
Hosting a World Café: experiences at the National University of Ireland Maynooth

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INTRODUCTION

A World Café, sometimes called a knowledge café, is defined by Wikipedia as 'a type of business meeting or organisational workshop which aims to provide an open and creative conversation on a topic of mutual interest to surface their collective knowledge, share ideas and insights, and gain a deeper understanding of the subject and the issues involved'.

This article describes a world café organised by the library at National University of Ireland Maynooth. Following some brief background information, the process is outlined. We hope the article will give an insight into the process and be of use to those exploring creative ways to engage people around a topic.

BACKGROUND / CONTEXT

The library at NUI Maynooth carried out a comprehensive organisational review between December 2010 and summer 2013. This was a period of significant change, with a major extension to the building completed during the period. The project board managing the organisational review (four library staff and a representative from Human Resources) organised a World Café to elicit ideas on how we could move forward with an organisational structure that reflected current and projected needs and developments. The library has a vast range of skills and knowledge and an experienced, dedicated staff, and we

wanted to harvest our collective wisdom. This was one of a number of interconnected activities to engage staff in the organisational review. The two authors of this paper were members of the Organisational Review Project Board. We worked with the University Staff Development Officer to design and co-ordinate the Café.

BACKGROUND TO THE WORLD CAFÉ CONCEPT

The World Café concept was developed in California in 1995, when 24 business and academic leaders got together for a meeting. They spontaneously formed small groups around tables and began to explore the questions that had brought them together, recording their insights on paper tablecloths. People moved between tables so that ideas and insights could circulate and be explored in different groups. They found this enriched the conversation. They came up with innovative ideas, learning together in a more engaging and participative way than in traditional meetings. Harvesting the notes from the paper tablecloths, they noticed emerging patterns in their thinking, and this gave more ideas for moving forward. Thus the World Café was born.

HOW A WORLD CAFÉ WORKS

The World Café operates on seven principles:

- it must have a clear purpose;
- it must be hosted in a pleasant space;
- it must address questions that matter to participants;
- everybody's contribution must be valued;
- it connects diverse viewpoints;
- people listen together for insights and discoveries;
- participants share collective discoveries.

The dialogue in a World Café centres on questions, which need to be worded in a positive manner and be relatively open in order to elicit real discussion. Two to three questions is generally the maximum used.

The questions NUI Maynooth library selected were:

- *A new structure in the library brings challenges and opportunities. What are they?*
- *What do we need to enable us to make the new structure work for library staff and users?*

THE ROLES IN A WORLD CAFÉ

There are certain roles within the World Café model. Below is an outline of our model.

- The **Café convenor** is the person / group who invites people to participate. Here the convenor was the Organisational Review Project Board.
- The **design team** take responsibility for the design and implementation of the world café. The two authors (both members of the Library Organisational Review Project Board) and the University Staff Development Office took on this role.
- The University Staff Development Officer acted as **Café host**. She managed the process on the day, providing enough structure to enable the café dialogue to produce meaningful conversation without over controlling.
- The **table hosts** were members of library staff who remained at a particular table to greet new arrivals and to host the evolving conversation at the table. The table host is not a traditional facilitator but an equal member of the conversation.
- The **members / participants** were the library staff who moved between tables. They carried the main points of their conversation from a table into the next round of conversation at another table.

PREPARATION

Prior to the Café, the University Staff Development Officer briefed the Organisational Review Project team on the principles and operation. Two members of the team (the authors of this paper) offered to organise the Café with the University Staff Development Officer. Information on the concept was circulated to all staff along with links to YouTube content on the topic. We put out a call for volunteers to act as table hosts, stressing that training would be provided. Six library staff volunteered and had ninety minutes' training in a group from the University Staff Development Officer.

THE WORLD CAFÉ MORNING

The Café was hosted in a large bright room about ten minutes' walk from the library. Room preparation involved setting out tables with paper tablecloths, small bunches of flowers, pens and pencils and bowls of sweets. Tea / coffee and pastries were provided. Thirty people par-

ticipated: approximately three quarters of library staff. There were six tables with five people at each at any given time, including the hosts. Participants took part in three sets of conversations, each twenty minutes long. Following a signal from the Café host, two people moved to the table on the left and two to the table on the right. The table host remained at the table. As people arrive at the 'new' table, the table host gave a brief synopsis of earlier conversations and the same two questions were used to guide discussions. Participants could draw, doodle and write on the paper tablecloths. Once under way, there was very lively dialogue with everyone participating in different ways: talking, writing, drawing and listening. At the end of the two and a half hours, main points were put on post-its. Three flip-chart pages with the headings challenges, needs and opportunities were placed at the back of the room. The relevant post-its were placed on the appropriate page. The session ended with what is termed 'Town Hall' feedback: an open discussion on the feedback. The tablecloths were photographed and taken and distilled into posters by the table hosts. Challenges, needs and opportunities were presented as posters and placed in the library tea room. The design team (the authors of this paper) summarised feedback and typed up and made available the key outcome of the Café to all participants.

The Organisational Review Project Board considered the challenges, needs and opportunities identified and a number of areas were actioned, including addressing some training needs.

REFLECTION

We found the World Café was a creative way of getting new ideas and feedback around the changes that were taking place. The fact that issues of concern to all were explored gave a sense of cohesion to the process. Participants got to talk about the same issues with different colleagues and got a better sense of the library as whole. This generated a feeling of inclusiveness – all are equal participants in the conversation regardless of what post they hold.

The model allows for different styles of communication and learning. Not everyone wants to communicate and learn in the same way. New ideas emerged, knowledge was shared, and there was evidence of innovative thinking. The comment 'I never thought of it like that...' was heard frequently at different tables. People found it fun: 'We should use this more often...' was also heard.

Planning and executing a World Café gave people an opportunity to develop skills. Table hosts received training and the two authors learned a lot about organising the process.

The Café took time to plan, execute and follow up. Because of the need to maintain services in two libraries, not all library staff could participate. However, all staff could view the posters and photographs of the event in the library tea room and were invited to add comments, even though they did not have the actual experience of participating in the Café.

CONCLUSION

The World Café was one of a number of methods used during the organisational review to give library staff an opportunity to share their views, discuss their concerns and make suggestions for moving forward within a new organisational structure. Other methods include briefing sessions from the Organisational Review Project Board, with an opportunity to give feedback and ask questions both at the briefings and in the subsequent weeks. We also organised a half-day seminar on organisational change with two librarians from the UK who spoke about the impact of change in their organisations. At the beginning of the process an external facilitator (who worked with the project board in the early stages) led two half-day workshops for staff in order to elicit feedback. The World Café had a context and a clear purpose and this was vital to ensuring its success.

Following on from the library's initiative, other university departments have used the World Café concept. Overall this was a very positive experience and something we would certainly consider doing again in the future.

MORE ON WORLD CAFÉ

- www.youtube.com/watch?v=YrTKD8NpApY
- Guide to running a world café: <http://www.theworldcafe.com/pdfs/cafetogo.pdf>
- www.collectivewisdominitiative.org/papers/WorldCafe.pdf