

# Teaching Tips/Notes



## Transforming Conference Presentations into Involved Conversations: An Agroecology Model

### Introduction

How many times have you attended a scientific meeting, listened to numerous lectures with little time for discussion and left the session convinced there was minimal communication or sharing of ideas? How often have you found it difficult to remember the content of the presentation, just a few hours or days after the meeting? How often have you left one of these meetings without even knowing the names of the people sitting next to you? At a conference of the International Farming Systems Association (IFSA) in Berlin in April 2014, we decided to catalyze an interactive session with brief presentations of a maximum of five minutes and to dedicate most of the time to discussion and generating further questions and ideas for action. The theme for instructors who presented papers was “Returning to the farming and food systems as they are – action and phenomenon-based learning as prerequisite for transdisciplinarity.” The workshop was well attended, with spontaneous and exciting discussions, and resulted in excellent feedback from participants and an action plan. Here we share the background, planning, and implementation as well as evaluation of what could be a model for future interactive workshops for educators and a prototype for involved learning in the classroom.

### Methods

Characteristic of planners for many professional meetings, the organizers of IFSA asked for submissions of papers for the conference and then organized these into 62 categories with a 90 minute session allocated to every four topics and 20 minutes for each lecture. We were given two sessions for the topic on action and phenomenon-based learning, with four lectures expected in each session. In consultation with the authors and with agreement of the organizers, we decided to have five-minutes for each presentation and ten minutes for discussion in small groups in a “world café” type setting ([www.theworldcafe.com/method.html](http://www.theworldcafe.com/method.html); Brown, 2004; Brown et al., 1997). Abbreviated titles for the topics included:

- Bridging the gap between academia and food systems stakeholders (Norway)
- MSc agriculture students working with ex-campus stakeholders (Denmark)
- Creating student confidence for communication with stakeholders (USA)
- Facilitating international education doctoral program in agroecology (Sweden)
- Action- and partnership-based PhD research (France)
- Engaging researchers with learning and innovation networks (Poland/Hungary)
- Experiential learning in a transdisciplinary setting (Germany)
- Transdisciplinarity as an emergent property in agricultural research (Australia)
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In the middle of the first session of four papers, we, as moderators shifted the order of presentations to provide a more logical flow in the subject matter; this is adaptive management of the facilitation process, and workshop participants agreed with the change.

To facilitate the session with short presentations, and to create an alignment between the different presentations, the presenters were asked to design their short talk as a response to three questions:

- What is the essence of the approach you have used?

- What have been the positive outcomes thus far?
- What are the main lessons you have learned?

Most presenters followed these guidelines and were careful not to exceed the time limits. Seven of them used brief PowerPoint presentations, and one posted a hand-drawn diagram of the educational activity in front of the room.

The session was opened with the facilitators presenting the rationale for the workshop. Workshop participants were divided into small groups of three or four per table with ten minutes to discuss each presentation. The groups were shuffled between the two workshop sessions. Based on the assumption that one of the prerequisites for success in communication and building of a shared understanding, is that participants become acquainted, we invited short personal introductions at the outset. What they were asked to share was 1) where do you work, and 2) what have you done during the past six months that you are most proud of? Then after each presentation the small teams were asked to discuss two questions:

- What about the approach did you find new, useful, and exciting?
- What are the two questions you would like to ask the presenters?

After eight minutes of discussion, and an attempt to build a shared understanding around the two key questions, we asked each group to report briefly on their conversations. Although questions were raised for the presenters, there was no time for them to answer or elaborate. Our observation was that each group fully engaged the two questions, recorded their major points on A-4 sheets, and were enthusiastic and animated during this discussion period. The reports out to the larger group were varied and relevant. These reports as well as our evaluation of the process follow. A wrap-up of the sessions was planned to address three questions:

- What one idea am I taking home with me and why?
- What do I plan to do as a first step, and what are the details?
- Where can I find other sources of assistance, and what steps can the community take?

In fact there was not time for this wrap-up, but we asked people to quickly comment on the learning process in the two sessions, and to record their individual comments on papers that we collected, along with all the other notes from the groups. An action agenda was prepared by the conveners based on the general discussions and their observations. This agenda added to the workshop notes. These notes resulted in an eight-page summary that was sent within five days to all participants for comments.

## **Results**

Among the lessons learned by participants and reported from the discussions were several on content and even more on the process in the workshop. Many comments centered around the topic of phenomenon-based learning and the need for more frequent and in-depth interaction with stakeholders. The importance of students being involved in practice on the farm was one key element. Another was building observation and reflection skills. One participant remarked that “structured reflection by students is rarely a part of the teaching agenda.” The importance of scale was suggested as key to understanding systems, and this is a foundation for agroecology learning. One person designated this type of learning as “engaged scholarship,” and further suggested that some things cannot be learned, only experienced, and thus the importance of experiential learning. Several participants pointed out that evaluation is really a critical part of the instructional process, and although we evaluate students and provide written and oral feedback as well as grades in a course, we are too often less concerned about evaluating the learning

process itself. There were many more comments that resulted from this rich conversation following the talks, and these will be analyzed more carefully in another venue.

There were more comments about the process than on the content. There were positive remarks about the organization of the topics, the value of the short presentations and time for discussion, and the active and flexible facilitation of the two workshops. The low level of formality was noticed by several, and we established familiarity and a certain level of comfort by having all participants introduce themselves at the start of each session. This created an informal, though short-term, "learning community" with encouragement to fully participate and feel some ownership of the process. One person mentioned it was "good to avoid the 'lecture-type' presentations and put weight on interaction, giving added value to the sessions." The five minute presentations were popular, helping speakers to "get straight to the point," urging participants to think about the essential take-home messages, and not investing valuable time pursuing interesting but probably marginal side issues. This was reflected in the intense conversations in the small groups, since they had only eight minutes to deal with two evaluation questions on each talk and two minutes to reach consensus. There was scarcely time for small talk or deviation from the topic at hand. Although the process and schedule may sound a bit "authoritarian," our experience is that when you have eight presentations and two ninety minutes slots, AND would like to have interactive conversations with everyone participating, then the sessions need to be carefully planned and managed by the facilitators. The response from participants was highly positive and there was respect for the leadership and facilitation model.

The action agenda summarized by the conveners included seven steps. These are being implemented by the conveners with collaboration of interested participants. Steps include:

- Circulate notes to all 16 participant to solicit edits, add comments, and keep the topics alive and encourage feedback
- Invite speakers to answer specific questions posed by the group in writing, and distribute the answers to all participants
- Provide participant evaluation comments to conference organizers to provide ideas for planning future conferences
- Survey authors to assess interest in developing a comprehensive article on their topics, and explore having a special issue of an education journal
- Develop a short article for the NACTA Journal on the workshop planning process and the results
- Perform a 'compare and contrast' evaluation of the eight papers in the workshop including comments from participants, and prepare a journal article
- Encourage IFSA to include workshops on active learning topics in future international conferences

The implementation of this action agenda will be catalyzed by the conveners, but we expect to share ownership and action with the entire group of participants.

## **Conclusions**

Needless to say, as conveners of the two sessions, we were delighted with the reactions of the participants who provided highly positive feedback on both the topic and content of the workshops and especially on the process. Their active discussions during the café-type sessions following each presentation were productive and resulted in valuable sharing as well as written summaries of the conversations. The general comments on the conduct of the sessions provided in the last few minutes of the second workshop indicated that they thought this was a valuable learning experience and a model that should be used more often in scientific and educational conferences. At the danger of sounding self-congratulatory, we as conveners reflected on the process and concluded that it was a great success. We

think there is continuing activity and added value to the workshop because of the elaboration of an action plan, and the pursuit of workshop objectives far beyond the two 90-minute session in Berlin.

Many comments from participants were highly positive, and there was consensus that this model should be extended to the entire conference. One said, "Do it again, and I will join you people in this learning environment." Another remarked, "My paper is going to be presented in another workshop, which is obviously a mistake." A participant from Belgium reflected on the excitement of teaching, and wrote in his comments: "Thanks for a very nice workshop, full of life and joy." One scarcely hears either "life" or "joy" associated with learning at a meeting of professional educators! And in the words of a Danish agroecology instructor, "I came out of the workshop with much more energy than when I went in." What better testimonial could we have about success of this approach to a conference meeting?

In our subsequent reflections about the process of the workshop, we are exploring how a similar process could be planned and managed for the university classroom? Assuming that we can provide adequate stimulus and rewards for students reading relevant materials before coming to class, could we present a five-minute 'speed lecture' and pose appropriate questions that could be explored in small student groups? Each team could report back on their consensus about the topic and raise further questions, and the educator could briefly respond. It seems that we could structure a 45-50 minute class period to explore two topics in some depth using this model, and we are anxious to test this strategy in coming semesters.

## **References**

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Submitted by:

Geir Lieblein and Charles Francis

Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU)