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# The true value of volunteering



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My participation in a variety of voluntary roles around the Exeter campus has helped me to enrich my personal knowledge and skills base. This was particularly apparent during the time I spent as a volunteer in August 2009 in the special collections department at the University.

The period of time I had organised coincided with a temporary loan of a personal archive from the estate of a local author. The task, or rather my challenge: ten large boxes containing a collection of personal and literary papers. At first it seemed a daunting task, but under the direction of the acting head of archives and special collections Christine Fauch – who kindly dedicated a period of time to show me how to professionally handle each document, make an assessment of its condition and collate a comprehensive box list – I soon became confident.

Gloved (to avoid transferring dirt or grease to any document), I methodically and carefully made an assessment of correspondence relating to the author's connection to the Arts Council, his letters to Ted Hughes, numerous scripts of poems, manuscripts of books, a series of sonnets to family members, newspaper reviews, a card and letter from Mary O'Hara and administrative papers relating to the Arvon Foundation – an eclectic mix which not only centres on general aspects of the author's life, literature and learning but also on his close association with the Arvon Foundation. More importantly, the collection reveals the true presence of the author, as the opportunity to see his amendments within the individual manuscripts exposes the original thinking behind a particular poem, sonnet or book.

One of the greatest challenges was not the quantity of boxes, the fragile condition of the documents or the dust and strange odour, but my own self-discipline, that is, not getting too involved with each artefact, especially when time is

short. One particular letter looked nothing out of the ordinary and I would have simply recorded it as a 'letter from a close friend' but the opening paragraph caught my attention. A close inspection revealed a tantalising link of the correspondent's family association to one of the great poets of World War One. This had a profound impact on me, and on reflection I am pleased that my natural instinct was to delve further into the letter.

It is uncertain at this stage if the collection will remain a temporary long-term loan or a permanent archive for the special collections department. Irrespective of the final outcome, maintaining the longevity of the archive must be paramount, and digitising a proportion of irreplaceable material will help to preserve the context for future generations.

Volunteering in the department has enabled me to widen my perspective on the importance of the preservation of archival material. On a personal level, I have enjoyed analysing and unravelling the collection, and on completion it left me feeling enlightened and mentally stimulated. When asked why I volunteer in such a specialist area, I explain that my reasons are based on four different but quite related criteria. Previously, inspired by the *Time Team* programmes, I registered as a volunteer with Exeter University's archaeology department. I was fortunate that during that summer an opportunity arose and I was invited to assist in a local archaeological excavation based at Stokenham, Devon. I found that I enjoyed the experience not only of working in a mixed team of volunteers, students and academics but, more importantly, handling the newly found artefacts and, with the assistance of members of the team, analysing and understanding the archaeological history related to these objects. It was hot hard work digging in a pit and at times I wondered if we were digging for 'coal'. Volunteering for archival work appealed to me and I could envisage a parallel to the archaeological experience. I felt that I would be able to utilise my skills and knowledge gained from my Open University humanities and literature degree and my twelve years' experience in library and information service in public libraries and further and higher education. This was especially poignant, as I had submitted my charter ship portfolio prior to volunteering. I enjoy investigating aspects of history; my private passions include reading obituaries, poetry (especially the war poets) and memoirs of pilots and aircrew of World War Two, which truly fascinate me and possibly provided the catalyst in my decision to volunteer.

As with most learning and development activities, there are positive and negative aspects to be experienced in volunteering.

The positive elements include being valued and appreciated for the input of your time, skills and the competencies that you bring. As you are encompassed in a different working environment it enables you to develop skills quickly without the everyday pressures of meeting deadlines and targets. Volunteering and working in a solo capacity is completely different to working in a mixed team where you may find yourself working alongside very dedicated volunteers. Each scenario will help to increase and develop your communication skills and boost your own self-confidence. If you are able to volunteer in different capacities and subject matter that eventually cross-relate, this may provide you with a strong feeling of personal achievement. I could not have perceived that volunteering for archaeological excavations would eventually inspire me to volunteer for work in special collections. Diversity in application and subject matter also helps to create a positive impact on your curriculum vitae, which may prove to be a valuable added asset when applying for new employment or seeking promotion.

Negative feelings could arise when you realise that due to the time-scale you may never see the final outcome of the project that you have been involved in from the outset. Returning to your full-time occupation, your colleagues or manager may not be aware that you have dedicated your free time to a completely different application, and possibly may not see any relevance to your current role.

I would certainly recommend volunteering to everyone as the experience will broaden your outlook. In most cases you are under no obligation to commit to attend at specific times or on a fixed rota but by arrangement with the person managing the project. Had I known this previously I would have started volunteering much earlier in my library and information career. I try to volunteer once or twice a year, dependent on my personal circumstances and the amount of annual leave that I'm able to commit. Occasionally you may have to put your name on a waiting list of potential volunteers and wait for the next available opportunity. Do not interpret this as being negative towards you, as the wait is usually worthwhile. When your opportunity does arise, do not worry if you feel apprehensive: I always do! It does not last long once you become involved and I can assure you that I have always returned feeling

excited and energised. I have arranged my volunteering again this year in special collections and I may be involved in further developments of the same archive as last year – who knows?