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dialog

Das Magazin rund um Neuland und das lebendige Lernen

World Café



Dellorei usciet eum fugia quam, utInvere
volAtiur, sima non porem quas sitatium
eaturi officimus volendit

- dialograum-Planung
- dialograum-Einrichtung
- Methode World Café
- Lern- und dialogwerkzeuge

Interview



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mit Juanita Brown, David Isaacs und
Amy Lenzo

1. To start with: Could you picture the circumstances, the time and thinking approx. 15 years ago that made the World Café come alive? Rephrased: What was the primordial soup of it?

Ah! That story is best told by Tom Hurley, Executive Director for the World Café Community Foundation. Here it is, taken from our World Café Prospectus:

In 1995, a small group of business and academic leaders from Europe and the US, known as the Intellectual Capital Pioneers, were meeting for two days at the home of Juanita Brown and David Isaacs in Mill Valley, California. As they arrived on the second day, none of them had any idea they were about to create a social innovation that would spread rapidly around the world over the next fifteen years.

Yet they did. With their plan for a morning large-circle dialogue disrupted by rain, the two dozen participants spontaneously formed into small, intimate table conversations about the questions that had drawn them together, recording their insights on makeshift paper „tablecloths.“ They periodically interrupted these conversations to switch tables so the insights and ideas that had real power might circulate, deepen, and connect. Harvesting the table conversations enabled them to notice the emerging patterns in their thinking, which then enriched subsequent rounds of conversation. Over the course of the morning, the innovative process they improvised gave birth to an experience of collective intelligence that transformed the depth, scope, and innovative quality of their collaboration.

They had discovered the World Café. Later they asked: „What happened here that enabled such great conversation and breakthrough thinking around critical strategic issues?“ Through action research and experimentation in several countries, they subsequently identified seven key World Café

designprinciples and began to articulate the core concepts of conversational leadership that underpin the process.

2. When I think of some of the basic ideas of the World Café it is about extraordinary contact, dialogue and interaction between people. What attracts you to this work in general and to the World Café especially?

Great question! On a big-picture level I'm fascinated by the „collective intelligence“ that can be felt in a really good World Café experience. After a couple of rounds of small group conversation sometimes you have the feeling that you know what everyone in the whole room is saying, even if there are a thousand or more people there. There is a quality of something emerging, both at the tables and between them. It's almost palpable. You feel connected to your deepest thinking and to the whole room at the same time. It's really remarkable.

On another, more personal level perhaps, I am very often moved by the quality of listening that is evoked in a World Café. People with very different perspectives can sit together and feel they are heard and understood. You don't have to agree or disagree with what you are hearing. In the World Café there is a relationship to difference that goes beyond just acceptance. There is a recognition that it's really through engaging difference that we learn and grow. Deliberately extending a warm welcome to all the people who show up and openly inviting a true diversity of thought into the conversations, sitting together without trying to convince anyone of anything, but rather sharing from our hearts about things we really care about; it's a marvelous way to expand our understanding of ourselves and each other and it gives us a valuable perspective on the complex issues we're all dealing with today.

These are things I am passionate about, and I am grateful to have work that allows me to experience them and be part of making them more widely known.

3. The World Café is meanwhile a global movement. What made/makes this huge „success“ possible? What is your personal perspective on this unfolding movement?

There are a lot of factors that have contributed to the World Café's successful growth, and different people would answer the question differently. To me, perhaps the most important reason is that the World Café is about something very simple and necessary to us all - the ability to engage in productive conversations about the things that are important to us. The World Café speaks to a fundamental human need to connect with and learn from one another. It addresses the imperative to learn to live together and respect each other's differences, and offers the ability to recognize each other's contributions and see each voice as a valuable part of the whole.

The times we live in make these qualities especially important, and I think the conditions created by our current global challenges have also contributed to the World Café's rapid growth, along with many other practices and social innovations that have emerged during this time.

Another factor in the World Café's success is that the method is both extremely simple and very powerful; it „travels well“ and is easily adaptable to the needs of different situations. The

Die Worte, die wir nutzen kreieren unsere Realität. Es macht einen Unterschied, ob ich von Differenzen oder von Vielfalt spreche.

World Café was born in quite an exceptional group of people, many of whom represented large mature networks of people and organizations all over Europe and the US that were interested in and ready for the kinds of ideas and ways of interacting that the World Café exemplified so beautifully. So it took off quite quickly right out of the gate as they went back to their own networks and shared what they had experienced.

Finally, the extraordinary generosity and community organizing skills of co-founder Juanita Brown and her partner David Isaacs

have played an immense part in the World Café's success as well. Juanita is famously collaborative, and has reached out to include and acknowledge a great number of people and organizations in her work over the years. For the World Café book, which was published in 2005, Juanita and David drew on stories from World Café hosts all over the world to use as guidelines to understand how each design principle could best be applied. That's not so unusual, but what is noteworthy is that the couple shared their author credit with the entire World Café community. When the book was published, they hand-wrapped beautiful gift copies for everyone who'd participated and personally sent them out all over the world with hand written cards of thanks.

The World Café has been promoted in such a way that everyone feels encouraged and empowered to practice it themselves. So the „ownership“ of the World Café has been extended out to a large community of practice that has grown expanded exponentially over the years to include many hundreds of thousands of people. Our adoption of online communication tools, too, has been a powerful amplifier for World Café ideas. These tools have helped us see ourselves as a community and enabled our work together in wonderfully exciting ways. We are still growing very quickly - between 5 and 25 new members join the online community platform or sign up for our newsletter or join one of our social networking groups every day - and our numbers will only increase as more and more people have their own experience of the World Café or hear about it from others.

4. What will be possible, let's say within the next 5-10 years? Will it lead to some even bigger and greater thing than just the dynamic raise and usage of a group methodology?

Well, the World Café has always been about more than a methodology. The method is basically just an extraordinarily effective way to give people the experience of what it's all about, which is conversation as a core process; the fundamental human capacity to reach out and connect to one another, to find answers together and create better futures, to reach across generations and cultures and professional and political silos and realize that we are wiser together than we are alone.

One of the metaphors we use to talk about this



interconnected web of generative conversation is „World as Café“, and for me that image conjures up a „culture of conversation“ spreading all over the world, where we turn to one another to collaborate rather than compete, we talk things through with respect when conflict arises rather than revert to unhealthy old patterns.

I think we are currently poised on the brink of something really important and potentially very new. There are a lot of challenges facing us globally, but I feel confident that we have the collective capacity to address these challenges in positive ways. Those of us who have been working in this field for all these years are well placed to take a leadership role in convening the conversations that are needed to make a difference in our lives and our futures.

Given my own professional focus, I'm personally most excited about the potential of new communications technologies when they are applied to this kind of deep human engagement. We're already hosting large World Cafes online and finding the same depth and connection between participants as we see in face to face Cafes. I'm thrilled that we can create the conditions for fostering communication, insight, and innovation in ways that are easily accessible to widely dispersed populations, and I very much look forward to what's coming.



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