

World Cafe

World Cafe is a way to bring people together in simultaneous rounds of conversation about questions that matter. Participants start a conversation with people at their host table and move to other tables to continue the conversation with different people. The more conversations they share, the broader their perspective becomes and the more likely they are to understand new ideas. Towards the closing stages of a World Cafe, people move back to their host table and share their experiences, new insights and understanding. The process was developed by Juanita Brown and David Isaacs after observing how groups of people naturally converse with one another. Although World Cafe is informal in presentation it is underpinned by the following seven principles:

- 1** **A clear context for the conversation**
- 2** **Creation of a hospitable space to talk together**
- 3** **Questions that matter and you don't already have the answers to**
- 4** **Encouraging contributions by everyone**
- 5** **Connection of diverse viewpoints**
- 6** **Listening together for insights**
- 7** **Sharing collective discoveries**

What is to be achieved?

World Cafe is designed to bring people together to explore/understand issues and to surface areas of commonality/divergence with the aim of establishing a way forward in decision making. It can be used to bring people together who do not regularly mix such as:

- Health consumers from across South Australia in a conversation to explore changes to the healthcare provision; or
- Business groups in a conversation to explore the challenges facing employers and to propose action strategies for further consideration.

World Cafe is less suitable for groups of people who are highly vulnerable (victims of domestic violence, refugees), or groups with poor language skills or speech and hearing disabilities, or mixed groups with different languages.

What is the format?

A World Cafe conversation is based around posing a question that matters to groups of people seated at tables of between 4 – 8 people. A lead facilitator sets the context for the conversation, establishes the ground rules and introduces the question. A single well considered and structured question encourages participants to deeply explore a topic. After a period of time (between 10 – 20 minutes for a 90 minute session) some of the participants from each table move to another table so they can converse with different people.

Depending on the complexity of the question, a World Cafe can vary in length from one hour to several days depending on the overall purpose for the conversation. For example, a World Cafe may be conducted during a two to three hour morning session to uncover underlying issues for action planning at an afternoon workshop, or in preparation for a deliberative panel process conducted over a number of weekends. A series of cafes may be conducted over a period of weeks to work through a number of complex issues with diverse groups of people.

On-line use of the tool?

World Cafes can be conducted on-line using available information technology such as Skype as a basic tool to a more sophisticated tool such as [weDialogue](#). Feedback from participants who have participated in international on-line cafes indicate the conversations are still rich and enlightening. The main drawback is the challenge of using technology with varying broadband widths affecting reception.

What to consider?

Consider the following when selecting the question for a World Cafe

Consider the following when selecting the question for a World Cafe:

1. It needs to be an open question to encourage open conversation
2. Set the scope of the question to be about “you/we/they”, for example, “What challenges do you face in your work” will generate a different conversation to “What challenges do they (eg. management) face in their work”
3. Assumptions based on your own beliefs and values are best left out of the question, eg. “Why do homeless people not keep themselves cleaner?”

Consider how much Space you need for people to move around

World Cafes need lots of space to enable people to move from table to table easily, and the tables need to be far enough apart so the conversations at the different tables do not drown one another out

Hosts at each table to meet your guests

A host is needed at each table to greet new people as they arrive during the moves and to summarise talking points from a previous conversation before the conversations resumes. Asking members of the public to act as a table host limits their contribution to the conversations and depending on their capacity it may be asking a lot to expect them to deal with any tension that might arise at the table – even if it is to request help from a lead facilitator. It is worthwhile training staff as table hosts or calling for members of the public to act as hosts and provide training for them

Lots of marker pens for recording notes

The note taking philosophy of World Cafe is that participants record their own notes with marker pens on paper covering the table like a tablecloth. Generally people are not used to doing the recording at community meetings and they need lots of encouragement and reminders to do it. Hosts can record dot points or ask other people at the table to make notes about things they want captured from the conversations

Its about letting everone convey their ideas

Any group of people being brought together in a collective conversation need to agree on a few ground rules for how they will behave together. World Cafe etiquette or ground rules are introduced by the lead facilitator and may be restated by the table hosts. They include listening to understand and not interrupting, treating one another with respect, and contributing ideas

How to use the World Cafe tool?

Before the session

- determine the purpose for holding the World Cafe
- hire a facilitator and organise training for table hosts
- workshop the question or questions with the facilitator, organising staff and key stakeholders
- select a venue, date and decide on the format for the World Cafe
- promote the session outlining the context and providing basic information about the process
- manage registrations, organise catering and venue arrangements, set up venue
- place paper and pens, handout materials and table etiquette list or ground rules on tables
- brief the table hosts and answer any questions they may have

During the session

- the lead facilitator welcomes everyone, sets the context for the session, introduces the World Cafe etiquette or ground rules, presents the topic question and invites everyone to enter into the conversation at their tables
- the table hosts invite everyone to introduce themselves and then begin the conversation
- after a period of time the lead facilitator rings a bell to indicate it is time for people to move randomly to another table
- after a number of rounds, participants return to their original tables and share what they have heard and learned
- to share what has come out of the conversations, each table group may present a key statement/insight/idea or every participant at a table may write down 1-3 things that came out of the conversation for them. Use a visual display or arrange them on a sticky wall in themes – the sticky wall option is visually powerful and accessible; and it avoids the “groan zone” that can occur when groups restate every word verbatim from their notes with no summary or convergent views

After the session

- gather all the recorded information from the session and write up the notes
- distribute a summary of the notes to participants, staff/management, key stakeholders
- facilitate a debrief with support staff and key stakeholders

Resource Required?

- a lead facilitator
- table hosts and/or note takers (depending on the group)
- spacious venue with wall space for “sticky walls” (sheets of fabric coated with adhesive to stick notes on)
- round tables of between four to eight people (many organisers choose to make the venue look like a cafe with flowers on the tables)
- pens and paper tablecloths or flipchart paper and “post it” notes for participants to write on
- water on tables for participants
- catering
- data projector, laptop, screen
- etiquette list / ground rules on the tables and posted around the room

How to Evaluate?

- ask participants for verbal feedback at the end of the session or invite them to complete a written evaluation form
- contact participants after the session and ask for feedback
- debrief with the lead facilitator, table hosts and supporting staff and use feedback to make improvements to future sessions
- review the response to the topic question
- measure the effectiveness of the process for identifying common themes, areas of divergence or specific actions

Case Study – Partnering with Carers Policy Directive

SA Health worked with Carers SA and Health Consumers Alliance SA to develop the new Partnering with Carers Policy Directive in consultation with carers to reflect the priorities and needs of carers and establish principles and standards.

A range of consultative methods were undertaken in developing the policy,

including social media, and a World Café event “SA Health Carers Engagement Forum” which was held on 30 September 2014. The forum brought together carers from across South Australia to gather input on their priorities and to explore what was important to them.

<http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au>

Tips and helpful hints

Lead facilitator	The lead facilitator needs to listen for the ebb and flow of conversation and time the table moves to maintain the energy in the room
Negative behaviour	If there is any negative behaviour among participants, table hosts may refer everyone to the ground rules and redirect the conversation by doing a brief summary of the thoughts and ideas already shared, or raise a hand to request support from the lead facilitator
Face to face conversations	Round tables help with face to face conversations and you may choose to set the room up like a cafe with for example flowers on the tables
Less people turn up	Be prepared to adjust the number of people at each table if more or less people turn up than you expected
Recording ideas	Get table hosts to hand pens to people and ask them to record their views on the paper
Role of the host	If staff take on the role of host, remind them to stay in the role and not take on the role of advisor/director
Read the signs	Some people take a while to feel comfortable enough to contribute to the conversation - look for signs that someone is ready to contribute such as taking a deep breath, moving forward, raising a finger, squaring their shoulders
Invitations	Inviting people to a World Cafe may sound a bit too obscure for some people so it is good practice to frame the invitation around the context for the conversation such as “A community conversation about health and wellbeing”; or to add something like “World Cafe: A place for a community conversation about health and wellbeing”

Support References

Cafe To Go www.theworldcafe.com

Publication *The World Cafe: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter*,
Juanita Brown and David Isaacs, 2005