

**The World Café in an Established Community:
Emerging Identity and Evolving Practice
by Mary Stacey, 2001**

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In the mid-90s, about 50 of us shared two intense years as mid-career professionals completing our graduate degree in an innovative Masters program offered by Royal Roads University in Victoria, British Columbia. The Master of Arts in Leadership focuses on organizational leadership and learning. In May 2001 we held our first reunion. We were returning to the University after three years, during which a lot of living and working had transpired.

As Royal Roads students, we had been involved in an initiative that was an experiment in the Canadian university system. We were the first students in a new program at a new university. We'd quickly become comfortable with ambiguity and felt quite at home when we learned the language of complex adaptive systems. Life on campus had us often stepping to the edge of chaos, and we learned to remind each other to 'trust the process.'

With this understanding of our way of working together, we were seeking large group processes for our reunion that we could feel at home with—ones which would enable a high degree of self-organization, facilitate emergence, and support individual and collective meaning-making. The design team was hoping that whatever processes we used could help us shift our from a sense of ourselves as 'beleaguered graduate students' and 'RRU alumni' to thinking of ourselves as a national network of learning and leadership practitioners. We decided to experiment with the World Café process and we contacted Whole Systems Associates to help us design and integrate a World Café into our weekend reunion.

Time was tight. We knew the weekend would fly by and we wanted processes which would support us in reconnecting deeply as well as exploring what was important now. We designed the first day to incorporate both Trek Mindscapes and Open Space Technology. Trek Mindscapes creates a graphic map of one's journey which allowed us all to communicate succinctly the highlights of our work and life since graduation. The Open Space gathering provided us with a way to jointly explore what is important now that we are 'out in the world' as leaders ourselves.

I had participated in the 2000 Discovering Connections conference where David Isaacs facilitated 400 diverse participants through the World Café process. I was curious to know whether we could generate the same level of energy and knowledge sharing in an established community with one-tenth the number of participants. We were hoping that using the World Café might indeed help us 'make the shift' and 'translate purpose into action'. It seemed ideal for helping our group—to paraphrase Juanita Brown—*move deeper and forward*.

Juanita and David's colleague at Whole Systems Associates, Ken Homer, skillfully helped us through the design and facilitation of the Café. His

understanding of the Café as both process and metaphor, and his deep knowledge of living systems became key to creating a successful learning reunion.

Designing and Facilitating our Learning Reunion

Although three years had passed, we soon found ourselves in that familiar ambiguous place. We couldn't know in advance what the Café question(s) might be. We knew they had to emerge out of the first days' work. Early in the design our inquiry focused on:

- What common purpose might grow out of the meaning shared by this community? How can this purpose be translated to effective action?
- What is the natural evolution of learning in this community?

So much had happened in three years since graduation! Fortunately we had planned to hold regular facilitator debriefs between the various sessions, anticipating that they would help us find the deeper questions that were waiting to emerge.

Entering Café Space

On the morning of the Café we entered our meeting room, which had been transformed into the kind of hospitable space that facilitates personal conversations. Small tables seating four were covered in checkered tablecloths, flip charts and markers were at each table for recording the ideas and images that grew from the conversation. Music played softly in the background.

To orient the group in the process, Ken led the group through some of the underlying assumptions of the Café work phrased as 'What if...?' questions. He asked that we not make a judgment as to their validity, but simply try them on as useful ways of being for the time we would be in the Café. He then invited us to add our unique areas of inquiry to create a framework for the day.

What if...

- The future is born in webs of conversation?
- Compelling questions catalyze collective learning?
- Human systems are living systems?
- Intelligence emerges as the system connects to itself?
- Collectively, we have access to all the resources we need?

To which we added:

- *We use the Café as a metaphor for our MALT community?*
- *We let this image of a web of conversations guide us through a collective inquiry into what's possible in creating a shared future for our MALT community?*

We next spent some time recalling the attributes of powerful, memorable conversations we'd experienced. This appreciative approach helped us carry an image of the best of our past into our present conversations.

Qualities of a Powerful Conversation

- passion
- desire to understand
- focused attention
- comfortable with silence / uncomfortable with silence
- “sacred space” outside of time
- interesting topic
- honesty
- trust and respect
- suspension of judgments
- different perceptions
- risk taking
- curiosity
- powerful questions
- authenticity
- courage
- personal experience
- energy
- re-framing
- body language
- whole self engaged
- synergy
- clarity

Our Café questions seemed to emerge in a spiral—moving deeper as the day went on. Our initial Café round was spent with a very simple question, “*Where are we now?*” This question was intended to provide an opportunity to reflect on the previous day and connect in our first small groups. We were surprised by the depth of exploration that such a simple question could yield—*now* meant *today* to some, to others it encompassed the *entire life journey!*

Here are some highlights from the conversations that took place in that first hour.

- “We’re beginning to ‘get’ what community looks and feels like, and where we can do this in our work.”
- “We’re empowered to challenge our assumptions.”
- “We’re moving toward something, rather than moving away.”

Then we explored our second question, “*What questions do we have that, if answered, would take us to the next level?*”

- What would have enough juice to get us committed?
- What are we in service to?

- How do we translate this dialogue into practice?
- What is our emerging identity?

After a couple of Café rounds we captured phrases and words that stood out, recorded them on giant post-it notes, which we then grouped into emerging themes. From these themes we found our key question for our community exploration, *“What returns us, what keeps us returning?”* The groups turned with energy to this conversation.

- Curiosity—who’s doing what, what’s happening out there.
- Sharing stories.
- Coming to a safe place where we can take risks, explore and be inspired.
- A place to share different images/metaphors of leadership.
- Play at a deep level.
- Tap the expertise of people that I trust.

These were just of the few comments that were made during our afternoon conversation—which helped us begin to see our emerging sense of identity and purpose. We noticed the energy in the room remained particularly high during this round, there was deep engagement in these conversations that simultaneously addressed our past, present, and future.

What We Discovered in the Café

We made a natural shift from presentation, discussion and advocacy on day one to dialogue during the Café. The imaging of ‘powerful conversations’ seemed to help significantly with this shift. The Café has an ability to help us remember that we already know how to have a great conversation—we just forget that we can bring them to our workplace!

During the Café process, we began to spontaneously refer to ourselves as a Community of Practice. Needless to say, the design team was happy to see this emerge! I don’t think we had a very refined sense of what it means to be a Community of Practice, but the intention was emerging—we were no longer graduate students, we were beginning to see ourselves as a national network of practitioners.

We became confident that, with or without the University’s future involvement, we would grow and develop this network to include all kinds of activities we couldn’t even see yet. And that was okay. Through the Café, we’d once again practiced ‘trusting the process’ and we knew the future would call upon us to do it again.

Many members saw immediate relevance of the Café to their work environments. Later, we heard about all of the organizations who’d had the opportunity to experience a Café—as a direct result of our reunion success.

The Café spirit remained alive in our group after we'd returned to our home communities; the emails were flying around the country. I couldn't help but think again about that ballroom of 400. Imagine the scope of inquiry that could continue to travel if Café participants had the opportunity to staying connected.

Overall, we gained momentum for the future, which is accompanied by a new comfort that it will emerge in its time, in its way.

I hope this brief story will provide the reader with yet another image of how the World Café can be used. I can't think of a process better suited to helping an established community access its present and move toward its desired future.