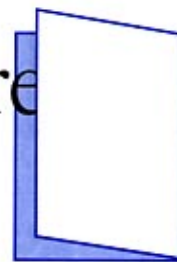


# Training Methodologies

## Open Space is Everywhere

### Open Space Technology - A New Way to Hold Large International Meetings of Youth Organisations



*In youth meetings "...the real excitement often comes in the coffee breaks and informal moments". Or in an Open Space, a method where a large part of the responsibility for the learning process is handed over to the group and which engages participants' passion and creativity.*

*"It is not about having better meetings, although that certainly takes place. It is about experiencing the mystery and power of **self-organization** to the end that we might learn to be at home in this rather strange, possibly new, universe."*

**Harrison Owen**

by Maria Frerichs

Have you ever been to meetings, organised in a traditional manner? Speeches, lots of overhead slides, papers, panels chaired by a few "experts" on the stage, sitting for hours, boredom and an apathetic audience. The real excitement often comes in the coffee breaks and informal moments.

I first met Open Space in a meeting on community building 1998. I was amazed and fascinated by the energy and simplicity of how a large group of about 60 people found ways to really tackle topics without any inputs from outside.

I learned more about the dynamics of large groups in a training course in Berlin 1998 with 100 people with Harrison Owen, the "originator" of Open Space Technology. I then tried it in several international conferences and training courses with youth workers. And it went brilliantly, so I want to tell you about it.

#### What is Open Space?

Open Space Technology is a process that was "discovered" by Harrison Owen in 1985. The main point is that there is no pre-defined agenda, there are no speeches, no experts. But how does the agenda come about?

The first part of the meeting is a time for the group to identify each person's passions regarding the topic. Everyone sits in a big circle. There are no

speakers or experts or trainers, just a facilitator who explains the 4 Principles and the Law of Mobility (I'll explain these later in the article).

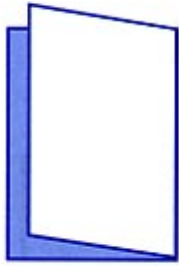
Before my first Open Space I had never sat in such a large circle and was quite anxious to see what would happen. I was very nervous in those few seconds after the facilitator invited people to stand in front of the group and announce their theme. What if no one came forward? What if all they wanted to do was discuss the process without ever getting to the topic of the meeting?

At this moment, the facilitator is, quite possibly, the only one in the room who has absolutely no doubt that this group of 20, 200 or 2000 is going to fill that large empty wall with a detailed agenda that will keep everyone working, playing, and learning for the duration of the conference. The energy is so high in that moment that even the planners of the event are often a little nervous, and eager for the agenda to appear.

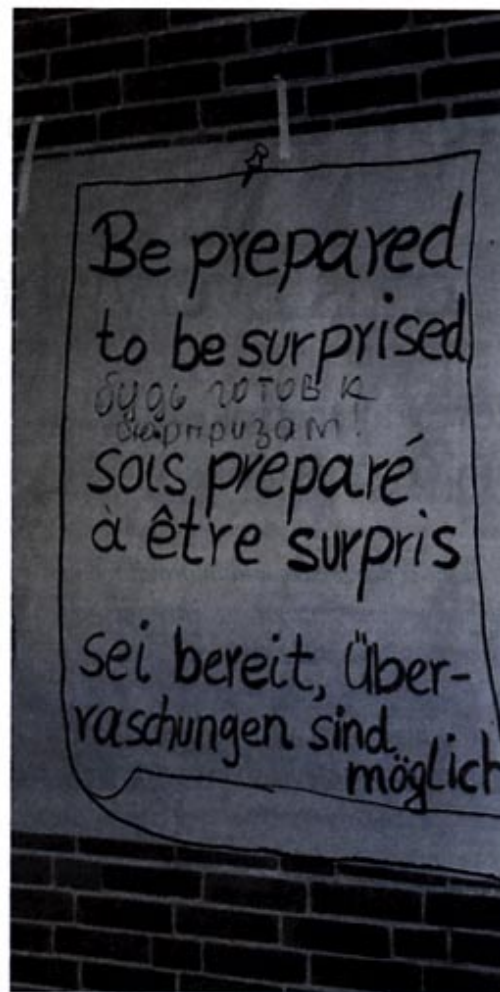
But first, a few instructions must be given, a few simple principles introduced, one basic law explained. All of this is also presented on the handful of posters that are scattered around the room.

After this brief introduction anyone who wants to has the opportunity to go into the centre of the circle ►►





**Picture**  
Open Space Technology,  
in action



and propose "sessions" related to the main topic. Participants nominate a theme that is important to them or one they would like to work on with a group of volunteers. Within 30 minutes, most groups have more than enough topics posted to "fill" the time allotted for the event. Once all the themes have been written up on a wall and the times and locations have been decided, everyone goes to whichever group they want to join in. This is the "marketplace". Once this is over, the workshops start. These last between 1 and 2 hours and there are always several running concurrently. So everyone can choose which to join in with. Some work in groups of 5, some 12, some 30. From that point forward, the group has become self-organised and usually "runs" itself for the rest of the event. The only meetings of the whole group of participants are each morning and evening at the main circle.

There are recommendations concerning the meeting's length. One day meetings are good for raising issues and opportunities and can set the groundwork for good communication. A two or three day meeting will go deeper into the issues and opportunities as well as identifying priorities, and developing these into steps for action. In three days, all of the most important ideas, data, recommendations, conclusions, and plans for further action can be elaborated.

At the end of the whole meeting every participant receives a report. Each initiator of a workshop has been invited - sometimes begged or asked - to insure that a record of the group discussion be prepared. The reporter may not be the initiator of the group, but someone else. Therefore people need access to a sufficient number of computers. At the end a comprehensive report is printed and given to the participants when they leave.

The theme or topic of an Open Space needs to be open, broad, and demanding a creative, collective response. An Open Space is best used for envisioning the future and identifying the issues and opportunities to realise a desired future. Appropriate themes or questions are:

*"What do we stand for?"*

*"How should we do better in youth exchanges?"*

*"How can we feel more involved and alive in international projects?"*

### **Passion and responsibility**

When the heart is engaged, passion is close. Passion and responsibility are the engines that fuel Open Space. They are best described in the 4 principles and the one Law:

#### **The Four Principles of Open Space**

- ▷ 1) Whoever comes is the right people
- ▷ 2) Whatever happens is the only thing that could have
- ▷ 3) Whenever it starts is the right time
- ▷ 4) When it is over, it is over

1) The first principle reminds people in the small groups that getting something done is not a matter of having 50 people in the group. The fundamental point is gathering people who care to do something.

2) Whatever happens is the only thing that could have, keeps people focused on the here and now, and eliminates all of the could-have-beens, should-have-beens or might-have-beens. What is - is the only thing there is at the moment.

3) Whenever it starts is the right time reminds people of the fact that inspiration and creativity rarely pay attention to the clock. They happen (or not) when they happen.

4) Lastly, when it's over it's over, alerts people not to waste time. Do what you have to do, and when it's

**... Whatever happens is the only thing that could have, keeps people focused on the here and now ...**

done, do not hang around just because the time is not yet over. Move on to something more useful.

### The Law of Mobility

If at any time you are in a place where you feel you are neither contributing nor learning you alone have the responsibility to remove yourself from that place and find a place where you CAN contribute and learn.

This law simply encourages you to visit another group, or even have a walk outside into the sunshine. No matter what, don't sit there feeling dull or miserable. One of the most profound impacts of the law is to make it clear that responsibility for the quality of a participant's learning resides with the participant.

### Experiences with Open Space Technology in youth work

Working as a trainer in the international education centre Jagdschloss Glienicke, Internationale Begegnungsstätte für Jugendliche und Erwachsene, I have organised youth exchanges and courses for more than 15 years. One of my professional highlights is the annual meeting between youth workers from East and West Europe. In 1999 we celebrated the 10th anniversary of this meeting. We wanted to do something new and exciting and dedicated two days (duration of the event 5 days) to Open Space Technology.

Our leading topic was "Towards exciting dimensions and new challenges in international youth projects", a theme wide enough to give space for individual contributions and future-orientated enough to open minds and hearts to creativity.

Here are some workshops that participants proposed:

- ▷ exchange tools on language animation
- ▷ play games and do exercises for the beginning and the closing of training courses
- ▷ how to cope with fear and anxiety towards foreigners
- ▷ teach each other typical and popular songs of our respective countries
- ▷ international teamwork, exchange of experiences, barriers, challenges
- ▷ what do westerners think about post-communist countries?
- ▷ codes, rules, signals and symbols of love in youth exchanges
- ▷ youth work 1989 - youth work 1999: what has changed, how do we act?

In a final evaluation we asked people to describe their experience in Open Space. Here are some quotations:

- ▷ it was a process in learning to fly
- ▷ opening spaces to my feelings, to others, to what is important to me
- ▷ I got in contact with my competencies and shared them with others
- ▷ I feel full of energy
- ▷ Open space means freedom
- ▷ Open space is something very natural, that we have practised for years without having had a name for it.

The lesson from Open Space is a simple one.

In an Open Space meeting, you will discover how to flow with the energy of the moment, and with the team spirit of the participants.

... you will discover how to flow with the energy of the moment ...



Picture  
Open Space Technology,  
in action



The only way for an Open Space to fail is to attempt to control it. In Open Space the traditional role of the facilitator has changed. 95% of what facilitators normally do - planning, monitoring, training - doesn't need to be done. It may, therefore, turn out that the one thing we always wanted (control) is not only unavailable, but unnecessary.

The main tasks of an Open Space facilitator are: Identify the task and main theme, create the context, establish the flow, which means handling time and space in a way that is supportive to the task. Order appears in Open Space when the conditions for self-organisation are met. To some people Open Space might look chaotic and unpredictable. But chaos also has a positive side. Chaos may even be the essential precondition for all that is truly new. No chaos, nothing new. In addition to modern chaos theory, I believe that life without chaos is no life at all.

In many meetings I attended the greatest pleasure and profit were not the papers and panel discussions, workshops and speakers. It was the coffee breaks that provided the significant moments for deep learning.

Why not create a big Open Space. A super coffee break in your organisation or in your next meeting?

If you want to know more: <http://www.tmn.com/openspace>

May there be a lot of open space experiences in your future.

I will be very pleased to get your remarks, questions, etc. You can contact me at:

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## The adventures of Spiffy

