

Making Conferences Human Places of Learning

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Abstract

Open Space Technology is a cumbersome name for a participative conference model that enables dynamic inclusive engagement and challenges traditional, highly structured hierarchical conference formats. Based on self-organising systems, (Wenger, 1998) Open Space Technology conferences have an open process, start with no agenda and empower the most equitable outcome determined by those attending. This article describes the author's participation in an Open Space Technology conference, discusses the principles underpinning Open Space Technology methodology and considers its application in adult learning engagement settings.

The Traditional Conference and Open Space Technology

A conference is a structured, hierarchical formal meeting of people with a shared interest. A conference is organised primarily as a plenary event with some opportunity for questions and breakout groups. People generally go to conferences to hear one or more speakers but more often to meet others, that is to network. Generally, most people who attend conferences, except for the presenters, are passive receivers of information and conference proceedings do not issue for a protracted period. Often when asked about a conference attended, people recall a person or persons they met during the coffee breaks as a highlight from the event, or information collected in a side discussion. Open Space Technology suggests that such chance meetings should be the focus of the conference process.

Harrison Owen popularised Open Space Technology as a method in the 1980s in response to the stifling nature of traditional conferences. However, Owen did

not copyright or trademark the intellectual property of Open Space Technology and encourages its free use. The very nature of the process challenges the hegemony of control, expertness and hierarchy of traditionally organised seminars and conferences. Open Space Technology is open, participative, and egalitarian. Young people adapt to Open Space Technology as a method without question, while people familiar with control and hierarchy initially feel uncomfortable with its liberating possibility.

Open Space Technology works best where, according to Corrigan (2004), there is:

- A real issue or question of concern
- A diversity of players
- A complexity of elements
- Presence of passion (including conflict)
- A need for a quick decision.

Each person attending an Open Space Technology conference brings with them the responsibility to be fully present, openly participative, and totally inclusive. No delegate should leave an Open Space Technology event saying “I didn't get an opportunity to say something”, or, “I didn't know what they were talking about”, etc. etc. This is because within Open Space Technology, participants have control over their own actions and the opportunity to maximise their involvement, contribution, and learning at all stages during the event.

My First Experience of Open Space Technology

Some time ago, I received an invitation to a one-day conference on the theme “Exclusion in Local Development: the Challenges” to be held in Athlone, County Westmeath. The fee was modest, the topic interesting, and I was free. There was no programme in the invitation, just a paragraph about the topic to be addressed, a start and finish time, that lunch was included, and that it would be a participative event. Even though I noted the lack of a programme, I had trust in the agency running the event and I was keen to learn more about exclusion, so I went. That event introduced me to one of the most challenging group work methods I have experienced – Open Space Technology.

When I arrived at the venue, about twenty minutes after due start time, I had expected to be able to slip in to the back of the conference while somebody was speaking. Instead, I entered a big room where about eighty people were seated in a semi-circle. People made room for me. I had missed the introduction so I was picking it up as it went along. There was no one making a keynote address, there were no seated rows, no top table. This was not as I expected.

The conference facilitator spent the first thirty minutes of that day inviting people who attended to come forward, share with others what aspect of the conference theme they wanted to discuss, write the topic briefly on an A3 sheet, and append it on the conference wall. After thirty minutes, thirty two discussion topics were put forward addressing a range of current concerns relating to “Exclusion in Local Development”. Some people suggested more than one topic, some suggested none, but we were all intent on the emerging process of evolving an idea into a discussion topic. Each person who proposed a discussion topic was invited by the facilitator to put their name on the A3 sheet as an indication of their commitment to have this topic discussed, to lead the discussion as necessary, and to prepare a report on the discussion for the conference proceedings on that day. When all the topics were listed, the facilitator announced that now the conference had an agenda drawn from the people who were committed enough to attend and share the reason they were there on the conference community wall. So, the first step in Open Space Technology is to encourage people to populate the conference community wall with the topics they want to talk about during the time available. In the list, I saw topics that interested me.

Next, the facilitator invited all who had suggested topics to meet at the community wall to share, combine, and amend their topics as necessary in order to form a programme of workshops for the day. This step is called the ‘market place’ and provided an opportunity for topic proposers to meet and barter with others who proposed similar discussion topics. This might sound chaotic but in reality, it works because people want their issue discussed and will naturally barter to get their issue on the conference programme. Following this step, there were fourteen discussion topics on the wall. These were to become conference workshops.

The primary role of the facilitator in Open Space Technology is to protect the assigned time and space for the agreed workshops to take place. Each of the fourteen workshop topics was assigned a space and a time throughout the day. Now, a conference programme designed by those attending had emerged.

Meanwhile, the rest of us networked informally over tea and coffee that is always on-tap in the community cafe at Open Space Technology events. The facilitator invited us back to the conference community wall to review the list of workshops and to sign up for the workshops we wished to attend. If people wanted to attend a number of workshops that were on at the same time, they were encouraged to do so and to move from one workshop to another as they wished. Such delegates are called 'bumblebees' because they move from discussion to discussion, cross-fertilising ideas and sharing information. We all know that at every conference there are those who do not go to any formal sessions. They sit in the cafe or stand in the hallways chatting with others. Such delegates at Open Space Technology events are called 'butterflies'. They flit around informally and make valuable contributions from the margins. I attended a number of workshops on that day led by people who were passionate about their topic. I enjoyed the freedom of being able to move from one discussion to another as my interest was tempted. The whole event was dynamic and interactive.

While the workshops were going on, a person, selected by the workshop participants in each workshop, recorded the discussion and immediately wrote it into a pro-forma conference report in a dedicated media room (three networked laptops and a printer). At this event the report was finalised, printed and distributed to delegates before they left. In more recent times, the conference report is emailed to delegates on the same day. In this way, the voice of the delegate is kept intact from their expression to publication.

That conference was eighteen years ago. Since then I have trained in Open Space Technology methodology and used it widely. I have used Open Space Technology in rural and urban settings, with small and large gatherings of people, in a local community centre and in Africa. I have used it in schools with young people and at university level with academic staff. It has always worked and always will, as long as there is openness to the outcome of people's unfettered interaction.

Principles of Open Space Technology

Owen (2008) notes that the organisation of village meetings in Southern Africa inspired Open Space Technology. In African villages, family huts are organised in circles around a central village fire. When people need to discuss a concern, they come together around the fire. During long village discussions, there is an ebb and flow of activity as people come and go to their family chores and farm work. Similarly, Open Space Technology encourages active participation

in workshops particularly through the 'law of two feet'. This law invites people to move from workshop conversation to workshop conversation, or from workshop conversation to coffee shop, etc., as they please. The 'law of two feet' gives people permission to be free in whatever space they are in, and makes Open Space Technology events dynamic and never boring.

There are four principles that govern the Open Space Technology workshop conversations. These are:

1. Whoever comes are the right people
2. Whenever it starts is the right time
3. When it's over, it's over
4. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened at that time.

These four principles give the workshop freedom to proceed with whoever shows up, to start when they are ready, to finish when they are done, and to be content with the outcomes. It means that the workshop is not controlled by organisers who were not at the workshop, or that the workshop has to continue even if there is no energy in that space at that time. If no one turns up for the workshop, the convenor can go to another workshop, or, they can write up their views on the discussion topic as a workshop report and have it inserted into the proceedings. In that way, nobody is excluded; the minority view is heard equally.

When the workshops are finished, the delegates reconvene in plenary to wrap up the event and receive the conference proceedings. The process of inputting workshop reports immediately and producing the proceedings in the view of all attending is a powerful and energising community effort. Because of the energy, participation, and the anticipation, I have yet to see people leave early from an Open Space Technology conference. The strengths of Open Space Technology are its simplicity, its flexibility, and its productivity. It requires one highly skilled facilitator and a commitment to seek a positive outcome in equality and inclusiveness. It does not require sophisticated facilities or a high level of administration.

Open Space Technology is a self-organising system that starts with no agenda, is an open process, and empowers the most equitable outcome. I have seen young people convene their own workshops, people with literacy difficulties dictate a

workshop report to a volunteer scribe, and people who never attended a conference step forward and lead a workshop, because they wanted to get that topic discussed. I have seen proceedings produced on the day of the conference and discussed at a community council, parish, or development group meeting the next evening. In Virginia, Co Cavan, one hundred and ten local rural people had a one-day conference on rural issues that affected them, in Clare a community council had a national conference on services for older people in the community, in Dublin twenty four young people used Open Space Technology over a double class period to discuss justice for shantytown residents in South Africa, and in Nigeria religious missionaries discussed good practice in handing over their mission to local religious. Open Space Technology was and is used by scientists to discuss scientific theory, by technicians seeking technical solutions, by managers looking for better systems, and by business owners seeking customer feedback. In summary, Open Space Technology has shattered and reconstructed my illusions about conferences.

The only time Open Space Technology does not lead to a positive outcome is when the attendees allow themselves to be disempowered by an external force; that is, when the outcome is already determined.

The Open Space Technology Concept in Adult Learning

Best practice in adult learning mirrors the practice of Open Space Technology. Peer-to-peer problem focused collaboration, seeking positive outcomes, is central to effective community education. When people meet in a spirit of openness and diversity, the potential for learning is significantly enhanced. Open Space Technology provides a structure for the community of learners to identify their learning need and a process by which learners can be empowered to address that need. The democratic nature of Open Space Technology ensures that imposed learning outcomes do not divert the learning journey to predetermined ends. Open Space Technology is an ideal model in informal learning settings where the outcome is not predetermined and can give people the confidence to progress into more formalised learning. In more formalised settings, the Open Space Technology method can be adapted for specialisation but will always retain a holistic perspective. Where it has been adapted to specialised situations, it has accelerated deep learning and advanced productive learning. Open Space Technology welcomes innovation and variation. Many adaptations have been made across cultures, specialisms, and locations. As a method, Open Space Technology is constantly evolving and offers possibilities within community, adult, and further education settings. While Open Space Technology

invites a number of variations, such as incorporating technical experts, facilitating participants with disabilities and accommodating online interactions, it provides a deceptively simple way for people to interact and learn from each other.

Conclusion

In this article I have described the Open Space Technology methodology to demonstrate how it can optimise participation, inclusion, and learning within a constructivist context. Open Space Technology can be adopted for wider application in community, non-formal, and formal learning settings and offers a standard template for conferences and seminars. In my view, Open Space Technology makes conferences human.

References & Resources for Open Space Technology

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- http://skat.ihmc.us/rid=1227187866819_1140452997_15052/communities%20of%20practice_wenger.doc
- Visit <http://www.openspaceworld.org>. This is a global community resource, managed by a volunteer webmaster, supported over the last ten years or so by a number of helpers and contributors, and linked to a number of other Open Space community gathering points and resource sites. “Membership,” online and around the world, is open, informal, self-selected — and active.

Visit http://www.openspaceworld.com/users_guide.htm or http://chriscorrigan.com/parkinglot/?page_id=1515 or <http://transitionculture.org/2008/03/21/12-tools-for-transition-no10-how-to-run-an-open-space-event/>. Tool #10: Details on the steps in planning an Open Space event.