

Connecting Diverse People and Ideas

A Virtual Knowledge Café

as told by
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I'm happy to tell this story. To be honest, I didn't know if it would work to use Café principles in cyberspace, since the on-line world is a different world than face to face. I've learned a lot from it. First of all, I should tell you about the MAOM. It's an innovative on-line Masters program for professionals and decision makers in the new economy, one of the first of its kind in graduate education. The MAOM is fostering new ways of leading and working with organizational change and transitions, leadership and complexity, virtual work teams, and work design. Members come from national and global enterprises across many industries, including high technology, healthcare, transportation, telecommunications, utilities, financial services, consulting, education and public sector agencies.

Every course is conducted asynchronously over the Internet. This means that people are logging on at different times of the day and in different time zones from anywhere in the world. I designed my course, *Organization Development Concepts and Methods*, in a Virtual Café format, using the same overall design principles that I've used in face to face Café learning and knowledge creation. This has been quite an experiment to see what would happen if I created a Virtual Knowledge Café using the Café methodology to cross-pollinate ideas and share collective knowledge. Since I'm be here in California for a few days, is it okay if I write out my story? I'd like to do it that way because I want to have a written piece to use as a case study that can show how a different structure for knowledge creation and building group intelligence can

work—and this one certainly has! (*I say, "Of course," and Bo spends a couple of hours writing the following story.*)

The Setup of the Virtual Knowledge Café

My course is 12 weeks long and the class size is not more than 9 members. The first week of my course, there is a general check-in among all the members. Each shares their personal biography, why they have chosen this course, and what expectations and norms they would like to see fulfilled during our time together. Similar to the personal introductions in a face to face Café, this initial check-in helps to establish mutual trust and willingness to be open.

After the first week of check-in, we set up the Virtual Knowledge Cafés. There are three Café rounds of three weeks each, followed by a final week of mutual reflection on the Café process as a whole, including personal and collective learnings. In each Café round, there are two or three areas of inquiry or topics going on simultaneously. Every member serves as a Café host for at least one topic area during the 12 week course. The Café topic/question might be connected to a project they are involved in at work or a concept they want to learn more about.

The first week of each Café round, the host posts a "think paper" with information about the topic, their own reflections, and why this topic matters to them. They include references to a variety of additional resources, including books, articles, and websites. The host also frames the question or questions that will serve as the "attractor" for the Café dialogue during the period they are serving as the host.

As there are several different Cafés topics going on simultaneously, the participants move from Café to Café to discover what's in the "middle of the table" at each place and to make their contributions. Members add experiences, observations, new ideas or questions, as well as additional references. I encourage the hosts of one Café to visit other Cafés that are going on at the same time so they can link and build ideas.

The participants who are not hosting this Café round are also weaving ideas among other Café conversations. This moving around and cross-fertilizing of ideas and experiences between Cafés creates a highly collaborative learning experience between students and faculty who are all recognized professionals in their field.

As a faculty member, I facilitate by simply participating in the different Cafés, perhaps making new connections, or encouraging a direction of inquiry that might not have occurred to the members. I also host an ongoing Café, called “Bo’s Special Café,” a social space where people can drop in at any time for a chat with me or others regarding non-topic related interests and concerns. This is one of the Cafés where the most authentic personal dialogue happens.

By the end of each three week period, it’s quite amazing to see how the Café conversations have gotten deeper and are getting woven together into a larger whole. People have participated actively since we’ve asked them to contribute to the Cafés at least twice per week. We’ve found, however, that most people end up contributing much more often.

During the first week of the following three week Café sequence, new hosts frame their topics and prepare their “think papers.” During this time, the hosts of the previous Café conversation are synthesizing the patterns and discoveries that have emerged in their Café. Simultaneously, during the first week of each new Café round, all members can go back into the Café conversations from the previous round to reflect on their own personal learnings and insights, and to review resource material.

The last week of the semester, all members develop a reflection paper about what they have learned from the overall Café process and discuss how they can use this shared knowledge in their lives and work. These synthesis papers are then posted in a special Reflection Café. This enables all members to get a sense of the whole by seeing the patterns made by everyone’s diverse contributions.

Discoveries about Café Learning in a Virtual Setting

The interesting thing about running a course as a Virtual Knowledge Café is that the students soon discover that everyone is the expert, including themselves. At first they are a bit uncertain how the Café will work, but they soon realize that the quality of the collective insight and knowledge creation can actually be much higher than in a normal face to face classroom setting where the faculty puts themselves in the role of expert. In the Virtual Café, everyone’s knowledge is mixed together on an equal level.

To my surprise, I’ve found that Virtual Knowledge Cafés create as powerful collaborative learning as I’ve found in the face to face Café approach. First of all, in the

Virtual Café setting, members have more time for reflection before they make their diverse contributions. Secondly, they can see everyone's contribution in writing. This often helps people who think more easily when they can see things visually. They can see the patterns and connect ideas more easily when they can read what others have said. Thirdly, they have time to find interesting resources and make a deeper contribution to each Café topic, including testing assumptions and mental models.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a diverse multi-cultural group of global leaders gets the opportunity to connect their thinking and ideas across a variety of on-line Café conversations before they begin to synthesize their own personal learnings. Through moving ideas and people around from Café to Café both within and between Café rounds, the members learn from each others' experiences and questions in a deeper and more coherent way. It's like actually weaving a knowledge web across many different dimensions and perspectives. Something special occurs from this web of conversations. Powerful collaborative learning seems to happen if people are asked to move from Café to Café, even on-line. They can plant new seed ideas and questions as well as linking and connecting ideas among Café conversations.

Here is a synthesis of comments from a number of students about their learning in the OD course and their experience with the Virtual Knowledge Cafés:

I really liked the Café process of hosts creating initial "thought papers" followed by an extended conversation in the Cafés. While I will admit I did not fully understand the expectations in the beginning, it was obvious that the entire group developed new skills, particularly the skill of layering a deep conversation on later topics. This last learning about group conversation and how it deepens was pretty amazing! Each person brought their own perspective and style to the discussions so that the learning had a web design rather than being focused on Bo's perspective. I also think that the opportunity for a variety of students to facilitate the Café dialogues was a real bonus.

I certainly perceive my knowledge level very differently now. I found the Café topics complementary. I could see how the themes connected throughout and saw a glimpse of the bigger picture for the first time.

This course was far-and-away the richest learning experience that I have had yet. I loved the open adult learning method using the Café. It forced us (the learners) to find and share resources and knowledge. It seemed as though I were engaged with serious learners who were speaking from their passions as well as their intellect.

This Café idea reinforces the need for me to be in community with others and to hear what they know, think, suspect, experience, and discover.

This was not only a program of content. It was a program of experience. We experienced cultural differences, new group processes, formal and informal leadership, empowerment, and new ways of working with technology in the Cafés.

The reflection time we had while each new Café was gearing up was key to my learning. It gave me the opportunity to really digest the previous conversations, instead of waiting until the end of the whole thing.

Every member contributed a high level of intelligence, brought wonderful and relevant personal experience forward, and exhibited engagement and participation that created a supportive and creative learning environment. I was impressed with both the academic level as well as with the caring and desire for each of us to have a good time while learning important material in the Cafés.

I cannot say enough about the level of learning this approach has afforded me. The give-and-take interaction in the group was very powerful. My expectations for the class were to learn about team dynamics. I came away with much, much more.

There are many Cafés on the Internet. Those are more like chat rooms. Chat rooms are fine, but they are not really Virtual Knowledge Cafés based on the face-to-face Café principles. I don't know of any on-line courses that are run according to these principles either, even though they may be very useful.

My experience shows me that Café learning using these principles can be done on-line. If we structure it right, I think that Café conversations can show great results for knowledge sharing and new knowledge creation. I found that out as I experimented with my own on-line classes. This was a big surprise, since I thought that without the face to face aspect it might not work at all. But just the opposite occurred.

That tells me that maybe these Café principles are not about whether it's face to face or on-line. Maybe it's just about the basic few principles for how humans in general can be in real dialogue and think together in ways that create new knowledge, wherever they are. I wonder how we could design the next stages of research to help us learn more about this.