

# Teaching Tips/Notes



## Interviews with Farming and Food Systems Experts

To gather additional resource information and broaden the scope of discussion in agroecology and other courses, we have implemented an exercise using interviews with experts outside the classroom. These activities introduce students first hand to farmers, consultants, input suppliers, and others directly involved in the production process, as well as with processors, distributors, marketers and nutritionists in the food system. Each student reports back providing an expanded picture of the farming and food system with perspectives and dimensions that enrich the topics presented and discussed during the lecture sessions. Through the questions posed to people interviewed, students move the content of the course and extend the discussion to a broader audience. The idea of “interview as outreach” is an innovative way to generate discourse in the community about issues related to the future of farming and food systems.

**Objectives** of the interviews in the community and reports back to class are to 1) expand the breadth of information resources and opinions about current and future food and farming systems, 2) explore new perspectives on content of agroecology or other courses through interactions with people in the community and 3) challenge key people in the farming and food system to think about issues central to future sustainability of the system and the long-term consequences of current practices and systems design.

**Methods include:** 1) an orientation about the interview process, 2) goals and conduct of interviews, 3) how to take notes or record results, 4) the format and value of a written report of the activity and 4) how this may be reported back to maximize the benefit of the interview for our class learning community. For the farming systems interview, students are urged to explore different opinions about the success of current systems and their limitations, and to ask about how their subjects view potential changes in the future of farming practices and design of systems. Most frequent interviewees include farmers, crop consultants, seed, fertilizer and chemical pesticide sales people, coop elevator managers, organic certifiers, and government officials involved in agriculture, including regulation and support programs. For the food systems interview, we again explore the successes and challenges in current systems, related issues such as nutrition, diet-related illness, and comparative advantages and disadvantages of local and global food systems. Those often chosen for interviews include food processors, wholesale and retail marketers, nutritionists, people involved in institutional food programs, health specialists, and others active in the food system. Students choose 1) who they will interview, 2) set up appointments, 3) conduct the interviews and 4) submit a maximum two-page report on the results. We then spend at least one class period summarizing the interviews and discussing the results. Substantial literature is available on the process of designing, conducting, and summarizing interviews; for example, Kvale and Brinkman (2009).

**Outcomes include** improved student understanding on practical applications of theory and information discussed in class, an appreciation of the range of opinions of people in farming and in the community about current and future systems. Classroom discussions often transcend those in the syllabus. Additionally, we speculate that an increase in community awareness and discourse about present and future food systems occurs as a result of the interviews.

Presentations in class have resulted in a rich array of facts about current systems, ideas about how they function as well as some of the shortcomings, and perspectives about the future. In farming systems reports, there is generally a satisfaction with current systems, a lack of concern about future resource scarcity, a concern about prices for commodities and the inputs needed to produce them, and a projection of future systems that closely resemble our current practices, rotations, and commodities. The results change to a broader concern about higher level issues and about the sustainability of future systems only if there is an interview with someone outside the mainstream, such as an organic or biodynamic farmer, a diversified crop/livestock farmer, or a vegetable producer who does direct

marketing. One exception is a concern about farmer age, and who will inherit the land and farm in the future and topics that come from interviews with both conventional and alternative interviewees.

In food systems interviews, there is a wider range of opinions about current food and systems, the availability and cost of quality food, current diets and related health issues, and potential long-term alternatives. Although there are limited people with innovative opinions about how future food systems will differ from those today, there is a general appreciation that current foods and diets are detrimental to health. Although some favor regulation and government intervention in the marketing of fast food and other prepared foods, there is a general agreement that consumers must make their own decisions from the options available. There is little support for taxation of harmful foods, incentives for a more healthy diet, or regulation of any kind, although many of the reports include statements on the importance of nutritional education and future informed decisions by consumers. There is a concern about childhood diets, and the current epidemic of obesity and how this can be solved through education and better meals in schools. Budget concerns often come up in discussions about changes in school, hospital, and institutional building cafeterias and food systems. At times, there is discussion of how the university dormitories and cafeterias could provide a healthy model for future consumers.

**In summary**, the interviews provide an opportunity for students to interact with farming and food specialists outside the classroom, and to bring in ideas to enrich the discussion. Apparently, most of those interviewed support the status quo, although some do question current practices and systems, and provide some alternatives for the future. We speculate that even the process of asking questions about the future will cause some thought and discussion about present systems, and the long-term result will be a broader impact of class topics than is possible with only our internal discussions.

## **Reference**

Kvale, S., and S. Brinkman. 2009. *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.

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