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Use the World Café concept to create an interactive learning environment

Liz Anderson

Teaching Small Groups

We all aspire to be enthusiastic educators. We know that learning in small groups is a powerful and stimulating experience. But when we are asked to deliver this type of teaching, we need to think of creative ways to stimulate activity and promote collective learning. The defining feature of a small group is not solely the number of learners; what is important is the collaborative dynamic between the learners and the educator (Dennick, 2011). The teaching approach is didactic when the flow of information is predominantly from educator to learner, any benefits of working with a small number of learners are then lost. What are these benefits?

In small groups:

- ▶ It is much easier to establish the learners' baseline knowledge
- ▶ Learners can interact with each other and this increases the learning potential
- ▶ The opportunity for achieving deep learning through reflection is maximised
- ▶ It is much easier to achieve a learner centred environment
- ▶ There are more opportunities for meeting different learning styles

In educational terms this style of teaching is constructivist; knowledge is constructed through social interaction (Mann, 2011). Whilst there are many ways of stimulating and encouraging this level of learner engagement, using the World Café concept is a novel approach that can achieve all of the above benefits and more.



What is a World Café?

The World Café is a phenomenon that was first devised by Juanita Brown and has been taken up worldwide (Tan and Brown, 2005). Her idea was simple; the learning experience can be promoted by enabling learners to exchange information through active dialogue, in a relaxed environment, with friends, colleagues, peers. This, she argues, is the best way to develop new understandings about the world and forms the basis of the World Café's seven principles, (see the website). Imagine you meet some friends at a café, you order your favourite beverage, perhaps something to eat, and you talk, you laugh, you debate. Someone else joins you, someone else leaves, soon diverse opinions are being shared, concepts are challenged and new learning occurs.

How does it work as a teaching method?

This method has been used to explore the characteristics of general practice including GP roles (Gillies et al., 2009). Gillies and colleagues used it to structure their workshops

If you want to use this approach then the key is in the preparation. Let's take an example. You are convening a meeting of a group of 12 trainees to discuss professionalism, which is a difficult concept to define (Martimianakis et al., 2009). You would like to create a debate to start the session with the aims of exploring what being professional means. Using the world café model you would need to:

- ▶ Book a suitable venue (light and well ventilated) with enough space for at least three tables and plenty of room to move about. Arrange for refreshments to be provided
- ▶ If possible, arrange for the session to have 2-3 facilitators including you
- ▶ Think café – you will need a table cloth. It's useful to use paper ones as the group can then use them to write down their ideas on them. A vase of flowers, biscuits and perhaps a menu can all help to create the informal environment.

- Prepare your resources in advance – you will need plenty of flip chart paper, pens and any reading material that you think might provoke discussion.

The most important thing is to prepare a different trigger question or statement relating to professionalism for each table. These MUST be thought provoking AND should also aim to make the discussion focussed.

See Figure 1 for example,

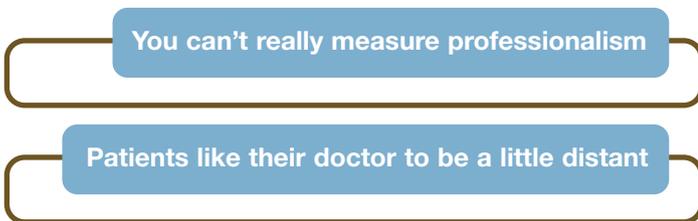


Figure 1: Trigger Statements

On the day you will need to get there at least 45 minutes before the participants. Set up the room informally, with the tables set out just like a café, with the table cloths, flowers and so on. At each one there is a host/facilitator, whose job it is to collate the discussion.

As the learners arrive invite them to sit at one of the tables. You can use one of your usual ice-breakers and you may wish to give a brief overview of the importance of professionalism before you give the learners instructions. At each of the tables, the group will:

- Read the statement in front of them and discuss the issues.
- Write down as many ideas as they can on the table cloth.
- After 15 minutes or so, each group will disperse and move onto a different table where the host will point out some of the main points in the previous discussion.

- Repeat the process until the learners have visited all the tables, adding to the ideas on each of the table cloths.

The learners need to finish back at their original tables in order to discuss the collection of ideas that have been generated. Using a flipchart each group will summarise the main points that have emerged from these discussions ready to present to the whole group in a plenary.

By circulating around the tables, the learners will contribute and gather different ideas. Each table has the potential to provoke a unique discussion because it will be populated by a different set of learners. The learners will have had at least five opportunities for discussion (two at their own table at the beginning and the end and three tables in between)

In my experience, if the instructions are clear at the outset, learners embrace the café ambience. There is always laughter as well as serious deliberation. Ideas are there to be challenged so the roles of the hosts at each table and the organiser are to encourage and manage this. The most important thing is that the participants have experienced diverse discourses about professionalism.

Conclusion

Whilst the world café idea is not really suitable for teaching groups of fewer than 10, it is suitable for use during a full day or a half a day meeting if the topic relates to complex clinical experiences or encounters. This is an excellent addition to your teaching armamentarium if you want to introduce new or challenging ideas and if you want to encourage reflection among your learners. Enabling them to experience a variety of difficult view points and perspectives and providing a forum for debate can help to clarify understanding and boredom perspectives in a novel, but educationally sound setting.

Further Reading

Dennick, R., Spencer J. 2011. *Teaching and Learning in Small groups*. In: Dornan, T., Mann, K., Scherpbier, A., Spencer, J. (ed.) *Medical Education Theory and Practice*. London: Churchill Livingstone.

Gillies, J. C., Mercer, S. W., Lyon, A., Scott, M. & Watt, G. C. 2009. *Distilling the essence of general practice: a learning journey in progress*. The British journal of general practice : the journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners, 59, e167-76.

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Martimianakis, M. A., Maniate, J. M. & Hodges, B. D. 2009. *Sociological interpretations of professionalism*. Medical Education, 43, 829-837.

Tan, S. & Brown, J. 2005. *The World Café in Singapore*. The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 41, 83-90.

Liz Anderson was a Lecturer in Medical Education in the School of Postgraduate Medical and Dental Education. Liz has used the World Café method to run a workshop for the Higher Education Academy where she now works as discipline lead for medicine and dentistry.

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