

“Service Leadership” through Service Learning at Christian Zheng Sheng College

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ABSTRACT

A credit-bearing Service-Learning subject from The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) has been implementing to nurture service leadership of students through vigorously engaging in providing quality services in real-life context. This paper reports the learning gains of PolyU students after having completed the services in the Christian Zheng Sheng College. The evaluation was based on the reflections and metaphors written from the students and the Student Feedback Questionnaire (SFQ) results of the subject in 2014/15 cohort. The results supported that the overall learning experience of students is positive memorable and be able to change their world view.

Key Words: service leadership, service learning, Christian Zheng Sheng College, metaphor

1. BACKGROUND

Christian Zheng Sheng College is a private school in Hong Kong established by the Christian Zheng Sheng Association (ZSA). By means of life education in Christian faith, the College is committed to help students with drug offense and/or other behavioral problems such as theft and smuggling. Among the programmes and schemes offered by Correctional Services Department, Social Welfare Department, Department of Health, Hospital Authority, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Christian Zheng Sheng College is the only agency providing schooling for drug offenders to participate in the rehabilitation treatment programmes (Narcotics Division, 2014; Narcotics Division, 2015).

The credit-bearing service learning subject titled “Service Leadership through Serving Children and Families with Special Needs” was developed to foster the development of service leadership for students of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU). Students are provided the opportunity to acquire service leadership skills through attending lessons and providing quality services in authentic life setting. In the context of Christian Zheng Sheng College, PolyU students applied knowledge of service leadership to provide quality services to Zheng Sheng students. There are several challenges faced by the students. First, the age range of Zheng Sheng students is similar to PolyU students which is challenging for PolyU students to demonstrate leadership roles than serving children and youths. Second, the world views between Zheng Sheng students and PolyU students are very different. Third, the developmental history of Zheng Sheng students is complicated. As such, PolyU students have to spend much effort to understand the needs of Zheng Sheng students and build up relationships with them.

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The curriculum of this subject was developed based on the service leadership model (SLAM) (Chung, 2011). Seven transformative paradigm shifts are the frame of reference in service leadership education which was included in the subject as the overarching framework of the curriculum (Chung, 2012). Within the framework, the importance of generic leadership competencies, morality and competencies are addressed. Besides, intrapersonal competencies, interpersonal competencies and caring disposition were also addressed in the subject (Shek, Yu, Ma, Sun, & Liu, 2013). Specifically, this subject is designed to enable students to: (i) understand the core attributes of service leaders; (ii) apply the core components of service leadership through the engagement of community-based service activities; (iii) develop self-awareness of sharing and empathy to others and the community; and (iv) reflect on their service leadership qualities, particularly intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies.

The pedagogy used is based on Kolb's (1984) four-stage learning cycle which emphasized on the importance of experiential learning. Students first attended lectures to acquire the basic understanding about the definitions, theories, and concepts about service leadership. Subsequent workshops were provided for students to develop their service proposals. After that, students were required to provide services to Zheng Sheng participants for at least 40 hours to conduct leadership training, sharing sessions and few hours of labour work. Reflection time was provided during the service camp at night for students to solicit feedback from peers and teachers.

2. IMPACTS

The impact of service learning at Christian Zheng Sheng College on service leadership is evaluated qualitatively by means of students' reflections and metaphors writing, and quantitatively by looking at the Student Feedback Questionnaire (SFQ) results of the subject in 2014/15 cohort.

Throughout the subject, students had to write reflective journals at three stages, before, during and after having completed the services. The last reflective journal was to consolidate the overall learning experience about the subject focusing on: (i) their ability in integrating the knowledge into practice; (ii) their role, responsibility and contribution as a professional and as a citizen; (iii) their own strengths and potentials; (iv) their passion in helping the adolescents in needs; (v) their problem-solving and decision-making capacities and (vi) their social competence and interpersonal skills in collaboration with others. In this last reflective writing, most of the students showed their paradigm shift of worldview in some extent through understanding the complicated background of the service targets. Besides, students also reflected on their development of service leadership components, such as empathy, professional/generic competencies, and leadership attribute. Last but not the least, the subject raised students' awareness in intra and inter-personal development.

During the reflection time in service camp at nights, the class was being asked to write three descriptors and a metaphor which could stand for their service learning experience of the day. From the various forms of qualitative evaluation approaches and methods such as focus groups, interviews, and written reflections, written descriptors and metaphors were used to understand the perception of student learning experience in this subject. In fact, metaphor has been used in the field of educational evaluation (Patton, 2002; Kaminsky, 2000; Smith, 1988). Besides, metaphor can be used for people to understand, express, construct, and organize their world (Smith, 1988; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Students were asked to use three words or phrases (e.g., interesting, helpful to my development, etc.) to describe their feelings, perceptions, and experiences

of the SL subject attended (i.e., descriptors). Upon completion of the subject, the class was invited to complete a personal reflection form to conclude their overall learning experience by using the three descriptors and a metaphor. There were 25 personal reflection forms collected (Response rate=53%, N=47). Among the 72 descriptors written, all the words are positive to conclude the overall learning experience of students. The top three words with high frequencies in the sample pool are, “meaningful” (N=8), “unforgettable” (N=4), “valuable/precious opportunity” (N=4). There is one student used “perspective changing” to describe his paradigm shift explicitly. Regarding metaphors collected, students perceived that this was a memorable journey to expand their horizon and be able to change their world view. 6 out of the 25 metaphors were using “enjoyable tour/journey” to describe the fruitful experience of students.

Besides, students also completed SFQ at the end of the subject to provide their feedback about their overall learning experience of the subject (rating = 4.125 out of 5), feedback on achievement of learning objectives/outcomes (rating = 4.2 out of 5), and their learning gains on service leadership and related concepts (rating = 4.22 out of 5). In particular, the score on the item that “I have felt more empathy towards people in need as a result of studying this subject” was 4.4 which reflected that the subject had high impact to foster students’ empathy development as one of the core components in the service leadership curriculum of the subject.

As promoting paradigm shift is one of the major goals in service leadership education, providing a very different authentic context as the learning environment for such leadership development is essential. In this service learning subject, service learning was used as a vehicle to promote service leadership qualities in students. Evaluation components showed that students were able to achieve the intended learning outcomes and they felt that the subject helped them achieve the qualities of service leaders.

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