

Focus group evaluation of a subject on leadership and intrapersonal development in Hong Kong

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Abstract

In this study, five focus groups involving 30 students were conducted to evaluate a subject entitled “Tomorrow’s Leaders” which was designed to promote the leadership and intrapersonal competence of university students under the new four-year undergraduate curriculum at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Four major themes could be highlighted from the narratives of the participants. First, the students generally had positive perceptions of the subject and the learning process, and positive features of the subject and related experiences were also identified. Second, students pointed out that they had personal gains and positive changes after taking this subject. Third, the students generally felt that there was a need for this subject. Finally, the students mentioned some negative aspects of the subject and they proposed some suggestions for refinement of the subject. Overall speaking, the qualitative findings suggest that the students had positive views about the subject and they experienced the benefits of taking this subject.

Keywords: Leadership, university students, intrapersonal development, Chinese, focus group

Introduction

In the field of evaluation, many different approaches have been proposed. For those who believe in the natural science models, experimental evaluation strategies such as clinical trials and quasi-experimental studies have been used. Actually, findings based on randomized controlled trials are usually regarded as the “gold standard.” However, experimental and quantitative approaches to evaluation have been criticized as superficial which cannot give any in-depth inquisition of the experiences of the program participants in the process. Hence, in contrast to the quantitative and experimental approaches, researchers have argued for the use of qualitative evaluation methods to examine

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the meaning of a program to its participants and the related program effects. Patton (1) pointed out that qualitative evaluation would be desirable if the evaluator wishes to look at individualized outcomes and internal processes of a program. Besides, the quest for in-depth and descriptive information, diverse and unique views of the stakeholders, and new insights from the human interactions would motivate one to adopt qualitative evaluation methods. Finally, if an evaluator wishes to be humanistic and personal and these are the ideological principles to be maintained, qualitative evaluation should be used. The qualitative research is therefore attempting to “make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of meanings people bring to them” (2).

There are different strategies and data collection methods in qualitative research, such as interviews, observations, and textual analyses (2). Among these methods, focus groups are commonly used in the context of evaluation. Focus group interview is a qualitative research method which assesses client opinions and program quality in different fields, including mass communication and public opinion (3), education and psychology (4), and health settings (5). According to Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (6), “focus group research is a key site where pedagogy, politics, and inquiry intersect and interanimate each other. Because of their synergistic potentials, focus groups often produce data that are seldom produced through individual interview and observation and thus yield particularly powerful knowledge and insights” (p. 559).

The advantages of adopting focus group interviews include cost-effectiveness in data collection (7, 8), allowing interactions among group participants that stimulate a fruitful exchange of ideas (4, 9), and enhancing data quality by checks and balances of the ideas shared by one another (11). A wide range of perspectives on the research issues could be sought and some cultural-specific or community-specific norms or practices could also be identified in the group environment. Despite the advantages of using focus group interviews in exploring the depth of the research issues, various experienced qualitative researchers highlighted some methodological issues in doing qualitative research (2, 7, 11). First, the response time available for each participant is limited because of the presence of other

members in the group. Second, a skillful moderator is required to facilitate a fair and free-eliciting communication environment. Third, issue of confidentiality can hardly be guaranteed in focus group settings because of the involvement of many people. Fourth, the focus group interviews are conducted in an arranged setting and thus the interactions among participants may not be as natural as usual.

Despite the wide use of focus group interviews in social science research, there are few studies using this method as an evaluation method in higher education settings (12-14). Only 22 citations were found based on a survey of PsycINFO in March 2014 when “focus group”, “university education” or “college students” were used as keywords. A similar search of Social Sciences Citation Index using the same keywords only located 37 citations. These two searches also indicated that there were limited focus group evaluation studies in Chinese populations (14). Recently, there are views suggesting that evaluators should use more focus groups in higher education contexts (15-22). With specific reference to Hong Kong, Shek and Sun (14) used focus group interviews as an evaluation methodology for a general education course. The use of focus group interviews aids the researchers to obtain a community-specific (i.e. the students who have attended the general education course) perceptions of the course content, lecturers, and the learning process. The results showed that there were personal gains and positive changes in students after taking the course. The students also voiced out the urgent need for similar courses in university settings.

Concerning university students in Hong Kong, Shek and Wong (23) identified several problems, including high level of mental distress, low social responsibility, drop in empathy, rising narcissistic personalities, and lower level of maturity. To respond to the needs of Hong Kong university students utilizing a holistic development approach, the first author developed and offered a subject entitled “Tomorrow’s Leaders” to cultivate various intra- and inter-personal competences of students under the General University Requirements at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Concepts of self-understanding, personality, emotional competence, cognitive competence, resilience, spirituality, social

competence, moral competence, positive identity, interpersonal communication, conflict resolution, team-building, and relationship-building are covered in this course. It is expected that students can learn these concepts through lectures, experiential learning, group presentation, and individual assignment, and apply them in their daily life.

There are several studies showing the effectiveness of the course in the pilot stage. These studies used several evaluation strategies including a) a pre-test/post-test design using the Chinese Positive Youth Development Scale to examine changes in intra- and interpersonal qualities in students, b) subjective outcome evaluation at the end of each lecture, c) post-course subjective outcome evaluation at the end of the whole course, d) process evaluation via systematic observation, e) focus group interviews for gathering students' view on their learning experiences, f) descriptors and metaphors from students about their feelings toward the course, and g) students' perception of the course written on a reflection sheet (14, 24-37). Taken as a whole, the evaluation findings were very positive, suggesting that the subject was well-received by the students and students generally felt that they benefitted from the course. Bloor et al. (38) suggested that the findings of focus group interviews can be mixed with that of other evaluation methods which can generate a triangulated picture. The triangulated picture generated from the existing evaluation studies generally showed that the subject could promote the holistic development of the students. To further understand the impact of the subject on the students, this paper reports evaluation findings of the course "tomorrow's leaders" in its full implementation stage based on focus group data. Translated excerpts (originally in Cantonese and Putonghua) of the focus group interviews would also be presented to support the findings.

Methods

Sixteen classes of students took this course, with a total enrolment of 1,029 students (57 in Class A, 52 in Class B, 58 in Class C, 70 in Class D, 59 in Class E, 55 in Class F, 83 in Class G, 66 in Class H, 84 in Class I, 73 in Class J, 91 in Class K, 72 in Class L, 56

in Class M, 58 in Class N, 52 in Class O, and 43 in Class P). After completion of the subject, local and non-local students were asked to participate in focus group interviews. Five focus groups were conducted as follows: Group 1 (8 local students), Group 2 (4 local students), Group 3 (7 local students), Group 4 (6 local students), and Group 5 (5 non-local students). All of the interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and then checked for accuracy in transcription.

Instruments

To conduct the focus group interviews, a semi-structured interview guide based on the CIPP evaluation model (Context, Input, Process, Product) developed by Stufflebeam (39) was used. The CIPP model provides a systematic way of looking at different aspects of the curriculum development process as well as outcomes. Based on the CIPP model (39), questions about the context, input, process and products were asked. About context evaluation, questions on the difference between "Tomorrow's Leaders" and other courses, and whether the students thought the existing university education was able to help them develop in a holistic manner were asked. For input evaluation, questions on whether the subject matter was difficult and how much time the students put into the course were asked. For process evaluation, questions on their views of the subject and the teaching/learning process were asked. Finally students were asked about the changes they had after taking this course.

Based on these questions, the data were collected and analyzed with reference to the following domains: (a) positive comments about the subject, class, and the lecturers; (b) benefits that students thought the subject had brought to them; (c) negative comments about the subject; (d) whether there was a need to have this subject; and (e) suggestions for future improvement. For the data analyses, broad themes related to the above domains were extracted to give a general picture of the process and outcomes of the evaluation. The analyses were discussed and reviewed by the researchers.

Results

Based on the results of thematic analyses, four major conclusions could be drawn from the focus group interview data.

Conclusion 1: Students had positive perceptions of the subject, learning process, features of the subject and related learning experiences

Generally speaking, students had positive perceptions towards the nature, content, and lecturers of the subject. The students liked the experiential learning activities. They thought the activities did help them gain the knowledge and understand themselves better, as shown in the following narratives.

- “It (“Tomorrow’s Leaders”) provided varied activities that enhanced discussions among group mates with the relevant topics. Comparing with other lectures that conducted in merely lecturing, this subject allowed students to interact more.”
- “Playing this game allowed us to discover our own ‘blind spots’ in interpersonal communication. The use of activities could help us understand the theories better than reading papers by ourselves which is quite time-consuming.”
- “I think the contents were good because the leadership skills focused in this subject were related to the self-level, like self-awareness and self-improvement. These were excellent contents.”
- “This subject related to our daily life and future career much, like teaching us the ways to cope with life challenges. ‘Tomorrow’s Leaders’ was an all-rounded subject.”

The students also showed their appreciation of the lecturers. They were impressed by the flexible and unique teaching methods of the lecturers. Some narratives are as follows:

- “We could not understand the content well at first. The lecturer then tried to change her teaching style by adding more daily

examples. This fostered our understanding of the theories.”

- “Sometimes it was boring when the lecturer was talking about the theories. However, the lecturer would walk around the lecture hall to ensure the learning progress of the students, which also attracted our attention to the lectures.”
- “Our lecturer would conduct her lecture in a research format that helped explaining the related issues to students.”
- “What our lecturer did very well was that she would go to every group to see if we were on the right track and gave us suggestions. She would share our ideas to the class and we could gain insights from different views. One more thing was that she could remember all of our names. She was awesome.”

Furthermore, students thought they gained more in-depth reflection and higher level of self-awareness from the learning process in this subject.

- “I thought leadership is just a kind of entrepreneurship or virtues at first. Never could I imagine that leadership can be related to different issues before the lecturer linked them up together. This linkage helps me to think comprehensively and deepens my memories.”
- “This subject really made me reflect on myself. The videos (one of the teaching tools) triggered me to have self-reflection and think of ways to equip myself to be a better person.”
- “I was so impressed by the activity about resilience. We had to write a sentence, draw a picture, and grab the candies on the table without using our hands. I suddenly realized that we would have restrictions without our hands. It was a good experience for us to practice alternative solutions when encountering obstacles.”
- “The subject provided us with lots of opportunities for self-detection, and we can understand ourselves better.”

Conclusion 2: Students had personal gains and positive changes after taking the subject

Students perceived the subject was able to facilitate their reflection on themselves, thinking about the meaning of life, and thus enhancing their self-understanding and thinking in a more positive way.

- “I think the subject facilitated my in-depth thinking through an academic perspective, which is different from the understanding only based on common sense.”
- “This subject reminds us of a very important thing: in addition to study, it is also important to nurture our own qualities.”
- “When there is a problem or a moment of feeling bad, I learned how to relieve myself.”
- “The subject provides a learning process in which we are able to reflect about ourselves seriously. For example, by writing the term paper, we could recall and reorganize our life experiences seriously. This is not imagination but self-reflection. Therefore, I think the term paper is useful for us!”
- “It makes me being even more attentive to my social skills, such as communication skills I will, throughout the entire [life] process, reflect myself constantly.”
- “I also think 'Tomorrow's Leaders' is a subject different from the other subjects. Other subjects focus on instilling academic information into students. 'Tomorrow's Leaders', however, provides us with many opportunities for self-reflection, which makes students understand themselves more. In my opinion, studying in the university is not only for the pursuit of academic knowledge, but also for self-understanding.”
- “I always carried out many reflections about myself on the way home after classes of 'Tomorrow's Leaders'. Therefore, this subject provides a very strong message to me, and that is reflection.”

Some students further stated that the subject has cultivated their competence, such as cognitive competence.

- “After the game had finished, I felt enlightened—the original idea [in head] did not work in fact. This was a very memorable experience for me!”
- “This subject is very useful for me, which changed my mode of thinking. I am now able to think with reference to situational needs.”
- “We now have a different approach to deal with various issues in life.”

Besides, students mentioned that the subject has provided an opportunity for them to learn how to work together.

- “Tomorrow's Leaders' provided many opportunities for us to make friends with classmates. As such, students were able to get to know one another through the class activities. Hence, the subject can encourage us to be more involved in those class activities, and we thus actively participated in the entire process.”
- “There was much interaction during classes. Apart from making friends with classmates, I also understood the importance of listening to the others' ideas. No one can be always right. I have also recognized the ways of effective collaboration.”
- “This subject can help us to understand how our personality can be developed, or how to get a job done better. This is also a subject about team-building. So I agree that, in most of the situations, the contents covered in this subject should be very useful to our daily life.”
- “This subject is useful to a certain extent. I have learned some communication skills. As there are many group projects throughout the university learning life, the experiences in this subject [of doing projects] can act as a reference for communicating with others in a better way, especially in dealing of interpersonal issues.”

Conclusion 3: Student felt that there was a need for this subject

Generally speaking, the students perceived the subject to be essential to their transition to the university life.

- “I think this subject is suitable for freshmen in their first semester. It was full of interactions in the subject, which allowed students within the same faculty interacting with each other. The students in the same group knew each other quite well and would take care of one another. I believe all these experiences are helpful to our learning in the future.”
- “The subjects I am studying [in the university] are mostly science courses. I think the provision of subjects by the University like ‘Tomorrow’s Leaders’ is good for the holistic development of students. It does not only broaden the horizon of the students, but also facilitates their intrapersonal development.”
- “I think it is fine to keep the subject that provides a bridge [with others] for those who are passive in their university life.”
- “I think it is like a 'bridging class' for freshmen if they could enroll the subject in the first semester as the university or even Hong Kong might be a totally new environment for freshmen. There is a need of adaptation. The subject does play a role in this adaptation process.”

Moreover, the students stated that the subject was able to prepare them for a better performance now and in the future.

- “I think the rationale of this subject is very good to include the topics of emotional management, self-awareness issues, self-reflection, and self-improvement. I think these ideas are very good and necessary.”
- “I think the subject is helpful. As I said earlier, although you learned some theories, you may not be aware of how the theories, such as team building and personality, can be

utilized in the daily life. The subject is thus able to facilitate students' self-understanding, enhance their self-confidence, and even change their life style.”

- “I think one of learning outcomes of the subject is to facilitate your competence of interpersonal communication, which should be a must for undergraduates.”
- “The subject is necessary for our preparation for entering the society. It is because we need to deal with people with different backgrounds, which requires a better self-understanding, emotional control, and even being empathetic to others.”

Conclusion 4: Students mentioned some negative aspects of the subject and proposed suggestions to overcome them

Apart from the positive comments and personal benefits, there are narratives on the negative aspects of the subject. First, some students remarked that there were too many theories in the course and the theories were quite difficult to understand. One student remarked, “Most of the theories are related to psychology but I am not from the social sciences stream. Therefore it is quite hard for me to understand the concepts.” Another student said, “I found that the theories were quite difficult for me to understand even though I had read through the journals from the required readings.” A student suggested that more practical opportunities should be given, “there should be more opportunities for us to practice what we have learned about leadership in real life situations.”

Second, some students found that the class started too early in the morning. A student remarked, “The class started at 8:30 am. Even though the activities were very interesting, we were too sleepy to participate much in the activities.”

In addition, other negative comments were heard. These included: (a) some group members were not involved; (b) there were difficulties in the group presentations and individual assignment; (c) there was a comparatively heavy workload; (d) the lecture time was long (three hours lecture).

With respect to the above negative aspects of the subject, there were several suggestions for

improvement from the students themselves. Some narratives are illustrated as follows:

- “The lecturers could use more real life examples or conduct more in-class activities to illustrate those abstract and difficult concepts.”
- “There are too many students from different disciplines in a group. There were seven students in my group. The number of students should be set at four to five students in each group.”
- “There could be more breaks because the lecture began too early in the morning and the duration of the lecture was too long.”
- “The guidelines for the group presentation and the individual paper could be explained more clearly so that we knew the expectations from the teachers.”
- “I know that there are many teachers teaching the subject 'Tomorrow's Leaders'. It would be fruitful if they could share their teaching methods and experiences with each other.”
- “The teachers could give us more time for in-class discussions. This could provide more chances for us to interact with our team members and develop cohesion among the group.”

Discussion

Based on the data collected from several focus groups, the present study investigated the views of students taking “tomorrow’s leaders,” a credit-bearing course on intrapersonal and interpersonal development at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. There are several distinct features of this study. First, the present study was one of the few empirical studies documenting the views and perceptions of university students of a credit-bearing course on intrapersonal and interpersonal development. Second, different students from different faculties were recruited so that perspectives of students with different background were examined. Third, based on the CIPP model (39), content, input, process and product of the course were covered in the focus group interviews.

Based on the themes derived from the focus group discussions, several conclusions could be highlighted from the qualitative findings. First, students from different faculties had positive views and experiences on the subjects, including content of the subjects (e.g., different intrapersonal and interpersonal competences were covered), teaching methods (e.g., group discussion, interactive teaching methods, and various in-class activities were used), teachers (e.g., caring and flexible) and benefits (e.g., better self-understanding after taking the course). The participants underwent a journey of growth throughout the learning experiences in the subject “Tomorrow’s Leaders.” The subject provided them with opportunities to explore themselves in a safe and supportive environment, especially with the lecturers’ provision of “caring” and “flexible” milieu. In addition, the arrangement of sitting in groups in the subject allowed the participants to have better interactions with their fellow classmates, which might be rare in other university subjects. This format aids the passive students to start building relationships with their classmates through collaboration in the in-class activities and communication in the group discussions during lectures. The participants thus gradually developed the “rapport community” in their own discipline. These could also be shown as students reported positive changes in intrapersonal and interpersonal competences in the interviews. For instances, some students felt that they became more resilient and sensitive in inter-personal contexts after taking the course. Given some real life examples and personal sharing (among group-mates or with lecturers) in lectures, the participants agreed that they could practice how to communicate with group-mates more effectively and appropriately. As one of the participants recalled, “It makes me being even more attentive to my social skills... I will, throughout my entire [life] process, reflect on myself constantly.” Moreover, students regarded this course to be vital and important for university students. Some students claimed that this course could help freshmen adapt to university by developing good inter-personal communication, being more active in learning and enriching the students in holistic development. These findings are consistent with the results obtained in the pilot stage (14) and with findings based on different evaluation methods (27-37). Besides the present

qualitative findings, other findings based on post-lecture and post-course evaluation as well as qualitative data based on metaphors suggested that students generally had positive views and perceptions on the contents and implementation of the course.

Although most of the students had positive views about the program, some negative comments were reported in the focus groups. First, some students felt that the course was too theoretical and contained too many theories. Although some participants asserted that learning theories or concepts was essential in the university life, it was still difficult for freshmen to grasp the abstract and refined concepts of the theories during their secondary school-university transition. It took time for the students to prepare themselves academically. While this comment was well-acknowledged, it would not be easy to balance the demand for academic excellence (as “Tomorrow’s Leaders” is a credit-bearing course) and personal development of the students. One possibility is to give more real life examples to students to make them understand the theories.

Second, some students mentioned that they experienced difficulty in group presentation and assignments. The participants had mentioned that there were “too many” group members in each group. They might have to take time to understand and communicate with each other, though some of the participants found that the groupings in Tomorrow’s Leaders helped nurture their social competence (“I also understood the importance of listening to the others’ ideas”; “This is also a subject about team-building”). In their secondary school-university transition, the students needed time to learn how to present and write their ideas academically. It is understandable for the participants found it difficult to accomplish the term paper and presentation of the subject. To address this issue, workshops on group presentation and term papers were provided. Individual consultations were available upon students’ requests. The lecturers tended to be more open to give room for students’ originality and led them grow and learn in the process of uncertainty and self-exploration. In fact, most of students performed well in group presentation and assignments and they treasured the opportunity for self-learning.

Finally, a few students complained early class-time. In fact, the earliest class begins at 8:30 am

which was more or less the same as the class time in secondary schools. Some of the participants admitted that it was their sleeping habit affecting their perception of “early lecture.” To address this issue, various class activities and breaks were offered to refresh students’ energy level. Students were also invited to re-think about their life style and sleeping patterns.

Although the positive feedbacks documented can be interpreted as support for the effectiveness of this subject, alternative explanations should be well-acknowledged. First, students might give positive comments on the course because they wished to act as “good students” (i.e., demand characteristics). However, this explanation was not plausible because students were invited to voice out their views honestly and their identities were kept confidential. The other explanation is that only students with positive comments joined in the focus groups. This possibility is low because participants were recruited from different faculties and the researchers did not have prior knowledge about students’ perceptions of the course. Third, favorable results might be the results of researchers’ biases and preoccupations (i.e., researchers influenced the data collection and analyses processes to “create” this positive picture unconsciously). As the researchers were not directly involved in the data collection and analyses processes, and there was discussion among the authors on the results, this possibility is not high.

Although there is a growing trend in using focus group interviews as the research tool to investigate the in-depth meaning of the “conversational process” of the participants, there is a lack of literature analyzing the limitations of the processes and structures involved (40). It is thus essential to realize the methodological limitations of focus group interviews in the present study. First, focus groups have been described as particularly useful at an early stage of research as a means for eliciting issues which participants think are relevant (40). This might help collect large volume of information yet the depth of the data has to be acquired or investigated by administering individual in-depth interviews. To fully reveal the in-depth inferences in dialogues can be very time intensive (41). Second, the moderators of the focus group interviews are the teachers or tutors of “Tomorrow’s Leaders”. Having the moderators from

the same background might help facilitate the discussion in putting the participants at their ease (40). The issues addressed were ensured to be the “same” issues across all the focus groups. However, Hurd and McIntyre (42) reminded the researchers about the “seduction in sameness” between the researchers and the participants that might hinder critical reflexive research. The moderators should be highly aware of the heterogeneity of the discussions in the focus groups and their potential biases in directing the participants to disclose what the moderators desire. Thirdly, during the process of focus group interviews, there might be some confusions of treating the dominant voice as the collective voice of the groups. Smithson (40) asserted that the voice of each focus group interview should be the collective and consensus procedures. The opinions of the participants should not be viewed as static or previously formed. The opinions are constructed in social situations and are the discourses emerged from the context. The researchers thus should be well-aware of the subtleties which are emerged in focus group discussions.

The present study documented the perceived attributes and benefits of a credit-bearing course on leadership and intrapersonal development at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The current findings concurred with other studies using various evaluation methods (27-37) that the subject was well-received by the students and the subject was perceived to be beneficial to the development of the students. However, like other studies, the present study has several limitations. First, as the participants were not recruited using random sampling, generalization of the findings should be cautious. Second, due to practical considerations and time constraint, interpretations of results were not counter-checked by participants (i.e., member checking). Third, the inner subjective experiences of students during taking the course were not investigated. Obviously, other qualitative studies, such as in-depth interviews or using students’ daily dairies could be employed in the future studies. Despite these limitations, the present study provided qualitative data to support the positive features of the course “Tomorrow’s Leaders” from students’ perspectives.

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