

Meghan Montagne

Communication Piece

Let's Talk: The Benefits of Conversation

Anyone who has ever had an interview knows how nerve wracking the experience can be, whether it be the time leading up to the interview or not knowing if you are answering the questions correctly even if there are no correct answers. Just the word interview has always made me nervous, but I have recently learned that conducted conversationally the interview goes quite smoothly and it can even provide more valuable information.

I had the pleasure of working with Dr. Stacy Lynn and Dr. Greg Newman to listen and analyze responses from participants of a civic science program growing perennial grains with The Land Institute. I was able to sit in on an interview with Dr. Lynn and one of the participants and listen to many more to learn about the interview and data collection process. What I noticed and what Dr. Lynn emphasized was that her technique for interviewing participants is less structured and more conversational.



Figure 1. The silphium plant, a type of sunflower and one of the perennial grains being studied by civic scientists for The Land Institute.

This means that rather than following a strict script and immediately moving onto the next question when provided an answer Dr. Lynn chose to talk about herself and ask follow up questions that were unique to their experiences.

I believe that this made interviewees more relaxed, and many seemed happy to share more about their lives or experiences. One of the first questions asked was about the participants background, where they come from, their connection to agriculture, etc. but the answer to this question was found throughout the interview because of the conversational structure. Had the interview been following a stricter script I do not believe that some of this valuable information would have been provided.

The conversational structure opened up a space for active communication between themselves and Dr. Lynn. Participants were asking their own questions and engaging with Dr. Lynn's responses just as Dr. Lynn was doing for them.

This concept of conversation over interview provides a unique experience, interest instead of worry. The interviewer and the interviewee can bond over shared interests or challenges making for a more relaxed environment where interviewees are less passive and guarded.

When I was able to sit in on one of the interviews, I forgot what we were doing, why we were talking to them. The interviewee was so interesting and told so many great stories of their experiences that I was captivated and by the end when I remembered why we were talking to them I was worried we hadn't collected the necessary information, but I was wrong. Going through the transcript after the interview showed that there were answers to every question we needed, it was just spread throughout the interview in little things that the participant shared.

This method is the only way I want to collect qualitative data from interviews because it made me feel connected to the participants and the research in a way that I don't think would have been possible had the interview been structured differently.



Figure 2. The sainfoin plant, a type of legume and the other grain being studied by civic scientist for The Land Institute.