

PARTICIPATORY METHODS TOOLKIT  
A practitioner's manual

The World Café

## Colophon

Participatory Methods Toolkit. A practitioner's manual  
Method: The World Café

This is an extract of the publication 'Participatory Methods Toolkit. A practitioner's manual', a joint publication of the King Baudouin Foundation and the Flemish Institute for Science and Technology Assessment (viWTA).

The full version of the manual includes:

- Introduction about participatory methods
- General guidelines and tips for participatory methods
- Complete description of 13 participatory methods: 21st Century Town Meeting® ; Charrette ; Citizens Jury ; Consensus Conference ; Deliberative Polling® ; Delphi ; Expert Panel ; Focus Group ; Participatory Assessment, Monitoring and Evaluation ; Planning Cell ; Scenario Building Exercise ; Technology Festival ; The World Café
- Brief descriptions of 50 methods and techniques

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# THE WORLD CAFÉ <sup>1</sup>

## **I. DEFINITION**

The World Café is a creative process for facilitating collaborative dialogue and the sharing of knowledge and ideas to create a living network of conversation and action. In this process a café ambiance is created, in which participants discuss a question or issue in small groups around the café tables. At regular intervals the participants move to a new table. One table host remains and summarises the previous conversation to the new table guests. Thus the proceeding conversations are cross-fertilised with the ideas generated in former conversations with other participants. At the end of the process the main ideas are summarised in a plenary session and follow-up possibilities are discussed.

## **II. WHEN TO USE**

The World Café process is particularly useful in the following situations:

- to engage large groups (larger than 12 persons) in an authentic dialogue process (Groups of 1200 have been conducted!)
- when you want to generate input, share knowledge, stimulate innovative thinking and explore action possibilities around real life issues and questions
- to engage people in authentic conversation – whether they are meeting for the first time or have established relationships with each other
- to conduct in-depth exploration of key strategic challenges or opportunities
- to deepen relationships and mutual ownership of outcomes in an existing group
- to create meaningful interaction between a speaker and the audience.

The Café is *less* useful when:

- you are driving toward an already determined solution or answer
- you want to convey only one-way information
- you are making detailed implementation plans
- you have fewer than 12 persons (In this case, it is better to use a more traditional dialogue circle, council or other approach for fostering authentic conversation.).

## **III. PROCEDURE**

### **A. Overview**

In the Café event the participants explore an issue by discussing and drawing in small groups or ‘tables’ for multiple consecutive sessions of 20-30 minutes. Participants change tables after each session in order to ‘cross-fertilise’ their

<sup>1</sup> Most of the information here is taken from Brown, J. (2002) *The World Café: A Resource Guide for Hosting Conversations That Matter*. Mill Valley, CA: Whole Systems Associates.



discussions with the ideas generated at other tables. The event is concluded with a plenary, where the key ideas and conclusions are established.

## **B. Preparation**

### **1. CHOOSE CAFÉ FACILITATOR**

This flexible method is relatively easy to organise. It can be organised and facilitated by a single person or by a team, as available. In any case, one person (or possibly two) will act as the Café facilitator(s).

The job of the Café facilitator(s) is to see that the guidelines for dialogue and engagement are put into action. It is not the specific form, but living the spirit of the guidelines that counts. Hosting a Café requires thoughtfulness, artistry and care. The Café facilitator(s) can make the difference between an interesting conversation and breakthrough thinking. The responsibilities of the Café facilitator(s) include the following:

- work with the planning team to determine the purpose of the Café and decide who should be invited to the gathering
- name your Café in a way appropriate to its purpose
- help frame the invitation
- work with others to create a comfortable café environment
- welcome the participants as they enter
- explain the purpose of the gathering
- pose the question or themes for rounds of conversation and make sure that the question is visible to everyone on an overhead, flipchart or on cards at each table
- explain the Café guidelines and Café etiquette, and post them on an overhead, an easel sheet or on cards at each table
- explain how the logistics of the Café will work, including the role of the 'table host' (the person who will volunteer to remain at the end of the first round and welcome newcomers to their table)
- move among the tables during the conversations
- encourage everyone to participate
- remind people to note key ideas, doodle and draw
- let people know in a gentle way when it is time to move and begin a new round of conversation
- make sure key insights are recorded visually or are gathered and posted if possible
- be creative in adapting the Café guidelines to meet the unique needs of your situation.

### **2. CLARIFY THE PURPOSE**

Decide on the purpose and focus of the Café conversation. Ask yourself the following questions, discussing them among the members of the organising team, if applicable.



- What is the topic or issue we want to address or explore?
- Who needs to be invited to participate in this conversation?
- Who can contribute conventional and unconventional wisdom?
- How much time do we have for the inquiry?
- What line(s) of inquiry do we want to pursue? What themes are most likely to be meaningful and stimulate creativity?
- What is the best outcome we can envision? How might we design a path toward that outcome?

### Explore Questions That Matter!

The question(s) addressed in a Café conversation are critical to the success of the event. Your Café may explore a single question or several questions may be developed to support a logical progression of discovery throughout several rounds of dialogue.

It is important to establish an approach of ‘appreciative inquiry’. The major premise here is that the questions we ask, and the way in which we ask them, will focus us in a particular manner, which will greatly affect the outcome of our inquiry. For example, if we ask, ‘What is wrong and who is to blame?’ we set up a certain dynamic of problem-identification and blame assigning. While there may be instances where such an approach is desirable, experienced Café hosts have found it much more effective to ask people questions that invite the exploration of possibilities and to connect them with why they care.

Knowledge emerges and creativity thrives in response to compelling questions. Generate questions that are relevant to the actual concerns of the participants. People engage deeply when they feel they are contributing their ideas to questions that are important to them. Powerful questions that ‘travel well’ help attract collective energy, insight and action as they move throughout a system.

#### **A Powerful Question**

- is simple and clear
- is thought provoking
- generates energy
- focuses inquiry
- surfaces unconscious assumptions
- opens new possibilities
- seeks what is useful

- Well-crafted questions attract energy and focus our attention to what really counts. Experienced Café hosts recommend posing open-ended questions – the kind that do not have ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers.
- Good questions need not imply immediate action steps or problem solving. They should invite inquiry and

discovery, rather than advocacy and advantage.

- You will know you have a good question when it continues to surface new ideas and possibilities.
- Bounce possible questions off of key people who will be participating to see if they sustain interest and energy.

**Give the Café a name.** The name should be appropriate for its purpose, for example Leadership Café, Knowledge Café; Strategy Café; Discovery Café and so forth.

### 3. INVITE PARTICIPANTS

Decide who should be invited to the gathering.

Decide upon the location. (For tips, see the section on 'creating a hospitable space' – physical environment.)

Decide upon a time. Allow at least three or four hours for the event. However, depending upon the issue and ambitions of your project, consider a kind of Café Marathon....

Make and send out the invitations. Include in the invitations the theme or central question you will be exploring in your Café. State it as an open-ended exploration, not a problem-solving intervention.

### 4. CREATE A HOSPITABLE SPACE

#### (a) *The social atmosphere*

First and foremost, a hospitable space means a 'safe' space, where everyone feels free to be him/herself and to offer his/her most creative thinking, speaking and listening.

Encourage all participants to contribute to the conversation. Inform them that, in accordance with the World Café philosophy, each participant in the Café is seen as representing an aspect of the whole system's diversity. As each person has the chance to connect in conversation, more of the intelligence inherent in the group becomes accessible. A popular phrase among Café-goers is, 'Intelligence emerges as a system connects to itself in new and diverse ways'.

Experienced Café facilitators have found that, on occasion, it is helpful to have a 'talking object' on the tables. Originally used by numerous indigenous peoples, a talking object can be a stick or stone, a marker or saltshaker – almost anything, as long as it can be passed among the people at the table. There are two aspects to the talking object:

- whoever holds the talking object is the only one empowered to speak, and
- whoever is not holding it is empowered to listen.

It is not necessary to use a talking object all the time, but it can be particularly useful in cases where the topic being



explored raises impassioned responses. It can be a very effective way to ensure everyone has the opportunity to contribute, even if they simply choose to hold the talking object and observe a few minutes of silence.

Whether or not a 'talking object' is used, encourage the participants to adhere to the following guidelines:

- The speaker's responsibility is to focus on the topic and express his or her thoughts about it as clearly as possible.
- The listeners' responsibility is to actively listen to what the speaker is saying with the implicit assumption that (s)he has something wise and important to say.
- Listen with a willingness to be influenced.
- Listen to understand where the speaker is coming from.
- Appreciate that the speaker's perspective, regardless of how divergent it may be from your own, is equally valid and represents a part of the larger picture that none of us can see by ourselves.

#### *(b) The physical environment*

Creating a warm and inviting physical environment can contribute significantly to designing a hospitable space.

When asked where they have had some of their most significant conversations, nearly everyone recalls sitting around a kitchen or dining room table. There is an easy intimacy when gathering at a small table that most of us immediately recognise. When you walk into a room and see it filled with café tables, you know that you are not in for your usual business meeting. Creating a Café ambiance is easy and need not be expensive. Some suggestions follow.

#### *How to Create a Café Ambiance:*

Whether you are convening several dozen or several hundred people, it is essential to create an environment that evokes a feeling of both informality and intimacy. When your guests arrive they should know immediately that this is no ordinary meeting.

- If possible, select a space with natural light, comfortable seating, a pleasant temperature and an outdoor view to create a more welcoming atmosphere.
- Make the space look like an actual café, with small round tables that seat four or five people. Four is the ideal number. Less than four at a table may not provide enough diversity of perspectives, more than five limits the amount of personal interaction.
- Arrange the tables in a staggered, random fashion rather than in neat rows. Tables in a sidewalk café after it has been open for a few hours look relaxed and inviting.
- Use colourful tablecloths and a small bud vase with flowers on each table. If the venue permits, add a candle to each table. Place plants or greenery around the room.
- Place at least two large sheets of paper over each tablecloth along with a mug or wineglass filled with colourful markers. Paper and pens encourage scribbling, drawing and connecting ideas. In this way people will jot down ideas as they emerge.



- Put one additional café table in the front of the room for the host's and any presenter's material.
- Consider displaying art or adding posters to the walls (as simple as flipchart sheets with quotes).
- Consider playing some soft background music. Music played too loudly will be disruptive to the conversation.
- To honour the tradition of community and hospitality, provide beverages and/or snacks, if it seems appropriate.

#### Café Supplies Checklist

- small round tables for four people are ideal
- enough chairs for all participants and presenters
- colourful tablecloths
- flipchart paper or paper placemats for covering the café tables
- coloured water-based, non-toxic markers. For legibility use dark colours such as green, black, blue and purple. Add one or two bright colours to the cup (red, light green, light blue or orange) for adding emphasis.
- a very small bud vase with cut flowers per table
- a mug or wineglass for markers per table
- a side table for refreshments and snacks
- mural or flipchart paper for making collective knowledge visible and tape for hanging up the sheets
- flat wall space or two rolling white boards
- additional wall (or window) space for posting collective work and/or the work of the tables
- refreshments, if appropriate

#### Optional (depending on size and purpose)

- overhead projector & screen
- sound system for playing music
- a selection of background music
- wireless lavalieres for Café facilitators and handheld wireless microphones for town meeting-style sessions
- easels & flipcharts
- basic supplies including stapler, paper clips, rubber bands, markers, masking tape, pens, push pins and pencils
- coloured 4x6 inch or 5x8 inch cards (for personal note taking)
- large and bright colourful papers for posting of ideas

### **C. The Café Event**

- Welcome the participants as they arrive and seat four (or five) people at the tables or in conversation clusters.
- Introduce the World Café process and the issue(s) or question(s) at hand.

Explain the purpose of this particular Café event and pose the prepared questions, posting them where they are visible to everyone.

Explain the Café guidelines and Café etiquette and post them on an overhead, an easel sheet or on cards at each table.





### Café Etiquette

- Focus on what matters.
- Contribute your thoughts.
- Speak your mind and heart.
- Listen to understand.
- Link and connect ideas.
- Listen together for insights and deeper questions.
- Play, Doodle, Draw – writing on the ‘tablecloth’ sheets is encouraged.
- Have fun!

Present the ‘safe place’ principle of the World Café and emphasise listening skills. For example, one might offer the following anecdote:

Listening is a gift we give to one another. The quality of our listening is perhaps the most important factor determining the success of a Café. Whole books and courses have been written about how to listen. However, one nice jazz analogy comes from Wynton Marsalis. Marsalis explains that when jazz musicians get together to jam, the best listeners end up contributing the most to the music because they are able to play off of whatever is being offered by the other ‘cats’ in the band. Café conversations share this jazz element of inviting people to express themselves authentically and those who listen skilfully are able to easily build on what is being shared.

A few tips for improving our listening:

- Help people notice their tendency to plan their response to what is being said and inquire internally as to the ways this detracts from both the speaker and the listener.
- Listen as if each person were truly wise, sharing some truth that you may have heard before but do not yet fully grasp.
- Listen with an openness to be influenced by the speaker.
- Listen to support the speaker in fully expressing him/herself.
- Listen for deeper questions, patterns, insights and emerging perspectives.
- Listen for what is not being spoken along with what is being shared.

Set up progressive (usually three) rounds of conversation of approximately 20-30 minutes each.

Once you know what you want to achieve and the amount of time you have to work with, you can decide the appropriate number and length of conversation rounds, the most effective use of questions and the most interesting ways to connect and cross-pollinate ideas.

The members of each table explore together the question(s) or issue(s) at hand.

Facilitators should ask the participants to share their individual perspectives and listen for what is emerging ‘in the middle of the table’.

Encourage them to use the markers and paper on the table to create a ‘shared visual space’ by noting key ideas and drawing the emerging ideas. Sometimes the co-created pictures can really be worth a thousand words in showing the relationships between ideas.

### **Five Ways to Make Knowledge Visible**

#### **Use a graphic Recorder**

In some Café events the whole group conversation is captured by a graphic recorder who draws the group’s ideas on flipcharts or a wall mural using text and graphics to illustrate the patterns of the conversation.

#### **Take a Gallery Tour**

At times, people will place the paper from their tables on the wall so members can take a tour of the group’s ideas during a break.

#### **Post Your Insights**

Participants can place large notepapers on which a single key insight is written, on a blackboard, wall, etc. so that everyone can review the ideas during a break.

#### **Create Idea Clusters**

Group insights from the Post-Its into ‘affinity clusters’ so that related ideas are visible and available for planning the group’s next steps.

#### **Make a Story**

Some Cafés create a newspaper or storybook to bring the results of their work to larger audiences after the event. A visual recorder can create a picture book along with text as documentation.

Upon completing the initial round of conversation, ask one person to remain at the table as the ‘host’ while the others serve as travellers or ‘ambassadors of meaning’. The travellers carry key ideas, themes and questions into their new conversations.

Make sure that members of each table during the first round each go to different tables as the conversational rounds progress. This cross-pollination of ideas often produces surprising results that could not have happened otherwise. Setting up your Café in conversational rounds and asking people to change tables between rounds allows for a dense web of connections to be woven in a short period of time. Each time you travel to a new table you are bringing with you the threads of the last round and interweaving them with those brought by other travellers. As the rounds progress the



conversation moves to deeper levels. People who arrived with fixed positions often find that they are more open to new and different ideas.

#### **I'm a table host, what do I do?**

- Remind people at your table to note down key connections, ideas, discoveries and deeper questions as they emerge.
- Remain at the table when others leave and welcome travellers from other tables.
- Briefly share key insights from the prior conversation so others can link and build using ideas from their respective tables.

At the beginning of the consecutive rounds, the table hosts welcome the new guests and briefly share the main ideas, themes and questions of the initial conversation. Encourage guests to link and connect ideas coming from their previous table conversations – listening carefully and building on each other's contributions.

By providing opportunities for people to move in several rounds of conversation, ideas, questions and themes begin to link and connect. At the end of the second round, all of the tables or conversation clusters in the room will be cross-pollinated with insights from prior conversations.

In the third round of conversation, people can return to their original tables to synthesise their discoveries or they may continue travelling to new tables, leaving the same or a new host at the table. Sometimes a new question that helps deepen the exploration is posed for the third round of conversation.

After several rounds of conversation, initiate a period of sharing discoveries and insights in whole group (plenary) conversation. It is in these town meeting-style conversations that patterns can be identified, collective knowledge grows and possibilities for action emerge.

Conversations held at one table reflect a pattern of wholeness that connects with the conversations at the other tables. The last phase of the Café involves making this pattern of wholeness visible to everyone. To do so, hold a conversation between the individual tables and the whole group. Ask the table groups to spend a few minutes considering what occurrences were most meaningful to them. Distil these down to the essence and then have each table share with the whole group the nuggets that are being discovered at their table. Make sure that you have a way to capture this, either on flipcharts or by having each table record them on large notepapers or the sheets on their tables, which can then be taped to a wall so that everyone can see them. After each table has had a chance to report out to the whole group, take a few minutes of silent reflection and consider:

- What is emerging here?
- If there were a single voice in the room, what would it be saying?
- What deeper questions are emerging as a result of these conversations?

- Do we notice any patterns and what do these patterns point to or how do they inform us?
- What do we now see and know as a result of these conversations?

#### **IV. RESOURCE CONSIDERATIONS (TIME, BUDGET)**

The actual Café event lasts a few hours – a minimum of four hours and perhaps a maximum of an entire day, depending upon the topic and ambitions of the project. Of course, one can schedule multiple Café events on consecutive days. The amount of time required to prepare for a given event depends upon the scale of the event and the intended participants. A small Café of 20 participants can be organised very spontaneously if the participants are readily available. If the targeted participants have complex schedules and/or the number of participants is very large, then the event will require at least several weeks, if not months, of planning.

The following items listed are the main budgetary items in a World Café process:

- Personnel
  - project host/team
- Travel
  - participants
- Food
  - light refreshments
  - meals for participants only if the event is all-day
- Recruitment and Promotion
  - invitations to participants
- Communications
  - printing and distribution of final report
- Facilities
  - location for Café
- Materials and Supplies
  - (See list provided.)

#### **V. ADDITIONAL BEST PRACTICES AND POTENTIAL PITFALLS**

The inventors of the World Café emphasise that the process is about helping people to "remember what they already know how to do": to convene conversations that matter. In other words, the facilitators help the participants to be more aware of the conditions conducive to productive, powerful dialogue, and they attempt to help participants tap into their own knowledge and wisdom in order to create these.

Experienced facilitators strongly recommend using round tables with four persons at each. Three is too few, and while five can work, their experience shows that the number four is far superior.



One potential pitfall is posing questions that ask about the nature of truth. Philosophers have spent thousands of years arguing the nature of truth, and many of the wars in history have been fought over such questions. We are after ‘shared meaning’, which does not mean that we all share the same perspective on what is true, but rather that each participant has the opportunity to share what is true and meaningful for them. This, in turn, will allow us all to see our collective situation in a different light, hopefully enlarging our individual views of truth along the way. The experience of seasoned hosts has been that questions that focus on ‘What is useful here?’ are more effective at generating engagement on the part of participants and they tend less to provoke defensive reactions than questions that focus on ‘What is true?’

### **References and Resources**

Brown, J. (2002) *The World Café: A Resource Guide for Hosting Conversations That Matter*. Mill Valley, CA: Whole Systems Associates.

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