

  

# AGRITRAIN

  


## Interviewing as a method

**used at farms as a  
place of learning**

A decorative graphic consisting of a row of seven triangles pointing downwards, each with a different color: light grey, green, orange, purple, yellow, blue, and red. Above the first triangle is another light grey triangle pointing upwards. Below the last triangle is another light grey triangle pointing downwards.

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# The Interview-method at a farm as a place of learning

## Embedding in the curriculum

The “Sustainable Food Management” degree programme at FH JOANNEUM (University of Applied Sciences) follows a dual approach that enables students to combine their learning experiences at university with learning experiences on farms (and other businesses). First year students spend one month (4 weeks) on a farm chosen according to the criteria of diversity, direct marketing and ability to engage in dialogue in the business.

## Underlying idea

The underlying idea is that the practical farm as an out-of-school place of learning is a contrast to the (college) school or possibly their parents business. Through the interview method, the experiences on the practical farm are connected to the theoretical knowledge and experiences are gained in conducting conversations and in attentive listening and documenting.

## Task

This learning assignment can be done in different ways. Students may work out the questions together with their teacher in the practical seminary prior to the internship (A), or they may be provided with pre-formulated questions (B). A third option is that students interview each other after a practical semester to document their impressions (C).

### Task A)

Developing questions in class is methodically very instructive for the students and serves the purpose that most students will then know the question's background. The questions were developed in groups and a Moodle-based voting system was used to select the top questions. The teacher supported the learners by asking questions from their own interview experience and revised collected questions for conclusiveness etc. before voting.

### Task B)

If the teachers provide students with questions that are interesting for an ongoing project, it is necessary to explain the background to the students and to enable them to deal with the topic in their group work. The evaluation method should be as clear and simple as possible. The best way to achieve this is to use a question in a table that can be filled in by the students during or after the interview.

### Task C)

This variant, is mainly used when the students work in very diverse businesses, the students interview each other on a question provided by their teacher. The answer is then summarized into 300 words and read out by the students. Afterwards, there is a round of reflection and discussion.

### Documentation

The interview answers are recorded in writing and summarized by the students. They may either be instructed to use a certain method (e.g. a literal transcript, a summary or paraphrase) or they are invited to choose their method so they learn to develop their own writing style. Other forms of summary are possible. For example, a style can be suggested, such as „lurid tabloid article“ or „expert report“ etc. Here, the mutual interviews between students are suitable to playfully take on a role that works with the information and presents it in a short report. The results of the interviews are documented in a report, which covers all phases of the practical work, answers the questions and reflects the learning goals. It is the teacher’s task to define the framework and the tasks prior to the practice or to choose them in exchange with the students, to guide the subsequent processes of reflection and, if necessary, to give input to ensure success of the exchange and a deepening of insights.

1. **Identify learning location:** The university’s network of farms includes numerous agricultural enterprises where university students frequently complete their internships. Students are free to choose a farm that interests them most. They are supported by teaching staff.
2. **Highlight networked problems:** Students receive a guideline for their practical period and the assignments of writing a report covering different tasks. These tasks may relate to the topics soil, water and occupational safety. One task is to conduct an interview with the business managers enquiring about dangerous situations and accidents at work.
3. **Save what you have learned:** The stories that were collected, e.g. about occupational safety, are summarized in a short report. In addition to re-telling the accident, this report also contains an assessment of the atmosphere of the discussion and consequences drawn from it in the business.
4. **Reflect on interrelations and connections:** Especially valuable is the exchange of practical reports at university. Students can present their reports to each other and deepen their understanding of occupational safety on a farm.
5. **Transfer connections to other fields:** The students learn to transfer what they have learned on their respective farm and the conclusions drawn to their own or other enterprises. This can contribute significantly to increasing occupational safety.

### Summary

The interview method fosters a gain of knowledge on two different levels. On the one hand, a method is acquired (the interview) and practical experience is combined with learned knowledge from school. On the other hand, a personal relationship between students and the business managers is established, as students ask about topics that interest them and personal conversation occurs. Both learning experiences are important and lead to the goal of combining experiential knowledge with learned knowledge. The learning assignment also plays an important role. If the questions are developed by the students themselves, there is a stronger interest and the background of the questions is easier to understand for students. In case of questions provided by the teacher, the preparation in the practical seminar is critical.

## Appendix 1

### Excerpt from the practical guide – task of agricultural engineering:

#### Aims:

- Gain a concrete insight into issues of occupational health and safety in agriculture.
- Make your own considerations about causes and avoidance strategies or explore them in discussion.
- Get an overview of topics of occupational safety and health protection by exchanging views and opinions
- Writing a report in English.

#### Task:

- Interview(s) with employees at the farm (including family members) guided by the question: What directly work-related accidents, injuries, illnesses, etc. have occurred at the farm? How did it come about, what were consequences and what was learned from the incident?
- Writing a short report as part of the practical report (max. two pages in ENGLISH).
- The events studied may be a minor incident (e.g. burns or cuts in the kitchen, illness from exhaustion). Only exchange in the group will produce a picture of the security risks in agriculture.

### Task „sustainability“

#### Aims:

Exercise in the practical application of the concept of sustainability in the dimension „ecology“ (with possible economic and / or social consequences).

- Communication exercise of comparison in the group, and thus reflection of individual views on sustainability

#### Task:

- Interview, supplemented by own observations of on-farm soil and water management.
- Special consideration of the connection between the topics soil and water, finding out about events that have made people aware of the limits of possibilities or special dangers. Attempt an evaluation of the handling of soil and water resources on the farm.
- Communicate with other members of your peer group, comment on, and compare your findings.
- Write a short report as part of the field report (max. two pages in ENGLISH).

## Appendix 2

### Exemplary student reports (Original) on „Occupational safety and health, soil and water“

#### Report „Farmgut“

*Sustainability is an important topic to the “Farmgut”, due to the dependency on environmental conditions like the weather or soil condition, for example. Especially the production of vegetables and grassland requires specific ways of treatment.*

#### **WORKING SAFETY**

*The Maier -family is working very efficient and their days are well planned. A thoroughly distribute of the different types of work ensures the safety of the daily tasks due to everybody knows what they are doing. When there were trainees on the farm, the family gave them precisely instruction or helped them with difficult tasks.*

*But nevertheless, as in every other company, accidents happen sometimes. In the processing areas for foodstuffs little injuries like cutting in the fingers is not uncommon. Also the stable could be a potential source of danger due to the work with the goats. To avoid these kinds of accidents, the family tries to use knives and other working tools correctly and also avoid working under pressure.*

*During my interview with the family, they told me about an accident which happened 20 years ago. Their son John, who was 1-year-old played with Margaret in the grass during Helmut was driving with the tractor. Suddenly John got under the tractor. According to his parents everything happened in such a fast way, they didn’t even notice the accident in the first place. Of course, they immediately called the ambulance and John was driven to the hospital. He didn’t had any apparently injuries, in fact he didn’t even bleed. The doctor evaluated him in detail, but they didn’t find anything, so they decided to retain him in the hospital for one week. In the days after the accident, the only visible injury was a bruise on the spine. The parents said, that they were afraid that John might have any permanent damages, but this is difficult to say at this young state of life. To get a further opinion on the case they visited a naturopath, who cleared things up.*

*Another incident happened 10 years ago, when Helmut’s father got injured from a tree at forestry work. He had injuries in his face and by the teeth. In order to avoid such situations, they try to work together as a family, to absolve tasks carefully and thoughtfully.*

#### **SOIL**

*The family focusses on the system of evergreen cultivation. This method is based on a continuous soil cover, therefore the ground is not allowed to stay uncovered for more than a month. Moreover, this system is based on the cultivation of catch crops between the main crops. Water supplies and erosion protection are examples for the advantages, but this system also improves rooting, soil condition, feed for soil fauna and transfer of important nutrients into the soil. To improve the soil quality, also flour made from prehistoric rocks is used, besides compost is put into the soil to enhance the soil fertility.*

#### **WATER**

*Dryness, caused through climate changes in the last few years, effected the production of vegetables, fruits and grassland. The Maier family even had to sell 40 goats because they couldn’t feed them anymore. The acquisition of grass and hay wasn’t profitable, and the quality of the purchased feed wasn’t very well. As the family do not believe that in the further years the weather condition would get better they **built a pond where rainwater is collected**. The collected water is used as a watering for grassland and the gardening. In my opinion the family tries to use water as efficient as possible. Even in the processing room water is only used when it’s absolutely necessary and the dishes where collected for one go of dishwasher.*

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<sup>1</sup> All Names anonymized by author.

Through my observations during my internship I became aware of the consequences weather conditions entail. Above all, farmers often have extreme struggles with this situation and sometimes they even have to give up their farm. Also, the "Farmgut" considers ending the goat production because it isn't very rentable anymore. This development of losing farmers is increasing and solutions to solve this problem must be found. Despite all circumstances, the farm tries it's best to use water as sustainable as possible and always looks for new possibilities to improve the soil quality.

## Report "Kogler-Farm"

### WORKING SAFETY

The work on the Kogler farm is associated with a lot of physically strenuous work, but the Kogler family had been lucky so far and nobody suffered a serious accident. This low injury rate is due to the careful work of the family. D. has also been trained to do tours for the initiative „ Schule am Bauernhof“. Before the first tour have started, the safety on farm is controlled by the „ Sozialversicherungsanstalt der Bauern“. The control is specialized in the safety of young students in the tours.

A. Kogler told me about minor injuries while working in the forest. These were mainly minor hand injuries such as squashings and cuts. Especially when using the wire rope can stand out wires which represent and they are a small source of danger. To avoid these injuries is only possible by working carefully and the use of work gloves.

D.'s father was also operated on the hip several years ago. This abrasion can probably be attributed to the physically laboring work, but not only. Such a symptom of old age is difficult to avoid, possibly only by correct posture at work and additional muscle building.

When I talked to D. about other physical problems, she told me about her mother's back problems, she had previously suffered, but these symptoms improved after switching to a vegan diet.

### WATER MANAGEMENT

In terms of sustainability, the farm is keen to use all it's resources as best as possible. Last year, the farm struggled with water shortage, to solve this problem, the farm bought a new cistern. The old one measures only two to three cubic meters and has become leaky over the years. The new cistern, which holds ten cubic meters, is already positioned but not yet in operation. The location of the new cistern was chosen carefully so that there is as much pressure as possible and that the overflows of the houses can easily run into the cistern.

On the farm there are two sources. The water which is too much for household, is led into the private wells. The overflow of the private well runs into the cistern. Since the herbal and vegetable field needs about one to two cubic meter in the summer, it would be a dream of Daniela to create a second pond over the herb and vegetable field to collect the water that overflows at the cistern. Using the resources as well as possible is also part of the principles of permaculture.

### SOIL MANAGEMENT

Especially important for the herb and vegetable field is the compost, which was added with stone meal and a little manure. Also the manure for the grassland is pre composted. Daniela has been able to observe a strong soil improvement in recent years by using their own compost. Although the farm is already composting all their organic material, they would need more. One way to produce more would be to compost the shrub cutting. This project has already been started but it has been neglected in recent years. Especially the cycle of using the composting toilet of the shrub cutting would be rewarding. The human consumes the harvested crop, he uses the composting toilets, the excretions will be composted, the composted material will be used to fertilize the shrub, the shrub cutting will be composted and the compost will be incorporated into the soil. A closed circuit.

As a future project Daniela also wants to incorporate charcoal in their compost. The charcoal must be certified and they have already found a supplier for it. The incorporation and composting of the charcoal should gain a particularly fertile compost. The „Terra Preta“ soil, also called blacksoil.

## Appendix 3

### A tabloid-style disaster-report from the Kogler farm

#### **Drought afflicts farmers: Disaster fund to help**

The persistent drought has severely affected agricultural enterprises, especially in western Austria. D. and A. of Biohof Kogler are among the affected and are now planning, among other measures, to tap into the disaster funds for farmers.

C., a young student from Graz, worked on site for a month and has shocking news: “Local farmers have to cope with an extremely difficult year. After the cold, wet spring, we now have a menacing heat wave. For many farmers the harvest is in danger - they need help quickly now”. The Steirische Kronen Newspaper

had an exclusive interview with a look at the effects of the current situation.

#### **First emergency sales of cattle**

In exposed sites, the grass is already dry and brown, and even with abundant rainfall, “only modest yields can be expected this year,” F. continued. Some owners of livestock, such as the Kohler family, already had to sell cattle as an emergency measure. Farms that have to buy additional feed are in urgent need of financial aid from the disaster fund.

#### **Potatoes soon before the out**

No Austrian potatoes will be available in the trade. Drought, pests and also the customers demands for nothing less than flawless products plague the farmers. The Kogler family also has to struggle with wireworm. “It lives in the soil and loves a moist environment. If the soil dries out, it makes its escape into roots or tubers, even into the potatoes, and leaves feeding tunnels. The potato is not bad, but it is unmarketable. It’s all doom and gloom now,” says C.

#### **Drought continues**

The weather situation is likely to stay in the coming days. According to the Central Institute for Meteorology and Geodynamics, thunderstorms will only occur sporadically from Monday to Tuesday in the particularly dry areas in the west. Until then and in the days after, hardly any precipitation is expected in the wider region.





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