



FIELD NOTE | INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO RECONNECTING THROUGH COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Part 2 – Conversation Café

BY DAN RITCHIE

CONTEXT

In recent years, shifting to a virtual community engagement environment has moved from being a mere option to being a necessity. But how do we meaningfully engage in such environments? Many groups and organizations have been asking this exact question and, faced with the challenge, are creating opportunities to engage more thoughtfully.

This compiled field note series describes the following for online community conversations:

- Principles
- Process and intended outcomes
- Insights
- Further resources to dive deeper

World Café (Also Known as Conversation Café)

Description

The use of Conversation Café (also known as [World Café](#)) is a strategy to foster diverse conversations around important topics. It is typically held as three rounds of discussion on questions of increasing complexity. Participants are organized around different tables, with each table assigned a different question. Each group spends time “harvesting” their thinking about their assigned question and synthesizing their thoughts into a summary statement that identifies the pattern or theme that emerged from the conversation. Between each round, groups are “shuffled” so that participants can connect with different

Four Engagement Strategies

In an effort to explore authentic virtual engagement strategies, four different methods were tested out with participants:

1. Open Space
2. Conversation Café
3. Deliberative Dialogue
4. Fishbowl

people who bring a range of ideas and perspectives.

Intended Outcomes

In a virtual Conversation Café setting, each group focuses on answering a single question until, through the rotation process, all participants have eventually weighed in on all questions. Having smaller conversations focusing on a single question at a time allows for different insights to emerge around a shared set of questions or themes without voices being drowned out by the larger group.



A world café or a conversation café is an exchange of ideas feelings and thoughts between people. The conversation café offers an opportunity to share our humanity, so we can understand one another better.

– Paul Born

Principles and Process

One group that has developed a methodology for Conversation Café is the organization World Café. Drawing on [seven integrated design principles](#), [the World Café](#) methodology is a simple, effective and flexible format for hosting large group dialogue.

World Café’s method for running a Conversation Café can be easily modified to meet a wide variety of needs, whether you are looking to gain insights from large groups or attempting to explore a topic with a small number of people. The method offers suggestions for how to adjust the context, number of participants and group size, purpose, location and question choice, but the following five components comprise the basic model:

1. **Setting:** Create a “special” environment, most often modeled after a café (i.e., small round tables covered with a checkered or white linen tablecloth, butcher block paper, colored pens and a vase of flowers). In a virtual setting, you can welcome participants to the main lobby by playing music or sharing your screen or background with images of cafés.
2. **Welcome and Introduction:** The host begins with a warm welcome and an introduction to the World Café process, setting the context, sharing the Café Etiquette and putting participants at ease.
3. **Small Group Rounds:** The process typically begins with the first of three or more 20-minute rounds of conversation for small groups (around four or five people) sent to breakout rooms. At the end of the 20 minutes, each member shifts to a different new table (changes breakout rooms). There may be a volunteer who stays as the “table host” for the next round, who welcomes the next group and briefly fills them in on what happened in the previous round. Each breakout room or “table” should be clearly labelled.
4. **Questions:** Each round is prefaced with a question specially crafted for the specific context and desired purpose of the World Café. The same questions can be used for more than one round,

or they may build upon each other to focus the conversation or guide its direction.

5. **Harvest:** After the small groups (and/or in between rounds, as needed), individuals are invited to share insights or other results from their conversations with the rest of the large group. Recording these insights can happen using a tool such as [Jamboard](#), [Mural](#) or [Google Sheets](#).

ADVICE TO OTHERS

Hosting Conversation Cafés online is a great way to add deeper questions around a particular topic. An example that we used during our session was to explore topics around equity and inclusion. We had three rounds of questions and used the free app [Jamboard](#) to record our insights from these conversations.

Below is the additional advice we can offer based on our experience.

Be mindful of time and transitions

Setting the stage for a Conversation Café involves several rounds in smaller groups along with a larger conversation to reflect. When sending people into groups, make sure it is clear who will be notetaking and when the notes will be shared with the larger group. Ask groups to dedicate the first part of their conversation to setting out who can take the roles of notetaker and reporter.



Our table talked about how technology is both an enabler and barrier too. ... This can be a challenge in rural communities with just having reliable internet.

– *Community of Practice participant*

Start questions general and become more specific

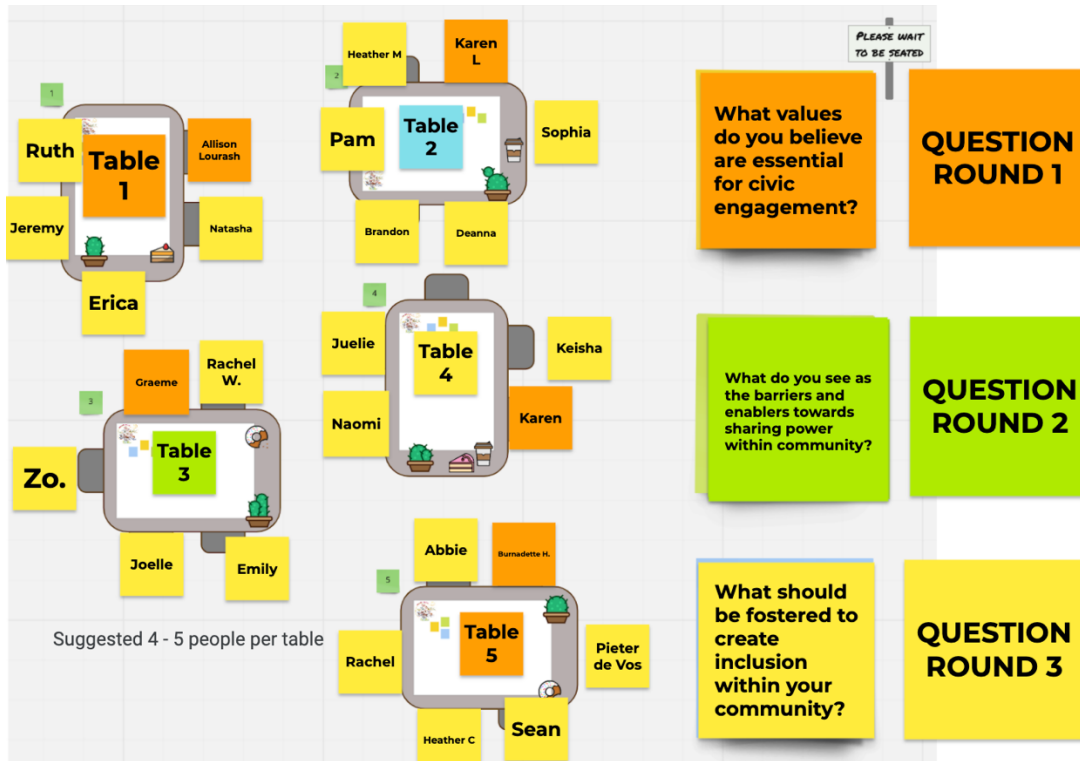
During your initial introduction, it is important to give participants time to warm up and ease into the process. Our session started with questions around values and then explored actions and ways to support equity and inclusion in our communities.

Close the loop and reflect as a group

Finding the time for groups to join back and “close the loop” is important for this process. Reflecting as a wider group is an opportunity to see any major themes that are coming out for each of the smaller groups. Being able to find time to display key words (e.g., through a word cloud or graphic) will allow participants to see what collective sentiments or ideas are repeatedly coming up.

Virtual World Café Table

Below is an example of what our discussion set-up looked like using the free Jamboard app.



TOOLS

Here are some tools and resources to learn more the Conversation Café / World Café method:

- Paul Born's book [Community Conversations](#)
- Hear a session being tested with this approach: [World Café](#)
- [Hosting World Café Toolkit](#)
- [World Café Checklist](#)