

Exploring the Role of Virtual Communities in Supporting Volunteer Relatedness

Molly Frendo

Extension Educator

Minnesota Center for Youth Development

University of Minnesota

Email: mefrendo@umn.edu

Abstract

The existing body of research on volunteer retention relies on face-to-face practices; however, many nonprofit organizations increasingly rely on online communication to connect with volunteers. The research reported in this paper explores the role a virtual community for national service members played in supporting volunteer motivation through the lens of Deci and Ryan's (1985, 2002) Self Determination Theory. A qualitative analysis found that when members had the opportunity to communicate asynchronously online, they discussed their motivation for serving, provided emotional support to one another, and collaborated on projects.

Keywords: volunteer retention, virtual community, qualitative analysis, AmeriCorps, national service

Introduction

As many nonprofit organizations have faced increased financial constraints, volunteers have become an even more vital part of providing services that are desperately needed in communities across the country. Many nonprofits rely on volunteers to keep their day-to-day operations going as they have faced ongoing cuts to staffing dollars. Not only do program staff members have more job responsibilities and fewer resources, but so too do volunteers. Economic challenges have increased work demands and stretched family resources. As a result, individuals are becoming more interested in accessing resources on their own time and learning asynchronously through distance education. Research has shown that online communities can help individuals gain access to information, build networks, and feel emotionally supported (Hiltz & Wellman, 1997). However, little research exists to understand the role of virtual communities in supporting, training, and connecting volunteers.

To address some of these challenges, an online community to support the social and educational needs of full-time AmeriCorps members was developed. A virtual volunteer community housed in a course management system offered the structure needed to both educate and connect these national service members. This study examines the interactions of national service members in an online community to better understand the conversation topics being pursued through asynchronous conversation and the motivational needs these conversations satisfied.

Review of Relevant Literature

Self-Determination Theory. Individuals choose to volunteer for many reasons and a variety of factors influence their decision to continue on in their role as a volunteer. While a volunteer's continued service is one indication of his or her motivation, further insight is needed

to fully understand the factors that support sustained motivation. Frendo (2013) found that Deci and Ryan's (1985, 2002) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a useful theoretical framework for further investigating the factors that influence motivation (2013). SDT attempts to explain how an individual's motivation is related to social-cultural factors and personal wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). SDT posits that specific environmental circumstances either hinder or support humans' innate desire for a unified sense of self (Deci & Ryan, 2002). An understanding of how social environments satisfy an individual's basic psychological needs is critical to SDT. SDT proffers that individuals have three core needs that are universal: competence, relatedness, and autonomy.

Competence is defined as a person's perceived ability and effectiveness related to a particular skill set. Humans' desire to feel competent leads them to move beyond skills necessary for survival; rather, they are inspired to learn for the satisfaction of learning something new and being more effective (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). Relatedness refers to having a sense of connectedness with others, to belonging to a community, and to caring for and being cared for by others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Mutual trust between individuals is critical for building strong relationships; a willingness to be vulnerable and open about oneself is critical to establishing trust (Brown, 2012). Ryan and Deci (2000a) described relatedness as more closely connected to the desire for a communal union with other people. Autonomy is defined as the ability to decide one's own behavior and make one's own decisions. Autonomous behavior takes the form of actions that embody self-expression, personal initiative, and agency.

Methods

A non-experimental descriptive research design helps to understand the role that participation in a virtual community played in supporting national service members' relatedness

satisfaction. Qualitative analysis serves to better understand what types of conversations national service members had during asynchronous communication and how relatedness needs were satisfied by those conversations. What follows is a description of the national service members who participated in the online community and an examination of their discussion board postings. A discussion of the results, significance, and limitations of the findings follows.

Sample

The sample for this study is comprised of AmeriCorps members who served in the final year of a large statewide mid-western national service grant. As part of that initiative, the AmeriCorps members participated in the virtual volunteer community.

Table 1

Description of Sample

Gender:	47 female	15 male	<i>n</i> = 62
Race:	20 African American	42 Caucasian	<i>n</i> = 62
Level of education:	90.3% completed a Bachelor's or more	38.7% completed some college	3.2% had high school completion <i>n</i> = 62

Usage data collected by the learning management system indicated that most members (more than 80%) contributed eight or fewer discussions to the online community throughout the course of their service. The remainder posted between 11 and 108 total discussions. Of these highly active users, the mean number of posts contributed was approximately 37. The member serving in the state office who was responsible for supporting the online community (individual identified as V8) posted 108 discussions. Respectively, the remaining four top posters created 54 (V5), 46 (V10), 39 (V16), and 38 (V18) discussions.

The learning management system also collected number of posts opened by each member of the community. Although number of posts opened may not be an accurate picture of the time a member spent reading, some information can be gathered by examining the reading patterns of members given the fact that they were not required to open any posts. From that perspective, one may assume that the usage data for number of posts opened gives some picture of participating by reading. For this purpose, the following exploration of number of posts open will be described as reading behavior. The reading activity of members varied greatly. Though only a small group of members regularly contributed to conversation, a majority of them read somewhat more frequently. Approximately 25% of members read 50 or fewer discussions. The majority of members (approximately 55%) read between 50 and 200 discussions. The remaining 20% read between 200 and 712 discussions. Again, the member serving in the state office (V8) had the highest reading record (712 discussions). Beyond V8, the most active readers included V16 (617 discussions read), V18 (561 discussions read), V12 (427 read), V5 (425 read), and V32 (423 read).

Description of Qualitative Data

The content of posts in the online community was examined to better understand the role it played in supporting participants' sense of belongingness. A variety of discussion boards existed with different purposes and audiences within the community. A description of each forum, total number of posts, and total number of replies is listed in the table below. Note that in this instance, threads are defined as original postings and replies as responses underneath those original postings.

Table 2

Description of Discussion Forums

Forum name	Description	N of threads	N of replies	Ratio of threads to replies
<i>What's New?</i>	This forum was used predominantly for one-way communication to disseminate information about due dates, upcoming opportunities, and program announcements. All members of the community had a forced subscription to the forum, meaning that they received an email every time something new was posted. The forum served as an archive they could return to regarding various announcements in case they deleted the email. This forum is not of interest given its limited scope.	130	13	10:1
<i>Introduce Yourself</i>	In this forum, members and program staff introduced themselves. Many of them used a standard format that was suggested. It asked them to share their name, service site, two words that described them, places they had lived, their hobbies, what they were excited about in their service, what they could share with others through their service, favorite book or movies, and three issues about which they felt passionately.	52	99	~1:2
<i>AmeriCorps and Civic Reflection: You Got Served</i>	This forum invited members and program staff to reflect on issues related to their service experience. Primary posters would share a quote, song, poem, story, or video and talk about how they thought it related to volunteerism or civic engagement. Secondary discussions included responses to primary posts and follow up conversation about the topic and individual experiences of volunteering.	32	129	~1:4
<i>Member to Member: A Forum for All AmeriCorps Members</i>	This forum was set so that only AmeriCorps members and the program director could access it. It was done under the guise that members need a place where they could share frustrations and ask questions freely but also that the program director could participate in those conversations. Its goal was to facilitate ongoing conversation between members and staff of the program. Conversations here were varied and included requests for information (statistics, nominations for awards, etc.), dissemination of information (training dates, event invitations, etc.) and requests for advice and/or support.	30	44	3:4

Focus of the Qualitative Analysis

The analysis focuses on three discussion forums: *Introduce Yourself*, *You Got Served*, and *Member to Member*. These discussions provide snapshots of online activity throughout a member's service year to indicate how participants interacted with one another. These forums were selected because they included the most robust conversation, the most diverse population of national service members engaging in discourse, and conversation topics that were most likely to encourage the development of relationships between members. No alterations were made to conversations beyond the removal of identifying information.

Table 3

Cohen's Kappa for Discussion Forums

Discussion Board:	Introduce Yourself	You Got Served	Member to Member	All Discussion Boards
Cohen's Kappa:	.809	.571	.565	.708

During the first review of data, common themes were noted and utilized to determine an initial set of codes. Initial codes included: (a) reason for serving, (b) relatedness to staff, (c) relatedness to volunteers, (d) seeking support, (e) exhibiting empathy, (f) accountability, (g) offering advice/support, and (h) showing vulnerability. A second coder examined one third of the data set selected at random from each discussion forum after being trained using the established code book; refinement efforts were made to establish a common coding scheme. Those refinement efforts resulted in collapsing of many codes into larger categories. The satisfaction of belongingness/relatedness needs as a motivational construct was used as a framework for coding the data. There was not sufficient evidence that volunteers experienced relatedness differently in relationships with one another as compared to program staff; therefore, there was no basis for

separating them; similarly, other codes like empathy or showing support were attributes of belongingness. As a result, one category for “general relatedness” was established. Existing codes that fell under the umbrella category of relatedness (relatedness to staff, relatedness to volunteers, empathy, accountability, and offering advice/support) were recoded under “general relatedness.” The codes of “reason for serving” and “vulnerability” were kept intact because they showed a pattern in the data that did not directly connect to the construct of belongingness. Inter-rater reliability was acceptable according to Jeong (2003) with a Cohen’s kappa coefficient of .708 for all discussion forums overall.

Results

When national service members engaged in conversation with one another and with program staff through discussion boards in the online community, they generally focused on describing their motivation for serving, supporting one another from an emotional and material perspective, and sharing fears and challenges related to their national service member roles.

Explanation of Codes

Motivation for serving

When discussing their reasons for serving, members’ conversations fell into two primary categories: personal development and desire to improve one’s community. AmeriCorps members described a desire to use their talents and the knowledge they acquired through education and experience. For example, V21 shared: “I was intrigued by this [AmeriCorps experience] because I had just finished my [experience in a youth program] and wanted to work more with youth. I loved working with youth and teaching them skills I had learned while I was in [the youth program].” Several members discussed the importance of gaining professional experience in their chosen field through their service experience. One individual wrote, “I’m looking forward

to a great second year where I can continue to improve my skills, network with others, and help others in the process!” (V46). Another shared, “In general I’m just really pumped about this great opportunity to gain so much experience doing something I really care about” (V41). Finally, AmeriCorps members expressed a desire to build their personal and professional network.

Beyond their personal development goals, AmeriCorps members expressed a strong desire to give back to their community. This sentiment was eloquently expressed by V38: “I’m returning to volunteer in the community that I grew up in. It will be wonderful to reconnect with a place that taught me so much, while bringing with me the experiences that I have gained since leaving town.” Similarly, national service members expressed a desire to make a lasting impact on these same communities. One wrote, “I am [...] excited to be in the community and be able to help improve it” (V60). Finally, AmeriCorps members articulated their goals of improving the future for youth. V47 wrote of a desire to “chang[e] the lives of children who are in need.”

General relatedness

An analysis of the discussion forums revealed a substantial effort on behalf of members to build a supportive community. AmeriCorps members supported one another both emotionally as well as materially. Evidence that members worked towards establishing rapport, building a sense of connectedness, and conveying a sense of empathy could be seen throughout all three discussion boards. For instance, in the *Introduce Yourself* discussion forum, V8 responded to the introduction provided by V36 by writing, “It seems like you will have a lot to offer our program as far as resources with your educational background, and I’m really excited to have you on board as a fellow service member!”

In the *You Got Served* discussion forum, participants discussed issues related to being a

national service member. This discussion board was often fraught with emotional and impassioned dialogue because AmeriCorps members sought out the experience based on their personal values and goals. As a result, the conversations were rich with connection, feeling inspired by others, and words of encouragement. For instance, in responding to a post shared by another member, V57 wrote:

I am finishing my second year and I [...] am nervous[...]. Where will I be next year as I finish my year of service? [...] After reading this post I think I will start to use this phrase! "Just like you, I will bloom where I am planted!"

AmeriCorps members described how the online forum served as an outlet to connect them to a physical community of people in similar circumstances despite feelings of isolation in their service site. For instance, after watching a video of two members talking about their service year, one AmeriCorps member (V38) who served remotely during the summer months shared,

I really feel isolated from the AmeriCorps community out here [...] I just feel a lot more connected and refocused having heard that interview. So wow, thanks! [...] You put out another thought provoking post.

By watching the video shared and engaging in conversation about it with other members, V38 shared a decreased sense of isolation and renewed sense of purpose. Though not able to physically connect with a community of her peers, V38 described how technology supported feelings of connectedness.

Beyond emotional support, national service members also used the discussion forums as a venue for requesting and offering material support. This was seen throughout both the *Introduce Yourself* board as well as the *Member to Member* board. For example, V16 sought individuals to pilot and review a curriculum he was working on as part of his service goals. Similarly, V15 wrote to other members for sample stories used to show success in monthly reports. Often, individuals would respond by suggesting tools they found already posted in the

online community or by sharing things they had created. Similarly, V8 used the boards to remind the cohort of upcoming workshops and encourage their participation relative to their personal and professional development goals.

Vulnerability

The *You Got Served* discussion forum provided an opportunity for members to discuss issues related to volunteering and their motivation to serve. Though much of the discourse in this forum focused on the life-altering aspects of volunteering, many AmeriCorps members also used the forum as an outlet to share their struggles. One common theme was the ongoing challenge of remaining motivated. For instance, V8 spoke about the difficulty of maintaining her enthusiasm for volunteering amidst the mundane tasks: “In my second year of service, my zeal for ‘changing the world’ sometimes gets lost in the everyday shuffle of the office or my calendar.” Also writing about motivation, V38 shared:

I think all of this talk about refueling can be really healthy for all of us. Motivation waxes and wanes for all of us [...] I'm now also understanding the ins and outs of keeping a non-profit organization running on a day-to-day basis. I see the struggles that we face to recruit volunteers and keep the lights on at the office.

National service members often use their national service experience as a stepping stone into the world of nonprofit and social service work. Because they came to their role with limited experience, many of them admitted to being naïve when it came to the reality of the situation – that is, that working with youth and volunteers and trying to make a positive difference in the world was sometimes unrewarding, boring, or fraught with tension.

Other members spoke of the vulnerability of national service as an exercise in humility. Describing this experience, V35 shared:

[At my service site] I found myself constantly going to co-workers and management team to get help with simply navigating [technology]. It was humiliating to admit that I did not know how to use these programs. [...] I am learning how to become a

better listener, organizer, time manager, and leader. I have become better in these areas of my life both in and out of my workplace. I have learned what it takes to operate a nonprofit [...] excellent humility, listening skills, organizational and time management skills, and teamwork.

Though well connected in her community, V35 described a sense of discarding all her previous experiences and knowledge and having to begin anew. Asking for help and learning to juggle multiple responsibilities were difficult and embarrassing. The lesson learned, however, was the importance of admitting the struggle and relying on others for support; through the experience of being broken down, V35 was able to build herself back up and become stronger for her future efforts.

Members often described the feeling of being overwhelmed or discouraged by the slow process of change and seemingly insurmountable odds when working to alleviate the difficult circumstances faced by the youth they served. In this post, V10 asserted the importance of making even small efforts to improve the conditions of her environment. Admitting a sense of powerlessness and helplessness is the core of vulnerability; nonetheless, individuals who choose to persevere accept that sometimes it might be difficult to push through the challenges. The *You Got Served* forum was the only forum in which any instances of vulnerability were coded. It also housed the highest number of posts coded for general relatedness.

Discussion

This study reported here examined what conversation topics were being pursued through asynchronous communication between national service members. Findings from the study indicated that AmeriCorps members' conversations generally focused in three areas: reason for serving, general relatedness, and vulnerability. Items categorized under reason for serving were consistent with research on volunteer motivation. Clary and Snyder (1999) identified six principal reasons that serve as the driving force behind volunteering: (a) career development, (b)

building self-esteem, (c) self-protective, (d) social, (e) understanding more about the world, and (f) personal values. Other studies found that volunteers sought new relationships through serving (Proteau & Wolff, 2008) or volunteered because someone they cared about asked them to (Okun & Eisenburg, 1992).

The importance of positive relationships with other AmeriCorps members and program staff was also underscored in the existing literature. Gidron (1985) found individuals who had strong relationships with others were more likely to persevere in their role. Lammers (1991) found similar results: volunteers must have established a connection to others connected to the program in order to remain committed. Bruny (1981) found that recognition by one's peers is the most meaningful form of recognition for a volunteer. By offering emotional and material support through the online community, AmeriCorps members were able to establish relationships with each other in ways that might have otherwise not existed due to the locational proximity of their service sites. The online community provided an outlet for relationships established at the beginning of the service year to continue to grow.

Finally, the importance of vulnerability in establishing relatedness was highlighted in the literature. Research from the field of therapy underscores the healing power of self-disclosure and the role of vulnerability in bringing about connectedness (Miller & Stiver, 1997; Jordan, 2008). Mutual sharing creates a sense of empathy and builds a stronger relationship. Brown (2012) described vulnerability as critical to establishing trust and reiterated the importance of appropriate boundaries in the context of sharing. National service members in the forums shared experiences that were contextualized by their service roles. From that respect, members maintained a level of professionalism by not disclosing more than what was appropriate given the nature of the relationship.

Limitations of the Study

Findings from the study are limited in several ways. First, as a qualitative study examining online interactions between a limited number of national service members cannot be considered representative of a larger body of AmeriCorps members or volunteers as a whole. Qualitative studies are meant to begin to understand phenomena; as a result, their findings cannot be generalized. Additionally, choosing to volunteer as a full time national service member is empirically different from the more casual volunteering done by the majority of the population. In many respects, national service members function more as staff in their time commitment to the program. Third, the virtual community was examined as an artifact; that is, it was not built with research in mind. As a result, it was impossible to go back and understand the nature of the lived experience from participants by asking them directly. Finally, the researcher of the study was also the program director for the national service program. All efforts to remove my own bias were made; however, one may not ever fully remove one's own existing knowledge base about the program, its history, and the members in it that is difficult to impart to others. Through bringing in a second coder, efforts were made to increase the validity of the findings.

Implications for Practitioners

The findings of this study reveal that online communities support belongingness in ways that are particularly effective for *some* national service members. Additional research is needed to better understand how and for whom this medium works. A small number of individuals were highly active in contributing posts to the community and therefore helped to sustain it. Similarly, Hampton, Goulet, Marlow, and Rainie (2012) found that so-called "power users" on Facebook contribute significantly more content than their peers. These power-users comprise 20 to 30% of individuals using Facebook. The study found that individuals who frequently update their status

on Facebook show higher levels of perceived social support and emotional well-being. What is not clear, however, is what drives individuals to become highly active in online communities and what those who are only moderately active or participate by reading gain.

From the practitioner standpoint, volunteer administrators might utilize those individuals who are heavily involved in the program and with whom they have a sense of connection if moving forward with an online community. Strategic involvement of what Cooperative Extension calls “middle manager” volunteers (Schwartz, 1978) is critical. Middle managers are volunteers who are in key leadership roles in the program who provide support to other volunteers through training, supervision, and advice. Middle managers could help volunteer administrators sustain the conversation in an online community and actively engage less experienced volunteers.

Another successful aspect of the online community is that it served as a one-stop shop; that is, AmeriCorps members completed their monthly reports, accessed resources meant to help them in their roles, received updates on program news, and communicated directly with one another. The success of this particular iteration of an online community over previous versions offered is that members needed to go there to access all the information they needed to succeed in their roles. Additionally, the online community was available from the beginning of the service year. Members got into the habit of going there to connect with others and gather information critical to their success.

Conclusion

To date, no other study has examined the role of virtual communities in volunteer motivation. This case study showed that virtual volunteer communities can be an effective medium for bridging the gap between ideal circumstances that support AmeriCorps member

motivation and retention. When AmeriCorps members are given an outlet for communicating and supporting one another that is not reliant on a shared time or space, they can establish connections that support relatedness, help them process the national service experience, and collaborate on shared projects. Given the reality of decreased resources and diminished staffing, the potential implications for nonprofits utilizing volunteers and national service members are many. Though the long-term implications for this research are many additional studies into the future, this study took the first step in understanding the role that virtual volunteer communities play by describing what happened in one context with a group of full time national service members. This approach helps researchers know what interventions they might consider in the future and what frameworks are valid. For instance, through the lens of SDT, volunteer program managers could work to create online spaces that build competency through training and access to resources, autonomy through allowing a shared space to offer unique ideas, and relatedness through asynchronous discussion boards and synchronous chats to process the shared experience and provide emotional support. Through this study, practitioners can better understand what design elements are crucial to the success of online volunteer communities.

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