



THE WORLD CAFÉ GOES LOCAL: A TOWN PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

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On the evening of February 27, 2008, the town of Reading, Massachusetts (population 23,708) held its first World Café conversation. The event, open to anyone who lived or worked in Reading, attracted about 220 participants, including high school students, senior citizens, business-people, representatives from cultural, religious, and other non-profit institutions, volunteers, activists, and residents who had never been involved in local activities before. People new to Reading and life-long octogenarian residents alike were all present to talk about what they wanted for the future of their community.

To our knowledge, no other Massachusetts municipality has hosted a World Café or similar process. We believe, however, that this kind of community-wide conversation offers valuable benefits to cities and towns that wish to increase civic engagement and qualitative community input in planning for the future, particularly during a time of stagnant budgets, escalating costs, competing special interests, contentious public discourse, and dwindling public participation. We offer the story of our process—how the Reading World Café came

together and the outcomes that resulted—to illuminate the practical role of inclusive conversation as a means of identifying priorities and building systemic support in community governance.

Why a World Café

It started in June 2007 in a kitchen, where a handful of people met to talk about the possibility of hosting a community-wide conversation about the future of Reading. The group was drawn to this idea for a number of reasons.

Reading has a strong history of community involvement. In addition to local governance boards, committees, and representative town meeting, Reading boasts dozens of volunteer organizations dedicated to schools, environmental activism, social services, charity, arts and culture, religious pursuits, and neighborly networking. However, these groups generally operate independent of one another, focusing only on their perceived sphere of influence. The folks around the kitchen table were attracted to the potential in all that divergent volunteer energy, asking “How can we as a community align ourselves to define the collective future of Reading?”

The idea greatly interested Pat Schettini, superintendent of Reading Public Schools, who had come to this initial meeting excited to consider that question. “Given the strong community involvement we’ve seen in the past, hosting an open, expansive community dialogue about the future sounded doable,” commented Schettini. “Yet I

have seen many public discussions deteriorate and polarize in the face of controversy and strong opinions—to the point where folks were no longer listening to or learning from each other. I am interested in encouraging more inclusive and courteous discussions to determine what is important to this town.”

Over the past several years, the

Reading community had experienced its share of conflict over a number of local issues, including commercial development proposals, interstate highway projects, redistricting for elementary and middle schools, budget allocations, tax

overrides, and the town’s water supply. Passions over these issues tended to run high, and the discussions often led to debates and even shouting matches; dialogue was scarce. A recent rezoning controversy concerning a retail development had become heated. “I think the debate became so volatile because as a community we hadn’t really explored what our future could be,” observed Priscilla Hollenbeck, one of the original conversation organizers. “We had to take a step back and consider, if not this, then what do we want as a community? We needed to heal the divisiveness and focus on a common vision.” The people gathered around the kitchen table thought the World Café might be a way to do so.

Previous efforts to engage community members in broader thinking had met with limited success. For example, Reading had recently finalized its 10-year master plan, a document that identified more than 150



TEAM TIP

Following the lead of the Reading World Café organizers, pay careful attention to gaining buy-in from stakeholder groups for any new initiative.

projects and actions for the town to undertake. Despite the best efforts of the master plan committee to draw citizens to any number of public meetings, this process drew little community input. As a result, the town manager and board of selectmen had only limited data on community interests to consider when developing priorities. In addition, the school district had completed its District Improvement Plan, which also contained many recommendations and objectives that reflected the best efforts of a relatively small number of dedicated residents.

It became clear to those who met that morning in June that hosting a World Café conversation could have tremendous benefit to the community, not only because of the potential for collecting qualitative data about what people cared about, but also because of the positive, collaborative experience the community could have by talking about their future together. “The hope was that we would get a sense of what the community valued most as part of the World Café conversation process,” reflected school committee member Elaine Webb. “The data generated will be valuable in helping those of us charged with implementing these plans prioritize our next steps.”

As with all things new, the approach was not without risk. Whether real or perceived, the possibility that the event could fail and make matters even worse was an underlying concern. Luckily, one of the initial organizers was an experienced facilitator who utilized similar processes in her consulting work, and she was able to bring her experience to the group of eager enthusiasts.

How It All Came Together

While the idea to host this event began with just a few people, over the course of the eight months it took to implement the World Café, the concept captured the interest and curiosity of many others. The first step for the organizers was to attract “Supporters” to draw participants to the Café. Once engaged, these individuals and organizations would help promote the event and ensure a diverse representation of perspectives.

Armed with a date, a venue, and a list of resources needed, the planning team organized an informational meeting in October 2007. They invited representatives from every group and organization they could think of. The team chose to use the introductory meeting to run a mini-version of the World Café so those in attendance could experience the conversation process for themselves. During this recruitment workshop, the participants were asked to share their perspectives on the questions: “What do I value about this community? What would make this community stronger and more connected?”

“I was pleasantly surprised,” remarked Selectman James Bonazoli of the conversation experience. “I had anticipated there being some kind of hidden agenda or ulterior motive involved, but the conversations were authentic and energizing. I really enjoyed hearing what people had to say.”

Curiosity among a broader group for what might come of a Reading World Café had been sparked. Over

the course of the next several months, the planning team worked to build the list of Supporters, meeting with many different organizations to gain formal and informal sponsorship for the event.

Early on, the team discovered it was important to list the essential questions and trajectory for the Café conversation on all marketing materials in order to clarify intentions and keep the process transparent. Accordingly, they developed a logo, an FAQ, press releases, and promotional flyers. With the help of early Supporters, the Reading World Café developed a website (www.readingworldcafe.org) and an online RSVP process. They enlisted volunteers to manage communications, set up and break down the venue, and supply refreshments and entertainment during the reception hour. They recruited a visual recorder willing to capture the event graphically, and contacted the local newspapers and community television network (see “Questions to Consider”).

“Many people are asking, what will happen at the World Café? What will come of it?” noted school committee

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Because the World Café process was new and unusual, many were unsure and even suspicious about its capabilities. The planning committee had to reckon with the following questions to ensure a high-quality event.

- **What if people have a difficult time understanding what the World Café is?** How do you get them to participate? We found it important to distinguish the World Café process from the kinds of public forums that people had attended in the past, and make the information about the process transparent and accessible. The planning team created a website, drafted an FAQ, spoke at dozens of meetings, ran a panel discussion on community access TV, sent out press releases, made personal calls, and used the connections and networks of the event Supporters to disseminate information.
- **How does this differ from formal decision-making processes?** This was perhaps the most difficult question to answer and required active support from the board of selectmen, school committee, town manager, and superintendent of schools. The message that this process was not in lieu of official decisions, but rather a complement to them, had to be reinforced on a regular basis.
- **Who needs to be involved?** The planning team sought as many local organizations, community leaders, and businesses as possible to support the event. The goal was to attract folks across a broad spectrum in interests, values, and perspectives. The team created categories of support with different levels of commitment to make it easier for groups to sign on.
- **How difficult is it to organize a World Café conversation?** The World Café organization is a great resource for groups that would like to host a community conversation (www.theworldcafe.com). Their website offers instructions, supplies, and case studies. We found it helpful to have the aid of a person experienced in this style of communication to lead the effort.

member David Michaud, during an interview on Reading Community Television. “The fact is no one really knows—it is all part of the mystique and excitement of expansive, collaborative conversation. In the end, however, I believe it will be the experience we have together that matters most.”

The Reading World Café Event

The evening of February 27, 2008 began with a half hour reception in the entrance hall to the high school field house. It didn’t snow until 11:00 that evening—a blessing in New England! Inside the field house itself, 45 round tables, each with five chairs, were covered with large sheets of plain paper and cups of colored markers. A projection screen was positioned so that people seated at the tables could see the questions on slides (see “The World Café in Action”). Participants arrived curious about what exactly they had signed up for.

Over the course of two and a half hours, the crowd participated in four rounds of conversation. Participants were invited to be “courteous and curious” during their conversations, and a “recorder” for each table was asked to keep records of what was discussed on the sheets of paper. The questions used that night allowed participants to explore what they valued most about Reading and what possibilities they hoped would be a part of the town’s future. Between rounds, all participants except the recorders were asked to move independently to other tables. The movement encouraged divergence and infused each table with new perspectives at each round.

At the end of the evening, the participants were asked to capture on large sticky notes (one idea per note) their ideas about Dreams, Opportunities, Dilemmas, and Next Steps. Notes were collected and posted on large templates located in the front of the room for all to see. The notes were later transcribed and published on the Reading World Café website. The templates and graphic recording remained on display at the Reading Public Library for the following month (see “The Future and What We Want”).

Closing comments shared in the plenary revealed that people felt energized, connected, and inspired. “I loved being included in this process,” offered a teenaged girl. “It felt really good to have the adults in this town listen to what we kids have to say.” “I felt so respected by the people here,” added a young parent. “I am proud to be a member of this community.”

The World Café process gave town officials data that was of a higher quality than what might have come from focus groups or surveys.

The energy level of individuals that night was positive and uplifting. The town administrators collected an armload of forms with names, contact information, and stated interest in following up on outcomes. When people reluctantly left the venue at the end of the evening, they were eager to know when the results would be available and when another World Café could be scheduled.

Outcomes

Members of the planning team organized and summarized the results of the World Café conversation. Overall, the sticky notes indicated that residents and business people wanted a richer community experience. There was a strong interest in:

- Increased community diversity
- Multigenerational spaces
- Ways and places to come together to learn and celebrate
- A downtown area as a focal point for community connection through social gathering spots, a community or cultural arts center, and more restaurants
- Accessible outdoor space ranging from sidewalks and walking paths to more usable open spaces and parks
- Public efforts to go “green” and become more environmentally friendly
- Increased communication and better use of the town website, including a community calendar

These thoughts and suggestions were sprinkled throughout the four

templates, taking the form of broad hopes, concrete suggestions to capitalize on community strengths, practical challenges such as funding and low public participation, and actual steps that could be taken to increase communication and idea implementation.

“It is clear to me that people want more information about what is happening in the community,” acknowledged school committee member Lisa Gibbs. “And they definitely want the results of this conversation acknowledged and used by the governing bodies. Those of us who are local officials also need to make it clear how valuable this kind of feedback is.”

The World Café process gave town officials data that was of a higher quality than what might have come from focus groups or surveys, because it was the result of an explorative conversation between people interested in the community. People had time to listen to each other as well as express their ideas before converging on concrete suggestions. As a result, the suggestions spoke to a deeper need for strong community and a quality of life that might not be as evident in results from anonymous surveys or small focus groups.

Much of the data collected that evening was not a surprise to local decision makers; they had heard these perspectives before. Nonetheless, the Café event helped to reinforce and validate those issues, and provided great assistance in prioritizing them. Town officials responsible for setting community goals and program initiatives can establish priorities confident of the support from a broad cross-section of the community. The ability to proceed with the “wind at one’s back” versus anticipating public inertia or resistance can be highly motivating for the volunteers who hold these important positions.

Town officials are not the only ones who benefit from the data; other community organizations are also privy to the collective perspectives, desires, and concerns of the participants. This information can inform direction, mission, and collaborative efforts. For example, the event spurred discussions between a local bank with

THE WORLD CAFÉ IN ACTION



The Reading high school field house was the setting for the World Café.

excess property in the downtown area and an umbrella cultural group that has been seeking space for a performing arts center.

In addition, participants connected with others in their community who share an interest in Reading's future, and they were able to influence the shape of that future. Perspectives were altered; new insights gleaned. "I have always felt I needed to advocate passionately for the environment," commented one participant after the conversation event. "I was really struck at how easily the idea of 'going green' took hold without my expending all that energy; and I was able to listen to others in a new way."

Finally, participants and the community organizations learned a new way of communicating, or perhaps, discovered the lost art of communication. In Reading, the World Café has

become a lexicon for inclusive, respectful dialogue that has spread throughout the town, cropping up in church gatherings, official committee meetings, and the Substance Abuse Prevention program; it has become the methodology of choice for community conversation.

A Valuable Step

The World Café process can be a valuable step between community involvement and formal decision making. When held in a productive manner that expands creative thinking, increases interaction, and affords a safe, inquisitive environment, conversations about important questions in which everyone has a stake can provide qualitative data for decision makers as well as invite a more collaborative and inclusive form of civic engagement. Taking time to discover collective perspectives and

desires—without the pressure of an imminent decision—permits the emergence of new possibilities, reduces resistance, and creates a shared experience that can fuel the courage needed to face an uncertain future.

In the words of 10-year-old Madeline Hollenbeck, who observed the event, "I liked Reading World Café because it was important. It was a chance for all of Reading to get together and speak out about what was on their mind. It was helpful to the community because it made people think about things that they may have never thought about before. If more people work together on something they agree needs work, it will get done quicker. And afterward everybody can admire what they've accomplished together." ■

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THE FUTURE AND WHAT WE WANT



A visual recorder captured the event graphically.