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Using World Café in Complex Conversations: Connecting the Parts to the Whole

IN THIS PRACTICE NOTE...

Facilitators of meetings, conferences, or convenings in general often encounter a dilemma: How does one tap the collective intelligence of the entire group while allowing for the richness and depth of small group discussions?

This Practice Note shares some lessons about achieving both breadth and depth in facilitated conversations through use of the World Café method. While an entire event can be carried out in World Café mode, in the Race and Leadership symposium RCLA chose to use this method in one segment, coupling it with other conversational methods. Our insights will be most useful to facilitators holding one to two-hour World Cafés. Yet some insights can also apply to those organizing longer World Cafés, and even to facilitators interested in fostering more explorative discussions in general.

The Experience ...

In June 2008 RCLA hosted an academic symposium bringing together prominent thinkers and scholars to discuss the topic of race and leadership. This conversation was inspired by seven years of research under the flagship Leadership for a Changing World program, through which we found that issues of social identity, particularly race and ethnicity, are central to the work of leadership in social change organizations.

In the symposium we discussed participants' own approaches to the connection between race and leadership. We also presented our findings on how social change organizations use race as an activator of collective leadership potential. As expected with such a complex topic, conversations were rich, varied and highly nuanced, illuminating many elements of the topic. At the culmination of the two-day symposium we wanted to create an opportunity for the group to explore together how the "parts" connected with the "whole." World Café helped us do just that.

World Café at a Glance

World Café itself was born out of a rich two-day dialogue in 1995 among a global, interdisciplinary group known as the Intellectual Capital Pioneers. Reflecting on the quality and innovativeness of their work over the two days, they asked, “What happened here that supported such great conversation and breakthrough thinking?” Reflection on the then-largely improvised process, followed by research and experimentation, resulted in the creation of the World Café method.

World Café is a method for aiding group discussion that draws on the metaphor of “systems.” Just as systems are “wholes” comprised of “parts,” so too are group conversations. World Café enables a group of 12 or more to have the benefit of a whole group conversation in the intimate setting of small groups.

Four to six people sit at a table or in a cluster to explore a question or issue. Other participants sitting at nearby tables or in clusters explore the same or similar questions at the same time. After a 20-minute or so “round of conversation,” participants are invited to change tables, carrying key ideas and insights from their previous conversation into a newly formed small group. A “host” remaining at each table shares with the newly arriving members key insights from the previous discussion.

This process is repeated for several rounds. Participants begin to experience each conversation at their table as linked and connected to the unfolding conversation in the room as a whole. So, the parts and whole metaphor extends to the substance of the conversation, as well as to the group itself.

At the end of several rounds facilitators bring together the group in a conversation to which everyone contributes. Participants are invited to explore emergent patterns and address how small table conversations contributed to a broader understanding of the issues.

Key Decisions for a Successful World Café

Clarify the Purpose

World Café is an excellent tool for *cross-pollinating* ideas and perspectives. Yet facilitators need to pay attention to why they are bringing people together in this mode. This includes how it fits within the overall activity, whether it would add variety to the dialogue, and what to expect out of it. Once all this is clarified, it helps to share the reasoning with participants in introducing the method.



Joyce Fletcher and Sonia Ospina at the Race and Leadership Symposium

World Café is designed for complex conversations with many “parts.” At our Race and Leadership Symposium we had organized a couple of Fishbowls¹ with participating scholars to share their work on the topic, and had presented findings from our own research. Our conversations, which thus far had been in a large group setting, had covered an array of nuanced points. We wanted to create the opportunity to delve deeper in smaller group discussions through the World Café. What had before felt like overwhelmingly diverse ideas began to coalesce through World Café. What happened as people moved from table to table is that ideas no longer seemed random or disconnected. As ideas circulated, they began to form a coherent pattern without facilitators having imposed direction.

In our Symposium the conversation had many parts even within the same space, since participants had been engaging in one large group dialogue up until the World Café session. A conversation can also have many parts when an event is designed to have separate workshops or panels that participants can choose to attend. We have found World Café to work well as a sharing exercise in those types of convenings because participants catch a glimpse of what happened in the workshops they did not attend. In this case, it helps to hold a World Café immediately after the separate parallel workshops have taken place and when ideas are still fresh on people’s minds.

Invite Exploration through Pertinent Questions



Vangy Holvino and Mary McRae at the Race and Leadership Symposium

Formulating appropriate questions is essential to a successful World Café. Questions that are appreciative and open-ended will invite participants to explore more. Questions that are clear, connected to purpose, and meaningful to participants will also generate creativity and insight. Here are some tips for selecting questions:

- Does the question honor the collective intelligence of the group by being dynamic but not daunting?
- Is the question relevant to the issues that participants are grappling with?
- What assumptions are embedded in the way this question is formed?
- Is the question likely to spark imagination and inspire hope rather than dwell on problems or technicalities?
- Is the question worthy of the group (i.e., is it a question that can not just as easily be explored by the conveners alone)?

Rather than predetermining the question, facilitators should be attentive to the kinds of discussions arising, topics that participants seek to explore more and the general energy level of the convening and base the question on this context. Our advice is that unless an entire event is organized in World Café mode, it is best to choose the question as the event transpires and after facilitators have a better feel for the conversation.

¹ Fishbowl is a dialogue method that allows anyone from the audience to participate in a conversation with the guest speakers or panelists. The setup typically consists of a small circle of chairs for the panelists in the middle with an empty chair for audience members to join. The remaining participants sit in concentric circles around the group in the middle.

When World Café is one segment in an event, the question needs to be relevant to and build on ensuing discussions yet leave room for new and different questions to take place. We designed the Race and Leadership symposium to have World Café toward the end of the event. Therefore, the question we posed sought to both capture some common threads in conversations from the previous day and a half and to trigger questions for further research. Our World Café question was: In light of our discussions, what are the different ways in which race and leadership intersect in our scholarship?

Foster Continuity in Conversations through the Hosts

Ideally in a World Café setting, there needs to be a ‘host’ for each table or conversational cluster. Unlike other participants who rotate to different tables, the hosts remain at the same table. Their role is to relay to each newly arriving group highlights from the previous conversation. After this brief summary, the host then takes part in the new conversation like the other participants.

The hosts’ role is essential in connecting the ‘parts’ to the ‘whole.’ The host captures the essence of the previous discussion and invites newcomers to note any commonalities of discussions held at their previous tables. In addition to maintaining some continuity with the previous dialogue on the table, the host’s summary acts as a trigger for the newcomers’ conversation. If conveners want to learn as much as possible from the conversations as well as maintain some consistency in capturing the dialogue, we recommend that the hosts are members of the convener’s team.

After a couple or more rounds patterns begin to emerge as similar ideas float around the room. World Café helps to foster collective ownership by the group of the knowledge percolating. Issues or ideas are less associated with individual members and become part of the larger conversation in the room.

Work Out the Math – Number of Rounds, Time, and Size of Each Table

Each table should have ideally four to five members plus the host. Three rounds is generally a good number; however, if you have more than six tables (i.e. a group larger than 30), a fourth conversation round may be needed to allow more people to interact with each other. A round is typically 20 – 25 minutes, if the same question is being explored.

Although more complicated, a World Café can explore different questions by assigning a question to each table. This is useful when the same issue needs to be explored from different angles or through different lenses. Some more time should be allowed for the rounds in this case, making them 30-35 minutes. In this case the host plays a more pertinent role as she/he holds the integrity of the conversation around the particular question being explored. The host summarizes key points from the previous discussion and invites new members to react and/or explore the question on the table. In this case, it is better to invite some processing around commonalities or differences from questions explored at other tables toward the end of the round and after new members at the table have had a chance to explore the question at hand.

Make sure to allow for some time between rounds so people can move to different tables. Also let people know a few minutes before the switch to allow conversations to end smoothly in each round.

Create a Hospitable Space through the Set-up

World Café can be set up around tables or by asking groups to sit in a round cluster of chairs. Tables are preferable since they make it easier for people to take notes. In fact, conceivers of the World Café encourage covering tables with paper, like with a tablecloth, and encouraging people to doodle, draw, or write notes directly on the table. Visual representations and writings on the table also help maintain continuity of the conversation as different groups come to the table.

You may also think about using recording devices at each table, so that the organizing team can listen more systematically for patterns. We used a recorder for each table at the Race and Leadership Symposium after getting the permission of all present. Sound quality will be compromised if tables are too close together. In fact, whether recording or not, it is advisable not to place tables too close together to minimize interference with nearby tables.

Invite Dialogue to Connect the Parts to the Whole



Erica Foldy facilitating a Fishbowl discussion with Patricia Parker, Boas Shamir, Mary McRae and Kauhla Murtadha at the Race and Leadership Symposium

After the World Café rounds it is best to invite participants to a large group discussion to reflect on what happened. The purpose of this dialogue is to nurture coherence and harvest collective insights. Group dialogue can be stimulated by asking questions such as: What are some key ideas that kept coming up at the different tables? What were the common threads? Where there any key differences felt as you moved from table to table?

We recommend making the connections visible through visual exercises such as creating a tapestry or using Visual Explorer. Here is where the paper sheets used by participants to doodle and make notes are very valuable. These sheets provide an excellent record of

the continuation of thought that happens as new groups join each table since no image belongs to a single group. Encouraging participants to share and explain each table sheet fosters creativity and is a great way to illuminate connections. Given availability of resources, graphic professionals, also called graphic facilitators or visual practitioners, add a layer of richness to the interpretation process. These facilitators map the Café conversation as it happens in an event by catching glimpses of conversations that happen at each table and by being present in the plenary. They create images that reflect key ideas, map nascent connections and illuminate relationships between different perspectives.

KEEP IN MIND

- **Don't rush the World Café process:** Engaging in a World Café conversation is a highly creative act that does not flourish if rushed. If you're planning on having three rounds, make sure to allow at least two hours including a group reflection at the end.
- **Transitions may be messy:** Don't fret if the rounds don't end exactly on time or if there is some awkwardness in kick-starting the conversation among newcomers to the table. It takes a few minutes for people to rotate and settle into new discussions.
- **Debrief with the organizing team and table hosts:** World Café is not the simplest method to use so make some time to reflect on what worked and what didn't to improve future use of the method. Address the different elements discussed above by asking questions such as: Was the question(s) clear yet open enough to engage exploration? How did the hosts feel about the conversations at their table?

MORE REFERENCES ON WORLD CAFÉ

Brown, J, Homer, K. and D. Isaacs (2007) "The World Café" in Holman, P., Devane, T., and S. Cady (eds) The Change Handbook – The definitive resource on today's best methods for engaging whole systems. San Francisco: Berrett Koehler Publishers.

Morrison Outon, P. (2007) "Group Facilitation for Non-profit Leaders – The World Café" in *Social Capital, Civic Engagement, Strong Communities*. A publication of Nexus: the Pittsburgh Dialogues for Volunteers, Philanthropists and Activists. pp 3 – 5.

WWW.THEWORLDCAFE.COM

MORE ON RCLA'S SYMPOSIUM ON RACE AND LEADERSHIP

<http://wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/news/raceleadership.php>

RELEVANT RCLA RESOURCES

Practice Note: Visual Tools - May 2008

This Practice Note shows how to use Graffiti Wall, Visual Explorer, and murals/tapestries to bring clarity to an issue or problem that otherwise seems murky or intractable. These tools can be used to facilitate difficult conversations, build connections among diverse groups and help leaders problem-solve.

http://www.wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/practice_notes/Practice%20Note_Visual%20Tools.pdf

Practice Note: Story Circle- June 2008

This Practice Note shows how to facilitate storytelling as a powerful tool for bringing people together to build relationships, identify common threads of experience and generate insight from personal and professional experience.

http://www.wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/practice_notes/Practice%20Note_Story%20Circle.pdf



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