

Reflections on the Taiwan SoL Café Executive Summary and Key Factors

Abstract

The Taiwan Society for Organizational Learning (TSoL) sponsored a four day conference in November of 2007. What began as an ordinary conference exploring the themes of human capital and e-learning, evolved into something that the organizers and facilitators found to be highly unusual in conference settings. Participants in the conference – who came from all walks of life – entered into conversations that took them far beyond creating a vision for just their own organization into envisioning a future for the whole of Taiwan.

This paper documents the reflections of the six members of the World Café hosting team. We were invited guests to Taiwan and we hope to include the reflections of our Chinese colleagues from Taiwan in a future version.

The conference had a two part structure:

- ~ Days one and two were structured as traditional keynote presentations.
- ~ Days three and four were hosted as a World Café to “Imagine Taiwan in the World as Café.”

Key factors in our success

- ~ Preparation
- ~ Open, Responsive and Emergent
- ~ Connection to Wholeness – Working with “A Living Being”
- ~ Asking Big Questions – Setting up a sail to “Catch the Wind of God”
- ~ Friendship, Playfulness and Harmony
- ~ Engaged Partnership with Organizers and Attendees

Preparation

Because the hosting team for the Café was coming from all over the world – we would not be able to meet in person until the night before the opening of the conference.

Several weeks before the conference, some 16 hours of phone time was spent in conversations among key members of the team. This included King Kong Lin, the primary conference program liaison, David Hwang, TSoL advisor, Stephen Meng, our bridge between greater China area and the World Café community, and Ulric Rudebeck, the café hosting team leader and lead café designer-facilitator. During these calls a great deal of attention was devoted to exploring the purpose, principles, design metaphors, and desired outcomes for the conference.

Later, Ken Homer joined that group for an additional six hours of explorations.

Approximately four to six hours was devoted to phone conversations connecting the café hosting team which consisted of: Ulric Rudebeck, Samantha Tan, Andri Lehn, Stephen Meng and Ken Homer.

Ulric and Ken designed and proposed several possible flows for the café conversations that would meet the desired outcomes agreed upon between the organizers and the hosting team. We estimate we spent somewhere in the neighborhood of 36 hours creating and sharing these designs with the rest of the hosting team, and refining them based on their input.

Additionally, Ms. Irene Chang in Taiwan spent considerable time translating our work into Chinese – crucial to our successful collaboration given the language challenges. We do not know how much time our colleagues on Taiwan spent in preparation, but it is easily several hundred or more person hours.

Once we all arrived in Taipei, we devoted as much time as possible to going over our design and listening in for what we all intuitively felt would work. Each morning we would have breakfast together, each evening we'd meet after dinner for several hours. Irene's assistance in translating was again invaluable.

Open, Responsive and Emergent

Throughout the course of our time in Taipei each of us kept our eyes, ears, hearts, and minds, open for how to best serve the very complex design and multiple outcomes the organizers had in mind. One of the best moves we made early on was inviting Morel Foreman, CEO of Gaiasoft, into our conversations. Morel proved to be an adept design partner and natural host whose contributions were both welcome and valued.

We stayed in conversation with our conference hosts. We met regularly with them, listened intently to their ideas and concerns and did our best to see to it that we could address them effectively.

We also adapted our design according to what was emerging in the room at any given time. Numerous "in flight" course corrections were a part of the process – including completely redesigning the morning of the second day of the Café as a result of a conversation with our hosts the evening before.

Connection to Wholeness – Working with "A Living Being"

Early on in the design conversations, Ken introduced the idea of finding some way to bring into the room the memory of all of those who have walked the Earth before us, and upon whose shoulders we stand – as well as evoking the images of all those who will follow after us – whose eyes are turned to the actions we take today which will so profoundly shape their world tomorrow.

These images resonated strongly in our small team, and we had hoped to actually have participants bring photos of grandparents and grandchildren into the room to make their presence more palpable, but logistics made this impossible so we used a guided imagery process instead.

Ulric framed the café process we were working with as one of co-creating a “living being”, another image that each of us felt strongly aligned with. We approached the café with the aim of providing the nourishment and care that all within it, and the larger whole emerging out of it, needed in order to thrive. A guiding principle for us was: “Everything in the Universe responds well to the energy of kindness.”

Asking Big Questions – Setting up a sail to “Catch the Wind of God”

Our conference hosts were very open to and supportive of our posing questions in the café that went beyond organizational goals and engaged people at deeper levels.

The presence of scholars such as Professor Fu and his presentation on “*To Be a Universal Dancer*” set the stage for people to move beyond their personal concerns. Posing these large questions was a key to the astonishing level of participation and creativity that we witnessed in the room.

Engaged Partnership with Organizers and Attendees

The close cooperation and collaboration among the conference organizers and the café hosting team was strengthened by the gracious hospitality of our hosts both when we arrived and throughout our stay. We were treated as honored guests and we all felt enormous gratitude for the thoughtfulness and care which was showered upon us during our visit.

For our part, we reached out regularly throughout the conference, keeping the organizers apprised of our thinking and plans, sharing our observations, staying open to listening to the concerns that would arise for them in the course of the café and integrating them into our design.

All of this behind the scenes work and collaboration showed up in the room as a very high level of engagement and creative participation among the attendees. At no time did any of us notice people hanging back, wandering off or breaking away to pursue their own agenda. The intent and focus of the group in going deeply into the material presented by the speakers, and engaging fully with the questions presented in the café, was energizing to everyone present.

Friendship, Playfulness and Harmony

During the four days that the hosting team was together – and in actuality, due to a staggered travel schedule not all of us were together for the full four days of the conference – we were working amidst many challenging dynamics:

- ~ There was a language barrier – we were working in a culture that few of us, besides Stephen, had any experience with.
- ~ We had never worked together as a team before arriving – and most of us were meeting each other for the first time.

- ~ The design was very complex and kept shifting in accordance with what was emerging in the room. Also, there were misunderstandings requiring nimble action, such as when we thought one speaker was slated for 15 minutes but we discovered shortly before he spoke that he was scheduled for an hour.

Thanks to the goodwill, professionalism and integrity of each of team member, we rapidly established a sense of trust, openness and even playfulness that allowed us to plan and design with great care, but to hold the design loosely in order to work with whatever was arising in the moment.

Ulric was a masterful leader, always focused on what needed to be done, while matching each team member's core strengths to support the best possible outcomes. There were moments of frustration to be sure – no team escapes those – but at no time did we experience ourselves caught up in power struggles.

As a team, each of us felt safe to speak openly what was on our minds even if it was at odds with what others thought. There was a respect for each person's experience, and we created space to listen for the little voices that nudged one or the other of us with warnings that something might be amiss. We all trusted that we each had valuable and important contributions toward making our work successful, and that by staying open to each other's views we could create fulfilling relationships while finding our way to a satisfying outcome.

Amidst the challenges we maintained a sense of humor, developed lasting friendships, delivered highly skillful facilitation in service to a wonderful group of people, witnessed the birth of something quite amazing, and had great fun too!

We feel blessed and honored to have been a part of this journey.

We hope that reading about our experiences will provide you with valuable insights into the nature of group process. And, how sometimes in the midst of great challenge, it is possible to construct magnificent bridges of meaning over the canyons of confusion where we all too often find ourselves.

Yours in the unfolding conversation,

Ulric Rudebeck

Ken Homer

Andri Lehn

Stephen Meng

Samantha Tan

Morel Foreman