

# Modified World Café Discussion Model for Conference and Course Settings

Alice Cassidy & Joanne Fox  
University of British Columbia

*A group facilitation technique called World Café usually involves dividing a large number of people into smaller groups at tables, exploring a variety of topics around a key focus, and collecting ideas from the discussions to debrief later as a large group. We used a modified version of World Café during the new Cracker Barrel session format at the 2012 STLHE conference. Inviting conference participants to explore science through writing, we met our goal of interactivity and collected ideas from 33 people in spite of the challenges of time (a 15-minute session repeated three times for different groups) and space (11 participants around one table each time). The success of involving conference participants actively in this new conference format shows its value as a conference technique and also led us to consider its utility in the classroom or other settings.*

## Introduction

The organizers of the 2012 Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) Conference launched a new session format called Cracker Barrel Discussions: 15-minute sessions repeated three times for different groups. We led one of these, our goal being interactivity; we also wished to share information about our course, Science 113: *First Year Seminar in Science*. We achieved these two goals by using a modified World Café discussion model (Cassidy, 2012), capped with a one-page handout overview of the course (Appendix).

In this paper, we describe the modified World Café model we used in our Cracker Barrel Discussion. In doing so, we also introduce aspects of Science 113, focusing

on how we introduce writing to first-year students in the sciences, and examples of the ideas that Café participants came up with. We show that, in spite of challenges of space and time, rich discussion can take place in a conference session, and the cumulative contributions from participants we captured are a great set of key points as one outcome.

We place our modified World Café model in the context of the uses of traditional World Café and consider its utility in other settings such as the classroom.

## Science 113: A Focus on Writing in the Sciences

This overview provides the context for how and why we used a modified World Café format in our session.

Designed following best practices in course design, the *First Year Seminar in Science* (SCIE 113) at the University of British Columbia provides students with the opportunity to explore the nature of science and the role science plays in society (<http://science.ubc.ca/students/new/first/113>).

With writing being an integral component of the course, a key focus is for students to construct and articulate a coherent scientific argument. Students are given multiple opportunities through carefully designed in-class activities to achieve this learning goal throughout the term.

Our ethics-approved research shows that students in this course demonstrate significant improvements in their overall understanding of science and scientific inquiry. They come in with a solid understanding about the role of change, observations, and inferences in science and made significant gains in their understanding of social and cultural influences, laws versus theories, and methodology by the end of the course consistent with our learning objectives (Fox, Birol, Han, Cassidy, & Samuels, 2012; Birol, Han, Welsh, & Fox, 2013).

Writing in the sciences is a topic that we feel has the capacity to re-draw boundaries, which was the theme of the 2012 STLHE Conference. Hence, we invited participants in our discussion to talk about the value, challenges, and opportunities of introducing writing in the sciences. By the end of each 15-minute session, we hoped participants would take parts of our experience, add those of others, and then be able to ‘adapt their own recipe for success’ at their institution. We used this recipe metaphor to provide an overview of the course in the handout, which tied in to the modified World Café technique used in the session.

## World Café for Active Group Discussion

World Café, a group facilitation technique developed by Brown and Isaacs (2005), makes effective use of the collective knowledge, questions, and views of a group. The technique is highly active and moves along quickly, with participants exploring a variety of sub-topics or questions in detail before moving on to a different sub-topic group. Traditional World Café, also known as Knowledge Café (Gurteen, n.d.), works well in sessions lasting several hours to multiple days (Change Management, n.d.).

Whatever the topic, facilitators pose unique questions or discussion sub-topics with one question assigned per group. Our main topic was Introducing Writing in the Sciences, and we posed the following sub-topics and questions:

- What terms would you use to describe science?
- In what ways do students receive feedback on their writing?
- How do you introduce writing in your course?
- How can writing help students connect to other disciplines?
- What topics work well for introducing writing in sciences?
- What is the value of introducing writing in the sciences?
- What are the challenges of introducing writing in the sciences?
- How do you help your students to construct and articulate a coherent scientific argument?

Usually taking place in a large room with tables, participants in traditional World Café discuss the unique sub-topic or question posed on a large piece of flipchart paper at their table. Note-taking by a scribe ensures the key points are recorded. After a period of time, usually 10-20 minutes, the scribe stays while the other participants disperse to other tables and sub-topics. Next, the scribe uses the flipchart notes to present a brief overview of the discussion that took place, followed by discussion of both new and existing ideas, for example, seeking clarification or building upon what has been noted, or adding something entirely new.

This process continues as time and sub-topics allow, with one scribe staying on each time. It is not necessary for every participant to have made it to each of the tables and associated sub-topics. Full group wrap-up can involve brief overviews from each table, open discussion, and/or a wrap-up by the facilitator to tie together the sub-topics or questions. Often the contributed material is summarized and shared with all participants. Traditional World Café takes a fair bit of space and time.

## Modified World Café Model for Conferences

Knowing that we had only three 15-minute blocks for our Cracker Barrel Discussion and that each set of up to 11 participants was seated at one table, we used a modified World Café format designed specifically for the Cracker Barrel format (Cassidy, 2012).

We printed our questions and sub-topics on pieces of ‘mini-flipchart’ paper, which we distributed around the table. Each 15-minute block enjoyed a ‘full house’ of 11 people around the table. We encouraged participants to pick one mini-flipchart, chat to those sitting near them, record their key points, then choose another question or sub-topic and do the same with the same or different people. As each of the two subsequent groups arrived, we asked them to look at some of the last group’s contribution and then continue that discussion (following the same technique as with traditional World Café, save that no one except the session leaders stayed to summarize between the three sets of participants.)

We went back and forth between this group work and a whole table discussion, by doing such things as elaborating on one point from one mini-flipchart, asking if something noted by others was a shared experience (through a show of hands), asking if someone had a question or topic they wanted to talk about, and so on. In this way, then, we built in the kinds of whole group discussions that, in traditional World Café, are done after all the group and flip-chart switching work is over.

## An Example of the World Café Contributions

Here, we provide a few examples from each of the sub-topic summaries:

*What terms would you use to describe science?*

- Wonder; uncertainty; exciting; progression; curiosity; imagination

*In what ways do students receive feedback on their writing?*

- Formal feedback from professor; peer feedback; office meetings; rubrics; audio feedback; one-page cover sheet on follow-

up assignment that articulates how student incorporated peer feedback on new assignment

*How do you introduce writing in your course?*

- Show professional journals; project proposals; opinion paper; micro-writing, pre- and post-reflective writing; ask them to outline a ‘hot topic’ in their area.

*How can writing help students connect to other disciplines?*

- Helps to communicate their ideas, to form and organize ideas in coherent manner; interesting questions to write about are often cross-disciplinary; writing requires and encourages reflection, helping students in the creation of interdisciplinary linking; allow students to explore topics from multiple points of view

*What topics work well for introducing writing in sciences?*

- Current news; controversial topics; reflections on their observations and skills; critiques of articles

*What is the value of introducing writing in the sciences?*

- Students who continue in science must be able to write – for grants and submitting papers; writing is a way to learn concepts and processes; forces students to articulate what they think they know; most employers want better writing

*What are the challenges of introducing writing in the sciences?*

- Understanding the difference between an essay and the scientific writing genre; vocabulary of scientific literature; students don’t think writing is part of science; class size (grading)

*How do you help your students to construct and articulate a coherent scientific argument?*

- Read scientific literature; write papers that examine both sides of an argument, showing

evidence to support their arguments; analyze others' writing; modeling and explaining that writing is thinking; after teaching students to 'break problems down,' writing assignments help in getting them to put the pieces back together

Our experience working with 33 participants at our session indicates that academics are both excited about science as well as the importance of articulating aspects of it in writing in the sciences. We feel that those who attended our session left with ideas they will continue to reflect on and use in their own teaching practice; all this in 15 minutes per participant. For us, the results of the conference activity were very useful in informing practice.

## Using Modified World Café in Other Conference and Classroom Formats

We found that World Café can work well in short sessions with multiple groups rotating through a session, such as the Cracker Barrel format. This modified World Café model could also work well in a 1-hour roundtable conference format because of the abbreviated time. If leading a half-day or full-day conference workshop, traditional World Café, with its multiple tables and more lengthy discussions, is likely the best option for facilitating an interactive exchange of ideas between participants.

Modified World Café could also be used as a highly interactive activity in a 50-90 minute class, regardless of the class size or physical structure of the room. It is important to encourage people to talk with each other, not just take each mini-flipchart and silently write. The model could also be used to start a session of any duration, before moving into other activities built around what participants noted on the flipcharts, perhaps as a form of pre-test or warm-up to a new topic. Delaney, Daley, & Lajoie (2006) found World Café to be an excellent format to facilitate empowerment and stimulate scholarly dialogue, particularly in nursing courses. Likewise Anderson (2011) notes its utility as a group technique that works well for introducing new and challenging ideas and encouraging reflection.

Given the limited published literature on the use of World Café in any setting, we feel this is a topic worthy of more scholarly consideration.

## Conclusion

We found this modified World Café technique to be an effective way to lead a dynamic and interactive session in the new Cracker Barrel session format at the 2012 STLHE conference. With only 15 minutes per group and three groups per session, the session was highly participatory, with many contributions and lively discussions that have the capacity to inform practice. Our metaphor of 'recipes for success' worked very well to not only describe our course, but to involve conference participants an exploration of writing in the sciences. The sample of contributions to each of the sub-topic mini-flipcharts shows the level of critical thinking and sharing that went on during the session.. It is easy to see how any one of the sub-topics or questions could later be the sole focus of another conference session or workshop. Moreover, there is great potential to use modified World Café in a classroom setting of any duration.

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## Biographies

Alice Cassidy is the Course Coordinator for Science 113 in the Faculty of Science at the University of British Columbia. She is an educational developer and science educator.

Joanne Fox is the Director of First Year Seminars in the Faculty of Science at the University of British Columbia. She co-designed Science 113 and is a Senior Instructor in the Department of Microbiology and Immunology.

## Appendix

### Overview of Aspects of Science 113

#### **Our recipe for success:**

##### *Invite students...*

- Designed for first-year science students to explore the nature of science, the important roles science plays in society, and how to construct and articulate a coherent scientific argument that is evidence-based
- Students study science in society, scientific process, and how to communicate scientific concepts
- Class size limited to 26 students (with first-year standing in Science), 3 x 50 min sessions/week, offering new students a more meaningful and connected academic experience, to successfully transition from high school to university
- Science and Society Speaker Series 7 times in term – to help expand students' horizons so they think widely about their future and what they can do with a science degree

##### *Blend in-class and other writing...*

- 3 in-class essays based on Writing Prompts, to practise argumentation skills, then submit to online Calibrated Peer Review (CPR) where students give and receive feedback from peers
- Term Project including Abstract and references, has 4 stages for feedback before final is submitted
- Grading rubrics and written comments on the in-class and Term Project writing
- Other writing includes short paragraphs based on readings, note-taking “Evidence Worksheet” exercises during Speaker Series, 1-minute written reflections and other assignments chosen by faculty

##### *Create a team and support it...*

- Provide faculty an opportunity to work with a small group of highly motivated first-year students, to expand own view about science, teach based on a well-designed and evolving syllabus with clear learning objectives
- Hire graduate student Teaching Assistants (TAs) who help facilitate discussions and track some grading components
- Instructional team supported by meeting every 2 weeks, quick response to email queries, Course Coordinator, SOTL researchers, binder of lesson plans and background readings, blog discussion and web materials

##### *Assess the course, fine-tuning as needed...*

- Design course based on science education research principles
- Follow a course evaluation plan including how we collect evidence from student work; student, faculty and TA surveys, interviews and other instruments, all ethics-approved
- Hold regular meetings of the research team; tweak course as needed during term, conduct in-depth course development between academic terms
- Present at conferences to share ideas with colleagues; work on publishing in SoTL and science education journals