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Co-creating and co-producing learning environments in adult education through the World Café method

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Introduction: This article analyzes teachers' efforts in preventing negative social control among newly arrived refugees at a Norwegian Adult Education Center (AEC). As the teachers realized that micro aggressive behavior hindered learning, they aimed for improving the learning environment. The World Café method (WCM) was implemented to change the learning environment in a positive way.

Methods: Data was collected by passive observation with participatory elements. This was followed up with individual and focus-group interviews on what happened during three World Café dialogues.

Results: This article uses management theories to analyse whether and how the implementation of the World Café was successful. The findings emphasize professional discretion combined with co-creation and co-production as organizational prerequisites for a positive change within the learning environment. The leaders at the AEC conducted professional discretion by employing bilingual immigrants as assistants at the AEC.

Discussion: The bilingual assistants used their multilingual resources and experiences with secondary language teaching in the planning and implementation of the World Café sessions for the newly arrived refugees. They contributed by co-creation and co-producing the WCM together with Norwegian born teachers. Their participation was an innovation at the AEC and led to a positive change in the learning environment.

KEYWORDS

co-creating, co-producing, World Café, microaggression, learning environment, immigrants, diversity, adult education

Introduction

The AECs in Norway are open for refugees and immigrants that “have the right and are obliged to participate in an introduction program offered by the municipalities” (Røhnebæk and Bjerck, 2021: 744). The program is full time, consisting of 600 h of language training and civic studies, free of charge after settlement in the municipality. The AEC, situated in a small town in Norway, have approximately 40 refugee immigrants as participants (learners). They come from all continents and speak many different languages. At the time when this study was conducted, most of them spoke Arabic, Tigrinya, Swahili, Farsi, and Dari.

Microaggression is defined as “brief and often subtle everyday events that denigrate individuals because they are members of particular groups” (Pierce et al., 1978; Sue, 2010).

The teachers experienced micro-aggressive behavior among some learners. They experienced quarrels, learners not wanting to work together, and they observed men (husbands) controlling their wives. They observed a traumatized woman experiencing ostracism from others. This resulted in uneasiness, avoidance, and passive participation among learners.

Possible micro-aggressive behavior from teachers to newly arrived refugees (Kenny, 2022a) has not been researched in this project. The leaders of the AEC wanted to involve as many of the teachers as possible in the decision-making process so that they felt ownership to the WCM. It was important to clarify early that the aim of the research was to gain more knowledge on how to improve teacher training, in general, in Norway regarding intercultural education and not to evaluate the teachers at the AEC.

On this background, the teachers decided to use the WCM to break up the negative pattern among learners as it hindered learning. Their first attempt to organize a World Café a couple of years before had been unsuccessful. The second attempt is the one analyzed in this article using organization and management theories, asking whether and how the implementation of the WCM changed the learning environment in a positive direction.

Before the World Café pilot-project started in 2020, bilingual immigrants had been employed temporarily on a part-time basis as assistants (called “language pilots”). Their employment developed as a 2-year project in 2017–2019 at some AECs in Norway (Eek, 2021). The State Directorate of Integration and Diversity (IMDI) supported the employment financially as IMDI had raised development funds to promote municipal integration efforts the year before. This WCM pilot-project was the AEC’s leader’s (the head, administration, and research and development leaders) answer to the aim of IMDI, to develop new knowledge and methods about integration of national interest (Tkachenko et al., 2021). In the beginning, the bilingual immigrants were employed to assist the AEC in using multilingualism as a resource. However, 1 year later, they were also involved in organizing a World Café.

The leaders at the AEC invited three external researchers to follow up the process and collect data throughout the organization process in the planning/preparation and implementation phases. The author of this article was the leader of the research project while a steering committee at the AEC was the leader of the WCM pilot-project. Vestland Regional Research Fund funded the research. The aim of the research was to provide researchers and practitioners in similar educational settings with practical advice and recommendations in using a WCM to improve learning environments.

Theoretical background and conceptual framework

As a starting point, Putnam’s theory on social capital building, in particular, the *bridging* type, was considered as relevant for studying the development of the World Café. Bridging capital strengthens networks of trust across people with heterogeneous social, economic, and/or demographic differences. Such a network might have capacity to produce a feeling of identity and/or mutuality despite differences and contribute to strengthen individual quality of life (Putnam, 2000).

Newly arrived refugee immigrants have one thing in common, and that is being newly arrived immigrants living in vulnerable circumstances in a new country. Apart from that, they might have little

in common (Røhnebak and Bjerck, 2021). They fit the description of Brown and Isaacs in being a diverse group of learners for which the WCM might be doable (Brown and Isaacs, 1995). In Putnam’s perspective, staff at AECs play an important societal role by working as a “junction” by the way of bridging gaps between people with diverse backgrounds. They are often called “natural helpers” when they try to bridge gaps, such as between newly arrived refugees at the AEC and people in the local community (Guribye and Hidle, 2013).

As Putnam’s theory on building social capital with an emphasis on bridging gaps was a theoretical starting point for this research project, theories on co-creation and co-production on the organizational level became equally important, as these theories helped to shed new and more detailed lights on what happened during the decision-making process (Osborne and Strokosch, 2013). As the concept of social capital has been challenged lately for its vagueness (Claridge, 2021), this article draws on public management theories explaining more in detail the organization process of the World Café, observing social capital as a possible outcome and side-effect of a positive learning environment.

Co-creation and co-producing

The public management literature on what co-creation and co-production mean, how these concepts are understood, defined, and what distinguishes the terms is vast and voluminous. Clarifications on how the concepts are used in this article are therefore needed.

Co-production was the first to be presented in the research literature, originally explained by Ostrom (1996) as: “the process through which inputs used to produce a good or service are contributed by individuals who are not “in” the same organization” (Ostrom, 1996: 1073). Her focus was on the service level on how to break the “great divide” between public and civil sectors. Of interest, the topic of this article is also her other focus on the ability of street-level bureaucrats to exercise *discretion* to co-produce public services (Ostrom, 1996; Røhnebak and Bjerck, 2021: 742). By drawing on the study of Lipsky (1973), her research team recognized that discretion was an important feature in how public employees spend their time. Producing a service is difficult without active participation of those supposedly receiving the service, they realized: *If students are not actively engaged in their own education, what teachers do may make little difference in the skills students acquire* (Ostrom, 1996: 1079). Ostrom’s research team thus developed the term “coproduction” to describe the potential relationship between teachers (“street-level bureaucrats”) and their pupils (the “clients”).

Co-production and co-creating are similar concepts. They have also been depicted as “joint efforts of citizens and public sector professionals in initiating, planning, designing and implementing public services” (Brandson et al., 2018: 3). However, the two concepts point at distinct *phases* in the decision-making process which is of highly relevance here. One way of distinguishing between them is that co-creation is input from citizens in the *planning* and *preparation* phase while co-production is related to input from citizens in the *design* and *implementation* phase (Brandson and Honingh, 2018: 10–16).

This article distinguishes between the two concepts in the same way when analyzing the inputs from the bilingual assistants. Co-creation refers to inputs in the *planning and preparation* phase and co-production in the *implementation* phase. Both concepts are

however understood as “the voluntary or involuntary involvement of citizens in public services in any of the design, management, delivery and/or evaluation of public services” (Osborne et al., 2016: 640; Eriksson, 2019; Lember et al., 2019).

The World Café method

The World Café as a participatory method has proven beneficial in organizational change processes. On the one hand, it facilitates dialogues and mutual learning. On the other hand, it has proven successful also for collecting data (Löhr et al., 2020). According to the founders (Brown and Isaacs, 1995), the method is relevant when there is a need for symmetry and closeness in relationships, need for the sharing of stories, discussions, explorations, and the development of mutual understanding in areas where participants have diverse backgrounds and conditions for participation.

Brown and Isaacs discovered that *diversity* was an important principle in WCM dialogues, compared with traditional dialogue circles. They stated that the WCM showed to be a fun and challenging way of learning through socializing with others. The participants or “coffee guests” sit down at “coffee tables” and discuss specific themes or questions made in beforehand. A “café host” leads each table. After a while, participants move to a new table and continue to discuss with other guests. The café hosts stay put at the same table, lead the sittings, and sum up the discussions at his or her table (Brown and Isaacs, 1995).

The article focuses on four out of seven design/organization principles primarily outlined by Brown and Isaacs in the 1990s. These are: (1) set the context, (2) create a hospitable space, (3) explore questions that matters, and (4) encourage everyone’s contributions. Context and space are in this article considered important principles and will be addressed in the planning and preparation phase, while exploring questions and encouraging contributions are relevant in the implementation phase. A limitation is that the last three principles of Brown and Isaacs are not discussed in this article as these were more sporadic in the dialogues. These are: cross-pollinate and connect diverse perspectives, listen together for patterns and harvest, and share collective discoveries (Brown and Isaacs, 1995, p. 40). The features of the *organization process* (planning and implementation) are emphasized more than the content of the dialogues.

Methodology—qualitative data with participatory elements

Organization

The researchers participated at all the three World Café dialogues lasting one school day each examining one theme per day. There were approximately 25–40 participants divided into small groups circulating between different tables (6–8) three times per day. The themes were divided into three sub questions to be discussed at the three seatings during the day. Each dialogue lasted for 45 min with 10-min break between them (with lunch in the middle). Newly arrived learners speaking the same mother tongue were together in a few groups while learners at higher language levels were divided into several mixed language groups. All groups moved as a group and not

individually to secure safety and help newcomers. This organization ensured that most of the tables had learners from different cultural backgrounds and that they discussed all three sub questions each day.

Follow-up research and mixed methods

Data were collected by passive participation (observation), followed up with individual and focus-group interviews on what happened at the AEC on the same days when the World Cafes were organized. Data were collected during the years of 2020–2021. It consisted of field work based on (mainly) qualitative data with participatory elements. The interviewees consisted of four Norwegian born teachers (café hosts), one immigrant teacher (café host), three R&D leaders, and four bilingual immigrant assistants. The researchers followed the organization process of the WCM (planning/preparation and implementation) in “same time,” collecting interview and field data (observation).

Interviews and observation with participatory elements

The researchers conducted two *focus group interviews* (before and after implementation) with ten teachers, three leaders, and four bilingual immigrant assistants. Four teachers were interviewed for a second time at the end of the WCM pilot-project. Notes taken by the café hosts during dialogues were also part of the data. The researchers combined the interview data with *observation data*. The observation consisted of mainly passive but also some active participation during the implementation of the three dialogue sessions during 2020–2021. One researcher took observation notes of what happened. The participatory elements consisted of one researcher partaking by organizing a welcoming station song as a start-up (head, shoulder, knee, and toe) and in arranging two drama workshops together with one drama teacher at the AEC. In addition, all three researchers circulated and sat down at the coffee tables, listening to the dialogues, and spoke with learners who talked to them directly at tables or in the breaks.

The researchers decided to write different articles using different theoretical approaches. The data analysis work for this article is done independently by the author of this article using thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2022). Ethical approval was obtained from the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, ensuring compliance with ethical guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Their anonymity and confidentiality have been maintained.

Results

Planning phase: co-create the context

The first World Café design principle that Brown and Isaacs point at is *set the context*. This is about “creating the purpose and parameters in which the collaborative learning would unfold and help shaping the content and the process in preparation and during WCM sessions” (Brown and Isaacs, 1995). This first World Café principle speaks very well with public administration theory regarding organization

processes. Eriksson (2019), inspired by public administration theory, states that inequities and disparities often are part of the context (Eriksson, 2019). This resonates with what happened at this AEC.

The AEC teachers and leaders were very much aware of the context as they had failed the first time. The World Café that failed a couple of years before had not been well enough organized and the questions they had prepared did not resonate well enough with the learners. Now their aim was to redesign the World Café based on earlier experiences. First, four to six bilingual immigrant assistants were invited to the planning and preparation phase. They were asked to give inputs to topics, questions, and how to organize the sessions.

Furthermore, the teachers considered it important that each table this time had a café host (a Norwegian born or immigrant teacher) that should be *active* during the dialogues. Each table should also have a bilingual immigrant who could assist and interpret, especially regarding newcomers. To speak with public administration theory, the bilingual immigrants achieved a role as both representative co-creators and co-producers of the WCM (Eriksson, 2019).

The staff allocated much more *time* and *attention* in this first phase of the process, something that Brown and Isaacs point at is important. In fact, the teachers stated that this was a prerequisite for a successful WCM (focus group 1). They also discussed other critical issues and questions. These were the foundation of the project, clarifications of goals and values, how to organize tables and groups, how to share roles (between café hosts and bilingual immigrant assistants) and clarifications of *expectations* from all stakeholders (focus group 1). Clarification of a common set of values showed to be important. In meetings, the staff anchored this in “how to see others and to show closeness.” The most important values connected to this became safety, security, trust, empathy, respect, and openness (focus group 1).

The importance of *informing* all classes beforehand about tasks and topics to be discussed at the World Café was another critical factor that had failed the first time. Now the bilingual immigrant assistants played a key role. They volunteered in proposing and adjusting topics and questions for the dialogues. The immigrant learners were given the opportunity to communicate with the assistants before the World Café started. The learners also got information from their respective teachers in their classrooms. This resulted in adult immigrant learners being well informed in beforehand about what *topics* they were to discuss at the coffee tables.

Preparation phase: tailor space to the goal of the project and target group

The second principle of Brown and Isaacs is to create a “welcoming hospitable space that provides personal comfort and psychological safety.” It was decided upon that the World Café should take place on the premises of the AEC in the mingling area that was already well known for the adult learners. Tables with coffee and cookies were set up. However, who should sit at which table? This question showed to be more important than anticipated because it was connected to elements of social control in the learning environment that they wanted to change. An important question addressed by teachers was whether the learners should be organized into homogenous or heterogenous groups regarding language and land background. The teachers hoped that building networks across was more feasible to change the learning environment. As such Putnam’s *bridging* concept came to the fore. The pupils were organized into heterogenous groups

at the tables, having different land backgrounds and speaking different languages. This again, raised new questions. One of them was that bridging in this way could make the learners feel uncomfortable or insecure.

To avoid people feeling uncomfortable, the staff decided that the learners should move *together*, not individually to the next table. They should stick with the same group together with their bilingual immigrant assistant the entire day. In this way, they tailor-made the second principle of Brown and Isaacs. The reason was 2-fold, first to avoid language homogenous groups sitting together with people from their own country where one or two could exercise social control. Second, moving individually from table to table could make newcomers even more uncomfortable, unsafe, and could complicate interpretation. Now, each table was compounded of learners with different land backgrounds and languages who developed a common group feeling because they stick together and moved *collectively* to a new table (interviews and field notes).

Explore questions that matters—share experiences—avoid conflicts

The staff spent many hours discussing relevant topics and questions for the tables, according to the third principle of Brown and Isaacs: “explore questions that matters.” The teachers asked: *what topics would excite the pupils?* The themes *should not be too big, nor too difficult*, they said. They decided that the dialogues needed to show some kind of progression in degree of difficulty (focus group 1).

Socialization became a central principle in the WCM to create security and increase tolerance. Thus, the sharing of experiences for cultural understanding became important to obtain socialization in the dialogues. One teacher put it like this: *Socializing is important to get to know others that do not attend the same class*. Understanding the concept of democracy was also part of the discussion. Another said that socializing was important: *for better understanding, for democracy, for discussion, and for dialogue* (focus group 1). The teachers wanted focus on *experiences*, avoiding issues that could create conflicts or racism, such as religion and/or cultural differences (focus group 1). The challenges were to encourage pupils to utter own opinions (not face answers), motivate them, and make them feel safe (focus group 1).

The challenges explain partly why the Norwegian born teachers involved the “language pilots” (the immigrant assistants) as *mediators* between themselves and the learners. In the role as co-creators in the planning phase, the teachers invited the bilingual immigrants to suggest and comment upon topics, themes, and questions for the WCM and inform the learners. The bilingual immigrants on their side emphasized making simple questions and allocate enough time for each topic at the World Café. They suggested a lot of topics such as *positive childhood memories* or a *place you liked to play as a child*. As co-producers in the implementation phase, they translated at the tables and assisted the café hosts. At one or two tables, they also took the role as café host.

Implementation phase—the three World Café dialogues

The dialogues became a co-product, developed together by café hosts and immigrant assistants. They divided the tasks between them:

the café hosts asked questions and took notes. The “language pilots” interpreted for newcomers who could not yet speak any Norwegian.

The learners were encouraged to participate by the teachers and bilingual immigrants before and during the dialogues. The first theme at the first World Café was *happiness*. The hosts asked: *what makes you happy* and *what do you do to make other feel happy?* A related question was *friendship*. The hosts asked for *thoughts about friendship* and *what is a good friend?* They asked the participants to *tell about a nice memory together with a friend*. The hosts used pictures to explain the themes. A third question was *time* and *associations about time* in combination with different images (field notes).

The second dialogue had a critical glance on Norway. The aim was to gain trust from the learners. One of the teachers reasoned: *It is important that we discuss the Norwegians, and what is negative in our society. Like this we can gain trust from the participants, it can make us more trustworthy if we also promote what is negative with the Norwegian society. Focus should not only be on those who comes to Norway!* (focus group interview). The hosts asked: *What is it to be Norwegian, what is typically Norwegian? What is strange with Norway and the Norwegian culture? What is fine with Norway and the Norwegian culture?* Additional questions at the end of the day: *What is care? What makes you proud?*

At the third dialogue, the theme was travel. The café hosts asked: *Travel in time. What time will you travel to, present time or the future? If you could choose, what time would you prefer to live in? You are to travel from the past to the present, what do you want to bring with you back to the present time?*

Discussion

Counterbalancing social control and safety

Evaluating the WCM, the teachers agreed that all the three dialogues had gone beyond all expectations (focus group 2). As café hosts, the teachers had made interesting observations of the social relations between learners (second interviews with teachers). Learners helped each other in the groups. Most of them became highly active during the conversations, included those whom the hosts did not expect would say anything.

Most importantly, they experienced reduced social control during the dialogues. The learners sat together with learners from other networks and countries whom they did not know very well. Thus, they could not control in the same way as compared with sitting with learners with similar backgrounds (interviews with teachers and immigrant assistants). As one teacher formulated it: *We experienced less wandering, and less chaos compared to earlier times* (focus group 2).

Organizing pupils/learners into groups *across* land backgrounds and languages inspired by Putnam's concept of bridging worked but was also a challenge regarding the feeling of safety. The staff had been afraid that sitting together with people with other land backgrounds could make people feel unsafe. However, it turned out that this way of organization tables felt safe. Moving *collectively* (not individually) to new tables together with language pilots and having a regular café host sitting at each table counter-balanced the fear of feeling insecure and unsafe. They created a welcoming hospitable space. This resonates well with research on the use of music to create and facilitate such welcoming spaces (Kenny, 2022b; Rinde, 2023). This provided

personal comfort and safety. Two to three girls in the beginning had been quite silent and invisible and started gradually to take part in the dialogues and speak (field notes). Very few dominated the discussions. The immigrant assistants (language pilots) showed to be important bridge builders as mediators and interpreters.

One teacher put it like this: *In the first break, pupils went back to the pupils they used to be with, but in the other break, several of them started to talk to the others around their table*. Another teacher wondered: *One man was glad and happy. He said he had no pain in the back. Could it have to do something with yesterday? Just sitting there talking and smiling. A pupil in nature study had thrived and smiled a lot today. Had been so clever and active yesterday, using mother tongue, felt useful* (interview with café host).

The teachers concluded that it felt safe for the pupils to stay in the same group during all dialogues. They were surprised that the pupils were so positive and forthcoming. The focus had been on the community. Coffee and cakes made it all informal.

Improving language skills, understanding democracy?

Talking together during café dialogues about the collective showed to be more important than first anticipated. The learners liked that the dialogues did not concern school issues. To them, it was good to speak Norwegian together. Several learners managed to speak Norwegian without interpretation. The hosts were surprised how well they managed (focus group 2). Teachers who initially worried about chaos stopped worrying. The conversations had been good, flowing and shifts between tables went well. All the learners participated in the discussions in all three dialogues (interviews and focus group 2).

Many of the participants shared personal stories at the tables, mostly in Norwegian, but also using their own language. The others listened. The bilingual immigrant assistants re-narrated what learners said if some used own language. It was a lot of positivity and good mood during the dialogues. The theme “Norwegian” created smiles. Themes such as “friendship,” “care,” and “time” led to deep and good reflections (field notes). The pupils found the themes relevant and applicable (observation notes). They experienced an increase in the degree of difficulty in the dialogues. However, “time” turned out to be the most abstract and difficult theme and was a bit more challenging (interviews with café hosts).

Teachers stated that the WCM could not only improve language skills but also give ways of understanding democracy. Some staff looked upon the *method* in the World Café as being more important than the *themes*, claiming that through the participation, newcomers got an introduction about the meaning of living in a democratic society. One café host said that the sessions were good “for those who can reflect and speak, a bit worse for the other.” Another café host meant that the pupils had understood a lot and that the café had “lifted thoughts and the language a bit.” The learners on their side did experience the dialogues as meaningful, and this was reported on from both teachers and immigrant assistants. The immigrant assistants emphasized that such dialogues are important because refugees lack discussion forums (interview with assistants). Research has however proven that online forums for refugees have given marginalized community members a platform to share their concern, thoughts, and questions (Anderson et al., 2021).

Conditions for a successful WCM to improve learning environment for refugee immigrants

Organizing a World Café by using the design principles as described by [Brown and Isaacs \(1995\)](#) implied important prerequisites in this case study: the use of *discretion* at the AEC in employing bilingual immigrant assistants in the first place and, second, inviting them to mediate through both co-creating and co-producing the WCM together with staff.

The leaders exercised discretion when seeking state financial support to employ immigrant assistants on a part-time basis. Thus, professional discretion was one important condition that contributed to make the WCM successful and innovative by using creative and productive inputs from different participants. The results were innovative ideas on how to organize a WCM with the help of bilingual immigrant assistants. The bilingual immigrant assistants had not only lived longer in the country but also many of them shared the same background as the newcomers, and all of them had been learners at the same AEC. They became mediators of supporting second language teaching and used their own multilingual, resources, and experiences. They assisted in designing and implementing the WCM and took part and gave input in all the organization phases. As such, co-creation and co-production became key participatory features throughout the WCM organization process.

Discerning between co-creation and co-producing, in this article, shows that the bilingual immigrant assistants obtained a combined co-creative and co-productive role on behalf of the newly arrived immigrants. The immigrant assistants became mediators between and among the refugee immigrant pupils, on the one side, and the Norwegian born teachers, on the other side, during all phases of the process ([Eriksson, 2019](#)). The role of the bilingual assistants can be described as “enhanced co-production” as their contribution resulted in new forms of public services ([Strokosch and Osborne, 2016](#), p. 674).

Conclusion

The way this World Café was organized, represents an innovation in adult education, as the organization of the World Café not only built bridges between learners at the AEC but also bridged staff, bilingual immigrants, and learners. Using professional discretion to hire bilingual immigrants to help with the organization and contents of the WCM showed to be an important condition for a successful World Café. In this way, the head and leaders succeeded to improve the learning environments for their immigrant learners. As a conclusion, employing representatives from the target group’s social context (the

bilingual immigrant assistants) showed to be a successful public administrative strategy bridging cultural gaps.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants’ legal guardians/next of kin. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

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