

# Use Design Thinking to Reorganize Voluntary Activities that Can Inspire Student's Volunteer Spirit

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**Abstract:- This article focuses on 'human centered' idea and the five steps process play the important roles in this application. These two points are both laying emphasis on student volunteers in voluntary activities, who we aren't care enough but we should pay more attention. Through this research, I think it's totally workable to apply design thinking into reorganizing volunteer activities among students and this application has a strong prospect. In this way, we can combine design thinking with voluntary activities and help inspiring students' volunteer spirit.**

**Keywords:- Human Centered Idea; Voluntary Activities; Volunteer Spirit, Design Thinking.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

I'm an ordinary school student in China, attending class, doing homework and studying hard for various courses. However, this is not my whole on-going story, besides learning, I have been doing voluntary work for over six years, starting from an inexperienced volunteer, and now have involved into one of members of Youth Volunteers Association in Sichuan University, throwing myself into organizing voluntary activities and recruiting volunteers. During this period of time, while participating in different parts of voluntary work, I am gradually used to have a deeper observation on these peer student volunteers contacted with me, and I find that there is a worrying similarity on a large percentage of them: lack in volunteer spirit to do voluntary work. My observation doesn't just point out a niche phenomenon, it also happens widely in America. Education Week points out that students are losing interests in doing voluntary activities. The University of Maryland's Do Good Institute even used U.S. Census data to track rates of volunteering from 2002 to 2015. It found that about 25 percent

of teenagers volunteered in 2015, down from 28 percent in 2005. (Sparks 1) This phenomenon of lacking volunteer spirit could finally cause the decline of volunteers and voluntary activities that we always don't want to see. So, I started the idea to improve this situation. In this research paper, I put forward a new potential way to solve this problem, which uses design thinking as the reference to reorganize voluntary activities that can inspire student's volunteer spirit.

## II. BACKGROUND

What is volunteer spirit? As professor Qi Zhou said: "Volunteer spirit is the general term of the standards, principles and ideas with universal value that has been gradually formed by volunteers in the voluntary service social practice." (Zhou 2) This sort of standards, principles and ideas was summarized by Kofi Annan, former Secretary General of the United Nations as dedication, fraternal love, mutual assistance and progress. (Annan) The above-mentioned are all in an abstract way which is a little hard to understand, so it's better for us to have a more particular knowledge of the specific embodiment of volunteer spirit. There isn't a uniform answer, and I choose to refer to Benyu Xu's profound understanding about volunteer spirit. Benyu Xu, once rated as one of China's top ten outstanding volunteers, clarifies that the volunteer spirit in voluntary work is aimed at volunteers to start from their own conscience and compassion, be people-oriented, take serving the public as a way of life and living habits, rely on a good sense of social responsibility, and always take a positive attitude to actively participate in voluntary activities. [我们把志愿服务当成一种生活方式、生活习惯，把志愿精神当成一种工作态度、价值追求，积极投身新时代文明实践中心建设。](Xu 1)

Looking back to the attitudes of those students I met before, I only saw negative, inactive and forced. Why would this undesired phenomenon appear? Certainly, students should take some level of responsibility, but we can't ignore problems on these voluntary activities. To some extents, voluntary activities among students these days are becoming more and more formalized, which means they are usually simple, repeated and superficial. Lina Gong, a teacher who has the same thoughts with me, points out that some colleges and universities organize voluntary activities for the purpose of publicity and fame, while the students who participate in them deal with it as if they have to finish the task, which is not to do things with sincerity. [有的高校为了名利,出于宣传自己的目的组织一些活动,而参与的学生像完成任务一样来应付,不是真心实意地办实事。](Gong 2) Under this circumstance, students will lose volunteer spirits because they don't know the meanings for them to get involved in these activities and what they can get. Voluntary activities like this bring a promising organization power of school administration and lower budget, but they go against the inspiration of student volunteer's volunteer spirit. This is what we want to avoid from being increasing serious.

I am always wanting to improve this situation, but don't know how to start. This seems to be a design work. In English class, when I first read about design thinking in the article "Design Thinking-Why Is It Important", I was greatly impressed by its popularization. Everyone can use design thinking to make effective strategy developments and organizational changes. Ultimately, it is there to help people make things a better way. (Makhoul 3) In Barry Wylant's viewpoint, design thinking also in line with innovation. It can help us do brainstorm, think 'outside the box' and solve problems with creativity. (Wylant 8) Due to these strong characteristics, I initiated the idea to apply design thinking into reorganizing voluntary activities.

### III. THE CORE IDEA OF DESIGN THINKING: HUMAN CENTERED

I begin with exploring the core idea of design thinking. From Tim Brown, one of the founders who brought out the concept of design thinking, we learn that "design thinking is a human-centered approach to innovation that draws from the designer's toolkit to integrate the needs of people." (Brown) This shows that 'human centered' is the core and it is an interesting idea since voluntary activities in schools are not always pay close attention to people. Applying the core of design thinking here seems to be a positive solution, so it's time for us to lay emphasis on people. On this occasion, it's worth noting that the group of people we should focus on are mainly the student volunteers that we have been kept discussing. What are their needs? In another word, in the planning stage, we are going to figure out their motivations for voluntary activities.

Students have plenty of different motivations for voluntary activities. We should accept the fact that few students expressed what might be regarded as purely 'altruistic' reasons for voluntary activities, and most students were conscious of how voluntary activities impacted in themselves. (Holdsworth 10) From reading Holdsworth and Cnaan's researches about motivations of student volunteering, student volunteers' motivations can be broadly classified as the following categories.

#### A. *Showing sympathy*

This is the most relevant motivation to embody altruism. Students want to give a helping hand to vulnerable groups in the society to show their sympathy. However, sometimes they just came to do the voluntary work without knowing more about people they were going to help in advance. One can establish a real sympathy to someone when he/she has a comprehensive understanding of this person, so a storytelling of vulnerable groups is necessary. Now the world is filled with logic, but we should keep an emotional dimension to show empathy and connectedness, that is how stories work. (PWR 6) Stories for voluntary activities are aimed to help students to start from their own conscience and compassion to volunteer.

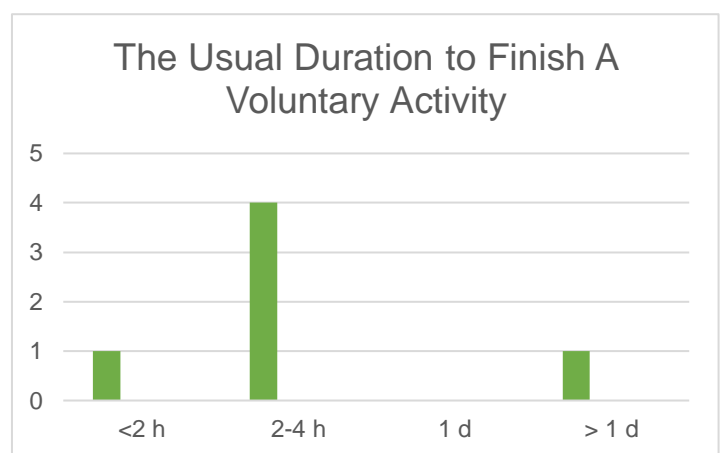
In order to reach ‘human centered’, stories we represent are supposed to focus on people involved in voluntary activities. Accordingly, all the plots and emotions in stories should launch around these people. For this, it is a bit special because we should not only pay attention to student volunteers, but also should care more about vulnerable groups in voluntary activities, which contain people that volunteers are planning to help.

The initial versions of stories should involve people in vulnerable groups’ personal experiences and present conditions in all directions to indirectly convey which kind of help they need. It has the function of letting student volunteers to get a deeper understanding of the certain group and the certain people so that their sympathy for them will be stimulated more completely. ‘Initial’ means each story shouldn’t have an absolute ending, and they should keep updating the follow-up between these people and student volunteers, this can not only solidify their connections, but also can play the role of publicity and attract more student volunteers to join in. How the volunteers and the group of people communicated, how they made it to achieve something together, all these things can be written in the story, just try to observe and record. We all know that the biggest difference between stories and facts is emotion, so the story should embody vivid feelings of the vulnerable groups and student volunteers. It means a lot, just like Maya Angelou said: “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” (PWR 6)

### B. Making connections

This is a kind of social demand. Doing voluntary work is a good way to get to know other student volunteers, who may be very nice people. When a student signs up to a voluntary activity, he/she is usually expecting a sense of belongingness and eagerly to form connections which may extend beyond their voluntary activities. When we talk about belongingness and connections, we often associate with a circle. While we are focusing our attention on this circle, it gradually becomes a central point made up by people, so setting up circles can be recognized as a human centered process. Circles needn’t to be too big, but make sure we have good relationships with

everyone else in this circle and anyone therein should have the chance to be the center to project oneself. For the purpose of achieving this, group building is indispensable. Students with similar hobbies, abilities and goals will gather in and form a circle. Voluntary activities should be proceeded in denomination of volunteer groups and every student volunteer is suggested to at least be in one of the volunteer groups. A sense of belonging and connections also mean a long-term process, for one can’t build them just through a short time activity. In my experience, long-term activities among students are really rare.



**Fig 1.** Wang. “The Usual Duration to Finish A Voluntary Activity”

And in the survey I made, we can see from the chart that only one respondent used to do a relatively long-term voluntary activity, which is at least more than a day. So, what we need to do is to make voluntary activities among students establish a long-term mechanism. Because the major job of students is study, so it’s hard for them to focus on a long spell to do a voluntary activity. However, we can make these activities persistently conduct with an interval time. For example, a voluntary activity hold once for a week with half of a day and continuous for a year. Student volunteers will blend in the group and make their connections to each other in this year. The final goal is to make student volunteers take voluntary activities as part of their life and living habits, instead of having a special attitude towards them.

### C. Improving skills

Students want to improve their skills during the voluntary activities, in this process, they learn new knowledge, develop technical abilities and link up theories with applications to adapt the new situation and demand in the society. Catering for 'human centered', we should first focus on finding out skills needed for each of them. Base on this, when we distribute a voluntary activity to volunteers, we put students whose needs of abilities strongly related to this activity first.

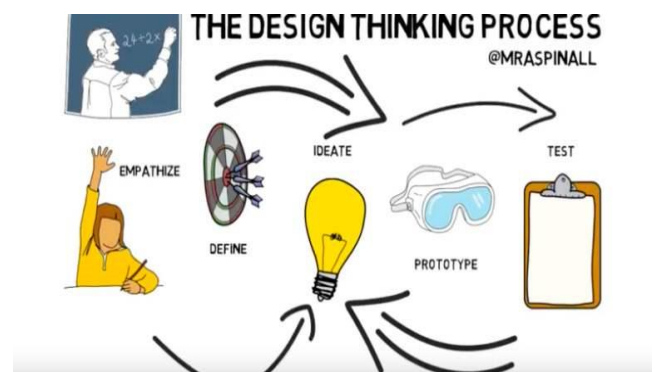
If students are still in primary schools or middle schools, just find out their interests and try the best to change their interests into specific skills. For instance, there is a student who like reading books, voluntary programs in public libraries are most suitable. While the student is helping readers to find the books they want or clearing up issues of magazines and newspapers, he/she can get to know how these things are classified in different areas of the library and how they are put in order in the bookshelf. With constant practice and memory, he/she is able to get the strong skills in archival science and system of information, which are beneficial to them when they face amounts of information in different subjects at school.

If students are already in colleges, then we can accurately dock voluntary activities with their majors to give students more chance to apply their majors in real life. In some school sports meets that are held by student organizations, we are more willing to see a student who majors in physical education to volunteer as a referee rather than another student who even seldom watch sports game on an ordinary day. In hospitals, we are more likely to have a sense of safety when inquiring a student volunteer majors in medicine the appropriate consulting room we should register. This kind of voluntary activities may have less threshold than internships, but to some extents, their effects are similar. When the student volunteers consider these activities they joined in are strongly related to their future developments and jobs, their social responsibility will rise correspondingly.

### IV. THE FIVE STEPS PROCESS

Besides the core of design thinking, this thinking mode also comes up with a five steps process, which is well-known by designers and ordinary people who want to put this way of thinking into use. However, in my previous synthesis paper, I summarized that the five steps process is the partial appearance and a concrete presentation of design thinking, so we shouldn't understand it as a method of design and then tend to reach formalization. In fact, I find the five steps process still has something to its credit when it's my turn to apply it into voluntary activities, and I try to avoid from making my application as a rote.

The five steps includes empathize, define, ideate, prototype and test in order. (Rossman 4) The following image also shows it clearly.



**Fig 2.** Mraspinall. "The Design Thinking Process" Brain Aspinall project. Brain Aspinall.org. Dec 17.2018. Web. 6 June 2020.<http://brianaspinall.com/5-stages-of-the-design-thinking-process/>

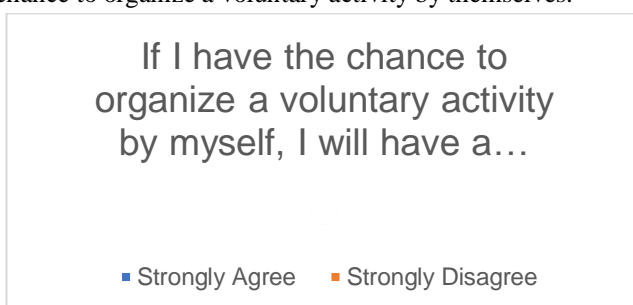
Actually, the 'empathize' step is enclosed to the core of design thinking, so I split it out to discuss invisibly in the before pages. It needs to be emphasized that except exploring students' motivations, people who need student volunteer's help are equally worth to pay attention to, and storytelling about them is one way to reach this. That's why the core of design thinking has a larger range than the 'empathize' step since it could only focus on users, which are student volunteers. Besides, 'define' part can be formulaic for different kinds of voluntary activities and different groups of

student volunteers can have a big distinction, so we can't just mix all these into one definition. For each different definition, the key is to clearly clarify the specific voluntary activity's problems and how these problems hinder student volunteers' willingness and needs. All in all, I am going to talk about the following three parts in detail.

#### A. Ideate

At present, voluntary activities that we participate in always have detailed expatiations to make sure we know what we should do for preparation and what we are going to do next, even correct to minutes. This is fine but a bit conventional, students are more or less tired with some traditional voluntary activities, maybe we should try to be more boldly. People of different ages have different ways of thinking. For adults, they prefer to 'use thinking', which means quickly find a good solution through existing knowledge, similar to the existing solutions. And 'exploratory thinking' will try new things, which may lead us to come up with unusual ideas and invisible solutions, and children and teenagers tend to do so. (Gopnik 1) Students are in the golden age with innovation and creativity. Why don't we just let them to be the designers of the main part of these activities? Schools' job is to let students know the three 'W': when, where and who. When the voluntary activity is going to carry out, where the main place of the voluntary activity is and who the people that student volunteers will meet are. Then, students' preliminary work is to figure out 'what' and 'how': what the precise arrangement of the voluntary activity is and how to put this into effect. Again, it is the step to show all of their imagination and creativity.

In my survey, I also sound students out by asking if they will have a strong sense of responsibility when they have the chance to organize a voluntary activity by themselves.



**Fig 3.** Wang. "If I have the chance to organize a voluntary activity by myself, I will have a strong sense of responsibility."

Looking at this chart, I'm pleased that 80% of the respondents chose 'strongly agree' and I believe that they will be more willing to shoulder responsibility during this process. However, this work could be pretty hard when students do this for the first time, and that's why we need to prototype and test it.

#### B. Prototype

The previous ideate step is tend to let everyone first has his/her own ideas, and this step is more similar to put their heads together to integrate a complete scheme. In design thinking, people like to use sticky notes as a supplementary means to set up the model, and it can be applied to organize voluntary activities either to collect different ideas. When members in the team reach an agreement and present the first prototype in an electronic edition or hard copies, it's time to start the voluntary activity to test all the early-stage preparations they did.

#### C. Test

Testing will help to understand what actually works and what does not. This step can be the most rewarding, if the prototype succeed to give positive results, or can be the most annoying, if the prototype fails. After testing, the former step may have to be repeated. This step is available based on the long-term mechanism so that we have the chance to analyze the feedbacks and refine a voluntary activity. Surveys are really necessary, we want feedbacks from student volunteers to find out problems that student volunteers realize in the real process of volunteering. Aiming at these problems, we start to refine the prototype and put it into use when the next action of the long-term activity come. Unceasingly iterate and improve the voluntary activity till all the results from surveys are positive, and this time means that students will always take a positive attitude to actively participate in this activity. At this point, we can say with pride that this is a perfect voluntary activity that can inspire student's volunteer spirit.

## V. CONCLUSION

As the ending, I hope this research make it clear that how 'human centered' idea and the five steps process play the important roles in this application. These two points are both laying emphasis on student volunteers in voluntary activities, who we aren't care enough but we should pay more attention. Through this research, I think it's totally workable to apply design thinking into reorganizing volunteer activities among students and this application has a strong prospect. In this way, we can combine design thinking with voluntary activities and help inspiring students' volunteer spirit. I try to give an innovative viewpoint to voluntary activities and I will be honored if this research can be a beginning of the connection between design thinking and voluntary activities, which might attract more people to discuss, promote and make it into practical use. I'm sure one day when I participate in a new voluntary activity, students around me will keep smiling, invest themselves with full energy and always with a high spirit of volunteering.

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