5 Dialogue Café – Bringing up Ideas in Collegial Teams

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This chapter aims to introduce the background of the Dialogue Café and, for replication purposes, present how it was conducted in School-In. The chapter sums up with reflections on experience gained through the Dialogue Café as a working and research method.

In School-In, the Dialogue Café was one essential working method used to implement the intervention. After the mapping of the school, questionnaires, student interviews, and staff focus group discussions (step 1), and after deciding on a development area for the school through the Mental Mapping Response method (step 2; chapter 4 in this book), the chosen development area became the point of departure for the intervention. The Dialogue Café working method, described in this chapter, was the next step in the intervention, always followed by the Reflection Cycle working method (chapter 6). The Dialogue Café was conducted twice in each innovation school and was carefully planned by the research team. The whole teaching staff – both teachers and paraprofessionals – participated, with the School-In research team leading the processes.

5.1 The origin of the Dialogue Café

The Dialogue Café originates from the World Café, developed by Juanita Brown and David Isaacs in 1995 (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). They invented the method while hosting a conference for leaders and researchers from different countries in the field of 'intellectual capital'. As the outdoor conference was surprised by a rain shower, they had to improvise. Thus, they decided to set up small tables all over their house, where the participants could discuss the matter from cross-national perspectives. This happening was the starting point of the World Café. Since 1995, the method has been used worldwide, in different fields, and often with several hundred participants. The World Café has been given different names and has been used in several ways in various countries. In School-In, we called it the Dialogue Café to illustrate the intended purpose of communication.

The World Café is intended to develop or improve visions, strategies, projects, products, or services. In addition, it is meant to motivate and support learning pro-

cesses. A World Café can last from one hour up to several days, or it can be an ongoing process. The number of participants can be from approximately 12 persons up to more than a thousand (Müller & Becker, 2013, p. 71). The method is designed to structure conversational processes by asking good questions and facilitating open discussions. When ideas are linked together, the group gains access to the collective intelligence of the participants, enabling them to understand and learn from each other's different points of view. This design fosters creative and open thinking and is, therefore, not suited to scenarios where there is a predetermined answer or solution (Alnes, Vågen, Midtbust, & Krøvel, 2013).

World Cafés have been useful in multinational groups, municipalities, associations, political organisations, and other learning communities. In multicultural, political, organisational, and professional contexts and in social sciences, education, and economics, it has had the aim of strengthening learning cultures and knowledge exchange (Prewitt, 2011). Here it has also been useful for development purposes within organisations (Fouché & Light, 2010). For instance, the World Café has been used in higher education for the purpose of internationalisation, facilitating both individual and cultural communication styles (Estacio & Karic, 2015). It can contribute to building bridges between races, religions, and socioeconomic status (Tan & Brown, 1995), and has proven to be useful in social services to foster a culture of enquiry and information exchange (Fouché & Light, 2010). In a Norwegian study, the method was used to encourage reflective processes among participants from municipal and banking organisations, fostering employee communication and shared understanding (Thunberg, 2011). The method has also been used at the university level in work with students. Elvekrok & Smith (2013) found that the method led to increased problem understanding and engagement among the students and that the engagement persisted during lectures even after the World Café was completed.

Different aspects of the World Café as a method have also been investigated. For example, the importance of the facilitator's role of ensuring participation and trust, encouraging different viewpoints in the group, and handling the dual purpose of both facilitating and participating (Brown & Isaacs, 2005; Prewitt, 2011; Jorgenson & Steier, 2013). In general, research shows that the more actively the participants engage in the discussions, the more they perceive the dialogue process as positive (Takahashi, Nemoto, Hayashi & Horita, 2014). In Norway, the World Café is often called Dialogue Café.

In School-In, we decided to use the Dialogue Café as a working method because the method has many characteristics that would obviously support teachers' professional development. Findings of O'Connor & Cotrel-Gibbons (2017) show that this method leads to shared ideas, develops opportunities to support students' learning in practice areas, and facilitates interdepartmental work and increased communication between the education department and mentors. Lagrosen (2017) found that the method contributes to profound dialogues with deepening insights, which stimulate creativity, increase understanding of quality issues, and allow a more holistic view. Alnes, et al., (2013) found that the method can promote professional development if

the participants have a common understanding of the purpose and form of the work. These characteristics of the method are helpful when involving the whole staff for learning purposes and joint reflections as a learning community (Fullan, 2010), which was our intention in School-In.

5.2 A typical run of a World Café

The World Café setting should provide a relaxed atmosphere. To attain this, the room may be decorated with flowers or greenery, nice music may play in the background, and hot or cold beverages and refreshments may be served. However, the most significant characteristics of a World Café are small tables dressed in paper cloths, the availability of markers of different colours, and participants who are interested in a common topic. The composition of the group of participants is crucial for the outcome of the method and subsequent research. The more heterogeneous the group of participants is, the more diverse the perspectives and knowledge background will be.

Before discussions begin, the moderator or the organising team divides the participants into groups, one group for each table, and instruct them that the upcoming ideas and thoughts are to be written on the tablecloth or a large sheet of paper placed on the table. Some participants are asked to volunteer for the role as table facilitator. Table facilitators have a special responsibility for ensuring an open, clear, and friendly atmosphere. They stay at the same table through all of the discussion rounds, while the other participants move from table to table, to welcome new participants and summarise the ideas from the previous discussions. The facilitator also makes sure that everyone is invited to contribute and the ideas are written on the tablecloths. The moderators or the organising team move from table to table, encouraging everyone to participate and making sure that the ideas are written down. After multiple sequences of discussions, and with different participants having added their ideas and thoughts to the tablecloths, the facilitator finally summarise the ideas developed in the World Café.

The questions have a central position in the café and invite open discussions and exploration rather than solutions and action. Thus, preparing good questions is an important first step. A good question requires more than 'yes' or 'no' answers; it encourages new ideas and gives new insights. Such a question also fosters reflection and makes it possible for all group members to join the discussion. A powerful question can evoke knowledge-sharing, inspire strategic dialogue, and invite committed action (Vogt, Brown, & Isaacs, 2003). The idea is that the participants should explore the questions, encourage everyone's contributions, connect diverse perspectives, listen together for insights, and share collective discoveries (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). This is why the World Café is also called Dialogue Café.

5.3   The Dialogue Café in School-in

There are several reasons why School-In decided to use the Dialogue Café method in the intervention. As outlined, research shows the method's effectiveness in bridging different groups, sharing knowledge and perspectives, and discussing matters of common interest to the participants. The schools participating in School-In differed in management and organisation. Thus, we needed a method suitable for all kinds of schools. The Dialogue Café seemed appropriate as an intervention measure that could contribute to creativity and ideas for developing measures according to the development that had been agreed upon through the MMR-method (chapter 4). We promoted the idea that the Dialogue Café should be an environment where different persons, in distinct roles and with various competencies, could discuss and reflect across usual boundaries. In School-In, the whole staff participated, both teachers and paraprofessionals.

We knew that in many schools, the teachers work in teams restricted to their year level, often teaching the same subjects. In larger schools, they might not even know all their colleagues. We also experienced that special needs assistants (paraprofessionals) were often not considered on an equal footing with the teachers in the teams. In addition, we realised that members of the staff were familiar with the school's context to differing degrees. Therefore, School-In holistically targeted the teaching staff by involving the entire staff in activities across year levels, different professional roles, teaching experiences, and local affiliations. Thus, School-in focused on inclusion and common expectations concerning the entire school community from a systemic perspective.

The Dialogue Café was meant to be a measure that could contribute to joint reflection on matters of importance for the entire school, concerning both the teaching staff and all the students. Its aspects of encouraging contributions from everyone, connecting diverse perspectives, sharing collective discoveries, and cultivating collective intelligence matched School-In's intentions of developing collective capacity for inclusion. The Dialogue Café also helped explore how commitment to the school's local setting could affect change and development in school since the participants had different connections to and knowledge about the local community.

In School-In, a typical run of a Dialogue Café started with preparing questions (usually five questions, depending on the size of the teaching staff) – one for each table. These questions were based on each school's chosen development area (chapter 4) and were meant to challenge the staff to reflect on and discuss their own and the school's practice to search for ideas for improvement and needs of awareness. Therefore, the research group spent a significant amount of time and effort developing questions that would trigger the teaching staff's ideas and discussions. The teaching staff kept the groups established for the focus group interviews in the very beginning, consisting of 6–8 participants across year levels.

In School-In, the Dialogue Café's cosy café character as described by Brown & Isaac (2005) was limited by conditions in the school building and the budget. We

prepared tables in a classroom and did not provide music and greenery, but the school management supported the participants with beverages and refreshments from a project-funded budget. These were usually enjoyed before we started. Hence, the setting of the Dialogue Café was limited to the most essential elements – group tables with a large sheet of paper and markers of different colours.

In addition, we wanted this method to be part of our research by collecting data that could help us understand the intervention process. In a pilot study, we noted that many of the participants' ideas were only vaguely, or not at all, written down on paper, although the participants were encouraged to do so. Therefore, the team decided to record all the discussions in the Dialogue Cafés by placing an audio recorder on each table to capture the utterances and reflections that became salient in the communication processes. In this way, all ideas were collected in detail, and the process was not so vulnerable to selection processes in terms of what ideas might be worth writing on the paper, or to the facilitators' inexperience in using the Dialogue Café method. In addition, the recordings were used for further research by the research group. Finally, all the 'paper cloths' were photographed and shared with the participants afterwards.

Each group was assigned a table at the start of the Dialogue Café, with a large sheet of paper featuring a question and markers of different colours. The moderator from the research group introduced the Dialogue Café (see the appendix) and informed the participants about the audio recording of the process. The moderator encouraged the staff to reflect on and discuss the question on the sheet of paper, listen to each other, include everyone in the group, give examples for the suggested ideas and thoughts, and write down the thoughts and ideas the participants voiced. Subsequently, the moderator asked each group to choose a facilitator. The facilitator would remain at the table throughout the whole process, while the rest of the group would split up after the first session and go to other tables to discuss a new question with other colleagues. This procedure was repeated until everyone had visited every table. Finally, each person returned to the table where they had started (figure 5.1.).

The facilitators and their groups were asked to highlight three main topics or findings from their sheet of paper. These topics served as a basis for further discussion and reflection in the following Reflection Cycle (chapter 6), where concrete measures were developed from the Dialogue Café ideas. These measures would be worked on in the upcoming weeks of the project.

Throughout the intervention, two Dialogue Cafés were conducted, always followed by a Reflection Cycle, narrowing the ideas from the Dialogue Café to concrete measures. The questions in the second Dialogue Café were built on experiences and outcomes throughout the process. Table 5.1. shows the different questions asked in the Dialogue Café throughout the project in relation to the development areas.
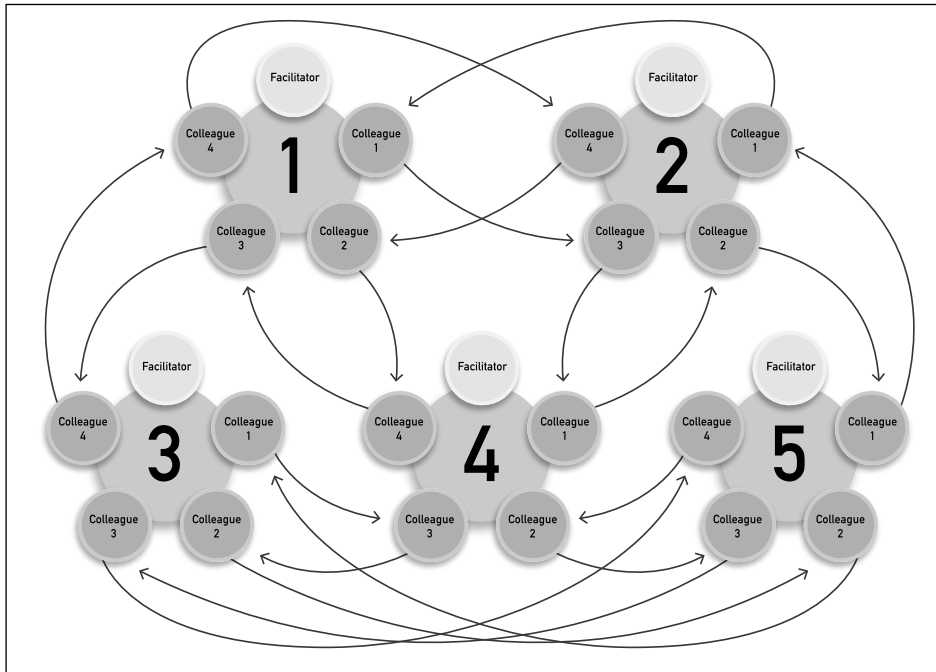
Figure 5.1: The progress of the Dialogue Café

Table 5.1: The development areas of schools and the questions

School 1	
Development area: Common expectations for the student role	
Questions for the first Dialogue Café	**Questions for the second Dialogue Café**
1 What common expectations do we want for the student role?	1 How do we help the students to master the student role – academically and socially?
2 Why can unclear expectations for the student role be problematic?	2 How can we find out if we have lowered the expectations towards students at our school – academically and socially?
3 What behavioural expectations should we commit to in the staff?	3 How do we prevent lowering the student's expectations?
4 How will the students notice that we have common expectations for the student role?	4 How far do we go in taking responsibility for the students – academically and socially? And where is our limit?

School 2	
Development area: Stronger focus on school community for all students	
Questions for the first Dialogue Café	**Questions for the second Dialogue Café**
1 How are boys and girls met in relation to their behaviour? Are there any differences?	1 How can we use the class in the inclusion of challenging students?
2 How can the weak or challenging students be challenged academically in class?	2 Which common expectations for the student role can we realise – academically and socially?
3 How can we be models for how students should meet each other?	3 How can the staff cooperate so that challenging students can be a natural part of the class?
4 Which rules can apply for both teachers and students?	4 What existing measures promote the community, and in what ways?

School 3	
Development area: A place for everyone – co-creation of community and the school's reputation	
Questions for the first Dialogue Café	**Questions for the second Dialogue Café**
1 How can we use students' knowledge about the local community in teaching?	1 How can staff and parents cooperate on handling differences and exclusion among the students?
2 How can we raise our awareness of the local community to create good adult-student-relations?	2 How can recess activities across year levels be a natural part of the students' school day?
3 How can we make better use of recess to create a community across groups?	3 How can the use of the students' knowledge about the local community ease and streamline the teaching?
4 How can the school influence its own reputation?	4 What positive aspects of our school's community could we highlight and convey, so the students notice?
5 How can we promote differences as a positive quality in the learning community?	5 How can the staff use the local community to nuance and elaborate the contents of the curriculum and textbooks?

School 4	
Development area: Use of the local community and parents as resources for the school	
Questions for the first Dialogue Café	**Questions for the second Dialogue Café**
1 What parts of the local community can engage the students, and how can we benefit from this?	1 How can we find local traditions and use these in school? (e.g., local lyrics, legends, baking traditions, celebration traditions, narrative art).
2 How can we use the students' knowledge about the local community in teaching?	2 How can we make use of local expert people in instruction to engage the students?
3 How can parents contribute to the teaching without meeting?	3 How can we use the curriculum to teach locally (across year levels)?
4 How can we motivate parents to attend parent meetings?	4 How can we cooperate with parents to create a common learning environment and a stronger community for the students?
5 How can we increase the staff's knowledge of the local community with the help of the parents?	5 How can we make use of the parents' or families' competence and interests in instruction?

School 5	
Development area: Creative and professional development within the school community	
Questions for the first Dialogue Café	**Questions for the second Dialogue Café**
1 How do we go about teaching when the results on national tests show that the students have to practice different task levels?	1 How can we facilitate connecting subjects to the students' common life-world? (relevance)
2 How can we use creative forms of expression to support the students' academic development?	2 How can we clarify the programme, content, and purpose of our teaching to the students? (teaching quality)
3 How can we see signs of student experience of academic mastering?	3 How can we show the students that we are passionate about the subject? (interests and enthusiasm)
4 How can we make use of each other's knowledge to strengthen the school's academic focus?	4 How can we support the students' academic independence and development? (autonomy and competence)
5 How can we teach to engage the students?	5 How can we recognise and support the students' academic and social role in the community? (relations)

School 6	
Development area: Jointly inspire students to engage and participate using the local community	
Questions for the first Dialogue Café	**Questions for the second Dialogue Café**
1 How can we facilitate the connection of subjects to the students' local community?	1 How can the students gain a better understanding of subject content based on the local community?
2 How can we engage in our teaching and show the students that we are passionate about the subject?	2 How can our knowledge of the local institutions, occupations, history and places be used in the teaching to inspire the students for participation?
3 How can we make concrete arrangements for student's participation and professional independence?	3 How can the students participate in the development of assignments based on the local community?
4 How can collaboration between the school and the local community contribute to security and belonging in the school?	4 How can the students' engagement and participation in local activities be made relevant in their school life?
School 7 (In school 7, the innovation stopped before the second Dialogue Café because of the pandemic)	
Development area: Together on common expectations for the school's student role	
Questions for the first Dialogue Café	**Questions for the second Dialogue Café**
1 How can common expectations for the student role strengthen students' life mastery?	
2 What must we do to show that we expect the students to participate?	
3 Which common expectations may apply for students in the classroom at both lower and higher year levels?	
4 Which common expectations can lay the foundation for the students' security in school?	

5.4 Implications for further research and school development

After reflecting on and discussing the use of the Dialogue Café as an intervention method in the project School-In, we noted that the method was highly fruitful for reflections and discussions. The teachers said they experienced 'active learning' and appreciated reflecting on and discussing common matters with colleagues they did not usually work with. This led to new ideas for teaching and student support and a shared understanding of each other's work and thinking. The discussions focused on common expectations, which brought the participants together as a community.

The Dialogue Café was new to most participants; they had to get used to this intervention method. The facilitator managed the role with varying degrees of success. Some wrote more on the paper cloth, while others wrote less. Some facilitators were dominant, while others were cautious; some were familiar with the method, while others were not. The role of the facilitator might have affected the group discussions to some degree. These are all implications we were aware of from other research. Fortunately, we audio recorded the discussions and could listen to the arguments again, if

needed. In this way, we gathered all comments and ideas regardless of whether or not the facilitator wrote them down.

For practitioners and researchers who want to work with the Dialogue Café, we recommend considering how facilitators can be prepared and trained for their role in the Dialogue Café. We also suggest that enough time and effort is spent on preparing good questions. For research purposes, we clearly experienced an added value from audio recording the discussions. This gave us access to all the reflections, examples, and discussions, without bias from the facilitator, in addition to the notes on the tablecloths. It also gave us an enhanced understanding of the teaching staff's ideas and knowledge as well as the progress of professional development processes within the learning communities.

The teaching staff enjoyed participating in the Dialogue Café the most. This appeared to be a working method they could adapt and use by themselves, not only with the teaching staff, but also in class with their students. One school even used it in a parents' evening to build a better relationship with the school's local context after taking part in this study. In this way, the diverse areas of application and the easy adaptation to different target groups made the Dialogue Café particularly useful as an instrument for joint learning in communities and also for research purposes.

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Appendix

Dialogue Café – introduction

The purpose of the Dialogue Café is to initiate and stimulate conversation and reflection in a group in relation to common issues or topics.

The participants gather in workgroups at separate tables. (Optional: Serve coffee with refreshments). At each table, there is a large sheet of paper and markers of different colours (5 min).

Step 1: The dialogue starts in the workgroup. Each group selects a facilitator, who remains at the table throughout the Dialogue Café, while the rest of the participants choose other tables from session to session. The group starts discussing the question presented to them. They use markers and make a mind map with different aspects appearing through the group dialogue (15 min).

Step 2: All the groups split; the group members go to different tables for a dialogue with other colleagues from other groups than their own. The facilitators remain at their tables. When a new group is gathered at the table, the facilitator briefly notifies the new group of what emerged in the first session. The dialogue continues and leads to new aspects being added to the mind map (10 min).

Step 3: Everyone but the facilitators changes tables again. Again, the facilitator notifies the new group of what has emerged so far, and the dialogue continues. New aspects are written down (10 min).

Step 4: Everyone but the facilitators changes tables again. Again, the facilitator notifies the new group of what has emerged so far, and the dialogue continues. New aspects are written down (10 min).

When everyone has been in a dialogue on each of the questions, the participants gather in their original groups and at their original tables.

Step 5: The different workgroups sum up the aspects on the mind map, preferably using a new, large sheet of paper. This can be an illustration, a new mind map, or just points that the group members find most important and for which they see value in taking further action on (15 min).

Step 6: The workgroups present the points they have chosen as important to their colleagues in a plenary session (max. 3 min per group). The sheets of paper are photographed.