

FULL-LENGTH ARTICLES

Adapting the World Café Method to an Online Format: Insights From Novice Qualitative Researchers

Dee Kinney¹, Wayne Kinney²¹ Education and Society, Miami University, ² School of Social Work, University of Cincinnati

Keywords: world café, Zoom-based research, branch campus students, qualitative research in higher education, virtual world café

<https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.122576>

Journal of Participatory Research Methods

Vol. 5, Issue 3, 2024

The original World Café (WC), by Brown and Isaac, is a widely used data collection method in qualitative research across various settings and is typically conducted in person. However, during the spring 2020 semester, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic prompted us to adapt our planned WC research project from an in-person to an online format using Zoom. Two online cafés were hosted with branch campus students of a large Midwest university during October, one in the morning (n=11) and one in the evening (n=7). This methods paper offers a concise overview of the WC method as an innovative approach to qualitative data collection in a branch campus college setting. We outline the original research plan, detail the adjustments made for online cafés, and summarize the outcomes of these virtual sessions. As novice qualitative researchers working with branch campus college students, we draw vital lessons from our experience with the WC. These lessons emphasize the importance of selecting a method suitable for the target audience and researchers' expertise level. Active participation in one or more WCs before conducting a study proves invaluable, and we highlight the facilitative role of a graphic recorder in ensuring optimal engagement and effective member-checking.

Insights from Novice Qualitative Researchers

This methods paper deviates from the initial research direction we had envisioned. We originally intended to explore the outcomes of utilizing the World Café (Brown & Isaacs, 2005) as a qualitative research method to foster meaningful discussions about health and well-being among branch campus college students. The aim was to gather valuable insights to aid the university administration in effectively supporting students' well-being and academic success. However, the unforeseen arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic (Wang et al., 2020) in the spring of 2020 disrupted our plans, compelling us to adapt swiftly to the university's shift to an online format. As a result, various adjustments became necessary. Consequently, the study occurred via Zoom (Zoom Video Communications Inc., 2019) during the fall 2020 semester.

This methods paper entails a concise overview of the World Café (Brown & Isaacs, 2005) as an innovative approach to qualitative data collection in the college setting. Furthermore, we will outline the original research plan and the revised approach that emerged in response to pandemic-induced changes. Our research plan changes included modifying the budget and

timeline and adjusting our methods for the Institutional Review Board. We also had to submit these revisions to the administrators of our internal grant, which funded this research. We will then summarize the outcomes of the online World Café sessions, share insights into hosting virtual cafes, and provide observations relevant to employing this method with a branch campus student population.

World Café Method

We first learned of the World Café (WC) approach to qualitative research in one of our graduate classes. The WC was founded in the early 1990s by Juanita Brown and David Isaacs as a learning and change management tool (Brown & Isaacs, 2005) used primarily in corporate settings and community organizations. Since then, the WC has been utilized in a variety of settings, including healthcare (see, e.g., Broom et al., 2013; Cunningham et al., 2018; Fouché & Light, 2011), public health (see, e.g., Bulsara et al., 2016; Canham et al., 2019; Emlet & Moceris, 2012), and higher education (see, e.g., Anderson, 2011; Froneman et al., 2016; Lorenzetti et al., 2016).

Often, using the WC in an educational setting tends to be a tool for student engagement (Anderson, 2011) rather than a data collection method (Froneman et al., 2016). More recently, however, the WC has been used as a data collection tool in higher education. One of the more recent studies (de Moissac et al., 2020) involved assessing college students' mental health. The authors did not develop powerful questions as described by Vogt et al. (2003); instead, they used three topics for conversation. The use of the WC did accomplish their desired results. The authors suggested that the WC is "an effective way to validate findings and engage students in a meaningful dialogue about student well-being and supports provided on campus" (de Moissac et al., 2020, p. 8). Another recent study by McDermott et al. (2020) utilized the WC method to research faculty well-being in university life.

What sets the WC method of data collection apart from other qualitative approaches is its utilization of a dialogic research method with nuances of appreciative inquiry (Llorens, 2008) in a relatable and accessible manner. It uses a café analogy where people gather in a casual, safe space that allows for a natural, free-flowing conversation. During such a conversation, people share their perspectives, create meaning, and discover solutions to problems (Oldenburg, 1989). McDonald et al. (2009) suggest that dialogic methods, such as world cafes, help investigate broad issues and specific aspects of problems that are value-laden and require an understanding of participants' interests and world views. Two aspects of this method struck us as unique and potentially more fruitful than hosting a focus group with its inherent limitations (Glanz et al., 2015; Moore et al., 2015).

Among the unique features of the WC method is that it provides the capacity to accommodate several groups simultaneously, enabling a broad range of participants, ranging from 25 to as many as 2,000 individuals (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). In contrast, conventional focus group research traditionally involves one group of 6–8 participants at a time (Glanz et al., 2015; Moore

et al., 2015). One compelling attribute of the WC method that captured our attention is its facilitation of idea cross-pollination (The World Cafe, 2015) through the systematic rotation of participants among tables, where they engage in focused discussions centered on the research question. As most participants move from table to table, one self-selected participant remains at the table. This individual's role is to ensure the inclusion of topics and themes that were previously articulated, thereby facilitating the gradual expansion and refinement of ideas. Rotating groups enriches the broader context and holds the potential to pave the way toward comprehensive solutions and a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

Additionally, each table includes markers, post-its, and paper tablecloths to allow participants to express their ideas through doodling or written contributions (The World Cafe, 2015). This feature addresses a standard limitation observed in focus group settings, where some participants may be reluctant to verbalize their thoughts (Glanz et al., 2015; Moore et al., 2015). Instead, participants can more comfortably convey their ideas through drawing or writing. Furthermore, the WC method's relaxed café atmosphere, its capacity to accommodate larger participant numbers, and the rotation of group members collectively address the challenge of groupthink, a limitation often encountered in smaller individual focus groups (Glanz et al., 2015; Moore et al., 2015).

There may be slight variations in how folks carry out their café. Some may choose blank puzzle pieces instead of index cards or post-its for participant doodling and notations. Some may choose to rotate all members without selecting a table host to stay at the table, and others may decide to have research assistants as their table hosts. However, during our WC training workshop (Lenzo, 2020), workshop facilitators mentioned that when people make significant adjustments to the WC Method, referring to it as “WC-like” or “based on the World café” would be most appropriate.

Guided by seven core design principles, the WC method leverages the power of conversation (Brown & Isaacs, 2005) to answer questions of importance to all key stakeholders. These seven principles include (The World Cafe, 2015, pp. 2–3):

1. Setting the context. In research projects, context is often the initial consideration, involving problem history, influencing factors, and key stakeholders (Glanz et al., 2015).
2. Creating a hospitable space. Traditional qualitative research methods may overlook this aspect (Glanz et al., 2015). Nevertheless, the WC method considers space to be of paramount importance.
3. Exploring meaningful questions. Crafting insightful questions is challenging, particularly for academics conditioned to seek answers. Thoughtfully framing questions sparks creativity and shifts focus toward possibilities (Vogt et al., 2003).

4. Encouraging everyone's contribution. Create an environment where everyone feels comfortable participating. Covering the table in block paper, using large post-its, and providing colorful markers may encourage people who are less comfortable speaking up to draw or write their ideas, thereby collecting a broader viewpoint.
5. Connecting diverse perspectives. When participants rotate to different tables for each round of discussion, they carry ideas and themes that connect to others' ideas and build upon existing themes. As defined by The World Café (2015), this method actively engages in cross-pollination, a process not naturally achieved by traditional focus groups (Hammond & Wellington, 2021).
6. Listening for patterns and insights. The WC utilizes whimsically designed table tents and posters to informally instruct participants to listen together to develop a deeper understanding (Niederhumer, 2023).
7. Sharing collective discoveries. As previously mentioned, the rotation of members to different tables serves the purpose of highlighting prominent themes. After each round, the host performs a "harvest," as described by The World Café (2015, p. 3). The host skillfully encourages participants to share key themes and ideas from each table. If affordable, it is ideal to hire a graphic recorder, who helps bring emerging themes to life through artfully drawing depictions of the group's extensive discussion (The World Cafe, 2015). According to Kelly (2005), a graphic recorder can be a valuable resource despite potential costs. Benefits include enhancing creativity, validating participant input, and encouraging continued engagement.

Planned In-Person Café on Student Health and Well-being

An internal institutional grant funded this research study, facilitating the planning of two robust World Cafés, one on each branch campus. We took several crucial steps to ensure a thorough and inclusive process. Initially, we developed our study protocol and obtained Institutional Review Board approval. Subsequently, our student research assistants underwent comprehensive training in research ethics and group facilitation skills, led by a licensed independent social worker with expertise in group dynamics.

To gather insights from the student body, we conducted a campus-wide survey to understand campus resource utilization by branch campus students and identify challenges impeding their academic progress. Additionally, an open-ended question solicited suggestions on relevant aspects of student well-being. Following the survey, we gave participants a link to register for one of two café sessions. Out of 176 survey respondents, 47 students registered for our scheduled cafés.

Furthermore, we actively sought input from various stakeholders to enrich our understanding of the context, which involved consultations with campus administrators; the college health and wellness steering committee; the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion office; and the director of our branch campus counseling department. We also engaged with key staff members from student-facing departments, including the registrar's office, advising office, and office of student activities. Drawing from the student survey responses and stakeholder discussions, we formulated the format for our Cafés, including two questions for our World Café sessions.

Context

This study focused on two branch campuses of a large Midwest university. According to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), a branch campus is “A campus or site of an educational institution that is not temporary, is located in a community beyond a reasonable commuting distance from its parent institution [main campus], and offers full programs of study, not just courses” (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Branch campuses often serve vulnerable, underserved student populations (Schuman, 2009). Because students commute, they spend significantly less time on campus compared to their main campus counterparts (Schuman, 2009). Moreover, branch campuses often have limited resources available to their students (Jacquemin et al., 2019; Schuman, 2009). Despite the advantage of geographical and financial accessibility (Schuman, 2009), providing sufficient and suitable resources to support the mental health and well-being of students from vulnerable backgrounds is crucial for their academic success (The Healthy Minds Network & American College Health Association, 2020).

In the spring of 2018, we administered the American College Health Association's (ACHA) National College Health Assessment (2018) at both branch campuses. The results indicated that stress, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and depression emerged as critical factors adversely affecting students' academic performance (ACHA, 2018). However, we lacked a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the mental health of our branch campus students and their specific resource needs. Considering that many branch campus students transitioned to the main campus (Schuman, 2009), and it was likely that the surveyed students had moved on or transferred to other institutions, we decided to undertake a World Café study.

Hospitable Space

We carefully planned to host the World Café on Student Well-being in an on-campus location so that students would not have to drive too far. Finding an on-campus space was critical as we knew that some students did not have reliable transportation (Schuman, 2009). Establishing a casual, café-like environment would create a space that encourages participants to engage more comfortably (Oldenburg, 1989). We arranged to use the faculty lounge on the first campus, as it would quickly transform into a café. The space

had several windows, live plants, and dark wood shelving. The second WC, on the second branch campus, was to be conducted in a lodge on campus typically rented out for special events. This space also had plenty of windows, a fireplace, and a chandelier.

We planned to set up 8 –10 small, elegantly decorated tables at each location. Each table would have drawing paper, colorful sticky pads, markers, and candy dishes. Soft background music would create a welcoming atmosphere. Our student research assistants, identified by the Café Conversations on Student Well-being t-shirts depicting a travel coffee cup and the year, would greet participants and guide them to their tables. In addition, participants would enjoy pizza, their choice of beverage, and a dessert selection.

Meaningful Questions

Whether preparing a survey or an interview guide, choosing the right questions can be challenging. Researchers know to select questions that are tested for validity and reliability. We understand that the shorter the survey, the better. We know to word questions carefully so as not to invite bias. However, the reason we do our best to choose the right questions is so that we can prove our hypotheses. We focus on the questions to ensure we obtain accurate answers, which we already believe we possess (Peavey, n.d.; Vogt et al., 2003).

This focus can pose a challenge when crafting questions, particularly when formulating WC questions for college students, as we aim to avoid turning discussions into mere complaint sessions. According to Vogt et al. (2003), powerful questions start with why, how, or what and have a clear and precise scope. Powerful questions are also relevant and focus on solutions and possibilities because, “People do not have a lot of energy around questions that are only about removing pain” (Vogt et al., 2003, p. 3).

While participating in an online graduate course on hosting a WC, we received support and coaching from WC experts and other course participants. We were encouraged to make our first question one that inspires creativity and invites participants to think outside the box. The question we came up with was, *“If money were no object, and you had a huge plot of land, how would you create a college that best supported your mental health and well-being and that inspired you to learn?”* While we agreed that this was an exciting question all about possibilities, we were skeptical that we would get the information we needed for the report and recommendations we would compile for the College Dean. Of course, this goes against the spirit of the world café. We were not to direct participants to give answers. We were to inspire and engage participants.

Another obstacle in formulating the appropriate questions stemmed from recognizing the busy schedules of our participants, who typically spend minimal time on campus outside of class hours (Schuman et al., 2009). Given

that a WC session can last up to three hours, we anticipated that such a time commitment would likely deter student participation. Consequently, we narrowed our questions to just two for this café session.

1. Why is it important for you to be here today to talk about student health and well-being?
2. How can this school's administration best support your health and well-being as a college student?

Revised World Café Online on Student Health and Well-being

We prepared to conduct the in-person World Café in early spring 2020 and sent email invitations to all branch campus students with a brief survey, at the end of which was an invitation to register for one of two WC events. We also provided formal invitations to student organization officers. We had procured 150 t-shirt incentives with 'Café Conversations on Student Well-being 2020' on the front and 'Wellness Warrior' on the back. The necessary materials, including block paper, large sticky notes, and colored pencils for the tables, were ready. We had secured our branch campus locations and finalized the menu. Unfortunately, everything came to a halt due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

We considered postponing the research until after the COVID-19 pandemic to avoid measuring the potential impacts of the pandemic on college students' mental health and well-being. However, we recognized that the pandemic presented an opportunity to study how students coped with the crisis and their unique needs in response to it. Despite the challenges, we decided to proceed with the research. Nevertheless, this decision required us to revise the budget, timeline, and procedures for our internal research grant and the institutional review board.

Although we had previously completed an online eight-week graduate course (Lenzo, 2020) to prepare for hosting an in-person café, we believed it best to begin rewriting our procedures by completing a three-day online workshop to learn how to host an *online* World Café (Lenzo et al., 2020). We adjusted nearly all seven WC principles for the online version of this research. [Table 1](#) illustrates the differences between what we planned for our in-person café and the adjustments made to move the café online.

The WC principle of clarifying the context includes many important details such as the purpose, key stakeholders, location, time, and expenses. Within the context, the major changes related to location. We chose the Zoom platform because our university had already been utilizing the application as it is secure (Zoom Video Communications Inc., 2019) and adheres to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (Zoom Video Communications Inc., 2020). Additionally, since COVID-19 forced the university to move classes online, students would likely have become more

Table 1. World Café Principles In-Person Plans and Online Adjustments

1. Clarify the Context	
<i>Planned In-person Event</i>	<i>Event Moved Online (Zoom)</i>
<i>The Purpose:</i> To engage branch campus college students in meaningful conversations to inform the administration on how best to support students' health and well-being for academic success. <i>Key Stakeholders:</i> Branch campus students. <i>Location:</i> Branch Campus #1 Faculty Lounge. Branch campus #2 Event Lodge. <i>Time:</i> Set up and breakdown estimated to be 30 minutes each. Café event time would have been 90 minutes (2.5 hours total). <i>Expenses:</i> researcher training, two rooms, table and chair rentals, table materials, microphones, transcription services, national graphic artist, and participant incentives.	No changes No changes <i>Location:</i> Hosted two online Zoom Sessions on Tuesday at 10:00 a.m. and Wednesday at 7 p.m. <i>Time:</i> The research team gets online 20–30 minutes early if participants arrive early. The Zoom session for participants was 90 minutes (2 hours total). <i>Expenses:</i> Many expenses planned for the in-person event were eliminated except for participant incentives and a national graphic artist. Expenses included specialized researcher training to host an online café, a consulting fee for a technology host, and gift cards for student research assistants to act as Zoom breakout room hosts.
2. Create a hospitable space	
<i>Planned In-person Event</i>	<i>Event Moved Online (Zoom)</i>
<i>Campus 1:</i> Faculty lounge with dark wood furniture, plants, wall art, windows <i>Campus 2:</i> Event lodge space with fireplace, chandelier, plants, windows	Zoom breakout rooms replaced tables. Zoom jazz music and café background replaced the lounge and lodge.
2. Create a hospitable space	
<i>Planned In-person Event</i>	<i>Event Moved Online (Zoom)</i>
Both campuses: Table materials: Tablecloths, centerpieces, table candies, colorful markers and pencils, post-it notes Jazz music in the background Student café hosts greet and seat participants as they arrive. Breakfast buffet, coffee, water, juices	Both campuses: The Zoom chat feature replaced table paper, which allowed participants to share without speaking. Room hosts introduced themselves and let participants know they were there to help. Room hosts helped participants in breakout rooms by keeping them on topic.
3. Explore questions that matter	
<i>Planned In-person Event</i>	<i>Event Moved Online (Zoom)</i>
<i>Question 1:</i> Why is it important for you to be here today to talk about student health and well-being? <i>Question 2:</i> How can Miami Regionals best support your health and well-being as a college student?	No changes
4. Encourage everyone's contribution	
<i>Planned In-person Event</i>	<i>Event Moved Online (Zoom)</i>
Table tents with World Café Etiquette guidelines. A talking stick is meant to be passed to the person speaking. Paper, markers, colored pencils, and various size post-it pads for simultaneous sharing.	The shared screen with World Café Etiquette guidelines was adapted for the online format. Breakout room hosts facilitated one person speaking at a time. Breakout room hosts reminded participants to share their thoughts via the Zoom chat feature if they were uncomfortable speaking.
5. Connect diverse perspectives	
<i>Planned In-person Event</i>	<i>Event Moved Online (Zoom)</i>
A graphic recorder circulates among the tables to incorporate key elements of the table conversations into the café graphic depiction of the discussions. The host completes the harvest in between questions.	The graphic artist entered each Zoom breakout room (without having a camera on) to listen in on the conversation.* The breakout rooms closed between questions, and the host conducted a harvest of ideas with all participants in the main Zoom room.
6. Listen together for patterns and insights	
<i>Planned In-person Event</i>	<i>Event Moved Online (Zoom)</i>
Participants self-select a table host before	Instead of participants being the table hosts, we had trained student research

initiating the discussion. This allows for the pollination of ideas because the host shares them with the new group members and vice versa.	assistants assigned the role of Room Hosts. We randomly rotated students to a new Zoom room to imitate the table rotation.
7. Share collective discoveries	
<i>Planned In-person Event</i>	<i>Event Moved Online (Zoom)</i>
Harvesting/Sharing key themes after each question. Participants would be encouraged to take post-its with themes and attach them to a master board in the room's central location.	Participants could view (via screen share) the graphic artist's drawings which captured the main themes observed across Zoom breakout rooms and provide feedback to improve the drawing.
* Participants were informed that the graphic artist would drop by to capture the conversation in his drawings.	

knowledgeable and comfortable with it. We also chose Zoom because we could record and transcribe our sessions. The university's institutional review board approved the use of the Zoom platform.

Not surprisingly, hosting our WC online eliminated many expenses, including food, renting tables and linens, centerpieces, microphones for the tables, and less time and cost required for the graphic recorder since they would not need to travel to the location. However, we did incur expenses we would not have had with an in-person café. First and most important, we had to hire a technology host. A technology host was responsible for handling the setup of the breakout rooms and switching participants to different breakout rooms between question rounds to simulate the cross-pollination that would occur when participants were to change tables. Technology hosts also handled any technology issues for hosts and participants. Having a technology host enabled the process host to focus on conducting the café and making participants feel comfortable.

Another expense incurred due to moving our WC online was our choice to pay for training undergraduate students to be breakout room hosts, which included a small stipend. If the café had been in person, the plan was to have one participant stay behind at each table to share a bit about the previous discussion. The room hosts played a vital role for several reasons. First, given our experience as educators using Zoom during COVID for classes and employing breakout rooms for group work, we recognized the potential lack of productivity in group discussions without a facilitator. Thus, one of the primary responsibilities of our room hosts was to facilitate the discussion, take notes, and initiate recording before each session.

Creating a hospitable space is essential to planning a WC (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). We found this challenging to do in an online format. Our technology host created a background that tried to replicate a third space, like a warm, inviting café with dark wood and string lights. They also played soft background music so that when students arrived on Zoom, it might feel like a café. However, we understood that these carefully planned details would not be able to create the same feeling as if they were in person because we could not keep that environment throughout the WC session. The research team still wore the t-shirts planned for the in-person café, and we raffled

off t-shirts to our participants at the end of both sessions. As for insisting participants turn on their cameras, we left it up to them and hoped the choice might help them feel more comfortable sharing. Most participants chose to turn their cameras on, except for one student who reported technical issues. However, the Zoom room host assured us that this did not disrupt the flow of conversation.

Similarly, our graphic recorder visited each breakout room to capture discussions. We decided to keep their camera off to prevent distractions. Nonetheless, we introduced the graphic recorder at the beginning of the Café, explaining their role to avoid any concerns about unexpected interruptions. Once again, our room hosts did not notice any impact on the conversation due to the recorder's presence.

The remaining principles (4–7) were most definitely impacted by moving to an online format. Most notable was the inability to use paper and colored pencils. Instead, participants were encouraged to use the Zoom chat feature to share if they did not want to speak. Nobody used the chat feature. Reflecting on the process, we wish we had utilized a Google Doc as a drawing board to possibly benefit from students who might doodle or write within it. There were always two room hosts; one helped keep the discussion moving, and the other kept an eye on the chat feature to avoid missing anyone's comments.

Overall, conducting the WC events online allowed us to maintain our study's momentum. However, we recognize that the WC is intended to provide a third space (Brown & Isaacs, 2005) distinct from the classroom, especially considering that students were already attending all their classes online. Therefore, hosting the cafés online likely hindered the natural flow of conversation. Our room hosts corroborated this difficulty in sustaining dialogue.

Zoom World Café Event Structure

We created a comprehensive WC playbook featuring a step-by-step guide tailored for each room host, outlining their responsibilities and actions at designated intervals. This playbook also included scripted cue phrases designed to prompt engagement and facilitate discussion flow without unduly influencing participants. Student room hosts were also equipped with contact details for the tech host and café host, enabling them to address any technical issues or concerns during breakout sessions promptly.

We began the session on time after initiating the Zoom link about 15 minutes ahead of schedule for potential early arrivals. We dedicated approximately 10 minutes to warmly welcoming participants and introducing the research team while explaining the roles of the room hosts and graphic recorder. Each discussion question was followed by two successive rounds of breakout room discussions, each lasting 10 minutes.

Upon completing the two rounds for question one, all participants reconvened in the main Zoom room, where the graphic recorder shared their screen, inviting student feedback on the visual representation of their

discussions. Participants expressed enthusiasm and satisfaction with how effectively the graphic captured their perspectives. This procedure was replicated for question two.

Results of the Online Café Conversations on Student Well-being

Participants

To begin recruiting for and planning our WC events, we developed a short survey, as described above, to gain insight into what questions we should ask. At the end of the survey students could register for one of the two WC events. As an incentive to participate, the IRB approved a \$100 gift card raffle that all café participants would be eligible to win. Since we had 176 students complete the survey and 45 signed up for one of our WC events, we were surprised by the low participation rate. We presumed that given the impact of COVID-19 on college students (The Healthy Minds Network & American College Health Association, 2020), there were several potential causes for this lower-than-expected participation, all of which were outside of our control.

We hosted two Zoom Café Sessions: Tuesday evening from 6–8 p.m. and Wednesday morning from 10 a.m.–12 p.m. All students completed a brief demographic survey when registering for participation in the café. We had 11 participants on Tuesday, with six females and five males. There were two international participants, one African American participant, and the remaining participants were Caucasian. All but one participant reported themselves as heterosexual. We had 7 participants on Wednesday, with five females and two males. One participant was American Indian, one was international, and five were Caucasian. All participants reported being heterosexual. Of the 18 participants, one was 53, and the remaining 17 were 18–24. Students' majors included nursing (3), psychological sciences (2), business (1), and undecided (12).

Main findings

A few students arrived early and were grateful to be online for reasons other than classes. As expected, they were all overwhelmed with learning online, losing their family's source of income, and spending more time than they would like at home without their friends. These things were casually discussed before formally starting the café. During the café's welcome and introduction, we prompted students to reflect on their experiences with health and well-being before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, upon reviewing transcripts and room hosts' notes, it became apparent that students struggled to recall pre-pandemic times. Despite this challenge, the insights we gathered were valuable. Many student comments mirrored findings from previous campus research on health and well-being before COVID-19.

Each team member conducted a thematic analysis independently. Each member reviewed the Zoom Transcripts and the room hosts' notes. Afterward, we met at length to discuss analyses and finalize themes for each question. Once we came to agreement, we finalized the themes.

Question One Themes

Question one was: Why is it important for you to be here today to talk about student health and well-being? We identified two overarching themes emerging from our qualitative analysis for this question: 1) Campus Life; and 2) Personal Health and Well-being. Under Campus Life, three distinct sub-themes emerged: Resources, Professors, and Online Classes.

In terms of resources, students highlighted a perceived reduction in available resources and expressed missing campus activities. They also noted the difficulty in finding peer support groups online. One quote encapsulates the challenge we faced in categorizing themes: “Technology is tough. It is stressful. Especially if you feel like you are on your own.” While this quote addresses technology resources, it also touches on mental health stressors, underscoring the interconnectedness of resources and mental well-being.

The sub-theme garnering the most comments was “Professors.” Students often felt overwhelmed by excessive workload demands and desired better coordination among professors to avoid overlapping deadlines. Many voiced frustrations with perceived inflexibility and lack of concern from some professors. Conversely, students appreciated professors who demonstrated care by checking in on their well-being, citing such actions as motivating and beneficial for mental health.

The final campus life theme addresses the challenges associated with online classes. Some students found communication on Zoom intimidating, while others struggled with language barriers, particularly international students. Many expressed difficulties maintaining focus without the traditional classroom environment and accountability. Regrettably, one student felt disillusioned, stating, “I’m Zooming to get a degree, not to learn.”

The second overarching theme, Personal Health and Well-being, encompassed five distinct sub-themes: 1) Mental Health; 2) Physical Health; 3) Financial Health; 4) Social Health; and 5) Spiritual Health.

Inadequately addressing mental health emerged as the predominant focus of students. Many struggled with time management and balancing various responsibilities, frequently citing feelings of anxiety, depression, stress, and overwhelm. The absence of in-person social interactions exacerbated these challenges for most students, highlighting the interconnectedness of social and mental well-being. Additionally, students readily acknowledged the reciprocal relationship between mental and physical health, particularly amidst the uncertainties and fears brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conversations concerning physical health centered on essential needs such as sleep difficulties, access to technology and reliable internet, and food insecurity, with one student noting, “It affects my ability to focus on school stuff.” Students also lamented the absence of freely available food on campus and discussed the negative impact of decreased physical activity and increased boredom eating on their self-esteem, further illustrating the link between physical and mental health.

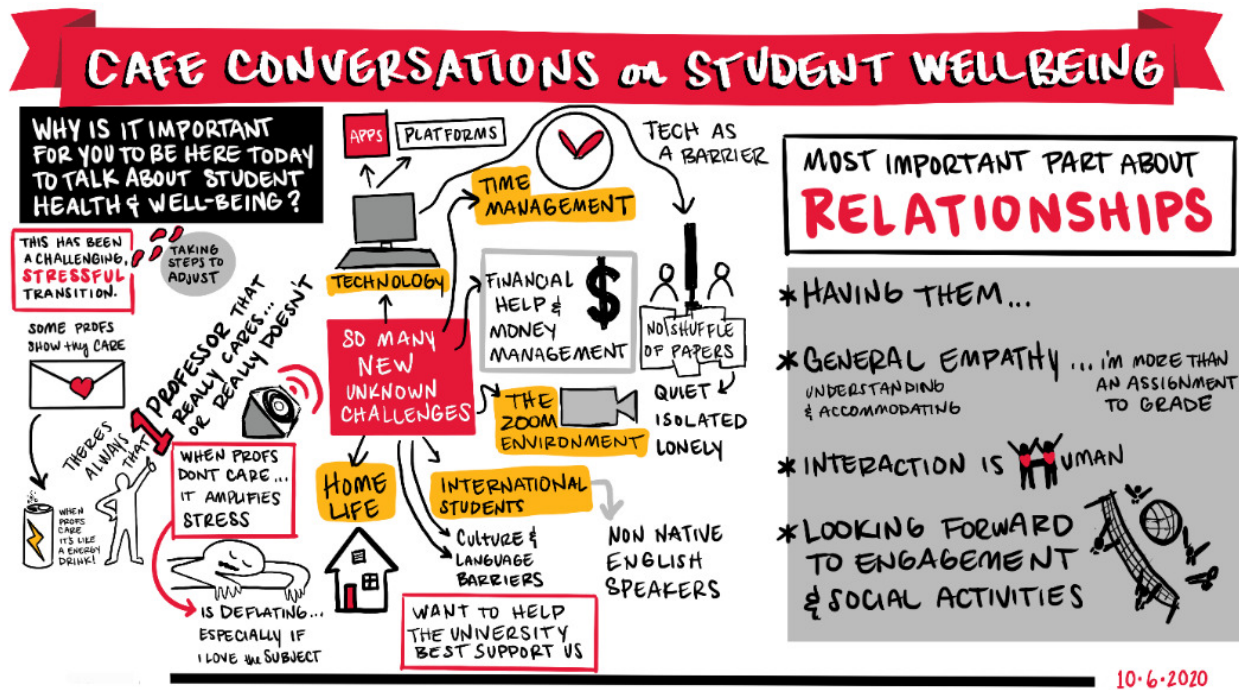


Figure 1. Question One Graphic Drawing (Tuesday Café)

Conversely, discussions surrounding financial, social, and spiritual health were less frequent but still impactful on mental well-being. Many students expressed frustration at the prolonged isolation from friends and difficulties managing finances due to decreased work hours. Additionally, the closure of religious institutions during the pandemic posed challenges to students' spiritual well-being, with some struggling to adapt to the lack of immediate online alternatives. [Figure 1](#) shows students' thoughts on the transition to online learning and the many challenges of not being in the classroom. Technology was challenging because they had to learn new apps and platforms, such as Zoom. It was also more difficult for them to manage their time. They missed "the shuffle of papers" from the student behind them. They reported having both professors who readily demonstrated care and those who did not exhibit care. When they perceived that their professors did not care, it increased stress levels and could be quite "deflating."

In contrast, when professors care, it was like "an energy drink." Another challenge was the language barrier experienced by international students and students who had professors with "thick accents." They looked forward to being in person and wanted to help the university understand their needs better.

Question Two Themes

Question two: How can the administration best support your health and well-being as a college student? The themes discussed in response to question two closely mirrored those of question one, continuing the conversation

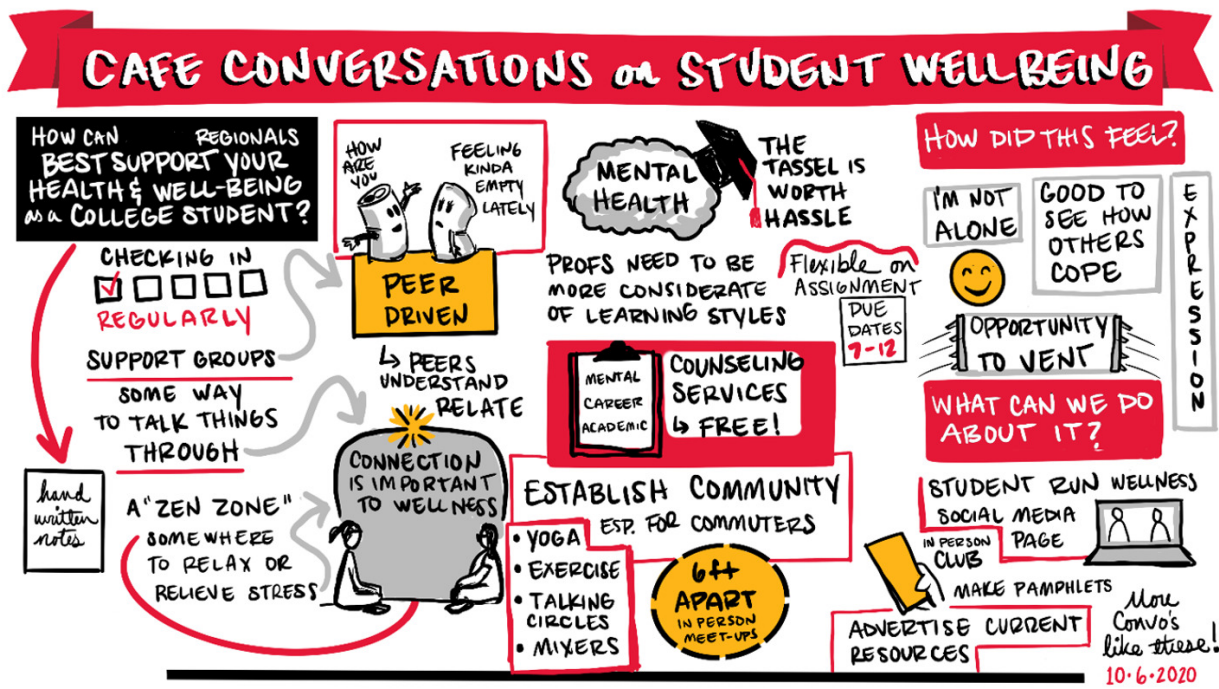


Figure 2. Question Two Graphic Drawing (Tuesday Café)

observed among students rather than an expected shift toward solutions. Video recordings revealed that some room hosts struggled to focus, with a few even participating in discussions rather than facilitating them.

Student recommendations regarding mental health centered on the importance of promoting free counseling and ensuring universal access despite lingering stigmas. Some students felt that their issues weren't severe enough to warrant counseling. While the Office of Student Activities hosted online social gatherings, students desired more online activities during the pandemic.

As with question one, students emphasized the role of professors in supporting their well-being. Suggestions included incorporating guided meditations and fostering a more compassionate approach. Flexibility with assignment deadlines was also highlighted. Regarding physical health, students expressed interest in having access to a nutrition coach during stressful times, along with financial and time management training.

[Figure 2](#) depicts some of the major themes that arose. Participants craved a sense of community and engagement. Regarding mental health support, they expressed wanting free counseling and a place for “yoga” and “exercise.” The university does offer free and confidential counseling and a free recreation center. This lack of knowledge demonstrated that students were unaware of campus resources. Peer-driven wellness was also a theme that arose in both groups. Students also expressed appreciation for personal “handwritten notes” and “checking in.” Finally, they mentioned that it would be helpful if there were more opportunities to “vent” and share their thoughts.

Lessons Learned

Our greatest lesson through this research project is understanding that the WC data collection method is an advanced method that requires formal training and experience in conducting this type of research. There are flourishing communities that teach and practice using the WC method (Lenzo, 2020), and there are free or low-cost ways that researchers can participate in world cafes to gain a better, more practical experience of the process (The Community Table, 2023). As novice qualitative researchers, we completed in-person and online WC trainings. We attended two practice cafes, which helped us plan our café and learn the most critical elements. For instance, before our training, we did not fully understand the concept of powerful questions. However, there were still many unforeseen challenges.

The training and practice opportunities provided to our six undergraduate room hosts proved beneficial. Yet, it failed to address their apprehension about hosting peers, leading to errors that negatively impacted the process and outcomes. One host forgot to initiate recording in the first breakout room, leaving us solely reliant on the host's notes. Additionally, some hosts struggled with handling prolonged silent moments, inadvertently deviating from the provided engagement guidelines by participating instead of facilitating. This issue was evident in the videos and transcripts, where participants began following the hosts' lead.

Another challenge emerged when a participant, a student worker at the university's student resource center, engaged in overt promotion of resources and monopolized the conversation. The host recognized the issue but lacked a strategy to address it, resorting to seeking assistance from our social work group expert, who intervened to realign the discussion. The expert also privately messaged the participants, encouraging them to reflect, listen, and share personal experiences with mental health and well-being. Although this intervention helped, the session suffered from lost time and potential conversation.

Furthermore, the technology host preassigned breakout rooms for 25 confirmed students, but due to several no-shows, only 11 and 7 students were present in each of our two café sessions, respectively. While attempting to remedy this, the host inadvertently created a room with only one participant and two hosts. Consequently, the participant was moved to another room, leading to logistical complications and lost conversation potential.

Most researchers realize that qualitative methods cost more time and money than quantitative research. These are two very limited resources for students and faculty in higher education environments. Branch campus students are not likely to be on campus for two to three hours outside of classes (Schuman, 2009). World Cafés are meant to be relaxed, not rushed. Ideally, a WC should take at least three hours (Involve, n.d.). Our café events felt rushed, mainly because it took a few minutes to get the participants to engage for each breakout session.

Even online, recruiting students for a 90-minute WC project was challenging. However, since this study was conducted amid the pandemic, students may have been more stressed and busier than usual. Under normal circumstances, branch campus students often juggle full-time jobs — even through the pandemic — manage family responsibilities, and carry a full course load, leaving them little free time (Schuman, 2009).

While we saved money conducting the WC online, we spent nearly an equal amount on a technology host and student research assistants to act as room hosts, taking the place of participant table hosts. Regardless, if you conduct WC research online, we highly recommend identifying a technology host; it is worth the cost to focus on the process and be fully present for listening and identifying themes. We found our technology host through our e-campus department, and they helped with this project as a consultant outside of their job. We did save money on a graphic recorder because we did not have to pay them for travel and housing expenses. Also, it was easier for participants to see the digitally produced graphic drawing created by sharing the screen during harvest time. Sharing the graphic allowed students to offer input about themes the recorder may have missed or misinterpreted. Lastly, Zoom allowed us to review the recordings and read the transcripts to clarify further and verify themes within and across groups.

Conclusion

The disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the shift of our carefully planned World Café events to an online format, which naturally left us disappointed. Despite these challenges, we derived value from our findings by generating a report and recommendations for the college dean. Additionally, we established quiet rooms on each branch campus to provide students with a space to decompress and manage their mental health, catering primarily to our Muslim students' need for a comfortable place to pray. Recognizing students' desire for peer interaction and support, we conveyed this information to the branch campus health and wellness steering committee, initiating a peer health educator student group.

Regarding the suitability of the World Café methodology for branch campuses, we advise caution. While the method is robust and valuable, its successful implementation requires skill in conducting and analyzing qualitative research. *Branch* campuses, being commuter campuses, present unique challenges, as students typically have limited time on campus due to work and family obligations. Whether conducted in person or online, the ideal duration of a World Café may exceed the available time for students on commuter campuses. Our experience suggests that shorter versions of the café may not allow sufficient time to foster rapport and establish the desired atmosphere conducive to meaningful conversations. Reflecting on this, we recognize the potential benefits of incorporating quantitative surveys, including open-ended questions instead of a World Café, in this situation. Realistically, this would allow students to complete the survey when they have time rather than gathering many students simultaneously for a café.

We acknowledge our oversight in assessing our capacity to conduct qualitative research and analyze resulting data effectively. Furthermore, we underestimated the impact of COVID-19 on students' readiness and ability to engage fully in online discussions. Despite recognizing the mental health challenges faced by students during the pandemic, we overlooked our struggles as educators rapidly adapting to new professional and personal demands. As emphasized in the hosting fundamentals course (Lenzo, 2020), we must be sure to host ourselves before attempting to host others.

Submitted: November 25, 2023 EDT, Accepted: March 21, 2024 EDT



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY-4.0). View this license's legal deed at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0> and legal code at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode> for more information.

References

- Anderson, L. (2011). Use the World Café concept to create an interactive learning environment. *Education for Primary Care: An Official Publication of the Association of Course Organisers, National Association of GP Tutors, World Organisation of Family Doctors*, 22(5), 337–338. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14739879.2011.11494028>
- Broom, M., Brady, B., Kecskes, Z., & Kildea, S. (2013). World Café methodology engages stakeholders in designing a neonatal intensive care unit. *Journal of Neonatal Nursing*, 19(5), 253–258. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jnn.2012.12.002>
- Brown, J., & Isaacs, D. (2005). *The World Cafe: Shaping our futures through conversations that matter* (1st ed.). Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Bulsara, C., Khong, L., Hill, K., & Hill, A. M. (2016). Investigating community perspectives on falls prevention information seeking and delivery: Older person perceptions regarding Preferences for falls prevention education using a World Cafe approach. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 44(7), 937–944. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.21816>
- Canham, S. L., Davidson, S., Custodio, K., Mauboules, C., Good, C., Wister, A. V., & Bosma, H. (2019). Health supports needed for homeless persons transitioning from hospitals. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 27(3), 531–545. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.12599>
- Cunningham, N. A., Abhyankar, P., Cowie, J., Galinsky, J., & Methven, K. (2018). Regenerative medicine: Stroke survivor and carer views and motivations towards a proposed stem cell clinical trial using placebo neurosurgery. *Health Expectations*, 21(1), 367–378. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hex.12632>
- de Moissac, D., Waddell, C., Smith, N., & Rocque, R. (2020). Students' perspectives on mental health: Using World Cafés to engage in dialogue about health promotion and support services. *Collected Essays on Learning and Teaching*, 13, 2–11.
- Emler, C. A., & Moceri, J. T. (2012). The importance of social connectedness in building age-friendly communities. *Journal of Aging Research*, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2012/173247>
- Fouché, C., & Light, G. (2011). An invitation to dialogue: 'The World Café' in social work research. *Qualitative Social Work: Research and Practice*, 10(1), 28–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325010376016>
- Froneman, K., Plessis, E. du, & Koen, M. P. (2016). Effective educator–student relationships in nursing education to strengthen nursing students' resilience. *Curationis*, 39(1), 9. <https://doi.org/10.4102/curationis.v39i1.1595>
- Glanz, K., Rimer, B. K., & Viswanath, K. (2015). *Health behavior: Theory, research, and practice*. Jossey-Bass.
- Hammond, M., & Wellington, J. J. (2021). *Research methods: the key concepts* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Involve. (n.d.). *Methods: World Cafe*. Retrieved March 14, 2024, from <https://www.involve.org.uk/resource/world-cafe>
- Jacquemin, S. J., Junker, C. R., & Doll, J. C. (2019). The Branch Effect: Understanding Multi-Campus Enrollment and Student Success. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 67(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07377363.2019.1642690>
- Kelly, S. (2005). *The benefits of using graphic recording / graphic facilitation*. The World Cafe. <http://www.theworldcafe.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/graphicBenefits.pdf>
- Lenzo, A. (2020). *World Cafe Hosting Fundamentals*. The World Cafe. <https://theworldcafe.com/services-programs/signature-learning-programs/world-cafe-hosting-fundamentals/>
- Llorens, J. (2008). *The Appreciative Inquiry Handbook: For Leaders of Change* (2nd ed.).

- Lorenzetti, L. A., Azulai, A., & Walsh, C. A. (2016). Addressing power in conversation: Enhancing the transformative learning capacities of the World Cafe. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 14(3), 200–219. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344616634889>
- McDermott, M., Simmons, M., Lock, J., & Kenny, N. (2020). A World Café discussion on well-being: Considerations for life in the university. *Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 11(2), n2. <https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2020.2.8337>
- McDonald, D., Bammer, G., & Deane, P. (2009). *Research integration using dialogue methods*. ANU Press. <https://doi.org/10.22459/RIUDM.08.2009>
- Moore, T., McKee, K., & McLoughlin, P. (2015). Online focus groups and qualitative research in the social sciences: their merits and limitations in a study of housing and youth. *People, Place & Policy Online*, 9(1), 17–28. <https://doi.org/10.3351/ppp.0009.0001.0002>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Systems: Overview*. National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved June 24, 2023, from <https://nces.ed.gov/statprog/handbook/ipeds.asp>
- Niederhumer, S. (2023). *Table menu and etiquette cards*. The World Cafe. <https://theworldcafe.com/tools-store/hosting-tool-kit/image-bank/table-cards/>
- Oldenburg, R. (1989). *The great good place: cafés, coffee shops, community centers, beauty parlors, general stores, bars, hangouts, and how they get you through the day* (1st ed.). Paragon House.
- Peavey, F. (n.d.). *Strategic Questioning Manual*. Retrieved September 30, 2023, from https://commonslibrary.org/wp-content/uploads/strat_questioning_manual.pdf
- Schuman, S. (2009). *Leading America's branch campuses*. Rowman & Littlefield Education.
- The Community Table. (2023). *The Community Table*. <https://thecommunitytable.ning.com/>
- The Healthy Minds Network & American College Health Association. (2020). *The Impact of COVID-19 on College Student Well-being*. Healthy Minds Network. https://healthymindsnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Healthy_Minds_NCHA_COVID_Survey_Report_FINAL.pdf
- The World Cafe. (2015). *Cafe to go: A quick reference guide for hosting World Cafe*. The World Cafe. <http://www.theworldcafe.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Cafe-To-Go-Revised.pdf>
- Vogt, E., Brown, J., & Isaacs, D. (2003). *The art of powerful questions: Catalyzing insight, innovation, and action*. Whole Systems Associates.
- Wang, X., Hegde, S., Son, C., Keller, B., Smith, A., & Sasangohar, F. (2020). Investigating Mental Health of US College Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Cross-Sectional Survey Study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 22(9), e22817. <https://doi.org/10.2196/22817>
- Zoom Video Communications Inc. (2019). *Zoom Security White Paper*. Zoom Legal and Compliance Resources. <https://zoom.us/docs/doc/Zoom-Security-White-Paper.pdf>
- Zoom Video Communications Inc. (2020). *Zoom Legal and Compliance Resources: Zoom FERPA Guide*. <https://explore.zoom.us/docs/doc/FERPA%20Guide.pdf>