

Learning to work in certain ways: bureaucratic literacies and community-based volunteering in the Philippines

Chris Millora*

Abstract Concerns have emerged of how the professionalization agenda in the development sector may water down the ‘spirit of volunteerism’ that thrives on community initiative, informality, and flexibility. This paper explores the role of literacy and learning practices in the bureaucratization of community development drawing from an ethnography of local volunteering in the Philippines. Through literacy practices such as preparing community health classes, making budget plans, and writing to government institutions, volunteers were inducted into ‘bureaucratic’ ways of working that, at times, clashed with their expectations and practices of volunteering that were founded on community building, solidarity, and agency. While volunteering could be seen as a means for community participation in development, findings in this paper signal that the formalization and bureaucratization of grassroots volunteer groups may shift the intended community dynamics and volunteers’ expectations, practices, and identities.

Learning and literacy amid the bureaucratization of volunteer organizations

Global development agendas of professionalization and value-for-money influence the everyday lives of various development actors, at different levels – from the management team of large international non-government

*Address for correspondence: Chris Millora, University of East Anglia, School of Education and Lifelong Learning, Norwich, United Kingdom; email: C.Millora@uea.ac.uk

organizations (NGOs) to the local volunteers of a community-based group (c.f. Kothari, 2012; Smith, 1996). While many recognize the role of volunteering in community participation in development (e.g. Rochester *et al.*, 2010), it remains strongly framed as a form of service delivery. Responding to increasing calls for more efficient delivery of aid and services, capacity building and skills enhancement are seen as ways by which development organizations could train their volunteers to offer competent and quality services. Within third sector organizations, volunteer groups were found to adopt ways of working that 'are more traditionally associated with their private and public sector counterparts' such as top-down volunteer management and greater emphasis on outcomes and evaluations (Ellis Paine *et al.*, 2010, p. 98).

This formalization of volunteering is an example of the widespread bureaucratization of various sectors in contemporary society. Following Weber, bureaucracy could be defined as 'formal rule-driven operation comprising professional individuals with appropriate hierarchical delivery structures' (Weber, 1922 as cited in Besley *et al.*, 2022, pp. 398–399). More than an attempt to coordinate large-scale tasks and activities for efficiency, bureaucratization has also been understood as 'a mechanism for exerting power and control over a population' (Jones, 2000, p. 69). Literacy practices play a role in these processes and are therefore, a unique lens by which to understand the bureaucratization of grassroots development. Several studies have found how texts serve as important vehicles to disperse and wield institutional power – regimenting people's actions and moulding their identities through textually-mediated processes such as form-filling, serving demand letters and signing contracts (Sarangi and Slembrouck, 2014; Fawns and Ivanič, 2001; Taylor, 1996). Taylor's (1996) ethnographic study of the lives of drug users and criminals showed how 'bureaucratic texts are used to control the circumstances in which politicals live their everyday lives' (p. 10). Literacy as a means of control was also evident in the experiences of Haitian immigrants in the Dominican Republic as state documents are used to 'manage' them and, in the process, exclude them from basic services in the host country (Bartlett *et al.*, 2011).

As bureaucratization spreads, it likewise facilitates new and shifting relationships and expectations for grassroots development actors like local volunteers (Florian, 2018). For example, research by Ellis Paine *et al.* (2010) found that volunteers are 'threatened with a lot of paperwork/bureaucracy' and that such overwhelming red-tape pulled them away from the more interesting and relational aspects of their volunteer involvement (p. 102). In the Philippines, volunteering remains strongly associated with pre-colonial values such as *bayanihan* (working together as a community because shared problems cannot be accomplished alone), *damayan* (helping a neighbour in

times of personal crisis or grief), or *bahaginan* (sharing of resources no matter how small; [Aguilin-Dalisay et al., 2004](#)). These expressions of volunteerism are far from the dominant framing and practice of volunteering as a formal service delivery model. Therefore, while upskilling could lead to increased social capital, concerns have also emerged on how this formalization may water down the ‘spirit of volunteerism’ that thrives on community solidarity, informality, and flexibility ([Ganesh and McAllum, 2012](#); [Rochester et al., 2010](#); [Milligan and Fyfe, 2005](#); [Florian, 2018](#)).

Drawing from my long-term ethnographic fieldwork with two community-based volunteer organizations in the Philippines, this paper seeks to explore the role of literacy and learning on how bureaucratic forces from state and non-state development actors influence activities, relationships, and identities of local volunteers. I will demonstrate how bureaucratization is operationalized in the information volunteers needed to engage with, documents they were tasked to produce, and the activities they were expected to take part in (and how). As these bureaucratic ways of working permeate everyday volunteering practices, I will also show how they ‘clash’ with more informal and flexible activities founded on community building and solidarity.

Social practice view of learning and literacy

This paper draws from a conceptual framework that frames literacy as social practice (LSP). Within LSP, literacy is seen as more than the autonomous skill of reading and writing and as something people do as part of their everyday lives, shaping their identities and power relationships ([Barton and Hamilton, 1998](#)). LSP is concerned with *social practices* within which literacy has a role – or what is called *literacy practices*. This includes literacies in mundane activities such as following a recipe, reading bus signs, and filling out application forms. I use the term ‘bureaucratic literacies’ to describe literacy practices that involve (or are required by) state and non-government institutions towards more efficient and standardized processes. Because literacy practices are embedded in people’s lives, they are ‘patterned by social institutions and power relationships’ and therefore, ‘some literacies are more dominant, visible, and influential than others’ ([Barton and Hamilton, 1998](#), p. 19). This paper is concerned with dominant literacies ([Papen, 2005](#)) sponsored and reproduced by bureaucratic institutions particularly state and non-state actors of development.

[Foucault’s \(1977\)](#) notion of micropower is a useful concept to unpack how the authority of these bureaucratic institutions remains pervasive in people’s daily lives. He suggests that power is not a ‘property’ that is possessed but something that is exercised through relationships. Although

he frames them as fluid and unstable, Foucault refers to relations and networks almost as basic units of analysis in dissecting power dynamics. In other words, to understand (micro)power, one needs to look at relationships and their modes of action. Following these lines, bureaucratic texts could be understood as technologies of power that ‘determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination . . .’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 80).

Now turning to learning, I draw from Wenger’s (1998) theory of learning in a community of practice (CoP) that likewise puts importance on relationships in learning processes. The primary focus of Wenger (1998) theory is ‘learning as social participation’ in CoP (p. 4). Texts play a role in this theory of learning through what Wenger (1998) describes as reification (c.f. Barton and Hamilton, 2005). Reification refers to the process of giving *form* to participation ‘by producing objects that congeal this experience into “thingness”’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 59). The creation, design, and representation of texts, tools, symbols, terms, and stories are all part of a wide range of reification processes and products in communities. Reification is a vital component of learning because it allows members ‘create points of focus around which the negotiation of meaning becomes organized’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 59).

Taken together, LSP and learning in CoPs are useful conceptual tools when studying how literacy-mediated learning look like at the interface between grassroots development actors (e.g. volunteers) and bureaucratic institutions. They offer insights into how literacies play a role in ‘reproducing or challenging structures of power and domination’ (Street, 1993, p. 9), for instance, in a development organization. Foucault’s theory of power is useful in signalling ‘where to look’ to understand how such dominant power hierarchies are maintained or challenged and Wenger’s notion of reification offers insights on the role of texts in such processes.

An ethnography of local volunteering and learning

This paper draws from some of the findings of an eleven-month ethnographic case study of two local groups in Iloilo City in the central region of the Philippines. My main method of data collection was participant observation. I took extensive fieldnotes as I participated in and observed daily life in the organizations – from helping in community health classes to attending weddings and celebrations. Therefore, my positionality within the two organizations has always been in negotiation as I took on multiple roles such as a researcher and as a volunteer (see also Chadwick, Fadel and Millora 2022; Millora, Maimunah and Still, 2020). I also collected several documentary sources, choosing those

that the volunteers engaged with regularly (e.g. organizational forms) or those that they took part in creating (e.g. letters and budget plans). To complement my observations, I also conducted semi-structured interviews with volunteers, government officials, and NGO staff. I often came with a short list of questions and topics that were foreshadowed by an observation that I wanted to follow-up on or discuss further. Different from casual conversations, my interviews could be best described as ‘conversations with a purpose’ (c.f. Burgess, 1984, p. 84) because they aimed at achieving a balance between achieving a research aim and a sense of informality.

My data analysis did not come as a distinct research stage, rather it can be described as an ongoing ‘study [of] the emerging data’, which fed into my overall research direction and data collection methods (e.g. selecting interviewees and focusing of observations; Charmaz, 1996, p. 36). Early analyses happened while I was in the field. I (re)read my fieldnotes, listened to interview recordings, revisited interview notes and transcripts, (re)read collected documents, and wrote down ‘memos’ on emerging themes, theoretical impressions, and methodological challenges. I continued this strategy when I returned to the United Kingdom and have used the conceptual lenses reviewed above to further refine the emerging themes and develop the overall argument.

A reacquaintance: selecting the two case studies

I conducted my fieldwork in my hometown, Iloilo City, where I worked as a development worker and volunteer before moving to Europe for postgraduate studies. Returning to the city after several years, I was struck by the changes I observed in the local NGO scene: stronger ties with national and international groups and funders and the differing tactics for organizing and campaigning. Feeling like a stranger in the development circles I was once part of, I began my fieldwork with a scoping research to reacquaint myself with the development and volunteering landscape in the city before selecting the case study organizations. I conducted interviews and observations with various volunteer groups in the city – from a local chapter of an international NGO to self-help groups and youth activist organizations.

After getting an overview of the existing volunteer organizations, I used three categories to decide on the two case studies: structure (formal or informal), nature of participation (volunteer created or volunteer involving), and the learning component (wide range of learning modalities like training programmes). In the end, I selected Youth4Health, a youth-driven NGO composed mainly of young gay men, trans girls, and adolescents living with HIV/AIDS (ALHIV) advocating for sexual and reproductive health and

rights (SRHR), and Land4All, an informal settlers' association of landless families fighting for land tenure. The two case studies were selected because they have varying, and at times, opposing characteristics based on the categories above. Youth4Health¹ is a more structured, established, volunteer-involving organization with more structured but non-formal capacity-building programmes for volunteers. About 30 youth volunteers are involved regularly and many more who engage sporadically – they are seen as essential members and effective campaigners, especially those of who have 'lived' experience of issues relating to SRHR and HIV/AIDS (e.g. ALHIVs). Land4All is more informal and organic, resembling a social movement where training and capacity building were rare and ad hoc. Unlike Youth4Health, this organization was initiated by and composed of volunteers themselves – with about fifty association members and ten volunteer leaders.

Once decided, I approached the leaders of each organization who readily welcomed me in their groups as a researcher and a volunteer who could assist them in tasks. I suspect that this ease in access was partly facilitated by my earlier engagement with them during my scoping research (see above). Following the leaders' suggestion, I then attended a community meeting (Land4All) and a staff and volunteer meeting (Youth4Health) where I explained my research activities to a wider group. As my field activities progressed, I recruited participants one by one – all of whom were happy to participate.

Civil society and volunteer groups in the Philippines: where do the two organizations fit in?

In the Philippines, state policies do not require civil society groups to get government permission to establish an organization and the state often had little control over foreign funding (Clarke, 1995). While these provisions may have helped encourage civil society activity in the country, there are shortcomings in the persistence of what Clarke (1995) described as a 'weak regulatory framework', particularly in terms of how these policies may allow for NGOs to be easily influenced and penetrated by external agendas. For example, informal estimates show that local NGOs source close to 70 percent of their annual budgets from overseas funders and some from government agencies (United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2019). Such funding environment was found to create anxiety amongst some local groups whose energy towards satisfying donor requirements

1 Names of the organizations are pseudonyms.

often competes with time for their constituents ([Asian Development Bank, 2013](#)).

Within this development ecosystem, local volunteer organizations are not 'immune' to external influences when they form partnerships (e.g. in terms of co-funding, co-designing programmes and activities) with local and international actors. In Youth4Health, volunteers needed to accomplish institutional tasks related to funder requirements. Their projects, partly implemented by volunteers, were funded by local and international NGOs, government offices, and aid agencies. Youth volunteers also participated in delivering reports and other documents so the organization can access funds. Although these working relationships are forged at the institutional level, youth volunteers remained the main movers of the many paper trails that these partnerships required.

Land4All's volunteer leaders were mostly preoccupied with working with government offices as part of their application for a Community Mortgage Program (CMP). CMP is a government-funded mortgage financing programme specially designed to assist landless and informally settling families to legally own the lots that they occupy or where they choose to relocate to. CMP will allow Land4All members to access a formal credit system and purchase land as a community. When I began my fieldwork, the group was processing paperwork for the registration of their association.

These connections with external institutions have tied both organizations into complex bureaucratic processes that shaped their volunteering experiences – a dynamic that I will analyze in detail in the next sections.

Informal ways of getting hold of bureaucratic process and information

Similar to the bureaucratic literacy practices explored by others (e.g. [Jones, 2000](#); [Papen, 2007](#)), the sort of information volunteers needed to engage with was vital yet extremely complex. Volunteer leaders of Land4All often had to figure out the CMP process on their own with very few government-led orientation sessions and seminars. The experience of Youth4Health volunteers was different because training and workshops were more common. These were often conducted by their government and/or NGO funders. The contents of these sessions were wide ranging – from technical training to more content-based workshops. These kinds of training provisions within Youth4AHealth seem to be more familiar and common in the development sector, which tend to be top-down and didactic with pre-determined topics. They mirror what has been described as 'formalised and managerial manifestations of professionalization' ([Jenkins, 2008](#), p. 142).

Efforts to professionalize practice have often focused on more structured attempts such as designing learning programmes or conducting trainings

(c.f. [Jenkins, 2008](#)). However, as I will focus on in this section, I found that much of the understanding of institutional processes by volunteers in Land4All was facilitated informally. For instance, Susan², a volunteer in Land4All explained:

'I only understand it now!' Susan tells me while carrying a set of documents. She adds that if she knew before, they could have had done the [CMP] processes on their own and no longer pay for a community organizer. 'Those documents? We comply one by one. It is quite simple'. I asked her how she found out, quite surprised by how confident she was of the simplicity of the process. 'On my own . . . because of all the reading I do little by little . . . '.

–Field Notes, 1 October 2017.

This quote is emblematic of the common experience of volunteers engaging with bureaucratic information through informal learning. When viewed through the social theory of learning, volunteering spaces could be understood as contexts where there are 'very little observable teaching; the more basic phenomenon is learning' ([Lave and Wenger, 1991](#), p. 92). Susan read documents and guidelines piece by piece, on her own time. She brought different fragments of information together to get a wider picture and see the requirements of the tasks at hand. She also seems to allude to their capacity, as volunteer leaders, to accomplish these tasks, on their own rather than relying solely on rare government training and support.

Support in engaging with bureaucratic processes and sources of information do not only come externally. Other volunteers were able to apply previous knowledge from other contexts (e.g. their workplaces) to accomplish institutional tasks and to 'make sense' of what they were required to do. For example, their secretary, Peter, who was then working at a fast-food restaurant, volunteered to prepare the budget plan for a project proposal because he learned how to do this from overseeing the grocery budget in his place of work. Another volunteer, Vivian, shared that she is very familiar with the government processes of land acquisition because she used to work for a similar shelter financing programme of the government. She was also a staff member in a resort where her boss owned several properties, so she knows how to estimate say, how big or small a fifty square metre land is.

In line with the notion of LSP, Peter and Vivian's ability to engage effectively with bureaucratic information was due in part to their 'funds of knowledge' ([Moll et al., 1992](#)) and 'banks of skills' ([Rogers, 2014](#)) gained from one context (e.g. at work) and could be transferred to another (e.g. volunteering). The way that Susan and Vivian spoke about their experiences

2 All names of participants are pseudonyms.

suggests that they learned these things in the process of doing the tasks and not necessarily because of a formal orientation. Drawing from the theory of [Lave and Wenger \(1991\)](#), they participate in the CoP through sustained engagement (i.e. learning by doing).

Despite the training-heavy nature of development organizations in general, this section highlighted that much of the bureaucracy-related learning happened informally – drawing from previous experiences and finding out information as they went along to conduct a particular task. Following the work of [Rogers \(2014\)](#), these informal learning processes are not always time bound and were self-directed (e.g. Susan read small portions of legal texts during her own time), accidental, and presumably unconscious at the time (e.g. volunteers drawing from previous work experiences).

Learning the tricks of the trade: managing expectations and visions

The informal learning processes I described in the previous section did not only lead to the accumulation of bureaucratic knowledge but also influenced the expectations and ‘ways of doing’ of the volunteers. In this section, I will explore how engaging with certain literacy practices ‘inducts’ volunteers into working conventions that define what counts as acceptable and unacceptable practices in highly bureaucratized processes.

To do this, I will track how a hand-written document (see [Figure 1](#)) prepared by Tito, a youth volunteer of Youth4Health, was transformed into a formal, budget plan (see [Figure 2](#)). The latter document was needed so that he could access the funding for an arts activity that he was spear-heading. Tito’s arts competition was part of a series of activities initiated by youth volunteers to generate audience for their then newly launched youth programme. Youth volunteers were given the freedom to design and implement their own programmes. Funded the government’s Department of Health (DOH), the project was subject to strict financial management rules. The account below narrates Tito’s interaction with various actors in the organization to prepare the budget plans.

After making a list of materials, Tito approached Luisa [program officer] who said that he needs to make a budget plan. On the list that he made ([Figure 1](#)) on a piece of paper, Luisa said that he should put a date as if tutoring him, ‘When is this happening? Put the date here. State what activity’, she paused to wait for Tito’s answer. Tito took a while, seemingly confused, and finally answered, ‘Art Contest’. Luisa then said that Tito should write ‘Line Items’ and ‘Total’ as headings. ‘How much is the total budget?’ ‘3000 ma’am’, he responded. Luisa then crossed out some of the items, saying they were too expensive and worried that he has not even placed any budget for food to which half of the budget should be dedicated

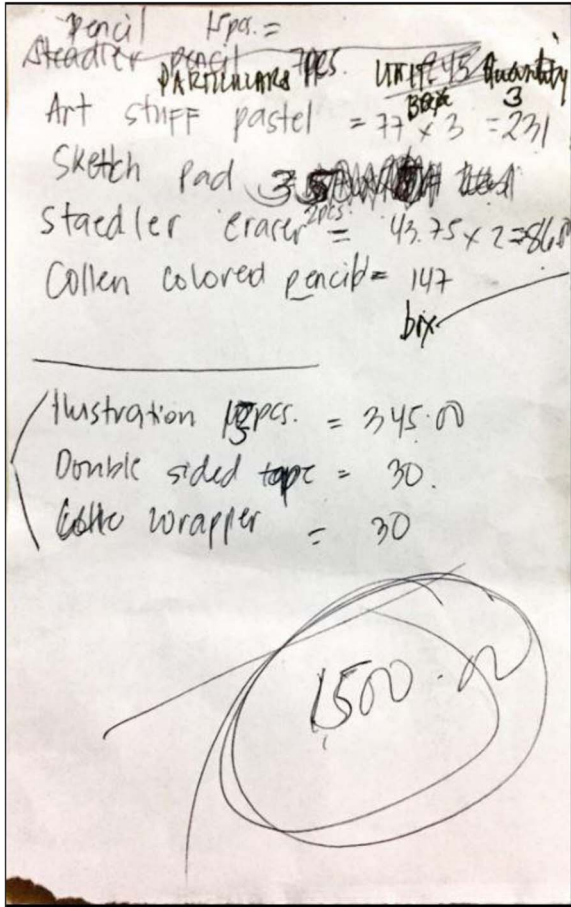


Figure 1 Tito's original hand-written budget plan

to. Later that day, Myra, another staff, went through his list. Myra saw that he did not place any item for food, 'increase the budget for food and then just buy cheap ones so we can buy for many. These are just estimates anyway!' He was also reminded that the main goal is that they deliver the adolescent health lecture, so the art contest is simply a background activity. Tito went to the computer and started typing. That day, no one looked at the Activity Proposal he made, so he saved it for approval. He seemed proud of what he has done!

–Field Notes, 9 January 2018.

Using LSP as a lens, it could be understood that Tito and the staff members were not only writing a document but also abiding to a certain convention of textual design: formatting and structuring the text so that it made sense to

Activity Proposal

POSTER MAKING CONTEST

Materials	Quantity	Price	Total
Illustration / Poster Paper	1	30	30
Pencil	5	6	30
Brush	5	15	75
Erasers	2	5	10
Crayons	1 box (32 pcs)	55	55
Oil Pastel	1	110	110
Pentel Pen	2	32	64
Sharpener	2	5	10
Plastic Cover	1	15	15
Scotch tape	2	10	20
Glue	1	17	17
Scissors	2	22	44
SNACKS	30	50	1500
		TOTAL	1980

PREPARED BY:



Peer Educator



Nurse



Chapter Program Manager

Figure 2 Finalized budget plan to be submitted to funder

and became acceptable under certain bureaucratic rules (Blommaert, 2004). The journey from Tito's original note (Figure 1) to being a budget document (Figure 2) mirrors what Blommaert (2004, p. 657) describes as 'generically regimented text production': a process of (co)producing a text that satisfies 'generic requirements (real or perceived) of "official", "literate", 'on record' discourse'. This is also an example of Wenger's (1998) reification taking place – ensuring the portability of the text by designing it as an 'institutionally

familiar' document so that it can be entered into a bureaucratic process (Barton and Hamilton, 2005).

Using Lave and Wenger's (1991, p. 95) ideas, I argue that Tito was also being subsumed into a particular 'culture of practice'. As a 'newcomer', he is in the process of assembling a 'general idea of what constitutes the practice of the community' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 95). Drawing from Blommaert (2004), I extend this to highlight that text (co)production amongst individuals with different (and therefore, unequal) power relations meant that there was an interaction of different 'textual ideologies' where one way of writing (Figure 2) is favoured over the other (Figure 1). In the process of co-creating this text with staff members, Tito was introduced to dominant ideologies (partly shaped by external agencies) about what counted as acceptable practice (e.g. inflating the budget).

In refining his original document, Tito was 'taught' strategies to help secure the approval of his budget plan. For instance, he was advised to increase his declared amounts so they 'fit' the budget caps – 'anyway, these are just estimates!' – and was asked to over-allocate money for food expenses so that they could feed more people. Luisa made Tito aware that 50 percent of budgets should be allocated for food, therefore crossing out 'expensive' art materials even though the activity was an arts contest. Myra also reminded Tito that the activity's success was not dependent on how it was organized but, more importantly, on the size of the audience. There is a clear clash here between Tito's expectation and aspiration of the activity (i.e. focusing on the arts contest component) versus what the NGO aims to accomplish (i.e. focusing on the numbers generated). The informal learning moment between him and Luisa further established bureaucratic literacies as the 'dominant' literacy practice within the organization (c.f. Papen, 2007).

Continuing the issue of how bureaucratic literacy practices are reinforced, I now turn to Land4All where many of the letters and notices were produced by the volunteers with significant help from others – often those who were 'outside' their association. In the example below, Atty. Subaldo (an engineer and lawyer who wanted to help Land4All with a land conversion application) and Susan were planning to write a complaint letter to a government office for the arguably irrational charging of an inspection fee.

On her green notebook, Susan has been writing down what to include in the letter. Atty. Subaldo was speaking fast... he was saying something like 'the president requires by law that [informal settlers] are prioritized in government offices'. Atty. Subaldo said, jokingly, that Susan should then write 'open-close parenthesis, I will report you!' His associate looked surprised and commented that he was being a bit combative and advised that they should not overdo the letter; otherwise, their request might be

denied. He continued dictating to Susan what she needs to write in the letter. 'We look forward to your favorable response,' he says, and this was written down in-toto by Susan on her green notebook . . .

–Field Notes, 17 October 2017.

Power in literacy practices, according to [Papen \(2005\)](#), p. 50, could be found in 'how the text assign roles to participants and what behavior it prescribes'. Atty. Subaldo and Susan's interaction could be analyzed as a manifestation of this dynamic. The former, a development worker and licensed attorney, assumes the role of the 'expert' – a constructed identity within the professionalization discourse (c.f. [Jenkins, 2008](#)) and who, in this situation, possess the knowledge of letter writing to state institutions. He ascribes the latter with the role being the less experienced volunteer who needs to be instructed. In producing this letter, Susan was being told what to do, rather than actively shaping its content. Atty. Subaldo was deciding and dictating the tone of the letter, although he was not a signatory. In the process of this shared letter writing, Susan was being introduced to what [Sarangi and Slembrouck \(2014\)](#) describes as the existing hierarchies and power inequalities between bureaucracies and 'clients' like her and whether her letter can dispel such relationships of power.

The experience of Tito and Susan shows how volunteers were not only learning workplace-related tasks and skills (as in 'workplace/organizational learning') but, as [Lave and Wenger \(1991\)](#) put it, were also subsumed into wider social processes and meaning-making. The experience of Tito and Susan illustrates that what people 'do' with literacy goes beyond simply reading and writing but also shapes activities, expectations, and power relationships within a space ([Street, 1993](#)). The volunteers were 'learning the tricks of the trade' and in the process subsumed to certain ways of working within the organization.

Regimenting language, identities, and relationships

In this section, I will explore further how institutional and bureaucratic requirements also tend to shape a 'certain kind of volunteer' within the organizations. In Youth4Health, young volunteers deliver a series of government-created modules as part of their SRHR programme. In these classes, they use a government-provided, centrally produced flipchart, which is a visual aid in English (no translations available). Although the flipchart comes with a user manual from the DOH, I observed volunteers relying on each other and/or the staff to know how to conduct the classes. They do this through informal, orientation sessions facilitated by a more experienced volunteer or staff. Usually, these orientations were done on

needs basis, often in preparation for community outreach programmes. For instance,

I chanced upon RJ (long-term Youth4Health volunteer) orienting Pip (a younger, newer volunteer) with delivering the content of the flipchart entitled the ABCs for preventing HIV. This session was neither planned nor intentional. The three of us were sitting outside the Youth4Health office when RJ proceeded to conduct an 'informal', 30-minute session, helping Pip familiarize himself with some of the flipchart content and how to deliver it:

Pip: ... if you're faithful with your partner, and he is not infected with HIV, then that's good because there's only two of you [having sex]. But if you cannot stop yourself, go to letter C [pointing to the flipchart]: Correct and Consistent Use of Condom ... this is what we call the right use of condom ... especially if you are *katol* [a colloquial term referring to a promiscuous person] then you should learn this ...

RJ: [interrupts Pip swiftly] No, no! Don't include your foolishness here ... [looking upset] ... you know there are kids that might be listening to you! Pip: [laughs, slightly embarrassed] ah, for kids, well, you should consult with older people or HIV counsellors to teach you how to use a condom, so you know and be aware of the viruses that might enter your body ...

–Field Notes, 25 November 2018.

Bureaucratic literacy practices retain their dominance because they follow 'a specific language and they invite specific forms of behaviour' (Papen, 2005, p. 46). In the case above, there are strict expectations, emphasized by RJ, on how to delivery state-sponsored health classes. RJ was quick to censor Pip's vocabulary by explaining that the term *katol* was inappropriate especially if children and adolescents were listening to his lecture. I had the impression that when Pip used such statements – which sounded like a side comment – he was trying to soften the mood, as the lecture did sound too formal. Interestingly, RJ and Pip are long-time friends who, along with other volunteers, often engage in fun banter – including calling each other *katol* during office activities. Yet in the account above, RJ was adamant that such language should not be used during a lecture. How volunteers learned about what counts and what does not count as acceptable practice partly depended on such exchanges which also shape the interaction between those involved in the literacy event (Papen, 2005). In this case, more informal, friendly dealings amongst volunteers could, at times, become more formal when they involved certain organization-related tasks.

Tensions between these differing expectations from volunteers were also observed elsewhere. For example, RJ used to organize his 'clients' living with HIV into smaller support groups, which he calls *pamilya* (family)

where he was considered their 'mother'. In addition to usual health visits and medication monitoring, they would also have informal gatherings, celebrating birthdays, partying together, or occasional shared lunches. I was often told that young people living with HIV are notorious for failing to keep in contact with the organization and this kind bonding noticeably facilitated better engagement and participation. Forming familial relations and shared identities as a response to a shared problem (e.g. living with HIV) could be considered as culture-specific expression of volunteering in Filipino communities. This may be related to the pre-colonial Filipino value of *pakikipagkapwa* or the extension of self to others (Aguiling-Dalisay *et al.*, 2004; Asis and Luna 2000 as cited in Aked, 2014) – a concept that is different from the 'othering' of marginalized communities that may be common in charity or service-delivery models of volunteering.

However, I found that these informal arrangements became an issue to the top management especially when a new international funder came through. According to the organization's leaders, this allegedly created favouritism and an unprofessional service provider–client relationship. RJ was later asked to temper these dynamics and integrate his clients into usual Youth4Health activities and services. I found that this was demotivating for him as he moved to becoming a more senior volunteer (with increased responsibilities) in the organization. He was often called out for posting complaints about the management on Facebook or wearing the organization's office T-Shirt outside duty hours because these violate the project funder's codes of practice. He was once reminded,

'This is no longer just about helping, RJ'. It was unclear if RJ understood the point – he looked disappointed – but the program officer kept on explaining that this is a 'project'. This is not like before where they would just go and conduct an activity then go home. This time, the funders need the number; they need to accomplish the targets.

–Field notes, 25 October 2017.

The message above is reminiscent of the audit and evaluation culture pervasive within the development industry (Kothari, 2012). They were now part of a wider project and needed to fulfil certain commitments including broader aims of institutionalization and scalability. In a way, RJ and, to a certain extent, Pip above became useful participants in what Choudry and Shrage (2013) describes as the 'ideology of pragmatism' within the NGO sector where local institutions are tied into seemingly inescapable institutional power and bureaucracy.

Drawing from Foucault (1977), we see how these practices (e.g. funder's protocols) could maintain the authority of institutions and arrange and control social order. The practice has been so ingrained in volunteers' ways

of working that they are the ones reproducing these practices already. Pip and RJ seem to have experienced what Wenger (1998, p. 152) described as learning to 'develop certain expectations about how to interact, how to treat each other and how to work together'. This process is part of identity-building whereby 'we become who we are by being able to play a part in the relations of engagement that constitute our community' (Wenger, 1998, p. 152). Therefore, Pip and RJ, by becoming part of this volunteer organization, are also indoctrinated to certain ways of behaving, talking, dressing, and ultimately, 'being'.

Conclusion

This paper puts forward three key arguments. First, against the backdrop of training heavy organizations, this paper demonstrates the vital contribution of informal learning to how volunteers 'took hold' of and became embedded in complex bureaucratic processes. Often, volunteers learned to work in bureaucratic ways by drawing from existing community resources (such as the volunteers in Land4All), working with more experienced others (such as the youth volunteers in Youth4Health) and learning by doing (as evidenced by the two cases).

Second, this article has shown how volunteers seemed to be inducted into much more formal and 'professionalized' ways of working when 'powerful' individuals regimented their language or taught them the 'tricks of the trade', similar to what Ganesh and McAllum (2012, p. 155) describe as 'professional restrictions placed around service delivery' (see also Kothari, 2012). The interaction between Atty. Subaldo and Susan also reifies how the role of 'the expert' within development is often attached to the more 'educated' and less on the community members who are themselves experiencing the very issues being addressed (c.f. Jenkins, 2008). Following Wenger (1998), the learning that was involved here could be described as that of developing repertoire, styles, and discourses where meanings were (re)negotiated (i.e. what counts as an acceptable budget plan?), tools were produced and adopted (i.e. a strongly worded letter), new terms were redefined or old ones were abandoned (i.e. refraining from the use of derogatory terms during the lecture).

Third, the dominance of bureaucratic literacies offers an alternative imaginary as to what volunteering could be like; what was expected of a volunteer and what sort of relationships would ensue. At times, these more bureaucratic ways of doing seemed to be in tension with volunteering discourses, practices, and relationships that were founded on altruism, service to others, self-sacrifice, and community building – such as volunteering motivations. As the discourses and practices of bureaucratization

became dominant, professionalism became an ‘operational discipline or a series of behavioral prescriptions’ (Ganesh and McAllum, 2012, p. 156) that transformed volunteer practices (e.g. not going to an informal gathering with clients), identities (e.g. wearing uniforms, being a ‘professional’), and relationships (e.g. clients versus children). This is in line with Wenger’s conceptualization that sharing in joint enterprises and repertoires does not mean that certain practices replace another: rather, it ‘is a process, not a static agreement’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 82) and that ‘practice is at once highly perturbable and highly resilient’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 96).

In its novel application of learning and literacy lenses in understanding bureaucratization of the development sector, this paper expands the existing debates on professionalization by providing in-depth evidence on how these practices permeate local community actors (see also the study of Jenkins, 2008). Particularly for programme development, there are lessons here to be gleaned on the tensions of (re)introducing new, more formalized ways of working (consciously or unconsciously) into development organizations that are otherwise informal. Theories of participatory development signal that voluntary action could be a pathway for ownership of and inclusion in any social change agenda regardless of literacy levels and educational background. Yet formalization and bureaucratization of these spaces may also alienate and disempower local volunteers through non-participatory, bureaucratic, and distant decision-making and engagement (c.f. Milligan and Fyfe, 2005). This article offers examples of how, through learning, literacy and knowledge hierarchies, global development agendas such as ‘value for money’ and ‘professionalization’ impact the experiences of volunteers at the grassroots level. They have the tendency to formalize and bureaucratize rather informal groups – shifting the community dynamics and volunteers’ expectations, practices, and identities.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the volunteers and staff members in the two organizations for their generosity in sharing their ideas and experiences. I also would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers and the journal editors for their useful and kind feedback in improving this piece. My gratitude to Professor Anna Robinson-Pant, Dr Catherine Jere and the late Professor Alan Rogers for their earlier comments and suggestions that have shaped my thinking in this article.

Funding

This research is part of my PhD project that was funded by the University of East Anglia UNESCO Chair in Adult Literacy and Learning for Social Transformation studentship. Field research was supported by a

Fieldwork Support Grant from the British Association for International and Comparative Education (BAICE). Writing of this article was supported by my Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowship.

Data availability statement

The data underlying this article are available in the article.

Chris Millora is Senior Research Associate and Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellow with the UNESCO Chair in Adult Literacy and Learning for Social Transformation based at the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia, UK. His research explores how community participation for instance, through volunteering and social activism, (particularly in Global South contexts) cultivate and/or confine members' learning processes and personal transformation. He employs ethnographic, participatory and participatory action research methods.

References

-
- Aguilung-Dalisay, G., Yacat, J. A., Navarro, A. (2004) *Extending the Self: Volunteering as Pakikipagkapwa*, Center for Leadership, Citizenship and Democracy, Manila.
- Aked, J. (2014) *Valuing Volunteering - the Philippines*, National Report, VSO and IDS, London.
- Asian Development Bank (2013) *Civil Society Briefs: Philippines*, ADB, Manila.
- Bartlett, L., Jayaram, K., Bonhomme, G. (2011) State literacies and inequality: managing Haitian immigrants in the Dominican Republic, *International Journal of Educational Development*, **31** (6), 587–595.
- Barton, D. and Hamilton, M. (1998) *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community*, Routledge, Oxon.
- Barton, D. and Hamilton, M. (2005) Literacy, reification and the dynamics of social interaction, in D. Barton, K. Tusting eds, *Beyond Communities of Practice: Language, Power and Social Context*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 14–35.
- Besley, T., Burgess, R., Khan, A. *et al.* (2022) Bureaucracy and development, *Annual Review of Economics*, **14**, 397–424.
- Blommaert, J. (2004) Writing as a problem: African grassroots writing, economies of literacy, and globalization, *Language in Society*, **33** (5), 643–671.
- Burgess, R. G. (1984) *In the Field: An Introduction to Field Research*, George Allen & Unwin, London.
- Chadwick, A., Fadel, B., Millora, C. (2022) Ethnographies of volunteering: providing nuance to the links between volunteering and development, *Voluntas*, **33**, 1172–1178.
- Charmaz, K. (1996) The search for meaning - grounded theory, in J. A. Smith, R. Harre, L. V. Lagenhove eds, *Rethinking Methods in Psychology*, Sage, London, pp. 27–49.
- Choudry, A. and Shragge, E. (2013) Disciplining dissent: NGOs and community organizations, in L. M. Coleman, K. Tucker eds, *Situating Global Resistance*, Routledge, London, pp. 117–132.

- Clarke, G. (1995) Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the Philippine state: 1986-93, *Southeast Asia Research*, 3 (1), 67-91.
- Ellis Paine, A., Ockenden, N., Stuart, J. (2010) Volunteers in hybrid organizations: a marginalised majority, in D. Billis ed, *Hybrid Organizations and the Third Sector: Challenges for Practice, Theory and Policy*, Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke, pp. 93-114.
- Fawns, M. and Ivanič, R. (2001) Form-filling as a social practice: taking power into our own hands, in J. Crowther, M. Hamilton, L. Tett eds, *Powerful Literacies*, NIACE, Leicester, pp. 80-93.
- Florian, M. (2018) Unlikely allies: bureaucracy as a cultural trope in a grassroots volunteer organization, *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 34 (2), 151-161.
- Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Penguin, London.
- Ganesh, S. and McAllum, K. (2012) Volunteering and professionalization: trends in tension? *Management Communication Quarterly*, 26 (1), 152-158.
- Jenkins, K. (2008) Practically professionals? Grassroots women as local experts - a Peruvian case study, *Political Geography*, 27 (2), 139-159.
- Jones, K. (2000) Becoming just another alphanumeric code: farmers' encounters with the literacy and discourse practices of agricultural bureaucracy at a livestock auction, in D. Barton, M. Hamilton, R. Ivanič eds, *Situated Literacies: Reading and Writing in Context*, Routledge, London, pp. 70-90.
- Kothari, U. (2012) Authority and expertise: the professionalisation of international development and the ordering of dissent, *Antipode*, 37 (3), 32-53.
- Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Cambridge University Press, New York.
- Milligan, C. and Fyfe, N. (2005) Preserving space for volunteers: exploring the links between voluntary welfare organisations, volunteering and citizenship, *Urban Studies*, 42 (3), 417-433.
- Millora, C., Maimunah, S., Still, E. (2020) Reflecting on the ethics of PhD research in the Global South: reciprocity, reflexivity and situatedness, *Acta Academica*, 52 (1), 10-30.
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D. et al. (1992) Funds of knowledge for teaching: using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms, *Theory into Practice*, 31 (2), 132-141.
- Papen, U. (2005) *Adult Literacy as Social Practice: More than Skills*, Taylor & Francis, Oxon.
- Papen, U. (2007) *Literacy and Globalization: Reading and Writing in Times of Social and Cultural Change*, Routledge, London.
- Rochester, C. E., Paine, A., Howlett, S. (2010) *Volunteering and Society in the 21st Century*, Palgrave MacMillan, Hampshire.
- Rogers, A. (2014) *The Base of the Iceberg: Informal Learning and its Impact on Formal and Non-Formal Learning*, Barbara Budrich Publishers, Berlin.
- Sarangi, S. and Slembrouck, S. (2014) *Language, Bureaucracy and Social Control*, Routledge, London.
- Smith, J. D. (1996) Should volunteers be managed? in D. Billis, M. Harris eds, *Voluntary Agencies*, Palgrave, London, pp. 187-199.
- Street, B. (1993) Introduction: the new literacy studies, in B. Street ed, *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 1-22.

- Taylor, D. (1996) *Toxic Literacies: Exposing the Injustice of Bureaucratic Texts*, Heinemann, Portsmouth.
- United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (2019) *2018 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index for Asia*, USAID, New York.
- Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*, Cambridge University Press, New York.