Leadership qualities as a foundation of service learning: The Hong Kong experience

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Abstract

In many adolescent developmental models, serving others is regarded as an important attribute of healthy development of adolescents and young adults. Besides, programs promoting university students' service to the community, such as Service Learning subjects/programs, are developed. In this paper, it is argued that to facilitate community service competence of university students, there is a need to cultivate their basic leadership competencies, including intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies. At The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, a 3-credit subject entitled "Tomorrow's Leaders" was developed to promote leadership competencies in students. In the past five years, different evaluation strategies have been used to examine the impact of the subject. Evaluation findings consistently showed that this subject was able to promote psychosocial competencies and ethical leadership qualities after students took this subject, which forms a solid foundation for students to undertake their service learning projects.

Keywords: Leadership, psychosocial competence, ethical leadership, youth development, Hong Kong

Introduction

Serving others is an important vehicle through which healthy development of adolescents and young adults can be promoted. For example, Benson (1) proposed 40 adolescent developmental assets. Amongst these assets, caring (i.e., a young person places strong emphasis on helping other people) is an important developmental asset conducive to healthy adolescent development. In the positive youth development literature, serving others is intimately related to six "C"s of optimal youth development - competence, character, confidence, connectedness, caring, compassion, and contribution (2).

With particular reference to Hong Kong, involvement of young people in community service

has undergone much transformation throughout the history of Hong Kong. Hong Kong was a British colony before 1997. The mission of university education in Colonial Hong Kong was to nurture elites for Hong Kong and Britain whom were submissive to the British. As such, students were not encouraged to have much community participation. To set a clear and non-political goal for young people that could consume their energy, the education system was very examination-oriented. Although Hong Kong has become part of China since July 1997, the education system is still very examination-oriented where young people are encouraged to strive for academic excellence. While there is greater emphasis on voluntary service in high school students in the recent education reform, the motive of the students in community engagement is still quite instrumental, such as using voluntary activities to "enrich" their curriculum vitae.

Service learning in the university context: Promise and challenge

For university students in Hong Kong, opportunities for community service have increased in the past decade, although the service learning movement is still in its infancy. There are two key questions we should ask. The first question is whether academic work on service learning is adequately covered in the scientific literature. The second question is whether university students are adequately prepared for service learning. Regarding the former question, computer search shows that there is not much academic work on service learning in Hong Kong. From the statistics, it can be concluded that scientific literature on Service Learning is still very inadequate. While Chinese young people constitutes roughly one-fifth of the world's youth population, less than 1% of the published work is based on Chinese people.

To promote service learning in undergraduate students, every undergraduate student at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) has to fulfill the Service Learning Requirement by taking a 3-credit Service Learning course since the 2012/13 academic year. This initiative is a pioneer in two aspects. First, PolyU is the first university in Hong Kong (and probably in China) that includes Service Learning

Requirement as a graduation requirement. Second, to give due recognition to students and teachers, three credits are given to the Service Learning Requirement. This ensures that there would be a universal coverage for all the undergraduate students. Besides the pilot projects developed before the 2012/13 academic year, a 10-hour e-learning package for the students (3) and a 3-hour e-learning package for the teachers (4) have been developed.

However, while we endorse the service learning initiative at PolyU, we have to ask a more fundamental question - are undergraduate students ready and well-equipped to serve other people? This question should be asked because there is research evidence suggesting that there are developmental issues in contemporary university students (5), such as growing mental health problems, decline in empathy, and growing egocentrism in university students. Shek and Cheung (6) further reported developmental problems in university students, such as life style and Internet addiction problems. As pointed out by Bips (7), "students now are less mature and often not ready for the responsibility of being in college …many students today lack the resilience and are unable to summon strategies to cope …many students are often not prepared to be young 'adults' with all the responsibilities of life" (p. 1).

Because of the above observations, it would be an ideal strategy to equip students with competence before they take up challenges in service learning. In the literature of positive youth development, it is asserted that it is important to nurture the psychosocial competence of young people (8,9). For instance, Weissberg and O'Brien (10) suggested that social-emotional competencies such as self-awareness, social awareness, and responsible actions are basic to youth development. Besides, character development is regarded as an ideal developmental goal (2).

Park, Peterson and Seligman (11) pointed out that there are 24 character strengths, which can be subsumed under six broad categories of virtue, which include wisdom and knowledge (such as love of learning), courage (such as honesty), humanity (such as love and social intelligence), justice (such as fairness), temperance (such as forgiveness and modesty), and transcendence (such as gratitude and hope). Interestingly, although character education is

covered in primary and high schools, focus on morality is less emphasized in higher education. Probably it is assumed that university students should have attained moral maturity.

Crosby (12) asked an interesting and important question – what is the most important subject in the university? Crosby (12) argued that "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' " (p. 1). In fact, Crosby (12) argued that character development is of paramount importance and that "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 wellbeing of others" (p. 1). Hence, while we promote Service Learning in undergraduate students, it is equally important to nurture their character and psychosocial competencies (13).

Promotion of leadership competencies in university students

Starting from the 2012/2013 academic year, the undergraduate curriculum in universities in Hong Kong has changed from three years to four years. At The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, undergraduate students are required to complete a requirement on leadership and intrapersonal development. As such, a subject entitled "Tomorrow's Leaders" was developed to help the students fulfill this requirement with the following content, which is intended to nurture their psychosocial competencies and character:

- Role of self-understanding and interpersonal relationship qualities in effective leadership
- Self-understanding: personality characteristics leading to effective leadership
- Emotional competence: understanding the emotions of oneself and others; role of EQ in effective leadership
- Cognitive competence: different components of cognitive competence, such as IQ; creative, logical and critical thinking, cognitive competence in effective leadership
- Resilience: life adversities and challenges; coping with life stresses; role of resilience quotient (AQ) in effective leadership
- Spirituality: meaning in life; spirituality and well-being; role of spiritual quotient (SQ) in effective leadership; servant leadership
- Ethics and morality: moral competence; ethical issues and leadership; morality in effective leadership
- Social competence: skills basic to social interaction; positive human relationship; social skills in effective leadership; egocentrism in university students
- Clear and positive identity: role of self-identity in human development; self-evaluation and self-worth; self-discrepancies; role of positive self-concept in leadership effectiveness
- Interpersonal communication: concepts and skills; effective interpersonal communication; communication skills and effective leadership
- Interpersonal conflict; dealing with conflict; conflict resolution and leadership; team building; relationship quality and effective leadership
- Personal integrity and sense of responsibility in effective leaders; egocentricism in university students
- Self-leadership: leading one's own life; self-leadership initiatives

There are two stages on the development and implementation of this subject. In the pilot stage, a 2-credit course was offered to 268 and 195 students in the 2010/11 and 2011/12 school years, respectively (14). Since the 2012/13 academic year, the subject has been implemented on a full implementation basis (i.e.,

full implementation stage). In the 2012/13 to the 2015/16 school year, the course was offered to 2,000+ students per year.

Evaluation of the subject

To understand the impact of the subject, different evaluation methods were used (14). These include objective outcome evaluation, post-lecture subjective outcome evaluation, subjective outcome evaluation (post-lecture and post-course student satisfaction survey), process evaluation, and qualitative evaluation based on written narratives and focus groups. These methods and the related findings are presented in the following sections.

Objective outcome evaluation

Objective outcome evaluation typically examines changes in program participants after they join a program such as a credit-bearing course. To examine changes in students after taking "Tomorrow's Leaders," two main research designs have been used. First, a group pretest-posttest design has been used to evaluate change in several cohorts of students. Second, a non-equivalent control group design was used. For the outcome measures, 13 measures based on the Chinese Positive Youth Development Scale were used, including indicators in the domains of resilience, psychosocial competence (social, emotional, cognitive, behavioral and moral), self-determination, self-efficacy, positive identity, belief in the future, spirituality, prosocial norms and prosocial involvement. Several composite measures based on the indicators in the subscales were also used.

The findings based on the one group pretest-posttest design are generally positive. In the pilot stage, evaluation findings showed that the participants displayed positive change in some of the domains (e.g., emotional competence and positive identity) and composite measures (15). In the full implementation stage, based on the responses of 1,029 students, Shek and Ma (16) showed that although students showed positive changes in self-determination, thriving, and life satisfaction, their scores on some of the domains declined over time. Further analyses suggest that the

impact of the course might differ for students in different programs.

Besides the one-group pretest posttest design, a quasi-experimental study was conducted in the pilot stage with an experimental group ($n = 195$) and a control group ($n = 71$), with similar socio-demographic characteristics in the two groups. After controlling the pretest scores, analyses showed that the students in the experimental group showed a higher level of psychosocial competence indexed by resilience, emotional competence, and beliefs in the future. The study suggests that this course is able to promote psychosocial competence and ethical leadership in Chinese university students in Hong Kong (17).

Subjective outcome evaluation (post-lecture evaluation)

To provide feedback to teachers, a post-lecture questionnaire was used after each lecture in the pilot stage. Based on the data collected by 2,039 post-lecture subjective outcome evaluation forms, Shek (18) showed that the students perceived the subject, class, and teacher attributes in a favorable light, with 93% and 90% of the respondents having positive views of the teachers and subject, respectively. In another study in the pilot stage, Shek and Sun (19) showed that the client satisfaction findings on the subject, class, and teacher attributes were very positive, with over nine-tenths of the respondents showing positive evaluation of the subject and the teacher. In short, post-lecture evaluation findings suggest that the lectures were well-received by the students.

In the full implementation stage, Shek and Leung (20) conducted post-lecture evaluation assessing student perception of the subject, instructor and effectiveness among 1,029 students. The findings generally revealed that the students had very positive evaluation of the lectures. As predicted, the findings supported a three-factor structure, and global evaluation of the lectures and the teacher were predicted by the perceived subject, lecture and teacher attributes. In another study based on 1,070 students, Yu, Shek and Leung (21) carried out a post-lecture evaluation of the modified version of the course. The

results showed that the students generally held positive views about the lectures and teachers. The findings also supported the hypothesis that the perceived subject, teachers and lecture attributes predicted overall evaluation of the teachers and the lectures.

Subjective outcome evaluation (post-subject evaluation)

Besides the post-lecture evaluation, a post-course subjective evaluation using a validated client satisfaction scale (comprising perceived program quality, perceived implementers quality, and perceived program effectiveness) was conducted to examine the views of the students after taking the course. Based on the responses of 189 students, Shek and Sun (22) reported that over 90% of the students had positive views of the subject and the course was effective in helping the students to thrive. Shek and Sun (23) similarly showed that the client satisfaction findings were very positive from 195 students measured by the same subjective outcome evaluation scale, with high proportion of the students agreeing that the subject had helped them develop in holistic development. In the full implementation stage, post-course subjective outcome evaluation studies were also conducted. Researchers showed that the students had a positive evaluation of the subject, the instructor as well as the perceived benefits of the subject (24,25).

Process evaluation

A process evaluation was conducted to understand the implementation quality of the course in the pilot stage. In the first process evaluation study, Shek and Sun (26) showed that the mean program adherence across the lectures (85.71%) and the implementation quality (such as reflection opportunity and preparation quality) were high. In the second piloting exercise, Shek and Sun (27) showed that the mean program adherence and the quality of implementation were generally high. In both studies, qualities of the program implementation were predictive of overall quality and success of the program.

Qualitative evaluation (individual reflection)

Several qualitative evaluation strategies involving individual reflection have been used to evaluate the impact of the subject. In the first strategy, we asked students to use descriptors and metaphors to portrait their experiences. In the pilot stage, Shek and Sun (28) reported that students generally used positive descriptors (e.g., "meaningful" and "enlightening") and positive metaphors (such as "meaningful tours" and "compass") to describe the subject. In the full implementation stage, Shek and Law (29) also showed that the students (N = 143) gave positive responses, with 94.4% and 92.7% of positive responses for descriptors and metaphors, respectively.

The second evaluation strategy was to invite the students to write personal reflections on the course. Shek (30) reported some personal reflections as follows:

"This course, Tomorrow's Leaders, was very different from what I have taken in my major, Marketing. In my major, there are only lectures and tutorials. After the lecturers finished what they wanted to say, they left. Interactions were seldom seen. But in Tomorrow's Leaders, there were many interactions which shocked me at the very beginning. Near everyone has to share what they think and feel during lesson. …This is something I can never encounter if I haven't taken this course. Also, the most interesting part was the worksheet. First, I think the worksheet is just like work in primary school. A bit wired. But I later find that these few pieces of paper can help me find my truth and know about myself. I have the deepest feeling when I was filling the worksheet about my strengths, weaknesses and ideal-self. I thought a lot. I would like to find out the answers. Fortunately, I found it, more than the worksheet required."

"It is a valuable experience to study this subject. In the course of this subject, different activities, writings, and drawings enhanced my understanding about myself, including my strengths and weaknesses, which helped me improve my interpersonal skills. The topics taught in this subject are important to our daily living. For instance, we need emotional competence when our feeling is fluctuating; we need resilience when we are in a deadlock. Good interpersonal skill is a must for all of us nowadays when almost every one of us is holding a bachelor degree. Our personality and how we deal with problems are more important than what we know."

Finally, to motivate the students, students with outstanding performance were awarded the Wofoo Foundation Scholarship and they were invited to write personal reflections on the subject. The scholarship recipients generally felt that there was a strong need to have this subject and shared that there were many benefits of the subject. Besides, they saw that there were many attractive features in the subject and the lectures were interesting and interactive. These attributes can be seen in the reflection of one scholarship recipient report by Shek and Wu (31) as follows:

"The subject facilitates me to be more confident in taking up a leader's role in my social work profession. The course introduced 13 elements that a successful leader should possess. I have heard some of them before but some of them were new to me. One new element has inspired me a lot and provided me insight to be a leader is "spirituality". A spiritual leadership style should include spiritual values such as integrity, honesty, and humility. By showing us a movie called "Invictus," the teacher used Nelson Mandela as an example to demonstrate these elements. During the movie, I was impressed by the decision made by Mandela. He provided meaning (i.e., unity of one nation) for every political decision even though such decision would be at the expense of his political capital. He could create ethical influence and climate that would influence the others. His belief of unity and caring for his original enemies guided him to be the President. This element inspired me that as a social worker, despite facing difficulties and structural constraints, there are some human values that I have to uphold – that is honest communication with self and others and at the same time be respectful and caring to every human, even the one you hate or originally is your enemy. Of course, this type of leadership quality sounds hard to achieve. It is difficult to love the one you hate. However, such leadership practice is attractive to me and I think I am willing to learn to be a spiritual leader in order to make ethical influence to my followers."

Similar positive reflections can be seen in the reflections of the scholarship holders reported by Shek, Wu and Law (32):

"Concerning how this subject assisted my personal development, it changed my belief in leadership. I used to think that leadership is innate. The idea had been consolidated during my secondary school life when only the best students were nominated to join leadership camps and workshops. Such students had been academically outstanding in primary school. Later, they became the president of the student union or held other important student posts in school. Nevertheless, the subject provided an alternative perspective for me. The materials suggest that leadership attributes can be developed. Everyone can be a leader. It gives me a new hope."

Qualitative evaluation (focus group interviews)

In the pilot stage, Shek and Sun (33) reported findings of a study using focus groups to examine the views of the students on the course. Generally speaking, the students were positive about the interesting course content, the interactive class atmosphere, and the useful guidance of the teachers. Most important of all, the students felt that the subject could promote their reflection and self-understanding. Some of the benefits of the subject were as follows:

- "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 felt that after taking this course, I realized something which I had neglected before such as understanding myself."
- "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."

- "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 the focus group study, the students also highlighted the need for this subject:

- "I absolutely agree that we need this course. May be 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."

5-year longitudinal study

Tomorrow's Leaders was developed to enable students to satisfy the Leadership and Intrapersonal Development requirement of the general university requirements (GUR) under the new 4-year undergraduate program. To understand students' experiences of the GUR, a 5-year longitudinal study has been conducted (34). We have conducted focus groups as well as secondary data analyses of the data collected by the Student Feedback Questionnaire to understand student feedback on Tomorrow's Leaders. For example, based on the secondary data analyses of the data collected via the Student Feedback Questionnaire, the results showed that the students were satisfied with the subject and teaching of the instructor (35).

Discussion and conclusion

In this chapter, we outline the development of a subject entitled "Tomorrow's Leaders" for students to fulfill the Leadership and Intrapersonal Development requirement in the 4-year undergraduate program at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The subject was piloted in the 2010-2012 academic years and it has been fully implemented since the 2012/13 academic year. Through several evaluation mechanisms, we have examined the impact of the subject on the psychosocial competencies and ethical leadership of the students. Overall speaking, the evaluation findings are overwhelmingly positive (14). The findings are promising because we have used multiple evaluation methods to collect multiple types of data from multiple stakeholders.

According to Shek and Wong (36), adolescent developmental issues would not "disappear over night." With reference to this warning, there is a need to strengthen the psychosocial competencies and character strengths of students before they undertake Service Learning projects. Interestingly, although there are numerous positive youth development programs designed for high school students (37), there are comparatively fewer programs developed for university students. In the present context, the evaluation findings demonstrate the usefulness of designing credit-bearing subjects using principles of the positive youth development approach. In fact, the evaluation findings accumulated in the past six years clearly point out that promotion of psychosocial competence in university students via credit-bearing subjects is a promising approach to promote holistic development of university students.

Actually, the evaluation findings related to "Tomorrow's Leaders" strongly complement the evaluation findings based on a project entitled "P.A.T.H.S. to Adulthood: A Jockey Club Youth Enhancement Scheme" (Project P.A.T.H.S.), which was designed to promote holistic development in junior secondary school students. The Project P.A.T.H.S. was launched more than one decade ago, serving more than 280,000 secondary school students (600,000+ man-times) involving more than 280 secondary schools in Hong Kong with an earmarked grant of HK$750 million. Multiple evaluation findings showed that the program was effective in

promoting holistic development and reduce risk behavior in young people in Hong Kong (38). Taken as a whole, the evaluation findings collected from the high school and tertiary education settings suggested that it is possible to promote psychosocial competence and character development in young people using curriculum-based approach.

Palmer (39) maintained that it is important to help students understand themselves. As he argued, "our colleges and universities help student 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). Obviously, Tomorrow's Leaders is a constructive response to this comment.

Astin (40) also pointed out that "although we argued that institutions needed to focus more on student outcomes, we avoided specifying what any of these outcomes should be, arguing instead that this task should be left largely to the individual institution. In retrospect, I think this was a mistake. If we had been more forthcoming about our own values with respect to some of the most important student outcomes, we certainly would have generated more controversy, but I think the controversy would have been healthy. More specifically, I wish we had spoken more directly about the importance of so called affective outcomes such as self-understanding, tolerance, honesty, citizenship, and social responsi-bility" (p. 587). Obviously, "Tomorrow's Leaders" can strengthen the affective outcomes of student development which provides a solid foundation for service learning activities. We earnestly hope that the subject can provide the necessary foundation through which Service Learning projects can be competently executed by the university students in Hong Kong.

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Ethical compliance

The authors have stated all possible conflicts of interest within this work. The authors have stated all sources of funding for this work. If this work involved human participants, informed consent was received from each individual. If this work involved human participants, it was conducted in accordance with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki. If this work involved experiments with humans or animals, it was conducted in accordance with the related institutions' research ethics guidelines.

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