

A Guideline for Formulating Questions to Research Learning Needs

In the GreenSouth project, we focus on enhancing the capacity of training centres to support not only nature-inclusive but also human-inclusive agriculture. As we begin to develop and refine curricula, we aim to identify learning needs through various forms of dialogue. These include questionnaires, in-depth interviews, networking conversations, and more. This guideline draws inspiration from anthroposophy and biodynamic farming.

The concept of the threefold human being as a tool

Commonly, questions like “What do you want to learn?” or “What skills do you need to secure a place in the labour market?” are asked. In our context, we would direct these questions towards agriculture and related fields such as marketing, management, economics, and environmental issues.

When questions are posed in this manner, the responses tend to be well-considered. However, there is a risk that these answers are merely wishes, not grounded in the reality of the interviewee or the practical demands of the world where specific skills are required. These responses lack context. If a curriculum is built on such answers, the likelihood of the training's success will be low.

Alternatively, you might ask questions such as: “Can you describe a positive learning experience you had last year?” or “What practices have you adopted in the past year?” These inquiries focus on the “will” rather than the “head,” eliciting responses about practical, contextually grounded achievements. By examining positive experiences, you can discern potential future successes based on past accomplishments. This approach not only reveals **what** has been learned but also **how** effectively it was learned.

To understand the effects of answering different types of questions and to gain a tool for constructing questions, we use the concept of the threefold human being:

- Thinking is centred in the head.
- Feeling is centred in the heart.
- Willing is centred in the hands and feet.

Thinking tends to abstract, to make themes universal, and to encompass a vast scope, often involving the entire world, but within your head. Willing, on the other hand, grounds you in the present moment. With your feet, you can only stand in one place and you move out, into the world. Feelings and emotions can serve as a doorway upwards when you ask, “What do you feel about...?”, “How did you like it?” or downwards when you inquire, “Please describe a positive experience you had...”

The responses you receive will correspond to the level at which you ask your questions. You can be aware of whether you are rising or going down in the questions you ask and in the answers you get.

The concept of the threefold human being transforms from a mere model or construct into a practical tool when used to enhance self-awareness and not only for categorising. It then provides inspiration to guide your actions more effectively. Thinking can in this way constructively be employed to shed light on the activities of the will, revealing the nature of actions taken. A thinking while willing emerges.

Context

When you ask farmers around the kitchen table what is important to them, there is a high chance the conversation will revolve around politics and money. However, when you are in the potato field, the conversation often shifts to what the farmer has done to develop this specific variety and how that aligns with their personal development.

When you sit opposite someone, the conversation is more likely to either stop or turn into a discussion, often operating on the thinking level. However, when you walk together, sit beside each other while driving, or invite the other person to sit next to you, the conversation flows more naturally. This setting tends to focus more on something in front of both of you, on what you are doing or what you can do, making it easier to engage on the willing level.

An essential aspect of the conversation's context is to make yourself part of that context, ensuring you are visible and engaged rather than remaining an outsider. Introduce yourself by sharing the context that motivates you for this conversation. This way, your conversation partner will encounter an inviting setting and will not be left guessing your intentions. When the other person is uncertain about your motives, they will be preoccupied with figuring out what is expected of them, which could lead to reluctance in continuing the conversation. (See Chapter 12.5 of the Inclutrain Connect Handbook, "Exploring while Advocating," for more insights.)

Scaling

Another way to provide some context is to ask for a rating on a scale, for example from 1 to 10. You can then follow up with questions like, "Can you clarify [better than: explain?] why you didn't rate it one point higher? Please provide an example." Likewise, you can ask, "Can you explain why you didn't rate it one point lower? Please provide an example." This approach, with this order, helps to end on a positive note.

Administrative data

At the end, not at the beginning, you can inventory some administrative data, such as:

- Your current occupation or field of study
- Year of birth
- Gender
- Highest level of education completed
- Most recent educational experience
- Your past connections with agriculture
- Your current connections with agriculture
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Check out

Introducing the context is a way of ensuring a smooth check-in, focusing on the willingness to engage.

During a check-out, questions like "What do you think about it?", "What is your opinion?", or "What did you like?" probe for overall emotions connected to the thinking process. To target the

will, you can ask, "What touched you?" This question encourages the person to select a specific moment and describe what occurred. This selection process awakens the will, highlighting something significant that this individual is likely to continue working on in the future.

At the beginning of a meeting, you might ask, "Can you share a positive experience, perhaps a successful unexpected action (an intuitive action), that you encountered last week or month?"

This approach sets a supportive tone, encouraging participants to reflect on and share their achievements. By doing so, the focus shifts from individual actions to creating a positive atmosphere from the outset.

Give space to those who wish to share; no one should feel obligated. Going around, one after the other, encourages reflection out of the "thinking".

Furthermore, in a questionnaire, it is beneficial to conclude with an evaluative prompt. For instance, "We designed this questionnaire to reflect the training experience [the way we train?].

Therefore, we conclude, as we often do in our training sessions, with an evaluative question:

'What touched you while completing this questionnaire?'"

To elaborate the answers

With this type of questionnaire, you receive fewer answers per person, but they are more detailed and narrative in nature. Consequently, you cannot simply process the questionnaire on a PC. Instead, you need to craft new stories from the responses and use these narratives as examples.

Grounded Theory is an ideal approach for this task. This method is commonly used in the social sciences to gain insights from people's narratives. The researcher identifies frequently occurring concepts and examines how these core concepts are linked to others. These concepts are derived from the reality experienced by people and depicted in their stories. Albert de Vries explains in his dissertation how the grounded theory process can be simplified and accelerated by focusing on the actions and verbs in the narratives. Typically, the theory developed in this manner is then tested by surveying larger groups. This testing is an ongoing process.

In our case, we should aim to describe the preliminary results after 2-3 months and use the remaining 2 months to delve deeper into the findings from the questionnaires and conversations we have at that time. Additionally, developing the curriculum and delivering training sessions are other ways of testing and refining our praxis theory.

Praxis theory involves the interplay between theory and practice, where knowledge is constantly refined through active participation and reflection. This approach is integral to our methodology, which emphasizes participatory action and continuous learning.

Scenarios

For our questionnaire inspires this participatory approach that we describe different scenarios and ask:

- "Which scenario would you like the most to attend, scenario 1, 2, or 3?"
- "What do you need to really participate in the chosen training?"
- "Can you design a fourth scenario that fits you the best?"
- "Can you clarify your answers?"

The questionnaire

In short, there are four main sections in the questionnaire:

- Introduction: Introducing the context, the purpose and structure of the questionnaire.
- Questions: The core set of questions designed to gather detailed and narrative responses.

- Scenarios: Descriptions of different scenarios.
- Administrative Data: Collecting necessary background information and details for analysis.