

World Café between research and teaching: Individual and community empowerment

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Submitted: July 26, 2024 – Accepted: March 12, 2025 – Published: April 15, 2025

Il World Café tra ricerca e insegnamento. Empowerment individuale e comunitario

This article aims to describe, from both theoretical and methodological perspectives, the characteristics of the World Café as a participatory technique particularly flexible to the context in which it is employed, thanks to its ability to create informal and relaxed settings as opportunities to generate and share knowledge. The authors trace its origins and guiding principles, explore its possibilities of application — both in-person and online settings —, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses in the fields of research, teaching and education, as a methodology capable of promoting and fostering empowerment, soft skills and social change among participants.

Questo articolo intende descrivere da un punto di vista teorico e metodologico le caratteristiche del World Café come tecnica di partecipazione particolarmente flessibile al contesto in cui viene impiegata, grazie alla sua capacità di creare un clima informale e rilassato in cui è possibile generare e scambiare conoscenza. Gli autori ne spiegano le origini e i principi guida e ne esplorano le possibilità di applicazione – sia in presenza sia a distanza – sottolineandone i punti di forza e di debolezza nei campi della ricerca, dell'insegnamento e dell'educazione, come metodologia capace di promuovere e sostenere nei partecipanti l'empowerment, le soft skills e il cambiamento sociale.

Keywords: World Café; Empowerment; Action research; Teaching; Social change.

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1. Introduction

The World Café (WC) falls within participatory techniques and can be used both in the field of participatory action research and in teaching. In both contexts, it can be considered an innovative method with relatively recent applications. It is a method that is part of qualitative research methodologies, specifically referred to as non-standard (Psaroudakis *et al.*, 2020). The metaphor of the café immediately brings to mind the dimension of conviviality, of the informality of the setting.

The WC originated and spread in the United States with Juanita Brown's book (2002). A resource guide for hosting conversations that matter at the World Café. However, the deep roots on which the technique is based can be traced back to the 18th century, when it was a common practice among intellectuals to gather in cafés or salons to discuss literary and philosophical topics. Brown's systematisation has allowed us to apply the technique with specific methodological steps that make it an easy-to-use tool in various contexts and with different objectives. Its flexibility, adaptability, simplicity but powerful and ability to facilitate informal discussions between large groups of people. The WC has mainly evolved within the context of participatory action research, empowerment development, teaching and education fields, as well as promoting soft skills and in combination with other innovative teaching methodologies.

2. Aims and methods

This work aims to describe the WC technique, underlining the contexts where it is used both for its applications in research and learning fields (in presence or online). Another aim of this work is to highlight how WC can develop empowerment in the participants, as well as its potential as a technique of transformation and social change and how this methodology can be used.

We consulted the Scopus database, using 'World Café' as key word and we found that there were over 450 articles in different research fields since its inception. After that, we decided to add other key words 'empowerment', 'action research', 'teaching', 'education' and 'social change' to identify those studies that used WC in that fields.

3. World Café: short guidelines for quick application

According to Brown (2002) and Brown and Isaac (2005) the guiding principles of the WC are seven:

- 1) clarifying the context means defining the purpose, identifying which participants to involve and considering possible constraints;
- 2) creating a hospitable work environment allows participants to enhance their thinking, listening, and speaking skills. To do this, it is necessary not only take care of the physical space but also the way participants are invited. The WC should be perceived as a pleasant and engaging experience. The space should be similar to that of a café, with preferably round tables that are not too aligned, with tablecloths on which one can write and take notes, and the presence of beverages and snacks to be shared during the discussion. The aim is to create a café environment, in the sense of Oldenburg's third place (1989): a home away from home that offers comfort and engagement;
- 3) asking important questions. Creating one or more open-ended questions on the same topic to analyse and delve into it can be enriching and stimulating for the group if they are perceived by the participants as important and meaningful to them;
- 4) encouraging everyone's contribution. To ensure everyone's participation and involvement, it is better to have tables with four or five people. This allows everyone to have a chance to speak and also protect who may not feel comfortable in larger groups. Furthermore, using the talking stick technique (an object that is passed between participants to manage participation and speaking turns) can facilitate conversation and the inclusion of everyone;

- 5) connecting different points of view. One of the distinctive features of the WC is the opportunity to move between different tables, bringing your own ideas, opinions, knowledge, and perspectives, fostering a process of reciprocal contamination and the development of new insights. These shifts between tables generate a cross-pollination of ideas. Each round of conversation lasts about 20-30 minutes. While people move to another table, one of them remains to welcome participants from other tables and provide them with a summary of what has already emerged, using the notes taken on their tablecloth. The aim is to establish new positions and connect what emerges on different tables. Furthermore, the importance of people and relationships as a key to seek and see new connections is evident;
- 6) listening to grasp profound intuitions and reflections. Active listening must be pursued within the different rounds of conversation: this allows to learn from others, change perspective, connect different positions, and thoughts;
- 7) collecting and sharing the results. At the end of each round, the findings from individual tables are shared with all participants. The representative of each table presents their synthesis, and the organiser of the WC provides a space for collective reflection, making it visible through tools such as visual recorders, poster sessions, and individual post-it notes.

Another aspect to consider concerns the high heterogeneity of the participants. For example the presence of professional experts and community members with diversified languages based on their knowledge and training that can lead to the creation of a third language (Elden & Levin, 1991; Thompson, Steier & Ostrenko, 2014). Furthermore, the role of the host/organiser of the WC is that of a reflective professional, who adapts to the context in which participants act (Bradbury, Steier, Brown & Silva, 2017). The WC, then, being organised in daily workshops, allows a lot of information and research data to be collected quickly, unlike other techniques such as interviews or focus groups which require longer times (Schiele, Krummacker, Hoffmann & Kowalski, 2022). The WC, therefore, is a large group social process that relies on small group discussions.

4. The World Café as a participatory research method

The WC has been used in various participatory research projects in different parts of the world and across different disciplines. This technique is well suited to the participatory dimension of action research, and in its practice, the focus on relationships plays a central role (Bradbury *et al.*, 2017).

Fouché and Light (2011) argue how no direct application of the WC has been discovered in the field of qualitative research prior to their contribution (p. 36) and only later developed as a method of qualitative data collection in academia by increasing the levels of participation of those involved. Therefore, the WC stands as a participatory action research method to collaboratively construct knowledge processes (Pettican, Speed, Kilbride, Bryant & Beresford, 2021) in a co-production perspective (Pettican *et al.*, 2023).

Salvi and colleagues (2019) used it along with other participatory tools to develop intercultural and digital citizenship paths with second-generation youth in order to create a participatory writing of the Manifesto of the New Italian Generations. MacFarlane and collaborators (2017) highlight how the WC is a valuable, precious, flexible, and participatory method that can be used with stakeholders in the community and healthcare sector to prioritise research with marginalised communities. The technique has also been developed as a participatory tool for engaging citizens, professionals, and government representatives in geographic contexts (Dumont, Gambazza & Gamberoni, 2021).

This technique has provided new insights on how to improve the livability and health of urban spaces, emphasising the importance of participating in planning processes (D'Alessandro *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, it has been used within intervention projects for prevention, highlighting the value of a non-standard methodology in engaging adolescents (Psaroudakis *et al.*, 2020). In a recent literature review, Recchia and colleagues (2022) has highlighted how the WC is an appreciated, stimulating, and flexible participatory process, often used in conjunction with one or more other research methods. It

seems to be particularly useful for exploring and delving into under-studied topics, identifying suggestions or best practices to share, developing improvements, or defining recommendations. Pavesi and Ferrari (2020) propose a reflection on methodological processes that may be suitable for the implementation of community development interventions consistent with the new Responsible Welfare approach, among which the WC. Huang and Chen (2022) conducted an action research to identify what can be achieved through collective awareness within a non-governmental organisation, using the WC. Pettican *et al.* (2021) use the WC as a method for structuring and recording conversations as part of action research to understand the nature and value of participation in a community soccer project, for people with experience of mental distress.

5. The World Café as a transformative technique, and of social change and empowerment in research

Different researches have highlighted the potential of the WC as a technique that engages and stimulates participation, in the service of community improvement. The WC was used within the project #IOPARTECIPO, which aimed to enhance the participation of young people in the economic and social context in which they lived (Salvi *et al.*, 2019). The technique in this context served to detail ideas, generate reflections and active and participatory discussion. Recchia and colleagues (2022) highlight the use of the WC as a participatory method to involve a large number of participants in the active search for creative solutions based on the sharing of experiences and knowledge useful especially in those cases where the object of discussion is not well defined and there is a need to explore it. Altares and colleagues (2022) describe an action research project aimed at developing empowerment in adolescents to become agents of change. The WC facilitated dialogue between youth and adults thereby generating new ideas with an impact on the community. The WC has also been used in the medical field. In some research, patients were involved, in others health care personnel (Thomas, 2010) or a stakeholder perspective with an approach on solution-finding (Markey *et al.*, 2022) to generate empowerment. The WC as a technique for fostering empowerment has also been used by involving the most vulnerable population. For example, in the field of disability (Bumble & Carter, 2020), with older people (Yankeelov, Faul, D'Ambrosio, Gordon & McGeeney, 2019) and with young adults living in vulnerable situations (Halås, 2021). However, Aldred (2011) has pointed out that a weakness in using this technique is that it does not provide space for dissenting voices. Therefore, the author recommends using the WC only when power inequalities among participants are limited or supplementing it with more formal democratic mechanisms. Several researchers (Aldred, 2011; Löhr, Weinhardt & Sieber, 2020; Recchia *et al.*, 2022; Thomas, 2010) highlight the effectiveness of this technique when used in conjunction with others.

Therefore, the transformative nature of the WC technique emerges, starting from the co-construction of shared imaginative spaces (Pedone *et al.*, 2023), with educational power and social change for the community.

6. The World Café in the fields of teaching and education

Numerous studies and researches attest to the experimentation of the WC methodology in the fields of teaching – from primary school classrooms to university settings –, of formal education – from master workshop sessions to professional training courses – (Bartels & Hahne, 2023; Hafford-Letchfield *et al.*, 2023; Hornett, 2007; McCunn, Bjornson & Alexander, 2020; Pinto-Pinho *et al.*, 2023; Shyshenko, Chkana, Martynenko, Udovychenko, Stotskyi & Semenikhina, 2023) and non-formal education – in extracurricular but still cultural settings such as museums (Mayer, 2013) or in international organisations which aim to promote children's rights and well-being (Fonseca Peso, Caro González & Milosevic, 2020). Regarding the use of the WC technique, studies in these fields allow to highlight its strengths, which primarily refer to the promotion of positive and effective learning (Recto *et al.*, 2023) and the acquisition of soft skills (Charterina, Pando-García & Periañez-Cañadillas, 2020; Geduld, Sathorar & Moeng, 2020) going beyond those merely knowledge-based (Kleinsorgen *et al.*, 2020) or technical (Cooke *et al.*, 2023). Other studies shed light on its weaknesses and areas for improvement (Lefika & Mearns,

2015; Lorenzetti, Azulai & Walsh, 2016). Therefore, both in specifically didactic learning environments and in educational ones, the WC is described and utilised as a highly flexible technique (Brown, Isaacs, Margulies & Warhaftig, 1999), in some way transversal.

In these fields, the WC is often called Knowledge Café, when the focus is on knowledge in a general sense or related to a specific domain, whether it be a discipline or a topic of cultural interest (Fallon & Connaughton, 2016; Lefika & Mearns, 2015). In the specifically didactic context, the WC's flexibility regarding the level of education and the target audience can be observed in studies conducted by Hines and Whittington (2017) and by Psaroudakis and colleagues (2020). The first describes the effectiveness of using the WC with university students, identifying their educational needs and how these should develop to contribute to the development of Higher Education itself; the second involves High School students, for whom the WC proves effective in conducting a reflection and understanding of their knowledge on health education topics, thanks to which possible informative and preventive interventions can be identified. Several studies also demonstrate how the WC is positively adaptable and effective for various disciplines such as Social Geography (Picone, 2021), Medical Sciences (Filies, Yassin & Frantz, 2016; Kleinsorgen *et al.*, 2020), Biosciences (Pinto-Pinho *et al.*, 2023), Technical Vocational Education focused, for example, in agricultural technology related to Economy (Masha, Mboweni & Mtshali, 2020), multi-languages teachings (Ravneberg, 2024), Mathematics (Shyshenko *et al.*, 2023), Psychology (Grakhova, Fayzrakhmanov, Zhundibayeva, Yakutina, Sharipov & Stepykin, 2019), Pedagogy (Moe, 2019) and Civil Engineering (Bartels & Hahne, 2023).

According to Geduld *et al.* (2020), the WC promotes shared reflection facilitating meaningful and transformative learning, impacting not only learning outcomes but also motivation (Al Yakin, Wafi & Harianti, 2021), lending itself functionally and strategically to integrated use with already existing active and participatory didactical techniques and methodologies (Fonseca *et al.*, 2020). For example, several authors describe the effectiveness of integrating WC with activities conducted in Flipped Classroom mode (Santini, 2021), as well as with Problem-Based Learning (Camacho, Rybels, Coppens, Pineda, 2020), Game-Based Learning and Serious Games (Inoubli & Khedher, 2022), and School-Based Learning (Geduld *et al.*, 2020).

Therefore, the WC is a very useful method for managing active teaching experiences in classrooms to develop dialogue around a community or social problem, or a shared experience such as watching a movie (Hornett, 2007). Moreover, this technique not only proposes active teaching but also serves to enliven and make relationships more enjoyable by increasing mutual knowledge among participants. Consistently, in their manuscript, Schiele *et al.*, (2022) emphasise how participants in the WC appreciate the sharing of knowledge and their learning process facilitated by a participatory method and high participant involvement.

The WC is also adaptable to different levels of formal education, as demonstrated by its use, often in the form of workshops, in specialisation courses, professional training courses aimed at professionals or future professionals in various fields – it is recent the use in the Faculty Development context (Dawson, Britnell & Hitchcock, 2010)– in Continuing Education and Adult Education fields (Bazilio, Pereira, Figueira & Silva, 2020; Hafford-Letchfield *et al.*, 2023; Pađen *et al.*, 2023; Ravneberg, 2024), and in Special Interest Groups (Cooke *et al.*, 2023), aimed at targets with different levels of expertise and years of service. Furthermore, the WC is a technique capable of building and promoting the emergence of interdisciplinary, multiprofessional, and interprofessional spaces (Bazilio *et al.*, 2020; Recto *et al.*, 2023; Santos, Queiroz, Pereira, Rosas, da Silveira & Rodrigues, 2019). In the field of non-formal education, the use of the WC in a cultural context such as a Museum appears interesting, as described by Mayer (2013), in whose study the author expresses its utility as a tool suitable for discussion and reflection on topics related to evaluation, to identify and renew meanings and criteria appropriate for identifying evaluative systems in terms of quality corresponding to the contemporary role of such a cultural environment.

Similarly, in the field of the formal education, it is interesting the choice of the WC as a genuine evaluative tool for measuring the effectiveness, the impact and success of an educational program or activity. For example, as supported by Cupido (2017), the WC can be used as a evaluative tool, that is most effective when there is a group dimension, also providing peer feedback, and less in terms of individual assessment.

Regardless of the didactic or educational context at different levels, as highlighted by Rossini and colleagues (2018), the WC is a cooperative learning method that enables the development of learning processes based on peer-learning and interconnection, allowing individuals to take advantage of the relaxed atmosphere and the pleasure of conversation to engage in meaningful dialogues on relevant topics. Several studies identify many advantages in the use of the WC, such as active involvement, knowledge sharing and discovery, collaborative learning, adaptability, and flexibility to the context, needs, and educational requirements of those involved, and the promotion of the acquisition of soft skills (Bazilio *et al.*, 2020; Charterina *et al.*, 2020; Pinto-Pinho *et al.*, 2023; Ropes, van Kleef & Douven, 2020). However Lorenzetti *et al.* (2016) highlight some weaknesses, which are considered areas that could be improved, which are related to the lack of relevance and attention given to structural and power inequalities inherent in the WC itself, which are especially evident in relation to facilitators. The authors, in an attempt to understand how to circumvent or at least contain them, try to identify new and more inclusive uses in educational and specifically community contexts. In line with the authors, Lefika and Mearns (2015) highlight further criticisms and weaknesses of the technique, attributing them to a literature not yet adequately developed. Among these is the risk of uneven participation, with group dynamics sometimes unpredictable and therefore difficult to facilitate and manage.

7. The World Café as a developmental technique for soft skills in teaching and education

The literature attests that the WC is a technique capable of promoting the development and the acquisition of soft skills in the fields of teaching and education (Dawson *et al.*, 2010; Filies *et al.*, 2016; Ghafli, Azzouzi, Hamdoune, Gantare, Lobet-Maris, & Gourdin 2023).

In particular, it seems that the most mentioned soft skill that WC allows to develop is the critical thinking (Al-Bayati, 2020; Dawson *et al.*, 2010; Lorenzetti *et al.*, 2016). In this regard, Paden and collaborators (2023) describe the effectiveness of using the WC in supporting and promoting the importance of learning to think, before even learning to reason clinically, in the field of Nursing and Midwifery Education. Also noteworthy in this context is the study conducted by Hornett (2007), which highlights how, in the field of learning, WC small discussion groups are powerful experiences for participants within which they can experiment and develop critical thinking skills and at the same time listening skills, even in large classes if divided into small groups.

The WC is also described as a technique suitable for developing soft skills related to effective communication (Rahmawati, Rahman & Usman, 2021) and, consequently, fostering conditions for an active and dynamic listening (Filies *et al.*, 2016), as in the moments when conversations begin in which different opinions and ideas are shared, each participant becomes aware of being really listened to (Bazilio *et al.*, 2020; Bowne, Cutler, Debates, Gilkerson & Stremmel, 2010). Therefore, the WC, by creating conditions for effective communication and listening, allows participants to develop soft skills related to sociality — such as those of team building and team working, as well of leadership (Cooke *et al.*, 2023) — while simultaneously stimulating in each of them an increasing ability for problem-solving, as a tool used to search for solutions to problems or issues relevant to a specific moment or topic (Camacho *et al.*, 2020; Roitto, Aalto, Söderling, Laakkonen, & Öhman, 2020).

Another relevant soft skill present in the literature on the subject is that related to creativity or creative thinking (Vasileva, 2020). This is highlighted, for example, in the study conducted by Decker-Lange and colleagues (2022), in which the authors describe its relevance and effectiveness in the field of Entrepreneurship Education in British Universities, specifically in a program where the WC methodology has allowed students to develop creativity skills in terms of actual innovation, regarding the identification of business strategies and solutions.

8. The virtual World Café: between teaching approach and research

The WC technique is not limited to in-person use. For example, in the field of formal teaching and learning, it has been shown to be effective even when designed and conducted remotely, using digital devices and platforms – using Zoom™ as favourite videoconference platform – and taking on the name of Virtual/Online World Café (Albrecht, Stark, Dongas, Wrona & Dockweiler, 2022; Laine-Gossin, DeKoven & Bordman, 2022; McKimm *et al.*, 2020).

Although online WC is a technique already used in this field before the Covid-19 Pandemic — as demonstrated by Gyllenpalm (2000) — its use appears to have increased in the literature, especially afterward. During the COVID-19 period, many scholars and researchers had to adapt qualitative methods to online formats to ensure the required distancing dictated by the situation or to safeguard vulnerable situations (Rania, Coppola & Pinna, 2021). Even experiences of the WC transitioned to digital, albeit with the fear of compromising its nature: the informal and welcoming space typical of a café (Monforte, Netherway & Smith, 2023). In this regard, (Galvão Ozório *et al.*, 2020) argued that, in this remotely form – adapting the original one – the WC could maintain its strengths related to generate a collaborative atmosphere for sharing reflections, knowledge, and learning. For example, in the form of a Virtual Knowledge Café, in synchronous online way, this methodology was used by Yawson and colleagues (2023) to promote collaborative learning with opportunities for the development of communication and critical thinking skills. The Online World Café has got strengths and weaknesses derived from both the differences and common elements with its physical version. This form allows the participation of many people simultaneously, even in different parts of the world (Laine-Gossin *et al.*, 2022); moreover, it is less time-consuming and more economical in terms of resources. Furthermore, the online WC helps to eliminate or reduce physical barriers or obstacles (Dantas Galvão Ozório *et al.*, 2020; Yawson *et al.*, 2023); However, is still exist inequality in the availability of digital resources. In this last regard, different authors argue that online WC is suitable for participatory engagement provided that certain actions are taken, such as providing an equal access to Internet and pathways for education and training in the use of digital devices (Albrecht *et al.*, 2022; Banfield, Gulliver & Morse, 2021; McKimm *et al.*, 2020). Another weakness may be linked to the lack of certainty about the effective participation of those present in the online WC, often difficult to verify active by all participants (Ozório *et al.*, 2020), highlighting the importance of being prepared for a variable number of participants.

In the research field many authors used the World Café, adapting it to the virtual mode (Banfield *et al.*, 2021b; Gulliver, Morse & Banfield, 2022; Harper & Maloney, 2021; Samardzic, Wildman, Barata & Morton, 2023; Villa-García *et al.*, 2023), with an action research approach too (Bettencourt, Simões, Fernandes & Fonseca, 2023; Kotzur *et al.*, 2023).

9. Conclusion

To conclude, analysing studies that used WC in different contexts examined, we can affirm how this technique has got many strengths, but also weaknesses. Starting from the strengths, the main identified are related to the ability to engage participants working and learning together, creating small groups of discussion (Recchia *et al.*, 2022), the ability to activate communities and other stakeholders in improving the specific contexts. Another strength of WC regard the informal environment that stimulates participants to share their experiences in more effective way, and its flexibility and adaptability to different topics, contexts, and target. Among weaknesses, one of the main risk of WC is that can be a tool that limits the expression of dissenting voices, not giving to each member the same possibility and time to share reflections and ideas, generating inequalities. Furthermore, as affirmed by Monforte and colleagues (2023), WC should be considered as an “unmethod within co-produced research”. The authors use the metaphors of jazz music, dance, and contact improvisation to describe WC and state that researchers should practice it as they do in these areas without too much methodological technicality. The unmethod, therefore, is a method that remains methodologically immature, just as it was born

with Brown and Isaac in their home on a bright rainy day among impromptu tables where informal conversations had allowed different voices to cross-pollinate (Bradbury *et al.*, 2017).

Finally, to date, there are not enough studies that deeply explore the weaknesses and strengths of WC methodology. This study, has got some limits. The first one is related to the methodology approach: in fact, although we used Scopus database, we did not conduct a systematic review. Another limit is represented by the choice to select those articles that used the WC in specific contexts and finding it often used in combination with other techniques or methodologies. In spite of that, our study can represent a starting point to pay more attention to this technique in its complexity.

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