The World Café in Action Research Settings

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Action research is a way of knowing rooted in engagement. This engagement derives from diverse forms of relationships, including relationships between people, and between people and places and things. What is clear is that the culture of inquiry that is action research, whatever form it takes, requires attention to the relationships that allow it to unfold.

Connected to this focus on engagement and relationships, action research has, at its heart, a participatory worldview. This is firmly expressed by Reason and Bradbury in their introductory chapter in the *Handbook of Action Research*, where they offer their working definition of action research:

> Is a participatory democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p. 1).

Foregrounding participation encourages a focus on the communication process as we build a collaborative learning agenda with our co-researchers. Yet, how we create opportunities for engaging WITH our co-researchers merits significant attention. In this chapter, we focus on a form of meeting, the World Café, that we feel fits well with the participatory worldview of action research, and which makes relationships central to its practice. The World Café's reliance on creating dynamic networks of conversation around questions that matter to communities, with its focus on co-generative learning (Elden and Levin, 1991) is a form of meeting, as collaborative inquiry, that can serve as a rich resource for action research practice.

WORLD CAFÉ IDEAS AND ORIGINS

The World Café is 'a simple yet powerful conversational process that helps groups of all sizes to engage in constructive dialogue, to build personal relationships, and to foster collaborative learning' (Tan and Brown, 2005). It is radically participative in that participants

are invited to take ownership – to participate in making meaning of – the very questions that form the basis of a World Café.

World Cafés strive to create networks of conversation in settings that invite a 'café' environment, in the sense of Oldenberg's (1999) 'third place' – a home away from home that affords comfort and engagement. World Café design enables groups to participate together in evolving rounds of dialogue with varying combinations of others while, at the same time remaining part of a single, larger, whole, to bring forth new insights into questions that deeply matter to their life, work, or community.

Consistent with forms of action research, the World Café relies on an appreciation of local knowledge (Greenwood and Levin, 2007), a feature we will emphasize in showing how the design principles play out in a particular setting, the Generation of Peace Project in Brazil.

Rather than being created from a technical-rational model, the World Café emerged from a situation that required adaptation to unforeseen circumstances. As such the very idea of learning about the World Café, particularly in action research settings, should recognize that co-evolutionary approach and ecological model of design. As the World Café emerged in conversation, we would like to present that story also in conversation.

A conversation between inquirers (co-authors) and a Café co-founder (Juanita Brown):

Juanita, how did the World Café begin?

Well, it was really a fortuitous accident.

It was Friday, January 27, 1995 – a very rainy dawn at our home in Mill Valley, California. We had 24 people arriving in half an hour for the second day of a strategic dialogue on Intellectual Capital, which my partner, David, and I were hosting in collaboration with Leif Edvinsson, who had flown in from Sweden. This was the second in a series of conversations among 'intellectual capital pioneers', including action researchers, from seven countries.

I was worried. As I set out breakfast and prepared the coffee I wondered how we'd manage if the pouring rain continued and no one could go outside on the patio to hang out on arrival. David suggested, 'Why don't we put our TV tables in the living room and just have people get their coffee and hang out around the tables while we're waiting for everyone to arrive. Then we can do our formal opening in the large circle'.

That sounded great to me. As David was putting out the small tables and vinyl chairs, our interactive graphics recorder, Tomi Nagai Rothe, arrived and said 'Those look like café tables – I think they need some tablecloths'. She put white easel sheets over each of the paired TV tables. I decided we needed flowers on the café tables, and got some small vases. In the meantime, Tomi placed crayons on each of the tables, and made a lovely sign for our front door – 'Welcome to the Homestead Café'.

Folks began to arrive. They were amused. As people got their coffee and pastries they gathered in informal groups around the café tables. Some doodled on the tablecloths. David and I huddled and decided that, rather than have a formal dialogue-circle opening, we would simply encourage people to continue to share 'what's bubbling up' from their conversations the day before about the relationship between leadership and intellectual capital.

Forty-five minutes passed and the conversation was still going strong. Someone in the room called out, 'I'd love to hear what's happening in the other conversations. Why don't we leave one host at the table and have our other members "travel" to different tables, carrying the seed ideas from their conversation and connecting with the threads that are being woven at other tables'.

The suggestion seemed like fun. After a few minutes of wrap-up, folks began to move around the room. One host remained at each table. Tablemates each went to a different café table, and the host received three new visitors, sharing what had transpired using the words and pictures left on the tablecloths.

What happened then?

This round lasted another hour. Now the room was alive!! People were engaged. Another person spoke up. 'Why don't we try a third round, now leaving a new host at the table, with the others traveling, while we continue to link what we're discovering'.

So that's how it began – the rain falling hard, people huddling around small tables, testing ideas together, adding to each others' words and images on the tablecloths. I looked up and realized that it was already close to lunchtime – time had flown by. The excitement of new discovery and mutual knowledge sharing was palpable.

You must have been really surprised at what was happening!

To be truthful, I really didn't know what was happening at that point, but I realized that the group needed to have a 'common sensing' of what they'd been discovering.

I asked the group to slowly wrap up their conversations and gather around a large piece of mural paper that Tomi had placed in the middle of our living room floor. David asked, 'What have we learned?' As I watched Tomi capture the groups' collective insights on the mural, I knew that we had accidentally 'tapped into' something very basic, that I had never actually experienced in this way in my previous collaborative dialogue work.

There was something in that living room that evoked my early years with the farmworkers movement house meetings with Cesar Chavez. The Café process had somehow enabled us to become more aware of our 'collective knowing' at increasing levels of scale, as the conversations cross-pollinated through the evolving rounds of conversation.

As the day drew to a close I said to Finn Voldtofte, a colleague from Denmark, 'Finn, we have to spend some time understanding more deeply what happened here'.

How did you begin to make sense of what had happened?

The next day we began to talk together of what we had experienced. What about the change in environment, had it contributed to the richness of the exchange?

We asked ourselves what it was about Café that evoked the collective engagement that we experienced. Did the café metaphor itself enable the quality of conversation we had experienced to emerge in a natural way? We wondered about the role of individual and collective intention, and its relationship to the collective actionable learning that seemed to envelop us.

We considered the role of questions in catalyzing collaborative thinking and actionable learning? What is the role of powerful questions that 'travel well' throughout a system?

We hypothesized about the cross-pollination of ideas that had occurred. What was important about the fact that people carried 'seeds' from one conversation to the next – noticing connections within and between conversations at increasing levels of scale?

I conjectured that perhaps the power of what happened in the café was that we were actually experiencing the world's natural self-organizing process, which continues to transform and change its shape. But as long as the intention to learn is held steady and the questions matter, then it can take many different shapes in a self-organizing way. The conversations recombine, each becoming a fractal of the larger whole.

Finn nodded excitedly, noting that cross-fertilization of insights and ideas was really at work here. He opined that it can't be predicted how that will travel throughout a World Café dialogue, but we can offer initiating conditions based on our understanding of self-organizing systems.

So, you sensed from the beginning that you'd tapped into some kind of natural way that people learn and make meaning together.

That afternoon the metaphor of World Café evolved as a core image to our emerging exploration. We felt that our living room had become a small microcosm of the world. The metaphor of the Café recalled for us the importance of people and relationships as a key to seeking and seeing new connections. It also implied to us a participatory ethic and a natural, comfortable social process of being and learning together. Writing on the tablecloths reminded us of how many new ideas and social innovations have historically been born through informal conversations in cafés, salons, and sewing circles.

It could have just ended with your own reflections that day.

Yes, but we were so curious ourselves that we began to try Café conversations in other places. We agreed to visit periodically to share our insights. I was fascinated by the patterns that we were noticing and was committed to supporting inquiry into the phenomenon we had experienced in our living room.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF A WORLD CAFÉ FOR CONTEXT SETTING

From this 'first' World Café, and subsequent research with Café hosts and participants in settings around the globe, a set of key design principles emerged to flexibly guide Café dialogues. Before presenting these design principles in the context of the Generation of Peace Project in Brazil, let's clarify how a Café dialogue unfolds.

A World Café strives to create a convivial setting with small, preferably round, tables and chairs (typically four chairs), arranged to allow for movement. To evoke images of

a café, tables often have checkered table-cloths, which are covered with white easel or butcher-block paper to afford doodling together. Bud vases with flowers may be used to enhance a café ambiance. The café begins with a welcome affirming the importance of democratic group participation and 'Café Etiquette', followed by posing of an initial question that matters to the group and is open enough for the group to 'make the question theirs'. After exploring this initial question, a 'host' stays at each table, while others move to new tables, bringing key insights from their table conversation to another. People move in several rounds of conversation from table to table cross-pollinating ideas, carrying key themes and questions into new conversations. Members continue drawing key ideas and new connections on their shared space. After several rounds, at times with a deepening question in a subsequent round, a whole-group 'harvest' begins. The wisdom of the group becomes more visible (often with the support of a graphic recorder who draws key ideas of the unfolding conversation). As plans for action emerge, participants are also encouraged to go 'meta' and reflect on their own process in addition to the content. The Café varieties are endless and innovations that embody the design principles continue to emerge (Brown and Isaacs, 2005).

A basic goal is to establish a focused and yet self-organizing process that is seen as 'not an ordinary meeting', but rather one in which the usual routines and authority structures are suspended. This freedom can feel awkward initially for participants who are expecting 'business as usual', rather than what might appear to be an open-ended task (Jorgenson and Steier, 2013), so attention must be paid to ensure that everyone's contribution is sought and valued.

At the base of this description are design principles that emerged from the initial Café and reflective conversations from subsequent Cafés. These design principles cohere with the socio-technical meta-design principle of minimal critical specifications (Herbst, 1976), where some structure is needed, but not so much as to hinder flexibility and ability to adapt to new circumstances and environments. Emanating from a living systems framework, these principles, which are developed from Brown & Isaacs (2005; see also Tan and Brown, 2005) should be understood as guides for coordinated action rather than as prescriptions for behavior.

Since the application of principles is highly contingent on the texture of the local scene, we present them in the context of a large-scale action research project, the Generation of Peace Project, in Brazil. In keeping with the conversational origins of the Café, we offer the principles in conversation with insights of practice arising from this project. By layering principles and insights in this way, we attempt to illustrate how the practice of the World Café rests on (1) a flexibility for adaptation to local situations and local knowledge, and (2) an ongoing conversation, for researcher-practitioners between design principles and local practices.

THE 'GENERATION OF PEACE' PROJECT

An action research-oriented project undertaken by the state school system of Ceara, Brazil, in cooperation with UNESCO, illustrates how the World Café design principles may play out in situations honoring local knowledge. The idea of the project, called the Generation of Peace Project (*Geração da Paz*, in Portuguese), was to build networks of a culture of peace between almost 700 high schools and their communities. The focus was on peace in a broad sense, promoting diversity and inclusion by involving 500,000 youth and their parents, as well as 16,000 teachers and school administrators in creating and maintaining a culture of peace, A guiding question, 'what is peace's face'? helped create a frame to explore peace through new metaphors. The project designers chose to make use of World Café meetings as a way to advance the project goals.

The initial Cafés produced generative themes (Freire, 1973) for conversations among the diverse array of participants. By bringing the World Café principles to a state-wide, long-term process, we found it helpful to preserve the principles of the Café, while allowing for evolution of the process. One of our discoveries was that every Café became a learning opportunity for all involved.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES IN CONVERSATION WITH LOCAL PRACTICES

With this brief background, we present seven design principles of World Café process, together with ways in which these principles have played out in the local practice of the Generation of Peace Project.

(Note that the 'we' in the illustrations in the conversation below refers to Flavio Mesquita da Silva, the Head of the project and one of our co-authors, and his Peace Project colleagues, while the 'we' in description of the principles refers to us, the authors.)

Set the context

With this first principle, the idea is to make clear the collaborative purpose of a World Café to those invited. Context-setting allows for establishing permeable boundaries within which the Café may unfold, giving participants space to make that context theirs. In other words, Café designers should strive to enable the participants to engage in the process as 'their process'. The principle recognizes that Café conversations take place in a frame that our context-setting helps to create. Yet, as Bateson (1972) notes, frames are also emergent in interaction. The perceived frame may shift over the course of a Café, requiring Café designers to be prepared to recognize multiple frames. Thus, setting the context, particularly in an action research setting, becomes an ongoing process which takes

into account the possibility that participants and hosts are in different frames (Jorgenson and Steier, 2013).

In addition, building on Bateson's (1972) idea that all utterances have both content and relationship aspects (see also Chapter 41 by Greenwood, this volume), the purpose of Café conversations can involve both exploring content AND building and maintaining collaborative relationships. Setting the context may involve a planning committee composed of people involved in the system of concern for the World Café. (Of course, the principle of setting the context also applies to the planning meeting!)

> What we learned in the Peace Project was that during all phases of its implementation, we had to make clear that the Café was not to be regarded as a 'technique' or a 'tool' that would merely facilitate the interaction between the actors in the school system. Instead, it was always meant that invitees would give their valuable contribution to the creation of networks of cultures of peace. We needed to let the tens of thousands of actors know that we valued them. Thus, more than offering the Cafés as simply the vehicle that would bring people together, we could set a context for authentic conversations. In other words, we always made sure that we sincerely expected the participants to join the process as co-creators of the Peace Project. We also realized the importance of having participants engage in the process prior to the Café, recognizing that, in a real sense, the Café begins 'before it begins'.

Create hospitable space

Café design warrants close attention to the physical and emotional space within which the Café will take place. What counts as hospitable to participants may vary across settings and across cultures. A recurring question is what kinds of physical spaces are created by our design choices for the Café – and are they felt to be hospitable by participants? It is not only the seating that is critical, but also affordances of movement as well as the symbolic valence of objects (flowers, tablecloths, music) that become part of the conversational semiotics of the

Café. The story of the original Mill Valley Café looms large here.

In the Peace Project, as with setting the context, we learned to become aware of how participants may reorganize (re-frame) the environment where the Café takes place. Our Cafés often began in the morning with breakfast. As part of the design, we requested that art by local talents (i.e. students) be presented. The nice surprise for most participants was to find such a welcoming setting created at the beginning being preserved across the day.

We chose to organize the tables in a way that did not leave much space between them, so that we provided a balance for the participants to feel both 'squeezed' and cozy at the same time. By recognizing that the relationship between teachers, students, and school managers might be tense at times, it works very well in a Brazilian setting to generate an undisciplined ambiance, perhaps a little messy one.

We have identified an interesting pattern. Whenever the participants feel the room is too tidy, they change some things around trying to 'fix' what seems to be too organized. Since we discovered this pattern, we have oriented the local organizers to arrange the room in a way that looks as much as possible as home.

Explore questions that matter

The questions posed for conversation are a critical aspect of how a Café dialogue will develop. A key idea here, from speech act theory (Austin, 1962) is the importance of paying close attention to what words DO in relationships. Questions can be heard as opening space, or as constraining it. Indeed, what might be posed as a question can, in some power-laden relationships, be heard as a command, or a critique ('how can we improve our community'? can be heard in many ways). For a Café in an action research setting, we would want the question(s) to both focus collective attention on issues that matter to the participants AND be mutable enough to allow the meaning-making of the participants to guide the unfolding conversation.

We have become increasingly aware of how hidden assumptions frame the activity for participants. For example, the above question, 'how can we improve our community'? may assume that the present community is problematic, pushing some to a more defensive posture. We might think of variations, such as 'what are many ways that our community might be (a model community)'? In addition, it is important to think about how questions can energize a group, a recognition that is also central to the work of Alfredo Ortiz Aragón and Juan Carlos Giles Macedo (Chapter 70, this volume) with their exploration of 'caffeinated' questions and social change.

In our Peace Project we have found it important for questions to create a positive, appreciative vision and hopeful image. This strategy has helped foster a context for conversations around issues participants want to support and against which they wish to fight. We found opening questions such as: *Qual é a cara da paz?* (What is peace's face?) / *De que a paz é feita?* (What is peace made of?) / *Quando a paz está presente, o que acontece?* (What happens when peace is present?) served to catalyze conversation.

We learned that people felt less emotional as they talked about violent and non-peaceful situations in their schools after having shared ideas and experiences around peace's 'face'.

We also found a need for questions to be powerful enough to travel from table to table, from one round to the next, and, in our case, from one Café to another, considering the large scope of the Peace Project. In other words, we expect – and have experienced – that people who join a subsequent Café have both their vision and understanding enabled by insights that earlier Cafés promoted.

Encourage everyone's contribution

World Café conversations are predicated on citizen power (the top of Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation), but, as with other design principles, ensuring this is an ongoing task. For example, all participants might be encouraged to also be good hosts, asking questions of each other, while valuing deep listening. The possibility for doodling or drawing with the materials provided can also be a charm for multiple forms of participation to be valued.

In the Peace Project, we found that people may feel overwhelmed or simply too excited, and this may cause a rough time between rounds, especially if

the group is large. We have found that asking a question such as 'what makes a good conversation for you'? can help set the stage for encouraging diverse forms of participation throughout a Café, allowing groups to generate their own grammar of participation, and good conversation.

We also found time to be a critical item in Cafés, and the lack of it should not compromise people's egalitarian chance of participation. Experience has taught us that it takes more time for some people to engage in conversation. Even when time has been reasonably planned for all rounds, it is important for the Café host to attend to emergent situations that might require more time in a specific moment – to be able to reflect-in-action (Schön, 1983).

Cross-pollinate and connect diverse perspectives

Based on the principles of living system dynamics, encourage all to offer their unique contributions, to bring the ideas that emerged at their previous 'session' to the next, and to fully appreciate the emergence of the new through intentionally increasing the diversity of connections among perspectives, while retaining a common focus on core questions. These core questions may even evolve as the interactions occur adding more meaning and increasing the possibilities of more insights.

In our Peace Project, we found it important to realize the desired interconnectivity applies to perspectives as well as to participants. We found it important to allow each group to decide the paths that best fit their conversation – while some groups might approach the questions from a broad perspective, others might choose to focus more on detail.

As in context-setting, diversity among the participants is important – the more diverse the group is the more perspectives are possible. We have learned to acknowledge that a good host will fully represent her group's contributions while gracefully welcoming the new stories that arrive at her table. By doing so, the host helps raise the level (of awareness, of enthusiasm) of the conversations as tables' stories meet one another.

Methodologically, we have found that it helps to encourage the participants to use the markers to draw important thoughts. In the Peace Project Cafés, we have also encouraged use of other materials, such as pictures from magazines that helped

create other forms for participants to depict their perceptions of who they are, who they want to be and what they are willing to build together. So, when participants visit other tables, besides listening to the host's story, both will exchange not only meaning, but also an image of their desired scenarios. For example, we asked participants to create a poster that would be hung on their school's front door, displaying their vision and mission statement. This process enabled tables to create a different means – an image – to visually communicate the Peace Project's goals. As new groups formed at each round, different images emerged.

Cross-pollination may occur in many ways and it was interesting to note how groups later added the ability to connect diverse perspectives to their understanding of what makes a good conversation. In the Peace Project this learning manifested itself, in new language and new exploratory ways of collaborating about the topics at the core of their conversations.

Listen together for patterns, insights and deeper questions

Encourage members to look for what Bateson (1979) referred to as the patterns that connect, as well as to explore underlying assumptions. Holding the tension between nurturing collective thought on one hand while honoring individual contributions on the other becomes key.

In the Peace Project, we found it helpful to ask participants to connect things that might at first seem unrelated, inviting participants to be systems thinkers. This led to reflections on the diversity of worldviews that should be welcomed in a process of co-creation such as the Peace Project. We have learned to ask participants to focus on coherence of ideas without losing individual contributions, a systemic unity-in-diversity.

In the regional Cafés, for example, we have found that participants have, in the act of looking for deeper patterns, brought in the perspectives of others who might not be present – what an under-represented social group should say? What might the university (that has not been included in most of the conversations) say? We have even on occasion supplied extra chairs to symbolize the absent voices that allow for exploration of deeper patterns and to afford a mélange of contents, experiences, and meanings. Our reflections on the importance of empathy, hope and solidarity as forces that can expand our reach towards absent

others helped us realize that we should find ways to bring them into the conversations as legitimate others (Maturana and Varela, 1987). And that is what we did in subsequent Cafés.

At another level, given the action research nature of the project, we found it important to link each Café to a next one, noting what themes were critical to participants. We tried to bring them, by way of new questions, for example, to future Cafés, creating a meta-dialogue of deeper patterns across Cafés.

Harvest and share collective discoveries

Make emergent knowledge and insight visible and actionable. The Café process is designed to appreciate the collective contribution to what is created, and to create space to reflect on this during a 'whole group conversation' toward the end of a Café. Harvesting can then become a springboard for new perspectives, as hosts encourage participants to connect the emergent meaning and purpose to a commitment to action.

In the Peace Project, this is the principle that we have perhaps learned the most about from our participants. One key insight that we gained concerned the hard work involved in holding to the democratic forms of participation, as with the hierarchies involved (teachers and students), it is very easy to slip back into pre-Café forms of relationship, disqualifying emergent ideas. Encouraging participants to see World Café knowledge as produced in relationships has become crucial.

WELCOME TO THE WORLD CAFÉ: BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME

In keeping with the systemic nature of the World Café, the design principles must be understood as forming an integrated whole. As we saw in the Generation of Peace Project, hosts need to think about how the principles interconnect in each local setting, and how the participants can contribute to those connections. In this sense the World Café fosters both a landscape (and

soundscape) of 'at-homeness' (Seamon, 1979) in that the design principles collectively provide for a common ground for participants (including hosts) but do not strictly regulate them/us.

We might also ask not what we get out of it, but, rather, where is this taking us. That distinction became clear with the Generation of Peace Project, as the emphasis on the practice, rather than a strict instrumentality of Café conversations became clear, with a key feature of the practice being the cultivation of the voices of all. Hosting in a World Café means mindfully paying attention to the energy in the room, and acting as a reflective practitioner, with a readiness to embrace and adapt to local ways of knowing, rather than simply following a script. This cultivation, which may emerge at tables, or in the flow between tables, can even extend to how we, as hosts (evoking action research ideas of first, second and third person perspectives) learn about our own World Café design principles through their practice in local settings.

The World Café, from its original story to the present, relies on improvisation and learning-through-use, and is continuously evolving. We invite readers who make use of the practice of World Cafés in diverse action research settings, to contact us and continue the conversation – particularly about ways in which our own assumptions may be open to surprise.

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