



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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THE JEFFERSON CAFÉ™: AN ADVENTURE OF THE MIND

As my colleagues and I know too well, the lion's share of our time is subsumed by tasks other than having sustained and satisfying dialogue about ideas: grading papers, responding to e-mail, attending meetings, holding conferences with students, planning lessons, and preparing and photocopying assignments. Some of these activities do include thoughtful, reflective, insightful moments (some of the very best of which occur at the photocopy machine or in the corridor), but this dialogue tends to be fragmentary and devoid of meaningful context.

Even in class, an ever-increasing amount of time seems to be spent on procedural matters: taking attendance, collecting and returning homework, making announcements, explaining new assignments, administering tests, reviewing lessons already taught, and answering factual questions ("How many pages?" "How many sources?" and so on).

Thus, it was partly as an act of sheer self-indulgence that I created the Jefferson Café™. As newly appointed director of the Paul Peck Institute for American Culture and Civic Engagement at Montgomery College (MD), I realized that I was in a position to work outside the curricular process and move quickly toward implementation of a program that would nurture reflection and promote civic awareness.

The Jefferson Café™ (the trademark application came about nine months into our wholly unexpected and meteoric success) is both an event and a concept. It is a grassroots discussion circle. It is offered under the aegis of an institute of American culture and civic engagement and it focuses on topics in American life and the role of the United States in the global community. It features no lecture or presentation, nor (as we are obliged to explain periodically) is it a book club. Rather, it is a locus for a conversation about ideas.

The format is based on asking and exploring questions, rather than finding definitive answers. At a typical Café, people begin to gather for coffee and dessert about

half an hour before the discussion is scheduled to begin. Presently, they begin to gravitate toward a conference table where they sit and talk for about 90 minutes.

A facilitator, who is a peer among peers and who claims no special expertise on the topic-at-hand, starts by offering some observations and open-ended questions relating to a chapter-length, pre-Café focus reading. At various points in the conversation, the facilitator may ask a follow-up question or address a query to someone who has not yet participated. At the end, no one sums up; satisfaction derived from this full and free discussion is not contingent on reaching consensus or closure.

In the brief introduction to each Café, the facilitator explains some simple ground rules. We ask everyone to participate—requesting that those who are comfortable speaking out in public be especially sensitive to the fact that others are uneasy about expressing themselves, and, on the other hand, asking those who tend to be shy about speaking to try deliberately to find an opening and jump in. Though the pre-Café reading serves as a focal point and springboard for discussion, we recognize that a free-flowing conversation may wander far from the text. However, if the dialogue ranges too far afield or becomes too personal or confrontational, any member of the group may tactfully shift the focus back to the reading.

The group is kept small deliberately (limited to about 15 people) so that everyone can see and hear everyone else. At each session we welcome both returning and new participants, about as many college personnel as community members. We have developed an informal "rule of thirds": one-third of the seats at each Café are reserved for returning participants and one-third for newcomers, with the last third up for grabs.

The Café creates a physical and psychological space in which people feel free to share ideas or try out notions that have just occurred to them, without pressure to defend to the death what they have just heard themselves say. Participants offer a range of viewpoints, sometimes arguing vigorously, but also striving to maintain a civil conversation.

And so, in May 2004, a pilot Jefferson Café was held



at the Takoma Park/Silver Spring campus of Montgomery College. We called it a café because we realized early on that it would be helpful—given that we are based at a multi-campus institution situated in a large metropolitan area plagued by heavy traffic—to serve coffee and dessert during a half-hour “gathering time” before the main discussion begins. The result is that hardly anyone is late for the discussion. We named the event after Jefferson: because even though his “stock” has fallen precipitously among academics, it is still generally acknowledged that he was one of our most intellectual American presidents; because the sparkling dinner conversation Jefferson was reputed to have enjoyed at Monticello and in the White House serves as an inspiration to us; because Jefferson is far enough back in time to evoke no particular partisan identification; and because here we had a figure whose own life story is replete with provocative contradictions.

For our very first meeting, we used a reading on “the American Dream” that turned out to spark a wonderfully interesting discussion. A participant at that first Café had an idea for another reading and discussion, and she became our second facilitator. We decided to meet monthly, at a fixed time and place.

As word got out through articles in local newspapers and items on the college’s web site, we were flooded with inquiries from community members. Soon we saw a need to develop training guidelines for facilitators. My subsequent appearance on local TV shows occasioned a number of requests to launch Jefferson Café series in community centers, senior centers, civic gatherings, and other venues throughout Montgomery County. We held our first off-site Café in July 2004, at a community center near our campus, and from that beginning a substantial network of Cafés began to evolve. Quite unexpectedly, we had a major success on our hands.

At subsequent gatherings we went on to consider a range of topics in American life: the breakdown of community in the United States (the “Bowling Alone” phenomenon), the relationship of religion and politics in our country, American food, suburban life, immigration/assimilation issues, the disappearance of the Western frontier, children’s literature and censorship issues, women in politics, globalization, and the application of ethical standards to government. We have developed a tradition of returning to a consideration of some topic relating to Jefferson and the founding fathers (or brothers or mothers or sisters) on every six-month anniversary of our first Café.

The Jefferson Café™ now comprises a set of monthly grassroots discussion circles, meeting on different days at a variety of locations throughout the region. There is no fixed membership. Each session welcomes a mixture

of college personnel and community members, including journalists, security guards, engineers, artists, environmental activists, social workers, homemakers, people with disabilities, job-seekers, and retirees. Some of these constituencies have been voiceless or disempowered traditionally.

Although the group is kept small, the ripple effect is powerful. Almost every month still brings requests to launch new Café series. We have formed strategic partnerships with the League of Women Voters of Montgomery County, Montgomery Community Television, senior and community centers throughout the region, and PBS-MacNeil/Lehrer Productions. We are talking with the Library of Congress about developing a model for a Café that will involve participants at remote locations around the country through teleconferencing and the Library’s online resources.

The Jefferson Café has become a model in the region for a type of lively, informed grassroots dialogue with no political agenda. It provides a locus and a format for thinking through complex issues in small groups of diverse membership, without insistence on desired outcome or immediate results. Using both college personnel and trained volunteers as facilitators, the Institute holds—and models—Cafés at civic meetings, community and immigrant centers, senior centers, bookstores, and art galleries. We are working to launch new Café series at soup kitchens, juvenile detention centers, women’s centers, and prisons.

Getting back to the intellectual “hunger” from which we started, we now recognize a real and widespread hunger among people we encounter for a dialogue that explores ideas and welcomes a variety of viewpoints without advocating immediate application or direct political action. Although we do no advertising beyond maintaining a web site and keeping an e-mail contact list, word-of-mouth endorsement is powerful: Cafés fill quickly, and many have a waiting list.

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You may also visit the college’s web site at www.montgomerycollege.edu. Click on “Department Websites” and then on “American Culture and Civic Engagement, Paul Peck Institute.”

