

Teaching Tips/Notes



Farmer Interview Role Play Exercise

Agroecology field work includes use of biological and social science methods. Some of the latter may not be familiar to most students from agronomy, horticulture, ecology, and other biological science majors. Interviews of farmers and other food system actors often are central to the field observation and data collection process, and some practice with interview techniques builds valuable skills before student teams head for the field. A role play exercise using student ideas and creativity has proven to be a valuable and compelling way to teach these skills, and a specific example from a workshop in Sweden is used to illustrate the method.

Learning objectives are to 1) prepare students to conduct stakeholder interviews by practicing in a safe and stimulating learning environment; 2) learn to deal with different types of behavior during interviews by farmers and other clients; and 3) provide opportunity for group feedback and comments on how to improve interview techniques. We have found that a practice session greatly improves student capacities and confidence to conduct interviews, and especially to deal with unusual circumstances that may occur during the process.

Methods we have used include orientation lectures, team design of key questions before going to the field, one-on-one practice in pairs, and what has proved highly useful – role play exercises where students do the planning and follow through with short skits to illustrate what may happen in an interview and how to solve unexpected challenges. When first used, the role play was done by two instructors, after a short briefing about why interviews were important, types of questions to be asked, and which questions might be sensitive such as too much detail about economics of the farmer and family situation. Although the orientation and demonstration were useful, according to students, we soon came up with a better alternative.

In a week-long workshop in Sweden on nutrient cycling, we decided one evening to hand the responsibility of preparing for interviews the next day to several select students. Three pairs of students were asked to prepare mock interviews for the next morning, one to play the role of farmer and the other a student interviewer. Three stereotypical farmer types were chosen: 1) the reticent person who was shy, gave very short answers, and was apparently unwilling to share much detail; 2) the highly verbal person who expanded on each answer, often diverging from the issue at hand, and rambling off in non-useful directions; and 3) the misleading person who gave contradictory information and appeared to attempt to mislead the interviewer. After a brief role play interview was completed in front of the entire class, other students and instructors were asked to critique the process, asking why certain approaches were used, and suggesting other strategies that might prove useful in each case.

Outcomes of the exercise included a high level of participation, an excitement of providing critique and suggestions of what might have been done, and a reflection on the entire interview process and how it could be improved. In the three examples, specific lessons were learned. In 1) the shy farmer example, the interviewer was forced to ask more than “yes or no” questions, to pursue the farmer’s short answers with requests for more detail and depth, and to explore the “why” of specific responses and their basis in experience. In 2) the talkative farmer example, the interviewer was challenged to steer the conversation back to the topic, to guide the process without showing disrespect for the farmer, and to eventually achieve the stated goals of the interview. In 3) the misleading farmer, the interviewer was most effective when tactfully pointing out inconsistencies with such questions as “I am a little confused about

the amount of leached nitrogen from the field; could you please explain that again so I can take some careful notes?" In all cases, the interviewers were urged to respect the stakeholders and their individuality, while still striving to achieve the best possible information about that farm or landscape. It proved both entertaining and useful.

This series of role play interviews sought to build an appreciation of overall context, while the specific objectives of interviews were to help understand the farm, landscape, watershed, and regional importance of nutrients from farming that were currently causing pollution of nearby lakes and rivers to the sea. The interviews with stakeholders also revealed a range of opinions about the nature of the nutrient runoff challenge and how serious this was in the present and potentially in the future. One of the most important outcomes was a new familiarity with some of the challenges that could be faced when talking with individual farmers. The safe space provided for the role play exercise was reported by students to encourage their creativity and enthusiastic acting of roles in preparation for interviews later in the week with actual farmer and people working at the landscape level.

Student participants further explained that the opportunity for critique after the role play exercise was especially valuable in assessing "how they had done" in adapting to the stakeholder and his/her response and attitudes toward the questions and the interviewer. To be sure, we selected some extreme stereotypes for the three farmer roles, and in practice there could be elements of each in any particular interview. This enhanced the excitement of the interviews, as the larger student group was not advised ahead of time which types of farmer or stakeholder would be included in the interviews. Probably the best dimension of the exercise was that students themselves came up with the individual and creative roles they played, and the reception of the workshop group was highly positive to seeing their peers perform in this educational activity.

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