

Welcome to a World Cafe

Introduction

The Value Project included a World Cafe as the closing session of the project's final conference. <http://www.valuenetwork.org.uk/html/conference.htm> The conference, held at the Middle Eastern Technical University (METU) in Ankara during June 2011, enjoyed good facilities in which to stage the session and the university provided excellent support to enable us to do the session as we had hoped we could. The session was organised and convened by Sue Cross, a consultant to the project from the UK.

This World Cafe primarily aimed to enable all the conference participants to engage deeply with key questions about the work of the project to date. The questions had been devised and refined by the Value Project managers. They were chosen to generate outcomes which could guide the final stages of the project, including options for future development. A secondary aim was to provide a stimulating and enjoyable experience of a World Cafe for all conference delegates. It was hoped to enable participants to refine their own use of the methodology or be sufficiently confident that they could do so, should an appropriate opportunity arise in their work.

World Cafe methodology is clearly described at <http://www.theworldcafe.com/principles.html> but the details and ethos of any Cafe session will vary. The conference's convenor of the Cafe aimed to exploit the potential of the method through close attention to detail in planning and execution. It combined the benefits of the design of the process with expertise in adult learning and professional development.

Background

The identification of the 'World Cafe' as a method (and some might say a 'brand') is credited to Juanita Brown and David Isaacs while they were working together in California in 1995. They were running an event when rain disrupted their large-circle discussion session and caused them to improvise a new method based around small, cafe-style tables where participants recorded their ideas on paper table cloths while they were talking together. The conversations were interrupted from time to time to enable participants to switch tables. The ideas were mixed and shared both by the visual record on the table cloth and the re-distribution of participants to different tables for several rounds of discussion. The informal and participatory nature of the interaction seemed to enable those involved to think more creatively and to capture those thoughts.

Some discussion of the way the process might be underpinned by an appreciation of adult learning

The World Cafe website identifies the design principles as follows:

Set the context

Create hospitable space

Explore questions that matter

Encourage everyone's contribution

Connect Diverse Perspectives

Listen together for Patterns and Insights

Share Collective Discoveries

The Cafe held at the Value conference was firmly based in these principles. A brief discussion of two perspectives on the way adults learn follows (see also Tusting and Barton, 2006). This will contribute to an understanding of the way elements of the process might be working together to be so effective. An appreciation of relevant theory is intended to enable convenors to be firm in their commitment not to take short cuts or try to economise on the resources required for a World Cafe. Such departures become tempting at times but they undermine the power and authenticity of the experience for participants. A convenor has a duty to try hard to ensure that the process is not compromised. S/he must be confident that certain details which are vital to it are not lost or neglected.

The METU building enabled Cafe participants to gather together within a small stepped amphitheatre for a welcome and overview. The context was set and the design principles for the session established with all the participants. The cafe itself was in an adjacent space and everyone returned to the amphitheatre for the conclusion and farewell. The World Cafe provides a powerful example of how vital the learning environment is for excellent outcomes. A more general discussion of learning environments can also be found in Cross (2009) pp27-53. The environment is not just the physical space, including its furnishings and fittings. The social environment, including all the people taking part in an event, will influence both individual learning and group outcomes. Learning can be considered to be socially constructed (see Cross pp 31-33). In a World Cafe ideas are shared and captured by all the participants who are seated in groups of between 4 and 8 at small tables (which ideally should be round to make the equality between the guests explicit.) Each table is completely covered by paper table cloth(s) and there should be enough large pens, in a variety of colours, for all the guests to have one of their own. While the discussion takes place all the participants are able to write directly onto the paper table cloths. This ensures that varied points of view can be focused onto the question or issue being discussed. The material recorded on the paper table cloth will be modified or simply left for other people arriving at the table later to consider and discuss. This combination of writing and discussion at the same time is a significant aspect of the methodology. Many participants will be familiar with other small group activities at conferences when excellent discussion goes unrecorded and so is lost, or where one or two people occupy most of the time so that others cannot get their contribution heard. Conversation may be facilitated by a table host (not essential but useful if time is limited and/or participants are not familiar with the World Cafe way of working). The working language for the conference at METU was English. Delegates spoke many different languages and so were invited to write in their own language (for translation later) if they had ideas which they just could not share in English.

Secondly, Mezirow's discussions of transformative learning builds upon work by Dewey and Piaget to consider how learning in complex cognitive areas involves a process of making meaning. In order

to refine and mature, revision and adaptation will occur as the learner brings more experience and reflection into a relationship with her/his current assumptions. Mezirow's work has been criticised on occasions for concentrating on learning as an individual process. In a World Cafe participants engage in a collective reflection on questions, themes and ideas to shed light upon complex problems and situations. It is anticipated that there will be some outcomes which have a value to the sponsor of the Cafe, in this case the Value project. In particular these may arise from the methodology as patterns and themes emerge when different table groups gradually dig more deeply into a question. Table hosts are uniquely positioned to recognise and assist this as they remain at the table and do not move between tables. There will have been particular moments when understanding was deepened through careful listening and engagement in a critically reflective conversation. The public outcomes will almost certainly be accompanied by some tiny instances of transformed understanding within individuals. These are sometimes described as 'Ah-ha' moments. Participants see their own, perhaps deeply held, views in a new light because they are placed alongside the perception and assumptions of others. For this to be a positive and enjoyable experience there must be an atmosphere of trust, security and personal respect at all times. Table hosts are also responsible for ensuring that a World Cafe is a very safe environment in which to take creative risks with one's own thinking and to support other people as they do the same. At best, the experience can be exhilarating as individual insight may be gained alongside a sense of shared endeavour towards a common goal.

What happens after the close of the Cafe

Successful world cafes produce rich resources of information. All the participants have contributed to this material. Most importantly at this point, no formal analysis has taken place. The convenor of the Cafe should try to ensure that the final large group session captures any remaining thoughts and reflections and that all participants know how the material which has been harvested through the tablecloths will be processed and shared. This will vary according to the circumstances under which the Cafe was convened. The team to which the table cloths are entrusted have a responsibility to examine, analyse, interpret and represent the collected wisdom from the cafe. This wisdom is owned by all and when shared is available to all those who took part in the cafe as well as others who might benefit from it.

References

<http://www.theworldcafe.com/principles.html> accessed 05/09/2011

Cross, S (2009) *Adult Teaching and Learning: Developing your Practice*. Open University Press. Maidenhead.

Dewey, J. (1933) *How We Think*. Chicago: Regnery

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Tusting, K. and Barton, D. (2006) *Models of adult learning: a literature review*. NIACE. Leicester.