

*Developing Students' Transferable Skills Through Service Leadership of  
Inclusive Learning Community*

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**Abstract**

One important aim of higher education is to develop students' attributes and skills that can be applied in their future career. Apart from contributing to employability, the skills students gain during university experience can enhance personal and social capacity and prepare students to take leadership roles in the community. This paper presents a study examining the development of university students' transferable skills through active participation in an inclusive learning community consisting of adolescents with and without special educational needs. University students received training to take service leadership role of the learning community as part of a general education capstone course. The study adopted a mixed-methods design. Pre- and post-course questionnaire survey and follow-up interviews were conducted with a sample of 27 university students enrolled in the course. Data analysis revealed a statistically significant increase in the scores of attributes related to appreciation of diversity, respect, contribution to society, and civic engagement after completing the course. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data indicated demonstration of service leadership skills, enhanced understanding of social inclusion, and cultivation of community engagement values. Students demonstrated empathy, respect and effective communication. They delegated roles to others and reflected on their leadership experience. Results of the study highlight the importance of empowering university students to undertake leadership of learning community involving diverse populations in real-life settings. This authentic experience contributes to the development of important skills and attributes for students' personal and social development.

Keywords: Transferable Skills, Service Leadership, Learning Community, Higher Education, Hong Kong

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## Introduction

Graduates of universities must now have a set of skills that enhance both their personal life and employability. As the number of graduates continues to rise and job market competition intensifies, it has become crucial to exhibit and substantiate skills that exceed the technical and subject-specific knowledge. These skills are known as transferable skills and they include interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, critical thinking, problem solving communication, teamwork and leadership (Mello & Wattret, 2021; Yate, 2017). Nowadays, graduates are not only expected to master these skills but also to demonstrate social values and respect to others (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011). While there is an increasing need for these skills, there remains a gap between skills that graduates possess and what employers require (Heaviside, Manley & Hudson, 2018). To best develop transferable skills there is a need for employing experiential and student-centered approaches (Calvaho, 2016). Mello and Wattret (2021) argue that the development of transferable skills requires the incorporation of student self-reflection process. Moreover, these skills can be best acquired if learning takes place outside the classroom through community engagement (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011).

Studies investigating the development of transferable skills were mainly conducted on specific discipline subjects (e.g., Carvalho, 2016; Valero et al., 2020). While these studies indicated a positive impact on students' skills such as information searching and teamwork in these disciplines, a need exists to find out more about the development of skills across the disciplines, especially in preparation of graduates for global working environment (Malm et al., 2022). One study conducted by Collins-Nelsen and associates (2022) examined students' development of transferable skills utilizing experiential learning beyond discipline-specific context. Results of the study indicated an increase in students' self-assessment of leadership, problem solving, knowledge translation, and knowledge mobilization. The research team recommended to further study the context in which the learning activities are held. They also raised the need for more pre- and post-learning research utilizing interviews to elicit students' voices about their learning process and the development of transferable skills.

The present study aimed to respond to these recommendations by examining an interdisciplinary university course incorporating experiential learning in the community and its contributions to students' development of transferable skills. Taking on board the importance of active engagement in learning community, students were involved in establishing and leading a learning community outside the campus. We further utilized a before-and-after research design to gauge changes in students' leadership skills and community engagement values.

Leadership entails a combination of numerous transferable skills and a demonstration of professional values highly sought by employers (Yate, 2017). The present study focused on the model of service leadership which is much needed to cater for the growth in the service industry (Shek & Lin, 2015). In this model, service leaders provide service to everyone they come in contact with including themselves, others, communities, systems and environments (Shek & Lin, 2015). Educating students to become service leaders involves the development of leadership competencies, moral characters and caring disposition (Shek & Li, 2015). These three elements align closely with social values and respect for others that are sought after by employers (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011). Service learning activities have been highly recommended for the development of caring disposition (Shek & Li, 2015). Service learning refers to students' engagement in experiential and authentic community service which benefits both the recipients and the students (Furco, 1996). Service leadership and

community engagement components were incorporated in the interdisciplinary course examined in the present study. We investigated students' development of service leadership characteristics, understanding and appreciation of social inclusion, and community engagement values.

The study was conducted on a semester credit bearing course entitled "Service Leadership in Learning Communities" which is a general education capstone course offered by a major university in Hong Kong. According to the university's descriptions, capstone courses aim to equip students with broad-based knowledge, transferable skills and a deeper understanding of people and issues through making connections at different levels. Students attending these courses are coming from different disciplines and they are required to apply their discipline knowledge to address real-life issues faced by the local, regional, and global community through engagement in teamwork. The course "Service Leadership in Learning Communities" integrates theories from psychology, sociology, and education, and employs experiential and action-learning approaches both in and outside of the classroom. It provides students with the opportunities to develop service leadership skills by applying elements of leadership, service-learning, and learning community in designing and implementing learning activities. Students plan and implement inclusive learning activities together with adolescents with and without special educational needs (SEN). Apart from learning the theories and concepts of service leadership, learning community, action learning and youth development, students participate in a workshop on social inclusion and special educational needs and pay a visit to a special school for adolescents with special educational needs. The present study aimed to investigate the contribution of the course to students' development of service leadership qualities, understanding of social inclusion, and cultivation of community engagement values.

## **Methods**

### ***Research Design***

A mixed-methods design was adopted combining elements of quantitative and qualitative research. Questionnaire surveys and individual and focus group interviews were conducted before the course and after its completion.

### ***Sample***

The sample consisted of two cohorts of students ( $N = 27$ ) who enrolled in the general education capstone course "Service Leadership in Learning Communities" in academic year 2021-2022. These were students in their third and fourth year of study and they came from different disciplines: Arts, Business, Communication, Creative Arts, Science, Chinese Medicine, and Social Sciences. Participation in the study was on a voluntary basis. Students gave informed consent and they were briefed and obtained a cash coupon upon completion of the study. All research procedures were reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the university.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

The data were collected before the beginning of the course and after its completion using questionnaire survey and individual and focus group interviews.

**Questionnaire.** A 23-item research instrument was designed and administered to the sample. The questionnaire included seven dimensions related to leadership qualities, social inclusion and civic engagement: diversity; respect; teamwork; inclusiveness; emotional sensitivity;

contribution; and civic engagement. The 23 items were designed with reference made to existing scales including Teamwork Scale for Youth (Lower, Newman, & Anderson-Butcher, 2015) Positive Youth Development Inventory (PYDI) (Arnold, Nott, & Meinhold, 2012), and Civic Engagement Scale (Doolittle & Faul, 2013). Each item was rated by the respondents on a five-point scale (1 = “not like me at all” and 5 = “very much like me”). Scores for each subscale were calculated by averaging the rating of respective items. Higher score indicates a higher self-perceived competency in that dimension. The Cronbach’s alpha of the entire 23-item instrument was .89, varying between .55 and .86 among the subscales.

***Individual/Focus Group Interview.*** Individual and focused group interviews were conducted with the participants to elicit their understanding of service leadership and social inclusion, perception of SEN youth, and their personal development. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or online via Zoom by a trained researcher. All interviews were audiotaped with respondents’ consent.

## **Results**

Data collected through the pre- and post-course questionnaire surveys were analyzed using IBM SPSS version 27. Both descriptive and inferential analyses were conducted. Dependent-sample t-tests were performed to compare self-report ratings of the seven dimensions of service leadership before the course and after its completion. There was a statistically significant increase in the scores of diversity, respect, contribution, and civic engagement dimensions after completing the course. Slight but insignificant improvement in teamwork and inclusiveness were reported.

The qualitative data collected through individual and focus group interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After familiarization with the data, an open coding process was conducted. Codes with similar content were then combined to form initial themes of the three foci of the study: development of service leadership qualities, understanding of social inclusion, and cultivation of community engagement values. The initial themes were further reviewed and discussed within the research team. Quotations that enriched and solidified the themes were identified. Students’ accounts indicated an enhanced understanding of service leadership and demonstration of these skills in their activities. There was a change in their perceptions of social inclusion and knowledge of special needs youth. Students also expressed their motivation to become involved in the community and undertake leadership role. The main themes and examples of corresponding quotations are presented in Table 1 below.

Main Themes	Quotations
Development of Service Leadership Qualities	<p>1) “Being a service leader has changed my idea of what a service leader is like. It is more about patience, willingness to listen to others, giving the rights and powers to others to be involved in the decision-making process instead of you making all the decision. This is not about dominance. This is not about intelligence. It is more about social intelligence and how you encourage others to be part of it. These are more crucial.” (Student K1)</p> <p>2) “I now like to listen to others’ opinion first before expressing mine. I think I have learnt to be an active listener and learn from others. It has nothing to do with the theories in the paper. I am willing to listen to others’ and assimilate their ideas into mine.” (Student B2)</p>
Understanding of Social Inclusion	<p>1) “The society really needs to let go of its prejudice towards SEN youth. There were things that we thought they could not do or that they needed our help.” (Student E1)</p> <p>2) “Social inclusion is not about giving SEN youth preferential treatment. You don’t need to see them as special. You just need to offer them respect and treat them like the way you treat everyone else. You don’t have to label and isolate them. No one wants to be seen as ‘problematic’. This is about finding a balance and having mutual respect.” (Student I2)</p>
Cultivation of community engagement values	<p>1) “I would like to do more. I think we have a better understanding of each other. It is great for both sides. Regardless of what we - both myself, secondary school students and SEN youth - will do in the future, we have grown because of this experience. This experience of working together helps.” (Student C2)</p> <p>2) I gained this sense of satisfaction, and it enriched my life experience. I would like to work with people of different backgrounds. This allows me to connect to other people in the society and I learn more about myself.” (Student D2)</p>

Table 1: Themes and corresponding students’ quotations

## Conclusion

This study examined the contribution of an interdisciplinary general education course to the development of students’ transferable skills related to leadership, social values and respect to others. Results of the study indicated the development of service leadership qualities, understanding of social inclusion and acquisition of community engagement values among university students who participated in the course. Undertaking a leadership role in planning and implementing inclusive activities in a learning community involving adolescents with and without special educational needs provided an opportunity for university students to learn about others’ needs and exhibit the caring disposition which is an important element of service leadership. The positive results of the study confirmed the importance of engaging

university students in experiential learning within the community for the development of transferable skills. The results also support the use of action learning to facilitate students' reflection and thus the acquisition of these skills. It is recommended to offer more courses of this kind and to examine their contribution to the development of transferable skills across different disciplines and contexts.

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