

Subjective outcome evaluation of a service leadership subject for university students in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This study examined the perceived effectiveness of the subject entitled "Service Leadership" from the perspective of students. A total of 110 students who took the subject completed a subjective outcome evaluation form. Results revealed that the students generally had positive perceptions of program content, program implementers, and program benefits; the students were also satisfied with the subject. As predicted, perceived program content, perceived program implementer qualities and perceived program benefits were positively inter-correlated and they were significantly correlated with overall satisfaction. However, perceived program content, not perceived program implementer qualities, significantly predicted perceived program benefits. Perceived program implementers and program benefits, not perceived program content, significantly predicted overall satisfaction with the subject.

Keywords: Hong Kong, service leadership, subjective outcome evaluation, university students

Introduction

Service-oriented industries are playing an important role in the economy of Hong Kong. From 2003 to 2013, the contribution of service industries to the GDP of Hong Kong rose from 89.8% to 92.9% (1). With the transformation of the economic structure in Hong Kong, there is a call for a leadership style that is suitable for the service economy where interpersonal interaction, trust and integrity are emphasized. Unfortunately, service leadership education is highly inadequate in Hong Kong because "soft skills" are not usually focused upon the formal curriculum in local universities. Besides, research studies have shown that adolescents in Hong Kong showed mental health problems, such as depression, Internet addiction, and suicidal ideation (2, 3). Hence, there is a need to promote the holistic development of university

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students. Against this background, a 3-credit General Education subject on service leadership was developed and delivered at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The purpose of the subject is to promote the attitudes, skills, and behaviors related to service leadership in the students taking this subject.

The service leadership subject was developed based on the framework of Service Leadership and Management (SLAM) developed by the Hong Kong Institute of Service Leadership and Management (HKI-SLAM) under the leadership of Dr. Po Chung. According to the framework, service leadership is “about satisfying needs by consistently providing quality personal service to all one comes in contact with, including one’s self, others, communities, systems and environments” (4), and a service leader is “an on-the-spot entrepreneur who possesses relevant task competencies and is judged by superiors, peers, subordinates and followers as having character and exhibiting care in action situations” (4). To nurture leaders who are qualified to serve other people and society, service leadership education within the framework of SLAM not only promotes leadership competences, but also fosters character strengths and caring disposition. It also upholds the principle that everybody has the potential to be a leader.

Positive youth development (PYD) can be used as a vehicle to cultivate service leadership education in university students. PYD focuses on positive attributes and potentials of adolescents and highlights the importance of developing all-round healthy functioning in adolescents (5). Theoretically, the concept covers several domains such as psychosocial competence, self-efficacy, clear and positive identity, and prosocial behaviors (6). When adolescents possess these developmental assets over time, they would be more likely to successfully transit from adolescence to adulthood (7). Studies have demonstrated that positive youth development programs promoted favorable developmental outcomes and prevented problem behaviors in adolescents (8-12).

At The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, a 13-week subject with 39 contact hours (135 total study hours) entitled “Service Leadership” has been developed under the 4-year undergraduate

degree program. The subject covers different topics, including intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies, service leadership, self-leadership, caring disposition, and character strengths. Different teaching strategies including experiential learning, group project, and reflective journal are used to facilitate students’ learning. After taking the subject, students are expected to learn the basic models of leadership with reference to the service sector, understand the basic leadership attributes intrinsic to effective service leaders (e.g., leadership competences and caring disposition), reflect on their own service leadership qualities, learn to develop and apply the basic qualities of an effective service leader and cultivate an appreciation of the importance of service leadership to the development and wellness of oneself, other people and the whole society.

Previous evaluation studies have been conducted to examine the effectiveness of the service leadership subject. Using multiple evaluation strategies such as objective outcome evaluation and qualitative evaluation, previous research findings showed that students had positive views of the program, instructor and benefits, and the students showed changes in service leadership attributes and holistic development (12-14). With particular reference to subjective outcome evaluation, a subjective outcome evaluation form was used to assess perceived program quality, instructor quality, benefits and overall satisfaction with the subject (13). Previous subjective outcome evaluation studies showed that students were satisfied with the program, instructor qualities, as well as perceived benefits (15).

While previous studies showed that the subject was well received by students and was effective in promoting students’ service leadership, these were mainly based on the 2-credit course offered to 3-year undergraduate program students in 2012/13 and 2013/14 academic years. Hence, there is a need to examine the subjective outcome evaluation findings. To fill in this gap, the current study examined the evaluation of the subject, instructors, benefits, and overall satisfaction with the subject amongst undergraduate students in 2014/15 academic year. Based on the existing literature, several research questions were examined as follows:

- 1) What are the views of the students regarding the subject content, instructors, benefits, and overall satisfaction with the course?
- 2) What are the inter-relationships amongst perceived program content, perceived program implementers, perceived program benefits, and overall satisfaction with the subject? Based on prior research (12, 14), it was hypothesized that the four aspects of subjective outcomes (i.e., program content, program implementers, program benefits, and overall satisfaction with the subject) would be inter-related (Hypotheses 1a to 1f).
- 3) Do perceived program content and program implementers predict benefits of the subject? Based on past studies (12, 14, 16), students' perceived program and instructor qualities would predict the perceived benefits of the subject (Hypotheses 2a and 2b, respectively).
- 4) Do students' perceptions of program content, program implementers, and program benefits predict overall satisfaction with the subject? Based on previous studies (16), it was hypothesized that students' views of program

content, program implementers and program benefits would predict their overall satisfaction with the subject (Hypotheses 3a, 3b and 3c, respectively).

Methods

Across two semesters, 174 students took the subject "Service Leadership" in Semester 1 and Semester 2 in 2014/15 academic year. These students were invited to respond to a subjective outcome evaluation form to assess their perceptions of the course in the last lecture. The purposes of the study and confidentiality of the data collected were thoroughly highlighted to ensure all participants completed the course evaluation in a voluntary manner. Teachers with research training were present throughout the survey process to answer questions. Enough time was given to all respondents to complete the form and the survey was conducted in an anonymous manner. Finally, there were 110 valid forms collected.

Table 1. Summary of the evaluation of the subject content (N = 110)

Items	1		2		3		4		5		Positive response (options 4-5)	
	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly agree			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
a1 The objectives of the curriculum are very clear.	1	0.9	2	1.8	13	11.8	70	63.6	24	21.8	94	85.4
a2 The content design of the curriculum is very good.	1	0.9	1	0.9	16	14.5	72	65.5	20	18.2	92	83.7
a3 The activities were carefully arranged.	1	0.9	0	0	13	11.8	69	62.7	27	24.5	96	87.2
a4 The classroom atmosphere was very pleasant.	1	0.9	0	0	14	12.7	58	52.7	36	32.7	94	85.4
a5 There was much peer interaction amongst the students.	1	0.9	1	0.9	10	9.1	63	57.3	35	31.8	98	89.1
a6 I participated in the class activities actively (including discussions, sharing, games, etc.).	1	0.9	1	0.9	17	15.5	68	61.8	22	20	90	81.8
a7 I was encouraged to do my best.	1	0.9	0	0	10	9.1	78	70.9	21	19.1	99	90
a8 The learning experience enhanced my interests towards the course.	1	0.9	1	0.9	14	12.7	69	62.7	25	22.7	94	85.4
a9 Overall speaking, I have a very positive evaluation on the course.	1	0.9	1	0.9	7	6.4	73	66.4	28	25.5	101	91.9
a10 On the whole, I like this course very much.	1	0.9	1	0.9	17	15.5	66	60	25	22.7	91	82.7

Table 2. Summary of the evaluation of instructors (N = 110)

Items	1		2		3		4		5		Positive response (options 4-5)	
	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly agree			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
b1 The instructor(s) had a good mastery of the course.	0	0	1	0.9	11	10	68	61.8	30	27.3	98	89.1
b2 The instructor(s) was (were) well prepared for the lessons.	0	0	0	0	12	10.9	58	52.7	40	36.4	98	89.1
b3 The teaching skills of the instructor(s) were good.	0	0	0	0	11	10	67	60.9	32	29.1	99	90
b4 The instructor(s) showed good professional attitudes.	0	0	0	0	10	9.1	60	54.5	40	36.4	100	90.9
b5 The instructor(s) was (were) very involved.	0	0	0	0	12	10.9	53	48.2	45	40.9	98	89.1
b6 The instructor(s) encouraged students to participate in the activities.	0	0	0	0	10	9.1	55	50	45	40.9	100	90.9
b7 The instructor(s) cared for the students.	0	0	0	0	7	6.4	66	60	37	33.6	103	93.6
b8 The instructor(s) was (were) ready to offer help to students when needed.	0	0	0	0	9	8.2	56	50.9	44	40	100	90.9
b9 The instructor(s) had much interaction with the students.	0	0	1	0.9	8	7.3	59	53.6	42	38.2	101	91.8
b10 Overall speaking, I have a very positive evaluation on the instructor(s).	0	0	0	0	9	8.2	59	53.6	42	38.2	101	91.8

Instruments

The current study used a modified version of Subjective Outcome Evaluation Form which had been used in the Project P.A.T.H.S. in Hong Kong. There are several parts of the form as follows:

- Program Content: 10 items were used to assess students' perceptions of the curriculum design, learning activities, in-class interaction, participation, encouragement, and overall evaluation on the course content (see a1 to a10 in the Table 1).
- Program Implementer: 10 items covering how students perceive the attitude, preparation, teaching skills, engagement, interaction and care of the instructors were used (see b1 to b10 in the Table 2).
- Program Benefits: 18 items were used to assess students' perceptions of the benefits of the subject (see c1 to c18 in the Table 3).

- Overall Satisfaction with the Subject: three items were used, including whether the participants would recommend the program to others (see d1 to d3 in the Table 4).

Similar to previous studies (12,14), Cronbach's alphas were 0.93, 0.95, 0.94, and 0.80 for the subscales on program content, program implementers, program benefits, and overall satisfaction with the subject, respectively. Table 5 shows the details on the reliabilities of the instrument.

Results

Descriptive statistical analyses including means, standard deviations and percentages were used to examine the responses of the participants. Four observations regarding students' perceptions of the course can be highlighted. First, more than 80% of the students had positive perceptions toward the subject content (see Table 1). For instance, around 92% of the

students generally had a very positive evaluation on the subject. The majority of the students (90%) thought they were encouraged to do their best in the subject. Over 87% of the students expressed that there was much peer interaction and the activities were carefully arranged in the subject. Second, students' generally held favorable perceptions of the subject instructors (91.8%). Over 90% of them viewed that the subject instructors had good professional attitudes and teaching skills, encouraged students to participate in the activities, cared for the students, offered help to students, as well as had much interaction with the students (see Table 2). Third, most of the students perceived that the subject was beneficial to them. The

students agreed that the subject promoted their personal development in the areas of social competence, resilience, emotion management skills, self-confidence, self-leadership, compassion, and positive future orientation. The students also agreed that the theories, research and concepts covered in the subject helped them understand (89.9%) and synthesize (92.6%) the characteristics of successful service leaders (see Table 3). Fourth, the students were satisfied with the program. As shown in Table 4, 88.9% of the students were satisfied with the subject. Almost 90% of the respondents would recommend the course to their friends, and around 65% would participate in similar courses again in the future.

Table 3. Summary of the evaluation of the perceived benefits (N = 110)

Items	1		2		3		4		5		Positive response (options 4-5)	
	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly agree			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
c1 It has enhanced my social competence.	0	0	0	0	9	8.2	86	78.2	15	13.6	101	91.8
c2 It has improved my ability in expressing and handling my emotions.	0	0	0	0	12	10.9	80	72.7	18	16.4	98	89.1
c3 It has enhanced my critical thinking.	0	0	1	0.9	22	20	66	60	21	19.1	87	79.1
c4 It has increased my competence in making sensible and wise choices.	0	0	2	1.8	21	19.1	71	64.5	15	13.6	86	78.1
c5 It has helped me make ethical decisions.	0	0	1	0.9	12	10.9	80	72.7	16	14.5	96	87.2
c6 It has strengthened my resilience in adverse conditions.	0	0	1	0.9	18	16.4	73	66.4	18	16.4	91	82.8
c7 It has strengthened my self-confidence.	0	0	1	0.9	14	12.7	73	66.4	22	20	95	86.4
c8 It has helped me face the future with a positive attitude.	0	0	1	0.9	15	13.6	73	66.4	21	19.1	94	85.5
c9 It has enhanced my love for life.	0	0	3	2.7	18	16.4	74	67.3	14	12.7	88	80
c10 It has helped me explore the meaning of life.	0	0	1	0.9	13	11.8	79	71.8	16	14.7	95	86.3
c11 It has enhanced my ability of self-leadership.	0	0	0	0	16	14.5	77	70	16	14.7	93	84.7
c12 It has helped me cultivate compassion and care for others.	0	0	2	1.8	13	11.9	73	67	21	19.3	94	86.3
c13 It has helped me enhance my character strengths comprehensively.	0	0	1	0.9	13	11.9	71	65.1	24	22	95	87.1
c14 It has enabled me to understand the importance of situational task competencies, character strength and caring disposition in successful leadership.	0	0	1	0.9	7	6.4	79	72.5	22	20.2	101	92.7
c15 It has promoted my sense of responsibility in serving the society.	0	0	2	1.8	22	20.2	68	62.4	17	15.6	85	78

Table 3. Summary of the evaluation of the perceived benefits (N = 110) (continued)

Items	1		2		3		4		5		Positive response (options 4-5)	
	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly agree			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
c16 It has promoted my overall development.	0	0	1	0.9	12	11	72	66.1	24	22	96	88.1
c17 The theories, research and concepts covered in the course have enabled me to understand the characteristics of successful service leaders.	0	0	0	0	11	10.1	71	65.1	27	24.8	98	89.9
c18 The theories, research and concepts covered in the course have helped me synthesize the characteristics of successful service leaders.	0	0	0	0	8	7.4	77	71.3	23	21.3	100	92.6

Table 4. Students' overall satisfaction with the course (N = 110)

Items	1		2		3		4		5		Positive response (options 4-5)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
d1. Will you suggest your friends to take this course? ^a	0	0	1	0.9	10	9.2	74	67.9	24	22	98	89.9
d2. Will you participate in similar courses again in the future? ^a	2	1.8	6	5.5	30	27.5	58	53.2	13	11.9	71	65.1
d3. On the whole, are you satisfied with this course? ^b	0	0	0	0	12	11	77	70.6	20	18.3	97	88.9

Note: ^a 1 = Definitely will not, 2 = Will not, 3 = Not sure, 4 = Will, 5 = Definitely will.

^b 1 = Very dissatisfied, 2 = Moderately dissatisfied, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Satisfied, 5 = Very satisfied.

Table 5. Means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alphas, and mean inter-item correlations among the variables

Variables	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha	Mean inter-item correlations
1. Program Content (10 items)	4.09	.53	.93	.59
2. Program Implementers (10 items)	4.28	.50	.95	.63
3. Program Benefits (18 items)	4.03	.41	.94	.48
4. Overall Satisfaction (3 items)	3.95	.56	.80	.59

Table 5 shows the descriptive statistics (means and SD) and reliability measures for the different measures. To examine the inter-relationships among the different aspects of the subject, Pearson correlation analyses were performed. Results showed that program content ($r = 0.59$, $p < 0.01$) and program implementers ($r = 0.46$, $p < 0.01$) were significantly correlated with perceived program benefits (see Table 6). Additionally, program content ($r = 0.46$, $p < 0.01$), program implementers ($r = 0.46$, $p < 0.01$), and perceived program benefits ($r = 0.51$, $p < 0.01$) were significantly associated with overall satisfaction with

the subject. To examine the effects of perceived course content and teachers on perceived course benefits, multiple regression analyses were performed. Results showed that program content ($\beta = 0.53$, $p < 0.001$) significantly predicted perceived program benefits, while program implementers ($\beta = 0.14$, $p = .16$) did not (see Table 7). For the predictors of overall satisfaction with the subject, program implementers ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.05$) and program benefits ($\beta = 0.37$, $p < 0.01$) significantly predicted overall satisfaction with the subject, while program content ($\beta = 0.11$, $p = .37$) did not (see Table 8).

Table 6. Correlation coefficients among the variables

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Program Content (10 items)	1			
2. Program Implementer (10 items)	.63**	1		
3. Program Benefits (18 items)	.59**	.46**	1	
4. Overall Satisfaction (3 items)	.46**	.46**	.51**	1

Note: ** $p < .01$.

Table 7. Multiple regression analyses predicting program effectiveness

	Predictors		Model	
	Program Content	Program Implementer	R	R ²
	β^a	β^a		
Program Benefits	.53***	.14 [#]	.60	.36

Note: ^a Standardized coefficients.

*** $p < .001$; [#] $p = .157$.

Table 8. Multiple regression analyses predicting overall satisfaction

	Predictors			Model	
	Program Content	Program Implementer	Program Benefits	R	R ²
	β^a	β^a	β^a		
Overall Satisfaction	.11 [#]	.18*	.37**	.55	.31

Note: ^a Standardized coefficients.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; [#] $p = .373$.

Discussion

The present study examined students' perception of the quality of subject content, instructors, subject benefits, and overall satisfaction with the subject entitled "Service Leadership" in the academic year 2014/15. The current study has several strengths. First, consistent with prior research (13, 15), the validated Subjective Outcome Evaluation Form had good internal consistency. Second, the study examined the views of the students on different domains of student subjective evaluation, including subject content, instructors, subject benefits, and overall satisfaction with the subject. Third, the study used multiple indicators (e.g., perceptions of subject content, perception of instructors and perceived subject benefits) to predict overall satisfaction with the subject.

In terms of students' perceptions of the service leadership subject, most of the students perceived that

the subject was well designed, the quality of teaching staff was high, and there were benefits of taking the subject. These findings are consistent with the previous studies based on subjective outcome evaluation (15, 16). For example, Shek, Lin and Liu (13) showed positive perceptions of the subject content and teachers, and most of the students regarded the subject as beneficial to their development of service leadership qualities. Similarly, Shek and Liang (16) also found that the students generally had positive perceptions of the program content and the instructors, and most of them perceived the subject to be beneficial to different aspects of their development. In conjunction with the previous findings, the present study suggests that the subject is well received and it promotes the knowledge, attitude and skills of the students taking the subject.

As predicted, there was significant inter-correlation among perceived subject content,

perceived subject instructors, perceived subject benefits, as well as overall satisfaction with the subject, which provided support for Hypotheses 1a to 1f. These results are generally consistent with the findings from previous studies (13, 16). With regard to perceived benefits of the subject, the study showed that perceived subject content significantly predicted perceived benefits of the subject (support for Hypothesis 2a), while perceived instructors did not (no support for Hypothesis 2b). Although the findings are odd, they are in line with prior findings (12, 15). Previous research has suggested the well-designed subject content (e.g., course materials or textbooks) may arouse teachers' interest and passion in teaching the course, which in turn may promote students' perceptions on benefits of the subject and improve the effectiveness of the course (15, 17). In conjunction with the previous and present findings, it is indicated that improvement of subject content may be an important factor contributing to improvement of course effectiveness.

Concerning the non-significant predictive effect of perceived instructors on perceived subject benefits, there are two possible explanations for the findings. First, it may be due to the nature of the subject that the subject was student-centered where students were owners of their own learning. As such, they would be more likely to play an active role in reflection and learning than passively receive knowledge from teachers (16). Second, this may be a statistical artifact. As the ratings for evaluation of teachers were very positive, the little variation involved may not be sufficient to predict perceived benefits of subject (i.e., ceiling effect). The first author has advanced this explanation in the previous studies.

In terms of overall satisfaction with the subject, results showed that perceived subject instructors and perceived subject benefits significantly predicted overall satisfaction with the subject (support for Hypotheses 3a and 3b), while perceived subject content did not (no support for Hypothesis 3c). Prior research has shown that the quality of teachers and perceived subject benefits were significantly related to students' satisfaction with the course (18). Consistent with the previous research, the findings in the present study suggest that quality of instructors and perceived subject benefits are two crucial factors influencing students' satisfaction with the subject.

Regarding the non-significant effect of program quality on overall satisfaction, more research is needed to investigate this odd finding. For example, further research may examine whether quality of instructors would moderate or mediate the effect of quality of program content on perceived program benefits or overall satisfaction with the program (19).

The current study has several limitations. First, as only quantitative analyses were performed, the present paper cannot give any qualitative pictures on the perceptions of the students. As such, future studies may combine qualitative evaluation such as in-depth interview and personal reflection to understand the effectiveness of the subject in a comprehensive manner (20). Second, as we only examined subjective outcome evaluation, future studies should include objective outcome evaluation (21). Third, utilization of subjective outcome evaluation had its own limitations. The true outcome of the program may not be entirely reflected due to the influence of halo effects and demanding characteristics. However, the use of validated measures may help to improve the reliability and validity of subjective outcome evaluation (22-23). Fourth, as the study only included cross-sectional data, future research should track the behavioral changes in the students over time. Essentially, it would be theoretically important to ask whether those who perceive the program as effective would actually show positive changes in service leadership attitude and behavior in real life.

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