Picture This: Exploring Career Identity through Narrative Reflection and Gen-AI

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Introduction

Developing a strong professional identity is a crucial component of undergraduate education (Barbarà-i-Molinero et al., 2017; Trede et al., 2012), particularly in fields like agricultural communications as programs often blend technical skill development, public engagement, and creative practice. Professional identity is central to how students understand their role in a discipline, make career decisions, and navigate their professional communities (Trede et al., 2012). In agricultural communications, professional identity development is often shaped through writing, storytelling, and media production experiences that help students position themselves as future communicators and advocates (Leggette et al., 2016; Leggette & Jarvis, 2016).

As in other applied communication fields, agricultural communications students are expected to cultivate not just technical competency but also a sense of purpose, voice, and connection to the public they serve (Corder & Irlbeck, 2018; Morgan, 2010). Pedagogical strategies prompting reflection, imagination, and dialogue can help students clarify their values, aspirations, and roles as emerging professionals. This activity is also grounded in the Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning, which emphasizes the importance of integrating verbal and visual modalities to deepen meaning making and support the construction of mental models (Mayer, 2002; Mayer, 2024).

This classroom innovation used generative AI tools as visualization partners to support identity reflection. It aligned with broader pedagogical shifts in higher education, where AI is increasingly positioned as a tool for reflection and meaning making rather than solely as a productivity mechanism (Kasneci et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2024). The use of AI in reflective, narrative-based activities provides students with opportunities to examine not only how they see themselves professionally but also how technology represents those identities.

How it Works

This activity was implemented in an introductory undergraduate agricultural course at Texas A&M University (n = 42). At the start of the activity, students were prompted to imagine themselves in the future—three to five years after graduation—and, using a word-processing software of their choice, write a short 5–7 sentence narrative describing their professional identity, environment, role, responsibilities, and priorities. This imaginative reflection occurred prior to any AI prompting or image generation to ensure the narratives captured students' own envisioned futures rather than being influenced by external representations. Students were not instructed on what the outcome of these narratives would be, rather, they were told to await further instruction. Once students completed their narratives, they used Google Gemini (Google DeepMind, 2025) to help shape their writing into a clear, simple AI prompt for image generation. After demonstration of these gen-AI tools, students then generated a single image of their imagined future using *Adobe Firefly* (Adobe, 2025, Image Model 4). No special technical skills were needed. Even if students were not familiar with the platforms, the process was simple—they entered their own words into the Gen-AI tools following a short, guided demonstration.

After generating the image, students reflected on how well the AI output matched what they had pictured in their minds, noting what felt accurate, what didn't, and what surprised them. This reflection helped students articulate their goals and consider how their identity was represented visually. The activity concluded with a class discussion where students shared their images and insights. Many students talked about why certain elements of the AI images felt meaningful, laughed at the odd or inaccurate details, and reflected on what the images revealed

about their professional goals. The entire activity took place within a single class session and required minimal resources.

Results to Date

Early classroom reflections revealed strong engagement and emotional investment in the activity. Many students expressed how closely the AI-generated image mirrored their vision for the future. One student said, "My AI-generated image is almost identical to what I imagined in my mind. It made my future feel real." Another shared, "Seeing my vision as a visual image absolutely helped me connect with my goal. It somehow made the goal seem more real and attainable." Students also described how this visualization process increased their clarity and confidence around their aspirations.

Students most often described their envisioned roles as centered on advocacy, storytelling, leadership, and working with livestock or rural communities**,** with many emphasizing how they saw themselves communicating on behalf of agriculture. These themes offered valuable insight into how students conceptualize their future roles early in their college experience. The activity also surfaced critical reflections on the limitations of AI. One student noted, "It didn't quite get me—it can't fully capture what matters most," while another laughed about "extra people I didn't put there." These comments open informal, but meaningful, conversations about how gen-AI tools represent professional identities and agricultural narratives.

Perhaps the most powerful outcomes came from moments of personal discovery. One student reflected, "I didn't realize how much I pictured myself working with people until I saw the image." Others described how seeing their imagined futures visualized helped them articulate not just their goals, but their values, environments, and priorities. This quick, engaging technological activity created an accessible but meaningful space for students to reflect on their professional identity formation and to articulate how they hope to contribute to their field.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Future iterations of this activity should expand to additional courses and institutions to explore how students across contexts envision their professional identities. Instructors replicating this approach should consider four structured steps: (1) prompt narratives with identity-based questions, (2) generate images using student-created prompts and a consistent platform (e.g., Firefly), (3) encourage guided reflection on alignment and dissonance, and (4) debrief using peer discussion to deepen meaning-making.

Tying back to the Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (Mayer, 2002, 2024), these steps intentionally layer verbal and visual modes to help students externalize and reflect on their internal mental models of future selves. This identity-centered reflection draws from research on professional identity formation (Trede et al., 2012), positioning the activity as both a creative and theoretically grounded pedagogical tool. This activity is adaptable to multiple content areas and requires minimal technology and training, making it an accessible and scalable strategy for fostering identity reflection. This project was implemented as part of a larger Gen-AI initiative exploring reflective learning strategies in agricultural communications courses and beyond.

Costs/Resources Needed

The required resources for this activity are minimal. Instructors need access to a generative AI image platform, time to generate images and facilitate reflection, and class time for discussion. Optional enhancements include displaying student work digitally or in print. Because of its accessibility, this activity can be integrated into courses with minimal cost or technical training.

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