

# Teaching Tips/Notes



## Transect Walks across Farms and Landscapes

Learning to traverse and read the landscape is an essential capacity for agroecologists, and vital to the education of our MSc students. For students acquainted with farming and natural areas, it is important to learn to observe using all the senses and to put observations into the framework of prior experience. For those new to agroecosystems or the natural environment, it is essential to develop skills of observation to absorb details as well as view the macrocosm and context. For everyone in the field of agroecology – ecology of farming and food systems – it is an opportunity to acquire and practice observational skills that will help in later analysis and evaluation of current systems, as well as prepare them for envisioning improved and more sustainable systems for the future. The method has been especially valuable in Participatory Rural Appraisal as a tool for community leaders and citizens to assess their resources [FAO, n.d.], and there are many variations that are used in teaching and in research.

**Learning Objectives** are to 1) both open and hone the multiple senses to broaden observational skills to absorb as much as possible the complexity of farms and the rural landscape, 2) expose the details of these systems and learn how they are unique from other systems understood in other contexts, 3) provide a foundation for later discussion and analysis of farms and community food systems, 4) quickly orient the group to a new landscape and its features by sending people in different directions and later sharing observations, and 5) develop a capacity for social learning and interdependence as different people on a team observe unique details related to their prior study or experience that may be transparent to others, and share their experience with the group.

**Methods** that have proven useful in this activity early in a semester or short course have included two variations on “walking the landscape”. We normally organize the class, course or workshop participants into pairs, with a goal of providing different perspectives on observations and to assure that each person will be a full and active participant in the exercise. Since people are often new to the immediate landscape and region where a course is held, we provide maps that include both topographic features and land use, as well as roads, trails, buildings, and other components of the built landscape. On these maps we designate a destination, with a distance from the classroom or other meeting venue depending on the time available; this is rarely less than one kilometer and may be up to three or four kilometers each way. We prepare for the exercise with key questions that are specific to the goals of the course. For example:

- What are the major observable consequences of geographic forces that have shaped the landscape?
- What are the most obvious human impacts on the natural resources and current land uses in the landscape?
- What features of the landscape appear especially valuable to provide ecosystem services?
- How is the landscape designed or managed to promote agricultural productivity? ... to preserve biodiversity? ... to provide resilience and stability to agriculture?
- Others unique to the goals of a course or workshop?

We normally discuss these learning goals and methods explicitly before people leave the class or meeting site, and ask in a general way what people are going to look for? The walks often provide an excellent venue for people to meet each other, discuss the landscape and its components, and compare the views and details with prior experiences. Another strategy we have employed on the walks is to urge people to walk quietly and not share observations on the outward bound trip, then to discuss their experiences on the return. We speculate that this will help each student enjoy a personal experience related to the landscape as well as a social learning situation on the return, but we have yet to decide which is best.

**Outcomes** that we have observed as well as gleaned from the subsequent discussions include an appreciation for the topography, principal land uses, and impacts of human development on the landscape. In Norway, one of our points in the orientation is that everyone in the country has access to the entire landscape, including tracts that are privately owned as well as those that are property of local or national government. This *allemansretten* policy guarantees everyone the right to follow trails or small roads, to pick berries or mushrooms (except in the vicinity of a dwelling), to cross forests or pastures, and to experience any area of the country as long as they are respectful of private property, close gates to keep livestock in or out, and refrain from walking through cereal fields that are near harvest. It is also legal to go on skis, by cycling or jogging, and to camp without permission, as long as the owner's livestock and equipment is respected. This rule that goes back to Viking times is a welcome surprise to many students who come from cultures where the signs "keep out" or "no trespassing" are commonplace.

The observations on multiple routes across the landscape quickly bring a fuller understanding of the total landscape to the student community. This could require several days or weeks if each person were to explore the entire territory on their own. The experiences of some people encourage others in the group to pursue further study of areas of special importance, including farming and livestock systems, especially interesting forests or land forms, and particularly unique paths for walking or trails/roads for cycling. Listening to others recount their experiences, we have heard classmates exclaim, "Oh, I saw that too, but I really did not understand what it was." Or, "That is really different, and it reminds me of ...." One variation on the same activity is for student teams to take shorter transect walks across their project farms without the farmer, observing crop and livestock enterprises and their integration and interactions. They begin to observe and assess the production potentials of the farm, its soils and biodiversity, and form ideas about intensity of land use and possible improvements for the future. This adds to their foundation of information when they later meet the farmer and learn in depth about the production, economic, and social strategies and connections that characterize the current situation.

In summary, we have found the transect walks to be a valuable form of orientation at the landscape and at the farm levels. We have used this activity to build and practice observational skills, and have received strong positive evaluations from students.

## References

FAO. n.d. Transect walks. Informal Working Group on Participatory Approaches & Methods. [http://www.fao.org/Participation/ft\\_more.jsp?ID=3581](http://www.fao.org/Participation/ft_more.jsp?ID=3581) [accessed 25 September 2011]

## Submitted by:

Charles Francis, Suzanne Morse, Tor Arvid Breland and Geir Lieblein  
UMB Norway  
[cfrancis2@unl.edu](mailto:cfrancis2@unl.edu) or [charf@umb.no](mailto:charf@umb.no)