Nurturing service leaders through service learning for university students

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ABSTRACT

To meet the demand for service leaders in today's service-oriented economies, The Hong Kong Institute of Service Leadership and Management (HKI-SLAM) proposed the service leadership model advocating that effective service leadership is a function of **m**oral character, leadership **c**ompetencies, and a **c**aring disposition (E=MC^2). A 3-credit service learning subject entitled "Service Leadership through Serving Children and Families with Special Needs" was developed at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University to enable students to learn, apply, and reflect on the essential qualities of effective service leaders through developing and implementing service programs to adolescents, children and families at the Society of Boys' Centre and Heep Hong Society. 145 students participated in this subject across two semesters in the 2013-14 academic year. This paper introduces the subject and reports the results based on subjective outcome evaluation and feedback of students from agency staffs. Student reflections and implications on the nurturing of service leaders through service learning will also be discussed.

Key Words: Service leadership, service learning, university students, service leadership model

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, Hong Kong has shifted from a manufacturing to a service-oriented economy. The contribution of the service sector to Hong Kong's Gross Domestic Product rose from 89 percent in 2002 to over 93 percent to date (Information Services Department of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2013). The economic transition resulted in different skillsets needed from the workforce, especially for leaders. Industrial leaders are highly autocratic and transactional; employees are therefore hired based on their task competencies. In contrast, post-industrial leadership is concerned with relationship building, adopting a leadership structure that is characterized by flexibility, openness, and autonomy (Shek, Chung, & Leung, in press).

To meet the leadership demands in today's service economy, the Service Leadership and Management (SLAM) Model was developed by the Hong Kong Institute of Service Leadership and Management. According to the SLAM model, service leadership "…is about satisfying needs by consistently providing quality personal service to everyone one comes into contact with, including one's self, others, groups, communities, systems, and environments. A service leader is a ready, willing and able, on-the-spot entrepreneur who possesses relevant task competencies and is judged by superiors, peers, subordinates, and followers to exhibit appropriate character strengths and a caring social disposition" (Chung, 2011). It is argued that **e**ffective service leadership is a function of **m**oral character, leadership **c**ompetencies, and a **c**aring disposition, as represented by the formula, E=MC^2 (Chung, 2012). Chung (2013) identified 12 dimensions highlighting desirable qualities of service leaders, categorized

into 4 domains, including (i) doing; (ii) thinking; (iii) being; and (iv) growing. In sum, additional to functional expertise and task competencies, service leaders nowadays must possess a holistic set of intrapersonal and interpersonal skills.

NURTURING SERVICE LEADERS IN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

As educators who aim to prepare students to become contributing members to the workforce and society, the important question is how we can nurture our graduates to become effective and successful service leaders in the contemporary service economy. A possible answer was provided in a recent article published in the South China Morning Post, where Chung (2014) suggested that to cultivate service leaders, "strategic and critical thinking must be taught in schools, colleges and universities. The addition of broad liberal arts and general education in schools and universities is a good start" (Insight & Opinion section, para. 9).

With the generous support of the Victor and William Fung Foundation, the Fung Service Leadership Initiative was implemented in eight University Grants Committee (UGC)-funded institutions in Hong Kong aiming at developing students' service leadership competencies, promoting their character strengths and nurturing their caring disposition and service orientation. Under this Initiative, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University developed and implemented a wide range of credit-bearing subjects as well as non-credit bearing programmes for students (Shek et al., 2014; Shek, Yu, Ma, Sun, & Liu, 2013). In terms of credit-bearing subjects, a service learning subject was developed entitled "Service Leadership through Serving Children and Families with Special Needs". Aligned with Rost and Barker's (2000) contention that "in the postindustrial world, the concept of leadership must serve the general needs of society rather than the exclusive needs of corporations or of corporate executives. Post-industrial leadership must be inclusive rather than exclusive; it must focus on the community rather than on the elite" (p. 5), it is believed that service learning experience will enable students to acquire and reflect on the attributes conducive to effective service leadership in today's society.

SERVICE LEADERSHIP AND SERVICE LEARNING

Service learning refers to the integration of learning objectives and community needs through active participation (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). It aims at promoting social justice, fostering civic engagement and developing leadership skills among students (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Through participation in service, a seamless learning environment is provided (Kuh, 1996). Students are asked to step out of their comfort zones, to apply their academic course materials and to reflect on their service learning experiences (Eyler, Giles, & Schmiede, 1996; Kendall, 1991). A substantial body of research shows the positive outcomes of service learning courses on students' cognitive and personal development (e.g., Maher, 2003; Quezada & Christopherson, 2005).

Although the theoretical importance of service learning is highlighted, research on the effectiveness of service learning program is scarce. Indeed, faculty and staff raise similar concerns and perceive this as a time-consuming and demanding course. As pointed out by Gray and colleagues (1999), "faculty are reluctant to invest the extra time that teaching service learning courses entails, and many are skeptical of the educational value of service learning" (p. 103). Therefore, more research is warranted to demonstrate the positive outcomes of this unique credit-based service subject.

In particular, as mentioned by Ko (2011), it is important to understand how students benefit from service learning through leadership program, such as service leadership subjects. Researchers argued for the need to nurture university students'

competencies and to increase their employability through leadership programs (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2002; Glanzer & Ream, 2009; Shek, 2010). Given the importance of developing students' interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, all students under the 4-year undergraduate degree program at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University are required to enroll in at least one 3-credit bearing service learning subject. This paper describes the background of a service learning subject developed aiming at fostering students' service leadership competencies. Quantitative findings from students' subjective outcome evaluation and feedback on students' performance from agency staffs will be presented. In addition, students' reflections on the subject and implications on nurturing of service leaders through service learning will also be highlighted.

BACKGROUND OF THE SUBJECT

A 3-credit service learning subject entitled "Service Leadership through serving Children and Families with Special Needs" has been offered to students studying under the 4-year undergraduate program since spring semester of 2013-14 academic year. A total of 145 students took this subject. Upon completion of the subject, students were expected to be able to:

1. Address the needs of the service recipients through service delivery;
2. Link their service experiences with academic course materials;
3. Appreciate and respect people from diverse backgrounds;
4. Integrate academic learning (e.g., knowledge on service leadership) into the service experience and activities;
5. Demonstrate empathy and care by providing community service;
6. Apply the skills (e.g., active listening) and knowledge (e.g., moral character and competencies) they have acquired in university education to deal with complex issues in the service setting;
7. Reflect on their service leadership qualities through service learning; and
8. Work effectively with different parties (e.g., students, teachers, family and community partners) when preparing and delivering service.

This 42-hour subject was aimed to enable students to understand and apply the core components of service leadership through the engagement of community-based service activities, develop self-awareness of sharing and empathy to others and the community, and reflect on their service leadership qualities. These were achieved through the process of developing service programs and implementing service to adolescents, children and families at the Society of Boys' Centre and Heep Hong Society.

Students applied their service leadership competencies and discipline related knowledge in both direct (e.g., design and implementation of day camps, remedial and developmental classes) and indirect service (e.g., preparation of a resource kit with family-based activities for children with special needs) provision. The details of some examples of the service projects designed and delivered are shown in Appendix 1.

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARD THE SUBJECT

In terms of quantitative evaluation, during the final workshop students were invited to complete a 38-item subjective outcome evaluation form (α = .97) to gauge their perceptions toward the curriculum content (10 items; α = .93), lecturer (10 items; α = .95), and subject benefits (18 items; α = .97). A total of 111 questionnaires were collected. The means and percentage findings are shown in Tables 1 and 2. Overall speaking, students had positive evaluations toward the subject. The percentage of respondents with positive responses to the items ranged from 83.6 to 99.1% across all three attributes. Students felt that the design of the curriculum was good (85.6%), with clear objectives (93.7%).

Lecturers were well-prepared (96.4%) and professional (96.4%). Most importantly, the subject helped them understand the attributes conducive to effective service leadership (91.0%) and was beneficial to their overall development (93.7%). Intrapersonally, students reported improvements in handling emotions (91.9%), critical thinking (91.9%), and ethical decision-making (92.8%). Interpersonally, students' social competence (92.8%) and sense of responsibility (93.7%) were enhanced. Apart from quantitative results, students also provided qualitative comments for improvements on the subject. For example, "*Add one more lecture to provide more knowledge about our clients*" and "*More communication between students and teachers*". In general, students perceived the course positively. They applied their knowledge (e.g, moral character, care) and skills (e.g., active listening) to their service learning experiences, learned to work effectively with different parties (collegiate and non-collegiate partners), and reflected on their service. These aligned with the intended learning outcomes of the course.

Item	Respondents with positive responses (3-5)		
Curriculum content (α = .93)	Mean (SD)	N	%
The objectives of the curriculum are very clear.	3.67 (.71)	104	93.7
The content design of the curriculum is very good.	3.29 (.78)	95	85.6
The activities were carefully arranged.	3.45 (.80)	95	85.6
The classroom atmosphere was very pleasant.	3.75 (.76)	105	94.6
There was much peer interaction amongst the students.	3.92 (.69)	107	96.4
I participated in the class activities actively (including discussions, sharing, games, etc.).	3.91 (.60)	110	99.1
I was encouraged to do my best.	3.77 (.64)	107	97.3
The learning experience enhanced my interests towards the course.	3.44 (.81)	98	88.3
Overall speaking, I have a very positive evaluation on the course.	3.50 (.85)	97	87.4
On the whole, I like this course very much.	3.34 (.88)	95	85.6
Lecturer (α = .95)			
The lecturer(s) had a good mastery of the course.	3.85 (.71)	108	97.3
The lecturer(s) was (were) well prepared for the lessons.	3.93 (.70)	107	96.4
The teaching skills of the lecturer(s) were good.	3.79 (.82)	105	94.6
The lecturer(s) showed good professional attitudes.	3.92 (.80)	107	96.4
The lecturer(s) was (were) very involved.	4.01 (.73)	107	96.4
The lecturer(s) encouraged students to participate in the activities.	4.03 (.74)	107	96.4
The lecturer(s) cared for the students.	4.05 (.85)	105	94.6
The lecturer(s) was (were) ready to offer help to students when needed.	4.04 (.80)	104	93.7
The lecturer(s) had much interaction with the students.	4.00 (.77)	108	97.3
Overall speaking, I have a very positive evaluation on the lecturer(s).	3.87 (.86)	103	92.8

Note: All items yielded positive responses (i.e., ratings above 3). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree.

Table 1. Summary of students' perceptions toward the curriculum content and lecturers (N=111)

Item	Mean (SD)	Respondents with positive responses (3-5)	
		N	%
Subject benefit (α = .97)			
It has enhanced my social competence.	3.82 (.68)	103	92.8
It has improved my ability in expressing and handling my emotions.	3.84 (.72)	102	91.9
It has enhanced my critical thinking.	3.66 (.75)	102	91.9
It has increased my competence in making sensible and wise	3.76 (.75)	102	91.9
It has helped me make ethical decisions.	3.83 (.75)	103	92.8
It has strengthened my resilience in adverse conditions.	3.88 (.74)	103	92.8
It has strengthened my self-confidence.	3.75 (.69)	103	92.8
It has helped me face the future with a positive attitude.	3.67 (.75)	104	93.7
It has enhanced my love for life.	3.32 (.82)	93	83.8
It has helped me explore the meaning of life.	3.38 (.85)	94	84.7
It has enhanced my ability of self-leadership.	3.75 (.70)	105	94.6
It has helped me cultivate compassion and care for others.	3.96 (.71)	105	94.6
It has helped me enhance my character strengths comprehensively.	3.74 (.74)	104	93.7
It has enabled me to understand the importance of situational task competencies, character strength and caring disposition in successful leadership.	3.81 (.73)	103	92.8
It has promoted my sense of responsibility in serving the society.	3.81 (.69)	104	93.7
It has promoted my overall development.	3.81 (.74)	104	93.7
The theories, research and concepts covered in the course have enabled me to understand the characteristics of successful service leaders.	3.65 (.68)	101	91.0
The theories, research and concepts covered in the course have helped me synthesize the characteristics of successful service leaders.	3.62 (.75)	99	89.2

Note: All items yielded positive responses (i.e., ratings above 3). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = unhelpful, 2 = not very helpful, 3 = slightly helpful, 4 = helpful, 5 = very helpful.

Table 2. Summary of students' perceptions on the extent of that the subject has benefited them (N=111)

FEEDBACK ON STUDENT PERFORMANCE FROM AGENCY STAFFS

Staffs from the two agencies including social workers, teachers, and psychologists were invited to complete an evaluation form to rate students' service performance with reference to the attributes advocated by the service leadership model (e.g., sense of care, service and reflective attitudes), with 27 evaluation forms collected. Results are shown in Table 3. In general, agencies were highly satisfied with students' service performance with reported mean scores of above 4 across majority of the items. Students held positive service attitudes (M=4.44, SD=.64), possessed a caring disposition (M=4.37, SD=.56), and demonstrated service leadership attributes including awareness to the needs of service recipients (M=4.11, SD=.64), problem-solving skills (M=4.18, SD=.68), and were reflective (M=4.33, SD=.55). Respondents were also encouraged to provide qualitative comments on students' performance. Below is a comment received:

- "We appreciate students' effort in the mentoring program. In addition to building strong bonds with children at our Center, students showed creativity in developing activities that greatly benefited the service recipients. We were also impressed by students' care and willingness to deal with challenges posed by the children with special needs. We believe this subject is a valuable experience that will enable and prepare students to face future challenges they may encounter in their life journey."

In addition, agencies also provided constructive comments on how students may improve in their service leadership competencies:

- "Students showed care toward the children by communicating and interacting with them in and outside of class. However, students need to better understand the characteristics and needs of the service recipients and to further improve on their teaching skills…"

General feedback	Mean (SD)
Service attitude	4.44 (.64)
Sense of responsibility	4.51 (.57)
Awareness of needs	4.11 (.64)
Sense of care	4.37 (.56)
Cultural sensitivity	3.29 (.83)
Teamwork	4.22 (.64)
Problem-solving skills	4.18 (.68)
Communication skills with service targets	4.22 (.50)
Teaching skills	4.03 (.51)
Application of discipline-specific knowledge	3.33 (.80)
Reflective attitude	4.33 (.55)
Punctuality	4.44 (.50)
Overall performance	4.22 (.50)

Note: All items yielded positive responses (i.e., ratings above 3). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = very poor, 2 = poor, 3 = fair, 4 = good, 5 = very good.

Table 3. Means and standard deviations of feedback scores from agency staffs on students' service performance (N=27)

STUDENTS' REFLECTIONS

Both service leadership and service learning emphasize reflection. As such, students were required to submit three reflective journals across the two semesters. These reflective journals clearly showed that students learned, acquired, and reflected on different service leadership attributes. Below are some examples of reflections from students.

In terms of leadership competencies, students shared that:

- "For interpersonal competence, I have enhanced my ability in conflict resolution. During group discussions, different group members may argue for their points. … I have learnt to deal with such cases by asking the members to clarify their points one by one; if there are any misunderstandings, I will try to explain and summarize them in an easy way."

- "I seldom have the chance to deal with children because I am the youngest in my family. This was a good opportunity for me to learn to take care of the younger ones... to appreciate and respect people from diverse backgrounds and to apply different skills and knowledge to deal with complex issues in the service setting. I understand that it is important to open yourself in order to have good communication and relationships with others."

Students were also aware of the importance of service leadership attributes:

Moral competence

- "Promise-keeping and integrity are very important to me because I know how disappointing and heartbreaking it feels when somebody breaks his/her promise to me. Therefore, I paid quite a lot of effort in maintaining trust and respect within the place, hoping that my service targets would feel fair and joyful."

Demonstrating care and empathy

- "Before this course, I seldom showed my care due to my passive personality. But after the services, I found that care is paramount for building relationships, only when people feel your care, will they be willing to treat you with heart. I will be more active to show my care when I meet someone in need in the future."

Active listening

- "I tried to use active listening skills and asked whether he (the service recipient) felt thirsty. I showed him my willingness to listen to his needs. Active listening skills enabled me to get in touch with my clients and to build positive relationships with them."

Students also had the opportunity to reflect on their roles and responsibilities:

- "In the past, I think a responsible citizen should be a good student who studies hard, try not to waste money and resources from taxpayers, donate money to charity, such simple things. However, a good sense of social responsibility is not only about donating money and saving resources, but also providing services to the needy personally."
- "A service leader should understand that providing services does not only satisfy the needs of people, but also benefits oneself by ethically improving competences and abilities. … As long as we are willing to contribute, we could make a change to the community by doing even the slightest."

Lastly, the subject has helped students to prepare for their future:

- "In the face of the future challenges, I would not only blame the surrounding, but try to have reflection and improve myself. I hope this attitude can guide me in the future and lead me to be a better person."
- "I am happy to have this opportunity that can stretch the way I think about the community. I become more willing to participate in other volunteer activities because of the positive impression of this experience. I believe such experience has a value of enhancing my sense of belongingness to the society and civic responsibility by participating in service."

The above qualitative findings indicate students' personal growth in terms of intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies, connection between the course and service experience and support the integration effects of service learning and service leadership on students learning outcomes (Ko, 2011).

CONCLUSION

The expansion of the service sector in economies worldwide poses new demands on the workforce. Educators' goal is to prepare students to meet these expectations and become contributing members to society. Based on the service leadership model, the present service learning subject plays an important role in nurturing students to become service leaders. In this subject, students not only acquired knowledge on the different attributes of effective service leadership (i.e., leadership competencies, moral character, and caring disposition), but they also had the opportunity to put such knowledge along with their subject and discipline-specific skills into practice through designing and implementing different activities for adolescents and children with special needs. Students also reflected on their strengths and weaknesses as service leaders, as well as their roles and responsibilities. Taken as a whole, results from the subjective outcome evaluation, feedback on students' performance by agency staffs, and students' reflections support the conclusion that the subject was beneficial to the development of students as service leaders, while mutually satisfying the needs of service recipients. As a part of the Fung Service Leadership Initiative sponsored by the Victor and William Fung Foundation, this subject is a successful endeavor in the nurturance of service leaders through service learning for university students. Tertiary institutions in Hong Kong will gain insight from this paper, including the rationale, practice, experiences, and assessment methods for the development of service leadership subjects. In view of the generic nature of this subject, it would be easy to transplant the subject to different institutions in Hong Kong. As economies worldwide are becoming highly service-oriented, there is a need for tertiary education universally to prepare students to adapt to the new challenges. Service leadership serves as an important framework to prepare graduates to become effective service leaders both locally and globally. As service learning emphasizes reflection, social responsibility, ethics, and empathy which are closely aligned with the advocated service leadership attributes, service learning is an ideal model for the development of service leaders in and outside of Hong Kong.

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Appendix 1. Examples of service projects delivered by students in Heep Hong Society and Society of Boys' Centre

Activity	Objectives of activity	Brief description of activity	Target service	Participants
Direct Service				
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University Fun Day	• To enhance children's social skills. • To provide children with a chance to visit PolyU. • To encourage children to form aspirations. • To provide an opportunity for harmonious family interaction.	A large-scale joint Parents' Resources Centre activity at PolyU: ▪ Children and families participated in small group activities (e.g., arts and crafts), mass games, and a PolyU campus tour	Parents and children with special needs (e.g., ADHD, Autism, Emotional Behavioral Disorders)	56 participants from over 20 families Children aged 6-15
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University Day Camp	• To give adolescents the opportunity to explore the PolyU campus. • To stimulate adolescents' thinking and creativity. • To encourage students to cooperate with each other.	Day Camp included: ▪ Team-building activities ▪ Fashion design activity ▪ Campus tour ▪ Visit to the Institute of Textile and Clothing Studios	Adolescents with special needs (e.g., ADHD, Autism, Emotional Behavioral Disorders)	18 students studying Art and Design Aged 15-17
Developmental Sessions	• To teach children appropriate ways to express their emotions, inner-feelings or personal views. • To teach children appropriate social skills (e.g., listening to and respecting others, conflict resolution).	Sessions included: ▪ Role playing ▪ Arts and crafts ▪ Making snacks	Children with special needs (e.g., ADHD, Autism)	21 children Aged 8-15
Indirect Service				
Activity Booklet for Children with Special Needs	• To assist parents to enhance the attention span of their children through activities in the booklet. • To enhance children's self-esteem and skills. • To encourage and inspire parents to create similar activities for their children.	Activity booklet consisted: ▪ Introduction to issues, prevalence rates, and research regarding ADHD, specific to Hong Kong ▪ Clear instructions to parents and children on how to conduct the activities. English and Chinese versions of the booklet were produced.	Booklets for parents and children with concentration/attention deficits	Aged 3-5