

**Changing Narratives: Leadership Journeys for Personal Growth and Career Development**

Erin Gorter, Assistant Professor  
Agricultural Education & Communication  
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo  
[ekthomps@calpoly.edu](mailto:ekthomps@calpoly.edu)

## Changing Narratives: Leadership Journeys for Personal Growth and Career Development

### Introduction/Need for Innovation or Idea

The Introduction to Agricultural Leadership-AGC 254 course at Cal Poly-San Luis Obispo (CPSLO) serves as a requirement within the Agricultural Leadership minor (Agricultural Education & Communication, 2024). Students are to become familiar with leadership development in agriculture; principles and techniques for developing leadership; their own characteristics, skills, influence, commitment, goals, and power; and issues agricultural leaders face. A challenge of the course is incorporating industry while also focusing on student development, in two hours per week.

Personal narratives “inquire into an individual’s lived experience” (Sztukowski-Crowley & Funk, 2020, p. 80). Narratives are dynamic and revised as new experiences occur and new knowledge is gained (Sztukowski-Crowley & Funk, 2020). This evolving nature of personal narrative aligns with Lattore’s (2021) Diamond Model of Leadership Development for agriculturists. Through feedback and reflection, individuals move from their current reality to their future reality within the contexts of the character, organization, spirituality, and community framing their lives (Lattore, 2021). The implementation of personal narrative in the agricultural leadership classroom provides a reflective tool for agriculture students’ current realities as well as models aspirational leadership and career development for the future.

### How it works/Methodology/Program Phases/Steps

To foster personal narrative development and industry representation in an introductory agriculture leadership course, a “Leadership Journey of the Week” was included. Presented by a person involved in the agriculture industry, individuals were invited via email to sign up for the week they were able to present, either in person or virtually, their personal leadership journey. Presenters were solicited via contacts of the instructor as well as alumni of the College of Agriculture, Food, and Environmental Sciences (CAFES) and the California Agricultural Leadership Foundation (CALF) (2024). A web-based calendar system facilitated scheduling of presenters. Each week was dedicated to a portion of the text *Introduction to Leadership* (Northouse, 2021). Presenters were encouraged to touch on the weekly text topics, although not required to do so. Other instructions included a time limit (10-15 minutes) and that they should focus on telling their personal narrative as it impacts their work in agriculture.

Each leadership journey lasted about 10-15 minutes. Some presenters used visual presentations, while others simply spoke. During, students listened and noted any questions. At the conclusion of each presentation, 10-15 minutes were allocated for questions. Weekly, students were asked to submit a reflection using Driscoll’s (2007) “What” model for critical reflection where the three questions what, so what, and now what (Borton, 1970) guided their reflections. These reflections were to address content they read, information learned from personal assessment material, and anything they gleaned from the leadership journeys.

At the conclusion of the term, students were asked to prepare their own leadership journey in oral and written form. Students were instructed that their oral presentations presented in class should be less than 10 minutes and written reflections should range between 2 and 3 pages. Both the oral and written pieces were to include the following:

- Summative overview of all leadership self-assessments and reflections during the term, including how they have helped shape student self-awareness, values, beliefs, and cultural identity.

- A personal definition of leadership.
- Beliefs in the importance of leadership relative to agriculture.
- A leadership development plan outlining future involvement on campus or other avenues.

### **Results to Date/Implications**

Twenty-three undergraduate CAFES students have enrolled in the 2 sections of AGC 254 offered in 2 different terms (Spring 2022 and Spring 2023). Seventeen different industry leadership journey sessions happened with 14 different industry speakers; 9 took place in Spring of 2022 and 8 in Spring of 2023. Speakers chose to reflect on the Northouse (2021) topics each week and did so uniquely. Presenters who were local presented in person, and those more than one hour away, elected to present via Zoom. At the conclusion of each term, enrolled students presented their own personal leadership journeys as an oral presentation in class and a written reflection submitted via the CPSLO learning management system. Students reflected on how the personal narrative portion of the weekly presentations influenced them from a personal development standpoint, but also from the angle of presenting them with different career options they may not have been aware of.

### **Future Plans/Advice to Others**

As AGC 254 is a service course to the university it is important to understand the backgrounds and career interests of the students enrolled to curate narratives appealing to all students. In 2022, the instructor asked for feedback from the enrolled students on who they thought was missing from the weekly sessions. It was noted, due to their being several first- and second-year students in the class, making sure third- and fourth-year students were also represented in the presentations would be helpful to their development. Addressing this, three undergraduate student leadership journey presentations were added during the 2023 section; these student presenters were students who completed the course in Spring of 2022. In the future, the instructor plans to continue to use students who have already taken the course as potential presenters. Additionally, they plan to submit a survey to enrolled students during week one of the term to solicit career pathways of interest, to further diversify leadership journeys presented.

Those who wish to implement this activity should consider their target audience when selecting presenters as well as include recommendations based on student interests. Additionally, while the use of the topics from the Northouse (2021) text was not explicitly required in the presentations, it did provide context for each week and created a space where the students already had background. It is recommended to use a similar text or assign topics to each week to keep content fresh and prime students for the journeys presented each week. An outline of topics for AGC 254, instructions for critical reflection (Driscoll, 2007), and a complete list of the leadership journey industries and businesses represented for both years, will be included with the poster presentation.

### **Costs/Resources Needed**

There are minimal costs associated with this idea and include items specific to thanking the presenter and providing parking for presenters on campus. At CPSLO the practitioner was able to find note cards and branded products within their university's department office, and used a departmental sponsored guest parking permit code, resulting in zero costs. Concerning resources, access to individuals who come from different backgrounds and industry sectors is necessary to provide an experience relevant for all learners.

## References

Borton, T. (1970). *Reach, touch and teach*. Hutchinson.

Agricultural Education & Communication. (2024). *Minors*. <https://aged.calpoly.edu/minors-agricultural-education-and-communication>

Driscoll, J. (ed.) (2007). *Practicing clinical supervision: A reflective approach for healthcare*. Elsevier.

Lattore, P. A. (2021). *How we grow leaders*. (n.p.).

Northouse, P. G. (2021). *Introduction to leadership*. (5th ed.). SAGE Publishing.

California Agricultural Leadership Foundation. (2024). *About the foundation*. <https://www.agleaders.org/about/>

Sztukowski-Crowley, C. A., & Funk, D. R. (2020). Personal narratives. In B. J. Carducci & C. S. Nave (Eds.), *The Wiley encyclopedia of personality and individual differences* (Vol. II, pp. 79-83). Wiley & Sons LTD.