

From Classroom to Community: Integrating Action Learning in Leadership Education

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Introduction

Exploring innovative approaches to agricultural leadership education allows educators to meet the changing needs of learners and equip students with critical skills needed in the workplace. Through action learning, students work in peer learning teams to address a real problem and engage in reflective practice to illuminate the learning occurring through the whole process, not just evidenced through a final product (Raelin, 2021; Volz-Peacock et al., 2016). Implementing action learning through community collaborations in any agricultural leadership course creates a valuable and innovative mechanism for students to see leadership in action and develop durable leadership skills for leading organizations and communities. This innovative approach integrates deep learning with real action (Marquardt & Banks, 2010), and equips students with critical skills in problem-solving, critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and leadership relevant to any future career (Petre, 2020). Working with community and industry partners provides tangible and relevant experiences that students can apply to their future work as engaged citizens and leaders in our constantly changing world.

How It Works

Using action learning in an agricultural leadership course provides students with a safe environment to practice the leadership skills taught in the course, transfer those skills to solve a real problem for a real partner, and ultimately develop critical thinking skills to use in other organizations and careers beyond the parameters of the course (Volz-Peacock et al., 2016). Educators build partnerships with the community and industry organizations to provide a context through which students apply the concepts learned in the course. Action learning partnerships with agricultural industries and businesses, local community non-profit organizations, campus-based departments, government, civic organizations, among others, enhance student learning.

Boller and Fletcher's (2020) Learning Experience Design (LXD) framework and Petre's (2020) action phases for cooperative learning aid educators in developing a robust learning environment to enhance learning. Through employing these human-centered design frameworks in conjunction with action learning, students gain perspective on the community and partner organizations, identify clear problems or adaptive challenges, refine those problem statements in consultation with partner organizations, ideate and formulate potential solutions, iterate with partners to obtain feedback on their proposed solutions, and implement recommendations through a final project report for the partner organization (Boller & Fletcher, 2020; Petre 2020).

Collective leadership, adaptive leadership, and systems thinking provide three conceptual frameworks to implement action learning in leadership education. Collective leadership focuses on every member of a group collaboratively co-constructing their work process and shared goals (Friedrich et al., 2009; Raelin, 2021). This is highly relevant for community-based collaborations in action learning. Adaptive leadership offers a framework through which students analyze and address the complex systemic problems faced by the local community (Heifetz, 2009; Nelson & Squires, 2017). Guest speakers from community organizations provide insight into local social issues through concrete community data. Lastly, systems thinking overlaps with collective and

adaptive leadership as a holistic view of the complexity of organizations and systems, providing a means to understand how a multitude of individual components intersect (Despres, 2004; Justis & Student, 2023). Integrating these three frameworks with human-centered design ensures that agricultural leadership education remains focused on the needs and experiences of learners, promoting empathy and innovation to develop effective and responsive leaders.

In an undergraduate agricultural leadership course, the instructor collaborated with a local non-profit organization to help students learn about the local community. Students then worked in teams to identify a specific community issue, connect with community partner organizations in that area, and make recommendations for addressing their chosen issue by applying collective leadership, adaptive leadership, and systems thinking frameworks learned in the course. Opportunities exist to modify this innovative idea widely for other adult and youth learners.

Results to Date

In fall 2024, an undergraduate agricultural leadership course focused on collaborative leadership implemented action learning with 53 junior and senior students. Student teams connected with a variety of community partners to learn about their chosen issue and potential solutions. Students shared positive feedback on their learning experience. They particularly enjoyed working with real people to solve real issues relevant to their community, industry, and career aspirations. A few also shared that they appreciated being able to choose their topic or issue rather than being assigned to them. In the specific context of this course, students shared that they appreciated learning about issues in the local community; many attend the university without knowing the challenges faced just off campus. Students said learning about the community and tangible leadership skills to address complex problems would be relevant wherever they live in the future.

Future Plans

Future plans include building new partnerships for this class and refining expectations for students and community partners. To effectively implement action learning partnerships, clear communication of expectations is critical for both the students and the community organizations. Current conversations with Extension units will expand areas for exploration beyond the course instructor's initial personal connections. Action learning partnerships exist in a variety of forms, ranging from a breadth of information from a variety of community partners for students to drive the direction of their work to a narrower scope where the course instructor identifies specific organization partners and student teams work directly with only one partner on an issue identified by the partner. The former provides a more streamlined approach to start small for the first iteration of this innovative idea that could be implemented by other educators.

Costs

There are no direct costs for this innovative instructional strategy. Given the academic course setting, space and class instruction time were provided within the structure of the course. Community partners engaged in the action learning partnerships for the benefit of the work completed by the students. A small token of appreciation for community partners could be provided if funding existed, but this is not required to implement this innovative idea.

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