Service leadership education for university students in Hong Kong: A qualitative evaluation study

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Abstract

A qualitative evaluation study of a subject entitled "Service Leadership" at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University was conducted. The participants were 68 university students who took this subject in the 2013-14 academic year. Through the use of qualitative descriptors and metaphors, the participants gave their subjective evaluation of the subject. Inter-rater and intra-rater reliability analyses showed that the coding was highly reliable. Content analysis showed that most of the students gave positive descriptors and metaphors about the subject. The findings suggested that this subject achieved its learning outcomes and it was effective in facilitating university students to be service leaders.

Keywords: service leadership, qualitative evaluation, Hong Kong, university students, leadership training

Introduction

The economy in many places in this world has been transformed from product-oriented economy to service-oriented economy. Accordingly, the leadership paradigm has shifted from industrial paradigm that emphasizes sheer productivity, individual achievement, management, and positional authority to post-industrial paradigm that emphasizes common good and shared responsibility (1-3). As such, leadership theories have gone through a transformation from the focus on trait and behaviour of elite leadership to transformational influence and moral character of leaders as well as to the reciprocal relationship of leaders and followers (4-8). In the 1990s, scholars began to pay attention to the development of leadership attributes in college students and apply post-industrial leadership theories/models in the education of college students (1). The two theories/models that are widely applied in the college student population are servant

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leadership model (9, 10) and the leadership challenge model (11). The servant leadership model proposed a service-oriented philosophy that leaders should emphasize the growth and well-being of people and the groups to which they belong (9, 10). On the other hand, the leadership challenge model proposed five practices of exemplary leadership, which are modelling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart (11). Unfortunately, while these notions are in line with post-industrial paradigm of leadership, they were developed in a Western context. In fact, there are few leadership theories or models that guide leadership education in the Chinese contexts.

In response to the lack of leadership education in different Chinese contexts, Chung (12) proposed the service leadership theory with specific reference to the Chinese socioeconomic and cultural contexts. This theory is developed by Chung and researchers in the Hong Kong Institute of Service Leadership & Management. It serves as a theoretical model guiding service leadership education among college students in Hong Kong. In the service leadership theory, the concept of service leadership is defined as "satisfying needs by consistently providing quality personal service to everyone comes into contact with, including one's self, others, communities, systems, and environments" (12, p. 5) and a service leader is described 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" (12, p. 5).

Moral character, leadership competences, and caring disposition are defining characteristics of effective service leadership (12). Although these characteristics are also intrinsic to other leadership models such as transformational leadership (4), authentic leadership (8) and servant leadership (9), service leadership model is unique in its understanding of service orientation and its systematic view of leadership (13). Specifically, leadership is regarded as a service instead of a means to obtain money and fame, and the service can be provided to satisfy a broad range of needs including individual, people, groups, community, society and environment. Leadership can be practiced in the individual context

(i.e., self-leadership), habitat context as well as community context.

Besides, the service leadership model holds the belief that everyone can be a leader (12), and thus advocates continuous self-development in order to improve individual's competencies, abilities and willingness to serve. In addition, as a theory developed within the specific Chinese cultural context, some concepts of service leadership are closely related to Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. The Chinese values of self-control, inner peace, recognition and avoidance of vices, concern for others, coping, and the bigger system are also unique features in service leadership. According to Shek, Chung and Leung (13), this model is comprehensive and broad, and it addresses leadership quality in a wide range of aspects and involves broad dimensions in leadership. More importantly, this model meets the requirement of leadership in the post-industrial era that emphasizes mutual influence, reciprocal relationship, shared responsibility, and integrity (1,3).

To cultivate leaders for the service-oriented economy of Hong Kong, credit-bearing subjects play an indispensable role. However, there is an absence of such leadership course for college students in Hong Kong. In addition, most existing leadership courses in Hong Kong are based on the old-fashioned leadership philosophy which only emphasizes relevant leadership skills and competences, and assumes that merely elites can be potential leaders (14, 15). Facing the lack of a service leadership course in tertiary education in Hong Kong, the Victor and William Fung Foundation launched the Fung Service Leadership Initiative aiming to develop service leadership courses and related educational materials in Hong Kong. Eight universities/institutions supported by the University Grants Committee have joined this initiative.

At The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, a subject entitled "Service Leadership" was designed for undergraduate students aiming at teaching students about the relevant theories, concepts, knowledge, skills, and values with reference to the service leadership model (15). This subject is credit-bearing which gives the students a sense that this course is emphasized by the university (15). Based on the framework of service leadership and management (SLAM), this course upholds the values and beliefs of

service leadership theory (12), nurtures students' competences, moral character, and caring disposition, and instills a message that "every youth has the potential to be a qualified leader" in the students (15).

This subject was launched in the 2012-13 academic year. The quality and effectiveness of this course was evaluated in numerous ways, including objective evaluation, subjective evaluation, qualitative evaluation, and process evaluation (14, 17-19). These evaluations suggested that this course offered in the 2012-13 academic year was well designed and effective, and it facilitated students' overall development and increased their potential to be effective service leaders.

This subject was offered again in the 2013-14 academic year. Again, some evaluation studies have been conducted. For example, Shek, Xie, Lin, and Law (20) conducted focus group interviews and found that the course reached its aim and was useful for students. However, this study was based on nine students only.

To reach a more thorough understanding of the impact of this study, an in-depth evaluation with the participation of more students is needed. In this study, we invited all the students who took this course to join a qualitative evaluation study. In this study, students were asked to give three descriptors and one metaphor to describe this course as well as by providing the interpretations for their metaphors. This evaluation approach was primarily qualitative as it allowed students to freely express their opinions. Besides, a qualitative approach can elicit rich information that can enable the researchers to have a comprehensive understanding of the problems under examination. The use of descriptors can provide us a quick understanding as to how students perceive this course in different aspects (17). The use of metaphors can be an effective approach to grasp emotionally difficult concepts and to catch the meaning in abstract ideas (21, 22). In addition, as we collected data from almost all students, the data collected can be regarded as representative.

Methods

Eighty-eight students at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University took the subject entitled "Service Leadership" in the 2013/2014 academic year. These students were invited to give feedback of this subject on a reflection sheet by using three descriptors in the final lecture. Besides, they were invited to give a metaphor to describe the characteristics of this subject and briefly explain why the specific metaphor was used. Sixty-eight of these students finally gave their responses to us. The students joined the study in a voluntary manner. Students signed a consent form before they joined the study.

Data analyses

The descriptors and metaphors written down by the students were coded by two researchers who were not involved in teaching the course and data collection. The codes were then categorized into four groups: "positive", "neutral", "negative" and "undecided". Another researcher further checked the codes again. Intra-rater and inter-rater reliabilities were examined for the codes. To test intra-rater reliability, the two researchers who coded participants' initial answers coded 20 randomly selected descriptors and 20 metaphors again, with the consistency of the coding at two time points by the same researcher calculated. For inter-rater reliability, another two researchers coded these 20 descriptors and 20 metaphors, with the consistency of the codes decided by the four researchers calculated.

Results

Table 1 presents the codes of the descriptors. Results showed that 198 out of 210 descriptors (94.29%) were positive, 4 (1.90%) descriptors were neutral and 8 (3.81%) descriptors were negative. The same descriptors were then merged and this showed that more than 15 different positive descriptors were obtained. The six positive descriptors that mentioned most frequently (by ten students or more) were "inspiring/encouraging," "interesting/fun," "helpful in self-reflection or personal growth," "useful/practical for development," "meaningful", and "happy." In addition, four neutral descriptors (i.e., "psychological," "theoretical," "normal," and "role-play dominant") and four negative descriptors (i.e.,

"boring," "idealistic," "meaningless," and "unfavourable") were obtained with each negative descriptors being mentioned by 2 students. The intra-rater agreement reached 90% and 95% respectively for the two researchers; inter-rater agreement percentages calculated between every two researchers ranged from 85% to 95%. This indicated that the codes given by different researchers were highly consistent.

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

Descriptors	Nature of the Response				Total
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Undecided	
Inspiring/encouraging	28				
Interesting/fun	27				
Helpful/helpful in self-reflection/helpful in personal growth	26				
Useful/practical/useful for development	17				
Meaningful	11				
Happy	10				
Improving leadership	8				
Interactive	7				
Fruitful	6				
Caring	6				
Knowledgeable/informative	4				
Positive thinking	4				
Relaxing/refreshing	4				
Good lecturer	4				
Stimulating	4				
Others (e.g., amazing, impressive, insightful)	32				
Psychological		1			
Theoretical		1			
Normal		1			
Role-play dominant		1			
Boring			2		
Idealistic			2		
Meaningless			2		
Unfavorable			2		
Total Count (N):	198	4	8	0	210
Total Count (%):	94.29%	1.90%	3.81%	0.00%	100.00%

The students gave a total of 68 metaphors, among which 61 (89.71%) were positive, four were neutral, two were negative, and the other one was undecided (see Table 2). The meaningful units included in each explanation of metaphor were further coded. For instance, a student who used "a shining star" to describe the course interpreted that "It gives me a clear direction and guides me to be a successful leader. Besides, it provides messages that are important for my daily life." This description was coded into two meaning units: the first is about providing direction and guidance, and the second is about providing important implications for daily life. The results showed that the interpretation of these metaphors could be coded into 113 meaning units, among which 100 (88.50%) were positive, eight (7.08%) were neutral, four (3.54%) were negative, and the other one was undecided. In addition, the metaphors that expressed similar meanings were grouped. For example, the metaphors of "compass" and "a shining star" respectively mentioned by two students were both used to stand for "providing directions in life course." Hence, the two metaphors were grouped into the same category. By doing so, 16 categories of metaphors emerged.

The first category was mentioned by 13 students, which was the most frequently mentioned category. It mainly indicated that the course provided direction and guidance on numerous aspects in life. This category also has other meanings such as that this course inspired students.

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
Compass in life/Guiding star/Lamp/ Shining star/Dictionary/Light in the street at night/Watch/Lamp/ Light bulb	13					20				
Tool book/Book/Kaleidoscope/ Inspiring/Buffet/Market/ Wikipedia/Octopus card/Sage	9					15	2			
The lesson of my life/Thought-provoking song/Teaching teenagers/ Torch/Lollipop talk/Fertilizer/Ladder	7					10				
Clear mirror/Mirror	6					8				
Pair of new shoes/Travelling/Going to a trip/Happy journey/Beijing study trip/Inspiring journey	6					11				
Beacon/Love nest/ Big tree	3					7				
Worship/Enjoyable flight/ Leisure time	3					4				
Puzzle/ Key to happiness/Rainbow	3					4				
Others	11					20				
Activities		1					1			
Book		1					1			
Balloon		1				1	1	1		
Ore		1					2			
Book			1				1	1		
Normal student			1					2		
Amazing smile				1					1	
Total Count (N):	61	4	2	1	68	100	8	4	1	113
Total Count (%):	89.71%	5.88%	2.94%	1.47%	100.00%	88.50%	7.08%	3.54%	0.88%	100.00%

Below are three examples of students' statements:

- Compass in life: "The course points out correct directions in my future life in many aspects, such as the attitudes towards working, learning, and treating others."
- A guiding star: "The course guides us to be a good service leader. It also gives us the direction to improve our interpersonal skill and inspires our future life."
- Light bulb: "I used to live in a rather darker area. However, after attending this course, I find that the road for me is brighter now, and I can clearly see the direction to go ahead and plan for my future."

The second category, which was mentioned by nine students, mainly implied that the knowledge taught in this course was rich and important. For example, two students mentioned the following metaphors:

- A book: "Some information and knowledge are very important for me to learn, such as how to love, listen and have empathy in our lives. They are all essential of being a social worker too."
- Wikipedia: "A lot of things can be learnt from this course, from academic theories and empirical studies to things related to daily life, such as personal beliefs."

The third most mentioned category mainly emphasized the benefits, usefulness, and helpfulness of this course, which was mentioned by seven students. Below are two examples:

- The lesson of my life: "The course provides many benefits in our life; therefore, it is the lesson of my life."
- A "lollipop talk": "This course can influence my future life a lot. Service leadership is important to communicate in society. Thus, the course has made me well prepared for the work in the society in the future by improving my communication."

Six students regarded this course as "a mirror", mainly because the course enhanced their self-understanding and self-reflection. Below are two examples of their statements:

- "Mirror image helps us to reflect ourselves and discover our strengths and weaknesses, and thus keeps tracking of our self-development. This is similar to the aim of this course, which is to increase our self-understanding and continuously improve our moral characters, leadership competences and caring dispositions."
- "Like a mirror, the course makes us discover our strengths and weaknesses in numerous aspects and renders us reflect on ourselves so as to improve ourselves continuously through rectifying our weaknesses."

Another six students regarded this course as a journey or a trip, implicating that this course gave students opportunities to experience and learn different things. For instance:

- A pair of new shoes: "This course is like a pair of new shoes that enable me to experience different things, such as knowledge, class atmosphere, and different teaching methods. I have learned a lot from the new journey of this course."
- Travelling: "In travelling, we can see many new things and experience different events. The content of this course is like something

new in a journey that inspires me a lot, and the activities in the classes made me feel as if I was experiencing different events in travelling."

The category "Beacon/Love nest/Big tree" was mentioned by three students. In this metaphor, the students reported that they felt the love, care, and support from others and they also learned how to communicate more effectively with others. Below is one example:

- Big tree: "We are under the care and love of our teachers, and they also give us a protective and safe place for us to study."

The three metaphors "worship," "enjoyable flight," and "leisure time" were in the category which mainly suggested that the course provided peaceful and relaxing atmosphere. For instance:

- Leisure time: "It was a relaxing time for me to attend this course."

The category that comprised of the three metaphors "a puzzle," "a key to happiness," and "rainbow" mainly described some content of the course. For example:

- Rainbow: "The 7 colors represent the 7 core beliefs in service leadership."

In addition, there were 11 positive metaphors which did not repeatedly emerge among students; however, these metaphors also showed that students appreciated the benefits of the course. On top of that, a fraction of metaphors was not positive. The four neutral metaphors were "activities" (activities were needed to be involved in addition to lectures), "theoretical book" (all the information comes from theories), "balloon" (the course was a bit boring but involved much interactions between the lecturer and students, just like a balloon that can be full of air but also can be released), and "ore" (the benefits were easily seen but not easy to be applied). Moreover, the two negative metaphors were "a book" (the contents were from books and not easy to be understood) and

"normal student" (the course was ordinary and not outstanding).

The intra-rater agreement percentage was 90% and 100% respectively for the two researchers. The inter-rater agreement percentage between each two researchers ranged from 90% to 100%. This indicated that the codes for metaphors interpreted by different researchers were highly consistent.

Discussion

The current study was conducted to evaluate the newly launched subject entitled "Service leadership" in order to reach an insightful comprehension as to whether this subject was effective and of high quality. The qualitative findings of this study can be regarded as very reliable. Students' responses were analysed independently by four researchers, and two of these researchers analysed the data twice at different times. The intra-rater agreement rates were above 90% and the inter-rater agreement rates were above 85%.

The present findings suggest that this subject was well-designed and effective. The overwhelming majority of students (over 90%) evaluated the subject positively. According to the descriptors provided by the students, this subject was seen as inspiring, encouraging, interesting, useful, practical, and meaningful. The metaphors were also consonant with the descriptors for this course. The use of metaphor helped students more clearly and precisely express as to what they thought of this subject.

The purpose of the implementation of service leadership course is to impart knowledge about service leadership and nurture service leadership qualities among college students. The written descriptors and metaphors showed that students acquired certain leadership knowledge and learnt certain leadership qualities. For example, students mentioned that this course furnished them with an important lesson in their life and taught them important qualities such as communication skills, good attitudes and caring about others. In addition, service leadership education emphasizes self-improvement and development. Both descriptors and metaphors show that the course improved students' self-reflection and promoted their self-development. In particular, students appreciated the importance of self-reflection, which was primarily indicated by the metaphors about mirror. These results indicate that reflective learning is important and also well-received in teaching service leadership. Taken as a whole, these observations suggest that this course promoted leadership qualities among students by equipping them with important knowledge related to service leadership and by promoting their capabilities.

The positive comments were reported by the overwhelming majority of students, and this suggests that this course was effective in the eyes of most students. These findings are consistent with previous findings (20, 23-25) which also showed that the course of service leadership reached its initial purposes and is effective in cultivating university students to be potential service leaders in the future. Both the current findings and the findings of Shek et al. (20) study suggested that this course offered in the 2013-14 academic year was well designed and well instructed.

Our study has important practical implications. It suggests the course entitled "Service Leadership" is effective in stimulating students on service leadership education. It can facilitate student development in multiple competencies, caring disposition and character so that they are more likely to become qualified leaders in the near future. Some scholars contended that a course aiming at improving student characters is the course critical for the life of students (26,27). Additionally, service leadership ideology is consistent with the post-industrial leadership paradigm (3) that fits the demands of contemporary service economy. Service leadership education will prepare students well for entering into the post-industrial world. Therefore, in the light of the current findings, we argue that it is necessary and important for universities to incorporate service leadership education in their curriculum. By doing so, students will develop their potential to be effective leaders in the future, and our society can also benefit from that, as "the future success of local communities, states, and the country is tied to the development of quality leaders" (28, p. 119). Besides, the present study used qualitative research method for program evaluation; therefore, it is able to provide a relatively thorough understanding of students' evaluation of this course and helps explain why these students rated the course positively in the close-ended evaluation survey (29).

However, it is noteworthy that there are several limitations of the present study. First, this study only addressed student perceived effectiveness of this course. As such, the effectiveness of this subject shown by this study was largely subjective rather than objective. To obtain objective evaluation, observations of students' real behavioural changes after taking this course are necessary. Second, as only written comments were collected, it is hard to examine the reasons behind certain responses, such as why a student used certain descriptor to describe the subject. This limits our in-depth understanding of the views of the students. For example, some students used the descriptor "meaningful" to describe this course. However, without further elaboration, we cannot fully understand why students regard the course as meaningful. To address this limitation, future studies are needed to understand the interpretations for the descriptors the students chose or to conduct interviews to elicit the reasons behind student evaluations. Finally, the current data was collected from one class of service leadership, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Nevertheless, in conjunction with the previous evaluation findings, the present study suggests that the subject "Service Leadership" is able to promote the knowledge, attitudes and skills of students who have taken this subject.

Acknowledgments

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