

Pedagogical assessments and possibilities of developing World Café Method and intergenerational learning into higher education learning

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Abstract

The World Cafe Method of Pedagogical Assessment and Possibilities is frequently referred to as 'The Knowledge Cafe'. It is a structured dialogical approach to learning in which groups of people discuss a topic at many tables where students move from table to table at intervals and are introduced to a new theme of the same topic for discussion at their new table by 'a table host.' A cafe environment is created to promote conversation, facilitating new ideas and engagement together. When this is combined with intergenerational learning which promotes the inclusion of older people who themselves are not students but who wish to bring a wealth of experience, knowledge and skills based on life experiences, this becomes a truly energetic and engaging way to promote deep learning in higher education between younger students and older people. This facilitates reciprocal sharing of knowledge ,competences and skills relevant in higher education teaching and learning. In this paper the opportunities and challenges of the World Café approach in the large class context are considered.

Keywords: *World Cafe Method; intergenerational learning; large class; higher education*

1. Introduction

Today higher education has seen a significant increase in the entry rates of students to third level education. This increase in student numbers is very much welcomed as a contribution to the economic, cultural, educational and social development of countries across the world. Despite this, increased entry to tertiary education creates its own difficulties in guaranteeing high quality learning and engagement between students and lecturers. This is in particular where student numbers in large classes can potentially be an issue for the participation and quality of learning engaged between staff and students in these contexts. The need for more active engagement and student-centred learning approaches can be seen as both a challenge and an opportunity for academic staff across many universities both at national and global level. A key factor is to share these approaches and strategies so that they become a benefit for academic staff at a universal level.

A high quality democratic process to promote student engagement is The World Café Method. This is a structured dialogical process which promotes critical thinking and knowledge sharing in which groups of people discuss the same topic at different tables in the same room. It consists of each table having 'a table host' who remains at the table to take notes related to the conversation engaged at the table. In addition, the participants are invited to move from table to table while the table host remains. This allows for physical movement from one table to the next but in addition it allows participants to discuss different aspects or concepts of the same topic as they move from table to table. The act of physically moving from one table to the next ensures that participants are alert, promotes engagement of all participants and demonstrates that all voices and opinions are valued within this context of teaching and learning.

The chief role of the table host is to collect notes related to the table discussion and to share these with each group who come to the table so that they have an understanding of the topic already covered by the last group and in addition to encourage their contribution to new conversation and knowledge related to the same topic. Each group is allowed the same time. For example twelve minutes might be dedicated to each table discussion and when this time is up, the groups are advised by an overall facilitator ie teacher or lecturer to move to the next table where they begin a new discussion based on a new theme or concept. The table host reminds them of the discussion just undertaken at this table and the role of the new group is to contribute new knowledge to the topic already discussed.

A plenary discussion is provided of approximately fifteen minutes before the end of the lecture or session where all groups are invited to present the findings discussed at each table. This is usually conducted by the table host from each table who writes the key points on a flip chart and where these reflections have been designed and developed to promote further discussion and reflection on the topic. The intergenerational engagement

compliments the World Café Method by inviting retired teachers or retired experts for example to join the discussion by sharing and gathering their ideas from within each group. This is to promote critical thinking, dialogue and a solution-oriented approach together. In this way advice and wisdom from past experiences can be collated with experiences of the present to promote a solution-oriented approach for the future. This method is suitable to promote effective and high quality pedagogical practice in higher education in large class settings.

2. Methodology

Word Café Method was designed by Juanita Brown and David Isaacs in 1995 when a major corporate event hosted at their home in California was disrupted by a thunderstorm. They organised a 'café style' ambience in their home where they invited the participants to move from table to table while simultaneously gaining relevant knowledge and reflection through the sharing of key concepts, knowledge and ideas together. All participants were encouraged to both speak and listen and to write down their comments and reflections where appropriate. In World Café Method, each table can have up to twelve participants but theoretically there is no upper limit. To make this work well, it is advised that a maximum of ten participants per table can work with at least ten tables in a large room.

This allows for the participants to move on ten occasions within a two hour session. For example ten participants per table will be invited to move to the next table every ten minutes discussing a new theme related to the same topic. Twenty minutes will then be dedicated to the final plenary session at the end. In an ideal situation up to ten participants per group will be invited to move to six tables every 20 minutes for example leaving thirty minutes for a plenary session at the end. The facilitator will need to ensure good timekeeping and ease of access in a safe manner to each table while six key topics might be decided in advance to allow for discussion and critical thinking at each of the six tables. The results are noted in a common plenum session where strategies for further discussion and sharing of knowledge can be developed for the future development of key concepts. This method can be very useful for developing key concepts and in addition for assisting with writing assessments or reports when the session has ended.

3. Literature Review

Kerr (2011) states that there is an assumption that smaller classes provide better learning environments but 'finding empirical evidence for this assumption is more challenging.' Despite this, a number of studies have highlighted that increased class sizes have a negative effect on student retention. Kerr notes that one of the most critical problems faced by instructors of large classes is that students can feel isolated and anonymous to both the

instructor and to one another (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2010:273). Class size can impact directly on student engagement or disengagement. Entwistle (2010: 22) sees that to address this issues among students in higher education that research highlights that an intrinsic focus towards student learning of a particular discipline is to understand content and to develop expertise in the field. This leads to higher quality learning instead of just the attainment of qualifications.

This approach is frequently referred to as ‘deep’ learning as opposed to ‘surface’ learning (Marton, 1976). The surface approach to learning tends to be identified as memorization and reproduction of information. While deep learning encompasses a genuine motivating interest in the subject which involves critical thought, interpretation, integration of new knowledge with previous understanding, application and transfer of knowledge to new contexts and situations. World Café Guidelines by Brown and Isaacs (2005) have seven design principles to promote deep learning and critical thinking.

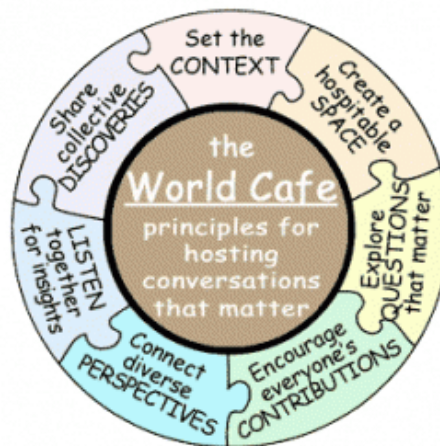


Figure 1. Seven design principles for World Café

These feature as the following (1) Set the context which focus on the reasons that a group of people have been brought together and what they want to achieve. (2) The second principle is to create a hospitable space where everyone feels safe and welcome. (3) It is important to explore the questions that matter where knowledge emerges in response to compelling questions. (4) The fourth principle is to encourage everyone’s contribution. (5) This is to connect diverse perspectives while (6) is to listen together to develop patterns and insights. The final and seventh principle is to share collective discoveries together. When these design principles are used they promote collaborative dialogue, active engagement and constructive possibilities to promote action for the future. They are especially relevant in the context of providing a solution-oriented approach to a diversity of contexts in education and in the corporate world. In this respect their transfer from a corporate

environment where they originated to an educational context is very relevant. Scheiffer, Isaacs & Gyllenpalm (2004) defined why World Café as a method is needed. They state that 'it is a user friendly method for creating meaningful and cooperative dialogue around questions that count. As an organized or social design process the World Café offers a practical way to enhance the human capacity for collaborative thought.' They believe that creating this kind of environment 'catalyzes dynamic conversations and opens new possibilities for action.' The philosophical ideas which guide the concept is that each person has his/her own interpretation of the world based on mental models constructed in his/her own reality. It is only when one's viewpoint is shared that individuals and organizations broaden their understanding of the various alternatives to action and solutions. Schieffer Isaacs & Gyllenpalm (2004) believe that World Café is 'not only a process for sharing world views but also a tool that creates the context for collective action'.

What is intergenerational learning? The European Network for Intergenerational Learning (ENIL) define this as 'the way that people of all ages can learn together and from each other. It is an important part of Lifelong Learning where generations work together to gain skills, value and knowledge. Sanchez & Kaplan (2014) in their paper on the relevance of Intergenerational Learning in Higher Education make the case for multigenerational classrooms. They see educational institutions in higher education 'both in Europe and in the United States in a context of sustained augmentation of age diversity among their students.' They argue that the greatest benefit of opening up classrooms to the expertise of older people is by inviting their opinions and ideas This the authors believe provides an opportunity so that age differences among students and instructors 'can be framed in ways that contribute to content- and- interaction- rich intergenerational teaching and learning processes.' They believe that this form of interaction creates a dynamic classroom setting and a flourishing of shared ideas and solutions through dialogue and engagement together. It should be noted, that in this context, the older generation are usually invited to provide their ideas and they are usually not seeking a degree for accreditation purpose. Instead they can be invited for the purpose of the World Café Method to share their experience and knowledge. In this way, World Café demonstrates to students that other perspectives and expertise of an older generation are welcomed and valued outside of the purpose of qualifications or accreditation.

What World Café Method has to offer within a large class context in higher education is that it provides the opportunity for students to engage in learning in a way that is meaningful and values their knowledge and reflections despite the large size of the class. Cooper & Robinson (2000) acknowledge the dissatisfaction of large class learning experiences with factors such as lack of interaction with faculty members, lack of structures

in lectures, lack of or poor discussion sessions, inadequate contact with teaching assistants, inadequacy of classroom facilities and environment, lack of frequent testing or graded assignments some of the reasons cited for dissatisfaction with large classes in their study. These are some of the reasons cited by them which makes lectures and large classes ineffective. Citing the work of McKeachie (1999), Cuseo (2007) and Costin (1972) they refer to the following as key elements of an effective lecture with large classes designed by facilitators to organise, integrate and update reading materials, model problem solving and critical thinking, demonstrate enthusiasm for the subject matter, relate course-relevant personal experiences to the students, provide contexts for issues and ideas and information introduced in the reading.

The use of Intergenerational Learning together with the World Café Method provides an opportunity to introduce a strategy to large classroom teaching that is dynamic, engaging and which draws on each student's experience and reflections to provide a deep learning experience relevant for each of them now and in the future. In addition it promotes the concept that a collective response through shared dialogue and engagement together and informed by lecture notes and resources can provide a solution-oriented approach to teaching and learning which is relevant within the classroom and also to wider world issues relevant now and in the future. For example our collective response to climate change, to world poverty; these are issues which can be introduced and addressed through the World Café Method in addition to discussion around the issue of large classes and assessments appropriate for students in higher education.

2.1. Limitations of World Café Method with Large Groups in Higher Education:

Tener (2014) outlined the benefits as well as the limitations of World Café Method. Used within large lecture settings the use is restricted because of the layout of the environment. For example large tiered classrooms provide little opportunity to create a 'round table' setting. Tener highlighted the need for a clear rationale to use this method as she says that 'some experiences were mediocre as there was not a clear reason people were put into conversation.' She also discusses that while much conversation takes place, 'often all the ideas do not get fully captured to take action.' Despite these limitations, Tener also acknowledges that World Café Method as a process is valuable. This she highlights as its ability to 'connect across siloes. For example participants can work on the same issues yet they do not get an opportunity to talk to each other. It facilitates a foundation of trust for collaboration ; it helps in 'planting seeds for new ideas' and it is a 'different way of learning.' This she attributes to the practice of 'collective learning , surfacing and synthesizing the collective experience of people in the room to gain new insight while also providing a way for individuals to learn and make unique connections' relevant to

learning. Tener refers to the limitations and the benefits of this method chiefly within a corporate context.

3. Conclusions

One of the innovative aspects of World Café Method is that it has yet to be adopted from its origin within a corporate context to a variety of educational contexts to promote deep learning and active engagement. It does bring with it the potential to add value to high quality teaching especially in large classroom contexts. The challenge for lecturers as facilitators is to be very clear in relation to the rationale for using this method as an effective teaching strategy. One way to do this is to design the overall key topic for discussion and then to break this into key sub themes so that these sub themes become the key question or the key topic for conversation at each of the tables. In this way, World Café Method facilitates the breaking down of a large topic for conversation to be divided into smaller key themes and then to be discussed together ie to build back together at the plenum discussion at the end of the session. This promotes dialogue, active engagement and shared critical thinking within a process of scaffolding both within smaller and larger groups to promote deep learning in the wider collective context of teaching and learning.

Limitations such as the lecture environment need to be taken into account but this should not prevent or limit the use of World Café Method. Where tables are not available, students can be encouraged to devise a group and to find a space within the lecture theatre where they can come together to discuss key topics and where the same rules apply for World Café Method. This is where they are instructed to move to another part of the room where the next theme can be discussed with their group. In this way the method can be as effective as if it was a group sitting around a table. The same active and democratic processes of learning apply in a variety of contexts of differing learning environments.

The World Café Method is a valuable, participatory and flexible method of learning which can be used to support deep learning especially in large classroom contexts within higher education. As Juanita Brown said ‘When we change the conversation, we change the future.’ This conversation has the potential to be transformational for every student and to develop classroom’s as communities of learning when it occurs within the process of active learning. As John Dewey said ‘give the pupils something to do not something to learn and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking; learning naturally results.’

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