

Qualitative evaluation of a positive youth development course in a university setting in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Qualitative evaluation was carried out to understand the perceptions of the students taking a course entitled “Tomorrow's Leaders” at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Based on the reflections of 189 students, results showed that most informants used positive descriptors to describe the course. When the informants were invited to name a metaphor that could stand for the course, the related metaphors were basically positive in nature. Intra- and inter-rater reliability analyses revealed that the coding of the positive or negative nature of the responses was reliable. The present study provides qualitative evaluation findings supporting the effectiveness of this course in promoting holistic development in Chinese university students in Hong Kong.

Keywords: Chinese adolescents; leadership; psychosocial competencies; qualitative evaluation; university students.

Introduction

Evaluation plays an important role in human services. In addition to value for money, accountability is another impetus for conducting rigorous evaluation. There are many evaluation paradigms in the literature. For example, Ginsberg (1) pointed out that there are several commonly used evaluation

strategies, including quantitative and qualitative approaches, cost-benefit analyses, satisfaction studies, needs assessment, single-subject designs, experimental approaches and models, utilization-focused evaluation, empowerment evaluations, fraud and abuse detection, client satisfaction, and journalistic evaluation. Patton (2) developed an evaluation “alphabet soup” and suggested that there were more than 100 ways of conducting evaluation. Some examples included audit focus evaluation (the degree to which the program meets accounting and contractual obligations), discrepancy evaluation (expectations about what will happen versus what actual happens in the program), effectiveness evaluation (whether the program is effective in attaining its goals), experimental evaluation (comparison between the experimental group and the control group), qualitative evaluation (description of the program by the major stakeholders and pictures generated by first-hand observations), and outcome evaluation (the extent to which the desired client outcomes are attained).

In the field of health and psychological research, quantitative evaluation is still the dominant form of research. Besides using experimental designs to evaluate a program, quantitative approach is also used in subjective outcome evaluation. For example, standardized assessment scales have been used for subjective outcome evaluation, such as the Medical Interview Satisfaction Scale (3), Consumer Satisfaction Questionnaire (4), and Client Satisfaction Questionnaire (5–7). In the Chinese culture, the Subjective Outcome Evaluation Scale has been used to assess subjective outcome in participants joining positive youth development programs (8).

There are several strengths of quantitative evaluation. First, the use of numbers creates a sense of objectivity and precision. This attribute is very important if we want to know how much benefit a program brings. Second, quantitative evaluation findings can generate change profiles throughout time. Through systematic charting of responses at different time, changes in the respondents can be understood. For example, the use of longitudinal trials can accomplish this task well. Third, quantitative evaluation could be carried out in an economical manner. For example, the use of rapid assessment instruments to assess subjective outcome changes is an application of this approach. Fourth, it is commonly used as a gold standard for evaluating programs. In short, quantitative evaluation is still a mainstream strategy for evaluation.

However, there are several limitations of the quantitative approach on the ontological, epistemological, and methodological grounds (9). Ontologically, the assumption that there is objective reality is challenged by constructionists. Epistemologically, the assumptions that the “subject” and “object” can be separated and that there are “neutral” scientists are questioned. Methodologically, whether the complex

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social world can be fully understood by numbers is challenged. For example, quantitative researchers are criticized as looking at the nomothetic trend and ignoring individuality, overlooking subjective experience, and failing to link the number to realities. As criticized by Patton (10), a quantitative-experimental approach oversimplifies the complexities of real-world experiences, misses important factors which are not easily quantified, and fails to understand the program impact in a holistic manner.

In the field of higher education, there are many voices arguing for the importance of qualitative research. For example, Joe et al. (11) used a qualitative approach to examine themes for general education in the arts and humanities. Six steps were included in the analyses, including coding, identification of themes, constructing the networks among themes, examination of the thematic networks, summary of networks, and interpretations of patterns. Through systematic document analyses, the findings provide support for the use of qualitative methods in understanding the program objectives of general education. An and Reigeluth (12) examined the application of a problem-based learning approach in three graduate-level online courses. Qualitative evaluation data were collected from interviews, observations, and document analyses. Based on cross-case analyses, the strengths and weaknesses of the problem-based learning application in online environments were identified and practical recommendations were proposed. Similarly, Jones and Turner (13) examined whether problem-based learning can help to develop holistic coaching. Evaluation data were collected through continuous observations, reflection about the course, and semi-structured group interviews with the students. The researchers concluded that the students developed a better appreciation of the inherent complexity of coaching in the process. Kember (14) used focus group interviews with semi-structured questions to understand perceptions of students from six academic departments, including Anthropology, Architecture, Government and Public Administration, Medicine, Nursing, and Material Science. The questions included the types of generic capabilities that students thought they needed when they graduate and the teaching approach, assessment, and course in their departments. The qualitative findings were consistent with those based on quantitative methods. The findings also underscore how the teaching and learning environment affects the development of generic capabilities.

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, team-building, and relationship-building. Brief lectures, experiential learning activities, group presentation, and individual assignments were used to promote the psychosocial competencies of the students. The objectives of the course include: (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 on personal qualities in leadership amongst students. On successfully completing this subject, students will be able to: (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 active pursuit of knowledge on intra- and interpersonal leadership qualities.

Several evaluation strategies were carried out to examine the effectiveness of the course. First, a one-group pre-test/post-test pre-experimental design was used to examine changes in the students using the Chinese Positive Youth Development Scale (15). Second, post-lecture subjective outcome evaluation with the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data was carried out. Third, post-course subjective outcome evaluation with the collection of quantitative and qualitative data was conducted at the end of the course (16). Fourth, systematic observations via process evaluation were carried out (17). Fifth, focus groups were conducted to understand the views of the students. Finally, students were invited to complete a reflection sheet where their perceptions and feelings of the course were revealed. The purpose of this paper is to document the responses of the students in the reflection sheet.

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). At the end of the course, students were given a reflection sheet in which they were invited to use three words or phrases (e.g., interesting, helpful to my development ...etc.) to describe their feelings, perceptions, and experiences of this course (i.e., descriptors). Moreover, they were asked to think about an object, an event, or a state which could stand for the course (i.e., metaphor) (e.g., an enjoyable tour, buffet, compass in life ...etc.) and gave a brief explanation about the meaning of that metaphor. This method has been used in the project Positive Adolescent Training through Holistic Social Programmes (Project P.A.T.H.S.) in Hong Kong (18–20). A total of 189 pieces of reflection notes were collected after the completion of the pilot course.

Data analyses

The responses in the reflection notes were entered in the computer for analyses. To enhance triangulation in the coding process, the data were coded and analyzed by two research staff who did not participate in the data collection process, and the final coding were further cross-checked by a colleague with a PhD degree. The unit of analysis was a meaningful unit instead of a statement. For instance, the statement that a course was “enjoyable and relaxing” was broken down into two meaningful units or attributes, namely, “enjoyable” and “relaxing”. On the other hand, descriptions with the same meaning

(e.g., “good quality” and “high quality”) were grouped into the same attribute category.

The present coding system was developed after much consideration of the raw data and several preliminary analyses. After initial coding, the positivity nature of the codes was determined, with four possibilities (positive code, negative code, neutral code, and undecided code). To enhance the reliability of the coding on the positivity nature of the raw codes, both intra- and inter-rater reliability were carried out. For the intra-rater reliability, two research staff who were involved in the coding process recoded 20 randomly selected raw codes on their positivity after the coding process was completed. For inter-rater reliability, two other research staff who did not involve in the coding process coded the randomly selected codes without knowing the original codes given.

Shek et al. (21) argued for the importance of discussing the ideological biases and preoccupations of the researchers in a qualitative evaluation report (Principle 4). As the developers of the course, the

authors might have the preoccupation that the implemented program was good and it was beneficial to the students. Additionally, the researchers might have the tendency to focus on positive evidence rather than negative evidence. To minimize such biases, the following measures were carried out to guard against the subtle influence of such ideological biases and preoccupations (Principle 5). To begin with, the researchers were conscious of the existence of ideological preoccupations (e.g., this course is helpful to students) and conducted data collection and analyses in a disciplined manner. Actually, the authors were not involved in the basic data analyses tasks to avoid biases. Second, both inter- and intra-rater reliability checks on the coding were carried out (Principle 6). Third, different research colleagues were involved in the data collection and analysis processes (Principle 7). Fourth, the authors were conscious of the importance and development of audit trails (Principle 9). The raw data files and steps involved in the development of coding system were properly documented and systematically organized.

Table 1 Categorization of descriptors used by the participants to describe the course.

Descriptions	Nature of the response				Total
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Undecided	
Self-understanding	9				9
Interesting	81				81
Informative	16				16
Funny	19				19
Cooperation	58				58
Motivating	6				6
Reflective	20				20
Useful	73				73
Relaxing	19				19
Happy	24				24
Meaningful	42				42
Good	5				5
Enlightening	20				20
Understand leadership	8				8
Communication skills improvement	6				6
Enjoyable	7				7
Comprehensive	9				9
New experience	5				5
Unique	6				6
Exciting	5				5
Practical	5				5
Other positive descriptors (e.g., attractive, innovative)	71				71
Need more activities		2			2
Room for improvement		2			2
Other neutral descriptors (e.g., general, semi-enjoyable)		9			9
Too theoretical			10		10
Boring			8		8
Too rush			4		4
Other negative descriptors (e.g., lack of guidelines, confused)			18		18
Unexpected				3	3
Theoretical				2	2
Different				2	2
Other undecided descriptors (e.g., experiential, competitive)				6	6
Total count, n	514	13	40	13	580
Total count, %	88.62	2.24	6.90	2.24	100.00

Table 2 Descriptors coded as negative responses.

Negative descriptors	n
Too theoretical	10
Boring	8
Too rush	4
Confused	2
Annoying	2
Too brief	1
Lack of guideline	1
Sleepy	1
Nervous	1
Abstract	1
Difficult	1
Lack of interaction	1
Unappealing	1
Forgettable	1
Worry	1
Not suitable	1
Not rewarding	1
Slow	1
Not helpful	1
Total	40

Results

In this paper, qualitative findings on the following two areas are presented: (a) descriptors that were used by the informants to describe the program; and (b) metaphors (i.e., incidents, objects, or feelings) that were used by the informants to depict the program. The descriptors that the informants used to describe the program were shown in Table 1. There were 580 raw descriptors which could be further categorized into different categories. Among these descriptors, 514 (88.6%) of them were positive responses and 40 (6.9%) of them could be classified as negative (Table 2). Most negative descriptors given by students are “too theoretical”, “boring”, and “too rush”. Moreover, there were descriptors describing the course as “lack of guidelines”, “too brief”, “sleepy”, “nervous”, “abstract” and “not rewarding”. Twenty randomly selected raw descriptors were used for reliability tests. The intra- and inter-rater agreement percentages calculated on the positivity of the coding from these descriptors were 95% and 85%, respectively.

Results on the categorization of metaphors used by the participants to describe the program are presented in Table 3. It was found that students used different words to describe the program, with most using “an interesting, enjoyable,

Table 3 Categorization of the metaphors used by the participants to describe the program.

Metaphors	Nature of the metaphor					Number of codes derived from the metaphor and its nature				
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Undecided	Total	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Undecided	Total
Smiley/happy face	3				3	6				6
Buffet	11				11	19				19
Light	3				3	4				4
An interesting/enjoyable/ meaningful/lovely tour	16				16	30				30
A guide/cook book	2				2	3				3
Faith	2				2	2				2
Compass	9				9	13				13
Gift	3				3	5				5
Ice cream	2				2	4				4
Relaxing course	2				2	2				2
A mirror and a telescope	2				2	2				2
Journey	4				4	8				8
Fun with interaction and friends	2				2	3				3
Star	4				4	5				5
Superstar	2				2	2				2
Flag	2	1			3	2	1			3
Mirror, trip, party	3				3	3				3
Bread and butter	2				2	1				1
Bubble milk tea	2				2	3				3
Seed	3				3	3				3
Map	1		1		2	3		1		4
Iceberg				1	1				1	1
Sky is the limit				1	1	1				1
Forest				1	1			1	1	2
Other metaphors (e.g., church, a blank paper, tower etc.)	88	13	3		104	163	2	17		182
Total count, n	169	13	4	3	189	287	6	16	2	311
Total count, %	89.42	6.88	2.12	1.59	100	92.28	1.93	5.14	0.64	100

meaningful, lovely tour” as the metaphor. Some students used “buffet”, “compass” and “journey” to describe the course. Among the responses, 287 responses (92.3%) could be regarded as positive whereas only 16 responses (5.14%) could be regarded as negative responses. The explanations for the negative responses could be seen in Table 4. Reliability tests showed that the intra-rater agreement percentages calculated on the positivity of the coding from the positivity of the coding were 95% and 85%, respectively.

Discussion

According to Shek, there are few studies on positive youth development programs in different Chinese contexts (22, 23). With reference to developmental issues in university students, there are views suggesting that credit-bearing courses would enable university students to develop in a holistic manner (24, 25). Unfortunately, there are very few credit-bearing courses aiming at promoting psychosocial competencies of university students. Against this background, the authors developed a course entitled “Tomorrow’s Leaders” at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and conducted systematic evaluation of the subject through different evaluation strategies. This paper presents the qualitative evaluation findings based on the reflection notes collected from the students. In contrast to quantitative methodology which focuses on numerical pictures, qualitative findings based on personal reflection notes offered more in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences of the students.

Two salient conclusions can be drawn from the present study. First, the course was primarily perceived in a positive manner, with roughly nine-tenths of the responses being positive in nature (Table 1). Most of the negative descriptions (Table 2), were related to the views that the course was too theoretical, boring or rushed. Although these comments

were the minority views, they serve as useful pointers to improvements for the course. Similarly, findings based on the metaphors also showed that most of the responses were very positive in nature. Again, “too theoretical” was a concern to some of the students. Another observation was that some of the negative comments were contradictory in nature. For example, while some students remarked that the pace was too fast, some regarded the pace was too slow.

To date, there are several lines of evidence suggesting that the course is effective in promoting the holistic development of the students. First, findings based on a one-group pre-test/post-test design showed that students changed in the positive direction in terms of the measures derived from the Chinese Positive Youth Development Scale (15). Second, post-lecture subjective outcome evaluation revealed that the lectures were basically well-received, although some negative comments were noted. Third, post-course subjective outcome evaluation showed that the students had positive views of the program, implementers and effectiveness. Fourth, process evaluation findings showed that high program adherence and good implementation qualities were associated with the course (17). Taken as a whole, different lines of evidence suggest that the course can promote holistic development of the students and the program was well-received by the students.

Although the present findings are extremely positive, one should be cautious about the existence of alternative explanations. According to Shek et al. (21), it is important to watch out for alternative explanations in qualitative research (Principle 10). First, although demand characteristics might explain the findings, this explanation was not likely because the students were encouraged to express their views freely, and negative views were in fact recorded. In addition, the students responded to the reflective notes in an anonymous manner. Second, although it can be argued that the favorable findings were a result of ideological biases of the researchers, several safeguards (e.g., intra- and inter-rater reliability as well as disciplined data analyses and interpretations) were used to reduce biases in the data collection and analysis process.

It is noteworthy that there are several limitations of the study. First, as the data were collected from only four classes of students, there is a need to replicate the findings in other time and space contexts. Second, as reflection notes were collected at one time point, it would be illuminating if regular and on-going qualitative evaluation data could be collected. Third, besides reflection notes, in-depth individual interviews would enable the researchers to understand the inner worlds and subjective experiences of the students. Finally, although 11 principles proposed by Shek et al. (21) were upheld in this study, peer-checking and member-checking (Principle 8) were not carried out because of time and manpower constraints. Despite the aforementioned limitations, the current study provides additional qualitative evaluation findings that support the positive nature of “Tomorrow’s Leaders” and further confirm its effectiveness in promoting holistic youth development among Chinese university students in Hong Kong (26–28).

Table 4 Illustrations of metaphors coded as negative.

1. The project and group work taste sour
2. If you just take a seat and listen to the theory, you fall asleep
3. Brief
4. However, information cannot be put into practical use
5. But, in fact, the celebrity is already the celebrity, the poor people cannot preferred to be the celebrity even though they are in the ball
6. Boring to listen to theory
7. We yet to be filled in more details
8. Find it quite boring, but it was too late for me to get off
9. The group mates are not stable, especially in the first six weeks
10. Have to learn different concepts every week...I also need to take times for adaptation
11. But after the course I would forget everything
12. Not enough to make me feel full
13. Cannot control easily
14. Bombarding our mind
15. But the pace is too slow
16. Seems complicated

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