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Exploring Our Significance in Our Communities at a Learning Café

ABSTRACT

A learning café is a presentation format in which the presenter briefly shares about the presentation topic and then uses most of the time to facilitate discussion with the attendees for further exploration of the topic. As it was the author's first time to present at a learning café, this reflection paper will focus on my expectations and the actual experience. I was expecting to be able to discuss all the prompts I had prepared for the presentation, but in reality the attendees were only able to share about a portion of questions related to their communities. Advantages of the learning café format are that attendees are actively involved in the presentation and have more egalitarian interactions. Conversely, those positives may be viewed as negatives by those who prefer traditional presenter-focused presentations. For instance, with learning cafés the presenter needs to be more of a facilitator rather than an expert, responding to what the attendees view as meaningful. The attendees also need to be prepared to share about the topics and participate actively.

Keywords: learning cafés, presentation styles, self-reflections

In this short-form reflection, I will share my experience facilitating a learning café at the Learner Development 30 (LD 30) Conference. Though I have presented many times, this was my first time with a learning café. Therefore, I will focus more on the presentation format instead of the session content. To begin, a learning café will be defined. Then I will explain how preparation for the café differed from preparation for a more traditional presentation. Next, I will detail my expectations for the café in contrast to the actual experience. Lastly, I will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of learning cafés.

DEFINITION

According to LD 30's Conference session page, *Collaborative Learning Spaces*, a learning café begins with a short presentation about the topic to prepare the audience members to use the majority of the time for having discussions about the topic, and later to make mini-posters (2023). In comparison to traditional presentations, the focus in a learning café format is on active audience interaction rather than the presenter sharing. When searching online for "learning café", some results were related to educational institutions offering computer rooms with support staff, small group discussions or opportunities for online learning (EdPrepLab, n.d.; Lethbridge College, n.d.; University of Louisville, n.d.). However, the learner café format at the LD30 Conference has more similarities to the World Café Method (2023) which is credited to an American organization using collaborative group discussions to promote social change. The *Design Principles* (2023) of the

World Café Method, outline having a clear purpose, creating a safe space, posing a question or questions relevant to the attendees, ensuring all attendees share their viewpoints through group interactions, and ending with a time for reflection. However, the LD30 learner café differed by including a short presentation segment. Based on the above, it seemed a learner café should be audience centered instead of speaker centered, starting with a brief presentation, with most of the time being dedicated to group discussions about the presentation topic in a comfortable setting for sharing.

PREPARATIONS

The topic of the presentation was about communities and the ways that members' participation can potentially solve problems that the community is experiencing. Studying community development as a social work undergraduate and then community studies as a graduate student, community has always been important to me. However, at my previous job I began to shift my focus to being a more efficient classroom manager and forgot my role as a community worker. In April 2023, I started at a new university and became part of a new community. In preparation for this change, I realized how I needed to not only focus on being a competent adjunct lecturer, but also a nurturing community member. Since everyone possesses knowledge of their communities, it seemed like having LD30 attendees share their viewpoints would be preferable to me lecturing about community development theories. I was eager to learn more about how others were interacting in their communities.

To promote discussion in my learning café session, the slides I presented at the beginning included questions such as “What communities are you a part of?”, “Do you have positive, negative or neutral feelings about this community?”, “What is your role in your community?”, and “Do you have ideas to make your community better?” At the former LD 20 conference, I recalled many Japanese students attending, so I wanted to give them, in addition to the other attendees, enough time to think about the topic first before the brainstorming sessions started. As a result, I created a worksheet about communities the participants belong to, issues their communities are experiencing, and possible solutions to these issues (Appendix A). The attendees completed the worksheet as an individual brainstorming activity. Next, they shared the contents with others. Then all attendees' contents were used for material creation in the form of mini-posters.

EXPECTATIONS

My expectation was that after an icebreaker, I would give a brief presentation containing the same questions that were mentioned above and that appeared at the top of the worksheet. This would allow the attendees to write down their answers to each prompt. This would be followed by a group discussion about the prompts, and then ending in a sharing session about the posters. It seemed that the mini-posters would be especially meaningful as they would concretely account for all the attendee's viewpoints from discussions. I felt sure that the session time limit of 55 minutes would allow for the completion of the above tasks.

REALITIES

Three university professors and one student attended my LD30 session. I shared my slides with the overview of the following points: 1) Community, 2) Community Role, 3) Challenges, 4) Initiatives, 5) Exchange, and 6) Thank You. I suggested moving the chairs to make a circle, so that discussions would be easier. After we had introduced ourselves to each other, I started with an icebreaker by asking everyone to share the beverage they order at a café and where they tend to get this beverage. Answers ranged from vending machine coffees for black canned coffees to Starbucks for seasonal drinks to small craft cafe shops near their workplaces. After the icebreaker, everyone received the worksheet. I asked attendees to write down their responses and later share their answers to “What communities are you a part of?” I expected most would talk about their universities.

However, except for the student, the communities discussed were our neighborhood, online, or religious communities. Next the question, “How do you feel about your community?” prompted attendees to share how strong or weak they felt their connections were to these communities. Though one member made mention of belonging to their community for a long time, they felt uncertain about how others viewed them and, to some extent, felt disconnected. Another member shared how creating a LINE group gave them a new community to participate in that was unique from the other communities they interacted with daily. It was interesting to hear about ways they developed and deepened their connections, or openly shared their disconnections and the challenges faced by their communities. As we took turns sharing and commenting on others’ remarks, 45 minutes quickly passed, and there was little time to directly discuss the roles we have as individuals in our community, community challenges, and initiatives to combat the challenges. Subsequently, I was still hoping that the attendees would write down their ideas related to anything discussed so that they would be able to create the mini-posters. The student did so by writing the community they belonged to and asking if they could keep the paper. The rest of the attendees, as well as the student, continued sharing about their relationships with their communities for the remainder of the time. Though I had only gotten to the fourth of twelve slides and no mini-posters were produced, and although I had wanted to learn more about the attendees’ significance in their communities, using the time for meaningful conversations in a relaxed setting was much more valuable.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

There are many advantages to using a learning café at conferences. The first advantage is a more relaxed setting where audience members can also participate throughout the session, versus a traditional presentation setting where the audience may only have time to ask questions in the last few minutes. Besides, there is more time for presenter-attendee and attendee-attendee interactions. Another advantage is that it gives more opportunities for deeper discussions about the presented topic and for everyone to share their personal opinions and experience. A final advantage is that the presenter, who may not be an expert on the presentation topic, acts more as a facilitator - without the pressure of having to offer expert opinions to questions posed by attendees, so for more egalitarian settings, learning cafés are beneficial.

Potential disadvantages will arise if the presenter and the attendees are unfamiliar with learning cafés. Presenters who lack the skill to facilitate such forums will also affect the outcome. The presenter needs to create an atmosphere for sharing to take place and activities that allow for that to happen. One way to address these issues could be to begin with everyday topics to allow for rapport-building and use more open-ended questions throughout one’s presentation. In turn, the attendees need to be active at the learning café. This contrasts with traditional presentation settings where attendees, at the bare minimum, are expected to be quiet and not create any disruptions during the presenter’s talk. Ultimately, the presenter needs to allow everyone to comment on the topic. Furthermore, the presenter needs to be more flexible in contrast to the traditional presentation format where adjustments for time restraints can be done smoothly and covertly. However, if learning café attendees are involved in deep discussions, the presenter may have to forgo their original program. Nonetheless, despite some potential difficulties, I think that learning cafés are a favorable alternative to the traditional presentation format.

CONCLUSION

Learning cafés are interactive settings for topics to be discussed by not only the presenter but also the attendees. This style of presentation is ideal for those presenters who seek collaboration and potentially more meaningful interactions with the attendees. Furthermore, for those presenters who do not feel comfortable solely in the role of expert and seek to learn from the different perspectives

of others, learning cafés are advantageous. However, presenters will need to focus more on facilitating and the attendees will need to be more active in discussions and material creation. By facilitating a learning café at the LD30 conference, I found that I could learn a lot from the attendees about their communities in a more casual setting. Also, I felt less pressure to complete all the tasks I originally planned to do.

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APPENDIX A

EXPLORING OUR SIGNIFICANCE IN OUR COMMUNITIES

How do I view my community? | What is my role in my community?/What can I contribute to my community? |

How do the initiatives affect the individual (you) and community (classroom, university, field)? & What challenges do you anticipate for the individual (you) and community (classroom, university, field)? |

What can we do as a community to overcome these challenges?

私は自分のコミュニティをどう見ているか? | 自分のコミュニティにおける自分の役割は何か / 自分のコミュニティに貢献できることは何か | その取り組みは、個人(あなた)と地域社会(教室、大学、現場)にどのような影響を与えるか。個人(あなた)と地域社会(教室、大学、現場)にとって、どのような課題が予想されるか。 | これらの課題を克服するために、コミュニティとして何ができるか?

My Community	My Role in the Community	Challenges	Initiatives