

WORLD CAFÉ: SIMULATING SEMINAR DIALOGUES IN A LARGE CLASS

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the use of World Café technique, an aspect of Appreciative Inquiry, to facilitate class discussion. The author creates the thinking and feeling of a seminar dialogue in a class too large for a seminar approach. The preliminary results suggest increased participation and improved critical thinking when using World Café. More research is needed and that may be of interest to ABSEL members.

Key words: world café, appreciative inquiry, pedagogy, dialogue

INTRODUCTION

In the MBA program where I teach, the students take courses in a prescribed sequence. Their first course is Organizational Behavior and the classes are small. Accordingly, I prefer to conduct the course as a seminar with Socratic or Claremont dialogue during every class meeting to enhance the students' listening and critical thinking skills.

One semester, student enrollments were increasing and I was assigned thirty-three students for Organizational Behavior. This is too large a group for my usual dialogue with the class sitting around one table as if in a boardroom. I decided to use a World Café technique, rather than redesign the course using a lecture format. I hoped that I could preserve some semblance of the dialogue approach. The technique met my expectations and this paper shares that experience with you for your consideration.

WORLD CAFÉ & APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

Juanita Brown and David Isaacs (2002) acknowledge that their World Café approach to creating community and solving problems through dialogue is generating considerable interest since they developed the practice in 1995. They invite website visitors to engage in 'conversations that matter' with family and friends, as well as organizations and communities (Brown & Issacs, 2002), and they ask for everyone to share what experiments they are doing and what they are learning. The World Café has grown through "expanding networks of relationships and from a dedication to keep listening together to the insights

that emerge from cross-pollinating diverse perspectives" (Brown & Issacs, 2002, p.1).

World Café dialogue technique derives from a relatively recent and growing interest in appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Appreciative inquiry (AI) puts into practice some of the theories of social construction of organization (Burrell & Morgan, 1979), and constitutes a post-modern approach to organizational learning. AI involves an open consideration of multiple perspectives on a situation through use of dialogue (Senge, 1990). AI is best known by examples of its use (Fry, 2002; Whitney & Bloom, 2003), and has wide-ranging applications, including organizational change (Quinn, 2004; Watkins & Mohr, 2001), ethics (Gergen, 1999; van Vuuren & Crous, 2005), and evaluation (Preskill & Coghlan, 2003; Preskill & Catsambas), among others.

The Rules

Vana Prewitt (2006) suggests while sharing ideas on the World Café website that the dialogues take place around tables. In my first experience of the technique, we had 40 in attendance and few were from the same organization. We set up six tables with seven chairs at each and we decorated the tables to resemble a café. I did not go to all that trouble in the classroom. I simply asked students to rearrange the furniture so that we had five tables evenly distributed throughout the room and I asked them to pretend we were in a café. On each table was a question card and blank paper for keeping notes. Each table elected a discussion facilitator and a note taker. As teacher, I was the café "host" and time-keeper.

I had written several questions in advance and each table had its own unique question or set of questions for consideration and dialogue. I explained the rules and gave the participants handouts with the rules written on them. At the end of the session, the note-takers from each table presented the nature of the discussion on that table's questions or topics and then the entire group (class) could reflect on their collective consideration of the issues presented. Because the class was on Organizational Behavior, I used this café early in the semester, focused it around a shared activity, and utilized the final class discussion to interject key themes we would be exploring throughout the semester by relating each to observations they were making about the situations they had discussed.

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These are the ground rules of the Café (www.theworldcafe.com):

- Create Hospitable Space
- Explore Questions That Matter
- Connect Diverse People and Ideas
- Encourage Each Person's Contribution
- Listen Together for Patterns, Insights and Deeper Questions
- Make Collective Knowledge Visible.

The sequence of the café is not pre-ordained as it is with AI. In Appreciative Inquiry, participants follow a sequence (Hagevik, 2000) that considers discovery (what is it?), dreaming (what might be?), designing (what's ideal?), and, then, destiny (how to empower, learn and adjust). The sequence of the Café is as follows:

Students, or participants, sit at tables and explore the question(s) posed for that table in a group dialogue.

The note taker writes down the key points that are made. After the host calls 'time,' participants move to the next table, clockwise.

Two members of the table – the discussion facilitator and the note-taker - do NOT move; they stay behind with the written notes.

The discussion facilitator at each table works to ensure that each participant is heard fully and encouraged to share.

After several moves among tables (the number depends on how much time you have available), the host asks for a report from each table. Those two who stayed in place report to the larger group.

People come and go from tables and convey the conversations of past tables to new tables. They are sharing with each other and acting as liaisons from one conversation to the next, creating and re-creating dialogue. In this way, the room becomes very lively as participants transfer the context of meaning from one group to the next. At the same time, each table is generating new meaning in a dynamic synthesis.

Like AI, World Café conversations tend to focus forward but in the classroom they can also focus deeper, allowing students to engage in analyses of shared learning experiences. Students also learn to hold an open mind and to engage in an evolving process of sense-making that is richer than a typical question and answer period.

World Cafes have been conducted in minutes and hours and over several days, with small groups and hundreds of people. The interactive dialogue process helps to make tacit knowledge explicit. Accordingly, World Cafes assist in transferring knowledge in order to develop shared understanding. World Cafes can also generate knowledge as conversations circle and flow.

AN EXAMPLE OF AN APPLICATION OF WORLD CAFÉ

My students watched the movie, *Brassed Off!* (Channel Four Films, Miramax Films, Prominent Features Inc.) at the beginning of the semester. This movie depicts how various allegiances to multiple organizations can tear at the fabric of community, family, and individual identity. The movie is based on the true story of the closure of a coal mine in Yorkshire, England, and alludes to the great miners' strike ten years before in 1984, and the imprisonment of Phil, the son of Danny the conductor of the miners' brass band. The role of Danny is played by Peter Postlethwaite who makes a compelling speech in the Royal Albert Hall near the end of the movie. *Brassed Off!* was released in the United States at about the same time as another film about Britain, *The Full Monty*. The latter got all the attention and in my experience most students have never seen or heard of *Brassed Off!* and are unfamiliar with the economic program of the Thatcher administration. The context of the story provides a political, economic, and historical mix within which the organizational allegiances displayed in the movie can be identified and appreciated. Students enjoy the movie and the romance between Andy (Ewan McGregor) and Gloria (Tara Fitzgerald). More importantly, the World Café process gives them insights that they build upon in future coursework.

The Questions

These are the questions that I placed at each table for discussion by the *Brassed Off!* World Café participants. After four or five rounds, we ended the movement from table to table, listened to and viewed reports from the note-takers and facilitators, and held a whole group discussion of the experience.

- Why is Gloria Mullins fired from the band?
- Why won't Andy Barrow speak to Gloria as she leaves the hospital waiting room?
- Why can't Danny understand that if pit goes, band goes too?
- Why are some of the wives working on the campaign to keep the pit open?
- Why do the miners vote to close the pit when they said they wouldn't?
- Why does Phil's wife, Sandra, leave him?
- Why did the union leaders work to reinstate Phil ten years ago?

These questions elicit dialogues about power, economics, community, leadership, temperament,

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individuals vs. groups and vice versa, and several other aspects of the course on organizational behavior. Several times during the course of the story individuals agree to tell Danny that the band will close down if the mine closes but they never actually implement their plan. This enables a discussion of group think and individualism. In this way, I can use the examples from the movie that they all shared to illustrate several of the themes we will be covering during the semester.

Students are also required to write a paper in connection with the movie. The assignment is: "In the movie, *Brassed Off!* people belong to several organizations: the band, the mine, the town, the family, the British society and the union. What happened in the movie that resonated with you and why? What are some of the organizations to which you belong and what commitments have you made to them? How do you manage these commitments? What are the trade-offs? What are the choices?" (Syllabus).

The Results

The students in the larger class using World Café reported in course evaluations and in conversational anecdotes that they enjoyed the learning experiences in the course. They actually received higher grades in comparison to a previous smaller class. For example, there were 88% A or A- grades in the large class using World Café versus 76 % A or A- in the smaller class using Claremont dialogue. There were 8% Bs in the larger class and 15% in the smaller class. However, this data set is too small to consider whether there will be a significant difference in grade distributions in classes using the World Café and those without. The goal was to offer a look and feel of small class dialogue in a large class based on the assumption that the small class dialogue increases class participation and thereby improves understanding. While these preliminary findings suggest the goal was met and that World Café may even be better than the Claremont method, it is too early in this experiment to make that conclusion. Additional research is needed.

CONCLUSIONS

World Café adapts very well to the classroom situation and can readily be modified from dialogue around a societal or community issue to a shared experience such as a movie. The sessions are powerful experiences for the participants and enable a professor to re-create the competencies of listening and critical thinking in a large class that are usually only capable of expression within a smaller class.

In the future, I am going to use more World Cafes and develop table cards for review of concepts in the reading, for analysis of cases, and for consideration of application of course concepts to situations where the students work. I know that each student will feel that s/he was 'heard' while the World Café technique frees me from being the sole facilitator of dialogue.

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