

THE WORLD CAFÉ IN CREATING A CULTURE OF MARKETING AT A PRIVATE INSTITUTION OF HIGHER LEARNING: A CASE STUDY

Carol Sutcliffe

ABSTRACT

As a contemporary approach to bringing about positive change, the World Café model was applied to a group of 45 staff members at a private institution of higher learning in January 2019, as part of a staff development colloquium. The main objective of the intervention was to create a culture of marketing among the staff and students, with a view to improving the financial sustainability of the institution, which was facing an uncertain economic future. The case study investigated how and to what extent the World Café session contributed towards the development of a marketing culture among staff participants. Whereas research on the World Café model suggests it is a good approach to build collaborative management, this study evaluated the effectiveness of the World Café model in developing a sense of responsibility among participants for the implementation of organizational change. With very few empirical studies having been done on the use of the World Café model, one goal of this study was to produce a robust empirical study on the topic. In this case study, primary data from a focus group discussion with 12 staff members, representative of all departments and faculties involved in the original World Café session, as well as a second set of primary data from seven personal /electronic interviews, were collected five months following the WC session. The data were categorized according to the 13 themes that emerged when the staff responses at the World Café session were analyzed. The results are discussed according to these 13 themes, representing all aspects of the operations at the selected institution. The data collected suggests that the World Café intervention served to ignite a culture of marketing among staff and students. These results could encourage other private institutions of higher learning and non-profit organizations to use the World Café model to bring about positive organizational and social change, as well as to strengthen communities in times of uncertainty.

Keywords: marketing culture; the World Café (TWC) design principles; TWC method; conversational leadership

INTRODUCTION

Two decades of research have investigated the concept of the World Café (TWC) in bringing about meaningful conversations, with a view to positive change. For example, The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) has adopted this model in dealing with international conferences when implementing or seeking innovative, safe solutions to the plight of disadvantaged children in over 190 countries (Arivanathan, 2015). Garfield (2018) confirms that a key example of effectively managing and processing knowledge is the World Café Model. This model has been employed by companies across the globe and serves as an eloquent workshop method for involving all internal and external stakeholders in valuable conversations about the company itself. Bradbury (2015) deals with the use of the World Café in various action research settings. The World Café Model of conversational leadership is a model which harvests the collective intelligence or wisdom of all employees by way of providing a relaxed conversation context for answering questions that matter to everybody involved. This model engages the participation of all, in bringing about lasting solutions to organizational and broader social challenges (Hurley & Brown, 2009), such as the uncertain times resulting from the Covid-19 global pandemic.

There is a need in the broader corporate world for management which is participative with regard to engaging the collective intelligence of all employees. Indeed, modern-day employees demand a voice and democratic treatment on all levels of organizational life (Angelopulo & Barker, 2013). There is a need for leaders who are able to facilitate intelligent conversations among all staff members (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). There is a need to capitalize on and manage the knowledge, skills and experience which each employee brings to the table (Angelopulo & Barker 2013). According to Klev and Levin (2016), most meetings tend to simply pacify many of the individuals present. The World Café is a simple method which somehow energizes larger groups of people. It brings people from different parts of an organization together in a fresh way, and teaches them new communication skills, by virtue of the unique way it is arranged.

The World Café model offers a powerful approach to managers, which if utilized correctly, could make a culture of marketing much easier to adopt. Research applications of the World Café method, meet many of the needs expressed above, leading to the effective functioning and sustainability of the organization (Bradbury, 2015).

In reviewing the literature, the existing research on The World Café, starting from the first work in 2001 (a doctoral thesis by Juanita Brown) to date (2019), was evaluated with a view to addressing the question of how the World Café model might be employed to promote a culture of marketing at a private institution of higher learning, using a qualitative approach. Clear guidelines were generated as to how an educational institution may be transformed into an environment where the majority of staff participate in promoting the institution in one way or another, by way of applying the TWC model. This model has been shown by researchers such as Brown and Isaacs (2005) and Brown and Hurley (2009) to be effective in bringing about positive organizational and community change by way of conversational leadership. "What we are discovering", according to Brown and Isaacs (2005, p 2), "is that the talking – the network of conversations – actually catalyzes action."

Significantly, if this qualitative evaluation of the extent to which staff perceive and experience the World Café model as an effective method of developing a culture of marketing is positive, the model could be applied in a similar way at other educational institutions

or even non-profit and community organizations, with a view to enhancing their staff participation in various areas of operation, thereby helping to ensure their financial sustainability, as well as improve staff morale in general during difficult times.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The research problem is one that is faced by many non-profit organizations today – that of financial sustainability, especially during an economic crisis. The specific issue faced at the the College in question, is that of gaining the participation of staff in promoting the institution, by way of creating a culture of marketing. The World Café model was chosen as a means to bring this about, since empirical research shows that this participative model has been effective in many contexts to bring about meaningful conversations and collaborative solutions. The research problem may be phrased in this way: How may the World Café model, as a comprehensive modern management tool, be employed in creating a culture of marketing at a private institution of higher learning?

SUB-PROBLEMS

The research problem may be broken down into the following sub-problems: How do the participants in the study understand the term “a culture of marketing”? After a World Café session on the topic of creating a culture of marketing, what has management done to bring about this goal at the selected institution? What evidence have participants seen as to a culture of marketing having been created on the campus as a result of the World Café session held in January? What commitments have participants in the study made to generate a culture of marketing at the institution in the future? What best-practice guidelines may be derived from the study, for creating a culture of marketing at a private higher institution of learning?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review investigated how the World Café Method has been used effectively in case studies and action research projects, to bring about sustained organizational change. The ground-breaking classic work on the World Café (Living Knowledge Through Conversations That Matter) was performed by Juanita Brown in her doctoral dissertation in 2001. This work, although it does not state it in these terms, shows clearly how the World Café method may be used to encourage a more participative approach in organizations and communities.

A major contribution of Brown’s (2001) research findings is that it demonstrates the ability of the World Café method to support conversational, collaborative learning and leadership in large groups of up to 1 200 persons. According to Faris (2014), a World Café session in Tel Aviv on 10 September, 2011, attracted over 2000 participants to discuss Israel’s future.

The research findings suggest a second unique contribution of the World Café method - its capacity to make more visible the role of conversation as an essential process for organizational change. Viewing organizations as dynamic and living networks of conversation, provides creative opportunities to come up with innovative strategies, bring about organizational learning, and develop leaders through the sharing of collective intelligence (Brown, 2001).

Brown, in collaboration with Isaacs (2005), published Brown’s (2001) dissertation as a book called: *The World Cafe: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter*. This book has become known as “The World Café Book”, as promoted on the official World Café website: <http://www.theworldcafe.com>.

As one of the few examples referring directly to how principles of the World Café Method may be employed in achieving a culture of marketing, McDonald’s founder posed the big question: “How can we assure a consistent hamburger for people who are traveling on the road?” Simply by asking that searching question, the company took the company to its dominant market position (Brown, Isaacs & Margulies (1999). The books and articles mentioned below make clear links to other successful applications of the World Café method.

Bradbury (2015) makes reference as to how the World Café Method improves participation in organizations, communities, educational institutions, hospitals, etcetera (Bradbury, 2015).

Fullarton and Palermo (2008) demonstrated clearly that TWC is superior to Large Group Facilitation as an evaluation tool in an educational context. This study shows how the World Cafe model could be useful to manage complexity within organizations by way of a participative approach.

Klev and Levin (2016) emphasize that participative learning and developmental processes are critical in bringing about organizational change. These authors suggest a style of learning and development that results in a self-sustaining developmental process, which is an integral part of the daily life of the organization. In accordance with the World Café method, this process develops options for action in order to achieve goals, followed by collective reflection on the results achieved. Reflection on one’s own practice can contribute to significant improvements, but may also contribute to new practices and new understanding. Thus, the World Café method could be used successfully in creating a culture of marketing at a private institution of higher learning, if adequate collective reflection is given to the results.

An example of a study which emphasizes the participatory and collaborative nature of the TWC conversational leadership model, is reported by Kotze, Seedat, and Kramer (2013, p. 494) who reported: “The [World Café] conversations were considered to have created a participative environment in which community members and external stakeholders could discuss potential solutions to

identified problems, thereby laying a foundation for future action. Additionally, the conversations were interpreted as promotive of relationship-building and collaboration opportunities...”.

The literature review gives evidence of the research ability of the problem, notably how The World Cafe model may be employed to bring about greater participation of staff in promoting a particular private institution of higher learning, thereby transforming the organization and making it financially sustainable during the current uncertain economic climate.

RESEARCH DESIGN

RESEARCH APPROACH

A qualitative approach was used, since this is a descriptive case study, based on an interpretative paradigm. Because limited research has been performed on the World Café Model, this leaves much room for descriptive investigation and analysis of a qualitative nature. The reflexivity, credibility and trustworthiness of the data collection and interpretation are described in full under Ethical Considerations. The questions asked during the World Café intervention, as well as those posed during the focus group and interviews, are valid, since they are based directly on the sub-problems, and have been formulated according to the scientific principles of questioning. The findings may be considered to be reliable and the results transferable to other small organizations, since great care was taken to ensure the reflexivity, credibility and trustworthiness of the data by way of triangulation, self-awareness and peer review. However, owing to the relatively small sample size, the results may not be generalizable to large organizations.

A cross-sectional approach was employed, as secondary and primary data were collected within a time-frame of six months, during January and June, 2019, respectively.

UNIT OF ANALYSIS AND SAMPLING

The unit of analysis is a focus group of 12 staff members, which comprises a purposive sample, since the participants were selected on the basis of their interest in the study and/or their involvement in marketing the institution. They were intentionally recruited to represent all of the departments and faculties (du Plooy, 2017). The 12-member focus group was fully representative of all of the departments and faculties involved in the original World Café session, and largely representative of the race groups and genders which were involved, thus:

Admin- istration	Cafeteria	Arts Faculty	Business Faculty	Theology Faculty	IT Depart- ment	Library	Mainte- nance	Manage- ment
2	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	2

Race group representation (with the two personal interviews and five electronic interviews taken into account): eight Europeans; two Indians; seven Coloureds; two Blacks.

Gender representation: eleven males; eight females. Sampling saturation was reached when no more individuals responded to the call for electronic interviews to be completed.

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

As an application of the World Café method, the session held as part of a staff development colloquium in January, is described below:

Groups of four to six gathered in the cafeteria, which had been recreated into a Café atmosphere with brightly coloured table cloths, flowers, eats and drinks and soft music. A large piece of poster paper and coloured pens and crayons were provided on each table. The purpose of the procedure was explained, and The World Café design principles and method briefly described. The staff were given two questions to address in their “conversation rounds”:

1. Describe what you would like to see at this institution for students to enrol.
2. In which ways could you help prospective students make this institution their varsity of choice?

The coordinator asked the participants to respond to these questions by writing, drawing or making designs on the poster paper. Each group moved to another table after a 15 minute-session, of which there were three in total. With each move, the “table host” was left behind to explain to the new group what had been done by the previous group. During the last “conversation round”, each group returned to their original table to regroup and sum up their responses to the questions. Then a feedback (“harvest”) session was conducted, in which the table hosts presented their posters to the whole group and gave a short account of their answers to the two questions, and stuck up their posters for all to see (<https://theworldcafe.com>).

Finally, the coordinator tried something unique and handed out sticky papers, asking the participants to write down personal commitments as to how they would contribute towards creating a culture of marketing, and stick them on the flip charts available. The drawings, diagrammes and notes which the participants had put down on their “table-cloths”, as well as the personal

commitments were then collected and carefully typed up by the researcher. Certain themes became apparent, based on the repeated patterns which emerged. See Analysis of Findings.

The researcher observed the implementation of the World Café model at the staff development session in January 2019. She faithfully collected the responses and commitments of the participants, and organized them to share with management. She has retained these artifacts, as well as photographs of the event as evidence, which will serve as secondary data for the study. Primary data were collected using a follow-up focus group with selected staff who participated in the January World Café session. The case study focus group was centred on what occurred at the World Café session. Categories were created by grouping similar responses together. These categories doubled as themes for a thematic analysis. In addition, informal observations of the researcher before, during and after TWC session were noted.

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS AND TECHNOLOGIES

The questions which were discussed by the focus group may be found under Sub-Problems. The full Focus Group Moderator Guide is available on request.

A voice recorder was used to record the entire focus group session, as well as the two personal interviews. The focus group session was also videographed by a professional videographer (files available on request). Transcriptions of the focus group discussion, as well as the personal and electronic interviews, are also available on request.

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

A two-phase process of analysis was employed: In the first phase the key themes were derived based on the data contained in the artefacts generated through TWC. These were used to guide questions for further exploration in the focus group discussions, which were then analysed in the second phase to build a deeper understanding of the original themes.

Codes have been assigned to the categories, for ease of interpretation:

Table 1: Categories and codes for thematic analysis of data

CATEGORIES	CODES
Marketing	MARK
Public relations	PR
Recruitment	REC
Customer service	CS
Registration	REG
Finance	FIN
Campus life	CL
Cafeteria	CAF
Academia	ACAD
Programmes	PROG
Spirituality	SPIR
Sport	SPOR
Commitment	COMMIT

SYNTHESIS OF DATA

The data from TWC session and from the follow-up focus group were summarised, then categorized and coded, using the above categories and codes. The final step was to interpret the data by way of a thematic analysis, using the above categories (themes). The results were synthesised in the form of a list of best practice guidelines for the application of TWC in bringing about a culture of marketing at a private institution of higher learning, emphasising the importance of thorough preparation and follow-up measures.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The proposal for this study was approved by the Research Coordinating Committee of the institution involved (document available on request). Since the researcher works at the institution involved in the study and is also an active member of the marketing committee, she was particularly aware that her desire to promote a culture of marketing could colour her perceptions and influence her interpretations so as to present the institution in a favourable light, and possibly exaggerate her findings in a subtle way.

To ensure reflexivity, the researcher continually monitored the research process according to accepted protocols, and engaged the oversight of an expert researcher at regular intervals. The researcher also remained conscious of her own impact on the research results, and intentionally guarded against subjective interpretation of the data.

Credibility of the study is assured by the fact that the study was piloted beforehand and that the findings are made public in an objective manner, avoiding bias and one-sidedness, by reporting the findings as accurately as possible, and by making sure interpretations are as close to the emic perspective of the participants as possible (through empathy and member checks). The researcher assures the reader that there is no misrepresentation of facts, concealment or distortion of the truth, or fabrication.

Trustworthiness was ensured by using triangulation of data collection methods (focus group, interviews and observation), and by making sure that the data was rendered truthfully and interpreted accurately in accordance with the data collection and analysis procedures specified. Thereby, confidence may be had in the findings (du Plooy, 2017). The secondary data was scrutinised by the full senate, who acted as a critical analytical team to ensure the trustworthiness of the data collected at the World Café session. Informed consent was gained from all of the subjects who participated in the focus group to be conducted in June 2019, for the collection of the primary data (document available on request). The participants were assured that they would remain anonymous and that the greatest care would be taken not to implicate them in any references which will be made in the published report. They were each given a number, which they stated each time they spoke, to anonymize the data. If names were mentioned by the participants, the transcription rendered the name as [a/my colleague].

Empirical evidence by way of quotations are included in the discussion, and photographs demonstrating the design principles in action are included in Appendix 1, to substantiate the analytic findings.

For future studies, it may be advisable to gain the informed consent of all of the participants in the World Café intervention before the case study begins, so that the data collected during the intervention may be used as primary (as opposed to secondary) data, along with the data collected during the focus group and interviews.

MAIN FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The study found that an application of the World Café model did indeed make an impact in terms of generating a culture of marketing among the staff at a private higher institution of learning. Thus, the main objective of the study was fulfilled. The unique aspect of this study was that the staff were prepared to commit to the recommendations they had made themselves and take ownership of sustaining a culture of marketing in the organization. The considerable number of heartfelt commitments made by the staff were the most encouraging aspect of the study. For example: "I plan to market the soon to be created Helderberg International Language Center of Influence to international markets in order to evangelize and promote the College and thus create an international presence". "What I posted up on the board at the end of the session was to refrain from any negative talk directed towards the institution when in company. Basically, working on the principle of rather building up, than breaking down". "Word of mouth. The Health Expo for Theology students next year. That is one thing that I will be involved in. And Education Day 17 August 2019". "Run the pizza oven project". "I would love to be the brand ambassador for Helderberg College in my personal capacity. Be willing and available and sometimes volunteer to go and promote the College. Wear branded clothing in public spaces. Enter a race for HCHE (maximum 15 km). This is something I have purposed in my heart to do".

The study has corroborated the findings of previous empirical studies in that the application of TWC model has once again shown itself to be an excellent conversation generator and collaborative problem solver. The study has achieved its objectives in the following way: It has demonstrated how a marketing culture may be brought about by way of The World Café model through participation in problem solving. It has also generated 12 best-practice principles relating specifically to the College's preparation and follow-up efforts before and after TWC session. Using this unique conversation leadership approach and the collective intelligence of all employees, rich data were collected from staff representing all departments and faculties.

Clearly the World Café session made a tangible and visible difference, as evidenced by the many personal accounts of growth and change, and specific examples of improvement mentioned by the participants. The most heart-warming result of the study was the overwhelming number of commitments the staff made to help build a culture of marketing at the institution. These commitments were freely given at the initial World Café session, as well as at the focus group and interviews. The level of participation may be described as highly cooperative. Moreover, the vast majority of staff were prepared to take responsibility for creating a culture of marketing at the institution. In general, the researcher observed that an improved staff morale and positive attitude among staff was evidenced by a number of commitments to become brand ambassadors for the institution, and to take care to speak only positively of the institution in future. It is safe to say that the World Café model may be used as a positive means of strengthening communities during times of economic and other uncertainty such as the College in question was facing.

The results may be explained against the background of TWC model which emphasizes the powerful sense of commitment which occurs when a safe space is created for everyone's contributions to be acknowledged and appreciated (Brown & Isaacs in Seng, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross & Smith, 1999). Best practice principles were established, such as the following: As long as the results are measured in terms of follow-up sessions and evaluation of Facebook page statistics, and as long as management abides by its commitments to support staff members to fulfill their personal commitments and encourage staff participation – and most importantly – reflect on and follow up on the results, the culture of marketing at this institution could be sustainable. In the words of Hurley and Brown (2009, p.6), "Research and best practices in every sector are demonstrating that successful outcomes and measurable results are more likely when we bring the voices of all key stakeholders to bear on critical issues using face-to-face ... technologies carefully chosen to foster effective solutions." The World Café model is just such a "face-to-face technology". World Café sessions will hopefully become a regular part of staff training and even be included in staff policy at Helderberg College of Higher Education and other educational, community and corporate institutions.

The World Café is only one of a plethora of similar collaborative approaches (such as Appreciative Inquiry, Open Space, Scenario Planning and Future Search), which stimulate interactive conversations within organizations of many kinds (Hurley & Brown, 2009). The literature gives evidence that the conversational leadership approach expressed in the World Café model, may be used effectively to assist non-profit organizations and communities, which are struggling with ways to gain the participation of employees in promoting the organization, thereby making it financially sustainable in uncertain economic times.

The significance of this study, is that the World Café model has proved its power as a collaborative tool to engender useful conversations which address real problems. The importance of this study is that it shows how TWC model may be used to bring about the commitment of people in effecting sustainability in times of uncertainty, such as the Covid-19 pandemic has caused. It is believed that this study makes a unique contribution to the field of corporative communication, in that it demonstrates how conversational leadership and fully engaged staff members may address just about any issue, if they follow the creative design principles of the World Café Model.

REFERENCES

- Angelopulo, G. C. & Barker, R. (2013). *Integrated Organizational Communication with CDROM*. Cape Town: Juta.
- Arivanathan, M. (2015). *WORLD CAFÉ: Dynamic iteration on key discussion questions*. Retrieved from https://www.unicef.org/knowledge.exchange/files/World_Cafe_production.pdf
- Bradbury, H., 2015, *The Sage Handbook of Action Research*, 3rd ed., Oregon Health & Science University, U.S.A.: SAGE Publications, Ltd.
- Brown, J. & Isaacs, D. (2001). The World Café: living knowledge through conversations that matter. *The Systems Thinker*. 12 (5), 1-5.
- Brown, J. with Isaacs D. and the World Café Community (2005). *The World Café: shaping our futures through conversations that matter*. Retrieved February 22, 2019, from <http://www.amazon.com/review>
- Brown, J., Isaacs, D. & Margulies, N. In Senge, P., Roberts, C., Rose, R., Smith, B., Roth, G., & Kleiner, A. (1999). *Asking Big Questions. A catalyst for strategy evolution*. Retrieved November 15, 2019, from <https://www.amazon.com/World-Cafe%C3%A9-Shaping-Futures-Conversations/dp/1576752585>
- Du Plooy, G. M. (2017). *Communication Research. Techniques, Methods and Applications*, 2nd ed., Cape Town: Juta.
- Faris, L. (2014). *The World Café: we are wiser together. An interview with Amy Lenzo, Director of Word Café Learning Programs. The Collaborative Services Blog*.
- Fullarton, C. & Palermo, J. (2008). Evaluation of a large group method in an educational institution: The World Café versus Large Group facilitation. *Journal of Institutional Research*. 14 (1), 109-117.
- Garfield, S. (2018). 10 types of knowledge management strategies. Retrieved August 2, 2019, from <https://medium.com/@stangarfield/10-types-of-knowledge-management-strategiesf947f28599a7>
- Hurley, T. J. & Brown, J. (November, 2009). *Conversational leadership: thinking together for a change*. *Systems Thinker*. 10 (9), 2-7.
- Klev, R. & Levin, M. (2016). *Participative Transformation. Learning and Development in Practising Change*, London: Routledge.
- Kotze, M, Seedat, M., Kramer, S., & Suffla, S. (2013). Community conversations as community engagement: hosts' reflections. *South African Journal of Psychology*. 43(4), 494-505. Retrieved February 2019, from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0081246313508353>

Prof Carol Sutcliffe
Faculty of Social Sciences & Education
Helderberg College of Higher Education,
Annandale Drive, Somerset West, Cape Town, South Africa
Email: sutcliffec@hche.ac.za

Appendix 1: Figures



Figure 1 Coordinator observing World Café session. Design principles in action: set the context; create hospitable space.



Figure 2 Participants engaging at World Café session. Design principles in action: explore questions that matter; encourage everyone's contributions.



Figure 3 Participants listening intently to each other at World Café session. Design principles in action: listen together for insights; connect diverse perspectives.



Figure 4 Feedback session (the “harvest”) at World Café session. Design principle in action: share collective discoveries.