

# Service leadership education in the global youth leadership programme: A qualitative evaluation

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## Abstract

This study investigated the effectiveness of class learning of service leadership in the Global Youth Leadership Programme (GYLP) using qualitative evaluation, which is the first qualitative evaluation study conducted for non-credit-bearing service leadership education in Hong Kong. Students reported their perception of class learning through three descriptors and one metaphor. Findings based on 47 students' reflection showed that 93.29% of the descriptors and 91.30% of the metaphors used by the students were positive. Together with other quantitative evaluation findings, this study suggests that service leadership education in the GYLP is effective to promote participating students' personal growth and service leadership development.

**Keywords:** Service leadership, university students, qualitative evaluation, descriptors, metaphors

## Introduction

Global Youth Leadership Programme (GYLP) is a two-year leadership training program jointly organized by The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and Peking University from 2013 to 2015. This program aims at fostering holistic development of young leaders in Hong Kong, mainland China and other overseas societies, preparing them for making a significant change to the society. As service-oriented economy has become increasingly important with an imperative call for service-oriented leadership in Hong Kong and other societal settings (1), GYLP incorporated the notion of service leadership into its training with the purpose of nurturing young leaders to be capable and willing to serve others and the society. Therefore, an intensive 4.5-day training based on the service leadership curriculum was held at the inception stage of the program, in order to prepare participating students with prerequisite knowledge

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and mindset of leadership. As service leadership education is the foundation of GYLP, its effectiveness is an important area of concern. This paper reports the effectiveness of the 4.5-day intensive class learning of service leadership through qualitative evaluation.

Service leadership education adopted in GYLP was based on the subject "Service Leadership" which had been piloted in university students of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (2, 3). The notion of service leadership was proposed by Po Chung of the Hong Kong Institute of Service Leadership and Management (HKI-SLAM). Service leadership education attempts to highlight the paradigm shift of leadership from industrial age to post-industrial age. While industrial paradigm of leadership emphasizes power, control, positional authority, and managerial influence, post-industrial paradigm emphasizes relationship, mutual influence, shared leadership, trust and integrity (2, 4, 5). In contrast to viewing leadership as a means to obtain frame and profit, service leadership education views service leadership as being "about satisfying needs by consistently providing quality personal service to everyone one comes into contact with, including one's self, others, communities, systems, and environments" and a service leader as "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" (6). Accordingly, service leadership education places much importance on cultivating moral character and caring disposition of young leaders in addition to competencies of leadership.

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the 4.5-day service leadership class learning in the GYLP, multiple approaches of evaluation have been conducted, including objective outcome evaluation (7), subjective outcome evaluation (8), and qualitative evaluation. The first two evaluations are quantitative in nature with standardized measures. The quantitative data obtained from the first two approaches suggest that the non-credit-bearing service leadership education is effective to promote holistic development in the participants. However, qualitative research is able to capture the information which is too complicated to be captured by structured methods, such as participating students' deep feeling or lived experience of the learning process (9). In fact, it is a

common belief that both quantitative and qualitative approaches are needed in evaluating program effectiveness. Snape and Spencer (10) even argued that "it is not possible to carry out comprehensive evaluation without the use of both methodologies" (p. 42).

Qualitative evaluation research can provide useful information for improvement of program design and implementation (i.e., formative evaluation). At the same time, it has been used to identify the effectiveness of program or outcomes that arise from the program (i.e., summative evaluation) (10). Issues such as identifying influential factors to the delivery of a program, examining effects of participating in a program, or probing into the needs of participating groups, are all intrinsic to qualitative evaluation studies (11). It is particularly useful when it enhances our chances of uncovering unexpected meaningful insights (9). Although qualitative evaluation might be influenced by the researchers' knowledge, training and practices (12), it is able to reach the informants' perspectives that the researchers or practitioners have not considered beforehand, which probably extend our understanding of program effectiveness from the perspective of the program participants.

Three kinds of data are commonly collected in qualitative research, including in-depth interview, direct observation and written documents (12). In this study, we collected written responses to the reflection sheets distributed to the students, and these reflection sheets tap on the perception of service leadership education amongst the students. Specially, we asked students to use descriptors and metaphors to describe the 4.5-day intensive course and their learning experience. For descriptors, the students were invited to write down some key words or phrases that can describe their experiences and comments. For metaphor, it is a linguistic tool which is efficient to capture plenty of disconnected information and integrate it into a meaningful set of ideas (13). Eliciting participants to make metaphors help us reach some emotionally difficult concepts and discover the meaning in intangible ideas (13). For example, a participant may use "compass" to represent the feeling that the subject provides some life direction for them. This methodology has been used in the previous studies (14-16).

## Methods

Participants were 48 students (37 female and 11 male students) who joined the Global Youth Leadership Programme (mean age = 19.65 years, SD = 0.76). Most of the students came from Hong Kong and mainland China ( $n = 42$ , 87.5%), while a few from Korea ( $n = 3$ , 6.25%), Taiwan ( $n = 1$ , 2.08%), Thai ( $n = 1$ , 2.08%), and the US ( $n = 1$ , 2.08%).

By the end of the course, students were invited to respond to a reflection sheet in which they reported their description about the course. First, they were requested to use three descriptive words or phrases (i.e., descriptors) to portray their feelings, perceptions, and experiences about this course (e.g., inspiring, helpful etc.). Second, they were asked to use one object, incident, or feeling (i.e., metaphor) to represent the course (e.g., mirror, compass... etc.) and briefly elaborate the meaning of the metaphor. Successful application of this evaluation method could be found in the project "Positive Adolescent Training through Holistic Social Programmes" (Project P.A.T.H.S.) in secondary school students (15), the subject "Tomorrow's Leaders" (16) in college students in Hong Kong, the Subject "Service Leadership" in pilot stage (14).

Student individual consent form was obtained before data collection. Students were repeatedly informed about the confidentiality of information and they could participate in the study in a voluntary manner. Forty-seven reflection sheets were finally collected.

### Data analysis

After the responses in the reflection sheets were transcribed and organized, two research staffs who were not involved in the data collection start to code the data. The final coding was then cross-checked by another colleague. This process improved the triangulation in analyzing qualitative data. For the descriptors, if participants mentioned two descriptive words in one phrase, the phrase will be divided into two meaningful units. Later, the descriptors sharing similar meaning (e.g., "interesting" and "fun") were grouped together as one attribute category. Similar practice was applied to metaphors, in which

metaphors sharing similar function (e.g., "journey" and "voyage") were grouped into the same attribute category.

We adopted the coding system that has been developed and employed in previous studies (14-16). To begin with, coders identified the positivity nature of each descriptor or metaphor based on four possibilities ("positive," "negative," "neutral," and "undecided"). Next, to enhance the rigor of the qualitative study, 20 descriptors and 20 metaphors were randomly selected from the raw response for the test of intra-rater and inter-rater reliabilities. For intra-rater reliability, we asked the two coders who had engaged in the initial coding process to recode the 20 descriptors and metaphors. For the inter-rater reliability, we asked two extra research staff who had not engaged in the coding process of raw responses to code the 20 descriptors and metaphors without knowing the original codes given.

## Results

The present qualitative study described the experience of the students through the use of descriptors and metaphors. With 149 raw descriptors extracted from the valid reflection sheets, descriptors were divided into several categories (see Table 1). Results showed that 93.29% ( $n = 139$ ) could be coded as positive descriptors, 2.68% ( $n = 4$ ) as neutral descriptors, while only 4.03% ( $n = 6$ ) as negative descriptors. The majority of the students showed positive comments in descriptors, such as "interesting/fun," "helpful," "meaningful" and "inspiring". Difference voices were also noted, with four neutral descriptors ("common knowledge", "academic") and six negative descriptors (e.g., "boring," "fast"). The intra-rater agreement percentages calculated from these descriptors were 95% and 95% for the two original coders, respectively. The congruence percentages between the codes of two extra coders and the original codes were 95% and 100%, respectively, which suggests high inter-rater reliability.

For the metaphors, 46 raw metaphors reported were grouped into several categories (see Table 2). Results showed that 91.30% ( $n = 42$ ) were categorized as positive in nature, 2.17% ( $n = 1$ ) as neutral, whereas only 4.35% ( $n = 2$ ) as negative.

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

Descriptors	Nature of the Response				Total
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Undecided	
Interesting/fun	24				
Helpful/helpful to self-development/helpful for leadership development/helpful for service leadership learning	16				
Meaningful	9				
Inspiring	5				
Improving service leadership	5				
Enjoy/happy	5				
Interactive	4				
Fruitful	4				
Useful	4				
Essential/valuable	4				
Energetic	4				
Friendship	4				
Wonderful/colorful	4				
Creative	3				
New	3				
Thoughtful	3				
Exciting	3				
Knowledgeable	3				
Motivational/encouraging	3				
Other positive responses	29				
Common knowledge		1			
Building blocks		1			
Academic		1			
Teamwork and group Operation are important		1			
Boring			2		
Fast/packed			2		
Repeating			1		
Childish			1		149
<b>Total Count (N):</b>	139	4	6	0	149
<b>Total Count (%):</b>	93.29%	2.68%	4.03%	0.00%	100.00%

Note: other positive responses included the positive descriptors once or twice.

The explanations of the metaphors provided by the participants were also broken down into meaningful units and coded.

For example, in the metaphor of “*interesting games*”, the student illustrated that “*We enjoyed ourselves through the interesting games; we developed our leadership through the games.*” The elaboration was then divided into two meaningful units: 1) “*we enjoyed ourselves through the interesting games*”; 2) “*we developed our leadership through the games*”. Then, these two meaningful units were coded, respectively, according to their positivity nature. Among 94 units, we found eighty-two (87.23%) positive codes, five (5.32%) neutral codes,

six (6.38%) negative codes, and one (1.06%) undecided code. The metaphors standing for the course were diversified. The frequently mentioned categories include “*journey*,” “*mirror*,” “*guidebook*,” and “*interesting doctor*.” As examples, we showed some typical positive metaphors with their illustrations below:

- “**An enjoyable tour**”: “In the first place, the tour is enjoyable, because we played many games in the course, which made us feel very happy. What's more, I made many friends here. Last but not the least, I learned a lot from the course. I know what's the meaning

of service leadership, how to be a service leader and so on. I gained many things from the course. In a word, the course is just like an enjoyable tour, making me learn new things happily.”

- **“A voyage”**: “I got to know many new friends who brought me new knowledge and ways of thinking from different educational backgrounds. And the lectures inspired me a lot about the ways and necessity to be a service leader.”
- **“The starry night”**: “The knowledge in this course is like stars. They scatter in the evening sky and shine forward bright light through the darkness.”

- **“Interesting doctor”**: “this course lets us know what's wrong with our behaviors and thoughts, giving us great therapies & clinics to make it right. For interesting doctor, this course is not just listening to some theories, but also we can learn from a lot of activities! We should think, imagine and create, using our brains!”
- **“Mirror”**: “I can do self-reflection in this course, so as to have a better understanding on myself. And through this course I discover I have more potential and possibilities. Thanks for all the efforts preparing this course which really inspires and impresses me.”

**Table 2. Categorization of the metaphors used by the participants to describe the course**

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
A colorful journey/an enjoyable tour/ a journey inside me/an instructive journey/ a magic journey/a camp/a tour in an amusement park/journey/a voyage	9					20				
Mirror	4					9				
The starry night/ guidebook/a shining beacon in the sea/high-speed railway	4					7				
Interesting doctor/ the interesting games/ an enjoyable and high participation/yogurt	4					8				
Snacks/straight highway/a book/ a transit station	4					9				
A growth process/reshaping & re-sharpening/ adventure	3					6				
Tofu/ forest/Chinese medicine	3					5		1		
Light/a nice project/“write advantages of others” on their back paper	3					5				
Other positive responses (e.g., lollipop moment, rainbow, wings)	8					10	1			
Element		1				2	4	1		
Dream			1					2		
Chores			1			1		2		
Rain				1					1	
<b>Total Count (N):</b>	42	1	2	1	46	82	5	6	1	94
<b>Total Count (%):</b>	91.30%	2.17%	4.35%	2.17%	100.00%	87.23%	5.32%	6.38%	1.06%	100.00%

Note: other positive responses included the positive metaphors reported once.

Nonetheless, negative student feedbacks were recorded as well. For example, one student regarded the notion of service leadership too idealistic, and used “dream” to stand for the course. “*The course is teaching something that is not really attainable and easy to understand. This is just like a dream; we could not let everyone become the leader. We may possibly*

*be leaders, but at one time, there can only be one leader.*” The other student expressed the dissatisfaction toward the course effectiveness in the metaphor of “chores,” by noting that “*although others gained, I personally only added a little to my common knowledge and experience, and the class environment*

*was a bit hard to stand through. But the end result was good.*"

Reliability tests showed that the intra-rater agreement percentages calculated on the positivity of the coding on metaphors were 100% and 90% for the two original coders, respectively. The congruence percentages between the codes of two extra coders and the original codes were 80% and 90%, respectively. Taken together with the reliabilities about descriptors, the current results showed that both the codes of descriptors and metaphors were reliable.

## Discussion

The present study employed a qualitative approach to evaluate the effectiveness of service leadership education incorporated in the Global Youth Leadership Programme (GYLP). In line with previous findings (14), positive responses dominated the descriptors, with more than nine tenths of the students expressed their appreciation toward the course. Similarly, the majority of the students used positive metaphors to stand for their feelings and experience during the class learning.

Both utility and joyfulness of the course were appreciated by the students. Quite a proportion of students described the course as "interesting" or "happy," which denotes that they obtained happiness through the learning and showed intrinsic interest in the learning. Other descriptors such as "helpful" and "meaningful" indicate that students perceived the utility value of service leadership education. This is very important, because it shows that our program is not just pleasing the students without bringing students any other gains. Similarly, students' joy in the learning process was manifested in the metaphors, such as "an enjoyable tour," "interesting games" and "an enjoyable and high participation. Their perceived usefulness of the learning was manifested in many other metaphors, such as "an instructive journey," "mirror," "guidebook," and "a growth process."

In conjunction with extant qualitative evaluation studies on the subject "Service Leadership" (14, 17), some descriptors and metaphors were found to be common across different datasets. For the descriptors, the words "interesting," "helpful," "inspiring" and "meaningful" emerged repeatedly across different

classes of students. For the metaphors, the objects "mirror," "journey/tour," "compass" emerged in the responses from different classes of students.

The common themes deserve our attention. This subject aims to provide students with opportunities to make self-reflection, increase self-understanding and finally improve themselves. Students appreciated such reflective learning and used metaphors like "mirror" or "a journey inside me" to express their positive comments. In addition, the class learning of service leadership is a process for students like a journey. During the journey, students gained joy, knowledge and abilities. Finally, the subject may serve as a guide or reference for students to think and behave in daily life, future life or leadership process. Therefore, some students would use metaphors with directive nature, such as "guidebook" and "a shining beacon in the sea." The commonality of the nature of metaphors reported across different classes of students indicates that service leadership education is effective in a similar manner across settings. Further studies are encouraged to provide more rigorous analyses to identify the nature of these metaphors.

Admittedly, the 4.5-day intensive service leadership education has some limitations which might make some students feel dissatisfied. For the negative comments, students either regarded the knowledge of service leadership too simple without any additional value or too idealistic. Students' honest feedbacks provide researchers and practitioners valuable reference to refine the curriculum and develop further training approaches, such as highlighting the link between knowledge and practical application.

This study demonstrates the advantages of qualitative method in program evaluation. Primarily, the vivid descriptions from the students supplement numbers obtaining from quantitative evaluations that investigate the program outcomes. Besides, these descriptions were coded and reduced to numbers, which helps us get a quick understanding of the positivity nature of the program.

Notwithstanding the overwhelming positive responses toward the service leadership education, alternative interpretations of the results are possible (18). The most obvious possibility is demand characteristics. Nevertheless, students responded to the reflection sheets in an anonymous way and

negative comments were included in the responses which suggest that this possibility is not likely. Next, ideological bias of the researchers should be concerned when interpreting the results, as curriculum developers, implementers, and researchers probably anticipated positive outcomes of service leadership education. To reduce such bias in the data collection and research analyses, several safeguards were adopted. Firstly, data collection and analyses were conducted in a disciplined manner without the involvement of first author. Secondly, both intra-rater and inter-rater reliabilities were provided, which showed high levels of agreement among coders. Finally, multiple research staff was involved in the process of data collection and analyses. In fact, the principal investigator (i.e., the first author) was not involved in the process.

While the findings are inspiring and encouraging, there are several limitations in this study. First, only 47 reflection worksheets were collected, which limits its generalizability to other student population. Second, this method did not allow much elaboration of the descriptors and metaphors, hence limiting our understanding of students' responses. Further studies should use in-depth interview such as focus group interview, in order to obtain detailed explanation and live experiences during the learning process of students. Last, peer-checking and member-checking are lacking in the coding process. If time and manpower allow, these methods can be added in the future studies, in order to improve the truthful understanding of the course effectiveness.

To summarize, together with evaluation studies applying other research approaches (i.e., objective outcome evaluation and subjective outcome evaluation) (7, 8), the current results suggest that service leadership education in GYLP is effective. In conjecture with the findings of evaluating credit-bearing Service Leadership program (19-21), the current results also indicate that service leadership education is effective across settings of training. In the long run, through the Fung Service Leadership Initiative, it is expected that a critical mass on service leadership will be gradually developed so that more university students can be nurtured as service leaders (22).

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