

# The effectiveness of a service leadership subject in Hong Kong: A qualitative evaluation study

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## Abstract

This study presented a qualitative evaluation of a credit-bearing, service leadership subject (2016/2017 academic year) at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. It drew on data collected from three courses carried out in different semesters and venues, and with different degree of intensity. Students ( $n = 76$  for the semester 1 course,  $n = 79$  for the semester 3 course,  $n = 64$  for the Cambodian summer camp) were invited to reflect on their learning experiences and report their perspectives towards the subject by using three descriptors and one metaphor. Findings demonstrated that the majority of students (more than 80%) evaluated the subject positively with positive perception of their learning experiences. They also perceived this service leadership subject to be effective to enhance their holistic development and nurture service leadership in them.

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

## Introduction

The contemporary world has gradually shifted from an industrial society that emphasizes manufacturing to a post-industrial society that emphasizes service (1-3). In Hong Kong, the services sector has occupied the dominant position with a contribution of more than 92% to Hong Kong GDP from 2008 to 2017 (4). This transformation of society has given rise to an evolving demand in leadership of future generation from directive and autocratic to collaborative and empowering (2). Only those who acquire good intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies besides their professional skills are able to provide high-quality services and thrive in the service economy (5).

Against this background, there have been a proliferation of theories and models in the field of effective leadership. For example, Conger and his

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colleagues (6-9) established a model of charismatic leadership, which perceives that leaders win reverence and trust from their followers not just because of the possessed authority and power but their extraordinary character.

Leaders should be a role model for their followers by exhibiting personal charisma such as an inspirational vision and impressive behavior. Greenleaf (10), as one of the pioneers, put forward the concept of servant leadership where he stressed on the power of leadership as a means to serve and empower followers and help them grow. However, Greenleaf's theory was argued by many as vague in definition and lacking of conceptualization and theorization (11). Similarly, the model of spiritual leadership also underscores qualities of altruistic love, hope, and faith in being a leader. As spiritual leaders, they are expected to create a sense of membership among the team, motivate followers and leaders themselves, and promote the psychological well-being of the whole organization (12, 13). However, it is argued that this model places less emphasis on the "functional abilities of leaders" (5). Another influential model is Astin and Astin's Social Change Model (14), which also breaks away from the traditional roles of leadership and aims at using leadership to promote positive social changes. This model comprises eight interdependent core values of leadership, i.e., "consciousness of self, congruence, commitment, collaboration, common purpose, controversy with civility, citizenship and change."

In this model, leadership is perceived as a developmental process rather than a fixed and static position (15). Studies have been carried out based on this perspective. For example, in a study aiming to examine the effectiveness of a 16-week, credit-bearing leadership course in an American university, the pre- and post-test results showed that college students, regardless of their age and gender, were able to develop more capabilities for socially responsible leaders, even more so for female students in terms of their development in the core values of collaboration and citizenship (16). In a similar vein, Haber and Komives' (17) quantitative study also confirmed that for university students, participation in college student organization, among others activities, contributed the most to nurturing socially responsible leaders. These

studies provided empirical evidence that leadership can be taught and trained at tertiary educational level.

Building on Chinese culture and context, Chung (18) carried forward the concept of service leadership and defined it as "satisfying needs by consistently providing quality personal service to everyone one comes into contact with, including one's self, others, groups, communities, systems, and environments." This notion was conceptualized as a 3Cs model that incorporates three major principles, i.e., competence, character, and care, in determining effective service leadership. In this model, the last two principles, character and care, were attached equal or even more importance than the principle of competence. There are seven core beliefs and several distinctive features developed within the model. For example, service leadership believes that everyone has the potential to be a leader, a perspective of which essentially distinguishes from the aforementioned charismatic leadership which underlines an idealized role of a leader (5, 18). Service leadership also holds the belief that "leadership effectiveness and service satisfaction are dependent on a leader or service provider possessing relevant situational task competencies plus being judged by superiors, peers, and subordinates as possessing character and exhibiting care" (18). It underlines traditional leadership skills and competences as well as character and caring disposition. Another note-worthy belief is that service leadership lays emphasis on a balanced attention given to the needs of self, others and systems, and does not necessarily underscore the precedence of others over self (5, 18, 19). In this sense, these scholars advanced the notion of servant leadership and spiritual leadership to service leadership by acknowledging that self-serving is also a type of service and also cannot be neglected (20). Self-leadership and self-reflection are also highlighted in the model of service leadership, as they facilitate leaders to constantly monitor the goals they set and motivate themselves to seek continuous improvement in leadership (5, 18). This notion, however, is not reflected in the model of servant leadership as well (5). As a service leadership model rooted in Chinese culture, it incorporates Chinese values of Buddhism and Confucianism such as harmony, inner peace, self-reflection, and concern for others (3). This service

leadership, as Chung and Bell (21) argued, is essential to the current service economy of Hong Kong.

Higher education is an important incubator to nurture future leaders through curriculum and projects (14). However, leadership education has often occupied a subordinate position in universities, and it has been considered inadequate at tertiary education level in reality (22, 23). In addition, there have been relatively fewer leadership programs that aim to nurture students' service leadership skills and beliefs oriented to our service-oriented society (2). In order to meet the high demand of service leaders in Hong Kong society, the Hong Kong Institute of Leadership and Management was founded to assist various stakeholders such as higher educational institutions and government branches to promote service leadership education and practice (24). Accordingly, the eight universities funded by the University Grants Committee (UGC) have then gradually introduced both credit-bearing and noncredit-bearing service leadership programs to bridge this gap (1). For these programs, the aforementioned 3Cs model has been established as a theoretical framework for practice (25).

The present study is based on the data collected from one of the Service Leadership subjects entitled "Service Leadership," which has been carried out in The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) since 2012/2013 academic year. This credit-bearing course aims to enhance undergraduate students' understanding of service leader, cultivate service leadership in them and promote the application of attributes of effective service leadership. To be specific, the intended learning outcomes are shown as below: "a) Understand the contemporary models of leadership with reference to the service sector, including their assertions, strengths and weaknesses; b) Demonstrate understanding of the basic leadership attributes intrinsic to effective service leaders; c) Reflect upon the need for developing the qualities of effective service leaders and their own leadership qualities; d) Appreciate the potential application of knowledge on effective service leadership gained in this subject to oneself" (26).

This subject has been evaluated by previous studies drawing upon both quantitative and qualitative methods, including objective outcome evaluation through pre- and post-tests and qualitative evaluation

through analyzing descriptors and metaphors, e.g. Shek and his team's evaluative work for this subject in 2013/2014 and 2014/2015 academic year respectively (2, 3, 24, 27-30). Overall, these studies have supported the effectiveness of the subject over the years as well as the positive influence the courses exerted on students. In the objective outcome evaluations, positive changes were found in participants' service leadership qualities, positive youth development qualities, and life satisfaction. For example, in a quasi-experimental study that involved both experiential and control groups, Lin and Shek (30) found that participation in this course contributed to great improvement in terms of service leadership attitude and knowledge as well as life satisfaction, which confirmed that service leadership could be trained. With reference to the studies of qualitative evaluation, results showed that the overwhelming majority of students perceived their learning experiences very positively. Many students considered the course with good instrumental value and were "useful" and "helpful" for personal development, while also providing guidance or reference to students within a meaningful and interesting learning environment (e.g., 2, 27). This subject has been conducted in different semesters, venues (e.g., Xi'an, Beijing, and Cambodia) and with different degrees of intensity. Many of these courses have been evaluated individually with regard to the effectiveness of the course and changes of students after participation. However, there has been a scarcity of research to take an overall perspective and compare the effectiveness of these courses within the same subject. This is the research gap the present study attempts to bridge.

For the present study, the overall dataset was based on three courses under the same subject, "Service Leadership," which resembled each other in content, syllabus, assessment, and intended learning outcomes, but were carried out in different time and venues. The first course was a regular, 13-week module conducted in the 1<sup>st</sup> semester of 2016/17 in PolyU. The second was a more intensive module with two lectures given each week and a duration of 6.5 weeks in total in the 3<sup>rd</sup> semester of the same academic year. The third engaged students in a two-week intensive teaching and learning summer camp in Cambodia with field visits and course attendance in the 3<sup>rd</sup> semester.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the subject and compare across the three courses by drawing on a qualitative evaluation. A quantitative evaluation is considered more adequate in generalizing findings, validating assumptions and generating patterns (31). However, it is often confined to prescribed variables, slicing up realities into discrete pieces (32). Qualitative evaluation, on the other hand, has the potential to capture the dynamics and complexity of a phenomenon, experiences, live stories and deep emotions, etc., all of which may not be easily reduced to numbers, statistics, and quantification (33). Therefore, it maintains a depth in understanding complex phenomena and multiple realities such as how respondents make sense of the social world (33, 34). Second, as it is more open-ended by nature, a qualitative study also has the strength of generating rich data of perspectives and experiences from informants without the risk of neglecting factors that may be critical in explaining the data (35). Moreover, it is able to provide researchers with a context for interpretation and analysis (34, 36). Third, a qualitative study often allows more flexibility in design and is able to accommodate different methods such as interviews, observation, and focus group interview (34). In the present study, we attempted to evaluate the effectiveness of the subject by investigating students' perceptions, attitudes, and learning experiences in this course. In order to obtain a deeper insight, a qualitative study is considered more appropriate for the present study. To be specific, students were invited to provide written responses containing three descriptors and one metaphor to reflect on their learning experiences and perceptions.

Descriptors, as a type of qualitative description, offer a straightforward way of eliciting data on people's views and experiences, and they bring researchers closer to the data (37). Metaphors can incorporate rationality and imagination, and they can associate cognitive and emotional domains, which allow us to capture intangible aspects in the respondents' experiences that would be more difficult to be otherwise grasped such as feelings and emotions (38-40). Therefore, it is considered to be a useful and complementary method for using descriptors. In addition, metaphors entail "culturally specific," meaning which can attend to feelings and emotions

within a context in evaluation (40). These reasons constitute the rationale of the employment of qualitative evaluation with descriptors and metaphors in the evaluation.

## **Methods**

As stated previously, the subject "Service Leadership" was conducted in semester 1, 3 and Cambodia summer camp in 2016/2017 academic year. Except the intensity and locations were different, the content of the three courses was the same. At the end of the course, the students who took these three courses were all invited to share their points of view and give feedback to the course by filling the Personal Reflection Form after they accomplished the lectures. To be specific, students were first asked to write down three descriptors (words or phrases) to depict their learning experiences and express their feelings or perceptions about this subject (e.g., helpful, joyful, boring, tough). Second, they were invited to come up with a metaphor (e.g., book, sea, beacon, journey) that can best reflect the characteristics of the subject or their learning experiences, along with a short explanation of why this specific metaphor was selected in order to facilitate interpretation in analysis. Before the data collection, voluntary consent forms were distributed to students to explore their voluntariness of participation. Students were informed about the research project, purpose of data collection, confidentiality of their feedback, and anonymity of their responses. This consent form also made it explicit that participation was entirely voluntary and they could withdraw at any stage in the research. There were 76, 79, 64 questionnaires collected from the course of semester 1, 3, and Cambodian summer camp respectively.

### *Data analysis*

Two researchers who did not participate in the teaching and data collection were invited to code the responses, which were transcribed from the Personal Reflection Form. With regard to the descriptors, if two words shared a similar meaning, they would be merged into one category (e.g., useful and helpful,

interesting and funny). This process of categorization was also applied to metaphors. However, metaphors were also broken down into different meaningful units if the short explanation of the metaphor entailed more than one meaningful unit. For example, a student used the metaphor “fitting room” with an elaboration that “this course provides a lot of idea on what attribute a good service leader should process, it likes the light in the room. This course also provides lots of chance for us to reflection, like mirror in the fitting room.” In this case, the interpretation included two meaningful units, i.e., “the light in the room” which was related to the fact that the courses offered them knowledge and guidance, and “mirror in the fitting room” which was concerned with the enhancement of self-reflection and self-awareness. Therefore, this metaphor was divided into two meaningful units.

Then the descriptors, metaphors as well as the derived meaningful units were all classified by their nature into four categories: “positive,” “neutral”,

“negative,” and “undecided.” The classification of descriptors was straightforward, while that of metaphors presented a more complex picture. The nature of a metaphor is depended on the nature of the derived meaningful units. For instance, the metaphor of “mother” entails positive meaning in a common sense. However, the student complemented it with an explanation that “sometimes it is really boring during the lecture, but I understand it is helpful and useful in my future”. According to the student, this metaphor included two meaningful units with one negative (“boring”) and one positive (“helpful and useful”). As the positive and negative units shared equal status, the metaphor of “mother” was considered neutral. If positive meaningful units outnumbered negative ones, the metaphor *per se* would be counted as positive, and *vice versa*. In addition, if those meaningful units were perceived as irrelevant, they would be classified into undecided.

**Table 1. Categorization of descriptors used by the participants to describe the course in S1 of 2016/2017 academic year**

Descriptors	Nature of the Response				Total
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Undecided	
Helpful to personal growth/Useful subjects/ useful to my development	37				
Interesting/Fun	32				
Inspiring/Encourage/Motivation/Enlightening	19				
Enjoyable/Relaxing/Joyful/Happy/No burden	17				
Caring/Warm/Full of love/Supportive/Love/Empathy	17				
Interactive	14				
Meaningful/Educative	13				
Informative/Knowledgeable/Fruitful/Comprehensive/ Gaining lots of knowledge	13				
Impressive/Unforgettable	7				
Improvement	7				
Active/Lively/Vivid/Energetic	5				
Higher-level thinking/Involve many critical thinking	5				
Practical/Able to apply daily/Real life experience	4				
Other positive responses	20				
Participation/Cooperation/Mission& Vision/Night/ Unit of my group		5			
Learn Caring/Moral character/ Service leadership		4			
Unlike any others/Special/Challenging		3			
Other Neutral responses		6			
Total Count (N):	210	18	0	0	228
Total Count (%):	92.11	7.89	0	0	100

**Table 2. Categorization of descriptors used by the participants to describe the course in S3 of 2016/2017 academic year**

Descriptors	Nature of the Response				Total
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Undecided	
Helpful/Useful/Beneficial	54				
Interesting/Fun/Funny	43				
Meaningful/Thought-provoking/Educational	21				
Informative/Knowledgeable/Fruitful/Rich content/Plentiful content	18				
Enjoy/Joyful/Happy/Delightful/Exhilarating/Relaxing	17				
Interactive/Engaging	15				
Broaden my horizon/Facilitates self-development/Develop perspectives/refresh mind	9				
Patience/Nice/Enthusiastic/Passionate	8				
Impressive/Impression/Unforgettable	7				
Inspiring/Encouraging/Enlightening	6				
Valuable/Worth learning	4				
Practical/Related to daily life	4				
Exciting/Excited	3				
Thankful	2				
Satisfaction/Fulfilled	2				
Other positive responses	17				
Unexpected		2			
Boring			2		
Too lengthy			1		
Hard to practice			1		
Busy to complete assignments			1		
Total Count (N):	230	2	5	0	237
Total Count (%):	97.05	0.84	2.11	0	100

**Table 3. Categorization of descriptors used by the participants to describe the course in Cambodia summer camp of 2016/2017 academic year**

Descriptors	Nature of the Response				Total
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Undecided	
Interesting/Fun/Funny	29				
Helpful/Useful/Beneficial	25				
Inspiring/Encouraging/Motivating/Heuristic/Eye-opening	17				
Achievement/Personal growth/Improvement	14				
Informative/Fruitful/Knowledgeable/content-rich	13				
Meaningful/Reflective	10				
Enjoyable/Joyful/Happy/Delightful/Relaxing	9				
Friendly/Nice/Patient/Caring	7				
Interactive	5				
Thankful/Appreciate/Grateful	4				
Impressive/Unforgettable/Memorable	4				
Great/Amazing/Wonder/Well	4				
Honest	2				
Easy to understand	2				
Practical/Learn and work it out	2				
Other positive responses	15				
Communication/Collaboration/Self-confidence/Self-esteem/Experience/ Moral characters		14			
Know myself/Understand history/Understand Interpersonal competence		5			
Special/Complicated/Directly		3			
Hot			2		
Tough			2		
Tired			1		
Sad			1		
Too much lesson time			1		
Keep saying			1		
Total Count (N):	162	22	8	0	192
Total Count (%):	84.38	11.46	4.17	0	100

**Table 4. Categorization of the metaphors used by the participants to describe the course in S1 of 2016/2017 academic year**

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/Light/Lamp/Compass/Google map/Road sign	20					20				
Burger/ Buffet/ Picnic/ Fertilizer/ Water/ Battery/ Lasagna/Tree	13	2				15		2		
Tour/Trip/Journey	13					18				
Book/ Handbook/ Notes/ Dictionary/ Smartphone	7					9				
A surprise present/ Happy subject/3D movie/Puzzle	4					6				
Treasure/ Treasure bag	2					2				
Marathon/ A long hiking path	2					2				
A catalyst	1					2				
Fitting room	1					2				
A fairytale	1					1				
A butterfly	1					1				
Rainbow	1					1				
Other positive responses	8					9				
Total Count (N):	74	2	0	0	76	89	0	2	0	91
Total Count (%):	97.37	2.63	0	0	100	97.80	0	2.20	0	100

To examine the intra-rater and inter-rater reliabilities and improve validity, 20 descriptors and 20 metaphors were randomly selected from each course respectively. For the intra-rater reliability, the researcher who initially coded the responses recoded the randomly selected items in a different time. For the inter-rater reliability, the researcher who was not involved in the initial coding coded the randomly selected items independently.

## Results

Table 1, 2 and 3 show the codes of descriptors collected from semester 1, semester 3 and Cambodia summer camp in 2016/2017 academic year, as well as their nature and classifications. The results in Table 1

(semester 1) reveal that 210 out of 228 descriptors (92.11%) were positive, and only 18 descriptors (7.89%) were considered neutral. The most frequently mentioned positive descriptors included “helpful/useful (to personal growth),” “interesting/fun,” “inspiring/encourage/motivation/enlightening” and “enjoyable/relaxing/joyful”. The intra-rater percent agreement reached 85% and the inter-rater agreement percentage reached 95%.

The data collected in semester 3 course generated a total of 237 descriptors, which were shown in table 2. Positive descriptors accounted for 97.05% of all feedback. The percentage of neutral descriptors was 0.84% and negative was 2.11%. The most frequently used three positive descriptors were “helpful/useful/beneficial” “interesting/fun”, “thought-provoking/educational” and “informative/knowledgeable”, the first three of which were similar to those in

semester 1 course. The intra-rater and inter-rater agreements were 90% and 85% respectively.

According to Table 3 (Cambodia summer camp), 84.38% (n = 162) of the descriptors were considered as positive, 11.46% (n = 22) as neutral, and 4.17% (n = 8) as negative. The categories “hot”, “tough”, and “tired” comprised the majority in the negative descriptors. The intra-rater agreement and inter-rater congruence in Cambodia summer camp reached 95% and 90% respectively.

For the metaphors, 76 raw metaphors were collected from semester 1 (see Table 4). As shown in Table 4, 74 (97.37%) metaphors were regarded as positive, such as “light,” “tour/trip/journey,” and “book,” while two metaphors were perceived as neutral. The 76 raw metaphors were broken down into 91 meaningful items, with 89 responses (97.8%) considered positive and two responses (2.2%) considered negative. The first category, mentioned 20 times, was the most frequently mentioned one by students. It indicated that the course had given them directions and guidance in various dimensions in life and helped them grow. Three examples are listed below:

- **Road sign:** “Service leadership, stress on not only personal growth, but also other's growth. It guide you the right way and sense of achievement!”
- **Light:** “It guides me to understand what a leader should be equipped and give me the tips and clues of how to become a successful leader...”
- **Compass in life:** “My programme (Hotel mgt) is something related to service leadership, which is knowledgeable for my career path.”

The second category, mentioned by 15 students, emphasized that the course was informative which nourished them:

- **Tasty burger:** “A burger consists a wide range of ingredients, just like the course consisting different parts of knowledge.”
- **Fertilizer:** “If I were a tree, fertilizer can bring me nutrient to make me grow strong.”

Like the course inspired me how to be a better person comprehensively.”

- **Buffet:** “This course is very informative that provide a lot of useful information regarding service leadership which enrich my knowledge base.”

The third category was mentioned by 13 students, which contained 18 positive meaningful units. This category implied that the subject was a joyful and memorable experience, which enriched students’ knowledge and broadened their horizons:

- **An enjoyable tour:** “Every teacher just like every different tour guide, leading us to walk around and understand every scenic spot. All the content is interesting as well as helpful.”
- **A wonderful journey:** “I am able to learn more about service leadership and it enriches my horizon.”
- **Wonderful journey:** “In our daily life, we seldom try to study about how we control our emotion, how we care others. In fact, it is a good way for me to review how we treat others appropriately. It is a matter of caring about other's feeling. Try not to just care about own feeling & interest. This is selfish and not a good manner.”

Table 5 presents the 79 raw metaphors collected from the semester 3 course, and 91 derived meaningful units. Among the 79 raw metaphors, 75 were positive, comprising 94.94% of the total. There were two raw metaphors (2.53%) regarded as neutral and 2 (2.53%) as undecided. With regard to the derived meaning units, 84 out of 91 were positive, accounting for 92.31% of the overall units. There were two meaningful units counted as neutral, four as negative, and one as undecided, which accounted for 2.20%, 4.40%, and 1.10% respectively. The first category was mentioned by 19 students. It conveyed the perspective that the course provided direction and guidance to them:

- **A compass in life:** “I learnt a lot of valuable leadership qualities in this course. These elements are important to direct my future road to be a successful leader of self and others.”



- **Torch:** “It help to light up the life and guide the road of future.”
- **A beacon:** “It helps us to find out and understand our goals, and leads us to wherever we want to reach.”

The next category, which was mentioned by 18 students, reflected the fact that the course was rich in knowledge and useful for their future:

- **Sandwiches:** “It contains many different kind of information and inspired me a lot about my future.”
- **Unforgettable buffet:** “There are so many useful information to put in my mind, it is so full.”
- **Fertile soil:** “The course itself provides us with lots of knowledge which it good for our personal growth just like fertile soil which provides lots of nutrients to the plants for them to grow healthily.”

**Table 5. Categorization of the metaphors used by the participants to describe the course in S3 of 2016/2017 academic year**

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/Guiding star/Beacon Compass/Map/Torch	19					20				
Buffet/Seafood/An egg/Bread/Sandwiches/Water	18					20	1	2		
Enjoyable tour/Interesting journey/Voyage	10					10				
Orientation camp/Party/Social media/Interactive forum	7					8				
Dictionary/Wikipedia/Guideline/Encyclopedia	5					5				
Enjoyable workshop/Psychological emotional consultation	3					4				
Rainbow	2					3				
Tool box	1					2		1		
Flower	1					1				
Other positive responses	9					9				
Mother		1				1		1		
People in my life		1					1			
Moon				1					1	
Causal relationship				1		1				
Total Count (N):	75	2	0	2	79	84	2	4	1	91
Total Count (%):	94.94	2.53	0	2.53	100	92.31	2.20	4.40	1.10	100

**Table 6. Categorization of the metaphors used by the participants to describe the course in Cambodia summer camp of 2016/2017 academic year**

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
Tree/Bamboo/ Palm tree	9					9				
Dictionary/Guidebook/ Light bulb/Lamp	8					9				
Tour/Journey	5					6				
Water/ Fountain	4					4				
Dinner/ Coconut/Egg	4					5				
Lamb/Lion/Cow	3					3				
Telescope/ Magnifying glass	2					2				
Bingo/Game	2					4				
Heart/Love	2					2				
Road signs/ Lego instruction	2					2				
Color pens	1					1				
Motorcycle	1					1				
Other positive responses	12					13				
Oven/ Microwave oven		2				2		2		
Tight		1				1		1		
Other neutral responses		5					5			
Urgent			1					1		
Total Count (N):	55	8	1	0	64	64	5	4	0	73
Total Count (%):	85.94	12.50	1.56	0	100	87.67	6.85	5.48	0	100

The third frequent metaphors involved perceptions towards the overall learning experiences. Similar to the semester 1 course, their learning experiences were perceived as interactive, interesting, enjoyable and useful:

- **An interesting journey:** “The knowledge taught in this course are new for me. And it makes me have an unforgettable experience.”
- **Life tour:** “It helps us to understand ourselves in different aspects based on the three components and we did self-reflection regarding to our past to our future.”
- **A mysterious tour group:** “I have to experience unknown, yet interesting inter-

active activities in each lesson with students I'm originally not familiar with, which is similar to that of a tour group.”

Table 6 demonstrates the 64 raw metaphors and 73 derived meaningful units. 85.94% (n = 55) raw metaphors were regarded as positive, while 12.50% (n = 8) of metaphors were seen as neutral, and 1.56% (n = 1) as negative. With regard to the breakdown of meaningful units, the proportion of positive ones was 87.67% (n = 64). For the rest units, five meaningful units were classified as neutral and four as negative, and the proportion is 6.85% and 5.48% respectively. The first category in table 6 suggested that students achieved personal growth via this course:

- **Tree:** “At the beginning of lecture, we know very little like a small sand seedling, and after having more than 10 lectures. We learnt much more and our mind is like a tree that grows into very strong.”
- **Palm tree:** “I learnt a lot and discovered that everyone has their own strength and we are unique, that everyone is born to be a leader, just like palm tree that grows tall and have a lots of uses.”
- **Bamboo:** “Growth fast. Can withstand in extreme environment. Adapt to change.”

The second category referred to the fact that this course gave them direction, meaning, and depth in life and enabled them to be on the right track:

- **A guidebook:** “It has many principles and practical insights for me to refer to when I meet adversity or lose confidence of myself. I will survive negative self-perception and develop a better-me. This course will guide me.”
- **Light bulb:** “It gave me a direction to become a good service leader so that I can set appropriate goal to improve myself.”
- **Road signs:** “As road signs help drives to find the way and guide them, so does this course.”

The third category was mentioned by five students. Similar to the other two courses, students regarded the learning process as a meaningful and joyful journey:

- **Journey:** “The course just gave me some very inspiring experience. All the experience are learning for me and it does on me during my travelling experience.”
- **An enjoy trip:** “I made a lot of friends and visited places that I have never been before. So it is a precious and enjoyable trip.”
- **An enjoyable tour:** “The course is based on the trip to Cambodia and it's really enjoyable to learn with RUPP students and relate what we learned to reality in Cambodia. This course itself is full of knowledge also.”

It is noted that the aforementioned three courses showed high similarity in terms of students' perspectives. Meanwhile, the metaphors perceived as neutral and negative from Cambodia summer camp drew our attention. Examples of neutral and negative metaphors are given as below:

- **Oven:** “The classroom is so hot, just like an oven. Also the teachers are passionate and the students are energetic, thus we are enthusiastic as a heat and warm oven.”
- **Tight:** “It is quite an intensive course. We learnt 13 lecture in less than two weeks. It is quite a lot of knowledge and we also presented on our topic which give us more in-depth understanding.”
- **Urgent:** “In the few days, we have finished our 13 lecture and a group presentation, and many course homework, so the time is quiet limit.”

The intra-rater agreement percentage of metaphors for semester 1, semester 3 and Cambodia summer camp is 100%, 95%, and 100% respectively. For inter-rater reliability, the percentage reached 95%, 90%, and 100% respectively. The inter-rater and intra-rater agreement percentages of both descriptors and metaphors suggested a high reliability in coding.

A chi-square test was conducted to examine if there was any statistical difference in the nature of feedback between the three courses. To be specific, we divided the descriptors into two major categories, positive and non-positive, the latter of which combines neutral, negative and undecided responses. The result showed that there was a significant difference between the three with respect to the descriptors ( $\chi^2 = 22.31, p < .05$ ). A post hoc test was run to explore which cells were significantly different, as  $\chi^2$  is an omnibus test. It can be seen from the result that the adjusted residual for positive feedback was -4.3 (smaller than -2.0) for Cambodian summer camp, which indicates that the number of positive responses were significantly smaller than expected. The same procedure applied to metaphors as well. It generated the  $\chi^2$  value of 6.42 and  $p$  value of .04, which also showed an association between the three courses and the nature of students' feedback. The post hoc test

demonstrated that the adjusted residual for the Cambodian summer camp, positive responses was -2.1, and the major difference lay in between Cambodian and semester 1 courses (adjusted residual = 2.3).

## Discussion

The present study drew on a qualitative approach to evaluate the effectiveness of the subject “Service Leadership” and its influences on students in order to improve our understanding of students’ learning experiences and the subject itself. The qualitative findings demonstrated that the positive feedback was predominant with more than 80% of students in all the three courses evaluating the subject positively. Positive responses reached more than 90% for the semester 1 and 3 courses. The overwhelmingly positive feedback provided evidence that the well-designed curriculum and projects in higher education are a solid way to improve students’ service leadership (14).

According to the written descriptors, the three courses shared the similarity that students considered the subject as useful, helpful or beneficial to them. Other commonly mentioned descriptors include “interesting,” “funny” and “enjoyable,” which denoted the courses had engaged students in a relaxing, delightful and interactive learning atmosphere; “inspiring,” “thought-provoking,” “eye-opening” and “heuristic,” which expressed that students had broadened their horizons through attending these courses; “informative” and “knowledgeable”, which were consonant with one of the objectives of the subject, i.e., imparting essential knowledge in the field of service leadership to students.

As to metaphors, the most frequently reported positive category was related to concepts or instruments that give directions, such as compass, map, beacon, lighthouse, and road sign. Based on students’ explanations, these metaphors entail two different meanings: one is that these courses cultivated leadership in them and led them to the right path of how to be a successful service leader, and the other is that these courses directed their way to a successful

career path in the future. Another common category shared by the three courses is “tree,” “battery,” “buffet,” “seafood,” “bread” and “sandwiches”, which all denoted that students had achieved personal development as these courses had provided “nutrients,” “fertilizers” or “essential knowledge” for students to grow. They also inspired them and added a competitive advantage to their profiles. In this sense, this category echoes the written descriptors such as “informative/knowledgeable” and “inspiring/thought-provoking.” The third noticeable broad category shared by the three cohorts of students is that the learning experiences were an “enjoyable tour,” “interesting journey” or a “party,” which demonstrated that this subject was featured with an active and relaxing learning mode. Among the overwhelmingly positive feedback, there were several negative comments, especially in the Cambodian summer course such as “hot,” “oven,” “tight,” and “tough.” Their further elaborations of the metaphors showed that the negative meaning units were often associated with the intensive teaching and learning modes and students’ inability to adapt to the hot climate in Cambodia during a short period of time. Despite the several negative comments, the overall findings demonstrated the effectiveness of the subject “Service Leadership” in promoting students’ holistic development and nurturing service leadership qualities. Students thought very high of this subject and of their learning experiences. The positive responses are consistent with previous studies (e.g., 27, 41), which centered around the instrumental and practical value of this subject, positive emotions emerged in this learning experiences, interesting and interactive teaching and learning styles, rich content, and personal development in competence, character, and caring disposition. In a sense, students’ comments also echo that of previous objective outcomes evaluation (e.g., 2, 24) that participation in this subject facilitated personal growth and helped them thrive as it equipped them with necessary knowledge in service leadership and promoted caring disposition such as “how to treat others appropriately,” and thus contributed to development in service leadership qualities and positive youth qualities.

In addition, this study adds to the literature by demonstrating the values of using descriptors and metaphors in evaluating a program. First,

descriptors and metaphors provide a context for readers, and hence can facilitate interpretation and secondary analysis (40). Second, metaphors are valuable in exploring informants' lived experiences as it attends to the depth of emotions and other intangible aspects in their lives (38, 42). Third, compared with interviews or ethnographic observation, using descriptors and metaphors is efficient in evaluating effectiveness of a program, especially when dealing with large cohorts of informants. It allows them to encapsulate their learning experiences and complex emotions into small linguistic units.

Despite the overall encouraging and positive findings, there are several limitations of this study. Firstly, the efficiency of using descriptors and metaphors may bring about omission or misrepresentation in interpretation and analysis, as this method only allows limited extent of elaboration from informants. For example, students described the course as "useful" or "helpful". Researchers nonetheless had limited understanding that in what ways the course was beneficial to those students without their further elaboration. In order to reach a more comprehensive understanding of students' learning experiences, in-depth interviews or focus group interviews should be involved in future studies. Second, as it was not designed as a pre- and post-test quantitative evaluation, the present study generated limited data on understanding in what aspects and to what extent students grew through attending the course. Despite the aforementioned limitations, the present study provides solid empirical evidence that the subject "Service Leadership" is effective in promoting students' knowledge and competence in service leadership, and contributes to their personal growth.

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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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