Promotion of service leadership: An evaluation of a service-learning subject in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

In 2014-2015, a total of 88 university students enrolled in a course entitled "Service Leadership through Serving Children and Families with Special Needs". To evaluate the effectiveness of this course, students were asked to complete a subjective evaluation form at the end of the course. Consistent with prior findings, students perceived the subject positively and found this subject to be beneficial for their personal growth. The present study showed how university students' leadership qualities could be promoted through service- learning.

Introduction

Service-Learning

Service-learning has received increased attention in higher education (Lim & Bloomquist, 2015). It is a type of experiential teaching that serves the community by identifying the needs of different stakeholders, combining classroom instruction and guiding activities for reflection, with the aim of enhancing students' learning experience and cultivating their sense of citizenship through serving the community (Sandaran, 2012). A major characteristic of service learning is the establishment of a reciprocally beneficial relationship among the stakeholders.

Specifically, community with identified needs receive service from students, (Lim & Bloomquist, 2015; Lovat & Clement, 2016), while students enjoy *"a credit-bearing educational experience in which [they] (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility"* (Bringle & Hatcher, 2006, p.12).

In service learning, students are asked to integrate and put their academic knowledge and skills into practice, which help them pursue their own career aspirations (Bialka & Havlik, 2016; Lovat & Clement, 2016). This teaching strategy has shown to have positive impact on students. For example, students' sense of caring, empathy, and altruism are enhanced through this non-traditional teaching and learning approach (Chien, Liao, Walters, & Lee, 2016). By linking theory and learning experience throughout the service delivery, students are able to critically reflect on and evaluate their own values and beliefs, which further boost their development in the emotional, social, and cognitive aspects (Cashman & Seifer, 2008). Through developing, planning, and implementing service activities, students learn how to identify the actual needs of the service recipient, design corresponding activities, and carry out the prepared activities. Furthermore, they obtain skills in liaising with different stakeholders and reaching an agreement in the context of collaboration (Ryan, 2012). To conclude, service learning provides opportunities for students to develop multicultural competencies (Bialka & Havlik, 2016) and nurture students' civic engagement and responsibilities (Konwershi & Nashman, 2002).

Service Leadership

In an era of a service-driven economy, fresh graduates are expected to possess not only professional academic knowledge, but also "soft" skills such as intrapersonal and interpersonal competences (Shek & Leung, 2015). They are expected to be equipped with leadership abilities, like knowing others' needs, demonstrating sincerity, and managing relationship with others in their workplaces and economic settings (Shek & Leung, 2015). With this in mind, the Service Leadership and Management (SLAM) Model was introduced by the Hong Kong Institute of Service Leadership and Management. Its philosophy is to develop leadership capabilities in students to enable them to provide any type of service with care and competence (Rosenkranz, 2012; Lim & Bloomquist, 2015; Lovat & Clement, 2016). According to the SLAM model, service leadership "is about satisfying needs by consistently providing quality personal service including one's self, others, groups, communities, systems, and environments. A service leader is a

ready, willing and on-the-spot entrepreneur who possesses relevant task competencies. They will be judged by superiors, peers, subordinates, and followers to exhibit appropriate character strengths and a caring social disposition" (Chung, 2011). In other words, service leaders are expected to liaise with different parties and provide services to the people in need by taking advantage of their different competences, such as caring, self-improvement, and moral competence (Shek & Leung, 2015).

Within this framework, effective leadership consists of competencies, moral character, and caring disposition ($E=MC^2$). Chung (2011) noted that these are essential elements for effective service leaders, who have the ability to not only lead others to achieve their goals, but also uphold high moral values and show empathy and love to their service recipients.

Promoting Service Leadership through Service Learning

Considering the increasing demand for effective service leaders, PolyU has designed a 3-credit course entitled "Service Leadership through Serving Children and Families with Special Needs" with the support of the Victor and William Fung Foundation. Students taking this course are asked to apply the service leadership knowledge and skills they learn in class, like $E=MC^2$, to the community. Upon completion of the course, students are expected to be able to a) address the needs of the service recipients through service delivery; b) link their service experiences with academic course materials; c) increase openness to the diversities of the communities; d) appreciate and respect people from diverse backgrounds; e) integrate academic learning (e.g., knowledge on service leadership) into the service experience and activities; f) illustrate moral characters through service delivery; g) apply academic skills and knowledge when handling difficulties in the service setting; and h) reflect on their service leadership qualities through service learning; and collaborate with different parties (e.g., students, teachers, family and community partners) when preparing and delivering service. Previous studies have shown that students reported positive changes after taking a service leadership course (Shek & Liang, 2015; Shek, Liang, & Zhu, 2016; Shek, Lin, & Liu, 2014; Shek, Lin, Liu, & Law, 2014a; Shek, Lin, Liu, & Law, 2014b; Shek, Law, & Liu, 2015). However, little is known whether these positive effects were due to learning through the experiential education approach of service learning. This study attempts to assess students' perception on their learning experience, in terms of curriculum content, lecturers, and subject effectiveness. Furthermore, the effect of this course in nurturing university students' leadership skill and cultivating them to be a future service leader is explored.

Methodology

The study was conducted in the 2014-15 academic year, in which a total of 88 students enrolled in the course "Service Leadership through Serving Children and Families with Special Needs". In this course, students were asked to deliver 40 hours of service to adolescents with emotional and behavioral problems from two local secondary schools.

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the results, multiple data sources were collected. First, during the final workshop of the course, students were invited to complete a 38-item course outcome evaluation form, which assessed the course in three different aspects, including perceptions on the program (10 items), perceptions on the lecturers (10 items), and the effectiveness of the program (18 items). Second, qualitative data were selected from students' reflective journals and further discussed. Descriptive statistics were derived using SPSS version 23.

Results

The descriptive statistics and internal consistency of each aspect are shown in Table 1. In general, students perceived the course positively, as the percentage of a rating of 4 or above on a 5-point Likert scale ranged from 55.7% to 86.4% for the various items measured. About 83% of students reported that this course has clear objectives, and a majority of students (over 80%) found that the lecturers demonstrated professional skills and knowledge and were well-prepared for the course. Also, students expressed that this course was able to help improve their leadership skills, such as social competence (85.2%), emotional competence (73.9%), and critical thinking skills (77.3%). Overall, they found that this course helped them become successful service leaders (72.7%).

Apart from completing a subjective outcome evaluation form, students' reflective journals were analyzed using qualitative approaches, such as identifying themes and setting up codes. Results show that students became more aware of other people's needs, and were able to apply the major components of service leadership through service delivery.

Table 1. Summary of students' perceptions toward the subject (N=88)

Item	Mean	N (%)
Curriculum content (α = .93)		
1. The objectives of the curriculum are very clear.	3.89 (.58)	73 (83.0%)
2. The content design of the curriculum is very good.	3.52(.68)	49 (55.7%)
3. The activities were carefully arranged.	3.63(.70)	57 (64.7%)
4. The classroom atmosphere was very pleasant.	3.89(.60)	71 (80.7%)
5. There was much peer interaction amongst the students.	3.92(.68)	66 (75.0%)
6. I participated in the class activities actively (including	3.93(.64)	71 (80.7%)
7. I was encouraged to do my best.	3.90(.64)	65 (73.9%)
8. The learning experience enhanced my interests towards	3.66(.77)	60 (68.2%)
9. Overall speaking, I have a very positive evaluation on the	3.68(.69)	59 (67.1%)
10. On the whole, I like this course very much.	3.64(.73)	59 (67.0%)
Lecturer (α = .95)		
11. The lecturer(s) had a good mastery of the course.	3.97(.58)	72 (81.8%)
12. The lecturer(s) was (were) well prepared for the lessons.	4.06(.61)	74 (84.1%)
13. The teaching skills of the lecturer(s) were good.	4.01(.62)	72 (81.8%)
14. The lecturer(s) showed good professional attitudes.	4.05(.64)	74 (84.1%)
15. The lecturer(s) was (were) very involved.	4.08(.59)	76 (86.4%)
16. The lecturer(s) encouraged students to participate in the	4.08(.63)	76 (86.3%)
17. The lecturer(s) cared for the students.	4.07(.60)	75 (85.2%)
18. The lecturer(s) was (were) ready to offer help to students	4.14(.65)	75 (85.2%)
19. The lecturer(s) had much interaction with the students.	4.05(.59)	75 (85.2%)
20. Overall speaking, I have a very positive evaluation on the	4.11(.67)	73 (82.9%)
Subject benefit (α = .97)		
21. It has enhanced my social competence.	3.97(.69)	75 (85.2%)
22. It has improved my ability in expressing and handling my	3.82(.80)	65 (73.9%)
23. It has enhanced my critical thinking.	3.81(.66)	68 (77.3%)
24. It has increased my competence in making sensible and	3.86(.66)	69 (78.4%)
25. It has helped me make ethical decisions.	3.89(.72)	69 (78.4%)
26. It has strengthened my resilience in adverse conditions.	3.81(.77)	63 (71.6%)
27. It has strengthened my self-confidence.	3.82(.77)	64 (72.8%)
28. It has helped me face the future with a positive attitude.	3.82(.78)	66 (75.0%)
29. It has enhanced my love for life.	3.65(.77)	57 (64.8%)
30. It has helped me explore the meaning of life.	3.58(.71)	55 (62.5%)
31. It has enhanced my ability of self-leadership.	3.76(.73)	61 (69.4%)
32. It has helped me cultivate compassion and care for others.	3.84(.77)	68 (77.2%)

Note: All items yielded positive responses (i.e., ratings above 4). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = unhelpful, 2 = not very helpful, 3 = slightly helpful, 4 = helpful, 5 = very helpful.

Table 1. (con't)

Item	Mean (SD)	N (%)
33. It has helped me enhance my character strengths	3.80(.78)	65 73.9%)
34. It has enabled me to understand the importance of situational task competencies, character strength and caring disposition in successful leadership.	3.99(.70)	73 (82.9%)
35. It has promoted my sense of responsibility in serving the	3.91(.71)	71 (80.7%)
36. It has promoted my overall development.	3.86(.73)	69 (78.4%)
37. The theories, research and concepts covered in the course have enabled me to understand the characteristics of	3.81(.74)	64 (72.7%)
38. The theories, research and concepts covered in the course have helped me synthesize the characteristics of	3.80(.79)	64 (72.7%)

Note: All items yielded positive responses (i.e., ratings above 4). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = unhelpful, 2 = not very helpful, 3 = slightly helpful, 4 = helpful, 5 = very helpful.

For example:

Demonstrating care and compassion

- "Putting ourselves into others' shoes is difficult because we always have our own stands and opinions. This course helped us improve our social competence and interpersonal skills. I found that empathy is very important in forming our social network and communicating with others."

Showing respect to others

- "After getting feedback from the teachers and the service recipients, we made adjustments to our activities. I realized that being respectful and having effective and active listening skills are very important if we would like to improve on our service quality."
- "I think being respectful is very important when we conduct the service activities. We need to get in touch with secondary school students. If we show our genuine respect and take proactive action on them, they will be more willing to participate in our activities."

Strengthening their sense of self

- "When I was conducting the service activities, I tried to be active and respond to my students quickly in order to let them feel comfortable in an unfamiliar environment. After being a helper for several times, I found myself more confident in communicating with my service recipients."
- "Before taking this course, I did not think I could be a leader. However, after this course, I think that everyone can be a leader and show his or her leadership in any context. Leadership is very important in our daily lives."

Developing moral competence

- "Having moral character is very important for my future career as a nurse, since I will be handling many patients and their medical records. I should respect my patients and their records the same way I treated my service recipients and protected their privacy."

Increasing awareness of civic responsibilities

- "If the school or service recipients still need my help in the future, I will help them immediately, as I really care about their needs. I think I should bear greater responsibility when providing service, compared to voluntary work."
- "From my point of view, contributing to society is not just pursuing social responsibility or higher profit. The crucial thing is to help the needy when we have the ability and availability."
- "In my opinion, social responsibility and contribution are crucial. We should help the needy no matter what."

Better preparation for their future career

- "From participating in the service, I learned that I should not interact with everyone using the same communication method or skill. I learned to be more flexible. I will apply what I learned in this course to my future career."
- "As an engineer, I should continue to constantly strive to improve others' lives; as a citizen, I am obliged to help those in need, since we are part of the same society."

The qualitative findings above provide evidence for the improvement of students' personal growth in terms of intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies and the connection between the course and service experience. The results support the integration effects of service learning and service leadership on students' learning outcomes.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study is to assess how service leadership courses promote positive changes among university students in terms of leadership qualities, moral character, and caring disposition. Empirical findings support the positive effects of service leadership and service learning. Results also shed light on possible directions for future research to refine and expand on present findings.

The course "Service Leadership through Serving Children and Families with Special Needs" offers a valuable opportunity for university students to learn about service learning and service leadership. Data collected from both qualitative

(students' reflection journals) and quantitative (students' subjective outcome evaluation) approaches lead support to the positive outcomes of service learning (i.e., development of students' interpersonal and intrapersonal competence), which are beneficial to transforming students into successful service leaders. Specifically, the quantitative results show that the majority of students responded positively toward the course, and the qualitative comments are constructive, clearly showing the positive effects of learning about leadership attributes through students' reflective journals. These results demonstrate the improvement in university students' leadership competencies, including moral competence, social competence and caring dispositions, as well as leadership effectiveness ($E=MC^2$) after they have taken this course. Such positive impacts show that service leadership can provide new insights and help nurture university students to become future service leaders who are equipped with various competencies.

Given the service-driven economy and the demand of service leader, university students in Hong Kong are expected to equip themselves with different leadership competencies, so they can readily take on challenges in this ever-changing society. With the support of the SLAM initiative, service learning programs are being implemented in tertiary education sectors to prepare university students to become future leaders armed with various competencies, social responsibilities, and an ethic of service. In Hong Kong, there are only a few tailor-made service leadership courses that aim at serving underprivileged children and families with special needs, and the course in the present study is one of them. Our findings reflect that leadership qualities and competencies are well-incorporated into the course and delivered through service activities. The hands-on application of knowledge taught in the classroom is clearly, concretely, and systematically connected to society. The sustained commitment to social justice and civic responsibilities demonstrated by students who have completed this course provides evidence of the benefits of learning about service leadership.

Service learning has been adopted by a growing number of higher education institutions and universities in North America and Asia (Ho & Lee, 2012; Lee, 2011; Lim & Bloomquist, 2015; Ngai, 2006; Rosenkranz, 2012; Vogel, Seifer, & Gelmon, 2010). It would certainly be beneficial if faculty members could continue to explore how service leadership can be applied to nurture students who might not be ready when entering the workforce. More research on the impact of service leadership among university students should be carried out by adopting a longitudinal design. Also, future study should be conducted to extend the understanding on factors related to the impact of service learning among university students. For example, whether students' attitude towards service

leadership discipline varies by their discipline or how the content, design and implementation of the service activities influence service effectiveness.

Although the findings of current study are encouraging, two limitations should be noted. First, the sample size was small, as there were only 88 subjective outcome evaluation forms collected. A larger sample should be recruited in the future. Second, students' reflective journal was one of the assessment methods being employed in this course. Other evaluation methods, such as interview, focus group, or longitudinal research can be used in future studies.

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