
Designing a Public Conversation Using the World Café Method

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Leaders talk about holding large-scale public conversations, but they won't succeed if the methods are unsatisfying for participants, if an authentic conversation occurs at all. In this paper, I present the World Café method, a viable way of involving large numbers of people in a meaningful, conversational exchange. I describe how a particular World Café event was designed, and then explore the value of the World Café method as a means to achieve social change.

Introduction

Increasingly, we hear political and economic leaders talk about having a 'conversation' with stakeholders, or shareholders and the large communities that they serve. In practice, the talk usually goes in one direction. Opinion polls, focus groups and stage-managed public consultations do not afford citizens much decisive influence.

More and more governments and non-governments organisations (NGOs) with a genuine desire for democratic public engagement are convening public meetings. However, even with the best of intentions, the default 'town hall' forum usually degenerates into an angry tussle between polarised groups committed to winning their arguments at the expense of others. This occurs because most people are grouped with friends, family, colleagues or neighbours who are like-minded in their values and beliefs, which in their local conversations they reinforce and defend. The adversarial question-answer format is inevitably dominated by familiar participants, typically those who are incensed and articulate, with comperes raising the temperature with provocative rather than conciliatory comments.

So how can we have a large-scale conversation that draws on the rich diversity of public opinion? If the public are to be engaged constructively, they too need to be exposed to that broad range of perspectives, and appreciate them with respect. This 'appreciative' approach lies at the heart of new thinking in the structured design of influential public conversations.

World Café, an Exploration in Happiness

This paper describes a dialogic method called *The World Café* (W/Café), first trialled experimentally in 1995 by Juanita Brown and Chris Isaacs. The 'café' metaphor describes the informal seating at multiple small tables

to encourage conversation. 'The world' symbolises how the format is scaled up to include dozens, even hundreds of people at a time. There is also hope that W/Café will gain global popularity as an accepted method to publicly address social and political issues.

I have designed and facilitated many W/Café events over the past decade around important issues like climate policy and regulatory frameworks. Rather than get caught up in the intricacies of such topics, in this paper I describe a light-hearted event that I was commissioned to design for the Sydney Festival in early 2010. The W/Café was designed to explore the meaning of happiness, which was the theme of the festival (hereafter called the *Happiness Café*). The originators of the W/Café format encourage us to 'explore questions that matter': the pursuit of happiness certainly satisfies that criterion.

While there are features that are the same for all W/Cafés, there is flexibility to adapt the format to the occasion. Usually I design the process and then facilitate or co-facilitate it from the stage. Drawing from colleagues and associates, we assembled a small team of volunteers to help run the event. Larger events require event management and a detailed running sheet. During each event challenges arise that provide opportunities to learn and to modify and improve my skills. The originators of the W/Café format describe a sequence of seven design principles (used as headings below) that still guide my design process, although perhaps less prescriptively now that I have gained confidence and experience.

1. Set the context: clarify the purpose and broad parameters within which the dialogue will unfold

For most W/Cafés, it is the designer/facilitator who directs all the initial work to create compelling invitations and promotion to gain a diversity of participants, often with little funding support. In the case of the Happiness Café, attracting participants was easy because the festival

organisers led the promotion. Unusually, the participants had to buy a ticket to attend, so it had to be an especially entertaining and rewarding event. Thankfully, the W/Café format rarely disappoints as people come ready to talk! Over two hundred people including several dignitaries participated. Their conversation was the performance.

Everyone knew why they were attending, but I had to help them focus their attention on having meaningful conversations. For most W/Cafés, participants are presumed to already have all the knowledge and lived experience to start and sustain conversations that stay on topic. In this case, with such a wide remit as 'the pursuit of happiness', I included a panel discussion at the beginning. The panel included an eminent academic and former politician as chairperson, a philosopher, a performance artist and a Buddhist monk, seated on comfortable couches on the stage. The panel demonstrated and modelled a civil conversation and presented different ways of thinking about happiness. Their discussion was entertaining and inspiring.

2. Create a hospitable space: assure the welcoming environment and psychological safety that nurtures personal comfort and mutual respect

The event was held at the University of Sydney, where I was on faculty, and which co-sponsored the festival. To gain the widest possible audience, the W/Café was scheduled on a Sunday evening. We used the university's vast, elegant and historic Great Hall, which we filled with small cafe tables, each with six to eight chairs (other W/Café organisers prefer only four or five), and on each table a linen table cloth, flowers, wine glasses, pens and large sheets of paper. Participants were greeted upon arrival by volunteers and invited to sit at any table that had a free chair. The lighting was subdued and musicians played on the stage to welcome guests. Throughout the event, waiters brought food and drinks to the tables. It felt like a fashionable restaurant.

I usually place a red card on each table that participants can raise if they need volunteer assistance or clarification about anything. The card is rarely shown.

3. Explore questions that matter: focus collective attention on powerful questions that attract collaborative engagement

Generally, a W/Café is planned to take about two hours, about as long as participants can talk together before fatigue sets in. A W/Café works through 'rounds' of table conversation, with each round lasting 15 minutes, a total of six to eight rounds of conversation.

While participants should know what they are attending to talk about, each round still requires a relevant focussing question. In most W/Cafés, a single question is addressed

through all the conversation rounds. It should be open and juicy enough to propel inspiring conversation through successive rounds. A constructive strategy, applied in the Happiness Café, is to frame questions to build appreciation of the positive rather than problematic aspects of an issue or situation. Participants are discouraged from judging answers as 'right' or 'wrong'. It should lead participants to 'drill down' into deeper mutual understanding and more awareness of the diversity of perspectives in the room. The current question can be visible on a stage screen, and/or left on each table along with the agenda and guidelines.

For the Happiness Café, I adopted a different approach, which I have applied in other events. Rather than a single question, I asked a sequence of questions with each feeding into the next. The theory behind this approach lies in pedagogical scaffolding, starting with tangible context-setting questions and then working towards the more complex and speculative. Designing these questions is a creative endeavour, which I often bounce off associates before implementing them. Here are the questions/topics that were offered for the Happiness Café:

Round one

Q: What are your responses to the panel discussion?

Rounds two, three

Describe a recent experience of happiness. It may have been fleeting or deep or enduring.

Rounds four, five, six

Q: Have you ever knowingly cultivated happiness? If yes, what did you do?

Rounds seven, eight

Q: What are you already doing or what might you do in the future to cultivate happiness in your wider circle of family, friends, colleagues, community?

Round one allowed people to start talking to each other civilly and release what was on their mind. In rounds two and three, I was hoping participants would begin to articulate their perspectives on happiness in the company of others. In the next three rounds I wanted participants to brainstorm the various ways that people cultivate happiness. In the final two rounds, I anticipated that participants would build on their own ideas and activities, and even expand their repertoire of activities that would support social wellbeing. Notice that all the questions invite personal storytelling.

4. Encourage everyone's contribution: enliven the relationship between the 'me' and the 'we' by inviting full participation and mutual giving

Before the start of the first round of conversation, I ask participants to nominate a permanent 'host' for their table.

To make it easy, I suggest that they select the person with the brightest clothing. If that person does not want the job, either at the starting time or later on, they can pass it on to another. This randomness enables a good mix of table hosts and avoids the task being taken by the most confident person at a table. The hosts do not shift tables between rounds, but rather record snippets of conversation on the sheets of paper provided.

Some helpful hints are available at each table for everyone to read, providing tips for good facilitating (see box). Hosts have the authority to gently ensure that participants have equal opportunities to speak by creating space for those who may be timid. Hosts can still contribute to the conversation, but must be careful not to dominate. I always reinforce this from the stage by saying something like, 'This is a conversation involving everyone. If you usually talk a lot, talk a lot less. If you usually say little, say a little more. It works best when everyone contributes equally.'

Tips for Good Facilitating

- When asking the question or stating the topic, speak slowly and carefully
- Listen actively. Let participants know they've been heard.
- When someone makes a point, thank them and write it down (very briefly).
- If you are not clear what someone means, check back with them as you write it.
- If people are talking too quickly, or too many at once, don't be afraid to ask them to slow down or wait in order to give you time to write down their points.
- Remain neutral, don't give any opinions about what people say, they are all valid – there are no rights and wrongs!
- Don't get into long discussions.
- Make sure everyone has a chance to be heard.

5. Cross-pollinate and connect diverse perspectives: use the living system dynamics of emergence through intentionally increasing the diversity and density of connections among perspectives, while retaining a common focus on core questions

I arrange for the end of each conversation round to be signalled with some walking music — at the Happiness Café I used the jaunty 'Baby Elephant Walk' tune. Participants stop their conversation, rise and shift to different tables. Rather than moving in blocks, everyone (except the table host) is instructed to spread out and get quickly settled at a new table. The intention is to have everyone mixing.

The brief notes recorded by each table host serve as the table's memory through the event, that each round expands. However, I also suggest that each round begin with conversation rather than a review of the record. I discourage hosts from trying to be too detailed or pedantic in their recording, as I'd prefer that they pay more attention to the actual conversation and its flow.

As lead facilitator, I suggest that if participants have a wild idea but are wary, they take it to the next table and claim it was someone else's idea! Personality clashes inevitably occur, but the table rotation ensures that nobody sits perpetually next to somebody they'd prefer to avoid

6. Listen together for patterns, insights, and deeper questions: focus shared attention in ways that nurture coherence of thought without losing individual contribution

At the Happiness Café, a large screen was on the stage, connected to a computer. To the side of the stage were eight volunteers called the Theme Team, each armed with a networked laptop. As the conversation rounds completed, volunteers collected the recorded notes and the Theme Team entered them quickly into their laptops. (In other events, the table hosts have entered their notes directly into networked laptops.)



World Cafe convened at the Sydney Opera House, October 2010

After eight rounds at the Happiness Café, each participant had a conversation with over fifty people about a topic dear to their hearts, a unique opportunity to hear the diverse views of a crowd. On stage, the Theme Team tried to retain the words that were originally written by the table hosts. Entries were categorised and grouped as patterns of ideas emerged. Almost immediately after the final conversational round, these patterns were summarised in relation to the conversation questions and projected back to the room. These comprised the ideas that 'had the legs' to travel around the room. At the Happiness Café, a short informal plenary conversation ensued with participants, table hosts and panel members mentioning new ideas that surprised and touched them. Participants

are usually impressed at how many of the ideas expressed during their small table conversations are reiterated, which provides for a satisfying closure to the event.

7. Harvest and share collective discoveries: make collective knowledge and insight visible and actionable

The database of collected ideas is a valuable resource that can inspire change. The results of the Happiness Café were publicised in conjunction with further promotion by the Sydney Festival. After W/Cafés that address more politically contentious issues, the results can be used to influence public opinion and inform public policy formation.

The Happiness Café yielded many subjective ideas about happiness. Recent experiences of happiness included hitting a great golf shot, enjoying a dog's loyalty, surfing in the Maldives, giving birth and experiencing sunset on a mountain top. Discussing the cultivation of happiness, participants spoke about practising random acts of kindness, doing voluntary community work, cultivating awareness of each moment, positively engaging with others, listing things for which to feel grateful, attending art classes, complimenting strangers, amongst hundreds of other ideas. Spreading these ideas into the wider community took various forms: knowing neighbours — including organising a Neighbour Day, teaching in developing countries, assisting Indigenous youth programs, changing jobs to a not-for-profit career, listening well, cultivating optimism, being politically active, being non-judgemental, practising generosity.

Notice that participants did not have a problem shifting their focus from atomised self to social community. This is a common feature of W/Cafés, even when the questions do not lead them in that direction.

On feedback sheets completed by participants at the end of a typical W/Café, there will be comments about being really listened to, discovering completely new ideas, understanding different opinions and unusual perspectives, and recognising alignment of personal choices where it wasn't expected. Participants will occasionally comment on a surprising insight. The sharing of ideas invariably leads to rich social learning for W/Café participants.

Bigger picture

How might W/Cafés influence social change? National conversations, when undertaken, tend to involve key stakeholders, those who already have a seat at the policy-making tables. The World Café is a way for everyday citizens to participate in conversations that matter, thereby enabling governments and NGOs to generate interest and discussion in relation to difficult and intractable problems. The W/Café provides a constructive alternative to

agonistic and unproductive public meetings, and facilitates a shift from self-interest to the common good.

A W/Café is very egalitarian. Participants mostly run it themselves. The small group activity enhances participants' citizenship skills and they feel more motivated to act. For example, consider the W/Café in the lead-up to the Australian Citizens' Parliament held in 2009. The topic for discussion was 'How do we reform Australia's political system to serve us better?' The sub-questions were: 'What are the problems with the current political system? What are your concerns? When does the current political system work at its best? What is it that makes it work well when it does? What changes would you wish to see in order to better reflect community interests?' After the W/Café there was an undeniable sense that these individuals, who had come together as people one night after work, had experienced an activity that acknowledged their rights and capacities as citizens. There was a palpable sense of empowerment and worthwhile dialogue. But most importantly there was strong commonality regarding the issues people identified as predominantly important. After the Citizens' Parliament was over, organisers were gratified to note the shifts in political activism on the part of participants: lobbying politicians, becoming more informed, working in the political arena and more.

W/Cafés offer the best prospects for positive social change when participants include both ordinary people and decision-making elites. Those in power gain insight into the needs and concerns of people who may live different kinds of lives. Everyone comes to a better understanding of the institutional barriers to change, leading to considerations about alternatives that are both feasible and would carry broad popular support.

W/Cafés can be convened to talk about happiness or politics or even intractable problems. When an issue attracts positions that are strongly held and apparently incompatible, the W/Café format helps all sides talk towards a better mutual understanding and appreciation of overlapping aspirations. W/Cafés can also be used as an educational tool. Some of the university students who experienced the method labelled it 'speed dialogue'. This is because of the repeated movement between tables by participants and the strict timing of each table conversation. These W/Cafés, conducted in universities, could be described as 'caged' events (students were expected to participate) whereas those in community settings could be seen as 'in the wild' expressions of the method (borrowed from Mitchell 2005:298 citing Callon et al 2002:196). Caged or wild, the W/Café is a flexible method for cultivating conversations that matter.

The W/Café method is used more widely than ever as a method to have a big conversation. Although the website

dedicated to it speaks of '[a]wakening & and engaging collective intelligence through conversations about questions that matter,' it can also be used as a research method, or for problem-solving, strategic planning and more. With those aspirations the World Café is not without its critics. Aldred, for example, has noted her concerns which include 'the concealment of structural inequalities, problematic notions of empowerment, and ... the co-option of critique' (2009: 13). These concerns arise when the promise exceeds its ability to effect social change and are less evident when the promise is merely to convene a large conversation, albeit 'about questions that matter'.

Learning more

If you would like to convene a W/Café, talk to someone who has done so already. In the absence of such a person, the website <http://www.theworldcafe.com/> maintained by Juanita Brown and David Isaacs is a useful source of case studies and resources.

The W/Café is one of a number of techniques that are covered in a cross-institutional, cross-cultural program, Dialogue, Deliberation & Public Engagement, that is offered simultaneously each year (August to January) by Fielding Graduate University in the US and the University of Western Sydney in Australia (I am the Australasian coordinator). For further details see <http://www.uws.edu.au/ccpp>.

My own website www.activedemocracy.net has links to related techniques and other relevant websites and case studies. There are also professional associations that can assist to find practitioners who are skilled facilitators of techniques like the W/Café. See, for example, www.iap2.org.

You might be surprised at how easy it is to convene a conversation in the style of a World Café, whether for a small organisation or a large public. I encourage you to try it.

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The Hon. Fred Chaney AO chaired the panel for the World Cafe at the Festival of Dangerous Ideas



The newdemocracy Foundation sponsored this World Cafe: "Is politics killing democracy?"