



ON CONVERSATION AND COLLECTIVE QUESTIONING: THEORY AND PRACTICE OF THE WORLD CAFÉ

BY ALAN STEWART



**The World Café:
Shaping Our Futures
Through
Conversations
That Matter**
by Brown, Isaacs, et al.

Are you looking for new approaches to address questions that matter to your organization or group so that what emerges is likely to be purposeful and useful action? *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter* (Berrett-Koehler, 2005), coauthored by Juanita Brown, David Isaacs, and an array of collaborators, is a compendium of experience, stories, insights, wisdom, practical tips, and resources from many sources that will greatly extend your perspective on the importance of conversation as a core process in our lives and work.

The World Café is an innovative approach to large-group dialogue that has been widely adopted around the world. In this process, groups—often numbering in the hundreds of people—participate together in evolving rounds of dialogue at small café-style tables while at the same time remaining part of a single, larger, connected conversation. Participants record key insights in words and pictures on paper tablecloths. Intimate conversations link and build on each other as people move between groups, cross-pollinate ideas, and discover new insights into questions or issues that are important in their life, work, or community. As the network of connections increases, knowledge sharing grows. The collective wisdom of the group becomes more accessible, and

innovative possibilities for action emerge.

Sounds simple? It is, and yet there is a depth of living systems theory and experience that underpins the successful operation of Café processes and influences what emerges from their use. This philosophical framework is woven throughout the book and is what distinguishes the World Café from many other conversational approaches.

Beginnings

In an early chapter, co-author David Isaacs relates the story of the origins of the World Café. On a rainy day in January 1995, a group gathered at a home in San Francisco as part of an ongoing session to explore a particular question. To create a welcoming environment, the organizers hurriedly brought out T.V. tables, festooning each with a large sheet of paper, crayons, and a small vase of flowers.

When people arrived, they sat in informal groups around the tables and immediately started talking about the question they had been addressing the day before. As people traveled from table to table to share ideas—something that one of the participants had suggested—Juanita and David noticed a palpable energy in the room that they had never experienced before. Later, they joined with others to reflect on the conditions that led people to engage with each other so spontaneously, naturally, and in such depth in that setting.

In their subsequent research with Café hosts and participants around the world, Juanita and her colleagues have discovered a set of principles that underpin the practice of a successful World Café:

1. Set the Context
2. Create Hospitable Space
3. Explore Questions That Matter
4. Encourage Everyone's Participation
5. Cross-pollinate and Connect Diverse Perspectives
6. Listen Together for Insights, Patterns, and Deeper Questions
7. Harvest and Share Collective Discoveries.

Much of the book is devoted to exploring the precise meaning and implication of these principles. Each chapter begins with a quotation, an illustration, and a question. These are followed by personal stories of Cafés in action, guidelines, Juanita's perspectives, and questions for reflection.

For example, "Connecting the Parts and the Whole: The Financial Planning Association" illustrates the spirit reflected in the case studies and describes just one of the creative ways in which groups have started to apply the principles. In this section, Kim Porto and Sean Walters describe an innovation they have invented for harvesting and sharing individual and collective discoveries from the Café process: what they call the Gallery Walk. During a Café, facilitators collect and post emerging questions; participants then walk from question to question, adding their comments and insights on sticky notes. According to Kim and Sean, "One of the aspects we think makes this particular approach to whole-group synthesis so engaging and useful is that people have control over what they contribute . . . each person gets the opportunity (and has the responsibility) to contribute exactly what is most meaningful to him or her, and

put it exactly where he or she feels it best fits in the overall synthesis.”

At the Core

This case study extends some of the ideas put forth in the book’s Foreword, written by Margaret Wheatley. Meg says, “The World Café process reawakens our deep species memory of two fundamental beliefs about human life. First, we humans want to talk together about things that matter to us. In fact this is what gives satisfaction and meaning to life. Second, as we talk together, we are able to access a greater wisdom that is found only in the collective.”

Thus, the essence of this book is the observation that whenever people converse and treat each other well in the course of addressing questions that matter, they are likely to achieve constructive outcomes. If you are familiar with the work of Humberto Maturana, you will not be surprised to learn that the authors reference it in several places. Juanita speaks eloquently about coming to recognize, through Maturana’s work, that “Conversation is our human way of creating and sustaining—or transforming—the realities in which we live.” Looking through this lens, she became aware of what key thinkers were saying about what happens when people feel secure and respected for expressing what they think is important. Juanita also came to understand that conversation is at the center of a wide range of fields that are integral to our everyday lives, such as strategy, information technology, conflict resolution, and global affairs.

One of the main components of conversation is listening. The book includes numerous references to how Café processes promote attentive

listening—and how this process affects both speaker and hearers. A poignant comment by Lloyd Fell illustrates.

When he was present at his first Café, he felt “a tremendous wave of energy . . . right across the room. It was as if something had suddenly been unleashed by the invitation to speak freely in the more intimate setting of the café tables.” Lloyd also noted his feeling of being heard. “I am never the first to enter into a group conversation, but I found myself listening with interest and beginning to feel that I wanted to join in. After a time I did and the respect with which my words were treated had a warmth and friendliness about it that I have never experienced at a meeting.”

The Café process also highlights the importance of questioning. Questions are the trigger for inclusive, respectful, purposeful, and animated conversing. The book is rife with examples of powerful questions, such as “What could a good school also be?” or Hewlett-Packard’s famous “How can we be the best industrial research lab *for* (instead of *in*) the world?” One of the key lessons from the Café is that genuine questions, questions to which we don’t know the answers, release energy in a way that focusing on “problems” or “answers” never could.

Creating Life-Affirming Futures

In addition to providing guidelines for action in our organizations and groups, this book’s most important contribution may lie in the insights it offers on how we may begin to address some of the global issues that have come into our consciousness in recent years. With regard to this big picture, the authors state, “Our deeper

intention in a Café conversation is for people to experience themselves being an integral part of a living web/network of *relational* thinking and of experiencing conversation itself as a co-evolutionary force for accessing co-intelligence on behalf of life-affirming futures and the conscious evolution of social systems.” Could the Café process contribute by helping people everywhere see themselves as being interconnected cells in a complex organism, with all the duties and rights of an individual as well as the concomitant responsibilities for the health of the greater whole?

In his Afterword, Peter Senge shares that the power and potential of the “collective creativity” that arises in World Café conversations is seldom realized in most of our daily conversations—yet! He characterizes the ways in which we currently express our needs as “being too small, too self-centered, too disconnected from the desires of others.” But using Café and other dialogue processes to expand our global vision and collectively address bigger questions could create a world engaged in conversations on questions that have real heart and meaning for us all—one conversation at a time. The prospects of such a dream coming to life—through the creation of intentional contexts such as Café conversations and other forms of dialogue—are much enhanced by the availability of this book. ■

Alan Stewart, Ph.D., refers to himself as a “professional conversationalist”—a facilitator of collaborative conversational processes. His report on a public consultation that he hosted for a local council in Australia has drawn wide interest (www.theworldcafe.com/storyconversing.html). Alan has been a Senior Fulbright Scholar at Stanford University. He is now promoting what he calls “Qin Tan Conversation,” or “Pure Talk,” in Hong Kong, where he now resides. For more information, go to www.creativestate.biz.

