

Review

Juanita Brown, David Isaacs and the World Café Community (2005) *The World Café. Shaping our futures through conversations that matter*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers: San Francisco.

Sibrenne Wagenaar

It is likely that you have heard of them before: 'world café' conversations. In their book 'The World Café, shaping our futures through conversations that matter', authors Juanita Brown and David Isaacs describe the world café as a flexible, easy-to-use process for fostering collaborative dialogue, sharing collective knowledge, and discovering new opportunities for action. The general idea is that café participants (varying between 15 to over 100 people) gather around a mutually relevant question and, in smaller groups of three or four, deepen their understanding of the question, sharing collective knowledge and generating new insights and ideas. This enables cross-pollination and sharing of different perspectives, combining insights within and between the smaller groups. By rotating members of each subgroup, people participate in evolving rounds of dialogue with three or four others while at the same time remaining part of a single, larger, connected conversation. The metaphor of a café is used as in such an environment ordinary conversations can develop quickly into significant exchange ('conversations that matter') in which there is deeper collective understanding in relation to a situation that people really care about.

The authors describe many different situations in which a world café approach was effective, how it was designed, and how it was hosted. The first chapters call on the often invisible role of conversation in shaping our lives and future, and the way they support us in adapting to changing circumstances, creating the knowledge necessary for success. The next chapters have a more practical character, focusing on seven core design principles for convening and hosting conversations, stimulating people to think together and exchange relevant knowledge. For people interested in the broader impact which world café conversations can lead to, I encourage you to read the last two chapters. They describe illustrative ways for the world café approach in conversational leadership, and some interesting societal implications are highlighted.

Throughout the book, the authors follow two leading questions: First, how can we enhance our capacity to talk and think more deeply together about the critical issues facing our communities, our organisations, our nations, and our planet? And second, how can we access the mutual intelligence and wisdom we need to create innovative paths forward? The seven core design principles of the world café address these two questions. As the authors rightly point out, these design principles are not limited to a formal café event, but can also be used to focus and enhance the quality of other key conversations. So, as a facilitator or host of any forms of dialogue or conversation, reading these chapters might provide helpful tools and insights for your work.

Principle 1: Setting the context

The world café approach enables a shift from presentation to exploration, from a formal conference to a more interactive forum with real learning conversations. The wisdom and

experience of all participants is used, rather than only the ideas of experts. As such, the first requirement for a world café setting is a context in which individual and collective meaning-making can unfold. The authors distinguish between three key elements which contribute to setting such a context. First, the *purpose* of the event should be clear. What is the real-life situation or need that makes this conversation relevant, and why is it important? Why are we bringing people together? Second, determine the right *participants*. The most important criterion for gaining new insights and accessing collective wisdom is having a diversity of thoughts and experience. The third key element is setting the *parameters*, i.e. the learning approach, pre-event activities, post-event follow-up, the appropriate location and needed resources and set-up.

Café conversations are generally not focused, at least initially, on finding an immediate answer or a solution. Often the most valuable outcome is discovering the right questions to ask in relation to a critical issue, or simply creating the opportunity to think (about) and explore your situation together with others for the first time.

Principle 2: Creating hospitable space

The philosophy behind the world café is that a safe, inviting, and informal space encourages more productive conversations to emerge. According to the authors, there is something about the physical and social environment of a café that evokes authentic conversations, even across cultures – conversations that are more creative, playful, curious, intimate, and honest than those in formal meetings.

When we offer hospitality to a guest, we welcome something new, unfamiliar, and unknown into our lives that has the potential to expand our world. Cafés provide neutral ground where people of diverse perspectives and backgrounds can come together in an inclusive way.

The authors provide practical tips for creating a conversational environment that looks as much as possible like an actual café, such as location, pictures on the wall, plants or flowers, artwork that honours the diversity of cultures, etc.

Principle 3: Exploring questions that matter

Because questions are intrinsically related to action, they spark and direct attention, perception, energy, and effort, and so are at the heart of the evolving forms that our lives assume.

This striking quote illustrates the importance of having a starting point for the conversation that engages people where they are. According to the authors, a good question:

- Should engage people's values, hopes and ideals;
- Is simple and is positively framed;
- Gets people excited, energizes them, and matters to them;
- Creates a certain tension, to lessen the gap between current knowledge and new learning;
- Should be a question for which we don't have an answer yet.

But how to discover the big questions? How to construct powerful questions? The café host can work on it simply by looking around, experimenting, rating questions in terms of their power. A suggestion from a more participatory point of view is to ask the people who are the

closest to the job to define the questions that are at the heart of the matter at hand, even before the café starts.

Principle 4: Encourage contribution

Clearly, contribution is a key word in a world café. 'Giving' is what brings a world café alive. As people begin to contribute together, create together, and learn together, a feeling of connection begins to emerge. Helpful design questions mentioned by the authors are: why is this group gathering? What does the host want the attendees to experience? Is it a homogeneous group who will all be exploring the same question, or are there multiple stakeholders who need to explore a common theme through addressing different questions?

A critical success factor in this process is that members understand their own role both in raising issues and contributing to solutions. Participants should be encouraged to share the feeling 'I am one of four people responsible for how interesting this is going to be.' Constructions supporting this include the intimate size of the café groups, the intentional use of small café-style tables of four, and introducing a talking piece (a stone or other object).

I very much liked the idea of looking at contribution in different ways: some people are listeners; others focus on patterns, or think in images. Someone who is sitting back and observing can help others see the deeper patterns. The café honours and includes the diversity of how people process information and synthesize it, and a good facilitator will capitalize on these different approaches in an inclusive manner.

Principle 5: Cross-pollinate and connect diverse perspectives

A world café is built upon the idea of different rounds. This helps in sharing knowledge and connecting diverse perspectives. By moving from one table to the next, participants or 'travellers' bring their key ideas from the first table to the next conversation. According to the authors, this is taking ideas to the next level of thinking.

The world café process engages new levels of collaborative thinking and supports unexpected insights. It is the creative cross-pollination of people and ideas combined with the disciplined use of questions as attractors that is perhaps the world café's defining contribution to dialogic learning and collective intelligence.

The café 'host' (facilitator of a conversation at a table) plays an important role in increasing the richness of the interactions in a conversation: the host can make the difference between an interesting conversation and the magic of experiencing collective intelligence in action. A host may stay with one table all rounds, welcoming guests and offering them the highlights of the earlier conversation, or rotates after the second to experience being a traveller as well. Another variation is to have one host staying at the table till the end, while the others travel, each going to another table. In the final round, each table synthesizes its learning experiences.

Principle 6: Listen together for patterns, insights, and deeper questions

A world café conversation can be conducive for bringing together a great diversity of people who do not normally sit down to think together. The communication process itself is therefore of significant importance. The café environment can create a natural feeling for people to really listen to each other's viewpoints, but this can be enhanced further by:

- Starting with a story that make people realize that new ideas are really needed;
- Using a 'dialogue stone' as a way to encourage better listening and avoid arguments and defensive positions;

- Encouraging people to speak in the first person, and in their personal capacity – another departure from traditional meetings;
- Using visual aids: *For real collaboration to flourish, the images, maps, and perceptions bouncing around in people's brains must be given a form that other people's images, maps, and perceptions can shape, alter, or otherwise add value to. It takes shared space to create shared understanding.*

Principle 7: harvest and share collective discoveries

Last but not least, principle 7 focuses on the question 'how can we help people sense the whole, together?' Sharing discoveries is an important part of being able to think and act together. As such, the authors recommend harvesting the insights from the beginning of the world café, for instance by using paper tablecloths to note the ideas from the conversations. All participants contribute to weaving together the bits and pieces of their emerging collective intelligence into a coherent whole, which can be captured, for instance, by:

- Displaying the tablecloths and exploring what's the centre of the conversation as a whole;
- Asking each table to bring in a large card with one key idea that expresses the essence of what was important from their conversations;
- Linking each participant with a partner to talk about what they have learned, then linking each pair up with two others, and so forth, until the group has consolidated its experiences as a whole.

Hosting: a critical success factor

The seven design principles create the impression that the world café process is fairly simple to implement successfully. At the same time, I couldn't believe it would be so easy to organise and facilitate an effective conversation with so many people at once – so I was reassured that the authors emphasize that *the magic of café conversations at their best does not always occur*. Hosting conversations is an art that requires personal awareness and attention; it involves fully presenting yourself, seeking creative ways for the members to make visible what's emerging in the middle of the table and in the conversation at large, and having faith in yourself and being able to open up space for everyone to contribute their best. Hosting in this sense involves engaging the café principles, creating the conditions for members to self-organize themselves, encouraging each other at their individual tables to share knowledge on questions they have a mutual interest in.

A broader context: conversational leadership

In the last two chapters, the authors place the world café process in a broader context of organisations and economy: in the current economy ideas and information are key currencies of exchange. People in conversation learn from each other, share knowledge and experiences.

It might be (come) the leader's primary responsibility to facilitate the kind of collaborative environments, mutual trust, and authentic conversations that enable the organisation to access the collective intelligence of its members.

Through 'conversational leadership', conversation is intentionally used as a core process to cultivate the collective intelligence needed to create business and social value. This might be effective in terms of convening and hosting learning conversations, inviting diverse perspectives, supporting appreciative inquiry, fostering shared understanding, honouring social networks and nurturing communities of practice.

My reflection

I found the book attractive in several ways. Each chapter starts with an actual story of café dialogues. These stories provide a clear idea of what a world café process might look like in practice. The many drawings in the book are illustrative and clarify theories and ideas from the stories. Subsequently, explanatory texts are written in such a way that they invite the reader to visualise fairly concretely the experiences of the authors. Whilst this makes pleasant reading, this style makes it difficult at times to find the core message of the text; as such, a concise summary of each chapter would have been very helpful.

The book touches upon a few learning approaches which can be identified in the world café (appreciative inquiry, social learning, and knowledge productivity). Even so, a more thorough focus on these approaches would have provided the book with a broader scope for learning, making the reading experience more rewarding.

Two or three stories in the book illustrate the world café approach applied in a mix of settings and cultures, which was in fact my main reason for reading the book: I was looking for methods and approaches to apply in a development context, taking into account cross-cultural settings, and stimulating deeper conversations and knowledge sharing. Unfortunately, the book remains vague on what it is that makes this approach particularly appropriate for knowledge sharing between cultures: what are the specific elements that make learning across borders and between cultures possible? What is the potential of the world café approach for capacity building?

Nonetheless, the book provides interesting insights for KM practitioners in two ways. The world café can be considered a specific communication tool. The book is full of concrete tips and suggestions for designing a dialogue, decorating a room, helping people to listen to each other, stimulating knowledge sharing, collecting meaningful insights. From a broader perspective however, the world café approach can be seen as a new way of 'shaping the future', by asking (more) meaningful questions, sharing our deeper thoughts and understandings and developing new meanings and knowledge together. This combination is what made the process attractive to me: on the one hand, the book is very concrete and practical, whilst on the other hand, it encourages the reader to think more thoroughly about learning, knowledge sharing, and dialogue, fostering more cross-cultural communication.

About the author



Sibrenne Wagenaar studied Educational Science and Technology at the University of Twente in the Netherlands. She worked for eight years with Kessels & Smit, The Learning Company, a consultancy firm that is specialised in the field of learning problems in organisations, strategic human resource development, competence development and knowledge productivity. She is now a learning facilitator at the Knowledge Centre of PSO, an umbrella organization for capacity building of civil society organisations in developing countries. Her fields of interest are professionalizing people responsible for learning in organisations, making the design process a learning process, competency based learning, and facilitating learning and knowledge sharing in groups. In her work she has a special focus on capacity development and humanitarian assistance. E-mail: Wagenaar@pso.nl