Teaching Leadership: Principles and Approaches For An Undergraduate Leadership Course

Ronald M. Jimmerson

While we might not be able to create prominent leaders in our agricultural schools, we can do a better job of providing our students with the skills, knowledge and perspectives to help them become better professionals, better citizens and better leaders. One way to do this is to develop courses specifically designed to help students improve their leadership. This article outlines eight leadership principles and the teaching/learning climate and approaches based on those principles used in an undergraduate leadership course. The leadership skills and perspectives promoted and teaching modifications that must be made to utilize this approach are summarized.

Introduction

There are numerous indications that colleges of agriculture need to do a better job of preparing students in non-technical areas which can broadly be termed leadership skills. Merritt (1984) reported the results of two major national projects which examined needed curriculum and instructional changes. Among other topics, these studies showed a need for more emphasis on problem solving, leadership, ethics and public policy internships and cooperative education. Courts (1987) called for more emphasis on communication skills, hands-on training and development of curricula with less specialization and a greater breadth of knowledge. He also emphasized the need for new approaches to teaching. The importance of teaching human relations in agriculture was documented by Field and Horner (1986). Newcomb and Trefz (1987) emphasized the importance of, and approaches to teaching "higher levels of cognition". A competency study of agricultural workers in central Washington (Hansen, Holmes, & Jimmerson, 1989) revealed employers believe non-technical skills are important for all agricultural workers but especially for management, sales and marketing positions; those which make up the majority of agricultural jobs.

While there is a groundswell of support for doing a better job of providing agriculture students with leadership skills, there is little consensus about what leadership is and little agreement about how (and whether) leadership can be taught (Cronin, 1984). During the last several years Washington State University has experimented with different approaches to teaching leadership to undergraduate students through an upper level three-credit course. The course was designed to help students gain skills and knowledge which were not obtained through disciplinary courses in Agriculture and

Jimmerson is an associate professor in the Department of Adult and Youth Education, College of Agriculture and Home Economics, Washington State University, Pullman, WA 99164-6236.

Home Economics.

This article identifies a set of principles upon which the leadership course was based and describes the teaching/learning climate and approaches used to implement these principles. While prominent leaders may not be created by a leadership course, students do gain understanding and skills which will help them make better use of their agricultural knowledge and be more effective professionals and citizens in a democratic society. Effective leadership is based on a renewable analysis of how people learn and change. Because people, the world we live in, and the change process itself are dynamic, students must gain process skills (i.e.: skills in analyzing people, situations, and change processes). This is quite a different focus than the emphasis on content learning which dominates formal schooling and much of their agricultural course work. It requires a major change in how the teaching process and instructor's roles are viewed.

Leadership Principles

While there are thousands of leadership principles, eight are basic to the leadership course and guide the teaching/learning climate and approaches:

① Leaders are ready and able to take responsibility to learn and to lead.

② Leaders learn from their experiences (positive and negative) through an ongoing process of action and critical reflection.

③ Leaders are able to collect and synthesize information and communicate it to appropriate audiences in appropriate ways.

④ Leaders know how to promote their own and others' self-esteem.

⑤ Leaders are generalists who understand that problems are interrelated.

⑥ Leaders recognize the importance of their personal world view and the world view of others as basic to the change process. One's world view includes his/her culture, background and experiences which provide the basis for his/her values, goals, beliefs and assumptions.

⑦ Leaders recognize that they have preferred learning and leadership styles which might need to be adapted to the styles of those they work with and to situations in which they lead.

⑧ Leaders recognize the importance of on-going analyses of group dynamics.

While these principles are stated as characteristics leaders possess, good leaders maintain a continuous growth process of developing and refining these characteristics.

Teaching/Learning Climate

As the principles imply, leadership development cannot rely on a typical teacher/student relationship. The task is to create a climate which encourages students to become more independent and self-directed in their learning (No. 1), which allows them to learn from experience (No. 2), which promotes information gathering and communication skills (No. 3), which raises student self-esteem (No. 4) and which helps them apply their technical expertise within larger systems (No. 5). In addition, fairly specific approaches are used to help students understand and reflect on: world views (No. 6), learning and leadership styles (No. 7), and group dynamics (No. 8).

A major challenge in teaching this course, as suggested by Principle #1, is to develop an atmosphere and find approaches to free students from teacher-directed learning so that they learn how to take responsibility. Students are used to being fed facts and tested at the "remembering" or "processing" levels as discussed by Newcomb and Trefz (1987). The goal of the course is to move them toward more self-directed learning at the "creating" and "evaluating" levels. Students are to decide what is important to them, how they prefer to go about learning it, and how to utilize the instructor and other people and materials as resources. It does not happen on day one, but is a slow process that takes place during the semester. Most of my students have been given very little responsibility for their own learning during their formal schooling and resist taking responsibility. However, students can not be expected to be responsible leaders if they are not responsible learners.

Principle #2 emphasizes learning from life experiences. The leadership class is set up so that students learn, not from what an instructor tells them so much as through their experiences in class and their current life experiences. Learning from experience can take place only when it is put in the context of the existing frame of reference. This requires critical reflection and evaluation of experiences to find their meaning. Meaningful learning about leadership comes only when content and experiences are personalized.

Principle #3 emphasizes the importance of communication skills. The whole class is set up to help students refine these skills by communicating to themselves through keeping logs and written papers and to others through class discussions, presentations, interviews and other actions. The class attempts to help students transform intuitive understanding into cognitive understanding which can be discussed and analyzed.

Principle #4 recognizes the innate human need to a good self image, to believe we have something to offer. If we don't believe in ourselves, we can offer little to others. This principle suggests that whatever else happens in the class, the student should emerge feeling more confident in him/herself and be better able to help others feel good about themselves. This can occur when the instructor recognizes that the affective domain is as important to learning as the cognitive domain. Building self-esteem requires genuine respect for students and a willingness to understand and take into

account their feelings related to the learning process.

Principle #5 reflects the concern that graduates of colleges of agriculture, while possessing good technical skills within their major, often have difficulty understanding the broader context of problems (Merrett, 1984). Most problems faced in agriculture today require expertise from several disciplines, including disciplines outside the field of agriculture. The class emphasizes problem solving within a broad context taking into account a range of perspectives.

Teaching/Learning Approaches

Several teaching/learning approaches have been tried and found especially useful in creating and promoting the climate and the leadership principles discussed. These are outlined here to illustrate the types of approaches which have worked.

Learning Contracts

To promote self-directed learning and motivate students to practice communication skills, students undertake an individual project for a portion of the course grade. The project is, in some way, related to leadership and is based on a topic of interest to the student. It can be a research project involving collecting, analyzing and reporting information on an aspect of leadership or it can be an action project in which the student takes a leadership role in planning, conducting, and evaluating an activity through a school, community, or religious group. The contract includes: (1) project title or topic; (2) project goals; (3) specific steps or actions; (4) timeline; (5) method of reporting results; and, (6) criteria by which the project should be evaluated. For many students, selection of a topic and developing a contract is, in itself, a major learning process. By the end of the semester, however, most students are very positive about its use as a learning tool. Because the project is of specific interest to them, they are motivated to learn from it and to communicate the results of their efforts. Knowles (1975) provides a good discussion of self-directed learning and learning contracts.

Learning Logs

In addition to the problems of getting students to take responsibility for their learning, one of the most difficult tasks is to get students to think reflectively about what is being taught in class and how it relates to their personal experiences and world view. Students keep weekly logs in the course to help them develop these skills. At the beginning of the semester the logs are structured. Students are asked to discuss their views of class activities, readings, or class assignments. As the students get used to writing logs, more responsibility for the content of the logs is turned over to the student. Students decide on a focus for their logs (e.g. to learn more about their personal leadership style or to better understand the dynamics of small groups, etc.). By the end of the semester, most students are reflecting regularly about a topic related to the course, putting down tentative ideas, raising questions, commenting on readings, including what they like and don't like about the class, the readings, their relationships with other students, and their student organizations. The logs allow them to think, reflect and write down ideas without worrying about mechanics as they would in a term

paper or other class assignments. Students begin to understand how they feel, think and react and gain a better understanding of themselves as learners. Progott (1975) provides a thorough discussion of using journals or logs.

World Views Analysis

Many educators believe that recognizing one's view of the world and the contradictions that world view has with one's life experiences is a key to meaningful change (Friere, 1970; Mezirow, 1978). Agriculturalists promoting soft systems approaches (Wilson, 1988) also recognize it as a critical part of the learning process. Several approaches used in the course help students make explicit some of the values and beliefs which make up their world view and at the same time help them become aware that others might have quite different views. This does two things: (1) it causes them to look more closely at and question their personal assumptions, and (2) it helps them understand why and where they are in conflict with others.

Sometimes the most effective atmosphere for exposing world views happens by accident. Classes sometimes have a diverse group of students. For example, international students, ag students, and non-ag students and/or older and younger students. This diversity forces discussion of diverse world views much better than a homogeneous group. To the extent possible recruit diverse students into leadership classes.

But, it takes more than having diverse students to force analysis of world views. For example, (1) self-evaluation instruments which help students identify their beliefs and values related to agricultural paradigms (Beus, 1987), (2) conflict resolution techniques which force students to repeat another's perspectives, (3) role playing of a perspective different from one's own, (4) encouragement of students to undertake projects to "prove their point of view" but requiring them to present the opposing point of view in the process. These techniques almost always leave students with a better understanding and appreciation of points of view different from their own and often cause them to modify or dramatically alter their perspective. Encourage students to pursue topics and issues outside the field of agriculture because this broadens their view of the world while developing skills they can use as agricultural professionals. For example, one group of students undertook a project examining whether university student fees should be used to fund the Gay Awareness Committee. At the start of the project the students were strongly opposed to the funding. After several weeks examining all sides of the the issues, they came out in favor.

Leadership and Learning Styles Inventories

Somewhat related to one's world view is one's preference for particular learning and leadership styles. To help students identify and reflect on their preferred styles, Several style inventories can be administered, for example: Fiedlers (1976) Least Preferred Co-Worker Scale, the Myers-Briggs personality inventory (McCoulley, 1980), and "Understanding Your Leadership Behavior" (Johnson and Johnson, 1975). Students discuss these in class, compare results, and reflect on them in their learning logs.

Group Analysis Tools

In addition to analysis of individual styles, students are asked to observe the dynamics of small groups. Students are provided with process observation forms which help them identify group leadership roles, stages of group development, group conflict, power shifts, etc. This analysis is reported both orally to the group and the class and through learning logs and a group process report of their team project.

Team Projects

Students learn most when they are involved in real life problems. For this reason, I divide the class into small groups of five or six. Each group selects a current issue on campus to research, report and take action on as a semester-long project. While some topics relate directly to agricultural issues, others do not for reasons mentioned above. These small groups provide a real-life laboratory for students to develop their leadership skills, to analyze group dynamics, to resolve conflicts, and to hone research and communication skills. Groups are required to take some action related to their project so that they, in fact, are involved to some extent in campus leadership. Action takes the form of testifying before committees, writing letters to the campus newspaper, or other public statements or actions. These groups occasionally influence policy at the state level.

The team project is probably the single most effective teaching approach because the students tend to reduce their preoccupation with a course grade and think about their project as influencing the University community. It provides a direct way to apply each of the seven principles listed above.

Peer Teaching

In addition to team projects, students teach sections of the class themselves becoming effectively motivated. This is especially useful earlier in the semester before teams have formed and while covering some basic content related to leadership theories or research. Most of us who teach realize how much we learn when we prepare to teach others. Even minor teaching roles like assigning students to summarize and lead discussion of a class reading assignment are usually effective motivators. Students learn well from their peers if the proper atmosphere and planning is established.

Role Models

Even though the instructor tries hard to be a good role model for students, the teacher is limited by his personality, by his status as "the professor", and by his individual style. Graduate students who have good communication, human relations and leadership skills can effectively become excellent role models for undergraduate students. Their younger age and student status eliminate some barriers. Graduate students are often willing to help out with a class to develop their own teaching skills--especially if they can work with students on projects related to their graduate studies or thesis topic. I purposely pick students whose personality, leadership style and perspectives are quite different from my own. These graduate students act as team leaders, facilitators, presenters, consultants and/or observers.

One graduate student, a past student body president, active in state politics, so enthralled one leadership class team with a highway safety project he was working on that they asked to work with him as a class project. They formed

a campus-wide Student Highway Safety Committee and, during the course of a six-month period, got a bill passed through the state legislature to allow placing highway fatality markers along the rural highway leading to Washington State University. Through this process, they researched highway safety, helped conduct a survey, held news conferences, visited legislators, testified before state legislative committees and met with the Governor for the signing of the bill. The students learned the process for enacting legislation and learned valuable leadership skills in the process. The age, enthusiasm and modeling of the graduate student convinced many undergraduates that they too could take on major leadership roles. The graduate student, by the way, used the project as his masters thesis in Continuing and Vocational Education (Ufkes, 1988).

Summary

Through leadership courses students can be helped to build the non-technical skills, knowledge and perspectives which will help them be better professionals, better citizens and better leaders. But, to do this requires a change in the view of teaching as facilitators of learning, not as "professors" of knowledge. The leadership principles outlined suggest a need to do better at helping our students to: (1) take responsibility for their own learning; (2) learn from their experiences; (3) collect and communicate information; (4) improve their self-esteem; (5) solve problems within a broad context; (6) understand world views; (7) apply understanding of learning and leadership styles; and, (8) understand and utilize group processes. To accomplish this, requires establishing a climate and utilizing approaches compatible with the eight principles. Most instructors need to modify their approaches to: (1) move from teacher-directed toward learner-directed approaches; (2) decrease content transfer in favor of experiential learning; (3) incorporate opportunities for students to generate, analyze and communicate information; (4) promote learning in the affective domain as well as the cognitive domain; (5) encourage exploration of broad perspectives over more narrow disciplinary views; (6) deal with the "what should be" (alternative world views) as well as the "what is"; (7) help students recognize different styles and adapt teaching to learner styles rather than forcing student's to adapt to instructor's; and, (8) promote use and understanding of group learning in addition to individual learning modes.

These are not simple changes which are easily incorporated into existing disciplinary courses. While development of leadership skills can be incorporated through existing disciplinary courses, history shows that this approach is not adequate. There is a need for leadership courses which model good leadership and provide opportunities for students to understand and practice good leadership. Effectively teaching such courses may require dramatic changes in teaching philosophies, skills and techniques.

References

Beus, Curtis. Agricultural Paradigms: The Conflict Between Alternative Agriculture and Conventional Agriculture. Unpublished thesis, Washington State University, Pullman, Washington, December, 1987.

Courts, Gerald D. "Updating Today's College Curriculum for Tomorrow's Agriculture", NACTA Journal, June, 1987.

Cronin, Thomas E. "Thinking and Learning About Leadership". Unpublished paper, Colorado College, 1984.

Fiedler, Fred E., et al. Improving Leadership Effectiveness. The Leader Match Concept. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1976.

Field, Harry and James Horner. "The Importance of Teaching Human Relations in Agriculture", NACTA Journal, December, 1986.

Friere, Paulo. Pedagogy of the Oppressed, New York: Seabury Press, 1970.

Hansen, Heather, W. Lee Holmes, and Ronald Jimmerson. "Background, Education, and Non-Technical Competency Needs for Agricultural Workers in Central Washington", Journal of Agricultural Education, Vol 30, Number 3, fall, 1989.

Johnson, D. and F. Johnson. Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills Theory, Prentice Hall, 1975.

Knowles, Malcolm. Self-Directed Learning, Chicago: Follett Publishing Company, 1975.

McCoulley, Mary H. Introduction to the MBTI for Researchers, Florida: Center for Applications of Psychological Type, 1980.

Merrett, Richard H. "Challenges for Undergraduate Education in Agricultural Sciences", NACTA Journal, September, 1984.

Mezirow, Jack. "Perspective Transformation", Adult Education, Vol 28, winter, 1978.

Newcomb, L. H. and Marilyn K. Trefz. "Toward Teaching at Higher Levels of Cognition". NACTA Journal, June, 1987.

Progoff, Ira. At a Journal Workshop, New York: Dialogue House Library, 1975.

Ufkes, Mark. "Highway Fatality Markers as an Educational Technique to Encourage Safe Driving Among Young Adults". Unpublished thesis, Washington State University, Pullman, Washington, May, 1988.

Wilson, Kathleen. Agricultural Systems Workshop, Post Falls, Idaho, August 10-13, 1988.