

LEARNING CAFE

GUIDE FOR GOOD PRACTICES



CaBatt – Capacity Building for
Battery Teachers in Vocational
Education and Training
Learn more about the project here -
<https://project-cabatt.eu/>



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INTRODUCTION

Overview of the Guide

This guide was developed within the framework of the **CaBatt Project – Capacity Building for Battery Teachers in Vocational Education and Training**, as part of its commitment to promoting innovative and collaborative learning practices. During the project's in-person meetings, the Learning Café (LC) method was used as a participatory activity to foster discussion, knowledge sharing, and joint reflection among partners. The positive feedback and results from these sessions inspired the creation of this guide, which aims to help others replicate the experience in their own contexts.



The LC is a simple yet powerful approach that brings people together to exchange ideas and co-create solutions in an informal, café-like setting. It transforms traditional learning environments into spaces of active dialogue, where every participant contributes knowledge and insight.

This guide provides practical guidance on designing, facilitating, and adapting an LC session — from understanding the method's principles to planning logistics, selecting topics, and managing group interaction. It also includes examples of how the approach can be applied in different learning and project scenarios. By sharing this resource, the CaBatt project aims to inspire trainers, educators, and facilitators to incorporate more collaborative, engaging, and learner-centered approaches into their activities, thereby fostering the spirit of openness and cooperation that underpins CaBatt.

01. What is a Learning Cafe?

The Learning Cafe is a group conversation method adapted from the “World Cafe” approach, developed in the mid-1990s. In 1995, facilitators Juanita Brown and David Isaacs began using a cafe-style process to host large-scale, open-ended dialogues^[1]. LCs bring this idea into education and training. They create a relaxed, coffeehouse-style setting where participants openly discuss key questions and issues. This format encourages everyone to contribute ideas and build upon each other’s thoughts, transforming a simple conversation into an active group learning experience.



In practice, an LC is “a structured discussion format where students rotate through themed discussion tables to share insights and develop solutions collaboratively” (Turku University of Applied Sciences, n.d.) [1]. In other words, people tend to form small groups around stations. Each station has a guiding question or topic. After talking and noting their ideas, the groups rotate to a new station, continuing the conversation started by the previous group. This way, everyone becomes both a learner and a contributor. Facilitators often describe it as modifying the World Cafe design to emphasize “an open and stimulating atmosphere and learning culture” (Ring & Kokko, 2012) – in short, a friendly space for sharing knowledge and creativity.

[1]

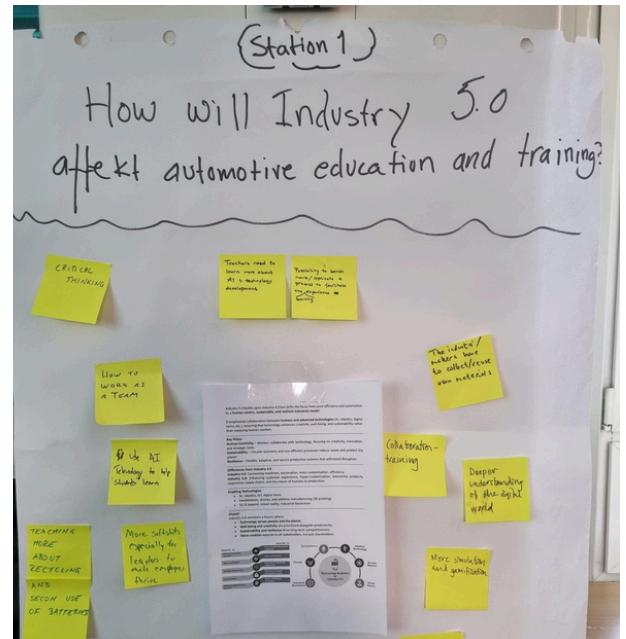
https://wikis.evergreen.edu/civcintelligence/index.php/The_World_Cafe:_Shaping_Futures_Through_Questions_That_Matter#:~:text=through%20which%20we%20coevolve%20our,inquiry%20into%20knowledge%20and%20leadership

1.1. Key benefits of the LC

An LC offers several significant advantages for training and education:

- **Active participation.** Small-group discussions ensure that all participants have the opportunity to speak and listen. No one dominates the whole session. Every voice can be heard, which boosts engagement and inclusion.
- **Idea-sharing and co-creation.** Because groups rotate and build on each other's notes, ideas are shared widely and developed collectively. Each station work serves as a platform for the next group, resulting in outcomes that reflect many perspectives.
- **Collaborative problem-solving.** Participants jointly analyse questions and brainstorm solutions. The method encourages people to combine their knowledge and creativity. In one study, LCs were described as a "practical and creative way to facilitate critical as well as innovative thinking, share knowledge, listen to each other and reflect over experiences (...)" (Ring & Kokko, 2012).
- **Active learning and reflection.** Learners actively construct understanding by talking and reflecting, rather than passively receiving information. This interactive dialogue deepens comprehension, helping participants remember and apply the information they discuss.
- **Supportive learning culture.** The cafe setting feels informal and welcoming, which reduces anxiety and encourages honesty. Participants often describe it as an "open and stimulating atmosphere" (Ring & Kokko, 2012). This positive environment can foster trust and openness, allowing learners to express ideas and questions freely.

Together, these benefits make the LC much more than a discussion; it becomes a shared learning experience where knowledge is co-created. Participants report feeling more involved and motivated when they can shape the conversation themselves, leading to richer learning outcomes.

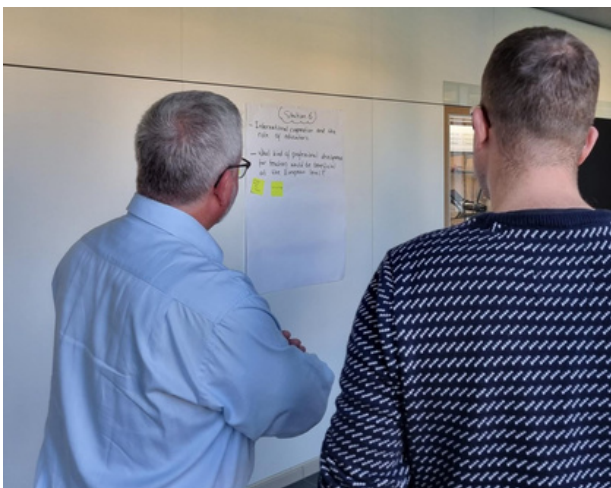


1.2. Relevance in Educational and Project Contexts

LCs are especially valuable in educational and project-based settings. They fit well with modern, learner-centered approaches and with EU-funded initiatives that emphasize stakeholder participation and co-creation. For example, a project planning team might use an LC to gather input from teachers, students, and community members on how to improve a course. By rotating through stations on different aspects of the project (e.g., "Resources," "Objectives," "Risks"), all voices contribute to every topic. The result is a set of ideas and plans developed collectively by the group.

In the classroom or training room, LCs encourage students or trainees to take responsibility for their own learning. Instead of the trainer lecturing, learners explain concepts to each other and reflect together. This model enables participants to practice real-world teamwork and communicate their ideas clearly. It also builds a sense of community: as one guide observes, an LC creates "an open and stimulating atmosphere and learning culture" (Ring & Kokko, 2012). Such an atmosphere can make workshops more engaging and productive.

In summary, the LC method transforms a meeting or class into an interactive, co-learning event. It values every participant's input and turns discussion into collective action. For trainers and educators, it is a powerful tool to break the ice, spark creativity, and ensure that everyone learns together.



2. How does an LC work?

Running a LC involves a few straightforward steps. Below is a typical process, with an example for illustration:

1 Set up the cafe space

Arrange several stations around the room, each labelled with a different theme or question (for example, "Lesson Planning," "Assessment Methods," "Classroom Technology"). Place flip chart paper, sticky notes, and pens at each station. This makes it easy for groups to jot down ideas (Turku University of Applied Sciences, n.d.). This can also be carried out without a host as long as the process is well explained on beforehand.

2 Explain the process

Tell participants that they will work in small groups at the stations and then move to new stations in rounds. Assign one person as the station host at each station – this host remains at the station and welcomes newcomers (Turku University of Applied Sciences, n.d.). The host's role is to introduce the station's topic to each incoming group briefly.

3 Discuss at the stations

Participants sit (about 4–6 per station) and discuss the station's question for a set time (often 10–15 minutes). As they talk, they jot down key ideas or conclusions on paper or sticky notes (Turku University of Applied Sciences, n.d.). The discussion is guided but informal: everyone is encouraged to speak, listen, and note down thoughts.

4 Rotate and build on ideas

When the time is up, group members move to the following station. The new group reads the previous notes and continues the discussion, adding fresh ideas and elaborating on earlier points (Pađen et al., 2023; Turku University of Applied Sciences, n.d.). This cross-pollination means each round builds on the last group's work.

5 Repeat as needed

Multiple rotations ensure that every participant visits different stations. Different people discuss each station's topic, and each person contributes to various issues. This broad exchange of perspectives helps the whole group learn together.

6 Harvest collective insights

After the final round, all groups are invited to present the outcome of their discussion from their last station. The station hosts or participants report the main ideas from their stations. Often this is done by having each station present a quick summary of its notes. This collective "harvest" highlights the session's key findings and ideas (Turku University of Applied Sciences, n.d.).

Each step is simple, but together they turn a workshop into an active, collaborative experience. For example, in a teacher-training session on project design, the facilitator might set up stations labelled "Goals", "Challenges", and "Solutions." Small teams would rotate through these stations, each time adding to the notes left by the previous group. Ultimately, all participants co-created a rich set of ideas for each topic.

2. 1. How to design an LC (step by step)

Designing an LC requires careful preparation to ensure that the activity runs smoothly and achieves its learning objectives. The process is simple but benefits from thoughtful planning, especially in how the space, timing, and participants are organised. Below is a step-by-step guide to help you set up and facilitate your own LC.

Step 1 – Define the Purpose and Learning Goals

Start by identifying what you want participants to achieve. Is the aim to generate ideas, share experiences, reflect on a topic, or solve a problem?

A clear purpose will guide the number of stations, the discussion questions, and the time needed for the activity.

- **Example:** “To share good practices in battery education” or “To explore challenges in digital teaching.”

Step 2 – Choose the Key Topics or Questions

Select 3 to 5 main topics or guiding questions that connect with your overall goal. Each station will host one of these themes.

Questions should be:

- Open-ended (to invite discussion rather than yes/no answers)
- Focused enough to stay on topic
- Written clearly and visibly on each station
 - **Example questions:**
 - “What skills are most important for future teachers?”
 - “How can we make online training more engaging?”

2. 1. How to design an LC (step by step)

Step 3 – Prepare the Space

Recreate the informal and welcoming feel of a cafe. Arrange small, round stations (or clusters of chairs) that can each seat 4–6 participants comfortably.

Provide:

- Large sheets of paper or tablecloth paper for note-taking
- Coloured markers or pens
- Sticky notes
- A visible sign or card with the station's topic or question
- (Optional) Light decorations or music to create a relaxed atmosphere

When working online, create virtual breakout rooms, each with a clear title and a designated facilitator or host.

Step 4 – Assign Station Hosts (Optional)

Each station may have a host who remains at that station throughout the session. The host's role is to:

- Welcome each new group of participants
- Summarise the ideas shared by previous groups
- Encourage everyone to contribute
- Record key insights on the station paper or flip chart

Hosts can be facilitators, trainers, or participants familiar with the topic.

2. 1. How to design an LC (step by step)

Step 5 – Organise the Participants

Divide participants into small, balanced groups.

If possible:

- Mix people from different backgrounds, roles, or countries to encourage diverse perspectives.
- Aim for 4–6 participants per station – small enough for everyone to speak, large enough for varied input.
- Ensure there are enough stations for each topic, and that all participants can rotate through them.

Rotation system:

- After each discussion round (10–15 minutes), participants move to the following station. The host remains in place, ready to welcome the new group and share the previous discussion's highlights.

Step 6 – Facilitate the Rounds

Explain the rules clearly before starting:

- Each group has a set time (usually 10–15 minutes) per station.
- Conversations should be open, respectful, and creative.
- Everyone is encouraged to contribute and build on others' ideas.

Signal when it is time to rotate, and remind participants to bring their notes or reflections with them if needed.

2. 1. How to design an LC (step by step)

Step 7 – Harvest and Share Results

After the final round, bring everyone together for a collective debrief.

You can:

- Ask each station host to present the main ideas discussed.
- Group similar ideas into themes using sticky notes or digital boards.
- Summarise key insights visually (e.g., on a whiteboard or poster).

Encourage participants to reflect on what they learned and how they can apply the outcomes in their work.

Step 8 – Document and Follow Up

After the session, collect all notes, photos, or flip charts and compile a summary document. This record can help identify next steps, inform project reports, or inspire future activities.

If possible, share the results with participants to maintain engagement and continuity.

Facilitator Tips

- Depending on how large the group is, you may need to have more stations so as not to build too large groups.
- Keep timing flexible: adjust rounds depending on the group's energy and number of topics. To facilitate this process, assign a person to signal when it is time to rotate.
- Encourage movement and conversation — the cafe works best when it feels dynamic and informal.
- Use visual aids or colour coding to make notes easy to read.
- End on a positive note by acknowledging the group's contribution and enthusiasm.

2. 1. Summary

Step	Goal	Main Actions	Time (approx.)	Key Materials	Facilitator Tip
1. Define purpose & goals	Clarify what the LC should achieve	Set objectives and outcomes	10–30 min (prep)	Notes, brief	Keep focus on one clear purpose
2. Choose topics/questions	Frame meaningful discussions	Create 3–5 open-ended questions	15–30 min (prep)	Paper, markers	Questions should spark reflection
3. Prepare the space	Set up a comfortable cafe-like setting	Arrange stations, materials, and signs	30–60 min (prep)	Paper, sticky notes	Round stations improve engagement
4. Assign station hosts (optional)	Ensure discussion continuity	Choose and brief station hosts	10–20 min (prep)	Host instructions	Hosts summarise and welcome groups
5. Organise participants	Balance group composition	Divide into small, mixed groups	5–10 min (onsite)	List of group participants on screen; Name tags/cards	Aim for diversity and equal voices
6. Facilitate the rounds	Guide time and movement	Run 2–3 discussion rounds	10–15 min each	Timer, bell	Keep energy up and transitions smooth
7. Harvest & share results	Collect and consolidate insights	Summarise and discuss outcomes	20–30 min	Flipcharts, sticky notes	Focus on key messages and patterns
8. Document & follow up	Ensure results are shared and useful	Compile notes and share a summary	30–60 min (post)	Photos, report template	Share insights promptly to sustain impact

2. 2. When to use and not to use this method

While the LC is a flexible and engaging approach, it is not suitable for every training or learning situation. Understanding when it works best — and when alternative methods may be more effective — helps ensure that the activity achieves its intended goals.

When to Use an LC ✓

An LC is particularly useful when the aim is to stimulate dialogue, reflection, and collective thinking.

It is best applied in situations where the exchange of perspectives is valuable and where there is no single “right” answer.

Use this method when you want to:

Encourage active participation and give everyone a voice in the conversation.

Explore complex or open-ended topics, such as challenges, lessons learned, or shared experiences.

Foster collaboration and build a sense of community within a group or partnership.

Generate ideas or solutions collectively, such as for project planning, evaluation, or innovation sessions.



Reflect on learning experiences after a course, meeting, or training event.

Engage diverse participants, such as teachers, students, and project partners, in shared dialogue.

In short, the LC is most effective when its goal is to foster connections, share knowledge, and co-create understanding, rather than merely transferring information.

2. 2. When to use and not to use this method

When to Use an LC

Although adaptable, the LC may not be the most effective format in every context. It should be avoided when the purpose requires highly structured content delivery or when conditions limit the quality of interaction.

Avoid using the method when:

- The group of participants is small;
- The goal is technical or skills-based training that depends on demonstrations or guided practice.
- The topic requires confidentiality or involves sensitive information that cannot be shared openly.
- Time is minimal, and participants need clear, concise information rather than exploratory discussion.
- The group is too large and there are not enough facilitators or hosts to manage several stations effectively.
- Participants are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with open dialogue and need more guidance or structure.
- The environment does not allow for rotation or small-group setup (e.g., limited space or online restrictions without proper digital adaptation).

In these cases, more direct facilitation methods — such as workshops, demonstrations, or guided discussions — may be more appropriate.

Key Takeaway

The LC thrives in environments that value collaboration, creativity, and collective reflection. When used thoughtfully, it transforms group dialogue into shared learning. However, knowing its limitations ensures that it remains an effective and purposeful tool, chosen for the right moments and objectives.

PRACTICAL CASES

3. Practical examples –
models used during
the project

3. Practical examples – models used during the project

- Idea
- Action plan (steps)
- Results
- What went well
- What can be improved

Portugal's Learning Cafe

Idea

The Learning Cafe aimed to foster active participation and peer learning among participants by creating an engaging environment that encouraged reflection on various problem-solving approaches. The primary objective was to stimulate creative thinking through group discussions, while encouraging ownership of ideas that could be implemented in future real-world projects.



Action Plan (Steps)

1. Preparation Phase

- Four discussion tables (Stations A–D) were set up, each representing one possible answer or approach.
- Each station included a visible QR code linking to a digital form for participant input.
- **Roles were defined:** one moderator to lead the main session, and four reporters to facilitate discussions at each table.

2. Round Process

- The moderator presented the question out loud for everyone (all participants were gathered in the middle of the room).
- Participants then moved to the table that best represented their chosen answer (A, B, C, or Other).
- At each station, the reporter guided a short discussion using key prompts:
 - Why did you choose this option?
 - How can this be implemented?
 - Can you contribute personally to this action?
- Participants registered their feedback via the QR code form.

Portugal's Learning Cafe

Action plan (Steps)

3. Rotation and Consolidation

- After each round, participants returned to the centre for a short debrief before starting a new question cycle.
- The process was repeated for four rounds, ensuring that everyone contributed to multiple perspectives.
- Ultimately, the moderator and reporters summarized the key insights gathered from all stations.

Results

- Over 90% of participants actively engaged in the discussions.
- The approach generated tangible action points that were later incorporated into project planning.
- The QR form data provided clear documentation for follow-up actions.
- Feedback highlighted a strong sense of collaboration and shared learning among attendees.

What went well

- The spatial layout (central start + four stations) facilitated smooth movement and dynamic exchanges.
- Having dedicated reporters at each table ensured focused, well-moderated discussions.
- The QR code registration system simplified data collection and avoided paper clutter.
- Participants appreciated the fast pace and structure of multiple short rounds.

Portugal's Learning Cafe

What can be improved

- The sound level occasionally made it difficult for some tables to hear clearly—consider using a larger space or noise dividers.
- Some questions could be phrased more specifically to prompt deeper insights.
- Time management between rounds could be fine-tuned to ensure all groups finish simultaneously.
- A brief reflection period at the end of each round may help participants consolidate what they have learned before moving on.

Some suggestions

- **Visual Feedback Board:** Something we did that allowed all participants to see the results for each round was to create an online form that then allowed everyone to see each input made for that round, which in turn also created new points of discussion.
- **Diverse Question Formats:** Mix question types (e.g., scenario-based, visual prompts, rapid-choice) to keep energy levels high.
- **Role Rotation:** You can allow reporters or participants to swap roles in later rounds to encourage ownership and fresh dynamics.
- **Summary Poster:** Make sure to have a summary sheet after the session, capturing each station's main conclusions.
- **Follow-up Session:** Hold a short virtual or in-person meeting two weeks later to review which ideas were implemented and measure impact.

4. Conclusions

The Learning Cafe is more than a training method — it is a dynamic way of creating spaces where people think together, share experiences, and co-construct knowledge. Within the context of the CaBatt project, this approach has proven particularly valuable for promoting dialogue, collaboration, and reflection among educators and professionals working towards innovative and sustainable education in battery technologies and beyond.

This guide aims to offer both an introduction and a practical guide to help trainers, facilitators, and educators design and implement their own LC sessions. From understanding its core principles to preparing the physical (or virtual) space and guiding participants through structured yet open conversations, each step contributes to an engaging, inclusive, and purposeful experience.

When used thoughtfully, the LC enables participants to explore complex topics in a relaxed and creative environment where every contribution is valued and matters. It supports active participation, helps identify collective insights, and builds a sense of shared ownership over learning outcomes.

As with any participatory approach, success depends on clear preparation, good facilitation, and flexibility. Adapting the steps and questions to your specific context — the number of participants, the goals of the session, or the available time — ensures that each LC becomes a unique and meaningful learning experience.

Finally, we encourage trainers to view this methodology as an invitation: to experiment, adapt, and share their results with others. In doing so, they contribute to a growing culture of collaborative learning that continues to evolve and strengthen educational practice — just as the CaBatt project has demonstrated through its own work.

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Interesting pages

The World Cafe - Hosting Tool kit - <https://theworldcafe.com/tools-store/hosting-tool-kit/>

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