

Appreciate, Reflect, Lead: Using Gratitude as Reflection in Agricultural Leadership

Erin Gorter, Assistant Professor
Agricultural Education & Communication
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo
1 Grand Avenue, San Luis Obispo, CA 93407
ekthomps@calpoly.edu

Ashlee Pike, Graduate Student
Agricultural Education & Communication
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo
1 Grand Avenue, San Luis Obispo, CA 93407
ampike@calpoly.edu

Nicole Ray, Assistant Professor
Agricultural Education & Communication
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo
1 Grand Avenue, San Luis Obispo, CA 93407
nray04@calpoly.edu

Hannah C. Parker, Lecturer
Agricultural Education & Communication
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo
1 Grand Avenue, San Luis Obispo, CA 93407
hparke07@calpoly.edu

Appreciate, Reflect, Lead: Using Gratitude as Reflection in Agricultural Leadership

Introduction/Need for Innovation or Idea

Guest speakers in agricultural education, leadership, and communication classrooms provide opportunities for individuals with specific expertise to share their valuable knowledge (Carter, 1958). College-aged students believe that guest speakers offer diverse perspectives and insights, which serve as valuable tools for their learning engagement and achievement of learning outcomes (Jablon-Roberts & McCracken, 2022). While the initial selection of speakers and alignment to the curriculum is important (Carter, 1958), determining learning activity purpose and effectiveness can pose challenges, creating a need for this innovation.

Effective assessment should promote higher-order thinking, which drives student motivation (Brookhart, 2010) and enables the idea of “transfer” defined as when individuals can make sense of and use what they have learned (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). One method of assessment that may motivate and aid in knowledge transfer is written reflections. Students see reflections as valuable (White, 2012; White & Guthrie, 2016), but formatting requirements and perceived utilitarianism can be a deterrent to the practice (White, 2012).

To meaningfully assess student learning in agricultural education, leadership, and communication, students in the Agricultural Education & Communication Department at Cal Poly State University have implemented a protocol for grading thank you notes sent to guest speakers. This innovation serves three purposes. First, it leverages community support as guest speakers can see how their presentation was valued, student-to-student. Second, thank you notes express gratitude, serving as an effective tool for stress management, promoting impactful leadership, and enhancing life satisfaction (Froh et al., 2011). Lastly, thank you notes can be used to assess student learning and knowledge transfer in a way that promotes student agency (Stenalt & Lassesen, 2022).

How it works/Methodology/Program Phases/Steps

The thank you protocol is rooted in the idea of scaffolding reflection via the evidence of *what* (personal knowledge), *so what* (experiential knowledge), and *now what* (propositional knowledge) (Borton, 1970; Driscoll, 2006; Rolfe, 2002; Schön, 1992). To implement the assessment, rooted in providing opportunities for higher-order thinking via transfer, the gratitude practice of thank you notes embeds a reflection framework, where students are asked to address what they have learned from the speaker, how the learning has impacted them, and how they plan on using what the guest speaker presented moving forward. A sample assignment and complete rubric will be included with the final poster. Implementing this thank you protocol is best completed by following the following three steps.

1. Onboarding: Students are introduced to the protocol for reflection via thanks early in the course with a sample thank you note. In this activity, students are asked to use the rubric to write a thank you note to anyone. Students peer-review each other’s notes to determine the successful implementation of the reflection framework. At this time, logistics concerning types of stationery and notecards are also given to students.
2. Implementation: Throughout the term, after each guest speaker, students are reminded to bring a completed thank you note to the next class session. These notes are handwritten or typed, depending on the student’s comfort level with their handwriting and the legibility of their writing. Notes are also submitted without an envelope, to facilitate grading and sending to speakers in one bulk envelope.

3. Grading and Feedback: The instructor reads each note and grades them using the rubric, providing feedback as necessary. The following are used as specific grading points on the assignment rubric:
 - a. Format: The Thank you note is legible and formatted to be readily available to be sent to the guest speaker.
 - b. What: A Thank you note that identifies what the speaker is being thanked for specifically.
 - c. So, What: Thank you note identifies the personal connection and meaning to the presentation/experience.
 - d. Now What: Thank you note identifies what the thanker plans on doing with what they have learned from the guest speaker/experience.

Results to Date/Implications

During the Fall of 2024, the rubric was incorporated into the Foundations in Agricultural Leadership class as a pilot method for evaluating gratitude. There were undergraduate ($n = 25$) and graduate ($n = 1$) students in the class. Over the term, students used the protocol to draft four thank-you notes for in-class guest speakers who covered a variety of leadership topics, including engaging in the community, communicating as a leader, and career exploration.

Anecdotally, the instructor of record indicated there was an observed increase in the quality of thank you notes during the second submission after giving feedback with the rubric during the first submission. The instructor noticed differences specifically in the “now what” section, where students indicated how they planned to use what they had learned from the learning segment in the thank you notes. Further, guest speakers have reached out and expressed how much they appreciated the notes they received. The use of the protocol has clarified expectations for assigned thank you notes, as well as providing a practical way for leadership students to reflect on their learning from guest speaker presentations while practicing gratitude.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

The initial class, which aligned gratitude with a reflection protocol, served as a pilot for incorporating the practice across similar agricultural education, communication, and leadership courses. Plans include refining the rubric and adapting it to other courses in the department as well as collecting student data on the usefulness of the protocol to guide learning. While most students have thank you notecards, we advise others to keep extra notecards available for students who may not have access. Instructor discretion should be used when determining what should be sent to guest speakers. In this example, the instructor of record asked students to type their notes if deemed illegible. The framework of “what”, “so what”, and “now what” is used as a frame for reflection in general, let alone when crafting thank you notes, within the department.

Costs/Resources Needed

When considering the innovation presented, which specifically deals with using a rubric to guide student thank you notes as a reflection exercise, there are no costs involved aside from the instructor's time spent on planning and grading the notes. Regarding the inclusion of thank you notes as an assignment, nominal costs are involved. These include making additional notecards available for students requiring them, as well as postage costs associated with mailing the notes.

References

- Anderson, L. W., & Krathwhol, D. R. (Eds.). (2001). *A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: A revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (Complete ed.). Longman.
- Borton, T. (1970). *Reach, touch and teach*. Hutchinson.
- Brookhart, S. M. (2010). *How to assess higher-order thinking skills in your classroom*. ASCD.
- Carter, J. T. (1958). Guest Speakers--An Overlooked Teaching Aid. *The Journal of the National Association of College Teachers of Agriculture*, 2(1), 4-4.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/44216006>
- Driscoll, J. (ed.) (2007). *Practicing clinical supervision: A reflective approach for healthcare*. Elsevier.
- Froh, J. J., Emmons, R. A., Card, N. A., Bono, G., & Wilson, J. A. (2011). Gratitude and the reduced costs of materialism in adolescents. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 12, 289-302.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-010-9195-9>
- Jablon-Roberts, S., & McCracken, A. (2022). Undergraduate student perceptions of industry guest speakers in the college classroom. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 22(3) 76-78. <https://doi.org/10.14434/josotl.v22i3.32317>
- Rolfe, G. (2002). Reflective practice: where now? *Nurse Education in Practice*, 2(1), 21-29.
<https://doi.org/10.1054/nepr.2002.0047>
- Schön, D. A. (1992). Educating for reflection-in-action. *Planning for Human Systems: Essays in Honor of Russell, L. Ackoff*; University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, PA, USA, 142-161.
- Stenalt, M. H., & Lassesen, B. (2022). Does student agency benefit student learning? A systematic review of higher education research. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 47(5), 653-669.
- White, J. V. (2012). Students' perception of the role of reflection in leadership learning. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 11(2), 140-157. <https://doi.org/10.12806/V11/I2/RF8>
- White, J. V., & Guthrie, K. L. (2016). Creating a meaningful learning environment: Reflection in leadership education. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 15(1), 60-75.
<https://doi.org/10.12806/V15/I1/R5>