

Dialogue and Innovation

World Café as a Contemporary Format for Dealing with Questions that Matter

Thomas Klug

The real voyage of discovery lies not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.

Marcel Proust

This article is a narrative about our World Café during the “Narrative and Innovation Conference” at Karlshochschule, Karlsruhe in August 2010.

It is actually two stories in one: first, the narrative about our World Café from the subjective perspective of the facilitator. This story is written in the first person and printed right-aligned in italics. Second, the article includes a description of the ingredients of a successful design of a World Café. This is written from an objective perspective, more like a scientific text, and is set left-aligned and in regular typeface for better identification.

This format has been chosen in order to reveal the fact that there are often two or more stories told when we communicate. The form of the article wants to remind us of this fact.

What is World Café?

The following characteristics will give an idea of what World Café is about:

- a “loose structure” (paradox) for hosting conversations about questions that really matter
- talking with each other, not about each other
- practicing deep narration
- holistic metaphor revealing our informal webs of connectedness
- like the Internet but in real life with real people face-to-face and heart-to-heart
- doorway to collective intelligence and wisdom

- space of possibility
- conversation as a co-evolutionary process creating the world anew
- creates the magic in the middle
- helps to connect others with each other and myself in a field of wisdom

How it started

In January 2010 I discovered Lutz Becker on the social network Xing. He was born in my hometown Solingen, Germany. That made me curious and I contacted him.

We arranged a phone call to get to know each other better. During this first call we got on quite well and he sent me a link to the conference "Narrative and Innovation" he was currently preparing with his colleague Andreas Müller.

He invited me to contribute to the conference with a speech, a poster or a panel. After checking all the other contributors and their input I opted for something practical - a World Café. My reasoning was: If this conference is about narrative and innovation, it is not enough to listen to presentations and speeches. It is important to experience what narration actually is and how someone feels about it. Experiencing the power of dialogue can help to discover where to find further leverage for innovation.

Why do we need World Cafés?

In the pluralistic western world, we are currently facing dramatic changes in many relevant areas such as science, economy, education, values, politics, technology, etc. Taking these changes seriously, we are wise to elaborate modes of sustainable living. How this works is not written in textbooks: it needs to be found out by trial and error. What we can do in order to search for the most promising approaches is to talk to each other on all levels of our society in order to tap into our collective wisdom. One very successful format for these conversations is the World Café. It provides a safe place to speak from our hearts about questions that really matter to us.

Questions open the door to dialogue, conversations and discovery... and ...to innovation.

Conversations and stories convey our collective knowledge. People tell stories about the "good old times"; grandmas tell fairy tales to their grandchildren (at least they used to); in church we hear about stories that are

2000 years old and older. In conversations we convey our cultural heritage and constantly reproduce culture. In dialogues we tell our stories by exchanging our ingrained culture and adding our personal view and experience. We do not only report on facts and figures. We tell the story as insiders with all our passion, our personal attitude emphasizing the aspects that matter to us. We relate these pieces of our own reality to our environment and by doing this we touch the others. They become a vital part of our story, because they are part of the relevant environment. We discover that somehow we are connected; we are part of the same community. That is the essential difference to fragmented analytical and rational talk.

The Greek word *dia-logos* means a free flow of meaning through a group of people. Dialogue overcomes the fragmentation that we have previously created.

The World Café allows us to be ourselves. We can talk as a whole person. We bring our entire personality to the table. This is encouraged and challenged at the same time.

How was World Café “invented”?

World Café was discovered because it was raining. In 1995 an international group of people met in Mill Valley, California, to speak about intellectual property. The meeting venue was outdoors, which is quite common in California. But weather conditions were not as planned. So the organizers Juanita Brown and David Isaacs had to re-organize. They improvised by creating a hospitable space in the host's living room. They arranged tables of four for their conversations, put white paper on the tables and some pens for doodling for new ideas and told the group to switch tables after some time talking about a subject in order to share and get fresh ideas.

They established that the success of the process had a lot to do with the attitude with which it was prepared and the safety of the space that helped people to be open to play and try new ideas with each other.

Preparation

After my discussion with the conference organizers, I assumed I would be working with an international group of about 250 people in our World Café. The advantage of World Café is that you can do it with 12 up to more than 1,000 people. So we were flexible concerning the number of participants. I checked the room conditions and the time slot that was available. For a World Café in which

the majority of participants have no or only marginal experience, you need approximately 3 hours.

To provide the full experience of the potential of a World Café, I needed a graphic recorder on board. I asked Lutz Becker whether they had one available at Karlsruhochschule. But there was nobody available for the time of the conference. So I had to search in my own network. Finally I found Hanno Langfelder (Deep Dialogue), who is an active member of the European World Café community. He was interested and had time to join me for the conference.

In order to prepare the recording properly and to benefit from somebody else's experience, we arranged a Skype conference with Sabine Soeder, an experienced and skillful graphic recorder and trainer. She and her husband are also active members of the European World Café community. Together we discussed several approaches for a suitable recording concept. Finally we agreed on an approach that felt right for all of us. So we were ready to promote our World Café.

The text on the conference website¹ announcing the World Café read as follows:

A World Café on Dialogue and Innovation

In our World Café we will collectively explore our experiences with innovation and innovation processes. In several rounds with alternating groups we will have intense conversations about questions that matter when innovating in our organizations, products, neighborhoods, families and lives.

This innovative communication format is based on the oldest form of conversation – the dialogue. It will provide us with new insights into innovation and our personal attitude. World Café offers the opportunity to talk, paint, play, etc. Simply be creative and have fun!

¹ <http://narrative-and-innovation.com/panel-thomas-klug/> 18.02.2011

How is a World Café designed?

In research it was discovered that there are seven principles that if performed in interplay create the field for fruitful dialogue and a space for possibility.²

1. Set the context

Here are some questions to consider when preparing a World Café:

What is the topic or issue we want to address or explore?

Who needs to be invited to participate in this conversation?

Who represents both conventional and unconventional wisdom?

How long do we have for the inquiry?

What line(s) of inquiry do we want to pursue?

What themes are most likely to be meaningful and stimulate creativity?

What is the best outcome we can envision?

How might we design a path toward that outcome?

2. Create hospitable space

Most meeting places are sterile, cold, and impersonal. Consider choosing warm, inviting environments with natural light and comfortable seating. Hospitable space also means "safe" space – where everyone feels free to offer their best thinking.

Hospitable space begins with the invitation to attend a Café. Include the theme or central question you'll be exploring in your Café in the invitation. State it as an open-ended exploration, not a problem-solving intervention. Use color, hand-printing, graphics and other ways to make it stand out from the deluge of paper and e-messages we all receive.

When we ask people where they have experienced their most significant conversations, nearly everyone recalls sitting around a kitchen or dining room table. There is an easy intimacy when gathering at a small table, that most of us immediately recognize. When you walk into a room and see it filled with café tables you know that you are not there for your usual business meeting.

² The text of this paragraph is a slightly edited version of the World Café website. <http://www.theworldcafe.com/principles.html>, 18.02.2011. I have deliberately adopted this text as it is because it reflects the attitude and perspective of the World Café community in the most appropriate way. The current text on the website has been edited. The quoted text reflects the version referred to in this footnote.

- Creating a Café ambiance is easy and does not need to be expensive:
- Stagger the tables in a random fashion, no straight rows
- Cover these with two sheets of (flip chart) paper or a white paper tablecloth
- Put markers on the table to encourage people to write and draw on the tablecloths
- A small decoration completes the table set up
- Have some soft music playing as people arrive

3. Explore questions that matter

Knowledge emerges in response to compelling questions. Find questions that are relevant to the real-life concerns of the group. Powerful questions that "travel well" help attract collective energy, insight, and action as they move throughout a system. Depending on the timeframe available and your objectives, your Café may explore a single question or use a progressively deeper line of inquiry through several conversational rounds.

A note about the appreciative process: David Cooperrider has co-developed the "appreciative inquiry" approach. After several years of studying how people ask questions, he stated that the most important lesson from appreciative inquiry is that "people grow in the direction of the questions they ask. The questions we ask and the way we construct them will focus us in a particular manner and will greatly affect the outcome of our inquiry." We find the same position in medicine: You can focus on people's deficits and sicknesses (pathogenesis) and you can direct your attention to a patient's experience with full health (salutogenesis). "The second approach is comparable with what Cooperrider describes. If we ask: What is wrong and who is to blame? We set up a certain dynamic of problem-solving and blame assignment. While there may be instances in which such an approach is desirable, when it comes to hosting a Café, we have found it much more effective to ask people questions that invite the exploration of possibilities and connect them with why they care.

4. Encourage everyone's contribution

People engage deeply when they feel they are contributing their thinking to questions that are important to them. Encourage all participants to contribute to the conversation. As Meg Wheatley says, "Intelligence emerges as a system and connects to itself in new and diverse ways." Each participant in the Café represents an aspect of the whole system's diversity and as each person has the

chance to connect in conversation more of the intelligence inherent in the group becomes accessible.

For the speakers in the conversation, the responsibility is to focus on the topic and express their thoughts about it as clearly as possible. For the listeners, the responsibility is to listen to what the speakers are saying with the implicit assumption that they have something wise and important to say. Listen with a willingness to be influenced, listen for where this person comes from and appreciate that their perspective, regardless of how divergent from your own, is equally valid and represents a part of the larger picture, which none of us can see by ourselves.

5. Cross-pollinate and connect diverse perspectives

Ask participants to offer their individual perspectives and listen for what is emerging "in the middle of the table." Use the tablecloths and markers to create a "shared visual space" through drawing and connecting the emerging ideas. Sometimes the co-created pictures can really be worth a thousand words when showing the relationships between ideas. This experience is the reason for engaging graphic recorders for the "harvesting" of the entire group.

A woman once remarked: "The most radical thing you can do is to introduce people to folks they don't know." Make sure that participants from each round all go to tables with different people as the conversational rounds progress. This cross-pollination of ideas often produces surprising results that could not have happened otherwise.

Setting up your Café in conversational rounds and asking people to change tables between rounds allows for a dense web of connections to be woven in a short period of time. Each time you travel to a new table you bring with you the threads of the last round and interweave them with those brought by other travelers. As the rounds progress, the conversation moves to deeper levels. People who arrived with fixed positions often find that they are more open to new and different ideas.

Experience shows that it is very useful to ask one person to remain at a table to act as the table host. This person will summarize the conversation of the previous round for the newcomers, ensuring that the important points are available for consideration in the upcoming round. They then invite the travelers to likewise briefly share the essence from the previous round, allowing everyone to become more deeply connected to the web of conversation.

6. Listen together for patterns, insights and deeper questions

Listening is a gift we give to one another. The quality of our listening is perhaps the most important factor determining the success of a Café. Whole books and courses have been written about how to listen. One of our favorite analogies comes from jazz: Wynton Marsalis, one of the best contemporary trumpeters, explains that when jazz musicians get together to jam, whoever is the best listener ends up contributing the most to the music, because he is able to play off of whatever is being offered by the other cats in the band. Café conversations share that jazz element of inviting each person to express themselves authentically, and those who listen skillfully are able to easily build on what is being shared.

A few tips for improving our listening:

- Help folks to notice their tendency to plan their response to what is being said actually detracts from both the speaker and the listener
- Listen as if each person were truly wise, and sharing some truth that you may have heard before, but do not yet fully grasp
- Listen with an openness to be influenced by the speaker
- Listen to support the speaker in fully expressing themselves-Listen for deeper questions, patterns, insights and emerging perspectives
- Listen for what is not being spoken along with what is being shared

7. Harvest and share collective discoveries

Conversations held at one table reflect a pattern of wholeness that connects with the conversations at the other tables. The last phase of the Café involves making this pattern of wholeness visible to everyone. To do so, hold a conversation between the individual tables and the whole group. Ask the table groups to spend a few minutes considering what has emerged in their Café rounds and what has been most meaningful to them. Distill these insights, patterns, themes and deeper questions down to the essence and then provide a way to share them with the whole room. It can be helpful to cluster this aspect of the conversation by asking for one thing that was new or surprising and then asking people to share only those ideas that link and build on that particular aspect. When it is clear that the group has exhausted this topic, ask for another one and repeat the process until you have given each table or person the opportunity to speak about what matters to them. Make sure that you have a way to capture this. There are different ways of capturing the wealth of ideas for the group and even for others. You can use

graphic recording or capture the ideas on flip charts, or by having each table record them on large post-it notes, or even on their table cloths, which can then be taped to a wall so that everyone can see them. After each table has had the opportunity to share their insights, the whole group may wish to take a few minutes of silent reflection and consider:

- What is emerging here?
- If there was a single voice in the room, what would it be saying?
- What deeper questions are emerging as a result of these conversations?
- Do we notice any patterns and what do the patterns point to, or how do they inform us?
- What do we now see and know as a result of these conversations?"

World Café at the conference

We started the Café after lunch. The number of participants of the conference varied around 25. So we had a much smaller group to work with than originally planned. In order to create a welcoming and hospitable space, we chose to start with an old Zulu greeting. I greeted everybody with “Sawu bona”, “I see you”.

And the response was “Sikhona”, “I am here” (Chart 2). This greeting is grounded in the Ubuntu culture and tradition of South Africa. It means that until you have seen me I do not exist. As soon as you greet me, I “exist” and can reply that I am here. This usually sets the appropriate appreciative tone for a mindful conversation. I got the message across to some of the participants, to some others I did not. It depends on how familiar a group is with these kinds of rituals and very different approaches to the implicitly known western way of behavior.

The magic of World Café is that we are allowed to be what we are: human beings. It is not only tolerated, it is mandatory to play with ideas and thoughts, experiment, improvise and have fun. With a diverse group of people it only needs a few guidelines – the Café etiquette (Chart 3) – to start and keep the process going. We introduced the etiquette to the community and it was also available on every table as a printed version.

Café Etiquette³

Focus on what matters
Contribute your thinking and experience
Speak your mind and heart
Listen to understand
Link and connect ideas
Listen together for insights and deeper questions
Play, doodle, draw on the tablecloth
Have fun!

Start and introduction

At the beginning of the Café, we introduced ourselves at the tables by mentioning our name, current activity/work and our most important experience with innovation (Chart 4). This helped to get to know each other better and break the ice before diving into the subject of innovation.

The overall target of our World Café was: to experience "dialogue" as a crucial resource for comprehensive and sustainable innovations. For this purpose we organized the Café into three rounds of 25 minutes focusing on questions that matter. After each round, we harvested the results of the dialogues at the different tables supported by our graphic recorder Hanno Langfelder.

Why Graphic Recording?

Graphic recording helps to visualize and memorize the main results of a meaningful conversation. It provides additional context; it is not only about what was actually said. Graphic recording can also capture the mood, the tension and emotions in the room. It can combine both levels of communication: the expressed and the silent, not expressed. By doing so, the recording taps into the collective intelligence of the group.

This integrated visualization of context and content helps to see the full picture, in particular in the western world with its fragmented language. In our languages single letters form a word; several words are put together to a sentence. Most of the time context is missing. It is different in Asian languages:

³ The World Café: Café to Go, 2008

They use images, intonation, and pronunciation to convey meaning. So we can say that the visual recording adds context to what we are saying with our words.

Questions

When preparing the World Café, my major focus was on the questions guiding the Café. Before I could create these questions, I had to ask myself some initial questions that guided and shaped the work:

Who are the people attending?

What matters to them?

How can we bring them to speak from their heart?

Do they speak English well enough in order to express what they really want to say?

Will the planned greeting open the floor for deep dialogue?

What can we do if that is not the case?

Will the participants be fresh and motivated in the afternoon to experience a good Café?

With all these questions in mind and assumptions about the answers, I had to collect questions that might be asked during the Café. I collected these questions during the period of preparing the conference while jogging, driving the car, talking to people or watching the news. The following is a collection of potential questions that needed to be checked against the criteria of powerful questions. They had to relate to each other and lead the participants more deeply into the theme of the Café with every round of questions asked. The collected questions are the following:

What is your understanding or metaphor of dialogue?

What is your experience with innovation (situations)?

Was that more a personal or a group experience?

What is important about innovation to you and why do you care?

What is our intention here?

What is the deeper purpose of working on innovation that is worth our best effort?

Why does innovation matter?

What really matters for innovation?

What do we know about innovation / what do we still need to learn?

What is the core (heart) of innovation?

*How would you describe the ideal conditions for innovation?
 Which assumptions and mental models do we need to test when thinking
 about innovation?
 How do we need to think, act and sense differently?
 What is needed for radical innovation?
 What is the next level of thinking we need to go for?
 What is missing in our picture of innovation? What is it we are not seeing?
 What do we need more clarity about?
 What had real meaning for you from what you have heard?
 What surprised you? What challenged you?
 What is being shaped here? What are you hearing underneath what has been
 said?
 What can my personal contribution to innovation be (in work and life)?
 If success was completely guaranteed, what strong steps would we take?
 What challenges might we face during our journey and how might we meet
 them?
 What seeds can each of us plant that could make the biggest difference?
 From this preselected group of questions, I distilled the ones used during the
 Café. As a filter I asked some other test persons and myself: "What are the most
 powerful questions that could matter to the group?"*

What are the characteristics of powerful questions?

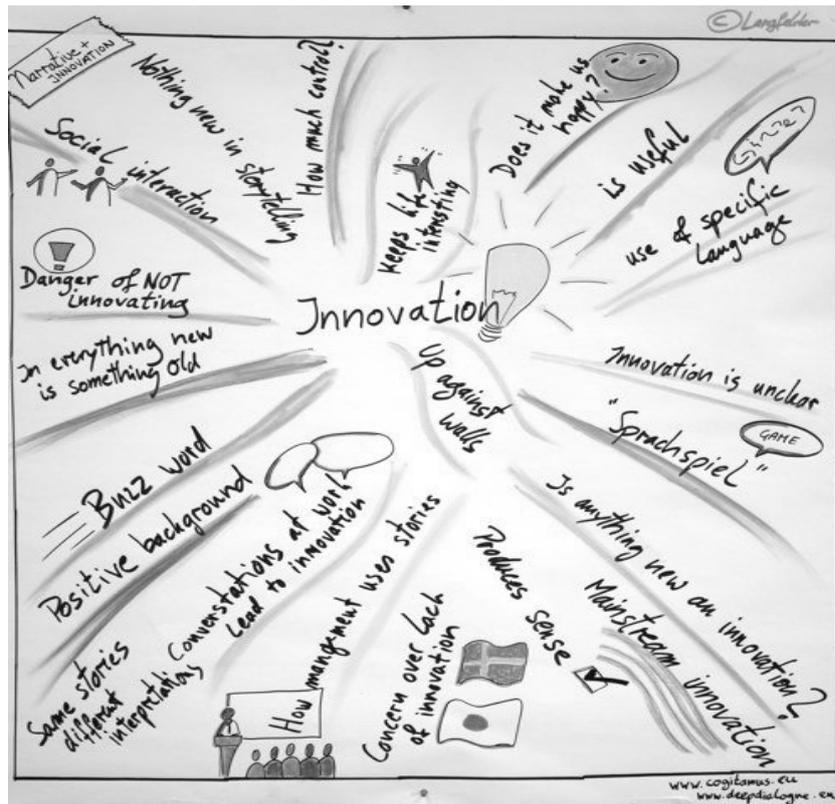
A powerful question⁴

- is simple and clear
- is thought provoking
- generates energy
- focuses inquiry
- surfaces unconscious assumptions
- opens new possibilities

*After each round of the World Café with a guiding question, we collected the
 insights gained at each table by "harvesting" the main ideas and aspects. I
 asked the participants what insights they had and Hanno documented the
 answers. In the following you can see the selected questions and the "harvest"
 as a graphic recording.*

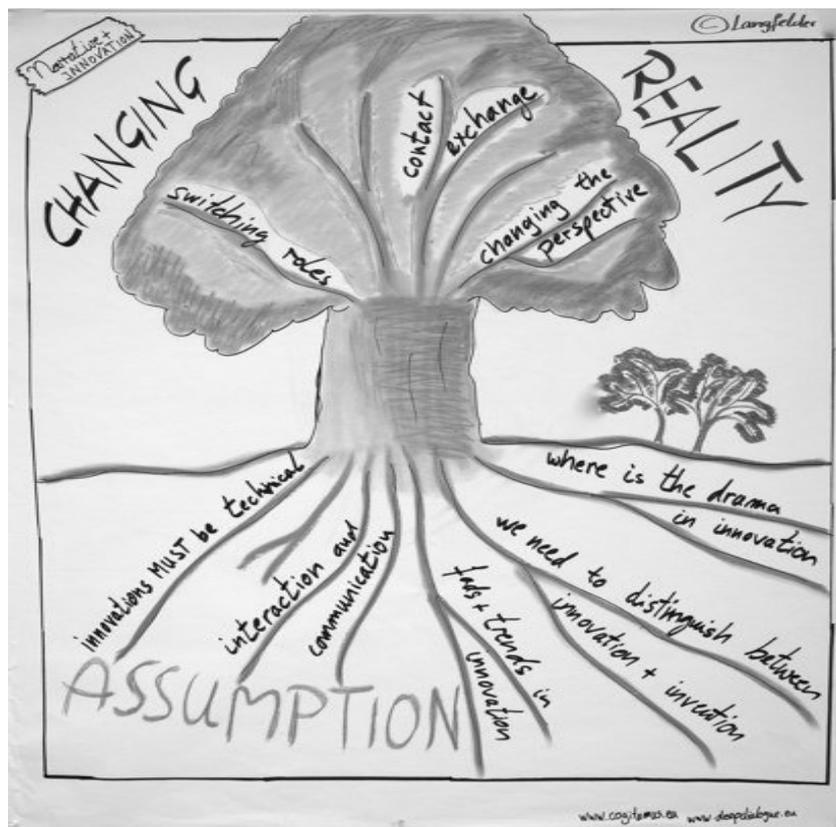
⁴ For more background see: Vogt et al. 2003

First question:
What is important to you about innovation and why do you care?



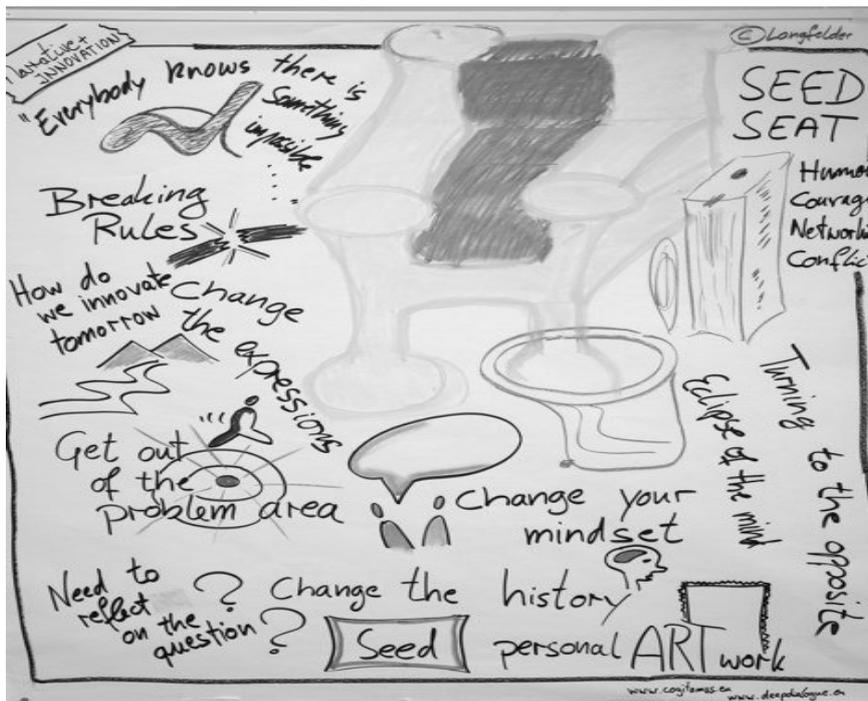
During the first round there was an intense conversation at each table. The visual record displays the diverse aspects that had been found at the individual tables and in the group as a whole.

Second question:
Which assumptions and mental models do we need to test when thinking about innovation? How might we think, act and sense differently?



This image of a tree demonstrates to the reader how deep our assumptions are rooted in ourselves. They influence how we see the world, how we think and act. It reminds us also of the fact that if we want to change reality we have to change our assumptions and deep beliefs.

Third question:
What seeds can each of us plant that could make the biggest difference in how we innovate?



With this question, part of the group got really energized. From a certain point in time we did not simply talk about innovation. Some people got up and were innovative. They broke the rule that they should only share with us what they were coming up with and that Hanno should record what they were saying. They started to record themselves. They played for instance with the words of the question – seed was interpreted as seat and painted in bright colors. First, Hanno and I as the facilitators were surprised and did not know how to deal with the situation. But then we realized that the entire Café was about innovation. And this consequently meant breaking rules, rules of convention. They did not even ask whether they were allowed to paint. They just did it. In the same way innovations are born in larger organizations. You do not ask for permission; you just do it and excuse yourself later.

Feedback: In one word - how did you experience the World Café?



The following picture shows one of the table cloths from the World Café. It is obvious that most of the drawing was done by one single person. Most of the little pictures face in the same direction and are drawn in a similar style. What is missing here is the connection between the images. In a conversation with a deep flow you will usually see wild scribbles that sometimes even cannot be identified by the people at that table after a while.

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- For more online information on Visual Facilitation/Graphic Recording visit: http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Visual_Facilitation.