



# Working in the café: lessons in group dialogue

Working in  
the café

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The aim of this paper is to report on findings related to the use of a large group intervention method known as The World Café.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The intervention method and its philosophical genesis are described along with lessons learned from observation, personal use, and interviews with café participants.

**Findings** – While The World Café approach has the potential to make significant contributions to large group knowledge exchange and collective meaning making, it has suffered from being used by inexperienced facilitators and for reasons not well suited to the method. Participants, as a result, have failed to achieve the results expected and in some cases formed negative opinions of a lasting nature about the method and its proponents.

**Research limitations/implications** – The limitations of this paper and its generalizability are framed within the nature of a case study, which is neither a representation of the whole nor a controlled experiment. Every effort has been made to fairly represent all perspectives as they were presented.

**Practical implications** – The World Café and its many imitations has been employed at numerous conferences, retreats, and gatherings during the last decade. Thousands of individuals around the world have been exposed to this method and many within the LO community have been exposed to it without understanding both its benefits and perils. Organizational leaders and practitioners can better analyze the value of this approach when measured against the learning goals of an event.

**Originality/value** – The paper makes an objective presentation of experiences with the method and shares lessons learned from the participant and practitioner perspective.

**Keywords** Organizational effectiveness, Learning organizations, Knowledge sharing, Group dynamics

**Paper type** Case study

## Introduction

This paper is a review by a single scholar-practitioner of a relatively new technique for large group intervention (Garcia, 2007) that has been seen by many but written about by few (Brown and Isaacs, 2005; Tan and Brown, 2005; Hechenbleikner *et al.*, 2008). This technique was developed specifically to facilitate knowledge exchange, and when used as intended is an efficient and effective vehicle for that purpose. The data for this report has been collected during the last six years with more than 20 groups and several hundred participants. It is not intended to be a handbook but merely one person's careful observation of human behavior within the context of being exposed to a specific group process along with a summary and analysis of lessons learned as a facilitator.

Many within the knowledge-based development (KBD) community are familiar with the café format, whether introduced to it in its original form or one of many subsequent versions. Also known as a Knowledge Café (Gurteen, 2005; Goldberg *et al.*,



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2006) and a Conversing Café (Stewart, 2009), participants may become confused by a growing number of conversational events entitled “cafés” that bear little or no resemblance to the original design. All of the following have been promoted at one time or another:

- Identify café.
- Strategy café.
- Study café.
- Transcendental Café.
- Aikido café.
- Town hall cafe.

What distinguishes one event from another beyond the subject matter is unclear from event descriptions. However, most of these forums appear to be using World Café techniques without employing its guiding principles or philosophical intent.

The author first became acquainted with The World Café (Brown, 2000) when its creator, Juanita Brown, gave her final oral review as part of her doctoral studies. She demonstrated the technique for her presentation and the potential uses for managing organizational knowledge were evident. As demonstrated and described in her materials (Brown, 2002), participants engage in a series of small group conversations with the intent of quickly transforming individual knowledge into something collective and more valuable. The dialogic foundations (Bohm, 1996) of the technique emphasize inquiry and understanding rather than problem solving in conversations. While remaining a strong believer in the method, the author has learned through observation and trial and error that creating a successful experience is more difficult than it appears and that the pitfalls of execution have not been broadly articulated by others who have written on this topic.

### **The café model**

World Café creator Brown has been involved for years with systems dynamics and regularly teaches business and management from a systems perspective. Formerly with Bill Isaacs (1999) on the MIT Dialogue Project, she has worked with such luminaries as Meg Wheatley (1992), Fritjof Capra (1996), and Peter Senge (1990). She has refined the café model over several years in collaboration with a network of café facilitators, known as hosts, from around the world. While capable of guiding groups to breakthrough insights, the model is not as easy to implement as it might appear.

Unlike some large group interventions, such as Future Search (Janoff and Weisbord, 2009) or Open Space (Owen, 1997), The World Café is not intended to produce action plans and work groups. However, it is a method that is flexible enough that it is prone to being used for these and other inappropriate purposes. However, the café experience is more likely to be perceived negatively by participants when the technique is used for reasons other than creating collective understanding. The underlying intent of the intervention is for participants to share openly, listen without judgment, and to accept diverse opinions. The café’s unique contribution to dialogic interventions is the way in which participants build on a structured conversation in brief cycles, deliberately mixing participants between cycles to maximize knowledge exchange.

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Brown (2002) says The World Café is both a technique for engaging people in group dialogue as well as a metaphor for the way we generate knowledge and make meaning of our world. Humans take parcels of information and pass them on to others, who in turn add their own contributions and pass it on – much like an evolving conversation at a sidewalk café where friends may join or depart at intervals. The mechanics of the technique are deceptively simple and have been known to lure unsuspecting facilitators into believing that hosting a café is not difficult. However, the work of hosting a café is similar to preparing for a successful seminar. The most crucial efforts are invisible to the guests since they are performed before the participants arrive.

As described on their web site, [www.theworldcafe.org](http://www.theworldcafe.org), cafés have been hosted by businesses, community groups, professional associations, and centers for learning. The essential components that differentiate this approach from any other are framed around the practice and philosophy of dialogue (Bohm, 1996). It is essential that participants are engaged in exploring a topic they care deeply about and are prepared to be in dialogue, which is well described on Tom Atlee's (2009) web page.

Bohm's approach to dialogue involved participants working together to understand the assumptions underlying their individual and collective beliefs. Collective reflection on these assumptions could reveal blind spots and incoherences from which participants could then free themselves, leading to greater collective understanding and harmony. Bohm maintained that such collective learning increases our collective intelligence.

Bohm reminds us that we normally engage in discussions instead of dialogue. Discussion rhymes with percussion and concussion – acts of force or violence. The purpose of a discussion is to make a point, convince others, or win a verbal battle. Discussions are combative. Dialogue, on the other hand, is about truly listening from the heart and taking in the meaning and intent of others. Being in dialogue calls on us to listen to our internal conversations as we listen to others, and to challenge our assumptions about the way we typically frame and interpret the world. Café hosts encourage participants to embrace the possibility that there is more than one legitimate way of seeing and interpreting the world. The intentional use of reflection-in-action (Argyris and Schön, 1996) during dialogue causes participants to retard thought processes and be less hasty to react than they might otherwise be.

When participants are passionate about a topic with which they have personal experience, a café is a suitable technique for groups wanting to explore vision, lessons learned (e.g. after a large project), cross-functional synergies, and tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1966) that has value to all. It is most ideally suited to these purposes and should not be thought of as an all-purpose facilitation technique. Some topics are very poorly suited to the café model while others can be risky. For example, an intervention intended to identify process improvement opportunities might be better suited to a Work Out (Ulrich, 2002) and efforts to create work groups would be better served by an Open Space (Owen, 1997) event. Emotionally charged discussions, such as reproductive rights or racism are difficult to hold in dialogue with large groups. A technique better suited for this would be an action learning design with reflective journaling and dialogic report-outs in circles. The creative potential of the café method, when employed correctly, is the emergence of a collective energy to identify and embrace new possibilities. A group loses or fails to find this energy if the purpose is to focus on problems, create action plans, or dwell on analytical concerns. Similarly, emotionally charged conversations attempted in dialogue are most likely to channel

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creative energy into negative spirals that have significant potential for becoming destructive to the purpose and individuals involved.

While Brown's book on the topic (Brown and Isaacs, 2005) does not specifically articulate cautionary tales to potential café organizers, a careful reading of the stories implies that organizers and hosts need to be highly focused on the café principles rather than the technique and willing to adjust, modify, or abandon recommended procedures if the café principles are likely to suffer. The first principle, "Setting the context", is a basic needs assessment. It articulates who, what, why, where, when, and how the café will be staged. The number of professed cafés that neither identified nor validated participant conversational passions has been disheartening and contributed to many interviewed participants perceiving the approach as ineffective.

The second principle is to "Create hospitable space". This is a feature unique to the café experience and is intended to direct hosts and facilitators towards thinking about the environment created for the café, beginning with the invitation to participate. The goal is to create a warm, relaxing, and comfortable environ where trusting communication is able to flourish. Since many of the early cafés were held in relatively sterile meeting and conference rooms, the recommended practice (Brown, 2002) is to create a café ambiance with small tables, colorful tablecloths, and votive candles. The point so often missed by novice implementers is that participants should feel at ease, not that a quasi-café environment needs to be staged. Taking the café metaphor too literally poses its own dangers.

"Encourage everyone's contribution" and "Connect diverse perspectives" are the third and fourth principles. Only one note of caution is needed here to amend the standard guidelines for a café, and that is to keep in mind that not all people contribute in the way you or others may think meaningful. The point to consider is whether the participants have contributed to the exploration of the topic in a way that is meaningful to them. The recommended practice of changing participant groupings at timed intervals assures that diverse perspective-seeking opportunities will be present but hosts and facilitators should keep in mind that this principle could directly conflict with the principle of creating hospitable space for someone who considers a rapid exchange of dialogic partners upsetting.

The fifth and sixth principles are linked directly to those of dialogue. Participants are encouraged to "Listen together and notice patterns" and to "Share collective discoveries". Both of these concerns have been identified as needs by other researchers (Goldberg *et al.*, 2006) working with knowledge management practices. As conversations progress during the café, the art of holding others in dialogue produces the ability to perceive more of what individuals have in common than what divides them. Humans are by nature pattern-recognizing animals and tend to compare the known and preferred to the unknown and new. They compare one person to another, one idea or experience to those that could be similar, and make judgments about relative value in the process. With effort and focus, humans can tame this tendency, step outside of their normal judgmental practices, and remain open to other ways of being that have meaning and value. One unarticulated and dangerous assumption is that all participants have the skills needed to engage successfully in dialogue.

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*Physical layout*

The way Brown describes a café setup in her resource guide (Brown, 2002, p. 9) clearly says that “[. . .] it is critical to create a comfortable environment that evokes a feeling of both informality and intimacy.” The quasi-café look and props are described as an example only of this effort but are all too often interpreted as the only way to stage a café. This may be, in part, due to the absence of alternatively staged events discussed by café hosts. Brown recommends adding some butcher paper with markers and crayons to the tops of the small tables and encouraging participants to draw, doodle, write ideas, or play while in dialogue. Other suggestions include adding posters to the wall, playing some café music in the background, and enhancing the café atmosphere by adjusting the lights in an effort to create the desired mood.

It is the author’s experience that the learning benefits of presenting participants with a surprisingly delightful conversational space are nothing short of remarkable. Participants who are joining a business meeting, conference discussion, or comparable event share a mental model (Kim, 1993) of their expected experience based on prior experiences. In most of these situations, chairs are lined up in rows facing one direction where the speaker traditionally stands facing the audience. Any significant deviation from this expected arrangement is likely to create a sense of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) and cause participants to question their assumptions. This initial experience is invaluable for stimulating transformational learning (Mezirow, 1991) since the shift from assumed knowledge to pleasant surprise at the unexpected opens one’s minds to new possibilities. While both positive and negative reactions may emerge to the café environment, significant learning can be had if adeptly facilitated for the purpose of shared understanding.

In one café, senior management walked into a boardroom knowing nothing about the process. The conversation was going to focus on critical learning opportunities to improve financial performance within the organization. Typically, these meetings produced predictable behaviors from all involved. Those who usually dominated the conversation had the greatest voice, generated the dominant message, and strongly influenced group decision-making. Participant interviews held after the café indicated that the physical environment was delightfully unexpected and that those who usually sat at the head of the table and dominated conversations sat at the back of the table and remained quiet. Conversely, those who usually held back were more engaged. The initial impression the room made on the traditionally dominant participants challenged their assumptions about meeting protocol. Those who felt most comfortable with the way things had been did not feel as comfortable dominating the dialogue in an unexpected environment. Those who had felt marginalized previously felt free to step up and claim their space at this new table.

Café participants are encouraged to sit in groups of four or five at small tables. If the table is much larger, participants have difficulty achieving the desired interaction and personal connection that is the hallmark of café conversations. Research conducted by HeartMath (Childre, 1999) indicates that our hearts are able to send and receive electronic signals that can become synchronized, or entrained, for small group harmony. This theory would explain the behaviors observed in small group café conversations absent in larger groupings. For example, a café held at a professional conference grouped people around large tables for 12 people. Participants reported that

they did not sense any real connection similar to that described by participants who attended cafes with small groupings.

*Process*

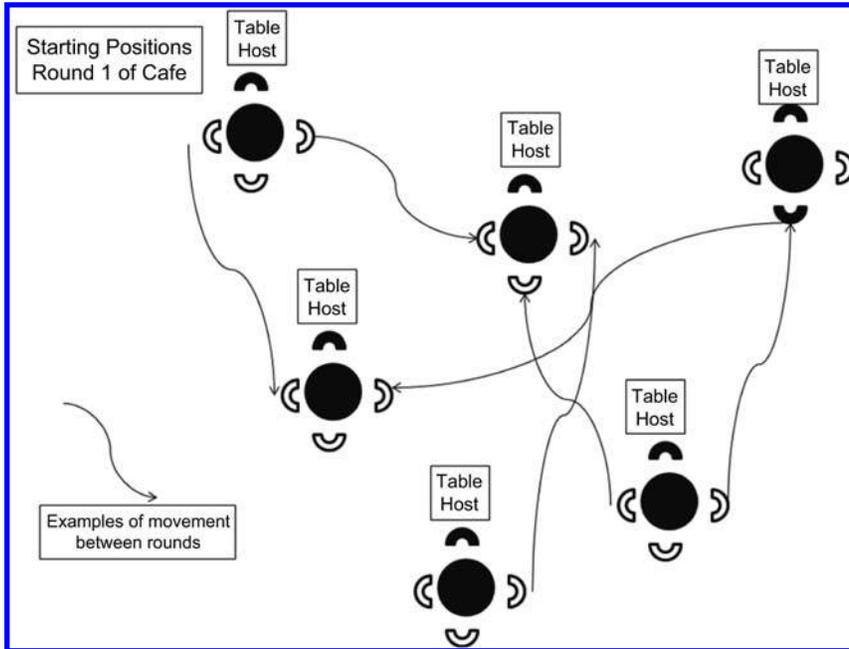
The café host begins a session by explaining the purpose of the progressive conversation and the way in which the event will proceed. The café principles and etiquette are discussed to help participants understand that what they are about to do is not a normal conversation but a dialogue. Participants are instructed to:

- focus on what matters;
- contribute your thinking;
- speak your mind and heart;
- listen to understand;
- connect ideas;
- listen together for insights and deeper questions; and
- play and draw on tablecloths.

Participants are instructed to speak one at a time while others at the table are listening intently. Brown encourages the use of some item that the speaker holds to symbolize that he or she has the platform. Often these props are ignored or seen as a contrivance. They can easily be omitted without negative consequences and it is one less piece of clutter in a space intended for heartfelt conversations. What matters is that participants embrace the expectation that each person has a chance to speak, that each speaker has an equal period of time to speak, and that others are expected to listen with an open mind. The café process does not explicitly address how a facilitator is expected to assure that each person has an opportunity to speak and this is rarely accomplished unless someone takes the initiative to remind participants. In some cases the facilitator may do so and in others the table host may be better suited. Additionally, café participants are asked to look for patterns of meaning as they listen to themselves and to others.

A café conversation is comprised of several rounds of discussing the same powerful question, with each round lasting 20-30 minutes and involving a different table grouping (see Figure 1). One person volunteers to be the table host during the first round and will anchor that table's conversation throughout multiple changes of visitors. The table host is responsible for holding the collective and evolving stories of the group conversation at that table. The other three participants from the first round move to other tables for round two, carrying with them their own collective and evolving story. Depending on how many rounds the group employs for one question, this orchestrated knowledge-exchange can quickly bring about a shared story as participants search for common threads of meaning. Individuals mix and merge ideas and perceptions into a collective whole, providing that sufficient numbers are sincerely engaged in dialogue.

After three rounds or so, groups tend to grow tired of a specific question framed around the café topic and are ready to move on. At the conclusion of each question, participants voluntarily share their insights and thoughts about collective patterns of meaning. The focus of these report-outs is to seek patterns in the individual contributions that might be considered a collective voice, insight, intelligence, or



**Figure 1.**  
Progression model for café  
discussion

experience. The host also wants to discover if there are unique contributions that participants found remarkable or inspiring that they want to share with others. Did they have any personal insights in talking at their tables? What sense did they make of what they heard? What does it mean at a deeper level?

### *Café murals*

An optional feature of a café event is the production of an illustrative mural depicting the conversations. Known as graphic facilitation, these murals (Margulies, 2009) capture what Brown calls visible knowledge using metaphoric illustrations and content mapping diagrams. In the hands of a deft and gifted illustrator, these topic murals make impressive presentations to the group at the end of a successful café. In more than one instance teams have taken them back to the workplace and displayed them in various locations to promote continued dialogue after an event.

One of the more powerful aspects of the café model is the applied philosophy that knowledge is embedded in more than the logical mind (Gardner, 1993; Polanyi, 1966). Participants are encouraged to learn by listening, reflecting, speaking, listening to and questioning themselves, listening for the patterns of meaning, and visualizing knowledge. In addition to the graphic recorder, participants may be encouraged to draw and doodle with crayons and markers on the flip chart or butcher block paper that is left on the tables. The reason participants are asked to doodle is based on the belief that we retain knowledge in different parts of our beings, and that some of our knowledge is activated by different activities such as drawing, singing, or moving. With some participant groups, it can be useful to provide this prompt to sharpen their

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attention to the possibility of knowledge or insights being stimulated by some source other than rational logic.

A story quickly illustrates this point. Championship skateboarder Greg Lutzka was filmed in stop-action sequence by television film crews for the Discovery Channel program, "Time Warp" (Discovery Channel, 2008). The purpose of the photographic experiment was to understand how Lutzka performed his kick flips since he was unable to explain how he managed to perform this trick. His explanation was that he knew how to do it from his body, not his intellect. Show producers realized that in order to convert this embodied knowledge into explicit information, it needed first to be transformed into an alternate knowledge medium.

The café guide (Brown, 2002) recommends using multiple tools to stimulate knowledge. Most groups seem to dabble haphazardly with the toys and crayons. One of the groups evaluated for this paper became intensely engaged in a progressive art project that took on a life of its own. They created visually stunning works that evolved after successive rounds of conversations. Another group became very upset at having been told to draw and doodle on the paper. In post-café interviews, they said they felt they were being instructed to write on the tables but perceived this behavior as rude. The conflict between the instructions and participants' sense of social courtesies made them angry with the café experience. For this group in particular, it was critical to maintain eye contact to show one was listening, paying attention, and was connected to the speaker. Drawing on the table while someone was speaking was something they considered disrespectful.

### **Lessons learned**

The lessons learned are the result of limited experimentation that may prove useful to others. They can be classified by participant culture, participant needs, and good facilitation skills that are critical for a successful outcome. It is important that the host and facilitator do not confuse a café with other forms of group facilitation. The facilitator needs to be highly focused on helping participants find shared meaning on a subject of deep collective importance. For example, a collective understanding and appreciation of a group's history and accomplishments might be a topic well suited to the café model, especially if that group's history engenders pride in the collective membership. Varied lived experiences and perspectives could be solicited and synthesized in a relatively brief, high-energy session. On the whole, café questions are more likely to hold the energy of participants and generate new thinking if they are framed around envisioning an ideal rather than discussing symptoms of something flawed.

### *Questions matter*

A universal lesson worth passing on is that Socratic questions are powerful catalysts for opening up minds and seeing the world in different ways. The questions used to frame café conversations must be carefully crafted to help participants explore new ideas and challenge their own assumptions. Insufficient attention to this detail will produce a lackluster and disappointing experience. Foundational assumptions about café conversations are that they are focused on what Kenneth Gergen (1999) calls generative themes. A café is ideally suited to identify opportunities and unexplored or unrealized successes. As Cunliffe (2002) points out in her discussion of learning conversations, a café should remain focused on meaning-making. An example of a

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question consistent with this intent might be, “What don’t we know that we know?” in response to Stewart’s (2001, p. 7) use of an ironic comment widely employed among Hewlett-Packard employees. “If HP knew what HP knows, we would be three times more profitable.” Alternatively referred to in the literature as generative, powerful, provocative, or Socratic questions is the potential to tap collective knowledge, both explicit and tacit, reaffirm and transform a cultural norm, and create new knowledge.

Consistent with Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987) techniques, The World Café hopes to bring large groups of people into dialogue around appreciative themes. Challenges to an appreciative dialogue are many, including management habits of focusing on problem identification. In one case, the client said he wanted to hold a café conversation for teambuilding and creating a shared vision for the next year. This department was regrouping from a difficult year of reorganization and trying to improve its ability to serve internal and external customers. The client’s typical approach would have been to identify problems and find ways to solve them.

A full day was made available for the café, which is a rarity, and five questions were posed to the group of 80 participants.

- (1) Remember a time when you were so engaged in a conversation with someone else that time seemed to stand still. It may have seemed that the rest of the world melted away, leaving only the two of you in this magic space. What made that possible? What contributed to you being able to be in dialogue with someone else?
- (2) Remember an experience with an internal customer that really made your day. What happened? What was it about you and the customer that made it such a wonderful experience?
- (3) Now think about a time when you really felt good about the service you gave to an external customer. How did that come about? What made it different from ordinary customer service experiences?
- (4) Imagine you wake up tomorrow and pick up the newspaper. On the front page is a story about your company. It says in big bold letters that this organization has won a national award for excellence. Inside the story, your department’s success is cited as a significant contributing factor to having won this national award. What did you do? Tell the story of how you made this possible and be specific about your actions.
- (5) Okay, we have all these amazing stories around us. What an incredible accomplishment! What steps would you need to take to make these real and not just an imaginary newspaper story?

Notice that the questions are framed within the realm of possibilities and lessons learned that could be used productively to craft an intended future. They draw on personal experience and ask participants to reflect on moments of success as well as identify what made them meaningful. These types of questions lead participants into reflection and recollection of personal accomplishments that were possibly unnoticed and unheralded at the time. By asking people to imagine future success through a process of identifying factors of past success, the café host can lead groups into action learning (Revans, 1998) and engage their commitment before typical energies of fear and resistance emerge.

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Once these generative questions were sent to the café sponsor, he altered them little by little until they became more familiar and therefore comfortable to him. Predictably, they became problem solving, strategic planning, and task-oriented types of questions, none of which are suitable for this process. The sponsor was made aware that he would not get the results he wanted or that had been promised if he kept his wording choices. What helped change his mind was explaining the difference between energy-giving dialogue and energy-draining discussions, a distinction he understood. The fifth question came about through a negotiated compromise that met the sponsor's need while not compromising the strengths of the café model.

The power of asking the right questions cannot be emphasized enough. Notably, during their day-long event, one very outspoken, pessimistic and negative individual was repeatedly redirected to focus on potential rather than barriers. Clearly, this was difficult for him. However, by day's end, he had used his creative energy to identify possibilities and make suggestions that surprised management, his peers, and himself. His evaluation of the process was that at first he saw the event as another feel good and waste time activity, but came away from it understanding that how he looked at the world made a difference to the way he set things in motion and ultimately the outcomes he could expect.

However, more than one participant has commented that a café failed to achieve an atmosphere of dialogue. When probed, most point to lackluster questions, ones that did not achieve the goal of engaging participant interest and energies. One café organizer developed the café questions without engaging the participants first to see what mattered most to them. One of the principles of café design is to engage participants in questions that matter – but to whom? In this situation, the café organizers posed questions that mattered to them but were not important to the participants. Once the participants gathered and began talking in small groups, they quickly found the subject that did matter to them and took the café conversation there instead of where the organizers thought it should go.

No matter what you think a café conversation is going to be about, it will go where it needs to be if participants are joined in dialogue, not discussion. Cafés have lives of their own, and once brought to life provide a lesson in self-organizing systems (Wheatley, 1992). This is an important warning to deliver to potential clients. If the generative questions are wrong, the sponsor risks losing what little control a host has over the group dialogue process.

### *Participant culture*

Early in this research, participant interviews produced surprising perspectives. One colleague who had attended events in New Zealand wordlessly rolled his eyes when asked if he had ever heard of The World Café. When asked to explain his experience he said that it had been pretty negative. The café host insisted on using language that made no sense to the participants and used techniques that put him off. When asked to provide details, he said that the facilitator had encouraged participants to “listen into the middle” and this bit of instruction had perplexed everyone. Later on, he had decided that the host and the café were too artificial, too contrived, and more of a show than a genuine attempt to create group dialogue. This perception of café events became a common theme from interviewed participants who had attended events around the world.

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Brown has several phrases she uses when she talks about cafés. Any of the hosts around the globe who learned the technique from her, or who have read her guide to hosting cafes, probably picked up on these phrases:

- Evoking the future.
- Listening into the middle.
- Magic in the middle.
- Co-evolution, co-valuing, co-creating.
- Living knowledge.
- Collaborative conversation.
- Collective intelligence, co-intelligence.

These phrases, while uniquely capable of describing the underlying philosophies of the café method, do not easily resonate with some groups and may best be forgotten or rephrased if the intent is to be understood and to fully engage participants. The danger of not doing so is that the café may appear artificial and manipulative, a serious hazard for individuals being asked to expose vulnerabilities in a group setting. A negative interpretation of the experience undermines all other efforts to produce meaningful knowledge sharing.

In addition to struggling with the unfamiliar language of the café, some participants have reacted negatively to the quasi-café setup. *The World Café* guide book (Brown, 2002) instructs hosts to arrange small tables, colorful tablecloths, markers, flip chart paper, flowers, etc. to create a “café” atmosphere. But is this everyone’s conceptualization of a café or is this a distinctly North American/Eurocentric perspective? Interviews with diverse participant groups indicate that unique cultural needs of the intended participants must be the starting point for determining what will facilitate a welcoming and relaxing experience. The suggested café arrangement has been called fussy by working class participants and African American participants have said it was too Eurocentric. In each case the environment created an impression that the café was a contrived experience. It is a good idea to ask volunteers from the participant group to design the café environment, explaining to them the principles and intent of dialogue. This involves the participating organization in defining the café principle of hospitable space and limits the chance of creating a culturally insensitive environment. It also creates an early energy around the whole process of coming together that begins to infect the group. A “menu” is a standard prop for a café and it describes the process and guidelines for participating as well as providing some information about the questions and the purpose of the event. When volunteers take this over, menus can become very personalized to the culture of the participants and produce fun and creative mementos of the event.

### *Facilitation skills*

It may appear obvious that advanced facilitation skills are needed for this technique. A few points about why this is so may help others avoid embarrassment or disaster. Large group facilitation is often an experiment in personal flexibility and adaptation. A café host must be an expert observer of subtly nuanced group dynamics and an adept improvisationalist. Hosts walk into a café event with scripted questions and processes for moving the café dialogue through what is hoped will be a good event, but one can

never tell once the questions have been brought to life in the room how participants will respond. Their reason for being there is perhaps the dominant predictor of the experience. If called together for routine board meeting business, their energies will be in one realm. If together for the purpose of learning, they may be inclined for other insights. Large groups at conventions may be the most difficult to channel into a meaningful knowledge exchange if they collectively see the event as a social outing. Any contributing influence to the group's behavior should be considered when designing the experience.

A story helps to illustrate the importance of exploring fringe issues in advance of a café. In one of the cafés, a small group of participants claimed an outlying table and never moved despite repeated efforts to get them to rotate among the tables. They remained intact as a group and for the most part went their own way in framing their dialogue. In trying to understand why this was so, they were asked about their behavior to see if a change in design or instructions could have engaged participants like them in the exchange of table partners. What they said was insightful. They said that 20 minutes in a round of discussion was inadequate for them to achieve dialogue. Their level of trust in speaking from the heart to strangers was not sufficient to be in dialogue so quickly. And because they truly wanted to be in dialogue, they chose to stay with similarly fearful people throughout the café where they could generate the trust needed to have those conversations.

A resistance to rapid cycles seems to be common for groups who engage fully with others in dialogue. Brown advocates for quick rounds of 15-20 minutes to maximize idea and knowledge exchange, but this goal needs to be balanced with the conversational goals of the participants and their willingness to engage quickly in what may seem to some a dangerous exercise. In working with vulnerable groups and environments, difficult subjects, or groups of people who do not know each other well, it seems wise to work first with safe questions and allow adequate time to master being in dialogue before having them change table partners. Effective facilitation skills help determine how long each round should last, using the intensity of the conversational energy as a guide. Without exception, failure to do so produces long lasting resentment towards the café experience.

The study of cafés and extensive conversations with participants has produced an additional insight worth noting. Cafés traditionally use a report-out process to identify areas of common understanding or insights. Experience has taught the author that debriefing is essential to foster meaningful learning after café experiences with unintended or unpleasant consequences. Hostilities toward the café process and misunderstandings or hurt feelings about emotionally disruptive events have endured for months afterwards when this was not done. Alternatively, helping participants understand what was intended versus what they experienced seemed to provide some release and acceptance.

### **Summary**

The World Café is a large group intervention intended to surface common threads of experience, knowledge, and understanding among participants. As such, it is well suited to the goals and processes associated with organizational learning. The technique is a derivative of dialogic processes and is not well suited to emotionally volatile topics, problem solving or action planning. The most critical aspects to staging

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a successful café are to adhere to the café principles, establish mutual trust, and assure that the café questions have generative power for the participants. Participant needs with regard to the subject at hand is an essential component of the needs assessment as well as assuring that participants have the requisite skills to suspend judgment and be open to opposing viewpoints.

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