Using the World Café to Explore Possibilities: Self, Students, Community, World

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ABSTRACT

Conversation as a problem-solving tool is as natural and ancient as human community. The World Café (Brown & Isaacs, 2005), grounded in principles of living systems, uses self-organizing conversation to address questions that matter. As such, it’s a versatile, accessible, and engaging method to enhance learning, solve problems, innovate, and more, in groups ranging from about twelve people to twelve hundred. The proposed session will showcase the World Café approach and its potential as an effective and fun teaching-learning tool, featuring questions oriented to the conference theme itself, Open to the Possibilities: Self, Students, Community, World.

Keywords: World Café, Conversation, Problem-solving, Innovation

PLANNING DETAILS

Proposed audience: Instructors who prefer highly interactive, self-organizing small group activities will benefit most.

Maximum number of participants: For demonstration purposes, an upper limit of 60 participants will be best.

Type of session: Small group conversation/dialogue-centered: modeling a World Café, with larger-group conversation/debriefing at end.

Special requirements: A/V: We’ll bring flip-charts, easel, & markers; we’ll need wall space to post flip-chart sheets. Room setup: 12 small (preferably round) tables arranged randomly, 5 chairs per table.

Length or Type: Please indicate min & max 90 minute max., 60 minute min. World Café literature recommends at least 90 minutes. If we must pare to 60, we will compress a few parts.
INTRODUCTION

Our human existence is one in which we can live in whatever world we can bring about in our conversations.

Humberto Maturana and Gerda Verden-Zöller, The Evolution of Humanness in the Biology of Love

The most important work in the new economy is creating conversations.
Alan Webber, former editor, Harvard Business Review

Change happens when you connect with, rather than oppose, the fundamental forces of human nature.
Fast Company magazine

Over the last twenty years, the organizational change literature has seen a dramatic increase in change methods relying on that most natural of human abilities, conversation. Part of the reason for this is the complexity of contemporary problems—no one person can possibly understand all dimensions of complex problems and issues; it requires different perspectives to more fully comprehend and address so many complexities today. Another important reason for the growth of conversational methods is efficacy—they work (Holman, Devane, & Cady, 2007). People often warm to these methods because conversation has basically always been a natural part of the human experience. This helps account for the enormous popularity of such conversation-based methods as Appreciative Inquiry, Dialogue, Open Space Technology, and the subject of this session, the World Café (see readings #5, 7, 9, & 12, respectively, in Holman et.al., 2007).

The World Café was pioneered by Juanita Brown and David Isaacs (2005), and has been applied in every setting imaginable worldwide—large/small businesses, nonprofits, governments, communities, civic organizations, etc., you name it—by a growing legion of facilitators. It is an extremely versatile and accessible method that harnesses the power of diversity, authentic communication, and living networks to tackle challenging questions that matter. As such, it reliably leads to innovation, problem-solving, and emergent learning. Participants generally finish a World Café with insights about focal

1 Special thanks to three anonymous reviewers for comments and suggestions we believe will improve this session.
questions they simply didn’t have prior to participating, and which they might not ever have acquired alone. It’s a powerful tool for thinking collectively and for accelerating individual and group learning.

**Goals.** The goals for this session are to: (1) Engage participants in modeling the design principles—the processes—of the World Café. (2) Create actual self-organizing conversations focused on questions of importance to the OBTC. (3) Produce “actionable knowledge” of value to members of the OBTS. (4) Produce actionable knowledge that will enrich participants’ work/teaching practices. (5) Have fun.

**Takeaways.** In keeping with the aforementioned goals, we expect participants to take from this session: (1) Firsthand, experiential knowledge of how the World Café design principles work integratively to produce learning and innovation; (2) Contributions to conversations about questions of importance to the OBTC; (3) Learning that will serve them in their relation to and participation in the OBTS; (4) Learning an experiential approach that can be adapted to many different learning settings; (5) Enjoyment and camaraderie with other OBTCers.

**THEORETICAL GROUNDING**

The definitive resource for the World Café is Brown and Isaacs’ *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter* (2005). Its success worldwide as a change method has been so broad that the book has been translated into at least eight languages. There are numerous additional publications about the World Café (e.g., Brown, Hunter & Isaacs, 2007; Hurley & Brown, 2009). An especially helpful and complementary resource is the World Café website and its vibrant online community of practitioners: [http://www.theworldcafe.com](http://www.theworldcafe.com).

As mentioned earlier, the World Café is grounded in principles of living systems (Brown & Isaacs, 2005, p. 112-114), including:

- **A living network:** “Surprising possibilities in any system emerge not solely from the individual parts of nodes, but rather from the *connections* among them”;
- **Question as attractor:** “When an ‘attractor’ is present to focus attention, even a simple network has rich self-organizing capacities”;
- **Diverse perspectives:** “Diverse participants [and their] unique contribution…bring more variety to the ‘ecology’ of conversation”;
Cross-pollination: “Participants…move from table to table, carrying seed ideas …they link and connect their thoughts, ideas, and questions, mirroring…iterating networks of conversation”;

Emergence—“The World Café intentionally connects the parts to the whole…. By encouraging people to carry forward the essential or most exciting ideas from their earlier conversations, the essence of the whole tends to become more visible as key ideas and insights travel rapidly through the conversational web.”

The heart of the World Café is its seven integrative design principles which frame the basic method (subject to endless variations based on circumstances). The highlights (Brown & Isaacs, 2005):

1. **Set the context:** Establish purpose, parameters, and participants, emphasizing diversity to maximize learning and creativity.

2. **Create a hospitable space:** Café décor: natural lighting, small round tables, each with a small vase, flowers, colorful tablecloth, multi-colored markers, large flip-chart paper on tabletops for drawing and doodling. Hosts review Café etiquette: contribute, listen, connect ideas, and draw/doodle to capture ideas. Hosts explain the café’s agenda, usually 2-4 rounds of 20-30 minutes each, with participants switching tables and table-mates each round.

3. **Explore questions that matter:** Crafting questions is crucially important, right down to single words. Example: How can H-P (Hewlett-Packard) be the best lab *in* the world? How can H-P be the best lab *for* the world? One word completely changes the question (Brown & Isaacs, 2005, p. 85). Questions matter. Powerful ones—there are guidelines—open thinking and conversation; weak ones close both (Vogt, Brown, & Isaacs, 2003).

4. **Encourage everyone’s contribution:** The spirit here: “When people feel they belong, they show up, bringing their gifts” (Holman, 2010, p. 112). Numerous features promote contribution.

5. **Cross-pollinate and connect diverse perspectives:** Participants switch tables and table-mates each round. Usually a table “steward” stays behind to re-cap highlights of earlier rounds for newcomers. People traveling to new tables convey highlights of earlier conversations to “seed” the next round’s conversation. This principle promotes learning by connecting diverse people and ideas across rounds.

6. **Listen together for patterns, insights, and deeper questions.** Participants listen for patterns and themes across conversations. The drawings/doodles on each table’s flip-chart paper reflect these insights, preserving conversational highlights.

7. **Harvest and share collective discoveries.** The entire group conducts a “conversation of the whole,” coalescing themes, insights, and questions emerging from all rounds. A graphic recorder often creates in real time a mural of this conversation, depicting symbolically in creative, colorful, and vivid forms the essence of the “harvest” (Margulies & Sibbet, 2007). A “what’s next?” question may come up at this point, leading to action planning.

Notice from the seven design principles, and the principles of living systems preceding them, how much pedagogical sense they all make, applied in the classroom, apart from any use of World Cafés.

**SESSION DESCRIPTION: “The Possibilities Café” (90 min. option)**

**1:00-1:10:** Everyone seated, preferably with 3-4 others they don’t know at each table. Hosts explain goals of session, Café Etiquette, and self-organizing process of three 25-minute rounds, the last one being the concluding conversation of the whole (see principle 2).
1:10-1:35: **Round 1:**

**Round 1 Question:** (The following question may be refined as needed.) **What can we learn, better appreciate, or even shed in order to open ourselves to possibilities?** Such a question can be interpreted at least several ways. An ensuing conversation, given a little time, could fruitfully pursue a number of them, as well as other unexpected and creative directions. We believe the “possibility word,” can, in the question connotes the hope of exploration and experimentation in thinking about one aspect of the conference theme—self. Self may be a needed starting point to facilitate opening possibilities at other levels: students, community, world.

After 25 minutes of conversation about the Question, one participant (each table) volunteers to stay behind as “conversation steward” to brief newcomers arriving next round, while everyone else moves to new tables and new table-mates. “Travelers” carry ideas from Round 1 conversations to new tables to seed ideas for the next round. Note that “conversation stewards” who remained behind are still regular contributors like others—not newly-designated “facilitators.” All conversations remain self-organizing.

1:35-2:00: **Round 2:**

Quick introductions are made if needed; briefing about Round 1 by conversation stewards.

**Round 2 Question:** (again, refined as needed) **Given what you heard in Round 1, what’s 1 idea you’d like to turn to action in your work/teaching, and 2-3 concrete steps to do that?** This question should get participants thinking about the practical implications of the conference theme and how they can translate them into actions.

2:00-2:30: **Round 3:**

**Conversation of the whole:** Possibly have everyone first do a short “gallery walk” to scan all tables’ tablecloths/flip-chart papers (or papers on walls) for themes, patterns, etc. (1-2 minutes silent reflection before starting conversation). The entire group will process the two prior rounds of conversation.
Round 3 Questions: (same as Rounds 1-2, tentative) *What is 1 seed from your conversations that you’re taking with you that you want to plant and allow to grow? What Question(s) are you taking with you as you go forth from here?* Other questions devised improvisationally.

*If the time frame must be 60 minutes instead of 90, Rounds 1-3 will each be 15 minutes, with the introductory part at 10 minutes.

APPLICATION TO CONFERENCE THEME AND SUB-THEME(S)

“Founders of major change initiatives often say, ‘Well, it all began when some friends and I started talking’” (Brown & Isaacs, 2005, p. 17). This quote exemplifies an important quality of living systems, linking both the World Café and the OBTC theme, Open to the Possibilities: Self, Students, Community, World. A central tenet of the World Café is that in living systems, very small beginnings regularly lead to large consequences—something as small as an individual concern or idea (self, me, you) can be communicated to others (students, colleagues, friends), whose own resulting actions and networked conversations promote wider impacts (community[ies], regions), which may in fact continue ramifying out to any number of systemic levels (society[ies], world). In a real sense, this is the World Café’s *raison d’être*—because conversations we start today, no matter how small, can eventually become compelling forces in addressing the world’s most vexing contemporary problems and issues. It’s an empowering idea, one that both accurately describes the reality of living systems and of the World Café, as well as one that our students need to know about. The World Café is *all* about being Open to the Possibilities: Self, Students, Community, World. It’s an exceptional approach for learning, and for experiencing the power of diversity, authentic communication, and living networks.
APPENDIX

REFERENCES


VISUAL RESOURCES

A large number of visual supports are available for public use from the http://theworldcafe.com website, notably at http://www.theworldcafe.com/bank.htm. Additionally, Nancy Margulies, an experienced graphic recorder who has worked with the World Café community for a long time, provides a number of resources to practitioners for free: e.g., http://prezi.com/cd73d3sezhg2/copy-of-world-cafe/ (this colorful set of visuals for introducing the World Café may require registration/login to see). See also her helpful website: http://nancymargulies.com/.