

What Are We Doing Right?

Are you tired every morning? During the work day, do you feel like a ton of bricks are upon your shoulders? Have you felt like you could not relax in some time? Is about all you think about, lately, is work? Well, we suspect that you are not alone (Dodson, 2006). The pressure to produce in academia is huge! Whether it is the graduate student/scholar level to the full-professor level, we are expected to go “above and beyond” to be the best (Dodson, 2008). The best in research, teaching/ learning, advising and service are becoming the norm, not the exception these days. Yes, the best, even in light of increasing numbers of roadblocks.

Limitations to our success include reduced numbers of grant dollars available for a higher number of competing grant proposals submitted (Dodson, 2006b). How might one obtain grant funding when there is (absolutely) no program in which to submit a proposal? Moreover, if one submits a grant proposal to a level-funded program whereby 200 proposals are vying for five (funded) projects, it is difficult to expect to receive support. In parallel to this, we are expected to perform in an outstanding manner in the classroom even if resources are not available for purchase of media supplies, etc (Dodson et al., 2006c). Personal advising of students seems to be something of the past and “professional advisors” are now taking over advising duties in departments all over the country, which limit faculty contact with (especially) undergraduate students. Centralization of services sometimes leaves the main office of some department’s void of any personnel (at times) such that students come for help, and no one is there. While times are changing and the new face of academia means less funding to teachers (even in light of increased costs to students; Dodson, 2011), limited desire to/tools with which to teach, detached (from the faculty) advising and empty spaces in our (once thriving) main offices, are there things that we are doing right?

Dedicated academicians have sized up the changing environment to which we (all) are being channeled into and have (in many cases) chosen a strategy for their work that focuses on what they feel is important. Can research be conducted without an abundance of funding? Sure, and the idea that research teams [perhaps at the international level] may be formed

to share what little everyone has to contribute effectively to a scientific field (Dodson et al., 2010b). Teachers are learning how to teach with no one “watching their back.” Indeed, one-on-one instruction is not only vogue, but an effective way for not only deciphering the intent of students, but to see who has the “spark” for learning (Duris et al., 2012). Moreover, classrooms (whether plugged in or not; Dodson, 2007) produce a student product that can compete nationally for jobs, professional school or graduate school (Dodson and Benson 2010). This leaves service. What can one say? If a department has been decimated to the point whereby the main office is ran by work study students, something is wrong. Administrators will need to take a look at this and determine the solution. The days of individualized student contact (by all faculty members) seems to be over.

In light of our changing academic climate, it is naturally difficult for a participant to get up (each morning) and head for school. Yet, we keep doing it. That is the astounding part of all of this. Even with all of the stress and more will come each day, dedicated academics keep working and imparting as much wisdom to the people around them as possible. Does it take a toll to “stamp out ignorance” and to motivate students? Sure, but teachers know how to do things right....and will continue to do so.

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What Does the Public Think of Agriculture?

According to the US Department of Agriculture, there are over 285,000,000 people living in the United States. Of that population, less than 1% claim farming as an occupation (and about 2% actually live on farms). There are only about 960,000 persons claiming farming as their principal occupation and a similar number of farmers claiming some other principal occupation.

Agriculture students at Wright State University Lake Campus enrolled in a class “Ag Society” are learning about trends and issues in agriculture. As part of their curriculum, Dr. Greg Homan, worked with them to develop and administer a survey of local residents to explore local perceptions of agriculture. Students visited local restaurants and stores to discuss agriculture with a random sample of local residents in St. Marys, Celina and Coldwater.

When residents were asked what they thought of farmers, their replies were varied, but positive. One respondent replied “Farmers are good, hard-working people.” Another individual commented, “They work very hard to feed the country and help the economy a lot.”

When ranking the impact of four possible impacts on their food buying choices, the averages in order of predominance of response were: 1) Nutrition, 2) Taste, 3) How it was Produced and 4) Cost. When asked how their food buying/consumption was different from their parents, most respondents indicated they were purchasing more of their food (versus raising it), were selecting more convenience items (packaged/prepared

foods) and had a much wider variety of items to select from than their parents.

Consumers were asked “*Your food price includes a variety of costs such as processing, shipping, marketing, etc. How much of every \$1 spent on food in the United States do you think goes to the farmer that produces it?*” Typical responses ranged from approximately 40-60 cents per food dollar. According to the American Farm Bureau, approximately 16 cents of every food dollar is earned by the farm producer to pay for their labor, supplies, land, etc. The students also explored with respondents how they thought agriculture had changed over the past 100 years. Common perceptions of agriculture change included modernized technology, larger farms and bigger equipment.

When asked about the potential prospect of an increasingly larger share of the United States food being produced in another country and imported to the United States, most respondents weren’t very positive. One respondent commented, “*I don’t trust food produced in another country as much.*” Another participant replied, “*I don’t think their safety is as good (in other countries).*”

According to student, Alyssa Muhlenkamp of Coldwater, “*By surveying people buying groceries about agriculture, I learned that many people feel farming importance has declined and don’t realize everything that goes into it.*” Levi Krouskop of Spencerville replied, “*The area I surveyed surprisingly knew more about agriculture than I expected. I expected uneducated responses but, many of the people were somehow connected to agriculture, knew a great deal about it and respected those involved in it.*”

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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.

Teaching Tips/Notes

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 minutes 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.

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