

A qualitative evaluation of a service leadership subject in a higher educational institution in Hong Kong

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Abstract

The present study represents an attempt to evaluate the subject “Service Leadership” which has been conducted at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University as a credit-bearing subject. The dataset was collected from three courses under the subject in 2017/2018 academic year, which included 207 undergraduate participants in total (n = 87 were from the Semester 1 subject, n = 89 were from the Semester 3 subject, and n = 31 were from the Cambodian summer school). By analysing students’ written feedback of descriptors and metaphors, researchers found that participation in this subject fostered students’ development in different areas including self-reflection, leadership competencies, moral characters as well as caring disposition, and hence equipped them to become qualified leaders in the future. This study also provides convincing evidence that it is important for higher educational institutions to incorporate service leadership education in their curricula.

Keywords: Service leadership education, qualitative evaluation, university students, Hong Kong

Introduction

Service industries have contributed greatly to the development of many societies in the past decades. The remarkable transformation from a manufacturing economy to a service-based economy has led to a shift of the desired qualities of employees. In a product-based industry, the crucial attributes of employees were following instructions and conducting routine work by merely using their technical skills (1). In sharp contrast, the critical requirement for employees in service-based economy is to hone their soft skills (e.g., leadership, integrity, resilience, teamwork, and interpersonal skills) (2). While in a manufacturing economy, leadership is often associated with centralised authority and personal power, a service industry calls for decentralised power, flexibility, and

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mutual influence (3). Accordingly, there has been increased attention among scholars given to the shift of desired attributes of leadership and the application of new leadership models for university students since the 1990s (4).

Among the many leadership models, two widely recognized models which are highly relevant to the service-oriented economy are “servant leadership model” (5, 6) and “transformational leadership model” (7). Servant leadership model proposes a servant-first philosophy in which servant leaders emphasize the needs of their followers, distinguishing itself from the conventional notion of leadership that highlights authority and dictation with top-down hierarchy (5, 6). This concept encourages leaders to focus on the development and benefits of followers and the groups to which they belong (6). Furthermore, Gregory and his colleagues (8) asserted that the servant leadership model offered the conceptual framework which can incorporate different leadership and facilitate empirical research. With regard to transformational leadership, Bass and Avolio (9) proposed four general components in leadership behaviours, i.e., “Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Individualized Consideration, and Intellectual Stimulation.” Building on and refining the previous theories, Kouzes and Posner (7) proposed their transformational leadership model, which presents five core practices in motivating followers and establishing effective leadership, i.e., “Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart.” It is also a framework based on a large number of empirical case studies and surveys. For decades, the five elements of exemplary leadership have been verified by scholars to be positively correlated to the effectiveness of leadership, organizational commitment and work satisfaction (7). They also hold the belief that not just great people can acquire exemplary leadership and mobilize others, but everyone can achieve that by receiving training and applying these practices. It is noted that despite their prevalence in service-oriented economies, they were developed in a Western context and rooted in Western culture, and therefore it is impractical to apply them in Hong Kong (10).

In answer to the call for a leadership model rooted in a Chinese context, Chung (11) and scholars

from the Hong Kong Institute of Service Leadership and Management (HKI-SLAM) developed a service leadership model with the aim of promoting service leadership education at tertiary level in Hong Kong and providing advice and assistance to stakeholders such as government agencies and business communities. In this model, service leadership is defined as “ethically satisfying others needs by consistently providing quality personal service to everyone comes into contact with, including one’s self, others, communities, systems, and environments,” in which the core concept of leadership is essentially about service (11). There are several core beliefs highlighted in this model. For example, the service leadership model upholds the belief that every individual is valuable with the potential of becoming a qualified leader (12). Everyone also has opportunities to practice his or her leadership on a daily basis from self-serving improvement opportunities to more complicated service encounters. In addition, this model accents self-serving and self-management, a process during which people can improve their competences and other qualities, and are hence better prepared to the needs of self and others (12). Besides the core beliefs, HKI-SLAM also proposed a 3Cs model in which leadership competence, moral character, and caring disposition are introduced as the three major components in determining the effectiveness of service leadership (13). This model distinguishes it from traditional leadership models that either highlight partial leadership skills that are primarily “related to individual achievement, sheer productivity and positional authority,” or claim that merely elites can achieve a good leadership (14). Moreover, it is a leadership model which incorporates Chinese concepts and philosophies, including Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. It reflects the Chinese culture and traditional values such as “harmony, righteousness, honesty, loyalty, benevolence and empathy” (4). In general, this model is considered as a framework oriented to the service economy specifically under Hong Kong socio-economic conditions (15).

Equivalent to the transformational leadership model, service leadership model cherishes a value that leadership can be acquired and not attributes one is congenital. However, the transformational leadership

model mainly stresses on collective value and shared vision of groups and organizations. As a follower-centric model, it focuses on the leaders' abilities to nurture, influence and mobilize followers but fails to place equal emphasis on self-management and self-improvement (12). It is in sharp contrast to service leadership in which balanced consideration is given to self, others and the system (12). Furthermore, transformational leadership primarily underlines high morality and personal charisma. Service leadership, on the contrary, pays significant attention to the comprehensive development of moral character, caring disposition as well as different leadership competencies in building up effective service leadership. A service leader shares several qualities in practice with a servant leader, such as the emphasis placed on service instead of autocratic and authoritative leadership, and on high moral characters and caring disposition. However, in comparison to the servant leadership model, it is firmly believed that service leadership model does not promote serving others and community at the expense of self-interest; instead, it includes self in service orientation (12). In addition, it gives due attention to functional competencies and practical skills in being an effective service leader, which is not fully addressed in the servant leadership model (12).

In order to promote service leadership education in Hong Kong, the Service Leadership Initiative (SLI) was launched by the Victor and William Fung Foundation. Total eight higher educational institutions funded by the University Grants Committee (UGC), including The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, joined in this initiative and integrated the service leadership model in their curricula. Based on this framework, a credit-bearing subject entitled "Service Leadership" has been introduced to undergraduates at PolyU. In the 2012/13 academic year, a 2-credit service leadership subject was offered to students under the 3-year degree program at the initial stage. Since the 2014/15 academic year, 3-credit subject has been introduced to students studying in 4-year degree program (16). Its objectives include "1) understanding and integration of theories and concepts on service leadership, particularly the key propositions, core beliefs, and curriculum content strands of the HKI-SLAM conceptual framework; 2) acquisition of skills intrinsic to service leadership; 3) formation of strong

identification with the attitudes and values emphasized in service leadership; and 4) recognition of the importance of service leadership to the development and wellness of oneself, other people and the whole society, particularly recognize the connection of learning in the subject to one's own life" (17). This subject highlights experiential learning, reflective learning and collaborative learning, which includes methodologies of lecturing, group work, papers assignments with reflection, and experiential learning sessions (18). It aims to facilitate students' understanding of contemporary models of leadership as well as the attributes of service leadership, nurture effective service leadership qualities in students, and encourage critical reflection and application of theories and knowledge from classroom to real life (18).

To examine the efficacy of service leadership course and improve teaching and learning experiences accordingly, evaluation is crucial (19). In general, both quantitative and qualitative approaches have their own advantages. Shek and Sun (20) argued that a quantitative evaluation could utilize numerical data and statistics to validate assumptions, quantify perceptions, and measure at multiple time points effectively. Particularly, the use of quantitative method has the advantages of generalizing investigation results to "a larger population based on a representative sample, determination of causal relationship between given conditions and program outcomes, independence of results from investigator's standpoint, and standardized instruments and procedures that can be repeated in replication studies conducted by other researchers" (17). It is also regarded as the mainstream methodology in social science research and has been used in the previous evaluation of the subject "Service Leadership" (21-23). For instance, in a quasi-experimental study (21), the pretest-posttest results indicated that there was a greater enhancement for students who joined the course than those who did not, with regard to knowledge and attitudes related to service leadership, as well as life satisfaction.

Nonetheless, quantitative approach is criticized as less adequate in exploring subjective experiences and life stories as well as understanding in-depth meanings of participants in social and behavioral studies (24). Qualitative methods can, therefore,

capture detailed information with openness in eliciting data and at the same time maintain depth in analysis, objectives of which may be more difficult to achieve for structured methods (24, 25). For an in-depth evaluation of program effectiveness, a qualitative study is considered more capable, as it contributes to the understanding of informants' experiences, perspectives and feelings in the learning process (26). In this study, therefore, a qualitative method was selected to evaluate the effectiveness of the "Service Leadership" subject from the perspective of university students in Hong Kong. Notably, qualitative evaluation can also incorporate many approaches, such as "direct observation, focus group interview, and written reflections" (24, 25). The qualitative evaluation has been adopted in previous studies. For instance, in a series of studies (e.g., 1,4), Shek and his team provided convincing qualitative evidence of the positive influence this subject exerted on participating students by analyzing their written feedback.

In this study, we included a total of 207 students who attended the "Service Leadership" during the academic year of 2017/2018. We elicited their written responses by inviting them to give three descriptors and a metaphor to describe their learning experiences in and attitudes towards the course. Meanwhile, they were invited to elaborate with an explanation for their selected metaphors. The written descriptors allowed students to express their opinions in a straightforward and open manner. It also offered researchers a quick view of students' perceptions facilitated our identification of the nature of comments. The use of metaphor is an efficient way to understand some "emotionally difficult concepts" and explore intangible concepts (27). According to Ma and her colleagues (28), conceptual metaphor theory is a frequently used method in evaluation research. A conceptual metaphor comprises two domains: the target (e.g., perceptions towards the course in the present study), and the source (e.g., "beacon" or "journey" used by students in the present study) (29). The target domain, as known as the conceptual domain, is what researchers pay particular attention to, while the source domain is the metaphorical expression to represent or describe the domain. Through pairing the target and the source, metaphors serve as a conceptual correspondence that sheds lights

on abstract thinking and its connections to subjective experiences (28, 29). As the present study mainly explores students' perspectives and learning experiences to evaluate the effectiveness of the course, using written responses of metaphors and descriptors is considered adequate to reach our research objectives.

Methods

The purpose of the presented study was to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of the subject "Service Leadership" in the 2017/2018 academic year. This subject was carried out in Semester 1 and 3 in Hong Kong, and in the summer term in Cambodia. The Semester 1 subject was a regular module course with one lecture weekly and a duration of 13 weeks all-inclusively. The Semester 3 subject was with modest intensity, where two lectures were given each week during a period of 6.5 weeks. The Cambodia summer school was a two-week intensive module, which requested students to conduct field visits and attend classes in Cambodia. Students who participated in those three subjects were all invited to describe their subjective experiences in the program. They were first requested to use three concise words or phrases (i.e., descriptors) as their personal reflection of the program. They were also required to use a metaphor to give a written account of their perception towards the course with a brief elaboration. The student consent form was collected before the data collection. There is a total of 87 students in semester 1, 89 students in semester 3, and 31 students in Cambodia Summer School participated in this research.

Data analyses

The coding of descriptors and metaphors was conducted by two independent researchers who were not associated in either lecturing the course or collecting data. To start with, the written descriptors were classified into four categories, defined by their nature of positive, neutral, negative and undecided. The coding of metaphor is more complex as a metaphor can entail more than one meaningful unit. By way of illustration, there was a student using

“water” as the metaphor to describe this course with the interpretation that “the class seems simple or even boring, but when you look back, you will realize that it is so important to build up our character and leadership. Just like water, simple but important.” It was coded into two meaningful units. The first one is a negative comment which indicated the course was boring on the surface, while the second is about the benefits and development of the student during the course. As the negative and positive units share equal status in quantity, this metaphor was coded as neutral.

If the metaphor was considered irrelevant to the context, it would be categorized into “undecided.” For descriptors and metaphors respectively, similar meanings were grouped into the same category. In order to examine intra-rater reliability in a reliable manner, the two research fellows randomly selected 20 descriptors and 20 metaphors from each semester and coded them in a different time. These 20 descriptors and 20 metaphors were exchanged to and crosschecked by the other researcher to examine the inter-rater reliability.

Table 1. Categorization of descriptors used by the participants to describe the course in Semester 1 (HK) of the academic year of 2017/2018

Descriptions	Nature of the Response				Total
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Undecided	
Fun/funny/interesting	44				
Inspiring/thought-provoking	30				
useful	30				
Meaningful	21				
Happy/joyful/enjoyable	13				
Interactive	13				
Helpful	11				
Reflective	9				
Informative	7				
Practical	5				
Creative	4				
Friendly	3				
Memorable	3				
Relax/relaxing	3				
Unique	3				
Other positive responses	51				
Social epitome		2			
Academic		1			
Information		1			
Listening		1			
Lollipop		1			
Mystery		1			
Self, others, system		1			
Loss of direction/slightly perplexed			2		
Regret			1		
Total Count (N):	250	8	3	0	261
Total Count (%):	95.79	3.07	1.15	0	100

Table 2. Categorization of descriptors used by the participants to describe the course in Semester 3 (HK) of the academic year of 2017/2018

Descriptions	Nature of the Response				Total
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Undecided	
Fun/funny/interesting	42				
Helpful/beneficial	27				
Inspiring/thought-provoking	24				
Informative	18				
Meaningful	15				
Useful	15				
Enjoy/enjoyable/happy/joyful	14				
Relax/relaxing	10				
Interactive	9				
Helpful	7				
Good/great	6				
Excited/exciting	4				
Applicable	3				
Attractive/intrigued	3				
Friendly	3				
Fruitful	3				
Fulfilling/satisfied/satisfying	3				
Impressive/unforgettable	3				
Responsible	3				
Other positive responses	33				
Hungry		3			
Long/long-duration		3			
Other neutral responses		4			
Unexpectedly		1			
Sympathy to others		1			
Boring			4		
Too many activities in class			2		
A little bit too fast			1		
Awkwardness			1		
Little sleepy			1		
Vague			1		
Total Count (N):	245	12	10	0	267
Total Count (%):	91.76	4.50	3.75	0	100

Table 3. Categorization of descriptors used by the participants to describe the course in Semester 3 (Cambodia) of the academic year of 2017/2018

Descriptions	Nature of the Response				Total
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Undecided	
Fun/interesting	17				
Helpful	14				
Informative	7				
Meaningful/profound	6				
Inspiring	5				
Improving	4				
Happy/joyful	4				
Useful	3				
Interactive	3				
Fulfilling/satisfying	2				
Innovative	2				
Reflective	2				
Relaxing	2				
Other positive responses	14				
Dynamic		1			
I get a little about the service leadership		1			
Some things new to me		1			
Communication		1			
Tired			2		
Sleepy			2		
Total Count (N):	85	4	4	0	93
Total Count (%):	91.40	4.30	4.30	0	100

Results

Tables 1, 2 and 3 show the descriptors of Semester 1, Semester 3 and Cambodia summer school respectively, together with the categories and the nature of them. As shown in Table 1, 250 out of 261 descriptors (95.79%) were positive, 8 descriptors (3.07%) were neutral and 3 (1.15%) were negative. The descriptors with the same meanings were merged. There were 6 categories most frequently mentioned by students from semester 1: “fun/funny/interesting,” “inspiring/thought-provoking,” “useful,” “meaningful,” “happy/joyful/enjoyable” and “interactive.” Eight descriptors, i.e., “social epitome,” “academic,” “information,” “listening,” “lollipop,” “mystery,” and “self, others, system,” were regarded as neutral, while 3 were seen as negative, i.e., “loss of direction,” “slightly perplexed” and “regret.” Both the intra-rater reliability and inter-rater reliability reached 100%, indicating a high consistency in coding.

Similar results can be found in Table 2, where 245 out of 267 descriptors (91.76%) were categorized as positive, such as “fun/funny/interesting,” “helpful/

beneficial,” “inspiring/thought-provoking” and “informative.” 12 descriptors (4.50%) were considered neutral in nature, such as “hungry,” “long/long-duration” and “abstract,” and 10 (3.75%) as negative, such as “boring” and “too many activities in class.” Both the calculated intra-rater and inter-rater agreement percentages attained 95%, which indicated that the codes were all highly consistent.

Table 3 displays the results of the descriptors from Cambodia summer school. It shows that 85 out of 93 descriptors (91.40%) were positive. The most commonly mentioned categories were “fun/interesting,” “helpful,” “informative” and “meaningful/profound,” which is similar to that of Semester 1 and 3 courses. Only 4 neutral descriptors (4.3%) and 4 negative descriptors (4.3%) were reported. The inter-rater reliability was 100% and the intra-rater reliability was 95%.

Tables 4, 5 and 6 show the codes of metaphors of the 3 courses as well as the categories and nature of them respectively. As can be seen from table 4, among the 87 metaphors, 82 (94.25%) were coded as positive, only 4 (4.6%) as neutral and 1 (1.15%) as

undecided. The 87 metaphors were broken down into 100 meaningful units, in which 95.0% (n = 95) were positive in nature, 1.0% (n = 1) was neutral, 3.0% (n = 3) were negative and 1.0% (n = 1) was undecided. The metaphors with similar meanings were categorized into the same group. For example, the “workshop” and “forum” that proposed by two students both implied interactive learning modes according to their explanations, therefore these two metaphors were considered as under the same category.

All categories were listed according to the frequency mentioned by students. The first category, that was recognized by 24 students, all indicated that this course of study gave them direction and guidance. Some examples are listed below:

- **Light:** “It leads us into a right way, and it lights up my career path.”
- **Compass:** “It gives me different ideas of service leadership, and it helps me to develop. Also, it shows the way to become a successful service leader.”
- **Map:** “It provides guidance to service leadership. It shows a clear path for my future leadership execution.”

The second category was pointed out by 9 students, which mainly suggested that it had been an enjoyable and memorable journey for them to attend the “Service Leadership.” During the process, they were able to acquire new knowledge and develop themselves. For instance:

- **Enjoyable tour:** “This course is very interested for learning how to become a successful leader and also helpful for my career and study after studying in this course.”
- **An interesting trip:** “I have learnt something more in each lecture. For example, I have learnt the basic concept of service leadership: $E = MC^2$. And the learning process was interesting.”
- **An inspiring journey:** “It would be like a journey to extremely new things, and concepts are really interesting and inspiring for me. I would be able to grow and learn through the journey.”

Table 4. Categorization of metaphors used by the participants to describe the course in Semester 1 (HK) of the academic year of 2017/2018

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
Light/beacon/compass/map	24					25				
Enjoyable tour/trip	9					12				
Camping/workshop/forum	6					7				
Book/dictionary	6					8				
Tree	6					6				
Interesting party/club/games	4					4				
Gas station/supply station	3					4				
Dessert/lollipops	3					3				
Mirror	2					2				
Other positive responses	19					21				
A boat		1				1		1		
Organization		1					1			
People get along		1				1		1		
Poet		1				1		1		
Ripples				1					1	
Total Count (N):	82	4	0	1	87	95	1	3	1	100
Total Count (%):	94.25	4.60	0	1.15	100	95	1	3	1	100

Table 5. Categorization of descriptors used by the participants to describe the course in Semester 3 (HK) of the academic year of 2017/2018

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
Light/compass/A travel guide/Map	16					18				
Book/encyclopaedia/Wikipedia	10					11				
Journey/tour	9					11				
Buffet	5					5				
Mirror	3					3				
Water	1	1				2		1		
Sun	2					2				
Tree/planting tree	2					2		1		
Other positive responses	34					39		1		
Detective game		1					1			
Durian		1				1		1		
Healthy food		1					1			
Mixer		1					1			
Beet			1					1		
Baby				1					1	
Total Count (N):	82	5	1	1	89	94	3	5	1	103
Total Count (%):	92.13	5.62	1.12	1.12	100	91.26	2.91	4.85	0.97	100

Other frequently mentioned positive categories include “camping/workshop” (n = 6), “book/dictionary” (n = 6), and “tree” (n = 6). There were four neutral metaphors (i.e., “a boat,” “organization,” “people get along” and “poet”) and one undecided metaphor “ripples.” The intra-reliability was 95% while the inter-reliability was 100%.

Similar positive results of Semester 3 course can be found in Table 5, where 82 (92.13%) out of 89 metaphors were positive, five (5.62%) were neutral, one (1.12%) was negative and one (1.12%) was undecided. In addition, these 89 metaphors were coded into 103 meaningful units, among which 91.26% (n = 94) were perceived positive, 2.91% (n = 3) were neutral, 4.85% (n = 5) were negative and 0.97% (n = 1) was undecided.

According to the frequency, topping the list of positive categories is “light/compass/travel guide/map,” which was stated by 16 students. This category expressed that the course gave them direction and guidance. Below are examples of student illustrations:

- **Light:** “Bring me new information to explore the dark future.”
- **Compass:** “This course helps me reflect my position in life and provides guidelines that lead to successful leadership.”
- **Beacon:** “This course guides my direction of my future life like what beacon does in the sea.”

The second category, which chiefly implied that the course covered meaningful knowledge and sufficient information, was mentioned by 10 students. Three examples are listed as below:

- **Book:** “The course contains a lot of knowledge and methodology of the development and concept of service leadership.”
- **Encyclopedia:** “Meaningful, full of knowledge.”
- **Reading a meaningful book:** “Learnt a lot in the course.”

Table 6. Categorization of descriptors used by the participants to describe the course in Semester 3 (Cambodia) of the academic year of 2017/2018

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
Light bulb/ a map/compass	7					7				
Mirror	5					5				
Tour/trip/travel blog	4					4				
Food/a baked toast/new style dish	3					3				
Plant/snowball/staircase	3					3				
Other positive responses	8					10				
My attention				1					1	
Total Count (N):	30	0	0	1	31	32	0	0	1	33
Total Count (%):	96.77	0	0	3.23	100	96.97	0	0	3.03	100

There are four neutral metaphors, (i.e., “detective game,” “durian,” “healthy food,” and “mixer”) stated by students. One negative metaphor, “beet,” and one undecided metaphor, “baby,” were recorded. Both the intra-agreement percentage and inter-agreement percentage calculated from these metaphors were 95%, which indicated high reliability.

For the metaphors used in the Cambodia summer school (see Table 6), 30 (96.77%) out of 31 were positive and only one (3.23%) was considered undecided. With regard to the meaningful units, 32 (96.97%) were regarded as positive and one (3.03%) as undecided. The first frequently mentioned category, which was acknowledged by seven students, conveyed that the course gave them direction and guidance to develop their service leadership, bringing meanings to their life. Below are the examples of students’ explanations:

- **Light bulb:** “The course is helpful to my development and is meaningful to my life, just like a light bulb lighting my future.”
- **Compass:** “It leads me to the way to provide great service to others in the future, especially I am a nurse to be.”
- **A map:** “It guides us to different places and helps me to know more about service leadership.”

The second category, which was appreciated by five students, revealed that the course helped them to reflect and understand themselves in a better way. Three examples are shown below:

- **A mirror:** “I can reflect myself for “who am I” and “what I want to be” seriously during the lesson.”
- **Mirror:** “It helps me to do reflections frequently to understand more about myself.”
- **Mirror:** “I can know more about myself through several reflective activities.”

The only undecided metaphor was “my attention.” Both the intra-reliability and inter-reliability reached 100%, indicating a very high degree of consistency in coding.

Discussion

The present study evaluated the quality and effectiveness of the subject entitled “Service Leadership” in the academic year of 2017/18. A qualitative evaluation methodology was used to reach an insightful comprehension of students’ perceptions and feelings towards the subject. Both intra-rater and inter-rater reliability of the descriptors and metaphors were all equal or greater than 95%, demonstrating that the qualitative findings are highly reliable.

The reported findings indicate that the subject was effective in nurturing service leadership of university students in Hong Kong. For the descriptors, the responses were dominantly coded as positive in nature as more than 90% of the students expressing their positive views of the course (95.79% in Semester 1, 91.76% in Semester 3, and 91.40% in

Cambodia summer school). The positive views from the three courses have several features in common. According to the descriptors, this subject was positively depicted as “interesting” and “funny,” suggesting students had been engaged in a joyful atmosphere of learning. Another frequently mentioned category is “inspiring” and “thought-provoking,” which indicated this subject stimulated students’ deeper thoughts and vision. A large proportion of students across the three courses also used “helpful,” “useful,” “meaningful,” and “beneficial,” which manifested that students largely appreciated the value of utility in “Service Leadership” education. Many students used “informative” as a descriptor to convey that the subject had offered them useful and rich information and was helpful and useful for their future development.

Similarly, over 90% (94.25% in Semester 1, 92.13% in Semester 3, and 96.77% in Semester 3 Cambodia) metaphors were positively used by students to reflect their perception and experience of the learning process. The most frequently mentioned category of positive metaphor resembled each other between the three courses, i.e., “compass,” “beacon,” “map” and “light.” According to the written metaphors, the service leadership subject was regarded as an effective tool to bring meanings to life and to provide direction and guidance for students’ future development and how to effectively be a qualified service leader. To elaborate, one student pointed out that the course could give him/her different concepts of service leadership, showing him/her the way to become a successful leader in future. This category of metaphor demonstrated that one of the essential objectives of service leadership subject, i.e., “recognizing the importance of service leadership to the development and wellness of oneself, other people and the whole society, particularly recognize the connection of learning in the subject to one’s own life” (17), were achieved to a great extent.

The second most frequently mentioned metaphors were associated with joyfulness, which expressed the positive emotions of students. Students used metaphorical expressions such as “inspiring journey,” “interesting trip” or “tour” to reflect their enjoyable learning experiences, which are resonant with the aforementioned written descriptors, such as “happy,” “interesting,” “enjoyable,” and “relaxing. The conc-

ordance between descriptors and metaphors implied that the service leadership subject provided them an interesting and enjoyable learning experience where they also learnt and developed. It was also suggested by the explanations of metaphors that this subject has engaged students in interactive games and experiential learning activities, in which students could learn in a practical way. It reflected the highlighted features of teaching and learning methodology in this subject (17). Students also used metaphors such as “book,” “Wikipedia,” and “encyclopedia” to describe the subject, as they thought it provided useful and interesting information in the scope of “Service Leadership.”

Additionally, several participants revealed that the service leadership subject promoted reflective learning. It manifested itself in the use of “reflective” as the descriptors and “mirror” as the metaphors. According to students’ elaboration, they had learnt to have constant and deeper reflection and were able to achieve a better understanding of themselves. For example, a student perceived this course as a “mirror” as he/she could understand who he/she is and what he/she “wants to be seriously during the lesson.” Researchers discovered that reflective learning is one of the effective learning methods for students. It was believed that critical reflection contributes to their avoidance of premature cognitive mindset, development of accurate perceptions, improvement of flexibility, and enhancement of creativity (30). Asserted by Begley and Branson (31), the use of self-reflection is an essential step that can foster leaders’ moral characters in their leadership development. Therefore, promoting students’ reflective learning has been one of the foci of attention in service leadership subject implementation (1). This view is also shown in the Subject Descriptive Form of the subject. These results suggest that reflective learning was well perceived by participating students. Besides, the findings indicated that participation in service leadership program was a solid way to promote self-reflection.

Despite the remarkable positive responses towards the course, there was still dissatisfaction expressed by a few students. For example, several negative descriptors (1.15% in Semester 1, 3.75% in Semester 3, and 4.30% in Semester 3 Cambodia) were found across three different classes. Taking the class in Semester 3 in Hong Kong as an example, four

students described the course using “boring,” and the other two interpreted it as “too many activities in class.” Although the negative perceptions were in minority, future evaluation studies such as focus group interviews can be conducted to understand negative views towards the subject and how to improve students’ learning experiences.

Overall, the findings in the current study are consistent with previous studies (e.g., 1, 4, 17) in that there were overwhelmingly positive responses in the form of both descriptors and metaphors. For the descriptors, several categories such as “helpful/beneficial,” “useful,” “inspiring/thought-provoking,” “fun/funny/interesting,” and “happy/joyful/enjoyable” repeatedly appeared across the past few years. For the metaphors, several objects like “light/light bulb/lighted candle/compass/map,” “(interesting/enjoyable/delightful) travel/journey/trip/tour,” and “mirror” were also commonly observed in the past years. The prevalence of similar positive feedback across years demonstrates that the subject of Service Leadership has been able to cultivate holistic development and leadership qualities in students. The overwhelming positive findings are also consistent with the findings from “objective outcome evaluation” where it relatively demonstrated a certain positive development for students who completed the subject (3).

The significant implications of the present study are as follows. First, our findings demonstrated that “Service Leadership” fostered students’ development in different areas including self-reflection, leadership competencies, moral character as well as caring disposition, and hence equipped them to become qualified leaders in the future. As the ideology of service leadership is well aligned with the post-industrial paradigm of leadership, university students were able to develop their leadership qualities oriented to the service society. Therefore, this study suggests that it is essential for the university to incorporate service leadership education in its curriculum. It confirms Hastings and Sunderman’s (32) viewpoints that higher education institutes and their educators should uphold the responsibility to nurture socially effective leaders.

Regarding the evaluation of subject effectiveness, the current study demonstrates several advantages of using descriptors and metaphor in a qualitative evaluation. From the analytical process, the use of

descriptors allows researchers to identify the features and nature of the subjective experiences efficiently. Metaphors also enable participants to efficiently encapsulate intangible meanings or abstract ideas into a concrete image or representation. It also facilitates researchers’ interpretation of participants’ subjective experiences and thoughts. As Shek, Siu and Merrick (17) put it, “using metaphor helps the students to express their mental representations regarding the effectiveness of the course, which at the same time allows researchers to access into students’ cognitive representation.” Of course, there is a need to assess the reliability of the coding and interpretations involved. According to Shek, Tang and Han (33), using intra- and inter-rater reliability procedures would be helpful.

Despite the inspiring and promising findings, several limitations are noted. Firstly, the present study only focused on addressing the perceived effectiveness of participating students. The evaluation of the subject was therefore significantly based on subjective but not objective approaches. Therefore, it is necessary to combine the current study with an additional assessment such as observation. However, as it is mentioned above, quantitative and qualitative evaluation findings in the existing literature conducted by the research team basically complement with each other. Secondly, the data collection conducted at a single point of time for each class. It is regarded less adequate than approaches such as pre- and post-test which can evaluate the course at different points of time (i.e., at the outset and the end of the semester) and investigate students’ behavioral changes after taking the course. Thirdly, as only limited explanations were obtained, it is challenging to ascertain the underlying reasons behind students’ positive comments. For instance, despite the fact that the majority of students perceived the course as “useful,” research staff could not fully understand how the course benefited the students. To obtain a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of students’ perception, in-depth interviews such as individual or focus group interviews could be incorporated into future researches. Nonetheless, the findings of this qualitative study demonstrate promising results for the effectiveness of the subject “Service Leadership” and the positive developments of participating students during the 2017/18 academic year.

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Ethical compliance

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

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