

Working Together to Realise Big Ideas: World Café: a simple technique for solving complicated problems

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Australia's Widening Participation agenda has significantly increased the number of non-traditional students in higher education. Universities, in their quest to meet both access and revenue targets, have opened their doors to students who may not initially have the cultural capital to sustain their studies. For some universities, this has led to unsatisfactory higher levels of attrition. In La Trobe University's College of Science, Health and Engineering (CSHE), attrition has doubled in the last eight years to 28%. Recognising both the moral as well as financial imperative to improve retention, CSHE desired a swift and measurable change. The College knew that to affect change, it would have to empower academics to take responsibility and, critically, give them the 'tools' to become change agents. Also recognised was the need to partner with another university division to leverage of its expertise and develop an integrated solution. The method CSHE employed will be of interest to other faculties who wish to change culture and innovate without spending a lot of money. Our strategy was simple: we hosted a 'world café' and invited subject coordinators from the most underperforming courses. Organised and implemented in less than four weeks, one key to our success was the championing of the APVC, who was not only armed with evidence – critical to any argument with academics – but also with the unpalatable future of our courses if we did not stem the flow of attriting students. Another key to our success was our collaboration with Learning Futures, responsible for curriculum reform and student support. We introduced our cafe with the premise that retention was not just our problem, but also our problem to solve. A series of short presentations about innovative interventions followed, each designed to inspire and empower participants to take action. Participants were then asked to create an intervention and commit to implementing it. The result was 12 action plans, each with an assigned 'liaison' from the STAR (Student Transition, Achievement and Retention) team to support implementation. Action plans are now in progress, and data will be captured to track their effectiveness. Our participants left the world café with tools, a plan and support. Equally important, they left with a clearer understanding of their role as agents of change. If your faculty is interested in fostering a change environment on a shoestring, you will be interested in learning more about CSHE world café.