

# The World Café method for engaging groups in conversation: Practical considerations and an agenda for critical evaluation

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## The World Café method for engaging conversations: Practical considerations and an agenda for critical evaluation

The World Café is a method for facilitating conversations that seek to engage groups in discussing important issues, aiming to generate insights in an egalitarian and welcoming environment. With roots in community action, it has recently been adopted as a method for gathering qualitative data. It can be treated as a data collection technique but is also deployed as part of interventions. However, because it has only recently been adopted for use in academic work, there has been as yet little evaluation of whether the World Café succeeds in its aims. In this paper, we introduce the method and discuss its application while identifying critiques and recommendations for realist evaluations of the World Café.

Keywords: World Café; Participatory research; Realist evaluation; Organisational intervention

The World Café (WC) is an information-gathering technique used for generating insights based on the assumption that groups or communities will share collective wisdom when they discuss questions or issues that matter to them (J. Brown & Isaacs, 2005). While it has been used in academic research to produce qualitative data (Clements et al., 2021), it has its roots in community action (Bulsara et al., 2016). It is a dialogic approach and therefore has some similarities with appreciative inquiry and action learning (Bushe & Marshak, 2009; Bushe & Paranjpey, 2015) and can be used to facilitate organisational development and learning (Ropes et al., 2020). The methodology has been deployed in a variety of projects, e.g. identifying wellbeing needs (Clements et al., 2021), improving services (Burke & Sheldon, 2010; Terry et al., 2015), and supporting young entrepreneurs (Chang & Chen, 2015). For example one paper summarised several case studies in which the WC was used to facilitate learning cultures in Singapore (Tan & Brown, 2005), e.g. to facilitate discussions about health between teenagers and adults, and discussions of policy amongst varying ranks of the police service. Another reported the use of WC facilitated discussions to inform the development of action strategies by working groups for modernising community health services (Burke & Sheldon, 2010). These two publications described examples of the WC use in practice, and provided relatively little detail on the procedure followed. One paper reported the involvement of students, service users, and carers in the improvement of social services (Terry et al., 2015). Terry et al (2015) focused on evaluating attendees' experience of the WC, reporting that attendees found participation helpful for understanding each others' perspectives. The WC has also been used to facilitate entrepreneurial strategic planning (Chang & Chen, 2015). While Chang and Chen did not report on the content of the discussions in which young Taiwanese attendees took part, they reported that participants in a WC produced better quality business proposals than those taking part in strategy workshops. More specifically in the context of occupational psychology, the WC has been used to investigate officer and staff perspectives on wellbeing in the police service, facilitating discussions of challenges as well as potential solutions from a bottom-up perspective, rather than relying on a top-down strategy (Clements et al., 2021). The WC is intended to be participatory and democratic (Jorgenson & Steier, 2013). In promoting an egalitarian ethos, the WC method argues that hierarchy should be suspended, enabling all to participate equally (J. Brown & Isaacs, 2005; Fouché & Light, 2011). While often treated as a method of data collection (Bumble & Carter, 2021) its originators treat the conversations facilitated by WC as a form of action that may produce further change (J. Brown & Isaacs, 2005). For example, in one evaluation a WC event was credited with improving attitudes towards a service improvement initiative, with an increase in incident-free days following the WC (Oelofse & Cady, 2012).

While there is a growing body of evidence relating to interventions e.g. improving work-related wellbeing (LaMontagne et al., 2007; Montano et al., 2014), there have been calls for more research that evaluates what interventions work for whom (Abildgaard et al., 2016; Nielsen & Miraglia, 2017), with particular attention to key mechanisms (Fox et al., 2022). In other words, we need to know not only whether interventions 'work,' but also why they do (or do not), and what strategies are needed to ensure success of interventions. One challenge is that most publications (e.g. journals) do not provide detailed explanations of the methods used (Nielsen & Noblet, 2018), with method sections typically being brief. Given its recent adoption as an academic research method, this paper discusses the WC approach, identifying fundamental principles and practical concerns and providing an approach for evaluating the components of this method. We draw upon available research, as well as reflections upon our own experience. Two of the present authors conducted research on wellbeing in the police (Clements et al., 2021). This was conducted with two organisations – one a collaborated service of specialist teams operating across multiple boroughs, and the other a borough

police service. We initially began planning the WC research with one organisation, conducting three events on their behalf, but were approached by the second organisation to conduct a WC event with their employees. All three authors are currently involved in research with a local authority. This latter project focuses on engaging with local communities regarding energy use behaviours. While this project had an initial focus on energy usage in the context of pro-environmental behaviours, the focus of facilitated conversations were influenced by wider developments in the current energy crisis.

## The World Café method: Advantages and disadvantages

In this section we will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the WC method firstly as a data collection method, and subsequently as a form of practice, e.g. for use in organisations. As a data collection method, the WC generates qualitative data. It is therefore useful for generating data about attendee's experiences, perspectives, etc, but cannot provide 'objective' data. For example a WC may be useful for exploring what employees think about their organisation's culture, but it will not 'prove' that changes will improve organisational performance. An advantage of the WC method is that it is easier to conduct at scale (Löhr et al., 2020). As Löhr et al note, this also makes "maximum participation" of stakeholders easier to achieve. This may also enable engagement with "whole systems" (Takahashi et al., 2014), such as an entire department. To illustrate the scaling advantage, in our published research (Clements et al., 2021), we gathered data from approximately 180 attendees, across four events, each of which took about half a day. Gathering data from 180 participants via interviews or focus groups would have taken much longer. The number of participants is primarily limited by logistical issues, e.g. who can attend, how many can fit in a single room, etc. Given enough enthusiasm and a large enough room, a single WC could involve hundreds of participants! Due to the larger number of participants the WC method can be used as to supplement quantitative data collection in mixed method designs (Takahashi et al., 2014). However, the data produced is 'thin' compared to the data gathered from interviews or focus groups (Löhr et al., 2020) – attendees will typically write short sentences, or write a few words to capture an idea. If in-depth data is needed, an interview or focus group may be needed instead of, or in addition to, WC data. Because attendees write down their ideas, practitioners do not need to worry about transcription. However, given enough participants there can still be a lot of data to analyse. If researchers or practitioners need to produce a report quickly (e.g. a client will only pay for a short amount of time) other approaches, e.g. quantitative, should be considered. It is also important to consider the nature of the topic to be explored. There can be concerns regarding use of focus groups to explore sensitive topics (Wellings et al., 2023; Woodrow et al., 2022), e.g. the inability to guarantee confidentiality (as researchers cannot prevent participants disclosing information heard in group events). These concerns logically can apply to WC events, which may impact what attendees share (Löhr et al., 2020).

From a practice perspective a key consideration is that the WC is a participatory approach for co-production with attendees (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2023), supporting learning through immediate feedback loops (Silva & Guenther, 2018), and is a useful way to engage with stakeholders (Löhr et al., 2020; Schiele et al., 2022). There is evidence to suggest that WC events can facilitate in attendees the acquisition of new knowledge, reflective learning, and expansion of networks (Ropes et al., 2020). Facilitators of WC events have noted that the conversations facilitated at events can persist long after the conclusion of the event (Löhr et al., 2020) and may spur attendees to take action (J.

Brown & Isaacs, 2005). Because the WC conversations are led by attendees the outputs of WC events are unpredictable. Facilitators may make some guesses about the content of future conversations, but there is room for surprise. For example, when we conducted events on wellbeing impacting police officers and civilian staff we expected to hear more about the impact of various forms of crime. In fact the majority of discussions focused on organisational stressors such as workload. It is important therefore to have the flexibility to adapt, and a commitment to honouring the conversations that take place in WC events. Facilitators should discuss this with clients (e.g. organisations) in advance to ensure they are committed to a participatory approach (e.g. they have not already decided what the 'next steps' should be), and to guide them in planning how to respond to the products of WC events. For example, in our work with the police we advised the organisations involved to set out a timeline for responding to suggestions from attendees, and to explain what actions would be taken – and where a suggestion was not seen as feasible, providing an explanation to attendees. This may help anticipate the cynicism attendees may feel if they have witnessed previous failed organisational initiatives (M. Brown & Cregan, 2008; Chiaburu et al., 2013).

The emphasis in the WC is on facilitating conversations. There are two important implications. Firstly, the facilitators should not be positioning themselves as the experts of the topic. For the purpose of the event, the attendees are the experts. It is more appropriate to think of the facilitators as experts in the management of the WC, similar to Schein's conceptualisation of process consultancy (Schein, 1978; Schein et al., 2001). The WC method may be uncomfortable for those who are more used to being present as a subject matter expert, and for such researchers and practitioners it will be particularly important to engage in self-monitoring to avoid taking on an expert role. Conversely, there may be times when a subject matter expert 'knows best,' in which case engaging communities is a waste of attendees' time. Secondly, it is important to avoid leading attendees' contributions. Part of this is to avoid using leading questions (Cairns-Lee et al., 2022), but it is important to avoid leading interpretations when facilitating group discussions (e.g. at the end of rounds). We recommend the use of 'clean language', reflecting back what attendees say, and asking questions to check that facilitators have understood attendees. As table hosts play a role in facilitating group discussions it is likely that they will need guidance from the WC facilitators.

It is also important to consider barriers to freely sharing ideas. There is already a recognition in action learning that power may enable some discussions and constrain others (Brook et al., 2012). We recommend considering the existing relationships between parties who would be present or represented at a WC. For example, if the focus of the WC is on improving employee experience, and there is a history of low trust between employees and managers, the facilitators should consider whether to proceed at all, whether to hold separate events for employees and managers, to enable authentic discussion, or to run shared events with conscious attention to power dynamics.

## Running the World Café

In this section we discuss practical aspects of delivering WC events. The WC process, as with research and projects in general, should begin with identifying the purpose (J. Brown & Isaacs, 2005) for the conversations that will be facilitated. It is essential to consider who will be invited, with recommendations often to invite diverse members of the relevant communities (Bumble & Carter, 2021). As part of setting the context, it is important to explain to attendees that they have been invited to the WC because of their personal knowledge and experience to discuss questions in a setting where the whole group would benefit from their insight. The introduction should also

explain how people are expected to engage within the WC ethos, by both contributing perspectives and listening thoughtfully to others.

A key element of the WC ethos is the creation of a hospitable space and comfortable atmosphere. One way of doing this is to recreate the physical features of a café (J. Brown & Isaacs, 2005) or use other forms of event décor (Bumble & Carter, 2021). For example the WC website ([theworldcafe.com](http://theworldcafe.com)) provides free to use images that can be used to decorate spaces and illustrate key principles. For example we have used images as part of presentations prior to the start of WC conversations when explaining ground rules.

Participants are typically seated in small groups of up to 8 drawn from different backgrounds, with one table per group. Often a paper tablecloth is provided to each table (Kitzie et al., 2020), although some researchers use other materials such as A4 card (Clements et al., 2021), on which participants are asked to write or draw (J. Brown & Isaacs, 2005). The lead author has a preference for using card, after an incident in which a participant spilled their drink (fortunately no data was lost!). In our experience attendees sometimes need to be explicitly encouraged to write or draw the content of their conversations. We recommend monitoring conversations to check that notes are being made. WC events are divided into a series of rounds where one question is discussed (Clements et al., 2021), each of which may last 20-30 minutes (Bumble & Carter, 2021; Kitzie et al., 2020). At the end of each round participants will move to different tables to ensure a new combination of individuals for the next discussion. Often WC events involve the use of table hosts (Bumble & Carter, 2021; Clements et al., 2021) who facilitate conversations, e.g. to ensure all participants at the table are enabled to contribute. This is important where there is status (e.g. linked to seniority) within the wider community from which participants are drawn. Table hosts will remain at their table across all rounds while other participants move around the room after the conclusion of discussion after each question. As a practical note, it is useful to explain to participants how the end of a round will be signalled. Consider that during a round the room may be very noisy, some participants will have their back to the facilitators, etc. We adopt an approach described in Brown and Isaacs (2005), in which attendees are told that at the end of each round the facilitators will raise their arm in the air. Attendees are asked to raise their arm in the air also when they see this occur, or when they see a fellow attendee put their arm up. They are asked to also bring their conversation to a close at this time. In practice this means that gradually all (or most) arms are raised, and the room gets slowly quieter – it is much more effective than trying to call out for attention in our experience!

During a round, participants at each table discuss a question. While Brown and Isaacs (2005) suggest that questions should be positive and energising and focused on issues which matter to the group, in reality, some participants express a preference to discuss problems related to the area of discussion, which affect them personally (Clements et al., 2021). Thus the questions that matter to participants are not necessarily the questions that WC organisers think ought to matter. During a given round we have asked all tables to discuss the same question, with a new question introduced each round. In alternative approaches each table may have a different question, in which case participants encounter new questions as they move each round.

The design of questions is an important element of the WC. Questions should be open, avoid being too complex, and should not be leading. While questions will vary across WC events (e.g. depending on the chosen topics), there are two that we recommend using routinely. The first is “what makes a good conversation?” This question is useful for the first round (although the data may not be directly relevant to the intended purpose), as this can help attendees set expectations for engagement. Common responses include showing respect to others, listening, making a contribution, etc. The second question we recommend is “what should we have asked today?” This can serve a dual

purpose. Firstly it is an opportunity for attendees to raise issues that had not occurred to the facilitators, which may show unrecognised priorities for the communities represented. Secondly the questions may be used for future WC events (and we have done so in our own research).

Table hosts play an important role in facilitating the group discussions and ensuring everyone can contribute. Hosts should represent the various stakeholders present at the WC event. We advise selecting and training table hosts in advance of the session, given that they may not have previous experience of facilitating group discussions and managing participation. Table hosts should be encouraged to introduce themselves, and manage others' introductions, at the beginning of each round. They should be attentive to the risk that some attendees may dominate conversations, while others may need encouragement to participate. They should make it explicit that varied perspectives are expected and welcome in the conversation, and they should ensure that the range of perspectives are recorded. Table hosts may also benefit from training on how to avoid leading or biasing conversations.

As noted, one of the principles of the WC is cross-pollination of knowledge and experience (Jorgenson & Steier, 2013). As rounds progress, individuals are able to share the previous conversations in which they participated, so that ideas spread around the room (Clements et al., 2021). It is also typical to facilitate group-wide conversations (J. Brown & Isaacs, 2005; Bumble & Carter, 2021). For example in our own research, we have facilitated such conversations at the end of each round, which may help to record further insights that participants have not written on the paper provided! On occasions we have found that participants will discuss their ideas further, which a note-taker can record. For example in one event we conducted for the police this led to a co-created discussion of email etiquette that might better support work-life balance for attendees. This group discussion can also sometimes provide useful context to help interpret what participants have written in brief form. These facilitated group conversations provide opportunities for identifying patterns together. As noted above, part of the WC principles involves harvesting and sharing discoveries. This can include producing displays representing the contributions of participants (J. Brown & Isaacs, 2005). This could include making use of an artist during the WC event if the budget will cover this, but could also involve making use of art generated by participants in reports. However, in our experience many attendees do not produce drawings, and they may require extra encouragement if this is a form of data that is desired.

### Ethical issues

Unlike other data collection methods, such as surveys and interviews, the WC does not generate data that is clearly identifiable with a single individual (Clements et al., 2021). This is because the data is the product of conversations (i.e. the result of co-constructive processes), and recorded by the table group. While this may enhance participants' sense of confidentiality, this presents some challenges in relation to the removal of data. If a participant later wishes to remove their data from the project it is not possible to do so, therefore it is important to ensure that individuals understand this before they engage with the WC. In past events we have advised participants to explicitly note any material that they would wish to be included in practice-related outputs (e.g. reports to managers) but not in research outputs, by drawing a ring around written content and noting that this is not provided for research.

## Evaluating the World Café method

While the WC provides an opportunity to engage individuals in conversations about issues that matter to them, and may be useful for engagement with collectives, e.g. participatory interventions, there has been very little evaluation of the methodology. One exception is a recent systematic review (Bumble & Carter, 2021), although this focused on application of WC to disability studies. They coded features of published research, noting significant variation in how the WC is conducted across the research consistent with Brown and Isaac's encouragement to adapt the WC process. While some features were commonly reported across the majority of studies, e.g. the use of open-ended questions, multiple rounds of small group discussions, involving table hosts in facilitating conversations, moving participants to new tables between rounds, and the use of whole-group discussions. Conversely, they found that only a minority reported the use of event décor to establish a hospitable environment. While this review provides useful information about actual practice in WC research, it cannot provide an evaluation of the impact of these variations.

Consequently, we argue that there remain questions about whether the WC functions as intended. For example, part of the WC ethos emphasises democratic and participatory approaches (J. Brown & Isaacs, 2005). It has been suggested that the WC method provides participants more influence over the focus of conversations (Estacio & Karic, 2016), e.g. compared to an interview. However, other scholars have suggested that the focus on consensus may suppress dissent (Aldred, 2011). While conflict can present challenges, it can also encourage greater understanding of different perspectives, and promote critical thinking about ideas (De Wit et al., 2012). Furthermore, while the WC method aims to suspend hierarchy, some critics have argued the method fails to consider and address power imbalances, both between table facilitators and participants and between participants themselves (Lorenzetti et al., 2016). For example, in some events table hosts may take responsibility for recording notes (Bumble & Carter, 2021). Does this create the risk that table hosts may influence which ideas are recorded, and the information that is subsequently shared with facilitators or managers?

Another element of the WC ethos is a focus on positive energising questions (e.g. "what would great work look like?"). However, we may question whether this is always desirable, or indeed necessary. In one study the encouragement to focus on positive and energising framing was considered to risk overriding real concerns of community members (Kitzie et al., 2020). In another, participants themselves indicated a wish to discuss problems so that solutions could be explored (Clements et al., 2021). However, it has been noted that positive framing may not be needed to generate new and compelling ideas (Bushe & Paranjpey, 2015).

The creators of the WC method also suggest that participants may continue conversations after the WC event ends, and may take action to implement ideas that they helped produce (J. Brown & Isaacs, 2005). Yet to the best of our knowledge, no WC research has evaluated what outcomes, if any, resulted from the facilitated conversations. We argue that there may be a need for developing research projects that track and evaluate spontaneous initiatives from the bottom-up, as well as those initiated by leadership teams.

There is a need to evaluate the WC methodology to examine the extent to which it is a robust method for data collection and intervention. Randomised controlled trials are often seen as the most appropriate research design for evaluating interventions due to their advantages in testing causal relationships (Antonakis et al., 2010). However, Nielsen and colleagues (Abildgaard et al., 2016; Nielsen, 2013; Nielsen & Miraglia, 2017) argue that experimental designs with pre- and post-



intervention measures only show whether an intervention works, not why it works (or does not), for whom, and under what circumstances. They advocate instead a realist approach in which not only outcome variables are measured, but also key processes such as participation (Abildgaard, Hasson, et al., 2020) or collective efficacy within the organisation (Abildgaard, Nielsen, et al., 2020). Nielsen and colleagues suggest evaluating the role of stakeholders (e.g. employees, middle managers, and senior managers) in shaping the intervention (Nielsen & Randall, 2013). An important process in the WC is the conversation itself. Some scholars have suggested the use of recording devices at tables to support analysis of attendees' conversation and behaviour (Löhr et al., 2020; Takahashi et al., 2014), although awareness of recording devices might influence what attendees discuss. We recommend inviting feedback from participants on WC events, such as whether they were able to share ideas, whether they felt able to disagree with others, and whether their ideas were recorded and reported. These might be measured both quantitatively (through a scale of agreement to disagreement with statements) and qualitatively (through open ended items about the WC event). It would be beneficial to negotiate with organisations ongoing access, so that there can be evaluations of whether conversations have a longer term effect, e.g. if employees continue to discuss wellbeing and how to improve it, whether recommendations are implemented, and whether actions receive support from stakeholders. With longitudinal designs it may be possible to see what aspects of a WC event's design predict future action.

In conclusion, the WC is a method seeing increasing use across a range of domains, including organisational change (Löhr et al., 2020). It is considered a beneficial strategy for engaging stakeholders in co-production, and is able to do so at a scale that focus groups and interviews are not designed to achieve. As a qualitative data collection technique it is a useful addition to the researcher's toolkit. It is also widely used in practice, where it is credited with generating useful insight and spurring action. Given that WC is presented by some as an intervention, and not simply a data collection strategy, there is a need to evaluate whether the WC is effective, under which circumstances it is effective, and which components are essential for its success. Not only should it be evaluated in terms of its success, but also whether it functions in the way its creators and facilitators expect. Given that the data the WC produces itself is qualitative in nature, it will be important for scientist-practitioners to adopt mixed-method designs. In other words, we recommend evaluating the WC not only through the data generated by conversations, but also to make use of surveys to evaluate participant experiences of WC events, and seeking objective measures that may detect changes resulting from conversations. For example, in the context of discussions about wellbeing (Clements et al., 2021) it would be useful to examine whether policies are changed as a result of WC events, and whether there are changes in, for example, sickness absence. By adopting mixed-methods realist evaluations we will be better placed to provide guidance on how the methodology should be implemented, and under which circumstances adaptations are necessary. While the present evidence base does not allow a definitive statement about when it should or should not be used, successful use of the WC method is likely to rest on the ability of researchers and practitioners to adopt a consciously facilitative role rather than the role of expert.

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