

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING: WORKING WITH WORLD CAFÉ METHODOLOGY IN A POSTGRADUATE STUDY COURSE FOR FUTURE EDUCATORS

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Abstract

The paper explores the connections between collaborative learning and the World Café methodology in an educational basis. World Café was used in a large group of postgraduate students. The aim was to discover at which extent would support the communication of individual ideas and producing new collective ones. Research on a postgraduate level, find students coming from different institutional and working environments, sharing diverse interdisciplinary backgrounds. The article claims that innovative forms of collaborative learning, as the World Café is, shape a desirable alternative way for students to experience their journey to knowledge. Our particular work with the students included interactive practices that focused on reflecting on real problems regarding education today. The article describes and analyses the method both as a practice to be researched as well as a useful flexible format to investigate educational issues. This paper argues the extensive interest in the methodology, highlighting the benefits of working with the World Café, a creative process based on dialogue, co-creation and collective knowledge. The results of the evaluation and the overall feedback from students showed that this particular method had a strong impact on their interaction and communication skills, introducing a new perspective for learning.

Keywords: collaborative learning, creative process, reflection, World Café methodology, future educators

1. INTRODUCTION

World Café is an easy-to-use method for creating a vibrant network of collaborative dialogue around a topic or issue of interest or concern to a group of people. The Café process has been used in many different cultures, among many different age groups, for many different purposes, and in many different types of communities and organizations (Brown, J, Isaacs, D 2005). Through key questions, participants are invited to an effort of creative thinking and elaboration of new ideas, which will emerge from the discussion. (The World Café Community Foundation 2021). The purpose of this paper is not to present the method in detail, but after giving a brief description of its stages, to focus on points that highlight it as important for its integration in the training of future educators. These data result from the application of the method in the framework of the Inter-department Post Graduate Program "Pedagogy through Innovative Technologies and Biomedical Approaches" of the University of West Attica (Uniwa) with which we have been collaborating consistently. They are also supported by ongoing postgraduate research from the same University.

2. ABOUT THE METHOD

The World Café is a method of conducting an experiential workshop in working groups. It is a creative process to facilitate collaboration, dialogue and exchange of knowledge and ideas, to create lively discussion and action. It is an innovative approach to highlighting and gathering collective knowledge through active listening and meaningful dialogue. Participants experience self-organization and self-regulation of the group, deepening of a topic, sharing and multiplication of knowledge. Leaderless groups are effective as educational tools (Rogers 1991, p.158). The ideas of the small groups are connected, multiplied and creatively fertilized, as new aspects of the topic are illuminated by questions that focus and deepen on a topic of interest and concern to all participants. (Brown & Issacs 2005). It

should be stressed here that one of the main purposes of each member is to find ways of referring to the other members of the group and to himself. (Rogers 1991, 27). At the end of the process, the main points are summarised and discussed in plenary.

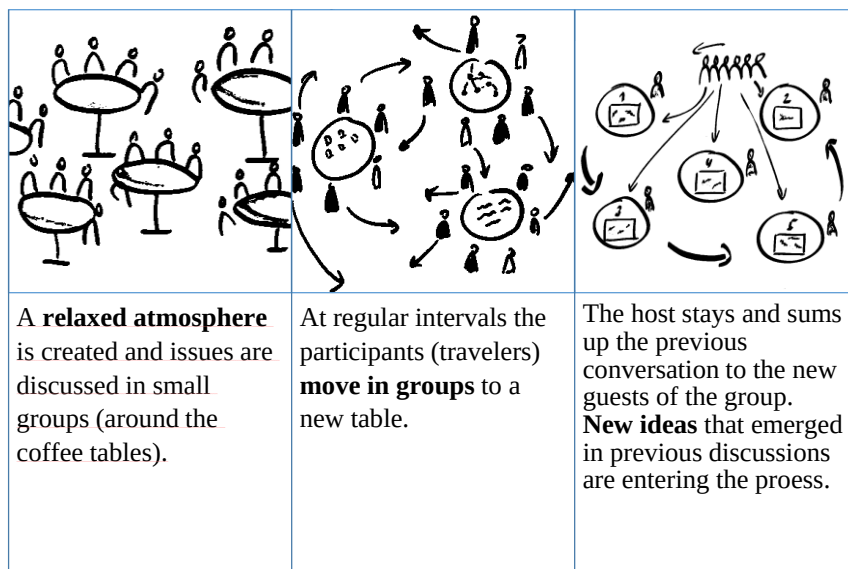


Fig. 1. The stages of the process

The basic process is simple. The World Café Community Foundation (2021) describes a basic model as follows:

- **Setting:** Create a “special” environment, most often modelled after a café.
- **Welcome and Introduction:** The host begins with a warm welcome and an introduction to the World Café process, setting the context and sharing the Cafe Etiquette.
- **Small-Group Rounds:** The process begins with the first of three or more twenty-minute rounds of conversation for small groups of four (five maximum) people seated around a table. At the end of the twenty minutes, each member of the group moves to a different new table. They may or may not choose to leave one person 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.
- **Questions:** each round is prefaced with a question specially crafted for the specific context.
- **Harvest:** After the small groups, individuals are invited to share insights or other results from their conversations with the rest of the large group. These results are reflected visually in a variety of ways.

For a figurative understanding of the methodology, Fig.1 shows the stages of the process while Fig.2, below, depicts the workflow. World Café has, also, set a number of design principles. As The World Café Community Foundation (2021) states, these are an integrated set of ideas and practices that form the basis of the pattern embodied in the World Café process.

- 1) Set the Context
- 2) Create Hospitable Space
- 3) Explore Questions that Matter
- 4) Encourage Everyone’s Contribution
- 5) Connect Diverse Perspectives

- 6) Listen together for Patterns and Insights
- 7) Share Collective Discoveries

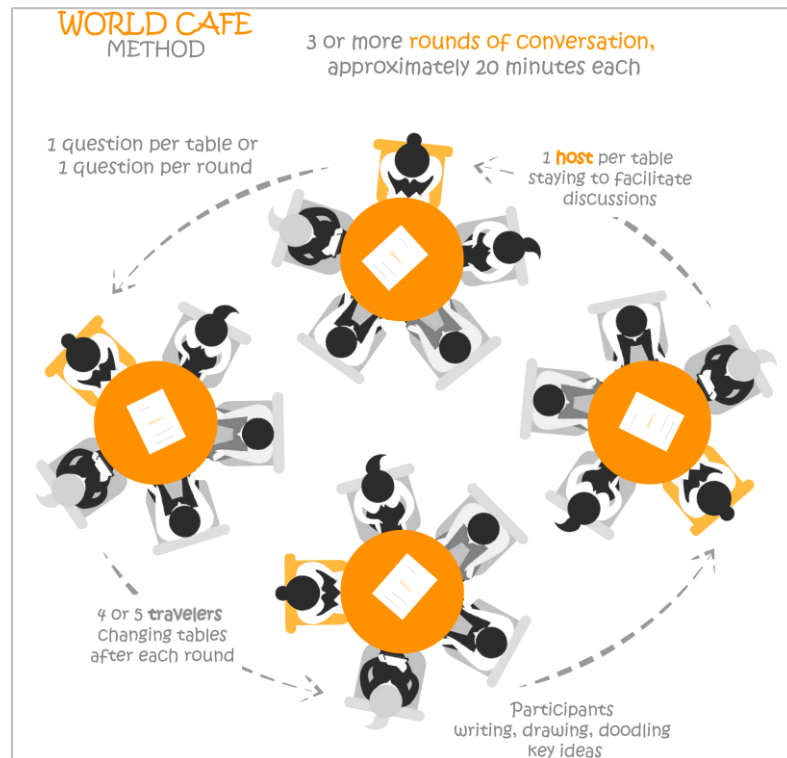


Fig. 2. Workflow of the World Café Method

Source: <https://urbact.eu>

From the above context, it is easy to see that this is a process that stimulates innovative thinking and enables the exploration of possibilities for action around different issues and questions. Without doubt it is a form of experiential learning as participants plan, test and make decisions, perform, reflect and contrast and get feedback (Jaques 2004, p.20). This interactive method engages people meeting for the first time in authentic conversation. It is a particularly fruitful process when large audiences are involved to share their knowledge. When we studied the method and saw examples of its application, we immediately realised the potential of its application in the context of training future educators.

3. IMPLEMENTATION

3.1. First years of implementation (2017-19)

In the context of the course "Contemporary Trends in Pedagogical Science" we applied the World Café technique in practice to two cycles of students of the Master's Programme. There were 100 students and the place where we worked was the faculty auditorium. After the method was presented in detail the students were invited to participate experientially in a World Café with educational topics. The questions asked were:

- What makes learning difficult and what is conducive to learning?
- What are the roles of the teacher?
- In what ways does a teacher foster good interpersonal relationships in school?

The questions we asked were general, to serve as a basis for a first contact with the method. We set progressive rounds of conversation. A timetable was made according to the principles of the methodology and the students moved according to it under our discretionary guidance. As participants in this process we had the opportunity to see a collaborative process working in practice that developed into a productive dialogue. The students respected the protocol and operated based on the principles of the World Café. We were also pleased to find that their interest and participation was lively and increased as the stages of the process progressed.

3.2. Online implementation (2019-20)

As Fruchter (2001) claims the roles of information technology (IT) as mediator and facilitator for improved communication and cooperation within teams support the diverse modes of interaction over time and space. The *World Café* method can be used during virtual meetings to organize an online collaborative exercise. A good preparation and facilitation of the exercise are required. There are tools that can be used to organise an online meeting and split the participants into separate sessions (e.g. ZOOM Breakout rooms) and assign each session to a facilitator. Participants have to discuss a question during around 20 minutes. Eventually, all participants are brought to the plenary session. This process can be repeated as many times as necessary. In parallel, a virtual collaborative whiteboard (Miro, Mural, Jamboard, Google doc) can be prepared to allow participants to take notes during each round of discussion. It allows facilitators to follow all the sessions live and to give feedback to the participants, back in the plenary session. This virtual whiteboard can be used to gather and summarize the outcomes of the World Café discussions in a document and share it with participants (URBACT, n.d.)

In our case, the method was applied remotely due to the conditions imposed by covid-19. The questions given to the students for processing were the same as in the previous year. The number of students who participated in this synchronous collaboration was more than 100 students. Adapting the method to the conditions, students were organized into 4 teams (red team, blue team, green team, purple team) and worked by combining Teams Meeting and Google docs. The participants were encouraged to write key ideas on the Google docs. This online word processor allows users to create and edit documents online while collaborating with other users in real-time. In this way, the space was given to record ideas and opinions of all by creating collaborative texts. Members of all groups edited the Google docs and contributed their thoughts by writing in the colour that represented their group. The outcomes of the discussions were gathered in different documents shared with all participants. In the end, a colourful mosaic was created that represented the progression of an idea, the evolution and the diversity of the participants.

Immediately after the end of the application, direct feedback was sought from the students who were asked: "*What they thought of the World Café technique*". As a feedback tool, Answergarden was used. From the feedback, the technique had a positive response. In the positive evaluations received the technique was rated as interesting (21), constructive (7), creative (6) interactive (6), engaging (3) playful (3) unconventional (3), alternative (2), innovative (2), challenging (2), different (2). Negative ratings were significantly lower in number. Some of which were the following: time consuming (1), stressful (1), chaotic (1), deficient (1), tiring (1) difficult to implement (1). The full set of responses can be found here: <https://answergarden.ch/1208741>

This was followed by an evaluation of the students, organised in such a way that the individual elements of the method were assessed. Google forms were used. The students were asked to evaluate a) the method itself b) the process of participation c) the contribution of the teachers and finally d) the distance application. To illustrate, regarding the method, the majority of students felt that the approach contributed to their knowledge (see Table 1).

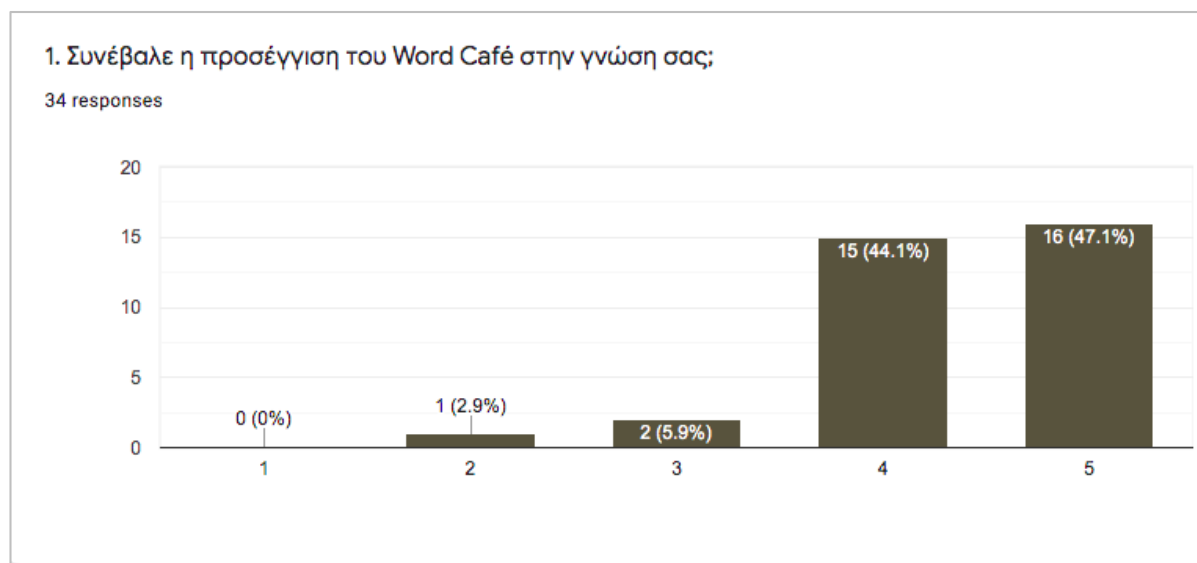


Table 1. Did the World Café approach contribute to your knowledge?

In response to the question, *"which aspects of the approach did you find useful?"*, the majority of students answered that the organisation of travellers and hosts was of particular interest (35.5%), while a large percentage of students (23.5%) found the process of circular questions leading to a deeper understanding of the topic useful. The plenary discussion was of interest to 20.6% of students. This was followed in smaller percentages by the option of participants to plan or participate silently (11.8%) and the idea of active listening and the talking stick (8.8%) (see Table 2).

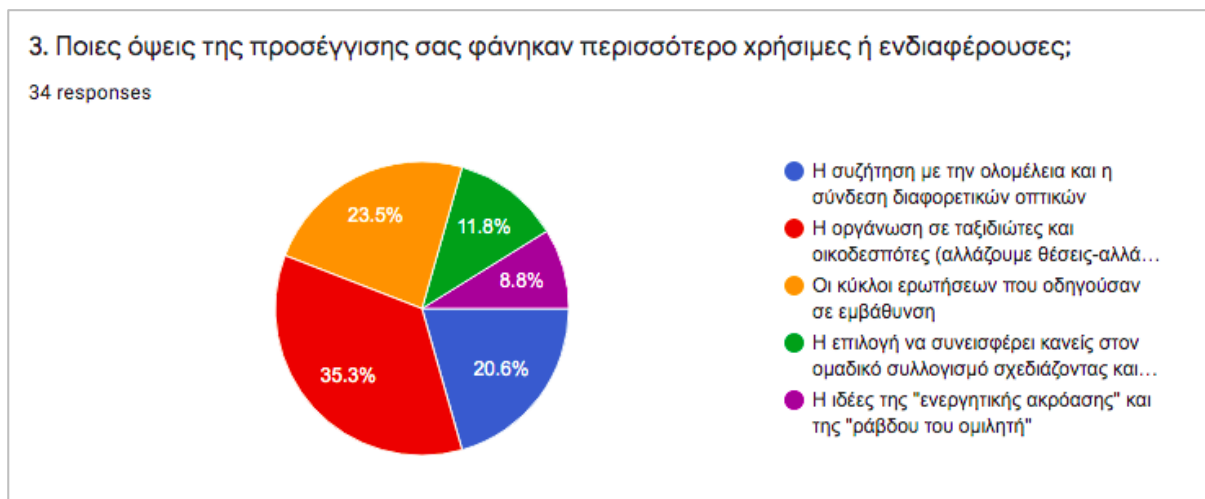


Table 2. Which aspects of the World Café did you find useful?

One of the key questions related to the experimental distance application asked students to rate whether the quality of the experience of this approach would be more enhanced if it were face-to-face. Here the results were quite clear. 70.6% answered "definitely yes" and 20.6% "yes" as can be seen in Table 3. Taking this evaluation very seriously we made similar decisions next year.

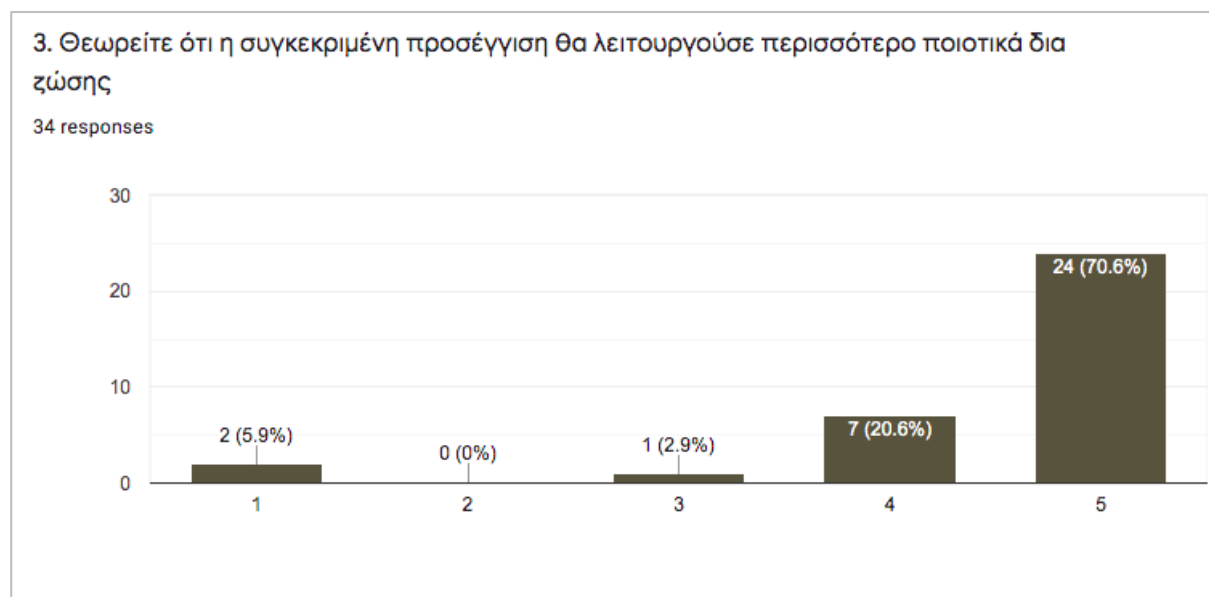


Table 3. Do you think the method would work better if it were face to face?

3.3. Presentation and potential implementation (2020-21)

Based on feedback from the previous year, as the courses continue to be delivered remotely due to covid-19, we chose to present the method rather than implement it. After presenting the method and the examples presented we asked students to give us feedback. Table 4 captures the positive impression of 106 students which ranged at very high levels. On a scale of 1-10 42.5% rated the method with 10 as indicated by the presentation. A 26.4% gave a 9 followed by 24.5% who gave an 8. The percentages of students with a less positive impression, but always above average, are significantly lower as shown in Table 4.

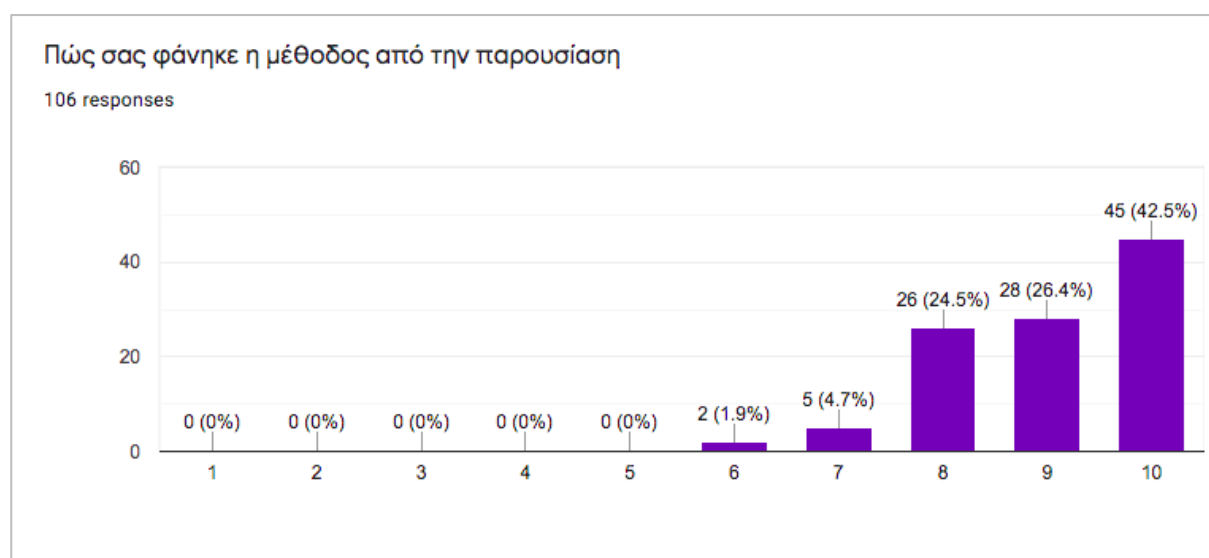


Table 4. What did you think of the method from the presentation?

Students were also asked to fill in anything they wanted freely. The originality of the method and its contribution to collective knowledge is highlighted there. One student said that "it is a method that I

heard for the first time, very interesting, and that through discussion it will help us in our personal development". Another said that he found the method "very interesting", noting that it is a "non-directive approach that promotes critical thinking". Students describe the method as a "creative", "communicative", "constructive", "interesting" and "interactive" process.

In addition, in the benefits we clearly see the characteristic of cooperation that can work cross-culturally *"It is an excellent method and beyond the results for the issue at hand, through a value system of respect-equality, channels of communication, socialization and possibly the development of new interpersonal relationships are created. Also, having the element of looseness ("company") could inspire and, over the years, penetrate the culture of a people"*.

It was also noted by many students that they would like to try it out in person "to see how it works". As one student says, "I would like to participate in an exercise to prepare to implement it as a facilitator".

4. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

We conclude that the World Café is a good, simple process for bringing people together around questions that matter. It is founded on the assumption that people have the capacity to work together (Brown & Isaacs 2005, p. ix). The dynamic of the application of this innovative approach lies in the fact that it is a catalytic tool of a process such as that of authentic evaluation. In recent years there has been a shift that starts from the teachers' own need for quality improvement and is reinforced by the knowledge and promotion of evaluation as a tool that solves problems, promotes innovation, improves everyday life in the school environment and expands knowledge through reflection.

In addition, this innovative process offers us the opportunity to invent new ways to make a significant change in our lives or work. The power of conversation is so subtle and natural that we often overlook it. But to harness it effectively for the benefit of children, parents and educators, we need to understand it as a key process.

The size of a group is directly related to the characteristics of the group which vary according to its members (Jaques 2004, p.34). The ideas of smaller groups are linked together and creatively fertilized as new aspects are illuminated by questions that focus and deepen on a topic of interest and concern to all participants. Through the experiential workshop, educators are given the opportunity to exchange views, share knowledge, and multiply ideas in a collaborative group environment where creativity and communication are fostered. It is a creative process that aims both to facilitate collaboration through the exchange of knowledge and ideas and to generate lively discussion and action.

The experiential learning cycle is based on the assumption that participants learn best when they are active, when they are in charge of their personal learning and when they can relate and apply the knowledge they receive to their personal context (Kolb in Jaques 2004, p.98). In this direction, current research which is in progress in the field highlights the need for practicing educators to support their pedagogical work with innovative activities, in particular the World Café. In particular, in a survey under the supervision of Dr. Trifaini Sidiropoulou, which is currently underway, the sample, in a large majority, had either heard from colleagues in the field, or had participated, even once, or had attended a training conference as a presentation (Provata 2021). Their experience was recorded in the survey as very positive and all the educators expressed a desire for this activity to become a permanent and stable activity. This development shows that the dissemination of the method has worked positively, and we are particularly pleased with our contribution to the creation of a network of collaborative dialogue.

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