes the first step by exploring the potential of volunteer work as a “learning site” where young people can acquire a wide range of skills, knowledge, and attitudes.

1.4 Research questions

This study aims to explore informal learning among young volunteers in the European Voluntary Service (EVS) programme. By using EVS as a case, I would like to explore the informal learning experiences of the youth volunteers. To this end, the following two questions guide this study:

1. What is the nature and characteristics of informal learning in EVS?
2. What do the volunteers of EVS believe they have learnt informally through the course of their volunteer work? What aspect of their learning experience has been most meaningful and valuable to them?

1.5 Outline of the study

I have started my Master’s thesis with this chapter relating my own personal story with the topic of the thesis. So far, I have introduced the general theme and the frame of the study as

well as the research questions. In chapter two, I will first review some of the basic definitions and concepts related to informal learning which construct the bedrock of this study. In chapter three, I will focus on volunteering and how it is understood in this research and its significance as a context for informal learning. I will also introduce the European Voluntary Service and my reason for choosing it as the case study for this research. Chapter four outlines the methodology employed in this study and delineates a clear and detailed description of how the data has been collected and analyzed. I will also briefly discuss some of the methodological challenges and limitations of this study as well as some ethical issues. Chapter five explores the findings from the data and chapter six presents a discussion of the findings and the conclusion of the research.

2 UNDERSTANDING INFORMAL LEARNING

2.1 From education to learning

Jarvis, Holdford and Griffin (2004) start their book on theory and practice of learning by listing a series of recent shifts in emphasis that have occurred in the “social institution” of education, at the center of which is a move along the continuum from education to learning (pp. 1-2).

While education has been seen as a means for transferring knowledge and skills from one generation to another, learning is understood as a broader concept (e.g. Jarvis et. al, 2003, p. 5).

It is an “existential phenomenon” which Jarvis (2010, p. 39) describes as:

“The combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person- body (genetic, physical, and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, meaning, beliefs, and senses) – experiences social situations, the content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual’s person’s biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person.”

Traditionally, education was seen as the only legitimate form of learning and thus it was considered equal to learning. In fact, in many cases the terms were used interchangeably. However, more and more, education is now being recognized as one channel for learning; one of the many systems that provide “learning opportunities” (Jarvis et, al, 2003, p. 5; Jarvis, 2010, pp. 39-41). While education is mainly defined as an “institutionalized and planned system”, learning can also be seen as a “process” (Taylor, 2011) which occurs throughout life in a range of various contexts both within and outside institutions.

Although institutional and formal education systems still are regarded as dominant forms of learning, it is widely accepted that many learning opportunities are created by the non-education sector. This recognition of other sources and modes of learning in recent years has led to a change in terminology in which the word ‘learning’ has replaced ‘education’. For instance, lifelong education has given its place to lifelong learning, or adult learning has replaced the previously more common adult education.

2.2 Lifelong Learning

“Lifelong learning covers the full range of provision of learning opportunities, from early childhood through schools to further and higher education. However, it extends beyond formal education to non-formal and informal learning for out-of-school youth and adult citizens.”
(UIL, 2012, p. 1)

The concept of lifelong learning as learning “irrespective of age” or “learn[ing] from life itself and make[ing] conditions of life such that all will learn in the process of living it” (Dewy, 1997, p.51) is not a new concept and can be traced to early twentieth century scholars like Dewy and Yeaxlee (1925). However, the term “lifelong education/learning” as such was used for the first time in 1960s by UNESCO and Council of Europe as “the master concept for educational policies in the years to come for both developed and developing countries” (Faure, 1972, p. 182).

As discussed in the previous section, up until the mid-1990s (Jarvis, 2010, p. 52), the terms lifelong education and lifelong learning were used interchangeably with the former even being more prevalent in the literature of policy. For instance, the 1972 UNESCO-initiated Faure Report, advocates for “lifelong and universal education”, while twenty-four years later, the Delors Report of 1996, rearticulates the same vision but this time considering the shift to learning.

Views with regards to the adoption of lifelong learning as a “key political, societal and educational organizing principle” (Torres, 2002) have been different among different governments as well as different academics and practitioners. Some like Jarvis (2010) consider the term “extremely confusing” (p. 64) as it combines the notion of individual learning and institutional education together: “lifelong learning embraces the socially institutional learning that occurs in the educational system, that which occurs beyond it, and that individual learning throughout the lifespan” (ibid, p. 65).

Lifelong learning not only refers to learning in different stages of life (childhood, adulthood, old age), but it also refers to various modes and sites of learning, including but not limited to schools and formal educational institutions, museums, libraries, internet, TV and radio

programmes as well as traveling, study visits, work place (e.g. Jarvis et al., 2004, p. 76; Bekerman, Burbules, & Siberman Keller 2006, p. 1). It is from this point of departure that in the next section I will present a typology of learning.

2.3 Typology of learning

Many believe that since learning is a continual and dynamic process, any effort to categorize it is problematic with borders being blurred, making distinctions arbitrary (e.g. McGivney, 2002; Colley, Hodgkinson & Malcolm, 2002; Livingstone, 2006). On the other hand, categorization often proves valuable in breaking down phenomena as broad as learning in order to understand how and what people learn. Thus, recognizing the limitations of such taxonomies as well as the fluidity of boundaries between each category, I will attempt to explore different types of learning based on the two variables of the degree of formality and level of intention.

2.3.1 Formal, non-formal and informal

Formal learning is considered to be the type of learning which often occurs in formal schooling systems, ranging from early childhood to university levels. It is highly institutionalized, hierarchically structured and chronologically graded and certified (e.g. Coombs and Ahmed, 1974; Schugurensky, 2000; Hodgkinson, Colley, & Malcolm, 2003; Jarvis, 2010; Livingstone, 2010).

Non-formal learning refers to the type of learning which occurs through planned and organized educational activities and programmes which are outside the formal schooling structure. Non-formal learning usually is short-term and voluntary. Examples could include learning in a wide variety of programs such as language courses, arts or sports classes, various workshops and training, etc. Like formal learning, often, learning requires the presence of a teacher and some form of a curriculum (e.g. Coombs, Prosser, and Ahmed, 1973; Schugurensky, 2000; Hebel et al., 2009; CEDEFOP, 2000; European Commission Communication, 2001).

Informal learning is used to refer to any learning which occurs outside the domain of formal and non-formal educational programs as described above. It is a lifelong process, which covers the everyday acquiring of values, experiences and building of skills and knowledge (e.g.

Coombs, Prosser and Ahmed, 1973; Schugurensky, 2000; Foley, 1999, Richardson and Wolfe, 2000).

It should be noticed that although there is no inherent hierarchical relationship among formal, non-formal or informal learning, the fact that informal and non-formal learning are defined by what they are perceived to lack in relation to the formal sector suggests the hegemonic influence of formal education and the relative inferiority of non-formal and informal learning (Schugurensky, 2006, pp. 164-165; Hager & Halliday, 2009, p. 24). As Colarydin (2001, p. 10) observes, for a long time, the terms informal and non-formal learning have carried a negative connotation:

“They are both “negative” concepts in the sense that they are the negation of something else: they include what is not covered in formal education and training. That “negative” aspect could well disappear the day non-formal learning would be better known and understood”.

This hierarchical view of different forms of learning has been both a product and a cause of the imbalance in the provision of learning opportunities. As Hager and Halliday (2009) argue, the policy and practice of lifelong learning has given more emphasis to formal learning/education and overlooked the value and significance of non-formal and informal learning. Today, as they conclude, it is undeniable that “a rich understanding of learning needs to recognize that both formal and informal are indispensable, and neither reducible to the other” (p. 23).

2.3.2 Intended, incidental

Although the above organization of learning into formal, non-formal and informal is widely recognized and used by many policy making institutions and bodies such as UNESCO, EU, OECD, and numerous governments, some scholars believe that it is too simplistic and flawed (Hager & Halliday, 2009; Smith, 1999-2008). One of the main points of such critique is that the above categorization is more concerned with the institutional context of learning- i.e. where learning happens- than with other characteristics such as process or content. For example, not everything that we learn in schools is through formal lessons or had been planned in the curriculum. Thus, informal learning can and does happen in formal institutions.

One way to move beyond this over-focus on the “situation” is to take into consideration the degree of intention or deliberation that can distinguish different forms of learning. Jarvis (2010, p.42) makes such a distinction by introducing “intended” and “incidental learning” across the spectrum of formal-informal (see table 2.1).

Table 2.1 Possible Learning Situations from Jarvis (2010, p. 42)

Types of situation	Types of learning	
	Intended	Incidental
Formal	A	D
Non-formal	B	E
Informal	C	F

In this categorization, under the intended learning column, box A refers to the formal education and training offered in educational institutions. Box B refers to non-formal education, short and semi-structured courses, and C² encompasses both learning in everyday life and self-directed learning³ where we decide to educate ourselves about a certain topic; for example, learning a language by using self-study materials.

Incidental learning can happen in a variety of situations as well. Box D refers to incidental learning in formal education institutions, a learning which although not planned by the education providers, happens in the context of formal institutions. In the same way, E refers to incidental learning in non-formal education settings. Finally, box F refers to everyday learning or tacit learning, which probably is the most common learning of all, with results not always being recognized as learning by the learner or the outsiders.

² As box A and B are understood as formal and non-formal education, one might wonder if box C can also be understood as informal education. Jarvis (2010) does not refer to informal education in his categorization probably because the term is used to refer to a specific type of education. The concept of informal education and its relation to informal learning is explored further in the final section of this chapter.

³ Self-directed learning is explored in the next section.

2.4 Exploring informal learning

“The lifelong process by which every individual acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment – at home, at work, at play: from the example and attitude of families and friends; from travel, reading newspapers and books; or by listening to the radio or viewing films or television. Generally informal education is unorganized, unsystematic and even unintentional at times, yet accounts for the great bulk of any person’s total lifetime learning – including that of a highly ‘schooled’ person.”

(Coombs and Ahmed, 1974, p. 8)

“Informal learning just seems to be a very normal, very natural human activity. But it is so invisible; people just don’t seem to be aware of their own learning. They’re not aware of other people’s learning; educators don’t take it into account and so on. People are spending 15 hours a week at it on average, and yet it’s not talked about, it’s not recognized, it’s sort of ignored or invisible”

(Tough, 2002, p. 1)

Using Livingstone’s metaphor, informal learning is the hidden part of the iceberg of adult learning (2001, p. 6). It is the type of learning which is often invisible and unknown even to the learners. It takes place every day in the context of family, in paid and unpaid work, in the community activities, and so on. As Tough, Jarvis and many other researchers have found out, it is the most common form of learning. However, it is the least recognized or appreciated of all as well. Although some of the most important things we learn in life are acquired informally, the results are not explicitly counted toward education or employment purposes.

While terms such as learning in everyday life, experiential learning, and self-directed learning have long existed, it is only in recent years that more systematic efforts are being made to make the learning which takes place outside the formal education sector visible and valued. In the

previous section, a basic definition of informal learning was offered. Here, I will present a more detailed outline of different types of informal learning.

Exploring the dynamics of informal learning, Shugurensky (2008) identifies three types of informal learning: self-directed, incidental and tacit. “Self-directed learning” (Tough, 1971) or “explicit informal learning” (Livingstone, 1999) refers to the learning which happens as the result of deliberate and conscious learning activities; what Tough recognizes as taking on “learning projects”, for example, teaching yourself how to use a computer. Tough’s decade of research found that a great part of what adults learn falls within this category. His results showed that around 90% of adults do some form of intentional (self-directed) learning in a year. He also found that 70% of what adults learn is self-initiated and self-guided (Tough, 2002, p. 1).

Incidental learning, in Shugurensky’s typology, covers the learning which is unintentional as it is not deliberately planned, but conscious in retrospect. This comes very close to what Eurat (2000) refers to as *reactive learning*. In his model, reactive learning falls between deliberative and implicit learning (respectively equivalent to Shugurensky’s self-directed and tacit learning). It is a form of learning which is explicit but spontaneous and without prior plan.

Finally, *tacit learning* refers to the learning acquired unintentionally and unconsciously through everyday interactions and socialization. This is the type of learning which Jarvis describes in the last box of his table (see table 2.1) and Polanyi (1966) recognizes as “that which we know but cannot tell”.

Another concept closely tied with informal learning is learning from experience. As Conrad and Hedin (1990) explain “to say that experience is a good teacher does not imply that it’s easy or automatically so [...] it’s true that we can learn from experience. We may also learn nothing. Or we may, like Mark Twain’s cat who learned from sitting on a hot stove lid never to sit again, learn the wrong lesson” (p. 87).

According to Jarvis, we only learn from “internalized experience” (2010, p. 85). He sees learning the result of a process which he conceptualizes as a top-down move in the following model:

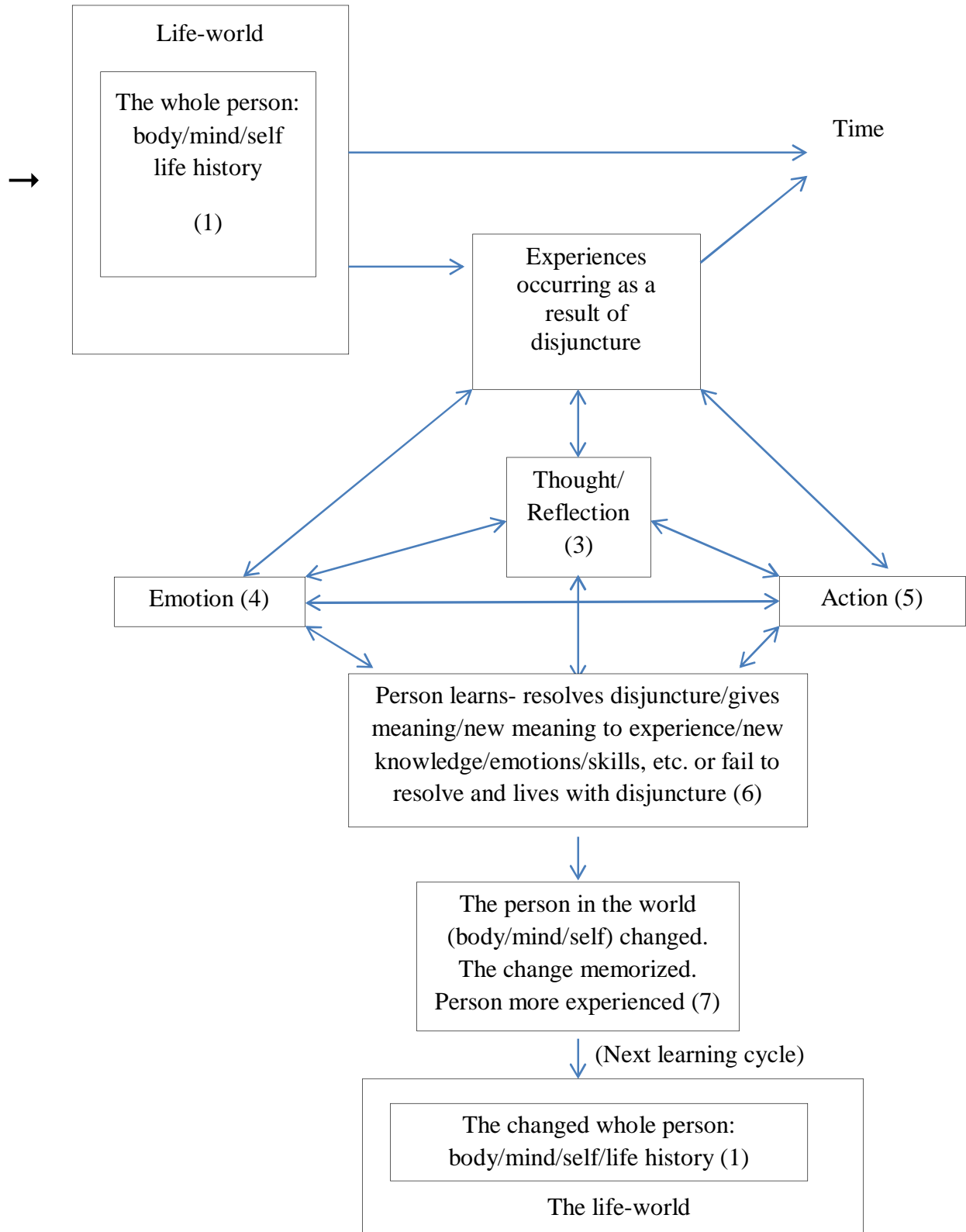


Figure 2.1. Learning from experience. From Jarvis (2010, p. 81)

In his view, we normally live in “harmony with our socio-cultural environment” which means our presumption about our world is in line with our previous learning experience. As a result, we don’t have to think before every action but we rely on our past learning experiences. However, there are situations where we have to “think on our feet”, understand the situation and act accordingly. He talks about “disjuncture” as “the gap between what we expect to perceive when we have an experience of the world as a result of our previous learning and what we are actually confronted with” (ibid, p. 83) and it is what provokes learning from experience at first place. Using this model, Jarvis explores different types of learning by describing different learning routes in the diagram. For instance, he illustrates *Action Learning* by the route from 1→2→5/4/3→6→7 or *Reflective Learning* by 1→2→3/4→6→7 (ibid, pp. 88-90).

2.5 Informal education vs. informal learning

I find it important to briefly clarify the distinction between informal education and informal learning. Informal education is considered as a non-curriculum form of education with emphasis on conversation and dialogue (Smith, 2006, p.10; Batsler, 2008, p. 5) and the presence of “some form of institutionally recognized tutor” (Livingstone, 2006, p. 206). In informal education classes, teachers and students get engaged in activities that are in the “middle territory” between social work and classroom teaching (Kornbeck as cited in, Smith 2006, p.17). It aims at creating a space for dialogue on “ideologically loaded issues” with the hope of “reforming the maladies of formal educational strategies” (Bekerman, 2006, pp. 229-230). As such, informal education is mainly incorporated in the after-school programmes in schools or community centers. Thus, informal education, as a set of planned educational activities following certain models and theories of education, is completely different from informal learning, which is the topic of this study. Care should be given that these do not get confused.

3 VOLUNTEER WORK AND LEARNING: EXPLORING CONNECTIONS

3.1 Volunteer work: A conceptualization of the field

“Volunteerism is a feature of all cultures and societies. It is a fundamental source of community strength, resilience, solidarity and social cohesion. It can help effect positive social change by fostering inclusive societies that respect diversity, equality and the participation of all.”

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon

Statement for International Volunteer Day, 5 December 2007

For years, people around the world have been volunteering in different forms and with different motivations. Some volunteer independently, some support local and start-up NGOs, while others might volunteer with voluntary organizations that have existed for years. Some turn to volunteerism to show solidarity and altruism and contribute to the greater good; while for others it can be a mandatory⁴ part of their studies or work. Whether for religious pursuits, in support of social and cultural movements or as a channel for self-realization and self-development, volunteerism has for long been part of our social human experience and its unprecedented growth in recent years has attracted many scholars to study it more systematically.

Volunteer work is a highly complex field and “volunteerism” can be an “illusive” concept with different connotations (e.g. Vanderdussen, 2009; Speck & Hoppe, 2004). As most scholars in the field admit, finding a definition which can encompass all aspects of volunteerism is extremely hard, if not impossible. As Handy et al. (2000) observes, the literature on volunteer work to a great extent has overlooked the existing differences among various forms of volunteering and has treated it like a “monolithic activity” (p.46).

Cnaan, Handy and Wadsworth’s (1996) review of more than 300 articles and reports on volunteering revealed that the term ‘volunteer’ has rarely been defined explicitly.

⁴ Although mandatory volunteering sounds like an oxymoron, a large section of volunteer work is mandated by policy and social institutions. This type of volunteering explored further in text.

Unfortunately, this means that most of the studies on volunteering are ambiguous with results and findings which cannot be generalized because conceptualizations of volunteerism differ greatly from one study to another (Cnaan et. al, 1996, p. 369; Cnaan & Amroffell, 1994).

Acknowledging the broadness and the heterogeneity of volunteer work, Bussell and Forbes (2001) propose a systematic approach for mapping and understanding the field. The “Four Ws of Volunteering” suggests the following four questions to be considered in every study of volunteerism: What (definition), Where, (context), Who (characteristics of volunteers) and Why (motivation) (See Figure 3.1).

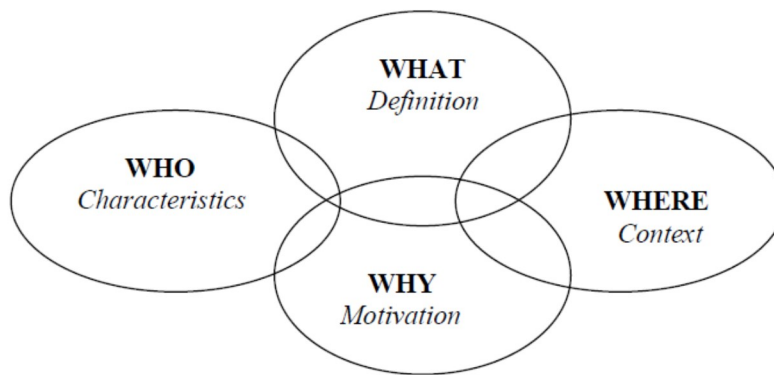


Figure 3.1. The four Ws of volunteering. From Bussell and Forbes (2001) p. 245

Following their model, in the first part of this chapter, I will try to explore volunteerism as it relates to my study. Drawing on the literature, I will look into the what and why of volunteering as well as some general comments on the other two aspects (volunteers and the context).

Defining volunteerism as it is used in this study, I will then turn to explore the link between informal learning and volunteering and finally, introduce my case study and elaborate on the context on which this research is based.

3.2 What is volunteerism? What can be called volunteer work?

The United Nations Volunteer Program (UNV)- the UN organization for promoting volunteerism for peace and development- recognizes three criteria for an activity to be considered as volunteer work:

“Firstly, the action should be carried out voluntarily, according to an individual’s own freewill, and not as an obligation stipulated by law, contract or academic requirement... Secondly, the action should not be undertaken primarily for financial reward... Thirdly, the action should be for the common good. It should directly or indirectly benefit people outside the family or household or else benefit a cause” (UNV, 2011, pp. 3-4).

Building on these broad criteria, UNV then introduces different forms of volunteering as: 1) mutual aid or self-help 2) service to others 3) participation or civic engagement and 4) advocacy and campaigning (UNV, 2009).

In the world of academia, one of the key studies on defining volunteerism is by Cnaan et al. (1996) in which through an analysis of the 11 most common definitions for volunteering, they came up with a typology of the field. They outlined four common dimensions for volunteer work which refer to different forms of volunteer activity: the voluntary nature of the act, the nature of the reward, the context of the volunteering, and who it benefits. Under each dimension, they identified two or three categories (See table 3.1).

Table 3.1.

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Categories</i>
Free Choice	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Free will (the ability to voluntarily choose) 2. Relatively uncoerced 3. Obligation to volunteer
Remuneration	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. None at all 2. None expected 3. Expenses reimbursed 4. Stipend/low pay
Structure	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Formal 2. Informal
Intended beneficiaries	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Benefit/help others/strangers 2. Benefit/help friends or relatives 3. Benefit oneself (as well)

From Cnaan, Handy, & Wadsworth (1996, p. 371)

Putting together different categories from each dimension results in different definitions for volunteer work which cover a wide range from volunteering to organize a friend's farewell party (relatively uncoerced, not remunerated, informal, benefiting friends) to volunteering in an international organization running a global campaign for animal rights (free will, expenses could be reimbursed/none expected, formal, and benefitting others). In a follow-up study conducted in Canada, the Netherlands, India, Italy and the United States, using the same matrix, Handy et al. (2000) confirms that the public perception of volunteer work only associates certain categories under each dimension with the definition of genuine volunteering. In what they call the *net-cost theory*, it is the relative cost and benefit to the volunteer that shapes the public perception of who can be called a volunteer and what can be considered as real volunteer work. In this model, the greater the net costs to the volunteer, the more the person is perceived to be a genuine one. However, as the researchers themselves admit "what actually constitutes benefits and costs to the volunteer is a complex calculus requiring further research" (ibid, p. 64).

Ilsley (1990) makes the following distinction between formal and informal volunteering:

"Formal voluntarism can be defined as service that is addressed to a social need or needs defined by an organization, performed in a coordinated way in an organizational context, and rewarded by psychological or other benefits. Informal voluntarism is spontaneous expression of service in response to a personally perceived social need, performed freely (without organizational constraints) and often without any thought of reward" (p. 5).

While the UNV's definition covers both informal and formal volunteering, in the world of academia, there are different approaches. Some limit volunteer work to what is done through organizations while others do not make any distinctions. For instance, Snyder and Omoto (2008, pp. 3-5) define volunteer work 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"; whereas, the first national survey of volunteering in Mexico defines

volunteer work as unpaid help given to another person not a member of one's family (Verduzco, 2010, p. 49).

Another approach to understanding different forms of volunteering is to look at various groups of volunteers and the roles they take. Schugurensky and Mundel's research (2005, pp. 6-8) on learning in volunteer work, based on different learning experiences of volunteers, present the following classification of volunteers and volunteering:

1. *Altruistic* volunteers dedicate high levels of time and energy out of their desire to help others and are not after gaining personal benefits.
2. *Semi-altruistic* volunteers combine their urge to help others and to do good with helping themselves and their communities. The main distinction between this group and the altruist volunteers lie in the fact that semi-altruistic volunteers are more likely to take part in activities that benefit the development or well-being of their local community or promoting a cause that is close to their heart; while, altruistic volunteers are ready to be engaged in any activity even if the cause does not personally affect them, their families or their communities.
3. *Socially-coerced* volunteers are those who, although not forced, are pressured to volunteer because there is a high level of expectation by their families, friends, religious institutions, workplace, school, and so on.
4. *Compulsory* volunteering is when the decision to do volunteer work is not out of free choice. Although the term compulsory volunteering sounds like an oxymoron, a large section of volunteer work is mandated by policy and social institutions. For example, educational institutions such as schools or universities might require students to do a certain number of hours of volunteer work as part of the requirement of their programme. Governmental employment/unemployment schemes or the community service in correctional or rehabilitation institutions are some other examples.

5. *Overtime* volunteers are employees who work outside their official working hours to achieve “organizational objectives” which are not part of their job descriptions. This type of volunteer work is more prevalent in voluntary and non-profit organizations where the employees are very committed to the organization’s goals.

6. *Intern* volunteering: In this case volunteering is seen as gaining experience for future gainful work, while there is not an obligation for people to volunteer but usually the pressure from the labor market leads them to carry out internships.

I have used different definitions and portraits of volunteering and volunteer work to give a glimpse of the complexity and diversity of the field. People volunteer with different motivations and for different purposes and aims. The definition of volunteering that I am using in this thesis shares the same basic criteria with the UNV definition; an activity which is: 1) being conducted voluntarily and completely out of freewill 2) is not remunerated 3) benefits the wider community. As much as I personally value volunteer work in both informal and formal contexts, for the sake of academic rigor and consistency (for more explanation, see chapter 4) I have chosen to focus on a specific volunteer programme which is full-time volunteering in the context of an organization’s projects. Thus, this research does not cover learning which happens in the form of informal, spontaneous or on-time/occasional volunteering.

As Shugurensky and Mundel (2005, p. 9) conclude: “the existence of a diversity of motivating factors for doing volunteer work presupposes, at least as a hypothesis, a diversity of learning experiences”. Having tried to define volunteer work as it is used in this study, I now move forward to the next section to explore the relationship between informal learning and volunteering.

3.3 Informal learning and volunteer work

“Being a volunteer transforms people’s perceptions of themselves, their emotions, and their knowledge of the world around them”

(Haski-Leventhal & Bar-Gal, 2008, p. 96)

Learning seems to be at the heart of every volunteering experience. As research shows, volunteering is an arena in which different forms of learning unfold; however, unfortunately, a considerable part of these usually stay unrecognized by both the volunteers and the organizations (e.g., Percy, Barnes, Graddon, & Machell, 1988; Ilsley, 1990; Brandstetter & Kellner, 2001; Cox, 2002). Similarly, learning is not often mentioned among the key factors that people give as the reasons for engaging in volunteer activity (Percy et. al, 1988; Ilsey, 1990; Cox, 2002; Duguid, Slade & Schugurensky, 2006). For the majority of people, volunteering and learning seem to have a one-way relationship in which volunteerism provides an opportunity to put into practice previously learnt skills and knowledge rather than being seen as an arena of learning itself. “The dominant perception is that we acquire skills and knowledge in educational institutions and to a lesser degree through our paid work, and then we can put our acquired knowledge and skills to social use through volunteering” (Shugurensky, Duguid & Mundel, 2010, p. 83). Another factor which makes the two-way relationship between learning and volunteering less visible is that learning is often seen as passive/reflexive or only associated with formal educational structures, while volunteering is seen more as engaging in action and doing things (Shuguresky, Duguid & Mundel, 2010). For instance, Cox (2002) in his research found that volunteers from four different UK formal volunteer training programmes usually identified their activities as “doing” rather than learning (p.166).

What makes learning in volunteer work remain unrecognized to a great extent is the nature of such learning which is tacit and thus difficult to identify. While most organizations arrange on-arrival or in-service trainings, workshops, and seminars or assign mentors to teach the new volunteers how to perform certain tasks, almost all research has shown that non-formal education only comprise a small portion of what volunteers learn and that much of the learning that happens is informal (Ilsley, 1990; Elsdon, 1995). For instance, in his study of a series of voluntary organizations, Percy et al. (1988) finds out that along the formal teaching, assessment, and certification, volunteers learn informally (learning by doing, observation, experimentation and social interaction). In another research, Weller (1993) confirms that most of the learning among credit union volunteers in the UK has been informal and hands-on type.

Despite the strong link between informal learning and volunteer work, the scope, characteristics and dynamics of such learning in volunteerism remain widely under-researched:

“The relatively small body of literature on informal learning pays little attention to volunteer work, and the relatively small literature on volunteer work pays little attention to informal learning. The dearth of research on this topic, then, can be largely explained by the combined marginal status of volunteer work in the literature on work and of informal learning in the scholarship on education. This is compounded by the fact that both voluntary organizations and volunteers themselves have paid little attention to issues of learning, because their main focus is on “doing stuff”, usually with the time pressure and a scarcity of resources”
(Schugurensky et. al, 2010, p 80).

As discussed in the previous chapter, towards the end of the twentieth century, thanks to the momentum created by the reemergence of the concept of lifelong learning, educational researchers started to explore the field of adult informal learning more systematically out of which some studies on informal learning and volunteering also emerged. In one of the first studies of this field, in a four-year research on volunteering in the United States, Ilsley (1990) described volunteers’ learning in three categories: instrumental/didactic, social/expressive, and critical reflection. While the first category refers to the standardized training programmes and courses to equip volunteers with the basic tools for their work, the second and third categories result from volunteers’ experiences. In this categorization, social learning was defined as “communication, trust, respect” and critical reflection as “turning inward and deliberately analyzing one’s own politics, values and priorities as well as those of the society” (Shugurensky & Mundel, 2005, p. 14-15).

The First Canadian Survey of Informal Learning Practices, conducted in the frame of one of the first initiatives in this context, New Approaches to Lifelong Learning (NALL) at University of Toronto, found that community-volunteer work time and community-related informal learning are much more strongly correlated than paid employment time and job related informal learning (Livingstone, 1999). In another pioneering research project on volunteers’ informal learning, Elsdon (1995) confirmed that informal learning leads to significant changes

among volunteers which he categorized under the following categories: “personal growth, confidence, interpersonal skills, empowerment, organizational learning, and ability and willingness to take responsibility”. Foley (1999) explored informal learning among volunteers and social movement participants in the United States, Australia, Zimbabwe, and Brazil. He highlighted that a significant part of learning in his case studies was implicit and embedded in the everyday working routine of the organizations (ibid, p.1).

Between 1998 and 2000, a study which aimed at identifying different informal learning process in volunteer work was conducted as the first phase of a project on “Learning within Voluntary Commitment” with the participation of eight partner organizations from Germany, Austria, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, and Great Britain. The results (Brandstetter & Kellner, 2001, p. 8) categorized what volunteers have learnt under the following themes: 1) Content/thematic-based learning 2) Social learning 3) Personal learning 4) Political learning 5) Occupational learning.

The Work and Lifelong Learning Network (WALL), another initiative by the University of Toronto, in the past decade has conducted a series of case studies under a project titled the “Informal Learning of Volunteers”. The project, which focuses on learning processes and outcomes experienced by volunteers, seems to be one of the most focused and extensive studies on informal learning in volunteer work to date. Through various case studies the project has explored informal learning within various groups of volunteers; for example, informal learning by the members of Toronto Senior’s Task Force (Schugurensky & Myers, 2008), community health volunteers’ learning in the province of Ontario (Mundel & Schugurensky, 2005), learning of volunteer board and committee members in housing cooperatives in Toronto (Mundel, Duguid, & Schugurensky, 2004 & 2006), learning acquired by immigrant volunteers who wanted to get a Canadian experience (Schugurensky & Slade, 2008), volunteer learning in Red Cross (Akingbola, Duguid, & Viveros, 2007) as well as international studies on learning experiences of volunteers in participatory budgeting in different cities across North and South America (Schugurensky, 2006; Lerner & Schugurensky, 2007; Pinnington, Lerner & Schugurensky, 2009).

Findings from these studies confirm that a great amount of knowledge, skills, and values are acquired by volunteers, a great part of which is context-specific. Among other things, the above NALL and WALL research highlight the instrumental skills, interpersonal and communications skills, advocacy skills, political efficacy, self-government skills, institutional and political knowledge about the organizations, specific issues related to the mission of organizations, and a broader understanding of social realities (Schugurensky, Duguid, & Mundel, 2010).

As the literature shows, most of the research has been in the form of case studies, which explore informal learning in certain groups of volunteers ranging from immigrants in Canada to women activists in Australia. Although there have been some studies on informal learning among elderly volunteers (Narushima, 2005; Shugurensky & Myers, 2008; Cook, 2011), insufficient attention has been given to research on youth and volunteer programmes which specifically have been designed for this age group. Further, compared to the pioneering research in Canada, the field of informal learning and volunteer work is relatively unexplored in Europe, which is quite odd considering the continent's long history in recognition of lifelong learning policy and practice.

It is from the recognition of this gap that I am writing this thesis with the hope that it can be a modest contribution to the emerging field of volunteering and informal learning and may be a small step in giving voice to the young volunteers' learning experiences in Europe.

3.4 European Voluntary Service (EVS)

An initiative from European Commission, *European Voluntary Service* was introduced in January 1996 as a pilot action for 1996-1997. At the end of 1996, it was decided that *European Voluntary Service Community Action Programme* would be implemented in 1998-1999 (Youth Archive, 2006b). Between 2000 and 2006, EVS became one of the actions of the *YOUTH* Programme which was the Commission's programme for young people at the time. *YOUTH* gave its place to the more elaborate *Youth in Action* for the period 2007-2013 which is the EU programme to promote active citizenship, solidarity and tolerance among young Europeans and

engage them in forming the future of EU. Since 2007, EVS has been one of the five actions⁵ of the *Youth in Action* programme (European Commission, 2012).

Under this scheme, the youth (aged 18 to 30) residing in European countries can participate in full-time and nonpaid voluntary service (minimum 3 months, maximum 12 months) in an accredited organization in a foreign country (within or outside the EU). The programme provides the participants with tickets and accommodation as well as insurance and a monthly allowance to cover living costs. Any EVS project requires three key players: a sending organization, a host organization and a youth volunteer. Through collaboration with the sending and host organizations, volunteers look for projects in their areas of interest and/or expertise and apply for placements. The programme service spans a wide range of areas, such as culture, youth, sports, social care, the arts, civil protection, the environment, development co-operation, and so on. There are regular application rounds per year and the *Youth in Action* website maintains a database which potential volunteers can use to search for open vacancies in different countries.

Based on the statistics published on the tenth anniversary of EVS in 2006, approximately 30,000 volunteers had participated in EVS in the period 1996 to 2006 (around 4500 volunteers only in 2006) with a participation ratio of female 70% and male 30% (Youth Archive, 2006a).

3.5 Learning in EVS

Promoting the principles of lifelong learning, European Commission introduces learning as one of the most important features of all *Youth in Action* and as a key instrument in non-formal and informal learning in a European dimension. Against this background, European Commission calls EVS a true learning service where volunteers develop new skills and enhance their personal, education and professional capacities. On a practical level, all volunteers through collaboration with either the sending or the host organization should develop a personal learning plan. This learning plan includes the expected learning outcomes and the processes

⁵ “Action” refers to different schemes of the Youth in Action programme. The five “actions” are: 1. Youth for Europe 2. European Voluntary Service 3. Youth in the World 4. Youth Support Systems 5. Support for European Cooperation in the Youth Field.

and methods which would help the volunteers to achieve those (Youth in Action Programme, 2011).

Based on the *Youth in Action* guidelines, participants in certain actions are entitled to receive a *Youthpass* certificate which describes and validates the non-formal and informal learning experience and outcomes acquired during the project.

3.6 Youthpass

Youthpass is an instrument that confirms a person has participated in EVS and documents the skills and knowledge acquired through this participation. It aims to bring the learning dimensions of the voluntary service to the forefront and ensures that the participation is being recognized as an educational experience. Moreover, as European Commission mentions it is an effective tool to make volunteers aware of the learning aspect of their experience:

“By following the learning process and preparing the learning outcomes for Youthpass, volunteers need to plan, follow and assess their own learning. Most volunteers have experience with learning in formal education; like school or university, but it might be the first time that they find themselves in a situation where they themselves will be responsible for their own learning and development. In this sense, Youthpass can improve and increase the learning within an EVS project, and the Youthpass Certificate makes this learning visible” (Youthpass in EVS, Info Toolkit, 2011).

Youthpass is based on eight key competences for lifelong learning which were adopted by the European Commission in 2006 (Official Journal of the European Union, 2006/962/EC). As a reference instrument for policy makers, educational institutions, employers and individuals, these areas of competence which have been considered essential by EU for “adapt[ing] flexibly to a rapidly changing and highly interconnected world” (European Commission, 2007, p.3) are:

1. Communication in the mother tongue
2. Communication in foreign languages
3. Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology
4. Digital competence
5. Learning to learn

6. Social and civic competences
7. Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship
8. Cultural awareness and expression

3.7 Why EVS?

Prior to the research, I was familiar with EVS to some extent. However, in order to be sure that it is the right option for the purpose of this study, I identified a number of substantial reasons for selecting EVS. Going through the programme documents and publications as well as talking to some of the former volunteers convinced me that it is one of the best options available for such a study.

First, EVS is a full-fledged volunteer programme, created, funded and supported by the Council of Europe and being implemented in a number of EU and non-EU countries. This means that not only there is already a substantial amount of literature on the programme's background and objectives, its evaluation and its future perspective but also significant time and systematic effort has been put into designing, evaluating and modifying it over the years. Moreover, the European dimension of the programme makes it a more relevant topic for a thesis coming from a European university. Furthermore, the width of EVS can mean that I can hope that the findings of the study could be interesting to a wider range of people -both in Finland and in Europe- those who are engaged in EVS on different levels, whether as host or sending organizations, programme coordinators, mentors and above all volunteers themselves. Last but not least, one of the key points that confirmed the choice of EVS as a case study for me was the level of importance that the programme explicitly gives to the learning dimension in volunteer work. Guides and handbooks on non-formal and informal learning have been published for both organizations and volunteers. On arrival trainings, mid-term service evaluation, regular workshops, seminars and volunteer get-togethers which are part of the programme provide more opportunities for volunteers to share and reflect on and evaluate their learning experiences. Learning has been given such an importance that volunteers cannot start their assignment without having an explicit personal learning plan. Based on the EVS and *Youthpass* guidelines, every volunteer is assigned a mentor whose responsibility is to develop and

maintain a dialog with the volunteer about learning and to provide a chance for volunteers to reflect and deepen on their experience and what they have learnt. Moreover, *Youthpass* is quite a distinctive feature of EVS which brings the informal and non-formal dimensions of volunteering to the attention of the participants. For the reasons above, the width and breadth of the programme, its relevance to me as a student of a European university and the central role it gives to non-formal and informal learning along with the tools it employs to document and recognize the volunteers' learning, I found EVS a suitable case for my study.

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 The background

In this chapter, I describe my research design and methods of data collection and analysis to give readers the possibility to verify the reliability and validity of this study for themselves (Kvale 1996, p. 209). Based on my research questions, the main methodological issue in front of me was how to find the best research approach and methods for finding what young people learn informally when they get engaged in volunteer work. From the very beginning, I knew that the young volunteers are central to this research and it is their perspective and their perception of their learning that I want to reflect.

Looking at the literature, I realized what is needed for getting into the depth of informal learning is “a process of self-reflection, of remembering, expounding, [and] providing examples” (Strumpel, Grilz-Wolf, & Kellner, 2004, p.22) for which I found a qualitative approach to be most well-suited. As Newby (2010, p. 115) mentions qualitative research is concerned with “understanding how people live their lives, the meanings they give to their experiences and their feelings about their condition” and it is most effective when we are looking for “how and why things happen as they do” (ibid, p 116).

Considering the vast world of volunteering and its various conceptualizations, I realized that for my research to be practical, systematic and to have meaningful results, it needed to be based on a specific case. The breadth of the field of volunteerism would have made it very difficult, if not impossible, for me to go much further without focusing on a single case as the grand differences between the circumstances and experiences of different groups of volunteer would have made comparison unreliable. Hence, the decision to choose one specific group of volunteers and focus on them; a study of “a particular” (Stake, 1995), “a detailed examination of one setting” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p 59) with “real people in real situations” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 289) was what I found most well-suited to the nature of my academic inquiry.

As Bogdan & Biklen (2007, p.59) beautifully describe the general design for a case study is similar to the shape of a funnel with the researcher starting at the wide end where a lot of uncertainty exists regarding the subject of the study, the source of data, data collection methods, the details of the sample, etc. As they go forward and make decisions, they learn more about the topic, the work finds a focus, and the scope of the study and the data collection methods get narrowed down and become specified. This description truly resonates with my experience as a novice researcher. What is more, looking back, I can see how choosing a case for my study has helped me to move from the “broad exploratory beginning” phase of my research to the “more directed data collection and analysis” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p.59).

I have explained the reasons behind choosing EVS as a case for my study in the last section of the previous chapter. It goes without saying that the fact that I am only studying full-time, non-paid, organized/formal volunteering does not suggest that I undermine the value of other forms of volunteering and their learning dimensions. This has been a methodological and practical choice which I had to make in order for my research to be manageable, focused and with reliable results.

4.2 The challenge of elicitation

Almost all of the researchers who have explored the theme of informal learning refer to one common methodological challenge: “elicitation” (Shugurensky, 2006a). The challenge of elicitation is to come up with a data collection strategy that can elicit information about the tacit, invisible and taken-for-granted informal learning. Knowledge, skills, attitudes and values acquired this way, usually remain “tacit and unable to be described symbolically” (Livingstone, 2006, p. 203). Eurat (2004, p. 249) makes the observations that the respondents themselves are not aware of their own learning as they regard it part of their “general capability” rather than something they have learnt. The tacit character of such learning also results in people’s general tendency to underestimate the total amount of their informal learning (Livingstone, 2006, p 207, Shugurensky, 2006a). As Polanyi observes “*we can know more than we can tell*” (1967, p. 4). Thus, the main methodological challenge in developing research design is for researchers to

identify the right questions or create the right opportunities needed for informants to elicit an answer which explores the depth and breadth of their learning experiences.

As the literature shows, due to the elicitation challenge, in exploring informal learning, providing the informants with open-ended interview questions, like “what have you learnt?” or self-administered questionnaires have proved to elicit little substance, if any at all. Most researchers have found themselves in situations where they had to use combined data collection strategies or go back in modifying their methods at a later stage in their research. Shugurensky (2006a) describes the way he devised an effective research strategy to elicit interviewees to talk about their informal learning experiences. Asking his interviewees what they had learnt as a result of their participation in a participatory budgeting project, he produced answers that were either “nothing” or “very little”. Recognizing this methodological challenge, he went back and redesigned his research plan. Creating a list of indicators and learning outcomes and using a five-point Likert scale, he would go through the list item by item, asking the interviewees to evaluate themselves by giving one score for their level of competency for each indicator before their participation in the project and another score at the time of the interview. Wherever, there was a change in the scores, he would ask them to give some explanations of why and how the learning had occurred and he would encourage them to share stories and give examples. What was interesting was that at the end of interviews, many interviewees would mention that they had not realized how much they had learnt up to that point. Thus, the interview would provide a moment of reflection, allowing the interview to become a learning opportunity in itself for both the researchers and the interviewees.

Livingstone (2006) believes that more “inclusive approaches” to study of informal learning such as “direct observation in situation” and “in-depth interviewing” are the key to making the invisible informal learning more visible. For the researchers in the European transnational research project *Voluntary commitment and Adult Learning* (Brandstetter & Kellner, 2001), narrative and biographic interviews as well as moderated group discussions proved effective means of data collection. Eurat (2004) found it helpful to talk with his research informants about the knowledge and skills required for performing their job and then letting them explore where and when those skills and knowledge had been developed.

Regardless of the specific data collection strategies each study employed, all emphasize the importance of “self-reflection, of remembering, expounding, [and] providing examples” (Strumpel, Grilz-Wolf, & Kellner, 2004, p. 22) in the attempt to overcome the difficulty of eliciting information about informal learning. It is important to remember that these evolving research studies on informal learning have only so far “*scratched the surface*” (Livingstone, 2006, p. 207).

4.3 Data collection

The data for this study has been collected through qualitative interviewing; a method which sees conversation central to knowledge generation among humans (Cohen et. al, 2011, p. 409). According to Rubin & Rubin (1995, p. 1) interviews enable the researchers to understand the experiences in which they had not participated themselves. They provide “in-depth information pertaining to participants’ experiences and viewpoints of a particular topic” (Turner, 2010, p. 754) and create a space where different interpretations of the world can be discussed (Cohen et. al, 2011, p. 409). As Cohen et. al (2011) observe almost each source of qualitative research has its categorization of different types of interviews usually covering a wide range from strictly structured interviews to life history narratives or from individual to collective interviews. For the purposes of this study, I have found the individual semi-structured interview/interview guide approach most apt.

In semi-structured interviews, there are often some topics or themes, laid out in the format of an interview guide, which can be discussed in the course of the interview as opposed to a fixed set of questions which characterizes structured interviews. This gives the interviewers some level of freedom to pose the questions whenever they see fit so long as they are addressing the themes or the topics. They can also offer clarifications or reword the questions for respondents, if needed. Usually, there are only few pre-set questions, and the interviewers can ask follow-up questions or open up the discussion with questions that were not originally planned to be asked (Newby, 2010, p 340). Semi-structured interviews are usually used when the researcher wishes to understand the participants’ experiences of similar situations and at the same time be sure that the obtained data can be compared across subjects (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 104) which was the situation I found myself in.

Being familiar with the challenge of eliciting information about informal learning from participants (discussed above), I found it essential to use a type of interviewing where I can have in-depth discussions with the informants about their experience as well as a series of learning indicators or learning themes to shape our discussion. Following Shugurensky's (2006a) strategy of having learning indicators, I decided to use the EU eight areas of competencies for lifelong learning (Official Journal of the European Union, 2006/962/EC), also listed in the *Youthpass*, as themes guiding the interview.

The interview guide had an opening where I would start with general open-ended questions about volunteer's personal background and details followed by some general aspects of their EVS experience. Then, the more structured part of the interview would begin where I would go through each area of learning with the interviewees and they would report if they felt there had been a change in their level of competence before doing EVS and at the time of interview. If yes, we would discuss the nature of the change and what they felt they had learnt. At that stage, they were encouraged to share stories and give as many concrete examples as they could to illustrate their learning. After discussing the eight themes, there was the closing part with a few more general open-ended questions. This was also a time for the participants to share any other significant learning experience that was not discussed within the frame of the eight themes.

Inspired by Shugurensky's methodology (2006a), I initially had planned to ask the participants to give themselves two scores on a Lickert scale for each competence, so that whenever a change was reported, we could talk more easily about it and its implications. However, unlike Shugurensky's interviewees, my informants found the practice of scoring themselves a bit impractical and difficult to maintain. Some explicitly mentioned that they were not comfortable using numbers to evaluate their competence and that they were more willing to describe the change they notice in each area verbally. Some would start by scoring themselves for the first two or three competences and then at some point along the way, they would get so much engaged in the discussion about learning that they would naturally skip the scoring stage. My approach to tackling this inconsistency was to let the conversation takes a natural course and flow without my reminding the interviewees of what I was wanting. I realized that the main purpose of using a Likert scale by Shugurensky must have been to make the interviewees aware

of the change in their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and to prompt them to talk about their learning experiences. I realized that with my group of volunteers, a basic awareness of the learning dimensions of their volunteer work had already existed (for reasons discussed in the following chapters). Thus, insistence on getting quantitative data from the interviewees would most probably only impose unnatural constraints on my respondents. Moreover, I had no intention of doing a quantitative or mixed methods study. Thus, the use of figures was only for the volunteers themselves to have a chance to think about the scope and magnitude of their learning. Therefore, I decided to leave it to the respondents whether they wanted to use the Likert scale or if they preferred to use qualitative measures to describe their learning. The main part of the interview which was the elaboration and description of learning was, of course, discussed with all interviewees.

Prior to conducting my official interviews, as a “pilot” interview, I had the chance to interview one of my friends who had done EVS before. This was a very helpful practice as it provided me with an opportunity to practice my interview skills and receive feedback. Moreover, I could evaluate my interview guide and make some changes based on my own observation and my friend’s comments.

Finding interviewees for the research was undertaken through a combination of different approaches. I used several online EVS groups and networking platforms to spread the word about my research and invite those current and former volunteers who were interested to be part of this study to contact me. This initial call for participation was a very general announcement with the overall themes of my research (informal learning and youth volunteer work) being outlined very loosely. More than 70 volunteers expressed their initial interest and requested more information. At this stage, a more detailed message with information about the interview process was shared with the potential candidates. Out of these 70 volunteers, around 20 confirmed their readiness to be interviewed. Parallel to this, I also used the snowballing technique by asking my informants to either forward my message to other volunteers who might be interested to participate in the research, or to pass their contacts on to me upon their approval.

Eventually, with these methods a total of 12 interviews were conducted in October and November 2012. In the final interviews, noticing that little new information was being obtained, I realized I have reached the “point of saturation” (Kvale, 1996, p. 102). Hence, I decided not to use two of the interviews for two reasons. First, the English levels of the informants were quite limited; and second, the information was redundant. All interviews were conducted in English and recorded on my personal laptop and iPad with the consent of the interviewees. On average, the interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes to one hour, with the shortest being 35 minutes and the longest being one hour and half.

4.4 Interviewees

As explained in the previous chapter, EVS attracts very diverse participants as it is open to all young people aged 18-30 residents in a “Programme Country”, a “Neighboring Partner Country” or an “Other Partner Country of the World”⁶. Therefore, the volunteers’ age, country of origin or county of EVS has not been a determinant in selecting my sample. However, I have made sure that my sample represents the diversity of participants. As for gender representation, the only statistics available from 2006 shows a participation ratio of 70% female and 30% male (Youth Archive, 2006a). The higher number of female volunteers was also evident in the responses I received to the call for participants in my study. Thus, I did not try to find equal numbers of female and male interviewees and preferred for my data to be a reflection of the real gender distribution in the programme.

Following these measures, this study reflects and analyzes the views of 10 EVS volunteers- five former⁷ and 5 current, three males and seven females. Table 4.1 shows a summary of the profile of the interviewees and figure 4.1 is a map showing the country of origin and the country of EVS for the volunteers I interviewed.

⁶ For a full list of these countries, please refer to the appendix 2.

⁷ In selecting former volunteers, care was taken that the period of volunteering has not been more than one year so that the results remain valid and reliable.

Table 4.1. Profile of the interviewees

Name⁸	Country of Origin	Country of EVS	gender	Duration of EVS	Type of project/organization
Laura	Finland	Poland	F	9 months	After-school center for underprivileged children
Tania	UK	Latvia	F	12 months	Teaching English in a youth/cultural organization
Celine	France	Latvia	F	9 months	Working with the disabled
Carlos	Portugal	Macedonia	M	6 months	Youth center
Peter	Bulgaria	Romania	M	9 months	Youth/cultural center
Emma	France	UK	F	12 months	Shelter for homeless and troubled youth
Mike	Czech Republic	Belarus	M	12 months	Modern Art gallery+ Youth NGO
Sonia	Georgia	Poland	F	9 months	Teaching English to the unemployed
Mona	Hungary	Italy	F	9 months	Youth organization
Carolina	Italy	UK	F	12 months	Community art center

All interviews were done individually, as I found it essential to get to the depth of each individual's experience through one-to-one interaction. Moreover, individual interviews would let participants to talk about their learning experiences more comfortably and without any group pressure. Individual interviews would also guarantee more confidentiality. As I wanted to keep my sample a true reflection of the diversity EVS participants who come from different countries, all of the face-to-face interviews – except one, for which the interviewee was in Finland- were conducted online and via Skype.

⁸ All real names have been changed.

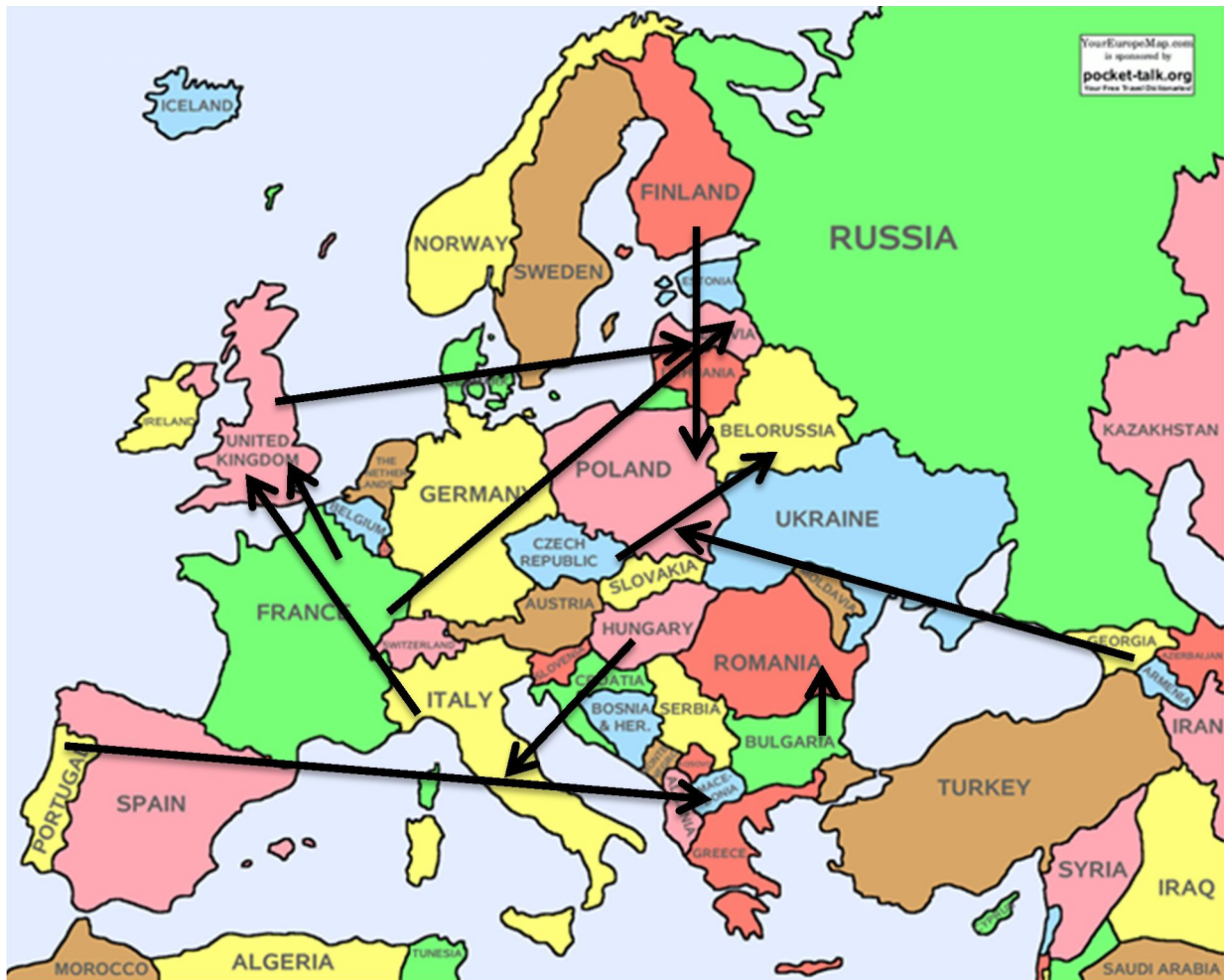


Figure 4.1. Map of the interviewees' country of origin and country of EVS. Applied from the Political Map of Europe, from www.youreuropemap.com

4.4 Data analysis

The data analysis in this study started at the time of the data collection by looking for tentative recurrent themes and assessing the relevance of the research questions to the interview guide. Bogdan and Biklen (2007, p. 160) recognize this “thinking and making judgment” at the time of data collection a vital step for qualitative research analysis. After the data collection, all the interviews were transcribed followed by a short break from the data which again Bogdan and Biklen consider necessary for gaining perspective (*ibid*, p. 172). It was only later that I started the official data analysis systematically by going through the transcripts and doing the initial coding. The themes were identified through the interviews themselves. However, it was not a simplistic, linear process and involved going back and forth several times between the data, the

theory and concepts and the findings from previous research. Through this process, I reformulated some of the codes, in parts combining some themes, in others breaking some broader themes into narrower ones. Finally when a fixed set of codes was reached, all the data was marked accordingly. Choosing an outline to report the themes, further analysis of the data was made based on the literature and my own interpretation.

4.5 Methodological limitations

Like any other research methodology, my research methodology had its limitations. In this case, some of the general limitations of qualitative interviews as well as limitations specific to my topic have been observed and acknowledged.

One general limitation of interviewing is that the researcher can never be sure that the responses the interviewees provide are truly a reflection of what and how they think and feel. This becomes more complicated in research on informal learning as there is no way to be sure that self-reported learning is consistent or not with the actual learning. In self-reporting, the interviewees might have a tendency to provide “politically correct” answers or answers which they feel the interviewer expects to hear (Shugurensky, 2006a). To address this limitation, I tried to make it clear to my participants that this study is not an evaluation of their performance and that they should not feel pressured to address all different themes of learning if it had not been relevant to their experience. I feel it has also been helpful to encourage the participants to illustrate their learning with examples and stories as this would bring the discussion from the abstract level to concrete level where one can judge the consistency between self-reported learning and actual learning more easily.

I am also aware of the limitations the use of English as a second language might have imposed on the study; for instance, two potential participants had shown interest to be interviewed but in their own mother tongues- German and French. I also felt that in two of the interviews, which I later decided not to use, the limited knowledge of English had reduced the richness and quality of the data as the interviewees were not able to express themselves as explicitly as they wished.

Last but not least, I am aware that the ideal would have been to physically meet the volunteers not only for the interviews but also to be able to observe them as they work in the organization (for current volunteers) and to use observation as a method of data collection. However, this was not practical as this was a case study of EVS as a whole and not limited to one country. Thus, the financial and time constraints along with the scope of a Master's level thesis made it impossible for me to travel to meet all the volunteer informants and the online interviews were found the most practical approach.

4.6 Ethical issues

Ethical decisions arise in all phases of a study including; thematizing, data collection, and data analysis. I tried to identify typical ethical issues that might arise in a qualitative study and to familiarize myself with ethical codes and ethical theories so that I could make informed and ethically sound decisions throughout the study.

In the phase of data gathering and interviewing, every effort was made to follow ethical guidelines such as informed consent, confidentiality and consequences (Kvale, 1996, p. 112). Participation has been absolutely voluntarily with the participants having the right to withdraw at any point they desired. All were given clear and transparent information about the purpose of the study and its features, as well as the methodology and how the data was going to be used. All the participants were given the chance to ask for clarifications or for more information at any point they needed. They were also told that if they did not feel comfortable answering certain questions, there was no obligation to do so. Written and verbal consent was collected from all those who volunteered to be interviewed and they all approved for the interviews to be recorded.

To guarantee the confidentiality of the interviewees, all real names have been changed and personal details such as age, gender, country of origin, country of EV have only been disclosed where the informants had given their approval. Moreover, the participants were only asked to describe the overall area of the activity of the organization and the type of work they were involved in and the name of organizations for which they volunteered were never collected during the interviews.

It has been explained for the interviewees that this research is an independent personal study for my Master's thesis and it has not been sponsored by nor has any links to the EU, Youth in Action, EVS, or any of the host and sending organizations. It has also been highlighted that this is not an evaluation of EVS or the informants' personal performance and the identity of the informants as well as the transcript of the interviews and their personal information would not be shared with any third party person or institution.

5 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the findings from the data analysis as they relate to the research questions of this study as outlined in the first chapter. As explained in more detail in chapter 4, through 10 individual interviews, former and current EVS volunteers shared their recollections and personal accounts of their learning. Although each individual had a unique learning experience, this section seeks to find and analyze the recurrent themes and topics which emerged during conversation with volunteers.

In an attempt to address the first research question, I will start by presenting what the data tells us about informal learning in EVS, its nature, its different forms and pace, what can enhance it, and so on. I will, then, address the second research question and explore what volunteers believe they have learnt with the findings being organized in four categories: learning about and in relation to one's self, interpersonal learning, learning about the world, and development of instrumental skills.

5.1 The learning of EVS volunteers: An overview

Reaffirming the findings from the literature on informal learning and volunteering, my data suggests that EVS provides a great learning opportunity for participants even though volunteers usually were not concerned about or much aware of the “learning” potential of EVS at the time of application. When asked whether learning has been a motivation for their decision to volunteer, most interviewees admitted that they either had not been thinking about learning at all or that they had been only partially motivated by learning a new language or developing their existing foreign language skills. Three out of ten also mentioned that they wanted to get some hands-on practice in the area of their studies. For these volunteers, professional learning was part of their motivation.

Despite their lack of awareness about or motivation for learning, almost all of the volunteers mentioned that they were motivated by wanting to have “new experiences”. What is interesting is how, at the time “experience” and “learning” stayed far and disconnected in their minds. For instance, Peter emphasized that when he applied for an EVS placement in Romania, he was not

thinking about learning but getting a new experience: “*I didn’t take this project as something that I will learn from...for me, it was more like a challenge, a new experience, an opportunity to see something different*”. Echoing the same sentiments, Sonia said “*I think I was more thinking what will I experience but maybe also experience will teach you something but I don’t think I was thinking about like specific what will I learn*”.

In most cases, volunteers said that they would regard everything as a new experience without attaching any “learning” dimensions to it. It was only later during their volunteering when they had a chance to revisit some of those experiences either in reflection (personally or in discussion with friends, mentors and colleagues) or because of EVS’ ongoing discourse on informal learning and its emphasis on learning reflected in Youthpass and other volunteer support mechanisms, that the experience would become a learning experience or a learning episode. In the below quote, Peter explains how and at what point he discovered the learning dimension of his experiences:

“Now I realize that I learnt all of this through this project but when I go back then when I was meeting with these people and when I was doing these things I was thinking more all of these things are just new experience. I didn’t take them as something that I learnt. It was more just like something that I experience. When I was making my Youthpass with my supervisor, I started realizing that I actually learnt all of those things. Then, I started realizing that these experiences are learning, not just experience but learning lessons and different things in my everyday life.”

Peter’s comment interestingly confirms Emma’s perspective, who was still a current volunteer at the time of interview and who had not completed her Youthpass or had the chance to reflect upon the whole experience: “*I am not aware that I am learning these. I am aware that I’m living something different... I need to go back to my former life, at least to my country to realize what I have learnt.*”

Experience as the foundation for human learning is not a new theme. One of the central theories of the field- Kolb’s theory of experiential learning (1984) - considers learning as a

cycle of concrete experience, observation and reflection, formulation of abstract concepts and testing the implication of concepts on new situations. As Shugurensky, Duguid & Mundel (2010, p. 92) observe, although Kolb's model is relevant, it is not precisely applicable for understanding the type of learning from experience in volunteer work, as the everyday experiences of volunteers are different from planned learning activities. Moreover, Jarvis (2010, p. 77) mentions that the model although a good "springboard" for further research is found to be too simplistic to illustrate the complex learning processes in everyday life. In understanding learning from experience as the EVS volunteers describe it, I have found Jarvis' (2010, p.81) model discussed in chapter 2 (see figure 2.1) to be more insightful.

Living in a different country and culture, being new to the world of work, and having new responsibilities, EVS volunteers see many discrepancies between their perception of the world and what they are actually confronted with, a phenomena which Jarvis calls "disjuncture" and recognizes as the starting point of the process of learning from experience. As with his model, the data from EVS volunteers also confirm that only those experiences which are given some thought/reflection or involve the volunteers' emotions or lead them to some action would result in learning.

In their recollection of the learning experiences, volunteers referred both to specific learning events (episodic memory) and to generalized knowledge that transcends particular learning episodes (semantic memory). As illustrated above, almost all of interviewees said that most of the times they were not aware of what they were learning in a specific situation and that learning only happened later when through some other means such as personal reflection or discussion with some friends about the situation, they revisited what had happened. As for the learning which has not been specific to a certain learning episode, usually reading their diaries and blogs or hearing comments from others on their attitude or behaviors would let them assess themselves before and after their EVS experience, get a grasp of the width and breadth of their learning and see the extent to which they had changed, which in most cases would come as a surprise.

As one of the interviewees mentioned not all the volunteers are equally capable or interested in uncovering what they are learning in the everyday work of the organizations; *“it depends on how you are ready to catch the things”*. It is this ability to “catch” the learning moment, the consciousness to see how your attitudes or mindset are being reshaped in the middle of the hustle and bustle of everyday work that tools such as Youthpass and personal learning plans try to foster by creating a dialog on learning. As mentioned by volunteers, on-arrival, midterm and final trainings as well as the preparation and submission of Youthpass as a personal learning plan provide this opportunity for them not only to become aware of their own learning but also to submerge in a discourse on and around learning. Thus, despite the fact that the volunteers had not been initially motivated by learning as they started their EVS, they developed a growing understanding of concepts such as informal learning and they were sensitized that their experiences can lead to meaningful learning. Sonia, for instance explains how her understanding of learning has changed during her EVS time in Poland: *“of course when I am opened up to new discoveries, to new international environment living abroad, it’s all about learning. I was not conscious about it from beginning but I found out here in Poland about it.”*

Although in principle, in EVS, learning is brought to the forefront by the structure and design of EVS and Youthpass, the data shows that not all organizations give the same level of importance to create opportunities for reflection and conversation on learning or to supervise and guide volunteers to pursue personal learning plans. Beyond the conversation around completing the Youthpass which is obligatory and happens between the volunteers and a mentor/coordinator, the rest seems to depend on the individual volunteer’s enthusiasm and determination as well as the organization’s initiative and commitment in managing the volunteers’ learning.

While most of the volunteers said they did not receive much support from the host organizations and their mentors in addressing their learning needs, Carolina, a volunteer, in the UK, was extremely happy with the arrangement that her host organization had devised to manage learning of her and three other EVS volunteers. Having just started the ninth month of her volunteering at the time of the interview, she explained that from the beginning, every month they have had a group volunteer meeting with the project coordinator in which each one

of them would identify certain learning objectives and present them in an individual learning plan for the coming month. They would also share the highlights of their learning in the past month and try to help each other see how their experiences have taught them something new or how they have been able to develop new skills. As Carolina mentioned, such learning management measures not only are helpful to each individual to get into the right frame of mind for learning, but they also create the right dynamics between the organization and the volunteers and among the volunteers themselves to support each other; *“It’s better for everybody because we are more happy, we are aware of our learning, and we are proud of ourselves and they can manage us better, you know... what we want to achieve, what they want, what they need us to do. So we find always a good balance. We try to. I think it is good also to be... I feel responsible, not responsible, but in charge also of the learning of other volunteers. That’s because we share and so sometimes we just remind each other, you said that you want to do it, why aren’t you doing? So we try to motivate each other”*.

Another factor conducive to learning which Carolina highlighted was a supportive and encouraging working environment in which the staff had always time for the volunteers and enhanced their learning experience. From the very beginning, despite their limited language skills, she and her fellow EVS volunteers were encouraged to get engaged in the work of the organization and try and learn from their mistakes without the worry of being looked down upon or feeling embarrassed. Laura’s experience, on the other hand, had been completely different. She recalled the start of her EVS and how she had been feeling lonely, insecure, frustrated and not knowing where to look for support as she felt nobody in the organization had time for her: *“I was asking like many weeks from the mentor from the beginning “when can I do this?” or “what about if we do this?” and I always got... the feedback was “we’ll see, we will talk about it later”. First weeks, I was just washing dishes and just being with the kids in a corner because I didn’t know what to talk about. It was really hard. I was expecting they [the organization] would come to me and they have a list of stuff that these are your duties; for example, on Wednesday you’ll do this. But it was nothing like this. My duties in the beginning were serving the lunch, washing the dishes and I don’t know what else. I didn’t know the language and I was really shy.”*

Some of the informal learning acquired by the volunteers would fall under the category of self-directed learning. This has been mainly the case where volunteers felt that they needed to learn something because of the certain tasks they had been assigned in the organization. For instance, one volunteer who was working at a school said he spent a lot of time reading and learning about Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) because he thought knowing this approach would help his job as he was specifically interested in using NLP methods to motivate the kids he was working with. Similarly, volunteers who were teaching their native language as part of their everyday work felt the need to learn more about their mother tongue by reading about its grammar rules and structure as well as getting familiarized with teaching methods and class management strategies. Self-directed learning also could be used to describe most of the efforts that volunteers made in order to study the local language on their own. These included reading books, using self-study materials, listening to radio or watching movies with subtitles with the purpose of learning the local language. One volunteer also mentioned that she had made friends with some local university students just for the purpose of practicing the language and she would arrange one or two evenings of get-together every week where they would only speak in the local language.

Another type of informal learning which could be observed through volunteers' accounts was incidental learning which is unplanned and unintentional but conscious. This was quite common in many areas of professional skills development; for example, using the language outside the classroom in everyday situations, learning how to start and run a meeting, or how to use social media to promote their organization, how to use office machines and gadgets such as a printer, copier, scanner, and so on. In all of these, while the volunteers had not planned to learn these beforehand, learning happened with volunteers either being directly instructed by a senior colleague how to perform these tasks or just developing the skills, by observation, participation and learning from trial and error: *"I was working with the social media team, with people that knew about it. So for the first hours, I was working with them and they were always there explaining to us at the beginning of what they were doing, why they were doing it and then when I felt I understood, I became more independent doing these things by myself. I've never been shy to ask people please explain me. I don't understand. Can you explain in a*

simpler language? Because I didn't understand. It's important to me to be humble and to ask people when you don't understand, you don't know, you don't have to pretend!" (Carolina).

Despite the above examples of self-directed and incidental learning, the greater part of the informal learning of volunteers falls into the "grey area of socialization" (Shugurensky & Myers, 2008, p. 87) which is known as tacit learning. All the interviewees revealed some level of awareness of such learning with some being more articulate about it than the others. In general, former volunteers were more articulate and expressive about this type of learning which can be due to the fact that they have had more time to distance themselves from the lived experience and to extract more learning episodes. Moreover, completion of Youthpass had helped the former volunteers to arrive at a higher level of awareness on tacit learning than the current volunteers who had not completed the Youthpass at the time of the interview. Other techniques that volunteers had found effective to create or raise an awareness of their tacit learning was to keep a diary or to write a blog or in general use any tools that could record how they were before doing EVS and how they have changed in the process. All of the former volunteers talked about this gradual change and how tacit and invisible this change was during the time they were volunteering, but it became more apparent when the EVS was over and they returned to their home countries or to their regular life.

Tonia, a volunteer who kept a blog and a diary throughout her EVS mentioned how reading her diary was like a learning experience in itself and how it made her aware of her own character change: *"[Going through my blog] I realized I complained awful a lot. I actually ended up taking it off the internet because I'd just spent the first 3 months complaining about the problems I had. I did end up keeping the diary. So I do have it written down, everything that I did. [...] The complaining thing completely changed. From somewhere in January instead of complaining I just speak about where I've been and what I have done!"*

Overall, the data from EVS volunteers shows that volunteering can be a meaningful site for learning and it has a great potential for different forms of informal learning. Volunteers reported different types of informal learning such as self-directed learning, incidental learning and tacit learning. In line with Jarvis' (2010) model of learning from experience, the accounts

of EVS volunteers showed that for an experience to lead to learning there needs to be an element of thought or reflection in any disjuncture with the world, whether at the level of action or emotion. In the case of EVS volunteers, unlike many other volunteer programmes where there is not much opportunity for reflection and analysis (Shugurensky, Duguid, & Mundel, 2010, p. 92), some space for reflection is provided in the policy and practice of the programme. This is evident through document papers of the Youth in Action and EVS programme as well as volunteers' on-arrival and in-service trainings, the mentoring system and the Youthpass.

5.2 What do EVS volunteer learn?

To present the findings in relation to the second research question, I have organized the EVS volunteers learning in four different categories: learning about and in relation to one's self, interpersonal learning, learning about the world and acquiring instrumental skills. It should be noted that learning experiences of volunteers, both episodic and holistic, usually bring elements from each of these categories together. In real life experience, learning under each of the themes is highly related and interlinked with the others. However, for the purpose of this thesis, I find such categorization gives me a better framework to explore different dimensions of volunteers' learning.

5.2.1 Learning about and in relation to one's self

Volunteers are at the center of learning. It is their "whole person" (Jarvis, 2010, p. 39) that goes through new experiences and learning; thus, it is not surprising that a great part of the learning that the volunteers reported was either discovering something new about themselves, figuring out where their talents and interests lie in terms of academic and professional life, or developing a new understating of their own language and culture.

Discovering a new aspect of their own character was one theme that almost all volunteers talked about. Several volunteers said that they had surprised themselves at many points. They had learnt about some of their until-then hidden capabilities or inner qualities that they never thought they possessed.

“It was a surprise for me because I think I am not, I don’t have... I don’t know, maybe I am not the best to deal with kids but then I think I found something good about me because I realized it was ok for me to deal with kids. It was important.”(Carlos)

“For me to go abroad, and to make an EVS was something that I thought I am not able to do this. It was always for others. I am not able to go abroad, and to start a new life and to speak another language. And so I was kind of looking myself about everything and I decided one day that ok let’s do it! Just try! and now I realize that I was able to do it and that I did it quite well. Why not? I am able to be completely independent!” (Celine)

Considering the age range of EVS volunteers, a lot of these personal self-discoveries influence their life trajectories by shaping their study or career plans and giving some direction to their lives. Several of the volunteers talked about having found their career interest during their EVS. Except the three volunteers who had applied to EVS to get some hands-on experience in the area of their studies, the rest had not come with any specific learning goals related to their future profession. However, several of them reported that their time volunteering helped them know what they are best at doing and what kind of career they want to pursue in the future.

Younger volunteers, i.e. between 18-20, who had taken a gap year between high school and university to do EVS, although did not have specific career plans, believed that EVS had helped them to know what they want to study or it had given them a general idea of what kind of career they would like to have. Even the volunteers whose everyday tasks in their EVS project were quite irrelevant to their current studies or career interest, still thought that they had learnt something about their professional life through EVS. Tonia, for example, who had done her EVS between high school and university and was now studying Graphic Design, said *“Me, the fact that I worked in an office, has no relation whatsoever to what I want to make of my career...but at least I learnt I never want to work in an office again!”*

However, for older volunteers (those who had done EVS after graduation with a first or second degree from university), the learning in relation to their future career seemed to be more concrete. In other words, they seemed to be better able to connect what they had learnt during EVS to their future professional life. Sonia, who was doing the last month of her EVS teaching English to the unemployed in Poland, was thinking of getting an official professional certificate

for teaching English. Carolina, also a current volunteer at the time of interview, said that if there is one thing that she has learnt in EVS that is what kind of profession she would like to have. Two of the older former volunteers also had interesting shifts of career because of what they had discovered about themselves during their volunteer work. Carlos, who prior to his EVS, had a regular office job, realized that he is best at working with people and he wants to have a job in which he is directly dealing with people. His self-discovery made him change his job and he now works in a youth hostel. Celine, a graduate of Social Work and one of the few volunteers who had come to EVS to get more practice in her field of study, discovered her passion for languages when she was asked to teach her mother tongue, French, as a side project to her main work with the people with disabilities. She became so interested in teaching that she left her EVS post one month earlier than intended, so that she can be back in France in time to start a degree in teaching French to foreigners. She hopes to bring both her social work background and her new passion for teaching together by becoming a language teacher for immigrants and refugees in France.

Another area of learning related to this theme was the volunteers' growing understanding and awareness of their own culture. I found this particularly interesting as often what is highlighted in youth exchange or volunteer abroad programmes is learning about new cultures and foreign languages. However, as many of the interviewees expressed, living abroad and interaction with people from different countries provide a chance to look back at one's own culture and to see how as individuals we are shaped by the environment we have been growing up in and how we can take a more active role in relation to a lot of our long-held assumptions, thoughts and behaviors. As Carolina mentions in the below quotation, living abroad can help one to understand her society better, to appreciate its positive points and to see its flaws and problems.

"I think to live abroad in general makes you more aware of how you behave in your society, or you have a more deep civic sense after the experience abroad. I feel that now I can appreciate more some things about Italy also about the society or I can see more clearly our limits and problems of our society today. I am not an expert but I am more aware of the situation now I think than to be at home." (Carolina)

It is quite interesting to see how volunteers' time away from home gives them more space to think about their own societies and get more perspective. Natasha, for example, started to appreciate aspects of her own culture that she had not noticed ever before.

"Maybe it sounds a bit strange but I went to Italy and I really liked Italy but I realized I really like that I am Hungarian... I am not nationalist but I realized that I really liked my culture when we had some intercultural nights and we had different topics about the kitchen, dancing, music, etc., I could always mention something about Hungary... I only realized this in Italy."

However, this realization was not always necessarily positive. It seems that as one starts to take a new look at his or her society, and compare and contrast it with other cultures, there are also the less pleasant aspects of one's culture, things that might have been always taken to be normal, which suddenly appear not so pleasant anymore. Sonia, for example, mentioned when in the middle of her EVS she went home for few weeks of holidays, she started to question so many aspects of her culture and society that were normal to her before: *"Georgian culture is much more conservative and maybe I have become much opened up. Nowadays, it gives me a little bit of shock when I hear something or what I thought nine months ago was quite ok and now it's a little bizarre, not acceptable so of course."*

Tonia, who through interaction with her flat-mates thought her country's education system was inefficient emphasized that time gives you the space to realize the flaws of your own country; *"it is not until that you are actually thrown into a situation and you are there more than a week that you realize how stupid this country is. I love my country but..."*. Likewise, Celine spoke of how her interest in Latvian culture made her realize that what she found interesting in the new culture was what she could not find in her own society and in a way the process of getting to know the new culture became a learning experience about her own culture and her own society's values.

"I thought a lot about my own culture and the one I was in and what I have learnt is one of the most important points in my EVS ... because I have learnt all the things I really like in Latvia, I also find all the things I really don't like in my culture [laughing] because of course if you compare, all the things I was really loving in Latvia it's because they are missing in my

culture... I think we lost a lot of values and I find them in Latvia, the values which are important for me. So, I thought a lot about my culture and things I don't like about it."

5.2.2 Interpersonal learning

A wide range of skills, attitudes and knowledge that volunteers reported to have acquired are related to working with others and can be summarized under the theme of "interpersonal learning". Living with other volunteers from different countries, working in multicultural environments, and engaging in projects with local communities, all the volunteers admitted that relationships with others and communication skills formed the bedrock of their learning. This is in line with the findings from Shugurensky and Mundel's (2005) review of literature where they identify social learning (interpersonal and communication skills) as the most frequently cited benefits by community volunteers (p. 15).

Among the interpersonal and communication skills mentioned by interviewees were learning/improving their knowledge of a foreign language, getting their message across with more ease and efficiency, improving listening skills, developing more tolerance and understanding, gaining public speaking/writing skills, conducting meetings, learning how to deal with difficult situations and becoming aware of the importance of cultural sensitivity.

Knowledge of language and language skills are at the heart of communication. All volunteers reported learning or improving their knowledge of the local language. Although most volunteers had access to formal language courses, they all unanimously admitted that they had picked up the language from environment while trying to use it on a daily basis or practice it through self-directed learning methods such as reading books, listening to local news, using online resources and so on.

In addition to the foreign language, all interviewees, including the one native English speaker, reported improvements in their English skills as it has been their main working language. For the majority, this improvement has been in terms of expanding the knowledge of their vocabulary and expressions, becoming more fluent, developing oral and written comprehension competences, and learning about different styles of speech and written work. It is interesting to note that the learning has not just been mechanical; for instance, Peter described his

improvement in English in the following words: *“I started to think in English. I learnt how to express my feelings, my emotions and my thoughts in much better way, in more fluent way. I learnt how to negotiate and... mainly I learnt how to drop barriers before starting practicing the language.”* Only one of the volunteers, who was volunteering in the UK, said that she attended a formal English course. For others, similar to learning the local language, their English language improvement was solely informal and through everyday use of the language.

Moreover, one aspect of communications that some volunteers pinpointed was learning the difference between being proficient in a language and being able to communicate effectively. As most volunteers had limited knowledge of local language at the beginning, they had to learn how to get their message across using non-verbal codes in situations where they could not use English. As Sonia put it: *“I understood it is not about learning a language but finding a way to communicate”*.

Volunteers made different comments on their learning about their mother tongues. Those who had the chance to teach their mother tongues believed that their understanding of their own language had increased and they had at least learnt something about the structure or the grammar of the language. The rest of volunteers, however, felt that as they did not have much chance to use their mother tongue, their language skills had temporarily become a bit rusty. However, they all admitted that the overall communication skills they had acquired would also apply to communication in their mother tongue.

In addition to language skills, volunteers spoke of improvements in general communication skills such as listening skills, showing tolerance towards different voices and perspectives, gaining leadership skills as how to run a meeting or facilitate a discussion or group work, how to negotiate, or present ideas and arguments logically and effectively. Along these oral communication skills, there were also reports of improvements and learning in written communication. For example, because of their responsibility in the projects, some had learnt to write reports or to apply for funding by writing grant application. A more common form of verbal communication skills was learning different styles and formats of correspondence, such as official letters, business emails, inter-organization memos and so on.

Another dimension of interpersonal learning that several of the volunteers referred to was learning how to deal with conflict in daily relationships, both at the workplace with their colleagues and supervisor or at home with their flat-mates. For most of the younger volunteers, their EVS was the first time they lived on their own and also shared accommodation with other people. For some of them it was also their first time living abroad. Except for one or two of the volunteers that I interviewed, the rest did not have any previous working experience and thus were totally new to the work environment. Considering all these factors, it was not surprising that the volunteers talked about conflicts or feelings of frustration and despair in their relationships with others. However, what was interesting was how some of them had been able to learn from those negative situations.

Tonia, who for the first time was living on her own, said she and her flat-mate, also an EVS volunteer at the same organization, had issues with each other and at the end they decided to live apart. However, she said through the experience she had learnt that *“not everybody is the same in the same situation. I did know this, but it was different in the situation”*. She also realized that in creating an understanding of the problems and resolving conflicts, it is good to talk about what bothers you. In her case, she had realized she was not *“good at voicing my side of the story...until later, and then it just fell apart.”*

Laura, a young volunteer who in her own words was not even used to “fighting” or “screaming” in her family, found it quite frustrating to have a boss who had rather a different style of communication. However, *“face[ing] negative things in more positive ways”* was one of the most valuable things she believed she had learnt in her EVS. The below description of the first conflict that she had to deal with at work is an impressive example of how with the right attitude and some reflection, an unpleasant encounter can become a life-lasting learning episode:

“Because in my life in Finland I don’t have fights, like in my family we don’t yell but there I experienced many these situations. And first I really panicked. I wanted to run away from the room. I thought I was going to cry because this person was upset. She was yelling at us in Polish about something that she didn’t like that we were doing and because it was in the beginning and I had been there only one month, we didn’t understand at all what she was saying. It was the most confusing thing ever because I felt really that there is someone saying

negative things about me and I couldn't respond but I think after this I also learnt how to behave in a negative situation better because they came a lot of these things. Also, at the different situations where you know someone was saying something negative to you. You knew it from the face but you didn't know what and why, what they were saying. I think at least that was something that I learnt. I learnt to react maybe more like cooperative way. I kind of tried. Because really in this situation I remember, I was yelling back in English/Finnish. I was a bit ashamed after that. Because I didn't know how to react, so I reacted with the first things that came to my mind which was not really good but after that I learnt really a better way how to cooperate in the negative situations. We were talking about the situation long time and then I also got to know my boss better I also got to know that actually she wasn't being so angry as I thought because she was just the kind of person who says things in a different way..."

Last but not the least is learning about the importance of cultural sensitivity in interpersonal communication. Cross-cultural communication is not easy and "sensitivity to cultural norms and values" increases the communication competence, while ignoring the cultural differences can result in "unsuccessful and unrewarding interactions" (Trenholm & Jensen, 2008, pp. 386-391). The interviewees gave examples of learning about the importance of understanding cultural differences for effective communication in everyday encounters they had. For instance, one of the volunteers recalled that acting upon her own cultural norms, instead of inviting guests to a party in person, she had used a note in the building to invite them which resulted in her guests' being offended and not showing up. For another volunteer, this learning about the importance of cross-cultural awareness occurred in her work as the coordinator of an art festival where she was in charge of corresponding with more than 600 artists from different countries:

"What was great is that I worked for this festival so I've been in contact with people from different nationalities for six months or more because I helped a lot with emailing them or in the communication and also we realize how many misunderstanding you can have just because you don't know the culture of the other people. So when you want to be professional or you have a specific question, sometimes you can just misunderstand because you don't know each other."

5.2.3 Learning about the world

Gaining a new understanding about the world beyond themselves, and the broader cultural, social dynamics of the society they lived in was another recurrent theme of all interviews. Learning under this theme more than anything else was in relation to meeting new people and getting new insights into different cultures and lifestyles.

Many times volunteers talked about how much their EVS has helped them see and appreciate the diversity of human cultures. Above that, they realized that despite all the differences in race, religion, ethnicity, language, and lifestyle, we are the same in our human identity. For instance, for Carlos, it had been fascinating to live and work with people from different backgrounds and religions and to feel that despite the different traditions and customs, they are the same.

“In Macedonia, there are really different cultures and I had the chance to know more about those cultures and their traditions. I was there with Muslims, or orthodox Christians and people with no religion at all and we were all together, we were all talking, we were all happy and we did a lot of things. Before, I never had the chance to live with people from different communities, especially from other religions. In Macedonia, there are three or four different communities living together and they were all open, at least I felt it, that they were open for everyone and for me. So I never had any problems. It was important for me to see... nowadays in the news they say oh Muslims and Arabs! [Laughing] You will have problems with them, but if you meet them you will see, if you meet them, if you talk with them you’ll see that they’re human beings and you should be open for everyone. We are all the same.”

Carlos was not the only volunteer who had come to a new level of cultural awareness and was able to identify cultural stereotypes in the media. Several other volunteers also echoed the same sentiments in developing awareness about people from different cultures and the ability to see beyond social and cultural stereotypes. Peter, for example, talked about how he learnt to see people as individuals instead of putting them in pre-set frames:

“I hadn’t been outside from Bulgaria except maybe only for few trips for few days but that doesn’t change anything. But when I spent more time with people from different cultures and nationalities and understanding their way of life, I started accepting them. In a way, not

judging them, by their culture, or nationality or the color of the skin, or whatever... you know when you say this person is from this nationality you put him in a frame for what you know about this nationality, but since I went to this project and all the time I am meeting with different people. I understand that everyone is an individual and it doesn't matter from where you are. It's important who you are."

Such international encounters and cultural learning also made some volunteers think of the arbitrariness of "geographical borders" or social constructs such as "nationality" or "citizenship". Some volunteers had started to see the socio-political arrangement of the world today from a new angle. Sonia, whose EVS was her first time abroad, believed that living in a house with people from twelve countries has shown her that we can all identify ourselves and communicate with each other as members of "one international environment" instead of belonging to a certain country: *"you are realizing that maybe there's no borders between you, no nationalities, just one thinking, just international environment..."*.

Mike and Carlos who were doing their EVS in non-EU countries had become familiar with the limitations in international mobility imposed upon people from certain countries, such as the need for a visa from a foreign country or the need to have an exit permit from the state.

"If you want to go to a country sometimes you need a visa, but we are all human. You know? So, it's a bit crazy. Maybe it doesn't make any sense, but if we are all humans why do we need visas? If my country is Portugal we are not better than other countries! So, why shouldn't we have people from other countries here? Why should we create for them problems to come here?" (Carlos)

"Belarus is a close country. People, if they want to travel abroad, they have big problems to get a visa and it costs them a lot of money and people there are poor so they can't afford to pay the money. Even if they have the money, they are sometimes not in touch with foreigners at all and they don't have access to free information. Because, also you if you want to go to Belarus, that's also hard. The regime is trying to give the visa only to few people." (Mike)

Finally, it is important to note that despite the above positive social and cultural learning, some of the volunteers had "negative learning experience"- a term used to describe the kind of learning which "does not contribute to the community well-being" (Shugurensky et. al, 2010,

p.88). For instance, several volunteers seemed to have made pre-mature generalizations based on a single negative experience or based on cultural and social stereotypes. For example: *“So many people say that Italians are a bit chaotic. You know... I really like the people and the country and the language, but I think it is true. They were such a mess.”* (Natasha)

5.2.4 Instrumental learning

All volunteers reported to have acquired “knowledge and skills that helped them to perform in the particular context of their volunteering work” a type of learning which is known as instrumental learning (Shugurensky et. al, 2010, p. 87). Areas such as IT and computer use, finance and budgeting, social media, (self-) management, research, and communication and entrepreneurship were often mentioned as areas where a vast amount of learning had taken place. In some cases, volunteers reported having learnt something totally new; while, in others, the EVS had provided an opportunity to deepen or develop previous skills and knowledge. Aside from the communication skills, which I discussed in the previous section, I will now explore the other areas of learning in more detail.

The volunteers who were working in an office often reported having learnt how to use office machines and equipment such as the fax machine, scanner, copier, printer, video projector, etc. Depending on the nature of their tasks, some had learnt or become proficient in using certain softwares and computer programmes and maintaining and updating websites. Others had learnt how to use social media such as Facebook or Twitter for networking or promoting the cause of their organization. Regardless of their specific tasks, several volunteers said that they had improved their information retrieving skills as they had to look for information relating to their work or information for survival in the new country.

In addition to the two volunteers who were directly in charge of writing grant applications and applying for funding in their organizations and who as a result had developed certain skills in budgeting and financing, several other volunteers stated that they had learnt something about managing their daily finances usually in relation to the monthly allowance that they received. When it came to self-management, volunteers spoke about acquiring time management skills; learning how to prioritize and be flexible. Many mentioned developing strategies to cope with stress or to work under the pressure of deadlines.

Almost all volunteers talked about learning in areas related to developing their sense of initiative and entrepreneurship in regard to the projects they were involved in. Several of them admitted that they had to create tasks for themselves as the organizations sometimes did not have much to give them to do. This of course would not only create an opportunity that volunteers could find their own interests but also it would require knowledge and certain skills in proposing ideas and implementing them. For instance, Peter, who had managed to successfully implement his idea of running workshops with different topics for school children, believed that the most important thing that he had learnt in EVS was how “to put ideas into action”. Mike, another volunteer, who on his own intuitive was organizing weekly documentary screening at his organization, talked about how in the process of bringing this idea to life he had learnt how valuable and helpful having a network of like-minded people and organizations can be and how vital it is for a start-up project to establish such contacts. In his case, the support of the local university and his home country embassy had proved very valuable for the success of his project.

Most of the instrumental learning had been tacit with volunteers being able to retrieve the learning episodes afterwards through reflection. Most said that observation and learning from their colleagues had been really effective. Interestingly, in some cases, respondents said that they had learnt by taking note of the inefficiencies or shortcomings they saw at the work. For example, talking about management skills and working under tight deadlines, Tonia said that out of her boss’s unsuccessful approach in tackling deadlines, she had learnt that delegating tasks can be a much more effective strategy.

5.2.5 Summary of the findings on volunteers’ learning

I found that volunteers acquire a wide range of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values through their volunteer work. As Shugurensky, Duguid and Mundel’s (2010) case studies show, the learning seems to be very context-specific and also dependent on the individual volunteers’ motivation, interests and personal history. Among other things, EVS volunteers gain new understanding about themselves, their talents and interests as well as discovering aspects of their personalities that they had not explored before. This rising self-awareness also extends to their perception of their own culture and social norms. They develop interpersonal and communications skills at a level which allows them to live and work more easily in multi-

cultural environments, to get their point across and to be able to handle difficult situations with confidence and positive attitude. Thanks to the international nature of EVS, volunteers also reported learning a lot about other cultures and ways of life as well as moving beyond some of their stereotypes. Volunteers also developed instrumental skills, ranging from IT to management or form financing and budgeting to research skills, as part of the work they are doing. While there has been no other research on informal learning in EVS to compare these results with, the overall findings from my research are consistent with prior studies on the topic.

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore youth volunteer work and to see how and what young volunteers learn as they engage in community volunteering. In the previous chapters, building on the concepts and theories of lifelong learning, informal learning and volunteering, I explored the nature and the content of informal learning among young volunteers of the EVS programme. This thesis is not an evaluation of EVS nor does it aim to measure its success or failure in organizing and managing learning of volunteers. EVS has been a case which, as explained in chapter 3, I found as my best option for the purpose of this study in understanding learning as it happens in youth volunteer work. Having said this, however, I feel there are certain aspects of EVS and Youth in Action in relation to learning which in the light of the current data can be discussed further. It is to this that I have dedicated the greater part of this last chapter.

6.1 Discussion

As presented in chapter five, the results of the study confirms the richness of informal learning in volunteer work and the potential of volunteering as a site for learning. EVS volunteers reported acquiring a wide range of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values which I discussed in the four categories of learning about and in relation to one's self, interpersonal learning, learning about the world beyond and instrumental learning.

The role of EVS Youthpass in bringing a learning dimension to the experiences of volunteers is one of the first points that I would like to discuss here. While measuring the real impact of Youthpass on volunteers and their learning would require further research, my data indicates its overall positive role in introducing the concept of learning to the volunteers and creating a space for reflection and dialogue on learning.

As Shugurensky and Mundel (2005) conclude, having a reflection space and reflective moments can contribute a lot to the learning experience: “the narrower the repertoire of volunteer experiences offered by the organization, and the scarcer the opportunities for reflecting on those experiences, the weaker the likelihood of significant learning and growth

among volunteer participants” (p. 17). From this perspective, besides being an RVA tool of non-formal and informal learning outcomes, Youthpass can be seen as an attempt to create enabling structures for volunteering and learning. Considering the fact that thinking and talking about informal learning for young volunteers is usually a new practice, the critical role of Youthpass in shaping individuals’ perception of their own learning becomes even more apparent. In other words, the language and the structure of Youthpass as a document can shape volunteers’ understanding of their own learning.

I do not intend to explore in depth the complex relationship between language and thought. However, I find it helpful to use Sapir-Whorf’s hypothesis that “language determines the way we interpret the world” (Trenholm & Jensen, 2008, p. 100). According to this hypothesis, the process of “naming” makes it possible for us to emphasize certain aspects of our reality by being able to think and talk about something, which we might have not noticed if there was no name for it. Trenholm and Jensen (2008), for instance give the example of an expression such as “sexual harassment” which did not exist in our vocabulary until recently. Although the behavior that it refers to has existed for a long time, as there has been no name for it, it was not “recognized, lacked legitimacy and victims had no way of defining what had happened to them” (Trenholm & Jensen, 2008, p. 101).

The implication of this political theory of language for a document like Youthpass can be both positive and negative. On one level, as discussed before, Youthpass makes it possible for volunteers to think and talk about learning by giving names to their experiences. It gives them a vocabulary and language which make them aware of what they are going through and enable them to communicate this to others. As much as this is a positive function, its danger lies in the fact that it not only describes learning, but it can also prescribe it. In other words, it might become very difficult for volunteers to recognize and articulate those aspects of their learning which are not incorporated in Youthpass. I believe, at present, this influence of Youthpass on the volunteers learning is even more critical, as documents like Youthpass are the only source which gives volunteers a tool to think and talk about their informal learning.

This of course does not make Youthpass any less valuable, but it calls for more sensitivity and awareness on the part of the programme organizers, host and sending organizations and mentors to provide more opportunities and spaces for further reflection and discussion on learning as to create a richer and more holistic language to talk about learning. Moreover, it would be imperative to make sure that Youthpass is as holistic and precise as it could be in describing the potential learning outcomes of volunteering work. At present, Youth in Action programme is using Youthpass in a single format as an RVA tool for all its programmes such as youth exchanges, training courses and EVS. Considering the differences between the nature, structure and objectives of each of these programmes, it is not hard to imagine that a uniform document as such would overlook unique learning outcomes specific to each of these schemes. In the light of the above, modification of Youthpass to reflect the specific learning outcomes of volunteering seems to be essential for enhancing its effectiveness.

The second issue that I would like to discuss here is an elaboration of what I found missing from my data. While the volunteers I interviewed talked a lot about a range of different learning in relation to themselves and the world around them, almost none of them mentioned learning about social justice issues or developing attitudes and dispositions oriented towards the common good. I am not coming up from a standpoint that issues of social justice and change are things that all volunteers have to deal with, but in the case of EVS volunteers I expected this to be one of the common aspects of learning as volunteering in EVS is defined as working specifically in the non-profit and social service sector. In other words, all the projects in which EVS volunteer work have the purpose of contributing to common good and positive social change in their communities. My interviewees were working or had worked on projects addressing the problems of the people with disabilities, the unemployed, immigrants and refugees, poor and disadvantaged children or youth and so on. In such a context, I found it odd that none of the volunteers, even on my prompt, mentioned learning about the social problems they were trying to address or about the oppressive social structures that had left certain groups or communities at a disadvantaged position at first place. Similarly, I had imagined that through

volunteering, a sense of commitment to greater good and social justice would be developed in young people, which again is an issue that rarely came up in the data.⁹

I do not interpret this gap in my data as indicating a lack of interest on the side of volunteers in what they are doing or any lack of altruistic sentiments for contributing to positive change. Rather, this represents a neglected aspect of their work which has also been perpetuated by the host organizations, Youthpass, and the discourse on volunteering and learning as conceptualized in EVS.

Unfortunately, the way the programme operates means that some of the volunteers end up working to “provide charity without examining why charity is needed in first place” (Vanderdussen, 2009, p. 29). As Claus and Ogdan (1999) discuss, such an approach to volunteer work often “*leaves unturned fertile opportunities to engage youth in investigating and reflecting on their own lives and the roots of the circumstances they address. It also often neglects the potential of service to educate and empower youth to act on their world for the purpose of improving it*” (pp. 2-3).

While EVS is far from volunteer-tourism programmes (Simpson, 2004) that have mushroomed in recent years, as the programme expands if the participating organizations are not selected with care and monitored regularly, there is no guarantee that it would not go in the same direction. If enough care and time is not given to raising volunteers’ awareness about the importance of what they are doing and the complex social contexts in which they work, their volunteer service would reduce to a mechanical act devoid of any real significance for positive change. In this sense, EVS would remain far from its objective in raising responsible and engaged citizens who are committed to work towards social justice in their communities.

In addition to the host organizations, the way Youthpass is structured also has its impact on this aspect of volunteers’ experience. In its current format, the Youthpass’ emphasis is on eight areas of competencies which put the individual volunteer at the center, perpetuating the illusion

⁹ As presented in the previous chapter, in relation to some specific issues (e.g. international mobility and visa restrictions), some participants showed an increase in their awareness of inequality, but that was still far from a commitment to social justice.

that the value of volunteering is all about the benefits the individual volunteer gains. As explained, the format of Youthpass used for EVS is the same as the ones issued for youth exchange and training courses, which make one wonders where in the document, learning is accounted for in relation to the concept of volunteering as contributing to social justice in a community.

Although the benefits of volunteer work to the individual volunteer is undeniable, reducing volunteering only to an avenue for personal advancement and self-fulfillment, diminishes the empowering potential that it can have on youth in becoming active and committed agents of change. In Claus and Ogden's words: "the potential of service to educate and empower youth to act on their world for the purpose of improving it" (1999, pp. 2-3) would be neglected. Moreover, such conceptualizations of volunteer work, with a superficial understanding of the complex problems being addressed, in which "the privileged" and the "lucky" (Simpson, 2004) of the world help the underprivileged and the unlucky ones, not only would not contribute to positive social change but would "perpetuate, if not exacerbate, existing forms of social injustice and oppression" (Vanderdussen, 2009, p. 25).

On one hand, in the current discourse of lifelong learning and employability, informal learning in EVS has been developed more in terms of its impact on equipping the youth with competencies they need in the labor market. On the other hand, "developing the volunteer sector and civil society" is one of the rationales behind EVS (Hove, 2009, p. 6). The unprecedented growth and expansion of non-profit sector in the last few decades, the "global associational revolution" is a phenomenon of our time: "massive upsurge of organized private, voluntary activity in literally every corner of the world, prompted in part by growing doubts about the capability of the state to cope on its own with the social welfare, developmental, and environmental problems that face nations today" (Salamon, Sokolowski and List, 1999). Against this backdrop, it is important to notice the great potential of EVS in raising and educating large numbers of youth who, besides having professional capabilities and skills for employment, possess an understanding of the complexity of social justice issues and above that a high sense of motivation and willingness to contribute to improvement of their communities.

This, in my opinion, would be a win-win situation for the EU commission and similar public institutions that invest in youth volunteer programmes.

6.2 Future research

Considering the limitations of this research in terms of time, geographic scope, and the type of volunteer work studied, future research would be essential to further explore the themes related to informal learning in youth volunteer work. At the level of EVS, comparative studies of learning between EVS volunteers and other full-time organizational volunteers can shed light on specific aspects of EVS such as Youthpass, mentoring, training and support mechanisms, with valuable results policy formation and implementation of youth volunteer programmes.

In the context of *Belem Framework of Action* and the ongoing UNESCO efforts in meeting its commitment to develop guidelines for RVA of learning outcomes of non-formal and informal learning, studies focused on Youthpass as an RVA tool can yield valuable results. It would be insightful to study the impact of EVS on volunteers' learning as well as the perspective of the mentors and organizations in regard to the usefulness of the document. Last but not the least, I find it equally important to trace the ways EVS alumni have been able to use Youthpass either as an equivalent, or in compliment to formal qualifications when seeking employment.

On a more general level, comparative intergenerational studies between learning in young volunteers and other age groups would help us understand the dynamics of informal learning and age much better. Moreover, studies on learning among volunteers with little means, from disadvantaged backgrounds or minorities and exploring the role of such learning in shaping the volunteers life trajectories would bring insights into the potential of transformative learning and empowerment in volunteering.

6.3 Conclusion

The result of this thesis confirms that volunteering provides powerful learning experiences for young volunteers. The goal of this research was not to present EVS as best practice, nor was it

a celebration of EVS' success or a critique of its flaws. Rather, its aim was to investigate informal learning in EVS and offer a number of insights into the dynamics of learning through volunteering. It is my hope that the study results in meaningful implications for policy makers and practitioners in the fields of Education, youth and volunteer work as well as the young volunteers themselves.

It is important to remember that regardless of the initial rationale and motivation of young people for volunteering, whether they are motivated with altruistic sentiments and an impulse to change the world or whether their decision to volunteer is based on a sense of adventure to challenge themselves or to explore a new country or culture, volunteering is an invaluable medium for learning. It is a matter of having the support systems and effective mechanisms both in policy and practice to make these young people aware of such learning and give them an opportunity to reflect upon it, articulate it and use it in response to challenges of our time; both in the labor market and in their social life.

At a time when our international educational institutions and world governments have admitted that learning is not just about formal schooling and under the current circumstances, where many of the out-of-school young people in developing countries are engaged in various forms of work both paid and unpaid, the importance of recognizing informal learning in contexts such as volunteering is more pertinent.

To conclude, I refer to the following quotation from the *Belem Framework of Action* (UIL, 2010, p. 11) which speaks to the heart of the current global discourse on youth and adult education and learning. After all, I believe the findings from this study indicate the great potential of volunteering as a site for learning and for “developing self-reliant, autonomous, individuals” who can “build and rebuild their lives” in the complex, interconnected and challenging societies of today:

“Adult learning and education are a critical and necessary response to the challenges that confront us. They are a key component of a holistic and comprehensive system of lifelong learning and education which integrates formal, non-formal and informal learning and which

addresses, explicitly or implicitly, both youth and adult learners. Ultimately, adult learning and education are about providing learning contexts and processes that are attractive and responsive to the needs of adults as active citizens. They are about developing self-reliant, autonomous individuals, building and rebuilding their lives in complex and rapidly-changing cultures, societies and economies – at work, in the family and in community and social life. The need to move to different kinds of work in the course of a lifetime, the adaptation to new contexts in situations of displacement or migration, the importance of entrepreneurial initiatives and the capacity to sustain improvements in quality of life – these and other socio-economic circumstance all call for continued learning throughout adult life.”

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APPENDICES

1. Interview Guide

I. Personal information

1. How old are you? Where are you from? What is your study/work background? What do you do currently?
2. Where and when did you do you EVS? What kind of tasks were you in charge of?
3. Overall, how did you like you EVS experience?
4. If there is one thing that you have learnt in your EVS, what is it?

II. Learning

1. Let's talk about your learning in each of these areas. Please tell me if there is has been any change in any of the below competencies before you do EVS and after (or at this point in your volunteering). If yes, then I am interested to hear what the learning has been. It would great if you can share stories, or anecdotes that relate to your learning.

- 1) *Communication in the mother tongue*
- 2) *Communication in foreign languages*
- 3) *Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology*
- 4) *Digital competence*
- 5) *Learning to learn*
- 6) *Social and civic competences*
- 7) *Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship*
- 8) *Cultural awareness and expression*

Is there anything else that you feel you have learnt but does not fit under any of these categories? If yes, please feel free to discuss it now.

2. In all that we discussed, how much were you aware that you are learning something on the spot? How much of it you only realized later?
3. Which of the things you have learnt is the most valuable to you and why?
4. Was learning one of your motivations at the time of application for EVS?
5. Can you recall one of the best memories of your EVS and what you learnt out of it?

2. List of eligible countries for EVS

Programme Countries

The following are Programme Countries:

Member States of the European Union (EU) ⁷			
Austria	Finland	Latvia	Romania
Belgium	France	Lithuania	Slovak Republic
Bulgaria	Germany	Luxembourg	Slovenia
Cyprus	Greece	Malta	Spain
Czech Republic	Hungary	Netherlands	Sweden
Denmark	Ireland	Poland	United Kingdom
Estonia	Italy	Portugal	

Programme Countries of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA)			
Iceland	Liechtenstein	Norway	Switzerland

Programme Countries which are candidates for accession to the European Union	
Croatia	Turkey

Neighbouring Partner Countries

The Youth in Action Programme supports cooperation between Programme Countries and the following Neighbouring Partner Countries:

South East Europe	Eastern Europe and Caucasus	Mediterranean Partner Countries
Albania Bosnia and Herzegovina Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) Kosovo, under UNSC Resolution 1244/1999 Montenegro Serbia	Countries of the Eastern Partnership: Armenia Azerbaijan Belarus Georgia Moldova Ukraine Other countries: Russian Federation	Algeria Egypt Israel Jordan Lebanon Libya Morocco Palestinian Authority of the West Bank and Gaza Strip Syria Tunisia

Other Partner Countries of the World

Cooperation is possible with the Other Partner Countries of the World listed below which have signed agreements with the European Union relevant to the youth field.

Afghanistan	Gabon	Niue
Angola	Gambia, The	Palau
Antigua and Barbuda	Ghana	Panama
Argentina	Grenada	Papua New Guinea
Australia	Guatemala	Paraguay
Bahamas	Guinea, Republic of	Peru
Bangladesh	Guinea-Bissau	Philippines
Barbados	Guyana	Rwanda
Belize	Haiti	Saint Kitts and Nevis
Benin	Honduras	Sainte-Lucia
Bolivia	India	Saint-Vincent and the Grenadines
Botswana	Indonesia	Samoa
Brazil	Ivory Coast	Sao Tome and Principe
Brunei	Jamaica	Senegal
Burkina Faso	Japan	Seychelles
Burundi	Kazakhstan	Sierra Leone
Cambodia	Kenya	Singapore

Cameroon	Kiribati	Solomon Islands
Canada	Korea, Republic of	South Africa
Cape Verde	Kyrgyzstan	Sudan
Central African Republic	Laos	Suriname
Chad	Lesotho	Swaziland
Chile	Liberia	Tanzania
China	Madagascar	Thailand
Colombia	Malawi	Togo
Comoros	Malaysia	Tonga
Congo (D. R. of the)	Mali	Trinidad and Tobago
Congo (Republic of the)	Marshall Islands	Tuvalu
Cook Islands	Mauritania	Uganda
Costa Rica	Mauritius	United States of America
Djibouti	Mexico	Uruguay
Dominica	Micronesia	Uzbekistan
Dominican Republic	Mozambique	Vanuatu
East Timor	Namibia	Venezuela
Ecuador	Nauru	Vietnam
El Salvador	Nepal	Yemen
Equatorial Guinea	New Zealand	Zambia
Eritrea	Nicaragua	Zimbabwe
Ethiopia	Niger	
Fiji	Nigeria	

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