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Collective Thinking for Extension Practice: A Time and Place for World Café

Abstract

World café (WC) is a structured methodology that provides an opportunity for collective thinking through open dialogue. The WC concept affords the opportunity for individuals to engage in the sharing of ideas and knowledge. Participants rotate through timed discussions on different themes with different groups of individuals, providing for an intermixing of ideas. Facilitators benefit from accessing dialogue output and ideas related to chosen topics of discussion as a result of collective input. Extension professionals should consider WC for increasing communication and generating shared knowledge. Our approach to WC was implemented at the 2016 National Health Outreach Conference.

Keywords: [world café](#), [collaborative thinking](#), [interactive methodology](#), [professional development](#)

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Within Extension, it is essential for personnel to explore different methods for gathering stakeholder and constituent input (Bitsch, Ferris, & Lee, 2009; Ripley, 2011). World café (WC) is a structured methodology that provides an opportunity for collective thinking through open dialogue. WC assumes that participants have knowledge and experience to communicate to others (Kempnich & Costanzo, 2014). The structure of this networking methodology provides the opportunity for growth and development in explorations, knowledge sharing, and generation of innovative ideas (Schieffer, Isaacs, & Gyllenpalm, 2004).

The concept is simple: engaged dialogue focused on information exchange and the generation of ideas for social action conducted in a relaxed environment with peers (Anderson, 2011). Participants are challenged to generate visioning for community development and viable solutions for real-life situations (Burke & Sheldon, 2010). Prior to beginning the WC, facilitators identify topics to be discussed throughout the session and participants are organized in small groups, each at a table. Once ground rules have been established, the dialogue can officially begin. After a preset amount of time, typically 15–20 min, participants move to another table with a different group of individuals. This format allows for intermixing of ideas for each topic. Participants take notes on each discussion to gain a clearer picture of proposed ideas. A host is placed at each table to summarize and facilitate fluid movement between conversations (Burke & Sheldon, 2010).

The overall goal of WC is to bring an emancipatory nature to discussions and voice to stakeholders and community members (Aldred, 2009). When preparing to conduct a successful WC, one must begin by determining the context and identifying relevant potential participants to ensure that the purpose and goals of the WC will be upheld (Schieffer et al., 2004). Facilitators must effectively communicate the concept of WC to

prepare individuals for participation. This task includes examining the role of power and supporting an environment built on authenticity and mutual respect (Delaney, Daley, & Lajoie, 2006). Next, conversation-starting questions must be used to initiate opportunities for participants to ask deeper questions (Schieffer et al., 2004). Table hosts should listen for patterns in responses, encourage equitable participation, and decipher and share collaborative discoveries with subsequent groups. WC provides an innovative way to generate collaborative visions through engaged collective dialogue.

Our Approach to WC

We implemented the WC approach during a preconference session of the 2016 National Health Outreach Conference (NHOC). The preconference planner suggested implementing a WC as a robust and interactive way to engage generative discussion around content related to efforts by the National Cooperative Extension Health Implementation Teams. This conference came at the midway point during the 2015–2018 implementation teams' program of work. The focuses of the five implementation teams are positive youth development for health, health literacy action, chronic disease prevention and management, health insurance literacy, and health in all policies education. The WC facilitators devised a plan to accommodate organized groups with 80 participants in five rounds of discussion. The purpose was to provoke discussion around the implementation teams' current progress and encourage further input from other Extension professionals around the United States. Herein we describe our use of WC so that others may adapt our method for use in other contexts.

WC Setup

In our WC event, two tables were assigned to each topic. For each topic, six questions were used as discussion prompts (three questions per table); participants could visit both tables for a topic and engage in discussion for all the associated questions. Over the course of five rounds, participants were encouraged to visit one table for each of the five topics or select a couple of topics and visit both tables for each of those topics.

When preparing questions for a WC, it is important to develop broad-based, semistructured questions that are focused on the goals of the WC. The following questions from our WC serve as examples of questions that are semistructured and relevant to the work of all involved:

- What are lessons learned from the past century that can be applied today, and in the future, to impact health in the United States?
- How can the work of Extension engage target audiences?
- How can land-grant universities be recognized through research, academic, and outreach programs when they are part of complex and multiorganizational partnerships?

The numbers of tables, questions, and rounds will vary according to the specific needs of an audience.

In our WC event, two observers took field notes, and their notes indicated that most participants were engaged in all conversations. Often a group would begin by asking clarifying questions about the previous group's notes. Then the group would participate in further discussion around the topic and questions posed. Notes written on flip-charts were transcribed and shared with the implementation teams. A preconference summary of overarching themes and topics discussed at the WC was developed. This summary was reported at the opening general session of the conference. Overall, the data collected served as valuable feedback for implementation teams at

the halfway point in a multiyear effort to develop programs of work. The WC allowed Extension professionals from across the United States to be a part of the discussion.

Conclusions/Benefit to Extension

Communication and collaboration are the backbone of and reason for the continued success of Extension. While communicative efforts drive and influence decisions made within the organization, research has indicated a positive shift in collaboration among Extension professionals (Brown & Issacs, 2005). WC is a technique for engaging people in group dialogue, generating knowledge, and making meaning of our world (Brown, 2002). In addition to conference settings, the WC approach can be used in further Extension settings to generate conversations with stakeholders regarding matters such as program planning, curriculum design and development, Extension team planning (administrative and nonadministrative), advisory team planning, health and wellness initiatives, and statewide youth and adult partnership efforts. This approach provides Extension with the flexibility to brainstorm new, innovative ideas, enhancing community- and state-level initiatives generated by the organization. Essentially, WC provides an opportunity to improve collaborative efforts across Extension entities, from volunteers to specialists in all program areas, while encouraging visioning, leading, and learning together; enhancing community presence; showcasing an active presence of teamwork; and fostering collaborative learning (Sandmann & Vandenburg, 1995).

Extension continues to work toward strengthening communities and families while positively influencing the lives of individuals. A WC approach, which can be incorporated at the local, state, or regional level, ensures that current knowledge and ideas are actively shared by stakeholders, thereby enhancing facilitation, change initiatives, and generation of solutions to address specific needs. With effective facilitation by volunteers, agents, researchers, or other personnel, the opportunities for and benefits of the use of WC at Extension events and meetings are plentiful and versatile.

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