

**Using the Art Arenas of Pittsburgh as Volunteer Sites for High School  
Individuals with Learning and Emotional Support Needs to Enhance  
Appropriate Social Skills.**

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**Overview**

This unit will serve as a guide for an integral part of the educational experience, volunteering. This unit is part of a larger curriculum unit where students would volunteer at both a direct service sight like a food bank or senior center and the part detailed in this unit, at a place where the students can learn information of an academic nature, like a history museum or photography studio.

This unit will span an entire school year and will continue throughout the individual student's school career. Students will use reflection writing and journaling to discuss their experience. They will self assess strength and need areas as evident during their volunteer time. This curriculum can be used in conjunction with any subject area with or without students with or without disabilities.

**Rationale**

Transition from school to work or school to a post-secondary institution is a driving force behind special education today. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA – PL:94-142) recommends that schools help students at the high school level plan for their life once they leave the public school system. This concept is really one that should be applied to all students.

My experiences in urban high schools are inundated with students who are not prepared for the world after high school. The current focus is high stakes

standardized testing. This testing, while required and moderately useful, can not be the only focus of education, particularly at the high school level for students with mild disabilities like learning and emotional disabilities.

Our students need social skills and experience in the work world. One place these skills can be developed is in the community at a volunteer site. Students require positive role models. The end goal should be the development of intrinsic motivators to help others while bettering oneself. There is no need for me to go into the many tribulations facing our young people, but they do need to experience the good of helping others, even if they have not been helped themselves. My goal is to stop the cycle of feeling helpless and build self-esteem to promote independence and work ethics. Historically, social competence has been a fundamental criterion used to define and classify students with high-incidence disabilities.

Since the inception of the field of learning disabilities in the 1960s, teaching professionals have concentrated their resources and energies in the remediation and improvement of academic skills. Countless hours of classroom time have been devoted to the students' mastery of the skills related to language arts, mathematics and science. Finally, in the mid-1980s the field began to recognize the critical importance of social skills in the development and ultimate success of individuals with learning disabilities. Research and observation clearly demonstrates that individuals with learning disabilities tend to be less accepted by peers, interact awkwardly and inappropriately in social situations and are socially imperceptive.

The goal for our students with learning and emotional disabilities is to achieve an appropriate degree of social competence. Social skills are a collection of isolated and discrete learned behaviors. Social competence refers to the smooth sequential use of these skills in an effort to establish an ongoing social interaction. There are two schools of thought related to the nature and causes of social incompetence. Proponents of the first hypothesis argue that social skill deficits are the result of the same neurological dysfunctions that cause academic problems. The second hypothesis holds that the social disabilities are caused by the child's chronic school failure and the rejection that often results. These researchers feel that the student has been unable to practice these social skills because of this isolation (LaVoie, 1994).

The cause of social incompetence is far less important than its effect. School-aged children and adolescents need to be accepted and supported by their peers. Their social incompetence often prevents them from establishing and maintaining such relationships. Consider the comments of Doreen Kronick, noted expert in learning disabilities and related social deficits:

*"To become a friend means to become interested in, and somewhat knowledgeable about the other person's interests, be sensitive to their needs and feelings, compromise on activities, laugh off differences, be supportive, allow the other person freedom to interact with others and spend time with themselves, be elated by their successes, share their sorrows sensitively, be able to communicate your pleasure, displeasure and anger without such communication being destructive to either party, and change and grow as your friend changes and grows. I wonder whether many learning disabled adolescents possess the sensitivity, empathy, flexibility, maturity, and generate sufficient interest and excitement to maintain such friendships."*

The importance of volunteering is immeasurable. Volunteering is the commitment of time and energy for the benefit of society and the community. It is undertaken freely and by choice without concern for financial gain. Volunteering is also an important expression of citizenship and democracy, and is a demonstration of an active community. Volunteering is a very valuable way to gain skills and experience and build confidence, which are useful when seeking paid employment. The National Survey on Volunteering (National Center for Volunteering 1997) showed that around half the UK's adult population is involved in formal Volunteering, giving on average 1.9 hours each week. Three quarters of the population (74%) are involved in neighbourly helping, or 'informal' volunteering. The National Survey also found that 84% of volunteers were involved with voluntary and community organizations, across a very broad spectrum of activity and 24% were involved with public sector organizations, e.g. hospital friends, special constables, school governors. Also, 13% of volunteers were involved with private sector organizations e.g. employer supported volunteering schemes.

The 1997 National Survey of Volunteering has stirred up controversy with its finding of a 'sharp reduction in levels of participation by young people aged 18-24' and of more negative views of volunteering among the younger generation than older age groups. These findings have been challenged by some in the youth volunteering field, who maintain that young people are participating at a high level.

This research, funded by the Institute of Volunteering Research, set out to explore through focus groups of young people their understanding of voluntary work and their view of its relevance to them. Attention was focused on the conditions and incentives which would attract them to voluntary work, and the best ways of publicizing and marketing volunteering opportunities to young people. Topics covered included the image of volunteers; motivations and perceived benefits for young people; their views of the opportunities for them to

volunteer, and the availability of information and access routes; and their perceptions of the barriers, deterrents and disadvantages.

The findings are presented as a 'wish-list' for volunteering. 'Flexivol' summarizes the essential requirements of 16-24 year olds, and serves as an acronym for the most important elements:

Flexibility

Legitimacy

Ease of access

Xperience

Incentives

Variety

Organization

Laughs

The context for young people's voluntary activity is rapidly changing. Concern has been expressed by youth organizations about 'enforced volunteering' undermining the essence of free choice in voluntary work. The emphasis on the dissatisfaction of young people and the potential role of voluntary work in promoting training for employment and citizenship has placed youth volunteering high on the policy agenda. Recent government initiatives have created unprecedented opportunities to expand youth volunteering.

Research evidence has grown rapidly in the last few years, indicating that many young people, while disliking the term 'volunteering', believe in the value of voluntary work both for society and for themselves. Instrumental motivations to volunteer – to gain work experience, qualifications and skills – are increasingly prominent among the young. However, young people are keenly aware of barriers and obstacles to their involvement. Solutions have been proposed and this report endorses them, with fresh emphasis on key areas. Above all it argues for the principle of flexibility to accommodate the pressures which young people experience and the preferences which they express.

The message from young people is that volunteering needs a make-over. It needs to improve its image, broaden its access points and provide what today's and tomorrow's young people need. Volunteering suffers from out-dated associations with worthy philanthropy and conjures images that do not appeal to the young. However, it is recognized as potentially offering opportunities to young people which are scarcely available anywhere else. This study suggests, as do previous ones, that there is a vast pool of young people who could benefit from voluntary work. Many are on the edge of involvement, and many could do more than they already do, but certain conditions need to be met in order to achieve this. Changes are needed to raise levels of knowledge and awareness, to increase access routes and information and, once involved, to improve the quality and value of the volunteering experience.

'Flexivol' summarizes the essential requirements of 16-24 year olds. Flexibility is given top priority by young people, particularly in respect of flexible work and working times for volunteering. The young have many pressures and demands on them and find it hard to make the time and commitment. They have a sizeable number of other outlets for their free time and volunteering has to compete with this. Much of their lives are controlled by others and it is important to them to have an element of choice and spontaneity in volunteering.

Legitimacy is a widespread need. Better education from an early age about the full range of voluntary work and its significance, and more positive images, would make volunteering seem 'normal' and 'cool' to young people. Their view of volunteers is basically favorable but negative stereotypes persist. Peer pressure, particularly on boys, prevents many young people from getting involved for fear of being labeled as suckers or wimps.

Ease of access is a requirement that has been highlighted in several studies and access is still a barrier. Most of the young people in this research did not have much idea of how to find out about volunteering opportunities. A major reason for not volunteering was simply that they didn't know how to go about it. More information, more encouragement and easy access points would help break down these entry barriers.

Experience is high on young people's wish-list for volunteering. They want relevant and interesting experiences which will stand them in good stead in their personal and career development. Volunteering needs to offer opportunities to learn new skills, to take on challenges, to explore different careers, and to get work experience. These instrumental motivations are not new, but are increasing rapidly among young people.

Incentives are important because of the competition for young people's time and attention. Inducements may be needed to help tip them into involvement, and once there certain rewards would sustain them. Most prominent is the incentive of tangible outcomes in the form of a reference or a qualification, to validate their experience and demonstrate their achievement to employers and others. In the absence of the main incentive for working – pay – young people at least need not to be out of pocket and full payment of their expenses would be an incentive.

Variety is an obvious and widely recognized requirement. Variety in types of work, issues and structures would accommodate the huge range of individual interests, goals, constraints and preferences among the younger generation. Variation should be offered in the amount of commitment, the level of responsibility and the type of activity in order to attract the widest possible range of young people.

Organization of the volunteering needs to be efficient but informal, providing a relaxed environment in which young people feel welcome and valued. They would like some appreciation and the right kind of advice and support. They do not want to be over-organized and heavily supervised but to have people there who can support them when they need it, and help them progress when they are ready.

Laughs should not get left out of the picture because of young people's serious ambitions for self-development. Volunteering should be enjoyable, satisfying and fun. Since some of the competition for young people's time is from the attraction of a good time socially, it is a distinct bonus if volunteering also offers some laughs. While young people may not volunteer primarily for the social side, they are more likely to continue if they are enjoying themselves (Institute for Volunteering Research, 2005).

There are 4 principles fundamental to volunteering:

Choice.

Volunteering must be a choice freely made by each individual. Any encouragement to become involved in volunteering should not result in any form of coercion or compulsion.

Diversity.

Volunteering should be open and actively promoted to all, regardless of background, age, race, sexual orientation etc. Equal opportunities principles are basic to supporting diversity.

### Reciprocity.

Volunteers offer their time and skills, but should benefit in other ways in return. Potential benefits include a sense of worthwhile achievement, useful skills, experience, contacts, sociability, fun and inclusion in the life of the organization.

### Recognition.

Explicit recognition of the value which volunteers contribute to the organization, the community, the social economy and to wider social objectives is fundamental to a fair relationship between volunteers, organizations and public policy and practice (National Center for Volunteering 1997).

Teachers of individuals with severe disabilities including mental retardation talk about “social skills” as a key area of need for students. I firmly believe “social skill” instruction is needed for the majority of our learning and especially our emotional support students as well. Volunteering is an excellent way to practice and improve these skill areas. Volunteer sites can also serve as learning centers for students. Student volunteers should choose two sites to commit time to. One should be of service, helping people in need. Some examples might include a food bank, soup kitchen, senior center or day care facility. The other site should be one where the student can learn information that is academic in nature. This can include local museums and artist displays. For this unit I will use the Carnegie Museum, The Silver Eye Center for Photography, The Frick Art and Historical Center, The Mattress Factory and the Pittsburgh Opera.

These locations were chosen for two reasons. The first being, I have connections with all of the education and volunteer coordinators at the sites through my participation in the Pittsburgh Teachers Institute. We visited each of these facilities during and had tours of the different activities and opportunities available. Most places have several positions that can eventually turn into a paid position as well.

What types of volunteer activities can the students participate in while at these museums? Carnegie Museum has opportunities for tour docents, security, front desk, café staff, coat check, gift shop cashier. At The Silver Eye Center for Photography they have a collaborative with the Pittsburgh Historical Society. They provide a picture tour of a South Side block around The Silver Eye. Students can serve as tour guides. The center also has a biannual auction (which will take place this Spring) where students can serve in a variety of capacities including runner, spotter, item locator etc. The Frick Art and Historical Center

has several areas that might be of interest to the student. The Center includes the home of Henry Clay Frick, an art museum founded by his daughter and a carriage house that take the onlooker through the many phases of vehicle transportation with some original carriages used by the Frick family. There is also a café on the grounds. Speaking of grounds, there are several acres that need maintenance and landscaping. Here the students can serve as docents, security, café staff and landscaping crew. The Mattress Factory is a unique installation museum with works changing about every three to six months. At the opening of a new exhibit there is usually a garden party on the property for members. Students can serve as museum tour guides and set up and clean up for the garden party. Installations are torn down and either packed up or thrown away. There is a need for volunteers to help in this process as well. The Mattress Factory also has a large department that works with school age children. High school volunteers can serve as aides for these programs and camps. Finally the Pittsburgh Opera is another excellent resource for education and volunteer activities. Students can work concessions, paraphernalia display, docent, and hand out programs and take tickets.

Pittsburgh Public Schools has initiatives to include students with disabilities in volunteer activities. One of these programs is the Project MOVE and SOS program. This program can serve as a model for this unit. Project MOVE and SOS is in almost every Pittsburgh public school. The program coordinators select students, between eight and twelve each school year, to participate in a service learning project and volunteer at a work site of choice. Typically the students have mentors whom they visit two times per month at the work site. Selection is based on teacher and counselor recommendation and student motivation.

This program is comprehensive in nature and reaches a select few of the students. My unit proposal allows more students to access volunteer opportunities. Ideally, this unit would be implemented with the assistance of one to three other teachers in the special education (learning and emotional support) department. This would allow more students to participate on a more regular basis.

This unit can be spanned over the students' four years at the high school. Three teachers have two classes of freshman students, fifteen students in each class. This adds up to ninety students total. Six students volunteer each week, every other week for eight months. There are ten months in a school year, but there will need to be time allowed for preparation and wrap up at the end of the school year. Students would go out to a volunteer site a total of eight times, sixteen, including both an academic and a nonacademic site.

The first month of school will include self assessment of the students' skills, strength and need areas. We will examine the types of work the students are interested in and realistic expectations in helping them meet those goals. Every other week the students will use one class period to write about their experience at the volunteer site. (See Classroom Activities Section). They will reflect on their likes and dislikes and the need to improve any skills they are lacking. Students will be given examples of what other teenagers had to say about how they came to volunteer and how the experience has helped them. Students will examine quotes about volunteering and analyze the meanings of the quotations. Finally students will read a poem written about volunteering. They will use the poem as a model for their final culminating activity which will include writing, drawing, acting what they gained from the experience of volunteering.

### **Objectives**

The objectives of this unit are to bring into being more well rounded, community oriented, socially appropriate young men and women. One of the principles of volunteering that I have outlined is that it need not be coerced. While I have no intentions of bribing or forcing the students to participate, I do believe that I must bring the opportunity to them in order for them to take advantage of the positive outcomes that will arise from participation.

Students will know and understand the volunteering opportunities available in their neighborhood and surrounding areas.

Students will have a minimum of three references upon completion of each school year. These contacts will be stored and used as part of a resume to be completed as early as the tenth grade year but not later than the eleventh year of high school.

Students will demonstrate the ability to problem solve social situations at the work place in a non-confrontational manner. This may be one of the most difficult objectives to teach but volunteering in the community will be one of the most effective ways to teach the process.

Students will learn about the information presented at their academic volunteer site. For example, students volunteering at The Silver Eye Center for Photography will learn about film and photographs. They will also learn about the historic nature of the South Side. Students volunteering at the Pittsburgh Opera will learn about what a critic does, explore the history of music drama, and discover the technical aspects of live stage performances.

Students will use writing as a tool to tell their peers and teachers about their volunteer experience.

All students will read and/or perform their final culminating experience description to their class of peers. Select students in the tenth, eleventh and twelfth grades will make presentations to the upcoming freshman at the beginning of each school year as well.

The Pittsburgh Public Schools standards, particularly Reading, Writing and Listening and Citizenship standards will be addressed in each of the above mentioned objectives.

### **Strategies**

The primary strategy used will be hands on experience volunteering in the community and reflection journaling in the classroom. Too often, in the high school classrooms, we are searching for curriculum, particularly in special education. We give worksheets that are mundane and students are not motivated. The hands on approach allows our diverse learners to access a different intelligence to gain meaningful knowledge. In addition, the students' work at art venues will expose them to pieces they typically would not learn about in a jewelry or art class. These elective classes offered at the high school level are often overcrowded and unproductive. Teachers try their best but the environment is not conducive to learning. In this unit, students will have an opportunity to learn in nontraditional ways, including hands on experience.

Students will use their own thoughts about what is happening to them to write. They will be permitted to write any genre of text as long as it meets the goal of reflection upon their accomplishments as volunteers. Students will use the writing process while working with their peers. This will be another avenue to enhance appropriate social skills. They must be explicitly taught.

### **Classroom Activities**

#### Activity #1

Kelly F. Wolcott, a teenage contributor to *Teen Ink, Community Service* Written by *Teens*, writes the following:

*"It was three years ago, and I was entering my freshman year of high school. My parents and I were sitting in the living room watching "America's Funniest People." Everything seemed fairly normal until my mom reached for the TV Guide. She lost her balance and could no longer speak. It was not clear to me*

*what happened. It was so quick! I remember hearing the ambulance and looking from my aunt's window, where I was sent. The tears poured from my eyes as it drove away. I later found out that my mother suffered a severe stroke, necessitating a long hospital stay. I was devastated! I felt like my whole world had been turned upside down. Nothing hurt me more than visiting my mom in such a somber environment. I hated the hospital, the waiting, and the fact that my helpless mom was forced to stay there. Fortunately my views changed thanks to some very special people. Every day I saw volunteers in the hospital lending a helping hand or speaking an encouraging word. They were always there when someone needed them. I was so impressed! I spent the next summer volunteering at that same hospital. I wanted to give back to the volunteer community what it gave so unselfishly to my mother. I have been volunteering ever since. I honestly believe volunteering is far more important than material things. It builds character, self esteem, and is a terrific learning experience. Not to mention a blast! I wish you could see the look in a child's eyes when you have helped them to win a game, or the joy received when you have taken a walk with the elderly. It's remarkable! Volunteers are a vital part of all communities. I would like to encourage everyone to volunteer. It's not only an important learning experience, but a special way to lend a helping hand and more importantly ... your heart!!!"*

Text like this can inspire students to pursue volunteering as an essential component of their education and hopefully it will become a lifelong learning experience. Students benefit from reading text written by their peers. They are connected and can relate better to the author's point of view. Students will read the quote and engage in small group discussions with leading guide questions about the quote. They will discuss any experience they have had and what their expectations and/or inhibitions will be.

## Activity #2

Students will also examine the following quotes and write about the message the author is attempting to portray. Students will work in teacher-assigned pairs with two of the seven quotes. Each pair will come up with their own quote upon completion of the volunteer experience.

- Many Hands Make Light Work
- Volunteering warms the essence of the soul.
- Earn good marks outside of the classroom volunteering
- Volunteers are not paid -- not because they are worthless, but because they are priceless
- A volunteer can be little but still make a big difference
- Don't just be good. Be good for something!

- Better to light a single candle than to curse the darkness; Volunteer.

### Activity #3

Part of the Reading, Writing and Listening standards include being able to read from and write in a variety of genres. Poetry is an element of writing we rarely expose our students with disabilities to. Teachers are often focused on the reading of just fiction and non-fiction text to motivate students. Poetry allows another creative avenue that many students will welcome compared to the perceived boring act of reading another novel out loud day after day.

This poem was written by Dr. Razzak about global volunteers but I still feel it is a good piece for students to examine. Perhaps poetry will be their choice for their culminating activity.

Volunteer Creativity - Solidarity of Global Volunteers  
Written by Sultan Muhammad Razzak  
October 2000

Volunteer, volunteer...  
Raise your hands volunteer  
Knocking centuries first year  
Proclaim before the globe again  
Nothing the end but begin  
Volunteer, all the years in future  
Yours year... yours year... yours year

Though hiss the seas with blackish hood  
All devouring cyclones mood  
Raging war ices and fire  
But your hands still so upper  
Volunteer, volunteer...  
Keep your hands so up volunteer  
Knocking centuries first year  
Volunteer, all the years in future  
Yours year... yours year... yours year

Let's win the century with love and care  
Let's peace on the earth free of war  
Let's globe for share and care  
Make a chain on planet all over  
Keep your hands raise volunteer  
Knocking centuries first year

Volunteer, all the years in future  
Yours year... yours year... yours year  
Volunteer, volunteer...

#### Activity #4

Social Skills are the key objective I hope the students will meet.

The following three skills are targeted for social skill instruction:

Listening skills  
Problem solving skills  
Negotiating skills

The steps for **listening** included the nonverbal skills of:

- (a) facing the person with shoulders parallel to each other
- (b) making eye contact at least 50% of the time
- (c) using a normal facial expression that is relaxed
- (d) standing up straight with weight on both feet and shoulders back, or sitting up straight
- (e) staying near the person (within 3 feet)
- (f) appropriate responses such as head nods
- (g) responding to the person or asking for clarification, not interrupting, and being sincere

The steps for **problem solving** include:

- (a) remaining calm
- (b) deciding on the nature of the problem
- (c) determining a solution
- (d) determining a second solution
- (e) determining a third solution
- (f) naming the pros and cons of the first solution
- (g) naming the pros and cons of the second solution
- (h) naming the pros and cons of the third solution
- (i) choosing a solution (the one with the most pros and the least cons)
- (j) deciding on a plan
- (k) if the first solution does not work, trying the second solution

The task analysis of **negotiating** follow. The same nonverbal skills used in listening are involved but also the following steps:

- (a) asking if you can talk with the person
- (b) stating what you want
- (c) giving a reason

- (d) if the response is negative, asking for a solution
- (e) if the response is negative, proposing a compromise
- (f) thanking the person for listening
- (g) remaining calm
- (h) not using any put-downs
- (i) not interrupting

Direct instruction is given for the three social skills modeled.

The following elements are included in the instruction:

- Students are asked to describe the skill, give a rationale for learning the skill, and discuss if and where they had used the skill before.
- The teacher models the skill steps.
- The students are asked to memorize each skill step with the help of a skills sheet (a written list of the skill steps).
- The students are prompted to memorize one skill step at a time until all skill steps are memorized.
- A practice session is conducted until each student reaches 100% criterion in demonstrating all steps of the skill on a novel role-play situation.
- Each instructional session is to last 50 minutes.
- Throughout, testing sessions are conducted.
- These sessions consist of asking the students to recall the steps and demonstrate them in novel role-play situations.
- Once students have mastered at least 80% of the first skill during testing sessions, the second skill is taught.
- Likewise, the third skill is taught after the students have mastered at least 80% of the second skill during testing.
- Each skill takes two to three testing sessions for each student to reach the 80% criterion (Prater, M.A., Bruhl, S., & Serna, L.A. (1998).

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### **Websites**

[www.cec.sped.org/](http://www.cec.sped.org/)

Council for Exceptional Children website. A very user friendly detail oriented description of IDEA.

[www.pittsburghcares.org](http://www.pittsburghcares.org)

Pittsburgh's volunteer organization, providing rewarding volunteer opportunities for several thousand Pittsburghers and providing volunteer hands to many local agencies across the city. Volunteers do group projects for Pittsburgh agencies that address human services, environmental issues, and animal rescue.

[www.volunteermatch.org](http://www.volunteermatch.org)

Recruiting service for over 30,000 nonprofit agencies.

[www.volunteersolutions.org](http://www.volunteersolutions.org)

Urban Youth Action, Inc. empowers young people to develop positive life and leadership skills by connecting learning to the world of work and the pursuit of postsecondary education.

### **Content Standards**

Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening

6. All students exchange information orally, including understanding and giving spoken instructions, asking and answering questions appropriately, and promoting effective group communication

8. All students compose and make oral presentations for each academic area of study that are designed to persuade, inform or describe.

10. All students communicate appropriately in business, work and other applied situations

#### Citizenship

7. All students demonstrate their skills of communicating, negotiating and cooperating with others

8. All students demonstrate that they can work effectively with others

10. All students demonstrate an understanding of the various roles they can play as citizens through participation in a community service project.

11. All students demonstrate the ability to resolve conflicts in peaceful ways, including but not limited to peer mediation, anger management, interpersonal skills, and problem-solving.

#### Career Education and Work

3. All students understand and demonstrate the importance of relating their academic and vocational skills – for example, interviewing, creative thinking, decision making, problem solving, understanding and giving written and oral instruction – to their ability to seek, obtain, maintain and change jobs.

5. All students have training and experience for a career through volunteering, internships, shadowing and/or paid work experience.