

Qualitative evaluation of a leadership and intrapersonal development subject for university students in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Qualitative evaluation was conducted for students taking a subject on leadership and intrapersonal development (“Tomorrow’s Leaders”) at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. A total of 1,029 students completed a reflection worksheet to describe their experiences about the subject through the use of descriptors and metaphors. Reliability analyses showed that the coding of responses was consistent across raters. Regarding the descriptors used to describe the programs, most of the descriptors were positive with around 3% were negative responses. Concerning the metaphors used to represent the program, 93% of the responses were positive in nature, with 12 themes emerging from the responses. Consistent with the findings reported previously, the present study suggests that “Tomorrow’s Leaders” was well-received by the students and they regarded the subject to be beneficial to their own development.

Keywords: service leadership model, realms of service leadership, leadership models, evolutionary anthropology

Introduction

Evaluation serves as an assessment tool for helping program implementers to understand the impact and effectiveness of a program (1). It allows the implementers to improve the quality of the program by carrying out continuous evaluations throughout the implementation process (2). Two main approaches, quantitative and qualitative approaches, are often used in conducting evaluation. The quantitative approach relies on numerical data to assess how the participants perceive a program at different time points (3). Qualitative approach focuses on the evaluation of comprehensive and in-depth thoughts as well as experience of the participants (4). As qualitative approach can generate data which can capture the experiences of the program participants, a qualitative

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approach was adopted in this study to evaluate a subject on leadership and intrapersonal development developed for university students in Hong Kong.

In the field of program evaluation, metaphor analysis is one of the major types of qualitative research. It not only serves as a key for people to communicate some abstract thinking and experience (5), it also makes the complex information more structured and clearer (6). There are several metaphor theories, including salience-imbalance theory (7), domains-interaction theory (8), class-inclusion theory (9) and conceptual metaphor theory (10). Among these theories, conceptual metaphor theory is the most popular method in educational and psychology research.

Conceptual metaphor theory, also known as cognitive metaphor theory, is often used to understand the abstract concepts and reasoning in our daily life (10). A conceptual metaphor not only shapes our communication, but also influences the way we think and act. According to Lakoff and Johnson (10), “communication is based on the same conceptual system that we use in thinking and acting, language is an important source of evidence for what the system is like” (p. 3). In other words, it is not only a property of language (i.e., a linguistic phenomenon), but also a property of thought (i.e., a cognitive phenomenon) (10, 11).

A conceptual metaphor consists of two domains; they are the target (also name as “topic” or “tenor”) and the source (also referred to as “vehicle”) (10). The target domain is the conceptual domain that we try to comprehend, while the source domain is the conceptual domain from which we use metaphorical expression to understand another conceptual domain. The metaphor can be understood as a mapping from a source domain, that is, sets of conceptual correspondences (10). For example, “life” (the source) is a “journey” (target). According to Lakoff (12), the life as journey mapping is “a set of ontological correspondences that characterize epistemic correspondence by mapping knowledge about journeys onto knowledge about life” (p. 207). These correspondences allow us to reason about life using the knowledge we use to reason about journeys.

Despite the common use of conceptual metaphor analysis (13-15), little is known whether it can be employed in assessing the extent to which a program

achieves the learning outcomes in tertiary education contexts. In particular, it would be helpful to understand how university students perceive a course by using this method. With reference to the Chinese contexts, metaphors have been used in different education contexts. For example, Shek and colleagues used this method to understand students’ perception toward a positive youth development program (4, 16) and two university leadership courses (17-19).

There are several advantages of using metaphors to evaluate the effectiveness of a course. First, more novel ideas and inspirations on how students perceived the course could be obtained by mapping between the metaphors and their learning process (20, 21). Second, it provides an alternative way to understand the subjects which emphasize holistic personal growth and development. By using conceptual metaphors, students could reflect on their learning and past experience, which in turn yields a more genuine perception with less embellishing thoughts towards the course. Researchers, therefore, can have a better understanding of the reality by providing an “emic, idiographic, case-based position that directs attention to the specifics of particular cases” (22). Shek and Wu (23) noted that “a thick description would be formulated by revealing the multilayered understanding of students’ learning experience and meaning-making process” (p. 2). This provides a better picture on how the students perceived a course, which especially focused on promoting self-reflection and holistic development of the students.

Given the aforementioned advantages of conceptual metaphors, this study assessed the effectiveness of a university leadership subject “Tomorrow’s Leaders.” Students were asked to write a personal reflection on their experience, perceptions and feelings of the course via the use of conceptual metaphor.

A subject on leadership and intrapersonal development

“Tomorrow’s Leaders” is a 3-credit subject developed at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University to promote the leadership and intrapersonal competence of the students taking this subject. This course aims at

helping students understand the constructs in positive youth development, including cognitive competence, emotional competence, resilience, moral competence, self-understanding, personality, positive and healthy identity, spirituality, social competence, relationship and team building, conflict management, as well as interpersonal communication. Various teaching methods, including lectures, experiential learning activities, group project presentation and individual written assignments, are used in this course to nurture both the interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies of the students.

There are several objectives of this course: a) to enable students to learn and integrate theories, research and concepts of effective leadership qualities (particularly intrapersonal and interpersonal qualities) of effective leaders; b) to develop students' intrapersonal and interpersonal qualities of effective leaders; c) to increase students' awareness of the importance of lifelong learning.

Methods

A total of 1,029 students enrolled in the subject "Tomorrow's Leaders" in the 2nd semester of the 2012/2013 academic year. By using a reflection worksheet, students were asked to choose three phrases or words to describe their feelings toward the course. Also, they were invited to write a metaphor which best describes the course and to give explanations about the metaphor. A total of 885 worksheets were collected at the end of course. Students were informed that their participation was voluntary and the data were used for educational and research purposes.

Data analysis

For each descriptor, four types of code (i.e., positive code, negative code, neutral code, and undecided code) were adopted. Moreover, to analyze the metaphor, thematic analysis was performed as (24) contended that this method is "a way of grouping those summaries into a small number of sets, themes

or constructs... it's an analogue to the cluster-analytic and factor-analytic devices used in statistical analysis" (p. 69).

To enhance the coding reliability, intra-rater and inter-rater reliability tests were carried out. Twenty raw descriptors and twenty metaphors were randomly selected for the intra- and inter-rater reliability tests. Two researchers, who did not participate in the coding analysis, were recruited to perform the inter-rater reliability test. One of them has a Master in Educational Psychology and another had a Bachelor degree in Social Sciences and was currently studying a Master degree. All researchers completed the task independently without discussion.

Results

A total of 2,642 descriptors were received and categorized into 25 areas. In Table 1, there were 2,548 (96.4%) positive descriptors and 74 (2.8%) negative descriptors. In Table 2, negative descriptors were found, such as "difficult," "boring," "time-consuming," "tiring," "noisy," "not environmental friendly" and "not helpful." Lastly, there were 8 (0.3%) and 12 (0.5%) neutral and undecided descriptors, respectively.

For the metaphors, a total of 874 raw data, which involved 1,694 codes, were obtained (Table 3). Results showed that 813 were positive metaphors (93.0%), such as "journey," "guide," "light," "book," "buffet," "tree" and "mirror." Moreover, 48 metaphors (5.5%) were regarded as neutral. Some neutral metaphors were "games," "rope" and "paper". Based on the 874 metaphors, 12 themes were categorized, including "entertainment / relaxing," "functional," "gift," "guidance," "hope," "interactive," "knowledge," "meaningful," "multi-dimension," "necessity," "reflection" and "others". The results of intra- and inter-rater reliability tests are good (intra-rater reliability tests: 85%, 90% and 100%; inter-rater reliability tests: 82%, 85% and 85%).

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

Descriptions	Nature of the response				Total
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Undecided	
applicable	21				21
educational	156				156
energetic	9				9
guidance	5				5
helpful	521				521
innovation	15				15
interacting	188				188
interesting	656				656
meaningful	508				508
reflective	183				183
relaxing	166				166
personal development	64				64
valuable	46				46
teacher is good	4				4
challenging		4			4
difficult			21		21
boring			16		16
time-consuming			14		14
tiring			10		10
not helpful			6		6
cold			2		2
others negative descriptors (e.g., noisy)			5		5
others undecided descriptors (e.g., OMG, rain)				12	12
other positive descriptors (e.g., big, born)	6				6
others neutral descriptors (e.g., pluralistic, metaphors)		4			4
Total count, n	2548	8	74	12	2642
Total count, %	96.44	0.30	2.80	0.45	100.00

Table 2. Descriptors coded as negative responses

Negative descriptors	n
difficult	21
boring	16
time-consuming	14
tiring	10
not helpful	6
cold	2
die	1
common sense only	1
not much interaction	1
noisy	1
not environmental friendly	1
Total	74

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to assess the students' perception of a leadership course "Tomorrow's Leaders" by using a qualitative approach. There are several strengths of this paper. First, by using descriptors and metaphors, students can use their own words to conceptualize their learning experiences and impact of the course. Second, a large sample size, which is rare in the field of qualitative evaluation research, was obtained. Third, the results of inter-rater and intra-rater reliability tests were good.

In general, students perceived the course positively. First, based on the results of the descriptors, about 96% of the students perceived the course was helpful, meaningful, reflective interesting and relaxing. In fact, one of the characteristics of the subject “Tomorrow’s Leaders” is to provide an opportunity to students to participate in a variety of in-class activities and the reflective exercises related to the concepts and theories of leadership qualities (e.g., cognitive competence, emotional competence, resilience, moral competence, self-understanding, personality, positive and healthy identity, spirituality,

social competence, relationship and team building, conflict management and interpersonal communication). With the adoption of experiential learning approach, students were asked to participate in different interactive activities and found these activities were interesting and inspiring as reflected from the positive descriptors. Through the diversified learning experience, students were more aware of their intra- and interpersonal competencies. This explains why the students used the positive descriptors, such as *helpful*, *meaningful* and *reflective*, to describe the course.

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

Metaphors	Nature of the response					Nature of the response				
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Undecided	Total	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Undecided	Total
Entertainment/ Relaxing	134	12			146	259	23	11		293
enjoyable experience	11					22				22
film	15					27	5	4		36
relaxing	12					22		1		23
game	21	12				59	7			66
journey	75					129	11	6		146
Functional	101	11		3	115	198	24	11		233
chair	6					14		1		15
farmer	6					11				11
gas station	9					19		1		20
lifeboat	3					5				5
schedule book	10					17	2	1		20
tool/ toolbox	23					38				38
medicine	10					16	3	6		25
smart phone	16					24	5			29
magnifying lens	7					12				12
color pen	11					18	6			24
lullaby		1				1				1
rope		2				5				5
paper		8				10	8	2		20
periodic table				1		4				4
swallow's nest				1		2				2
tea Table				1		2				2
Gift	35				35	61	9	6		76
magic box	1					1	1			2
surprise	3					3	1			4
sweet	19					36	4	6		46
treasure	12					21	3			24
Guidance	157			1	158	250	10	6		266
manual	2					3		1		4
guide	93					148	8	2		158
light	62					98	2	3		103
lantern fish				1		1			1	1
Hope	20				20	40	2	2		44
dream	7					14	1	1		16
heaven	3					7	1			8
new born baby	1					2		1		3
rainbow	9					17				17
Interactive	12				12	23	1			24
friend	5					10				10
group cooperation	7					13	1			14

Table 3. (Continued)

Metaphors	Nature of the response				Total	Nature of the response				Total
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Undecided		Positive	Neutral	Negative	Undecided	
Knowledge	77	2		0	79	122	14	11	1	148
encyclopedia	13					22	2			24
elderly	4					7		1	1	9
leaflet	8					11				11
lesson	11					16	4			20
dictionary	9					18	5	5		28
book	32					45	3	3		51
assignment		2				3		2		5
Meaningful	7	1			8	11				11
meaningful movie	2					3				3
meaningful tour	5					7				7
abstract painting		1				1				1
Multi-dimension	33				33	53	4	0		57
canteen	1					2				2
various of fruit	6					10				10
supermarket	3					4				4
buffet	23					37	4			41
Necessity	125	4			129	224	20	32	4	280
human	4					7	1	1		9
refresh air	4					7	1	2		10
ocean	10					19	2	5	1	27
home	4					5	2			7
nutrient	27					44	2	5		51
sun	18					40				40
tree	40	3				72	5	13	2	92
water	18					30	6	6	1	43
toilet		1					1			1
Reflection	70	1		1	72	115	5	2		122
chicken soup	2					5				5
diary	3					3				3
photo album	3	1				7				7
mirror	62			1		100	5	2		107
Others	42	17	3	5	67	106	7	24	3	140
others positive metaphors (e.g., snowball, special, additional products)	42					73	3	13	1	90
others neutral metaphors (e.g., America, lemon, pig)		17				24	1	8	2	35
others negative metaphors (e.g., white elephant, compulsory military trip)			3			1		3		4
others undecided metaphors (e.g., ant, coke)				5		8	3			11
Total Count, n	813	48	3	10	874	1462	119	105	8	1694
Total Count, %	93.02	5.49	0.34	1.14	100.00	86.30	7.02	6.20	0.47	100.00

Second, based on the results of metaphor analyses, the majority of the students (above 90%) perceived the course positively as reflected by the metaphors, such as a *meaningful journey*, *nutrients*, *guide*, *light*, *book*, *buffet*, *rainbow*, *treasure*, *tree* and *mirror*. In addition, the present study extends prior

studies (18, 25, 26) by grouping the metaphors into themes. In this study, all metaphors were categorized into twelve themes, which demonstrated to what extent the intended learning outcomes of the course being achieved from the students' perspective.

Some metaphors were coded under the themes, such as “*entertaining*,” “*relaxing*” and “*gift*,” indicating students enjoyed the course and would take a similar course in the future. Some were categorized into “*functional*,” “*knowledge*,” “*multi-dimension*” and “*necessity*,” showing that students understood different qualities of effective leaders and recognized the importance of these attributes. Other themes, such as “*hope*” and “*guidance*,” demonstrated that students were inspired by the course content and perceived positively towards the future. The findings of the present study show that the intended learning outcomes of the course have been achieved from the students’ perspective.

While the findings based on descriptors and metaphors are generally positive, there are plausible alternative explanations for the findings. First, it can be argued that the students might please the teachers by giving positive responses (i.e., demand characteristics). However, this possibility is not high because the students were encouraged to give their honest responses and negative responses. Second, the students gave positive responses because they were afraid to be punished. This possibility is also not high because the students were not required to write down their names on the reflection sheets.

Several limitations of the study should be taken into account. First, the data were collected at one single point of time (i.e., at the end of the semester). This cross-sectional design may limit the understanding of the long term effects of the course on students’ personal growth and development. Second, students were asked to complete a worksheet. Some students, especially those who were not good at writing, may not be able to express their innermost feelings and thoughts freely by using this paper and pencil format. In particular, students may prefer to have a quiet place with no limit on the time frame to reflect on their learning experience. This may be difficult as the students were asked to submit the worksheets at a particular amount of time (i.e., 5-10 minutes). This might hinder the students to do an in-depth reflection during the class. Finally, the worksheet format also limits the depth of information that can be gathered.

In order to have a more comprehensive understanding of students’ perception and thoughts about this course, future study may consider the use

of mixed-method approach. By using both quantitative and qualitative methods, a more comprehensive picture of the effectiveness of the course can be obtained. Also, other qualitative methods like focus-group interviews and weekly diaries could be used in the future. Therefore, students can express the innermost feelings comfortably and freely without hesitation. This can help researchers capture a better picture of the impact and effectiveness of a holistic youth development university course. Despite the above limitations, students generally perceived the subject positively and beneficial to their academic and personal lives. It is important as university students is a sizable part of population and will be leaders in different fields and disciplines. The current study sheds light on promoting holistic development of students in university contexts.

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Submitted: December 18, 2014. *Revised:* January 05, 2015. *Accepted:* January 14, 2015.

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