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Virtual Volunteerism: Review of LibriVox and VolunteerMatch

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As a writing teacher who values service-learning pedagogies and digital literacy, I have often wondered about the possibility of combining the two. On the one hand, the prospect of assigning virtual service-learning eliminates the complications of organizing transportation and finding a time for service that fits the students' and community partners' schedules—practical concerns that have been explored in early scholarship on service-learning (Adler-Kassner, Crooks, and Watters; Cushman; Deans; Mathieu). On the other hand, oftentimes the most transformative aspects of service-learning are powerful because students serve local communities *in person* (Bacon; Goldblatt; Flower; Higgins, Long, and Flower; Long; Parks). However, as Jeffrey T. Grabill claims, community literacy practitioners interested in writing for community action and change "must understand the technologically mediated places where people invent new knowledge" (7). As we consider the ways in which technologies may intersect with our own and our students' volunteer projects, we must acknowledge the complexities of digital and online spaces—the places where citizens must be able to "access, assemble, and analyze" information to be able to participate in "decision-making processes that affect their lives and communities" (Grabill 8).[1] The following review examines two websites that complicate the local and face-to-face components of community literacy work by presenting online service opportunities that are not necessarily connected to physical communities. *LibriVox* and *VolunteerMatch* have the potential to enhance and redefine community literacy in a virtual environment, but they also call us to critique the rhetoric surrounding virtual volunteering and to be mindful of the quality of online community experiences.

LibriVox (http://librivox.org/)

LibriVox is a nonprofit, noncommercial site that seeks to make books in the public domain (e.g., those published prior to 1923) available for free audio download on the Internet. Following the discourse of nonprofit organizations, the site frames its work in terms of "volunteering" and

"donating." Specifically, *LibriVox*'s mission involves two efforts: (1) recruiting readers to volunteer their time, technology, and literacy skills to read aloud and audio record books in the public domain, and (2) donating these recorded readings to online listeners in a searchable and downloadable format. With readers of *Community Literacy Journal* in mind, I review how the site works and how its two purposes—as a site for listeners and a site for volunteer readers—might be of interest for faculty, student, and/or community volunteer projects.

As a site for listeners, *LibriVox*'s catalog of online readings offers a valuable resource for use in the community. Listeners can choose from a range of genres and types of texts; some popular downloads from the site include Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Brazilian Cat," Albert Einstein's *Relativity: The Special and General Theory*, and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The catalog provides basic options to search texts by title and author, as well as more advanced options to search by language or reader's name or to simply browse "new releases." Texts available for download on *LibriVox* could be used in a number of capacities within community literacy projects, including working with children learning to read, adults studying for their GED, or immigrants learning English. Additionally, some texts are offered in multiple languages, providing yet another alternative for use in the community. In my own experiences with the Literacy Volunteers of Tucson, I could imagine using *LibriVox* to help speakers of other languages learn English by asking them to listen and then respond to poems or short stories as a means of honing their comprehension skills.

However, community literacy projects such as this would require users—volunteers and/or the populations served—to have computer literacy skills and access to technology. Many community literacy projects face challenges with access to and usability of technologies (Grabill). Because of this, *LibriVox* may be problematic for volunteers and community users alike. Users wishing to listen to readings must be able to subscribe to weekly podcasts, download a zip file of a text, or download a text using the subscribe feature in iTunes. However, as a user who is familiar with this software and these procedures, I had no trouble retrieving readings on *LibriVox*. Community volunteers will likely need to offer additional support for users who have little to no computer literacy skills. While access to technology and technical skills may present challenges in community literacy work, the breadth and variety of readings available on *LibriVox* are worth the effort of considering options for using this excellent resource in the community.

For reading and writing teachers interested in *LibriVox*, I could imagine organizing lessons around the privileges and responsibilities students have as literate, academic citizens, perhaps resulting in an online

assignment that asks students to contribute a reading to *LibriVox*'s catalog. *LibriVox* lends itself well to collaborative pedagogies; thus, dividing students into groups to address smaller tasks of a larger class-based digital community literacy project might work very effectively. For example, one group of students could be in charge of representing the project in *LibriVox*'s online forum, another group of students could serve as readers, while other students could be leaders in recording and editing the readings.[2] The copyright issues related to the site's mission could also lead to engaging discussions in the literacy classroom.

I expect that many student volunteers would need guidance navigating *LibriVox*'s virtual community because initiation into the forum requires reading content embedded on multiple parts of the site. Despite the instructions provided for volunteer readers, learning the processes to engage in this online community does take some time, energy, and effort. In fact, *LibriVox* presents a prime opportunity for initiating discussions about virtual communities and how one might enter and knowledgeably contribute to an online forum. As a site for literacy instruction combined with opportunities for community literacy service, *LibriVox* is worth taking the time to explore in more depth.

VolunteerMatch (http://www.volunteermatch.org/)

VolunteerMatch is a popular national website that currently offers nearly 65,000 volunteer opportunities across the country. The primary purpose of the site is to connect "good people and good causes" by offering nonprofit organizations and businesses an online forum through which to advertise their need for volunteers and by offering potential volunteers the ability to search for a variety of service experiences. The search feature prominently displayed on the home page prompts users to "find a great place to volunteer" by entering a "location," such as a zip code or city name, and a "keyword." However, the aspect of *VolunteerMatch* focused on for this review is its option to "search for virtual opportunities," which the site suggests "have no set location and can usually be completed from home or using the Internet."[3] Many of the virtual opportunities require technical literacy skills, such as helping a nonprofit organization build a website, while others require certain kinds of academic and professional literacy skills, such as content editing and proofreading websites, writing grants, or conducting research on a particular subject. In all of these cases, users with a computer and Internet connection can volunteer from any location and at any time.

Because *VolunteerMatch* is such a large site with a powerful search engine, it can be difficult to locate meaningful online service opportunities there. Checking the box to search for virtual opportunities and entering

the keyword "literacy" results in a listing of over 800 possibilities for volunteering. This certainly presents a challenge for community literacy practitioners wanting to narrow their virtual service options. Conveniently, though, calls for volunteers include an option for user ratings. Not all calls have been rated, but the five-star system and user comments can be useful in many cases. For instance, The Daily Source has five stars and twenty-nine reviews; many of the comments note how this is a great opportunity for volunteers interested in gaining experience in the field of journalism.

Service-learning advocates interested in reciprocal experiences for students will find that many volunteer options are advertised as an internship opportunity: a chance for students to gain valuable skills and experience while offering an important service to the non- or for-profit organization. In addition to internship experiences, *VolunteerMatch* could be useful in professional, civic, or community-based writing courses in which students need to learn the skills of writing grants or conducting research for an organization. The site also offers unique opportunities that could be integrated into digital literacy assignments. For example, one intriguing possibility involves volunteering in Second Life to help veterans and other people with post-traumatic stress disorder. Users who take the time to search for the right kind of virtual volunteering experience for which they are qualified will find *VolunteerMatch* to be a useful site with a diverse range of opportunities. *VolunteerMatch* has much to offer professional writing teachers, community literacy practitioners, and service-learning instructors.

Combating the Rhetoric of "It's Easy"

Despite the many advantages of virtual volunteering on sites such as *LibriVox* and *VolunteerMatch*, the ways in which the service experiences are framed are, in some cases, problematic. For example, *LibriVox* displays the link "It's easy to volunteer" for users to find more information about their volunteer process. Similarly, many of the virtual volunteering ads on *VolunteerMatch* focus on the ease of the experience: "it's easy, safe and fun . . . just 10 minutes a week from your computer." These websites certainly have an interest in garnering as many volunteers as possible, and advertising their volunteer experiences as being "easy" is perhaps one way to accomplish this goal. However, readers of *Community Literacy Journal* will likely agree that volunteering in meaningful, reciprocal ways is rarely "easy." Successfully building a community partnership—whether locally or online—takes time, commitment, and trust. Rather than emphasizing the ease of volunteering, virtual volunteer experiences might be better positioned as offering a valuable contribution to an online or distant community. Thus, literacy instructors planning to use *LibriVox* or *VolunteerMatch* should interrogate the rhetoric of "it's easy" that can be found on these virtual volunteering

sites perhaps in conversation with their students. In fact, students and community practitioners alike will almost certainly find that engaging in online communities, such as those offered in *LibriVox* and *VolunteerMatch*, cannot be simply defined as "easy" or "difficult." On the contrary, volunteering virtually in active and sustained ways has the potential for intriguing challenges, meaningful contributions, and transformative learning.

Endnotes

1. In this review, I use the term "volunteer" purposefully, acknowledging its complicated and contested usage in community literacy scholarship. Scholarship in this area tends to privilege terms like "service" or "service-learning" over "volunteering" as a means of avoiding and problematizing deficit- and charity-based models of community-based work. However, because the websites I review in this piece specifically use the term "volunteer," I analyze the sites using their own terms.

2. *LibriVox* requires readers to register with their online forum. The forum is what drives the volunteer project by providing discussion threads with suggested texts to be read and calls for readers or listeners wanted for ongoing projects. Volunteer readers are instructed to post all new reading projects to the forum, and, once complete, recorded readings undergo review for technical problems.

3. The option to search for virtual opportunities can be accessed by clicking the link to "advanced" search options from the site's home page.

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