

# World Cafe

World Cafe is a way to bring people together in simultaneous rounds of conversation about questions that matter.

It follows a simple process:

- Participants start a conversation with people at their host table and move to other tables to continue the conversation with different people.
- The more conversations they share, the broader their perspective becomes and the more likely they are to understand new ideas.
- Towards the closing stages, people move back to their host table and share their experiences, new insights and understanding.

The process was developed by Juanita Brown and David Isaacs after observing how groups of people naturally converse with one another. World Café is underpinned by the following seven principles:

- 1** A clear context for the conversation
- 2** Creation of a hospitable space to talk together
- 3** Questions that matter and you don't already have the answers to
- 4** Encouraging contributions by everyone
- 5** Connection of diverse viewpoints
- 6** Listening together for insights
- 7** Sharing collective discoveries

## What is to be achieved?

World Cafe brings people together to explore issues and surface areas of commonality/divergence to establish a way forward in decision making.

It can be used to bring people together who do not regularly mix such as:

- health consumers from across South Australia to explore changes to the healthcare provision; or
- business groups to explore the challenges facing employers and to propose strategies for further consideration.

World Cafe is less suitable for groups of people:

- who are highly vulnerable e.g. victims of domestic violence, refugees
- with poor language skills
- with speech and hearing disabilities
- with different languages.

## What is the format?

- A World Cafe conversation is based around a question that matters to groups of people seated at tables of between 4 – 8.
- A lead facilitator sets the context for the conversation, establishes the ground rules and introduces the question.
- A single, well considered and structured question encourages participants to deeply explore a topic.
- After a period of time (between 10 – 20 minutes for a 90 minute session) some of the participants from each table move to another table so they can converse with different people.

A World Cafe can vary in length from one hour to several days depending on the overall purpose for the conversation and its complexity. For example it can be conducted:

- during a 2 to 3 hour morning session to uncover underlying issues for action planning at an afternoon workshop
- in preparation for a deliberative panel process conducted over a number of weekends.

A series of cafes may be conducted over a period of weeks to work through a number of complex issues with diverse groups of people.

## Online use of the tool?

World Cafes can be conducted on-line using the right tools like Zoom, Mural or Microsoft Teams. You could use breakout rooms in place of each table and work out a process in which participants will go in and out of each room and chat to each other. There are other more sophisticated tools such as [we Dialogue](#) that you could also explore.

Feedback from participants who have participated in international on-line cafes indicate the conversations are still rich and enlightening. The main drawback is the challenge of using technology, when the digital skills of participants vary as well as their accessibility to computers or digital devices.

## What to consider?

### The question for a World Cafe

Consider the following when selecting the question for a World Cafe:

1. Use an open question to encourage open conversation
2. Draft the question to be about “you/we/ they”. For example, “What challenges do you face in your work?” will generate a different conversation to “What challenges do they (eg. management) face in their work?”
3. Leave assumptions based on your own beliefs and values out of the question, eg. “Why do homeless people not keep themselves cleaner?”.

### Space for people to move around

World Cafes need a large space to enable people to move from table to table easily. The tables need to be far enough apart so the conversations at the different tables do not drown one another out.

The host will greet new people as they arrive and will summarise talking points from a previous conversation before the conversations resumes.

### Hosts at each table to meet your guests

Asking members of the public to act as a table host limits their contribution to the conversations. They might need to deal with any tension that might arise at the table, hence, it is best to train staff or to call for members of the public to act as hosts and provide training for them.

## World Café

### **Lots of marker pens for recording notes**

The note taking philosophy of World Cafe is that participants record their own notes with marker pens on paper covering the table like a tablecloth. Generally people are not used to doing the recording at community meetings and they need lots of encouragement and reminders to do it.

### **Let everyone convey their ideas**

Hosts can record dot points about things they want to capture from the conversations. World Cafe etiquette or ground rules are introduced by the lead facilitator and may be restated by the table hosts. They include listening to understand and not interrupting, treating one another with respect, and contributing ideas.

## How to use the World Cafe tool?

### Before the session

- Have a clear purpose for holding the World Cafe.
- Hire a facilitator and organise training for table hosts.
- Workshop the question or questions with the facilitator, organising staff and key stakeholders.
- Select a venue, a date and decide on the format for the World Cafe.
- Promote the session outlining the context and providing basic information about the process.
- Manage registrations, organise catering and venue arrangements, set up venue.
- Place paper and pens, handout materials and table etiquette list or ground rules on tables.
- Brief the table hosts and answer any questions they may have.

### During the session

- The lead facilitator:
  - welcomes everyone
  - sets the context for the session
  - introduces the World Cafe etiquette or ground rules
  - presents the topic question
  - invites everyone to enter into the conversation at their tables.
- The table hosts invite everyone to introduce themselves and then begin the conversation.
- After a period of time the lead facilitator rings a bell to indicate it is time for people to move randomly to another table.
- After a number of rounds, participants return to their original tables and share what they have heard and learned.
- To share what has come out of the conversations, each table group may present a key statement/insight/idea or every participant at a table may write down 1-3 things that came out of the conversation for them.
  - You can use a visual display or arrange them on a sticky wall in themes. This option is visually powerful and accessible and it avoids the “groan zone” that can occur when groups restate every word verbatim from their notes with no summary or convergent views.

### After the session

- Gather all the recorded information from the session and write up the notes .
- Distribute a summary of the notes to participants, staff/management, key stakeholders.
- Facilitate a debrief with support staff and key stakeholders.

## Resource required?

- A lead facilitator.
- Table hosts and/or note takers (depending on the group).
- Spacious venue with wall space for “sticky walls” (if you are using them) round tables of between four to eight people (many organisers choose to make the venue look like a cafe with flowers on the tables).
- Pens and paper tablecloths or flipchart paper and “post it” notes for participants to write on.
- Catering.
- Data projector, laptop, screen.
- Etiquette list / ground rules on the tables and posted around the room.

## How to evaluate?

- Ask participants for verbal feedback at the end of the session or invite them to complete a written evaluation form.
- Contact participants after the session and ask for feedback.
- Debrief with the lead facilitator, table hosts and supporting staff and use feedback to make improvements to future sessions.
- Review the response to the topic question.
- Measure the effectiveness of the process for identifying common themes, areas of divergence or specific actions.

## Tips and hints

### Lead facilitator

The lead facilitator needs to listen for the ebb and flow of conversation and time the table moves to maintain the energy in the room.

### Negative behaviour

If there is any negative behaviour among participants, table hosts may refer everyone to the ground rules and redirect the conversation by doing a brief summary of the ideas shared. If necessary, request support from the lead facilitator.

### Face to face conversations

Round tables help with face to face conversations and you may choose to set the room up and decorate it like a cafe.

### People's attendance

Be prepared to adjust the number of people at each table to suit the number of participants.

### Recording ideas

Table hosts to ask people to record their views.

**Role of the host**

Table hosts should stay in their role and not take on the role of advisor/director

**Read the signs**

Some people take some time to contribute to the conversation. Signs such as taking a deep breath, moving forward, raising a finger, squaring their shoulders might suggest they are ready to participate.

**Invitations**

Frame the invitation around the context for the conversation such as “A community conversation about health and wellbeing”; or “World Cafe: A place for a community conversation about health and wellbeing”

## Case Study

**Partnering with Directive Carers Policy**

SA Health worked with Carers SA and Health Consumers Alliance SA to develop the [new Partnering with Carers Policy Directive](#) in consultation with carers to reflect the priorities and needs of carers and establish principles and standards.

A range of consultative methods were undertaken in developing the policy, including social media, and a World Café event “SA Health Carers Engagement Forum” which was held on 30 September 2014. The forum brought together carers from across South Australia to gather input on their priorities and to explore what was important to them.

## References

[The world café](#)

Publication: [The World Cafe Book: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations that Matter by Juanita Brown and David Isaacs with the World Café Community of Practice.](#)

## Further resources

[The Systems Thinker: the world cafe: living knowledge through conversations that matter](#)

[The World Café: Participedia](#)

[The world café: Involve UK](#)

[Watch this video featuring Juanita Brown as she gives a quick overview of what the World Café is.](#)

[Read some case studies from World Cafes hosted around the world for further inspiration.](#)