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Review

Development of a positive youth development subject in a university context in Hong Kong

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Abstract

A survey of the literature shows that there are worrying developmental issues among university students in Hong Kong. Unfortunately, universal adolescent prevention and positive youth development programs specifically designed for university students are grossly lacking in Hong Kong. With reference to the positive youth development approach, it is argued that promotion of intrapersonal competencies and interpersonal relationship skills among university students is an important strategy to facilitate holistic development and well-being of young people in Hong Kong. At The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, a course entitled "Tomorrow's Leaders" focusing on positive youth development constructs to promote student well-being will be offered on a compulsory basis starting from the 2012/13 academic year under the new undergraduate curriculum structure. This paper outlines the objectives, intended learning outcomes, syllabus, assessment and references of the subject.

Keywords: credit-bearing subject; leadership; positive youth development; psychosocial competencies; university students.

Introduction

Human development is always shaped by the contexts within which the person develops. With particular reference to university students in Hong Kong, what developmental contexts do they face? There are at least four contextual factors we should take into account. First, with the growing influence of globalization, university students face many uncertainties. For example, there have been several financial crises in the past two decades – the Asian financial crisis in 1998, the economic bubble created by the Internet-related stocks in 2000, and the financial tsunami in 2008. Globalization also means that university students should acquire adaptive skills and a flexible mindset in response to the changing external environment. Second, in contrast to the increasing volatile international economic conditions, the economy in China has grown tremendously in the past three decades. Many university students in Hong Kong go back to work in China after graduation. These changes pose another challenge for university students, because they have to speak fluent Mandarin.

Third, the economy in Hong Kong has changed to focus on service industries. Service industries are commonly regarded as industries which generate revenue through producing intangible products and services (1). According to the Census and Statistics Department, service industries in Hong Kong are multi-faceted, including import/export, wholesale and retail trades; accommodation and food services; transportation, storage, postal and courier services; information and communications; financing and insurance; real estate, professional and business services; public administration, social and personal service; as well as ownership of premises (2). In 1980, service industries constituted 67.5% of Hong Kong's gross domestic product (GPD) and the figure increased to 92.6% in 2009 (2, 3). In the first half year of 2011, there was about 93% of the total workforce engaging in service industries, with import and export trade, retail, and professional and business services having the highest number of employees (4). In the recent policy address by the chief executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, development of service industries is the top priority in Hong Kong (5). As the economy in Hong Kong has changed from manufacturing industries to service industries, we have to ask what qualities university graduates need in a post-industrial era.

Fourth, living in an era of knowledge explosion, university students have to engage in life-long learning and develop appropriate learning strategies. For example, knowledge on information technology and biomedical disciplines becomes out of date easily. As such, university students do not simply need to acquire knowledge, they also need to learn how to learn and develop meta-cognitive skills. In other words, it is

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not just the "what" of learning but the "how" and "why" of learning that are important.

Finally, it is noteworthy that the education system in Hong Kong is very examination oriented. Actually, the education system in Hong Kong has been criticized as being geared towards survival (i.e., survival education which attempts to increase the chance of the graduates to find jobs), rather than a "living" education (i.e., helping students how to live by helping them to develop life skills) and a life education (i.e., helping students to reflect on life and finding a purpose). Traditionally, civil service examinations were highly valued in the Chinese culture. In contemporary Hong Kong, as the number of university places is not large, emphasis on academic result is still a hallmark of the education system in Hong Kong, where students are drilled for rote and examination skills. Against this context, university students have been regarded as having "high" marks but "low" psychosocial competencies.

There are at least two consequences of growing up in the above-mentioned developmental contexts. First, stresses faced by university students are not low. In a general context, Shek (6) showed that stresses in Hong Kong were high. With specific reference to university students, research findings suggest that poor mental health among university students is an issue deserving our attention. For example, Wong et al. (7) found that there were high rates of psychological morbidity in first-year tertiary education students in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (8) reported that 10.1% and 5.9% of the students were classified as "Need Attention" and "Need Further Exploration", respectively. The Hong Kong Tertiary Institutions Health Care Working Group (9) showed that roughly half of the respondents displayed excessive anxiety problems. With reference to these stresses, we should consider how university students can be helped to cope with their stresses.

The second consequence of these developmental contexts is unbalanced development in young people. Over-emphasis of intellectual development in young people simply means that they are under-developed in other areas of development, such as social and emotional competencies. In the Western literature, there is an increasing focus on the importance of social and emotional learning in young people (10). According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), "social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process of acquiring the skills to recognize and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, make responsible decisions, establish positive relationships, and handle challenging situations effectively. Research has shown that SEL is fundamental to children's social and emotional development – their health, ethical development, citizenship, academic learning, and motivation to achieve. Social and emotional education is a unifying concept for organizing and coordinating school-based programming that focuses on positive youth development, health promotion, prevention of problem behaviors, and student engagement in learning" (11). Generally speaking, although there are different SEL models, several elements are common in social and emotional learning. These include self-awareness (identifying emotions and recognizing strengths), social awareness (perspective-taking and appreciating diversity), self-management (managing emotions and goal setting), responsible decision-making (analyzing situations, assuming personal responsibility, respecting others, problem-solving) and relationship skills (communication, building relationships, negotiation, refusal). There are research findings showing that social and emotional learning (or psychosocial competencies) are related to positive youth development and reduced adolescent problem behavior (12).

What is the most important course in a university?

Against the above-mentioned developmental contexts and issues in university students in Hong Kong, one question that should be asked is how to promote holistic development in university students. As psychosocial competencies are important for the development of young people, it is argued that nurturance of psychosocial competencies is an important strategy. Basically it is important to help university students to understand themselves and have reflections on their lives. In an article entitled "The most important course in the university", Donald Crosby (13) had the following view – "What is the most important course in the university? Some would say that it is a course in economics or business, since that is what most jobs, at bottom, seem to be about. Others might want to argue that it is a course in mathematics or computer science, since so many of the jobs in our world are becoming scientific and technological. Still others might claim that it is a course in English composition, critical thinking, or speech, since clear and effective communication is so essential in any job. But the most important course at the university is none of the above. It is the course of each student's own life …. It follows, therefore, that development of moral character in students is not an appendage, afterthought, or mere by-product of the process of liberal education, but something that lies at its very heart. Proper development of a student's character can enable that student to see beyond education merely as certification and preparation for a job to the critical importance and value of a life that is lived well in all of its dimensions, a life that continues throughout its course to develop and sustain a sense of purpose and fulfillment in oneself and the satisfaction of contributing responsibly and effectively to the well-being of others" (p. 1). Similarly, Parker Palmer (14) pointed out that "our colleges and universities help students examine many dimensions of the external world – history, politics, economics, physical reality; yet we rarely turn the lens inward to help students examine their own lives. This lack of critical inquiry into these personal dimensions of students' lives reflects a multi-leveled fear on the part of academics – the fear of venturing into 'subjective territory,' saying, 'I don't want to go there because I'm not a psychotherapist.' But faculty and staff need to find ways of inviting students to examine these inner drivers and dynamics within the classroom and co-curricular activities that lead to greater

self-understanding, without which one cannot be said to be well-educated." (p. 4) In these two views, personal development and understanding of the inner self are indispensable in university education.

Even though personal development is an important topic to be addressed, the next questions are whether the course should be credit-bearing and whether it should be made compulsory. Concerning the first question, provision of credits can motivate students to study the course. In fact, those who perform well can be duly recognized. Credits can also give a strong signal to the students that this is an important course valued by the university. Regarding the question of whether it should be made compulsory, the crux of the issue is whether we have visions. Depending on the needs of the students, there are many required courses in the university context. In the first place, professional programs normally have required courses for their students. For example, social work programs require students to take courses on human behavior and the social environment. In view of the drop of language abilities in university graduates, many universities in Hong Kong require students to take compulsory courses on English and Chinese. In the same vein, in view of the changing social and economic background and the growing belief that university students should be best prepared for life challenges, it is argued that courses on personal development are indispensable for university students.

Objectives, learning outcomes and syllabus

Shek (15) proposed that several principles should be maintained in the design of courses aiming at promoting holistic development in university students in Hong Kong. These principles include: (a) responding to the total needs of the students in an honest and whole-hearted manner; (b) responding to the community concern that young people lack social and emotional competencies and moral values; (c) upholding the belief that "problem free is not fully prepared" and preparing students for adulthood and studying with life-long benefits; (d) being visionary and unique; (e) ensuring that no student is left behind; (f) ensuring that design of courses that target personal qualities is based on well-articulated theoretical models, such as positive youth development models; and (g) using an evidence-based approach in course development.

In an attempt to develop a course to promote psychosocial competencies in university students, the author has developed a course entitled "Tomorrow's Leaders" at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. There are several objectives of this course, as follows: (a) to enable students to learn and integrate theories, research, and concepts of the basic personal qualities (particularly intra- and interpersonal qualities) of effective leaders; (b) to train students to develop and reflect on their intra- and interpersonal qualities; and (c) to promote the development of an active pursuit of knowledge of personal qualities in leadership amongst students. With reference to these objectives, it is expected that on successfully completing this subject, students will be able to achieve the following learning outcomes: (a) understand and integrate theories, research and concepts on the basic qualities (particularly intra- and interpersonal qualities) of effective leaders in the Chinese context; (b) develop self-awareness and self-understanding; (c) acquire interpersonal skills; (d) develop self-reflection skills in their learning; and (e) recognize the importance of an active pursuit of knowledge on intra- and interpersonal leadership qualities. The syllabus and reading lists for the course can be seen in Table 1 and Appendix 1, respectively. The proposed course will be offered to all first-year students starting from the 2012/13 school year. To test the course, it was piloted in the second term of the 2010/11 academic year.

Teaching/learning approach

As the subject is intended to promote intra- and interpersonal competencies of students, those studying this subject are expected to be sensitive to their own behavior in these contexts. Both intellectual thinking and experiential learning are emphasized in the subject. Case studies on successful and fallen leaders will also be covered in the subject. In addition, the lectures are designed to enable students to understand theories, concepts, and research on leadership qualities for which simulation exercises, games and discussions are carried out in the classroom. The teaching/learning methodology includes lectures, experiential learning sessions, group project presentation, and written assignment.

Method of assessment

In the pilot program offered in the 2010/11 academic year, several methods were used to assess the performance of the students, including class participation (20%), group project presentation (30%), and individual assignment (50%).

As the course emphasized student participation, assessment of student participation was carried out. There were two components for class participation. The first component was assessment by lecturers (15%), where student performance was assessed by the following criteria: (a) class attendance (students are required to sign for class attendance); (b) participation in class activities; (c) preparation before class; and (d) completion of in-class and home assignments. The second component was assessment by group mates (5%), where students were invited to evaluate the contribution and performance of each group member by completing a standardized form. A Peer Assessment Form was designed for this purpose. In the form, students were invited to give a mark to each group member (ranging from "0" to "5") regarding that member's performance and contribution in the group. To avoid conflict of interest, students were not required to assess their own performance in the group. Students who passed the subject and attended 70% of lectures received a Certificate of Attendance issued by the offering department. Five students demonstrating outstanding performance in the subject each received a HK$5000 scholarship funded by the Wofoo Foundation, with at least one scholarship in each class.

Table 1 Syllabus of the course.

Topic	Subject content
1	An overview of the personal attributes of effective leaders: role of self-understanding and interpersonal relationship qualities Required reading: Hogan R, Kaiser RB. What we know about leadership. Rev Gen Psychol 2005;9:169–80.
2	Self-understanding: personality traits conducive to successful leadership Required reading: Shek DT. Nurturing holistic development of university students in Hong Kong: where are we and where should we go? ScientificWorldJournal 2010;10:563–75.
3	Emotional competence: awareness and understanding of emotions, emotional quotient (EQ), role of emotional management in effective leadership, and mental health Required reading: Lau PS. Emotional competence as a positive youth development construct: conceptual bases and implications for curriculum development. Int J Adolesc Med Health 2006;18:355–62.
4	Cognitive competence: different types of thinking, higher-order thinking, experiential learning, role of cognitive competence in effective leadership, and effective leaders as teachers. Required reading: Moseley D, Elliott J, Gregson M, Higgins S. Thinking skills frameworks for use in education and training. Br Educ Res J 2005;31:367–90.
5	Resilience: stresses faced by adolescents, life adversities, coping with life stresses, adversity quotient (AQ), and role of resilience in effective leadership Required reading: Lee TY. Resilience as a positive youth development construct: conceptual bases and implications for curriculum development. Int J Adolesc Med Health 2006;18:475–82.
6	Spirituality: meaning in life and adolescent development, spirituality and mental health, role of spirituality in effective leadership, and servant leadership Required reading: Lau PS. Spirituality as a positive youth development construct: conceptual bases and implications for curriculum development. Int J Adolesc Med Health 2006;18:363–70.
7	Ethics and morality: moral issues and moral competence, role of ethics and morality in effective leadership, integrity and responsibility and effective leadership Required readings: Park N, Peterson C. Character strengths: research and practice. J Coll Character 2009;10:1–10. Dalton J, Crosby P. Being and having: shouldn't excellence in higher education (and people) be a measure of what one does rather than what one has? J Coll Character 2007;9:1–5.
8	Social competence: basic social competence skills, ability to build up positive human relationship, role of social competence in effective leadership, and egocentric mentality as a block to effective leadership Required reading: Ma HK. Social competence as a positive youth development construct: conceptual bases and implications for curriculum development. Int J Adolesc Med Health 2006;18:379–85.
9	Positive and healthy identity: self-identity, self-esteem and self-concept, self-discrepancies, role of self-concept in leadership, and self-leadership Required reading: Tsang SK, Yip FY. Positive identity as a positive youth development construct: conceptual bases and implications for curriculum development. Int J Adolesc Med Health 2006;18:459–66.
10	Interpersonal communication: theories, concepts and skills of interpersonal communication, and role of communication skills in effective leadership Required reading: de Vries RE, Bakker-Pieper A, Siberg RA, van Gameren K, Vlug M. The content and dimensionality of communication styles. Commun Res 2009;36:178–206.
11	Interpersonal conflict; role of conflict resolution in effective leadership; team building; relationship quality and effective leadership Required reading: Barki H, Hartwick J. Conceptualizing the construct of interpersonal conflict. Int J Conflict Manage 2004;15:216–44.
12	Personal integrity and sense of responsibility in effective leaders; egocentricism in university students Required reading: Thomas JC. Ethical integrity in leadership and organizational moral culture. Leadership 2008;4:419–42.
13	Self-leadership, mental health and effective leadership Required reading: Dolbier CL, Soderstrom M, Steinhardt MA. The relationships between self-leadership and enhanced psychological, health and work outcomes. J Psychol 2001;135:469–85.

Assignments

In the pilot subject, there were two assignments. The first one was group project presentation (30%). Students were required to form groups to work on a project on one chosen attribute of an effective leader based on the topics covered in the lectures. The attributes might include: positive and healthy identity, emotional competence, cognitive competence, resilience, spirituality, ethics and morality, social competence, and conflict resolution skills. Students might also focus on topics not being covered in the subject after consulting the subject lecturer. Students were required to prepare the group presentation with reference to the following aspects: (a) review the conceptions and definitions of the chosen attribute; (b) review one theory or model about the nature of the chosen attribute, such as factors affecting the development of the attribute (e.g., Kohlberg's theory on morality); (c) present research findings and/or arguments from two studies showing the importance of this attribute (e.g., influence of spirituality on psychological well-being); and (d) discuss two ways by which the chosen attribute can be strengthened for an individual. It was expected that all members in the group made equal contribution to the presentation. Students were required to complete a Group Presentation Declaration Form documenting the contribution of each of their group members.

The assessment criteria for the group presentation included: (a) content (richness of the related knowledge in the presentation and thoroughness of the review); (b) higher-level thinking (depth of discussion on the theoretical issues; level of critical discussion; integration of the theories and research findings reviewed; level of reflection); and (c) quality of the presentation (flow of arguments, division of labor, ability to engage the classmates, ability to complete the presentation within the allocated time).

In addition to the group project presentation, students were required to write a term paper with two parts (at least 1500 words in total, excluding references). In the first part, students were required to critically discuss the concepts of leadership quality covered in the group presentation on the conceptual level (around 750 words). In the second part, students were expected to evaluate the extent to which they possessed that leadership quality based on a thorough reflection of their life experiences (around 750 words). The term paper accounted for 50% of the final grade. For Part 1 of the paper, the assessment criteria included: (a) content (richness of the related knowledge in the paper; evidence of extensive and extra reading); (b) higher-level thinking (depth of discussion on the theoretical issues; level of critical discussion; integration of the theories and research findings reviewed; level of reflection); and (c) quality of the paper (flow of arguments; clarity; use of English; typographical errors; correct references format). For Part 2 of the individual assignment, the assessment criteria included: (a) content (richness of the reflection, presentation and analysis; evidence presented in relation to the problem; degree of passion); (b) higher-level thinking (integration of concepts and personal life; arguments supporting conclusions; level of reflection; insights based on self-examination); and (c) quality of the paper (flow of arguments; clarity; use of English; typographical errors; correct references format).

Criticisms and responses

While many colleagues support the development and offering of this course, there are criticisms. These criticisms and the possible responses are outlined in the following sections. Fundamentally, we welcome critical friends and we believe healthy and constructive criticisms are indispensable for further improvement of the subject.

Criticism 1: There is no need for this course in the university

Response: Some colleagues maintain the view that there is no need for such a course in the university setting. While this view is respected, we should be conscious of the developmental issues in university students. According to Shek and Wong (16), developmental issues in university students include mental health problems, substance abuse problems, egocentrism, and lack of integrity. Such problems are quite revealing when we take note of the following quotations: Mowbray et al. (17) mentioned that "averaging across a number of studies, it appears that approximately 12%–18% of students on college campuses have a diagnosable mental disorder" (p. 227); Loeb (18) observed and conversed with college students across 30 states in the USA throughout the late 1970s and early 1990s, and noted that they were "pathologically selfish, greedy, apathetic, and unconcerned with higher ideals" (p. 2).

Criticism 2: The course is too short to create leaders

Response: While acknowledging that we may need time to nurture leaders, the following points should be noted. First, the course is not geared towards "elitist leadership". In fact, we believe that every young person can be a leader at least for oneself (self-leadership) and assuming a leader role in one's social circle. Therefore, the focus of the course is to promote self-understanding and psychosocial competencies in the students. Second, it is our firm belief that before one can be an effective leader, one must be a person with good self-understanding and reflections.

Criticism 3: Students do not like this kind of course

Response: As the subject adopts a lecture format with small groups formed in the class, some people would argue that this approach is not preferred by the students. Nevertheless, it can be argued that this is basically a scientific question to be addressed. From the subjective outcome evaluation based on the lecture or the course, findings consistently showed that the students liked the course very much. The responses of the students suggest that the students enjoyed the course and they had active participation in the program (19–22).

Criticism 4: It is difficult to evaluate courses on personal development

Response: It is not uncommon for people to argue that it is difficult to evaluate courses on personal development and there are

two issues intrinsic to this criticism. First, there is no valid measure of personal development. Second, it takes time for the effect of personal development to emerge. While these two problems may be valid, it is noteworthy that there are valid and reliable instruments for assessing positive youth development and the short-term effects of a course can be reliably assessed. In this course, multiple evaluation methods were adopted. First, objective outcome evaluation was conducted with pre-test and post-test data collected using the Chinese Positive Youth Development Scale (19). The Chinese Positive Youth Development Scale is a validated scale based on different samples. Second, subjective outcome evaluation for the lectures and the course was carried out (20). Third, process evaluation of some of the lectures was carried out (21). Fourth, qualitative evaluation based on reflection notes and focus group interviews was carried out (22).

In conclusion, the course is an innovative attempt in Hong Kong in the area of positive youth development. In conjunction with studies showing that positive youth development approach is a promising approach in early adolescents (23–30), the evaluation studies in the course suggest that positive youth development approach is also a good strategy to work with university students. As Lewis (31) pointed out, we should re-think whether we can "help [our students] to grow up, to learn who they are, to search for a larger purpose of their lives, and to leave college as better human beings" (p. xii).

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Appendix 1

Basic and supplementary reading lists for the course.

Basic reading list

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