In my dissertation, I used interviewing techniques to investigate how students learn. But the constraints of teaching made me leave behind some interviewing tools—my video camera and tape recorders. Instead, I found a place to use other useful interviewing techniques to assess my students. The “sorting interview” was especially helpful. For example, while my biology class completed small-group work, I would call up individual students to sort through cards that contained graphics depicting change in the pelage color in a population of rabbits. The students selected the cards in any order to explain the color change phenomenon. As they sorted through the cards, I encouraged them to talk about their reasoning.

The explanations they offered in those interviews helped me understand how the class was interpreting my instruction on evolution. Although I had known that interviews were useful for research, in my teaching I learned to depend on informal interviews as a valuable resource to guide my instruction.

—Sherry Sutherlin
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