

This article is part of a series exploring the value of complexity-science inspired consulting practice. First, I am trying to make sense of my own experience in helping people organize. Second, others may benefit from a description of my joint exploration with clients. Feedback is treasured! KLM

## **Conversation As A Creative Advance Into Novelty** **A Collaborative Hunch-In-Progress**



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Conversation is an improvisational art form -- a collaborative hunch-in-progress. Contributions by participants cannot be scripted, forced, controlled, or leveraged. The course is radically unpredictable and can be wildly creative. Yet, mastery of a few simple practices can boost creativity and increase depth in conversations.

As a professional facilitator and consultant, I have been surprised to find that my ideas about how to facilitate, lead or host conversations have been turned on their head. Over the years, I have been loaded down with "tools to leverage, containers to hold, and processes to align" conversations. Participation in Conversation Cafés [see page 10 for a description] around Seattle has opened my eyes and lightened my load. Here is how.

### **What Makes Seattle So Sleepless?**

On a rainy winter evening in Seattle, a group of 7 near-strangers are milling and chatting outside a neighborhood Café. One person makes a move to leave... then catches the eye of another participant. More animated talking. No one seems to want to leave this drizzly, dreary parking lot. The conversation is lively, almost euphoric, with no end in sight... with no sleep in sight.

Odd for a group of folks that just met 1 ½ hours ago. They have just finished a Conversation Café. Summing up their "take aways" from the confab on 3-by-5 cards, it is clear they have had a powerfully creative conversation. "I'm aware of the longing to understand - to learn - to broaden - to explore - to question." " I'm finding from these conversations that I'm becoming even more cynical about

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government, but more hopeful about people." "Where are the heroes we need now and how can we support them?" "I was trying not to cry... and there were tears of gratitude for the persons I am with, and not wanting to lose them." "I discovered the wisdom and common sense of my neighbors, and I want to know them better!"

This article will explore the following questions. How is it that strangers generated this deep level of mutual curiosity, creativity, respect, euphoria and insight? What happened in this conversation to create such powerful results? How can we create more conversations like this?

### Three Elements We Can Influence in Conversations

The appearance of control is always an illusion.

*Gayle Pergamit & Chris Peterson*

When we convene conversations that are intended to move a group or organization forward, we exert our influence over:

- *who* we choose to include;
- the *subject* of conversation; and,
- the *way* we talk together.

In most organizational and community conversations, we very carefully choose *who* will speak. We narrow the *subject* with the agenda and expert information. We choose to critique, discuss and analyze participant contributions as the *way* to find a solution, answer or path forward. All these practices are perfectly rational and full of good intentions. It is the conventional way to manage conversations toward an end.

The central assumption is: without choosing who participates, narrowing the subject, and critiquing contributions *pure c-h-a-o-s* will prevent us from moving forward. The facilitator, in cahoots with the leader, is in charge of minimizing what might go wrong. Skilled facilitation is all about controlled movement toward a pre-determined aim. A key objective is to reduce the number of surprises and divergent thoughts that pop-up. Critical thinking that helps to steer the group toward the aim is treasured.

This conventional approach works well when conditions are stable (near equilibrium) and people are close to agreement. When conditions are unstable and people need

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to explore many ways forward, unconventional approaches can be very effective. These far-from-equilibrium conditions call for a structured-yet-improvisational approach, a structure to guide creative emergence.

Conversation Cafes flip conventional notions about each of the three elements of conversation.

- **who we choose to include...** are strangers, loosely "invited" to join by simply showing up at a neighborhood cafe. No RSVP required!
- **the subject of conversation...** shifts from small talk to BIG talk about life after September 11<sup>th</sup> ...what it means to be an American... where can I make a difference in the world... how can we come together in peace?
- **the way we talk together...** slows down and deepens through the use of a talking-stick circle and rounds of contributions, focusing more on listening and understanding in contrast to critique and witty interruption.

### Patterns - Not Pure Chaos - Arising in Conversation Cafes

Reality is only a consensual hunch. *Lily Tomlin*

Strangely, Café Conversations often turn out to be wonderfully creative, deeply meaningful, and focused on novelty. Patterns and purposeful themes emerge spontaneously. The raw unpredictability, power and creativity of the flow of meaning takes participants by surprise. All this without a script, agenda or pre-determined characters cast for the conversation.

Creative, often surprising, attributes of the conversations (1) in Cafes include:

- The direction of the conversation - within a very broad theme - is perfectly unpredictable (so very different than small talk or most work discussions)
- Small differences among participants are amplified and combined as the conversation unfolds
- The differences might arise from personal experience, in cultural background, political stripe, or in accidental misunderstandings... but we are never really sure
- It is nearly impossible to trace the origins or causes of themes that emerge... even as they are arising and gaining power in front of you
- Unintended consequences on top of unintended consequences seem to rule the day

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- Both creative and destructive patterns in the conversation arise and fall in relatively short cycles
- Some themes repeat, gain strength and deepen as they are explored
- Other themes seem very important and then fade away to inconsequence
- Certainty hangs in suspended animation as individuals play with each others' thoughts, gestures and feelings
- Some themes pop-into-view purely in reference to the conversational pattern itself, not in response to an individual's contribution
- Individual contributions seem to be simultaneously forming and being formed by others and their contributions
- Individuals lose themselves as the collaborative hunch about "reality" unfolds, jointly created as a result of their interaction

The conversation often seems magical because it appears to order itself. ((( Wow Daddy ))) It self-organizes without being consciously managed by any one person, the host, or the group as a whole. A familiar world is seen in an entirely new light.

The order simply emerges from the interaction of individual contributions, gestures, feelings and intentions. Self-ordering seems to be an inherent property of the conversation (1). It cannot be attributed to any of the individual participants or contributions.



Creative conversation happens in a generative space that lies between. Notions of leading or following dissolve. A keen attentiveness and responsiveness among participants takes over. The process evokes a fine attunement to each other and what is happening in the moment.

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### A Creative Advance Into Novelty

In *Café Conversations*, the "order" constitutes a shared sense of "reality" after 9/11. Order and reality includes explorations of BIG questions and combinations of BIG questions. For example: where I can make a difference?; what can I learn from 9/11?; How can we come together in peace?; and, What myth are we living?

[See "Strange Attraction To Conversation Cafes" for more detail about these four questions.]

Many participants have noted that *Cafe* conversations are much more "real" than other sources of information. "I trust the validity of views expressed by people in the conversation...more than conventional news reports. This conversation helps me sift through what is wheat and what is chaff."

Participants share perspectives and jointly create responses to questions by weaving their individual contributions. Contributions can be personal stories, ideas, laughing, raised eyebrows, nodding, posture, and verbal comments. While "reality" is clearly not the same for all participants, individuals find their views changed and deepened in the conversation.

The change may or may not be consciously noticed in-the-moment. Yet post-meeting euphoria suggests that something dramatic has happened. A fresh, coherent view emerges. Participants become the "music" as it is being created... and it is heard so deeply that it is not heard at all (2). The conversation becomes much more than the sum of its parts.

The conversation is far from linear, yet it is very clearly ordered. Participants suspend certainty as they seek new insight - combinations of ideas, emotions, diverse experiences and mis-understandings that reveal a new possibility or view. Wide latitude is given for this kind of improvisational exchange.

Conversation Cafes employ explicit operating guidelines that help to create "new way of talking." The guidelines are common to many dialogue formats: suspend judgment as best you can; respect one another; seek to understand rather than persuade; invite and honor diversity of opinion; speak what has personal heart and meaning; and, go for honesty and depth without going on and on.

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The two, short opening rounds of conversation also utilize a talking-stick ritual (the person holding the talking-object has the floor without interruption). The following portion of conversation is open dialogue with an option to use the talking-stick if needed. This starting ritual helps to create three conditions for creative conversation to unfold (1):

- Close attention and responsiveness (via listening, gesturing, posturing) among participants is encouraged by slowing down and ordering initial contributions
- Diversity is revealed by giving individuals uninterrupted time to contribute and have their uniqueness (or strangeness) noticed by others
- Dramatic tension is building regarding how (or if) specific themes introduced relate to each other and will be combined during "open dialogue"

### Perfect Strangers Become Strangely Perfect

In most Cafes, the diversity of people and their contributions is breathtaking. We start as perfect strangers. After a few people have shared in the opening round, the range of themes and combinations of themes seems infinite. Everyone is mind-reading - imagining what people mean by what they say, don't say, and how they gesture. Often, we end seeing each other as strangely perfect.

Even before "open dialogue" begins, the novel combinations of themes are bubbling up and unearthing associations. No one knows where the conversation will go or what associations will be made. Any one of a number of individual interactions of people or viewpoints might incubate into a pattern or theme. Here starts the sleeplessness.

### Rules of Improvisation Conversation: A Hunch-In-Progress

I suspect that by not merely accepting an unforeseeable future,  
but by building it into my life, I may come closer to living  
a true life than those who struggle against it. *E.B. White*

As the open dialogue gets going, an implicit set of rules takes hold. The first and most important rule is to *make the most of whatever happens*. Rather than seeking agreement or alignment, each participant takes responsibility for contributing something that might add to the flow. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't.

High levels of instability (e.g., fast changes in topic, confusion, tangents, strong emotions) in the conversation are jointly supported if novelty is emerging or anticipated. Themes and exchanges that seem to offer a glimpse of insight get

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amplified. Attention is focused where creativity is rising, where meaning is manifesting.

Boring, unproductive, or destructive conversation occurs because one person offers a contribution that the others can't build on or interweave. It shuts down opportunities for others to contribute. At their best, all the participants share a responsibility for fostering the connections that lead to joint insight.

Additional rules of improvisation come into play (3). They include:

- Accept all offers from other participants (say "yes" unless you absolutely can't... there is very rarely a "right" or "wrong" contribution in Cafes)
- Don't ask too many questions (make assumptions about meaning, make judgments, and act)
- Take risks and make leaps (trust your attunement to the creative flow)
- Give and take (let go of a personal theme quickly and adapt to the emergent themes)
- Maintain mindfulness by listening and watching (your keen attention, gestures, and posture contributes to the creative flow)
- Contribute at the top of your intelligence (don't hold back, everyone is seeking new insight)

The focus is on "doing something with what just happened." Participants take responsibility for using whatever happens to move forward together - a creative advance into novelty. They act on what they perceive and create in-the-moment.

Surprising or mildly disturbing contributions are often valued (not judged right or wrong) because their value in creating insight is unpredictable. Themes that are familiar, repeated too often by one person, or potentially too disturbing are dampened and sink away. In some situations an individual's contributions cannot be integrated and this stifles the flow. Nonetheless, elements of sinking themes are often revitalized as new contributions emerge and weave into the conversation.

### The Art of Hosting Without Controlling

"Cease striving; then there will be transformation." *Chuang-Tse*

Café hosts often mention their inability to predict or control the conversational themes. Most, but not all, participants find this unpredictability to be exciting and

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attractive. As Martin Buber the philosopher suggests, "Every journey has a secret destination of which the traveler is not aware."

Without directly controlling, hosts certainly make a difference in the process. But what is it that they do? How can we describe their influence?

Hosts and participants can try to *amplify* or *dampen* patterns in the conversation. For example, *dampening* a destructive or hostile pattern can involve "catching" small, disturbing contributions before they propagate by:

- referring back to the Café agreements ("We agreed to go for honesty and depth without going on and on and on", how are we doing?")
- checking back ("Am I correct in understanding you to be saying...?")
- inquiring without judgment ("please say more about that" or "is there another way you can say that?")
- making "I" statements ("I am having strong feelings about your statement" or "I have another point of view to offer")
- surfacing what is emerging in-the-moment ("What is happening in this conversation? Does anyone have a thought or feeling about what you have been hearing?")
- making statements of empathy and acknowledgement ("I understand and appreciate what you are sharing.")

Hosts (and participants) can also *amplify* positive patterns by noticing happy surprises and accidents that might concatenate. Practices include:

- Accepting and affirming contributions by saying "yes... yes... yes"
- Holding anxiety or ambiguity (or allowing it to be present)
- Welcoming new themes as they emerge (avoid blocking)
- Not trying to settle or narrow the conversation
- Trying to be unfamiliar with topics you know best (letting go of your firm grasp on what is possible or impossible)
- Laughing about simple mis-understandings that open up new thoughts
- Playing with and appreciating the differences in viewpoints (especially eccentricities and loosely connected tangents)
- Noticing and celebrating novelty as it pops into view

Hosts can use and model all of these practices, but there are no a sure-fire recipes for success. In the midst of the conversation, discerning creative from destructive

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events or patterns is subtle and tricky. Whole conversations can turn creative or destructive in a moment or two. Conflicts can escalate very quickly. One person, in love with their point of view or their own voice, can shut down a whole group.

Nevertheless, I find that most conversations and groups of people are drawn to the creative light. They are drawn to deeper meaning and do their best to make something novel out of their conversation. Powerful social change is afoot.

Founder of the Conversation Cafes, Vicki Robin, describes the role of host in this delightful way:

"Hosts welcome and orient people to the Conversation Café process. A good host is a cross between a flight attendant, a coach, a mother, an old philosopher and an innocent child. Hosts are NOT therapists, NOT shining examples, and NOT impartial facilitators. They are simply the steady, welcoming presence that allows a great conversation to happen.... A good conversation is more like a game of hacky-sack than a game of tennis - the objective is to keep the ball in the air, not to defeat your opponent. At its best, such conversation gets deeper and richer the longer it can be sustained."

In this spirit, Conversation Cafes engage people in collaborative hunch-in-progress, not unlike a game of hacky-sack. Together, participants concentrate on keeping the ball (e.g., a hunch about reality after 9/11) in the air, responding in-the-moment as an adaptable hunch *weaves, spins and careens* in surprising directions. Everyone plays with whatever comes their way, knowing it will be unique pattern every time. It is a conversation that is treasured - a creative advance into novelty.

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Notes:

1. Anthony Suchman, MD, Professor Ralph Stacey and others have blazed the trail in efforts to describe creative conversations as "complex responsive processes." See: Ralph Stacey, (2001) Complex Responsive Process in Organizations: Learning and Knowledge Creation. London: Routledge.
2. Antonio Damasio, (1999) The Feeling of What Happens. Harcourt Brace.
3. Richard DiNapoli, Ed.D., (1999) "Creative Community: Applying the Process of Learning Improvisation." (unpublished)
4. Joseph Hart, 2002, "The Power of Talk: Create Social Change By Starting A Conversation," *The Utne Reader* (54-65)

*Additional articles in a complexity-science-inspired series by Keith McCandless:*

"Safely Taking Risks: Complexity and Patient Safety," (2008). *Exploring what will help safety leaders match effective approaches to simple, complicated and complex challenges, focusing on the most entangled and chronic.*

"Mastering the Art of Innovating: A Funny, Wonderful Thing Happened on the Way to My Deliverable!" 2006 with Linda DeWolf. *Illuminating the interplay of make-it-happen and let-it-happen innovation strategies among nine innovation grantees.*

"Oil, Water, Apples, Oranges: Bootstrapping Innovation with Social Networks," (2005) with Linda DeWolf. *Creating a vibrant learning network among grantees of the VHA Health Foundation.*

"A Primordial Pedagogy: Caves, Campfires & Watering Holes at the Mayo/Plexus Summit," (2003). *Learning insights and lively design methods for a complexity science conference.*

"The Sky Is Falling, Or Is It? A Strategic Planning Self-Assessment," (2003) *Fun survey to help you notice and amplify what is making your planning more creative and resilient.*

"*Surprise & Serendipity At Work: Managing the Unknowable Future,*" (2002) with Jim Smith. *Scenario-planning insights with a complexity twist at Group Health Cooperative.*

"Reliability, Resilience and Results in Operations: Designed Autopilot and Collective Mindfulness At Work," (2002). *Exploring behaviors that help people collectively and mindfully respond to surprise and complexity.*

"Integrated-Autonomy: From Shilly-Shallying to Unleashing System Vitality," (2002). *Reflecting on the paradoxical development of distributed systems, moving beyond "bi-polar swings" between decentralized and centralized strategies.*

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## Conversation Cafes in Seattle

**Conversation Cafés** are lively hosted conversations among small groups of people with diverse views but a shared passion for engaging with others. Held in public spaces like cafés, restaurants and bookstores, **Conversation Cafés** provide an open forum to talk about important topics over a cup of coffee or tea.

People of every philosophical, political and personality stripe circle up around tables and steaming beverages to earnestly shift from small talk to BIG talk. Everyone is welcome. There's nothing to join. Anyone can come, just once or many times. There are no books to read, no assignments, and no dues (except a bite to eat at the café).

A few consistent elements allow a "new way of talking" that shifts from small talk to BIG talk:

1. Hosts: One or two people are on hand to greet people, orient them to the process and launch the conversation.
2. Agreements: 6 principles common to most dialogue and circle groups guide the conversations:
  - Suspend judgment as best you can
  - Respect one another
  - Seek to understand rather than persuade
  - Invite and honor diversity of opinion
  - Speak what has personal heart and meaning
  - Go for honesty and depth without going on and on
3. A simple process: The Conversation Cafés adapt two ancient traditions: the talking-stick circle and deep dialogue. Two rounds of speaking without interruption introduce a quality of listening and reflecting that opens people to themselves and one another. People can pass if they like. They can be silent as their way of speaking. Then a lively conversation happens, keeping in mind the agreements to inquire rather than assert and debate. At the end, a final 'talking stick' round anchors for each participant the gems they are taking away.

Founder, Vicki Robin

See [www.conversationcafe.org](http://www.conversationcafe.org) for more information

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