

# Teaching Tips/Notes



## Practicing and Preparing for Stakeholder Interviews

Students have found substantial educational value in their interviews with farmers and other stakeholders as an integral component of learning and practice in agroecology. As teachers we need to provide time for planning strategies and practicing the skills of dialogue-based interviews to have students well prepared before meeting farmers and stakeholders in the community. We have found that a three-hour “crash course” learning about and practicing interviewing can be effective for introducing the method in the agroecology context.

Characteristics of the interview method include a mutual appreciation that students are involved to learn, that there is a specific purpose and this is clear to all involved, that the process is open ended and designed to maximize what is derived from interviews and that a dialogue-based interview is superior to a straight-forward set of rigid questions often used in a survey or highly structured questionnaire. Here we summarize learning objectives, learning methods for using interviewing and apparent outcomes for students from this educational and research process.

**Learning objectives** are to learn about and practice 1) empathetic interviewing with thoughtful concern about the interviewee, 2) careful listening and observing during the interview process and 3) critical reflection by the student team following the actual interview, emphasizing key challenges in the interview process. These three activities correspond to several agroecological key competencies (Lieblein et al., 2012).

**Learning methods** used to accomplish these objectives and to acquire such practice include dividing students into groups of three to conduct a *role-play exercise*. One student does the interview, a second is the stakeholder interviewed and a third takes notes as an active observer of the process. The group first chooses a *topic* for the interview and then develops an *interview guide* that elaborates a list of *research questions* that help to narrow and focus the topic which are then transformed into *interview questions* (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Examples of each are given under outcomes.

One possible schedule for a 90-minute session on learning and practicing interviews is:

**Introduction.** Fifteen minute introduction and discussion of importance of techniques and characteristics of the dialogue-based interview; more time may be needed here.

**Role-play exercise.** Twenty-five minutes with small groups deciding on roles and developing interview guide and 10 minutes to conduct the interview and observe the process.

**Reflection.** First, in small groups (about 10 minutes), and then whole class reflection and discussion of the process and key challenges of performing dialogue-based interviewing (about 30 minutes).

Times can be adjusted for the nature of the class as well as their prior experience and level of comfort with the process. Investing the majority of available time in preparing the interview guide and reflecting on results demonstrates to students the over-riding importance of planning and reflecting on the process as compared to merely conducting an interview and writing down the results.

**Outcomes** of the educational process on interviewing techniques depend on educational context within which the activity will be conducted, the topics chosen and the dedication of students to quickly acquiring the skills to design and conduct such interviews. An example of an interview guide to explore questions on communication may include:

**Topic:** Communication with stakeholders in the case study region.

**Research questions:** What methods do farmers use to communicate among themselves? What are strengths and weaknesses of the present communication process?

**Interview questions:** Can you describe the ways you farmers here currently discuss ideas about farming practices, markets and other key issues related to farming? What do you learn from other farmers and in what ways are these lessons useful? How would you see the communication situation in your region improved?

During the reflection period after this short exercise with an agroecology class in Norway, several comments and questions were raised by the group:

- How to initiate the interview is important, including establishing trust and credibility, clearly stating the purpose of the interview, discussing how the results will be used and describing the move from simple to complex questions.
- There is great importance in designing open-ended questions and to allow the dialogue to move from the initial topic to more in-depth issues related to it.
- One challenge is to decide whether or not to record the interview, realizing that this may create a barrier to communication and that much time is needed later.
- Observations about body language, apparent feelings about specific questions and other details form the bases for reflections on how to improve yourself as an interviewer and add more information to what is written.
- Finish with questions like “Are there additional topics you would like to discuss?” and “What do you have to add to what we have already discussed?”

Just as agroecosystems are diverse and complex, likewise the stakeholders represent a wide and divergent population. According to action learning (Lieblein and Francis, 2007), students who intend to understand and cope with the complexity of food systems need to be prepared to adapt to the circumstances and dynamic nature of an interview situation. We have found that a “crash course” provides students with experience in a safe space environment before applying this qualitative method in the field.

### **References**

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