

Out of the Classroom: Experiential Education through Volunteering

by Michelle Smith (Showa Boston Institute, Boston, USA)

Background

It was a warm late summer day and 20 eager Japanese university students descended on a local Boston food pantry for their first volunteer experience in the United States; for most it was their first volunteer experience ever. As the food pantry's volunteer coordinator went through the 30-minute orientation on "how-to" sort food, the students' expressions moved from furrowed brows to glassy eyes, overwhelmed by the English. They were then ushered into the sorting room to join Tufts University students already hard at work. With the knowledge that the bus back to campus wouldn't leave for two hours and a gentle nudge (literally) from Showa's volunteer coordinator, the students smiled nervously and got to work. The Showa Boston Volunteer Program had begun.

History

Showa Boston has long offered community service opportunities for Japanese students studying in the US. For years, more than 30 students per semester have taken a Community Service Elective class with the opportunity to participate weekly at a service site under the watchful guidance of an instructor. In addition, students who have taken part in Showa's summer session have experienced many different types of volunteering over a four-week span, again under the watchful eye of their teacher. In the year 2005, however, Showa received grant money as part of the Japanese Ministry of Education's *Good Practice* (GP) Program. The GP Program allotted funding to be used particularly to expand the volunteer program, so that the opportunity to volunteer would be made available to all Showa students in many different forms. Showa Boston was thrilled with the opportunity. A teacher was given the task of "volunteer coordinator," a part-time position charged with finding volunteer projects for students and overseeing their success. With monumental successes and a few minor failures, the expanded Showa Boston volunteer program is now entering its sixth year of existence.

Options for Students

Showa Boston has approximately 200 Japanese students on-campus in a given semester. Whether or not a student chooses to volunteer while in Boston is, by nature, purely voluntary. In an effort to reach all students who would like to participate, there are

three different options for volunteering which students can decide upon, based on interest and schedule. First is the aforementioned original *Community Service Elective*. Interested students sign up for a semester-long class that meets once a week in the classroom and once a week on a site. The teacher uses the class time to troubleshoot problems and brainstorm solutions to make the volunteer experience a smooth process. She also keeps in contact with site coordinators to ensure everyone's satisfaction with the program. Due to tight schedules while in Boston and class size constraints, some Showa students are unable to take the elective class. For this reason, many students opt to volunteer once a week on their own. Students are matched with an on-going volunteer project based on their interests



and availability. The projects range from month-long to semester-long. These students must be responsible and outgoing because their success relies mainly upon themselves. The volunteer coordinator places them, helps with initial site contact, and serves as a resource as needed, but students are expected to take the initiative. Finally, as an opportunity for students who cannot take the elective class or the independent weekly volunteering, the Showa Boston coordinator organizes small and large group projects for students who would like a one-time chance to participate. These projects are posted monthly, or as they arise, and students sign up at will. Even with these three options working simultaneously, the demand for volunteering still greatly outweighs the supply of available projects.

Volunteer Sites

Over the years, dozens of sites have welcomed Showa student volunteers in one capacity or another. There have been soup kitchens/food pantries where students help sort, cook, and serve food to the homeless and hungry. Showa students have provided company and companionship for elderly residents living in nursing homes or hospitals. Many students have volunteered in childcare facilities providing one-on-one attention to children.

Still others students have worked with the environment on projects ranging from trash collection to conservation. Yet others choose to work with animals at the local zoo or through the *Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals* (SPCA). Finally, a number of students have volunteered to teach Japanese culture anywhere from schools to museums. Showa has found that there are an inexhaustible number of volunteer possibilities for students; one only has to ask.

Volunteer Numbers

Showa Boston operates on semesters, which are slightly askew from the American semester. The greatest numbers of students are on campus for the fall semester, although spring semester numbers, and consequently the demand for spring volunteering, are ever increasing. Currently, Showa is able to offer five sections of the Community Service Elective every fall. There are approximately 16 to 18 students per class resulting in 80 to 90 volunteers. An additional 30 to 40 students choose to volunteer independently on a weekly basis. Approximately 40 to 70 students volunteer each month through small or large group one-time projects. This group often includes students who are already participating through one of the weekly options but wish to try some different volunteer experiences too. Since last spring, all students in the spring semester now volunteer twice weekly. This year that equals 100 students. Every year Showa has about 25 students who are in Boston to study for 18 months (three semesters). All of these students become members of a larger Boston-based volunteer organization, *Boston Cares*, and are able to pick and choose among their wide array of projects at will. Finally, every summer Showa hosts a summer session, where about 15 students study the concept of “volunteerism” and take part in a number of projects during their four weeks in Boston.

Student Benefit

There are many benefits to volunteering for international students. As with any kind of volunteering, students are helping those in need -- be it an organization or an individual -- and all of the good feelings that come from helping apply here as well. An added benefit for foreign students is that volunteering allows them to meet Americans and become involved in their host community. This often heightens their motivation to learn English. The students also gain an outlet for speaking English with both native and nonnative speakers. This is immeasurably valuable for Showa’s monolingual population. Students also, depending on the project,

have the opportunity to gain work experience. In the United States, as well as in a growing number of countries around the world, volunteer experience is desirable among future employees. Finally, students have the chance to spread knowledge about their native cultures which, in general, fosters understanding and tolerance.

Program Challenges

As amazing as the program is for the most part, it is not without its challenges. Showa has struggled with three main obstacles.

- First, language creates a number of problems. Showa’s students have a wide range of English ability, and often this makes communication difficult: students are unable to understand directions from their site coordinators and site coordinators are unable to understand questions from the students. Students also often want to participate in projects that have a high level of human interaction such as at a hospital or a nursing home. They are disappointed when they are unable to and feel that the more language-level-appropriate projects, such as invasive species removal, is beneath them.
- A second challenge is the students’ lack of understanding of the concept of “volunteerism.” Students with little personal or cultural experience on this topic often expect to observe and make friends. They are surprised by the amount of effort one must put into volunteer work.
- Finally, there are sometimes personality conflicts. Students are occasionally shy and unable to overcome this to be successful. At times, they are also irresponsible, saying they will be somewhere and then not showing up. Despite these challenges, the student (and site) satisfaction level remains high.

Feedback on the Program

There is no shortage of student feedback on Showa Boston’s volunteer program. Showa values all feedback, both positive and negative, in an effort to better the overall program to cater to students’ needs. Much of the feedback received from participants reads as follows:

Student Comments

- *I felt proud when someone thanked me*
- *I want to go back again*
- *I made a friend*
- *It was very hard, but I felt it was an important job*
- *At first I was nervous, but everyone was so kind*
- *I didn’t think I could do it, but I tried my best*
- *I felt happy to help.*

Conclusion

Showa Boston’s volunteer program is a thriving, successful program today due to the efforts of its collective parts: from Showa’s bus drivers who help students arrive on-time to their sites, to Showa’s new full-time volunteer coordinator who works tirelessly to serve all students, to the numerous sites that welcome international students into their organization year after year knowing the challenges it brings. But ultimately, it is the students who drive this program and whose young-spirited passion and desire to "do good", even when it seems difficult or strange, is motivating to all those who have the pleasure of witnessing it.

This article is based on a talk given by the author at the TESOL 2010 conference in Boston, USA.

Michelle Smith
 Showa Boston Institute, Boston, USA
 E-mail: <msmith@showaboston.org>

Showa Women’s University
 <www.swu.ac.jp>



Showa Women's University was founded by Enkichi Hitomi (1883-1974), a poet and scholar who, with his wife Midori's support, became deeply committed to establishing peace in a world ravished by World War I. Their concept for building a peaceful society, based on the ideas of Tolstoy, centered on educating women to play an important role in its development and growth. Enkichi and Midori Hitomi took the first step towards making their vision a reality by establishing a technical school for women which opened in 1920 with 8 students and 5 teachers. Today, the University, located in Setagaya, Tokyo has grown to over 7,400 students and 700 faculty members. It offers a kindergarten-through-high school program, a junior

college, a four-year university, a graduate school, an overseas Boston program and an Open College which promotes lifelong learning to people in the local community.

Showa Boston Institute
 <www.showaboston.org>



Showa Boston Institute for Language and Culture is a residential academic institution, established by Showa Women's University. Its mission is to increase students' English language proficiency, develop their cross-cultural awareness, and foster their personal growth. Students share Japanese culture through local school visits, festivals and personal contacts.

Showa Boston believes that culture and language are inextricably linked and are best learned in conjunction with each other. Our English-as-a-Second-Language classes combine skills with content-based instruction, taught in an immersion atmosphere with a communicative approach. Instruction is enhanced by interaction with native speakers, both on and off-campus. Through this integrated program of experiential learning, windows of insight open, stereotypes disappear and mutual respect emerges.

Showa Boston fosters accelerated personal growth and a broadened global perspective in its students. They are encouraged to take increasing responsibility for their intellectual and personal development within a structured, supportive, and culturally sensitive framework. Students are given opportunities to gain confidence in mastering a different language and culture, engaging in self-discovery and learning mutual responsibility through group living. In a secure and healthy environment, we strive to provide students with a solid foundation of knowledge, skills and character to become active participants in the international community.

<p>Global Issues at ESL Etc < www.esletc.com ></p>  <p><i>ESL Etc.</i> is a dynamic website dedicated to bringing global issues and activism into English language teaching. The website provides free handouts, resources, podcasts and articles as well as an on-line forum for sharing teaching ideas.</p>	<p>HATO < www.facebook.com ></p>  <p><i>HATO (Hands Across The Ocean)</i> passes out food and clothing to homeless people in Osaka. Join its facebook group to get news on upcoming future events and to help raise awareness among Japanese students of homelessness in Japan.</p>	<p>Youth for Human Rights www.youthforhumanrights.org</p>  <p><i>Youth for Human Rights (YHR)</i> is an international NGO which has produced a powerful set of 30 public service TV ads designed to promote human rights. See these ads on-line or order the DVD for your classroom teaching.</p>
--	--	--