

Focus group evaluation of a positive youth development course in a university in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Five focus groups (n=23 students) were conducted to understand the feelings and views of the students taking a course entitled "Tomorrow's Leaders" at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Several observations were highlighted from the findings. First, students generally had positive perceptions of the subject content, the class, and the lecturers. Second, almost all students regarded the subject could promote their reflection and self-understanding. Third, all students held the view that there was a need to have this course in their university study. Finally, students identified some aspects of the course that could be improved and some suggestions for revamping the course were made. In conjunction with other evaluation findings, the present findings suggest that this subject can promote the holistic development of Chinese university students in Hong Kong.

Keywords: Chinese university students; focus groups; leadership; qualitative evaluation.

Introduction

One basic issue in social science research is how to understand the lived experiences of people and their social interactions

in the natural world. While quantitative research methods can generate "maps" or "profiles" about human lived experience, such methods have been criticized as artificial and non-contextual in nature. Therefore, qualitative research methods are commonly used to understand the subjective views and socially constructed realities of people in the real world. Generally speaking, several data collection techniques are used by qualitative researchers. First, through individual or group interviews, informants are encouraged to give their definitions of social situations and perceptions of social objects and events (i.e., collection of "talk" data). Second, through systematic as well as live observations, first-hand experiences of social processes in the "natural" world are documented (i.e., collection of "observational" data). Third, through textual analyses and transcripts, such as audio and video tapes (i.e., collection of audio or visual data), social phenomena can be better understood.

With specific reference to the collection of "talk" data, focus group discussion is a method which is frequently used by social scientists, such as researchers in the fields of marketing and media research. The unique feature of focus groups is the conscious use of group interaction (e.g., agreement and disagreement among the participants) to produce meaningful data and insights. There are several strengths of the focus group methodology. First, focus groups can help researchers orient to a new field of study. Second, this research method can help researchers generate research hypotheses based on the views of group members. In other words, it is an inductive method which can be used to generate theoretical frameworks. Third, it can be used as a preparatory stage of a study which can help researchers develop interview schedules and questionnaires. Fourth, it can be used to examine differences in various study populations and research sites. Finally, it can help researchers to understand informants' views of some earlier study. A survey of the literature showed that the focus group is a popular qualitative data collection technique which has been used by researchers in different disciplines (1–3).

Despite its wide use in social sciences and marketing contexts, there are two drawbacks in the literature based on focus groups. First, there are few evaluation studies using focus groups (4–7). Second, there are few studies in Chinese populations. With specific reference to Hong Kong, focus group methodology has been used in the evaluation context to examine the effectiveness of positive youth development programs in education contexts (8, 9). For example, based on an integration of the data collected from program implementers implementing the project Positive Adolescent Training through Holistic Social Programmes (Project P.A.T.H.S.) in different years (n=176 implementers in 36 focus groups), results showed that the descriptors used to describe the

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program and the metaphors named by the informants that could stand for the program were generally positive in nature. Program implementers also perceived the program to be beneficial to the development of the students in different psychosocial domains (10). An integration of the qualitative evaluation findings collected in different cohorts of students who participated in Project P.A.T.H.S. (n=252 students in 29 focus groups) showed that the participants had positive descriptions of the program, and they used positive metaphors to stand for the program. The participants also reported that the program was able to promote their development in different psychosocial domains (11).

As youth development is not restricted to secondary school students and there is evidence suggesting that university students have psychosocial needs that require attention, it is argued that there is a need to promote the psychosocial competencies of university students in Hong Kong (12, 13). To promote holistic development of university students, a General Education course entitled “Tomorrow’s Leaders” was developed at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The course is intended to help students understand positive youth development constructs, including self-understanding, personality, emotional competence, cognitive competence, resilience, spirituality, social competence, moral competence, positive identity, interpersonal communication, conflict resolution, personal integrity, and self-leadership. Brief lectures, experiential learning activities, group presentation, and individual assignment were used to promote the psychosocial competencies of the students. There are several unique features of this subject. First, instead of upholding the belief of “elite leadership”, it is believed that every young person has the potential to be a leader. Second, it is argued that the fundamental pre-requisite for a leader is self-leadership – leading one’s own life. Third, one can lead one’s own life via self-understanding and development of psychosocial competencies. Fourth, it is our strong belief that before one can be a leader, one must be an authentic and honest person.

There are several research findings suggesting that the subject can promote holistic development of the students (14, 15). First, objective outcome evaluation findings based on a pre-test/post-test pre-experimental design showed that students showed improved holistic development and psychosocial competencies after taking the subject (16). Second, post-lecture and post-course subjective outcome evaluation utilizing standardized assessment tools showed that students had positive perceptions of the subject and lecturers as well as perceived benefits of the subject (17, 18). Third, process evaluation via systematic class observations showed that program adherence was high and students generally had good interaction and participation in class (19). Fourth, reflective notes collected from the students showed that students generally had positive views of the subject and they perceived the subject to be beneficial to their development (20). Finally, reflections of the scholarship recipients of the course also revealed the beneficial nature of the subject (21). To enrich the qualitative evaluation data, the present study was conducted to understand the views of the students via focus groups.

Methods

Four classes of students took this course, with a total enrolment of 268 students (65 in Class A, 68 in Class B, 66 in Class C, and 69 in Class D). After completion of the subject, five focus groups were conducted as follows: Group 1 (8 students), Group 2 (8 students), Group 3 (2 students), Group 4 (2 students), and Group 5 (2 students).

Instruments

A semi-structured interview guide was used to conduct the focus group interview. Based on the CIPP model (22), questions pertinent to the context, input, process and products were asked. Regarding context evaluation, questions on the difference between “Tomorrow’s Leaders” and other courses and whether the students thought their existing university education was able to help them to develop in a holistic manner were asked. For input evaluation, questions on whether the subject matter was difficult and how much time the students put into the course were asked. For process evaluation, questions on their views of the program and the implementation process were asked. Finally, students were asked about the changes they had (or did not have) after taking this course. Based on these domains, the data collected were analyzed in terms of the following domains: (a) positive comments about the subject, class, and lecturers; (b) benefits that students thought the subject had brought to them; (c) whether they thought there was a need to have this subject; (d) negative comments about the subject; and (e) suggestions for future improvement. To give a broad picture of the views of the participants, thematic analyses were performed. Consistent with other qualitative studies, a disciplined attitude was maintained in the data collection and analysis procedures.

Results

After the audio data were collected, they were transcribed by student helpers. The transcripts were then checked for accuracy. After the data were cleaned up, they were read repeatedly to identify themes from the focus group discussion.

Positive perceptions of the subject, process, and lecturers and related experiences

Students generally had positive perceptions and experiences about the subject, process, and lecturers. The students liked the interactive and experiential nature of the subject. Besides, they also felt that the subject was very unique when compared to other subjects in the university. The following narratives revealed these perceptions:

- “There was one unique feature of this subject. It was not purely theoretical. The use of activities could help us understand the meaning of the theory which made the whole thing not so abstract.”
- “I had deep impression about the group activities, games, and sharing. I liked this course because it was not rigid and it was enjoyable. It was like an interest group where you could chat and play with the classmates.”
- “I appreciated students coming from Mainland China. I appreciated their courage to speak in public.”

- “We were very involved. Every group member would try and some were very enthusiastic.”
- “I felt that everybody has different personalities. Therefore, if everybody is just concerned about oneself, it is difficult for them to integrate in the society. This subject could teach us how to make consensus and accept the views of different people so that we could identify a common point so that we can work together on a task instead of holding on one’s personality. At least the course taught us that there are different types of people.”

Besides their appreciation of the interactive and experiential nature of the class, students appreciated the lecturers for their passion and “heart” in teaching the subject.

- “Actually the lecturer taught well. Overall speaking, the lecturer came over to ask whether you understood or not. If we did not understand, the lecturer would slowly explain to you and he/she would try his/her best to help you understand.”
- “The lecturer was very nice.”
- “I felt that the lecturer did his best to arouse our motivation to learn. At the end of each lecture, he would invite two students for sharing. I felt we were ‘forced’ to share because I had the fear that I would be chosen.”

Furthermore, students were of the view that the subject could promote their self-reflections.

- “I had reflections. Is it right or wrong to do things in certain ways? Therefore, I felt that more activities and personal involvement would help us have a deeper impression of the subject matter.”
- “I was very impressed by the videos played in the class. Also, there were many examples for our discussion and sharing.”
- “I was amazed and I was moved by the lecture content. I asked why I could not stand the setbacks in life as others did and why other people could ‘bounce back’. These stories could move me.”

Personal gains and positive changes from taking the subject

Generally speaking, the students perceived the subject to be helpful, because it helped them to reflect and gain more self-understanding and self-confidence.

- “I felt that after taking this course, I realized something which I had neglected before, such as understanding myself.”
- “I concurred with the view of another student that there were many reflections related to self in the subject.”
- “I had personal gains ... at least I felt that I understood myself more after hearing materials on theories.”
- “I had more understanding about my identity. After reading journal papers and doing my assignment, I understand that there are different ways of attaining ideal positive identity. When I do things now, I will think more and think about other people.”

- “I feel that it is helpful to my self-confidence. When you know your strengths and weaknesses, you know how to appreciate yourself.”

In addition, students felt that the subject helped them interact with other people in a positive manner. Some of the following narratives illustrate this benefit:

- “Before I took the course, I did not know how to stand in others’ position to think about other people. In other words, I looked at things from my perspective. I thought about myself first – it was your fault, but not my fault. I am a perfectionist. I do not like other people intruding in my life and I am very stubborn. In particular, I always have quarrels with my mum and I do not understand her feelings. For example, I always go out at night until very late and my mum worries about me. In the past, I simply ignored her and thought it was her business if she worried about me ... but now I will stand in my mum’s position to look at things. I think our relationship has improved. My mum said that our relationship had improved. She also said that I had better temper and became more easy going. In the past, we would stop talking when we were unhappy. Now, we would communicate and I would understand her feelings.”
- “We learned how to do a group project. If you are a leader, you have to deal with some emergencies and how to relate to the professor. These would be helpful to our academic performance.”

In addition, the informants felt that they had acquired cognitive competence and emotional competence as well as new ways of doing things after taking this subject. These views are shown in the following narratives:

- “I have changed to another person with at least some changes – I will think more about different possibilities of a matter so that it may change from unsuccessful to successful outcomes. This would promote my competitiveness.”
- “One of the changes I have after taking this subject is that I have my own views. That is, I have more courage to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’.”
- “I think this subject is not primarily concerned about IQ but EQ. Actually, EQ is very important in our study and after our graduation. There are many opportunities where we have to use our EQ. I feel that it is very useful. After we heard the lectures, we realized that we neglected something important and we pay attention to them again.”
- “I have gained some concepts. If there are crises in future, I will have a system that knows how to work.”
- “I have learned many things on how to relate to others and handling things. When I realize something that I did not notice before, I will ‘correct’ my behavior. In the group discussion, we shared our experiences and learned the good things from others.”
- “The subject helped me think about my problems. That is, I had self-reflections. The most important thing of this course is that you have to understand yourself before you consider how to manage people.”

Views on the need for this subject

All participants unanimously agreed that there is a need for this subject in the university curriculum. The views of the informants were as follows:

- “I absolutely agree that we need this course. Maybe you have grown up in a very protective family and you will offend other people ... We have to learn how to evaluate oneself and then change some of the ‘bad things’ and re-integrate in the society. I think this understanding is not just unique to university students. It is vital to everybody.”
- “When I communicate with secondary school students, I find that they have difficulty to express themselves and manage their matters. Therefore, having this course to help them reflect is a good method.”
- “This is a very good subject which is helpful for future. University education relies heavily on self-autonomy and interpersonal relationships.”
- “I feel that this subject is important for students who come from secondary schools.”

Views on the negative aspects of the subject and proposed suggestions

While positive comments and personal benefits were mentioned by the students, there were also views on the negative aspects of the subject. First, some students opined that there were too many theories and jargons in the subject:

- “I feel that there were many terms and theories ... Sometimes I do not quite understand what the journal papers are talking about.”
- “I am studying engineering. There were many theories which you did not really understand. Also, presentation of the theories was ‘tight’ in lectures and classmates participating in class discussion were not that much.”

In addition, other negative comments were heard. These included: (a) there was a comparatively heavy workload; (b) there was less participation toward the latter part of the subject; (c) some groups were not involved; (d) interaction of the students could increase; (e) there were difficulties in group presentation; and (f) there were difficulties in preparing for the group project and individual assignment.

With respect to the above “imperfect” aspects of the subject, there were several suggestions for improvement, including ways to enhance the involvement of students, self-disclosure of the lecturer, and clearer grading guidelines. Some examples can be seen in the following narratives:

- “Next time we may have to force them ... do not let them form their own groups. We can observe those who talk more and then group them in different groups so that they can promote group participation. It is like going to church. You may not sing hymns initially. However, when you feel the atmosphere when everybody sings, you will sing.”
- “I think we may have to link student involvement to the grade ... because university students are pragmatic.”

- “When the teacher talks about something, it would be helpful to discuss their experiences and the related problems. This would be helpful to student involvement.”
- “The guidelines for group presentation and individual paper are very important. The expectations should be clearly outlined. We are now guessing.”

Discussion

Using focus group methodology, the present study examined the views and subjective experiences of students taking the course entitled “Tomorrow’s Leaders” at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. There are three unique features of the study. First, this is the first known scientific study examining the subjective experiences of students taking a credit-bearing subject on intrapersonal and interpersonal development in Hong Kong via focus group methodology. Second, five focus groups were recruited so that the views of different groups of students could be gathered. Third, by adopting the CIPP model, different aspects of the subject including the context, input, process, and product, were covered in the focus groups.

Based on thematic analyses, several interesting observations could be highlighted from the findings. First, students perceived that there were several positive attributes of the subject, including the subject matter (e.g., novel and relevant to the needs of university students), implementation process (e.g., active participation of the students and interactive), and the lecturers (e.g., helpful and willing to disclose). Second, the students perceived that they had changed after taking this subject in the domains of intrapersonal and interpersonal competence. Actually, some students felt that they became more self-confident and had better relationships with others after taking this course. Third, all students held the view that the subject was relevant and important for university students. These findings are generally consistent with those evaluation findings based on different strategies. For example, objective outcome evaluation findings based on pre-test and post-test data showed that students had enhancement in psychosocial competencies after taking this subject. Findings based on post-lecture and post-course evaluation as well as qualitative evaluation also showed that students had positive views of the subject, instructor, and implementation process. Based on the principle of triangulation, the findings showed that the students displayed positive changes after taking the course and they had positive views of the subject, implementers, and benefits of the subject.

However, students also perceived negative attributes of the subject. First, some students felt that the subject was too difficult and there was too much material. While this comment is taken, it is important to note that it is rather difficult to balance the demand for academic excellence under a credit-bearing course and a personal development emphasis of the subject. Also, it is noteworthy that different students have different expectations about the depth of the course. Actually, from other evaluation strategies, there were views saying that

the course was not in-depth enough. Hence, how to balance the different demands of the students is a challenging task to be accomplished. Second, regarding students' comments on the guidelines for group presentations and individual assignments, it seems that the students need very specific and direct guidelines. However, by doing this, there is not much room for creativity and students may be deprived of the opportunity to grow in the process of uncertainty and self-exploration. Nevertheless, the comments made by the students constitute good pointers for improving the curriculum of the subject in future.

Although the present findings are quite positive, alternative explanations exist. First, students may play the role of "good informants" by being helpful and voice the positive aspects of the subject only. However, this explanation was not likely, because the students were encouraged to honestly express their views and negative views were heard. Also, the interviewers did not have any direct interest in the study. Second, group dynamics might shape the consensus of the views involved thus giving a biased picture. However, this possibility was not high, because the interviewers were experienced social workers with substantial experiences in conducting groups. Third, it can be argued that the favorable findings were as a result of the preoccupations of the researchers (e.g., subtle expectation that the subject worked well). However, it should be noted that the researchers were not involved in the data collection and initial data analyses process.

The present study underscores the importance of using positive youth development constructs and the findings concurred with other studies suggesting the usefulness of positive youth development programs (23–28). It is noteworthy that there are several limitations of the study. First, as the data were collected from only five groups of students who were not randomly selected, there is a need to replicate the findings. In addition, generalization of the findings to other contexts should be careful. Second, as there were few students in some of the groups, group dynamics might be not adequately generated in those contexts. Third, because of manpower and time constraints, the interpretations of findings were not counter-checked by the students concerned (i.e., member checking). It is suggested that this should be done in future. Fourth, as focus groups may not be able to look at the inner subjective experiences of the students, qualitative strategies, such as weekly diaries (29) could be used to understand the subjective experiences of the students. Despite these shortcomings, the present qualitative findings provide additional support the positive aspects of "Tomorrow's Leaders" and further confirm its effectiveness in promoting holistic youth development among Chinese university students in Hong Kong.

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