Open Space Technology: An effective tool for consultation

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Introduction

This paper provides an introduction to Open Space Technology (OST) and its key principles, and encourages the consideration of OST as a potential method for consulting with students and staff on important issues or questions where there is diversity and conflict and where there appears to be no clear solution.

The paper also provides an example of OST in use, briefly outlining how the method was used for initial exploratory data collection as part of a 4 stage PhD research project examining the identities of practitioners (teachers, trainers, tutors, instructors, facilitators etc.) within the Irish Further Education and Training (FET) sector, and the impact of recent (post 2013) sectoral changes on these identities.

Introduction to Open Space Technology

Harrison Owen developed Open Space Technology (OST) in the 1980s in the hope of creating spaces that inspired the synergy and excitement of a good coffee break (Owen, 2008). Since then OST has been used successfully in 124 countries, with millions of people, within multiple contexts including commerce, education (including adult education), government and community settings (Kenny, 2014; McDonald et. al., 2009; Owen, 2008). OST sessions can last for up to 5 days or for as long as a typical second level school hour (50 minutes). The number of participants can and does vary, from as few as 5, up to over 2000 (Herman, 2006; Owen, 2008; McDonald et al., 2009).

OST as a method brings people together through dialogue and activity, and provides structures to gather the thoughts, feelings, experiences, ideas and suggestions of interested, self-selected participants in relation to a key theme. It creates a space where all participants are viewed as equal, which requires individuals to 'shed their power roles' (McDonald et al., 2009:71). The

agenda is designed by those present and not pre-determined (McDonald et. al., 2009; Owen, 2008).

OST draws on 'theories of complexity, self-organisation and open systems' (McDonald et al., 2009:70). Owen (2008) asserts that OST is most effective in situations where the theme is complex, with no clear solution or way forward, and with groups of people with diverse backgrounds.

The Five Conditions of Use

When considering whether OST is an appropriate method to use with a group, Owen (2008) suggests that it is best to evaluate whether the five 'Conditions of Use' (Owen, 2008:19) are present:

1. Presence of a real issue to be addressed - OST is not simply about engaging in an interesting process;
2. Presence of an issue of great complexity;
3. Diversity in relation to the people and views present;
4. Real passion for the issue among the people present;
5. Need for the issue to be dealt with urgently, with 'a decision time of yesterday' (Owen, 2008:20).

Key ingredients – Passion, Responsibility and Voluntary Participation

Owen (2008) places strong emphasis on certain essential ingredients for OST to work. These include 'passion' for the issues being addressed; the taking of 'responsibility' by the participants to contribute fully and in the best way for them; and 'voluntary' self-selection on behalf of the participants (Owen, 2008:29). According to Owen (2008:29-30), 'being a volunteer is the prime prerequisite for the full expression of passion and responsibility'.

The four principles and one law of OST

OST processes are built on four principles and one law, which are visually displayed in sign form around the spaces where the OST event will take place, setting the scene for how the event is run (Owen, 2008).

The **four principles** are the following:

1. 'Whoever comes is the right people' (Owen, 2008:115).

    This principle implies that it is not important how many people come (either to the OST session, or to individual topic groups within the overall session), or what their outside roles are, but that they are the right people, because they are the ones who cared enough about the issue or topic to come.

2. 'Whatever happens is the only thing that could have' (Owen, 2008:115).

    This principle implies that organisers and facilitators should accept and cherish what happens, and not spend time and energy wishing to control what cannot be controlled, and focusing on 'should-have beens, could-have-beens, or might-have beens' (Owen, 2008:118).

3. 'Whenever it starts is the right time' (Owen, 2008:115).

    This principle implies that organisers and facilitators in particular should not get hung-up on starting times. For OST to work, the process and all that takes place within it cannot be pre-ordained or controlled. For meaningful, useful, productive engagement, 'creativity and spirit' need to be present and 'neither pays much attention to the clock' (Owen, 2008:119). The session will, and must be allowed to, start and finish when the group is moved to action or ready to break away from the discussions/action. This leads onto the last principle.

4. 'When it's over, it's over' (Owen, 2008:115).

    This principle implies if the objectives have been completed before the expected finish time, the session needs to end, or move on, at that point. This principle also allows for 'When it's not over, it's not over', meaning that a group can decide not to move on or finish should they wish to stay in a specific discussion etc. (Owen, 2008:120). This may need to be managed (e.g. moved to a different location) but should be encouraged and facilitated (Owen, 2008:115-120).

By applying these principles, traditional aspects of organised consultation such as 'control, expertness and hierarchy' (Kenny, 2014:87) are replaced by an acceptance of those present and an acceptance of whatever takes place within the framework of an OST event.

The **one law** of OST is 'The Law of Two Feet/Mobility' (Owen, 2008:120). This law encourages participants to move if they feel they are in a situation where they are no longer learning, and/or have nothing left to contribute. In these situations it is time to join a different

discussion where they can be productive (Owen, 2008:120-121). It gives permission to participants to move in and out of the big group, the smaller groups and indeed the event itself, depending on what feels right for them. The Law of Two Feet/Mobility places responsibility on individual participants to fully participate in the best way for them (Owen, 2008).

Much of the work of the OST facilitator is completed during the preparation stages of an event and the setting up of the event space. During the event itself, the facilitator's role is to explain to participants the OST tools and techniques, then step back and allow the tools and techniques to work (Owen, 2008).

Guaranteed outcomes

OST, when the guidelines are followed by organisers, facilitators and participants, comes with 4 guaranteed outcomes.

If participants choose to fully participate and take responsibility for putting forward any topics they choose to have discussed, then

1. All issues of concern to anyone present will have been raised.
2. All issues raised will have been discussed.

If time allows and computer support is present

3. A full report of the issues and discussions will be in the hands of all participants when leaving (though this can be provided later to participants if necessary).

If time allows and if it is part of the agenda to identity future actions, then

4. An action plan, prioritising actions within stated timeframes, will be produced.

(Owen, 2008:37-38)

Not all OST sessions will need or want to move to action planning. OST can be used for 'collegial gatherings where the discussion itself is the final objective' and has been used to fit into as short a time span as a fifty-five minute school hour (Owen, 2008:45).

For detail on the actual processes associated with the different stages of an OST event, please refer to Owen 2008. Details are provided at the end of the paper.

Overview of an experience of using OST principles for a consultation

What follows is based on the experience of applying Open Space Technology (OST) principles to the facilitation of a consultation process with research participants as part of a PhD research project examining the identities of Further Education and Training (FET) practitioners. The group, due to the nature of the consultation, did not engage in any processes involved in action planning.

The Further Education and Training (FET) sector only became an official sector within the Irish education system in 2013 and to date there is no published research on FET practitioner identity from within the Irish context and very little research into the recently established Irish FET sector. Previous studies on individual distinct parts which now form the overall sector are now dated or obsolete. So as a beginning point of my PhD research into FET practitioner identities, I first felt I needed to ask FET practitioners for their own ideas on their identities. In May 2015 I held a half day consultation event in Waterford City with a collection of 15 diverse FET practitioners to ask the complex question, 'Who are Further Education and Training practitioners?'

The group consisted of 7 men and 8 women, aged between 25 and 65, with diverse personal and educational backgrounds, who had experience of diverse FET contexts. The participants' experience included working: in accredited and non-accredited FET; for statutory, community and private providers; within formal and informal settings; with diverse learners who represented all age groups served by the sector (from age 16 upwards) and various educational and cultural backgrounds. The aim of the event was to capture the views and opinions of those present, in relation to the specific theme 'Who are Further Education and Training practitioners?' This aim was achieved through the application of OST principles and guidelines to the consultation event by myself as the facilitator. 3 rooms were used throughout the event, 1 main room and 2 break out rooms.

Creating the agenda

On the afternoon of the May 2015 scoping event, as participants arrived into the main room, they were given an envelope with a participant information sheet, a consent form to read and sign, and support contact details should they need support after the event. They sat in a circle of chairs in the middle of the room. When the majority were present and had signed their consent forms, the session started with a welcome and introduction from myself as the

facilitator and researcher, an explanation of how the session would run, and an introduction to Open Space Technology. I explained the 4 principles and 1 law, which were displayed around the room, and explained how the group would set the agenda by writing any topic they wished to discuss under the theme/question 'Who are Further Education and Training practitioners' on post-its. The group were supplied with post-its and markers which had been placed on the floor in the middle of the circle.

Once they had written on their post-its, the participants were invited to stand up, state their topic for discussion to the group and place their post-it on the community bulletin board (see figure 1), choosing the specific timeslot and location they wished to be used for their theme. Some participants chose to group their topics together under one discussion slot.

Figure 1: Community bulletin board template used for the May scoping event

	Time Slot A	**Time Slot B**	**Time Slot C**	**4.40 – 5**
A1 (recorder) Main area				**CLOSING CIRCLE**
B2 (recorder) On the first floor to left of stairs				
B1 (recorder) First floor, directly above main area				

Discussion groups

Once the agenda and timetable were established, the group broke into 3 smaller discussion groups, with individual participants free to move from group to group. I rang a bell when it was time for the discussion groups to change topics and at this point participants would consult the community bulletin board and decide which room/discussion to attend next. By the end of the afternoon, 8 discussion groups had taken place.

To end the session, the group were invited back into the main room where I thanked them, invited feedback on the process and facilitated a closing circle.

Capturing key points

A scribe (non-participant) was present in each of the three discussion rooms. The scribes' role was to record in an anonymous manner (no names) the key points of the discussions which took place. These records were typed up (with no amendments made to the content of the records) by myself and disseminated to the participants within a week of the event. These records were then analysed and informed the following stages of the research project.

Findings from the consultation

The appropriateness of the use of OST to consult with FET practitioners, instead of a more traditionally structured consultation with pre-established questions or areas of focus, was evident in the contrast between the issues that I had expected to be raised in the consultation process and the actual issues that were highlighted. I had expected that issues relating to personal histories, beliefs and values would form the larger part of discussions under the theme 'Who are Further Education and Training practitioners', whereas the FET practitioners present at the consultation event emphasised issues relating to professional identity, professionalisation and registration, conditions of employment and characteristics of their current working climates. The over-riding message from the reports was that there was no common understanding of what constituted a FET practitioner.

There was much data produced from the consultation. OST proved to be an effective tool for making the best use of time as the group established their own agenda and 8 documented discussions took place over a half day period. OST also proved to be an effective research technique, particularly as it strictly limited my influence on the event. The data resulting from the discussion groups genuinely came from the research participants and was not influenced by myself as the researcher or as the facilitator.

Potential uses of OST in education settings

OST principles can be used in a multitude of ways within education settings to engage and consult with students of all ages and with all staff (including non-teaching staff). OST techniques can be used to facilitate consultations of any type, for action planning and

evaluations. For example, OST could be used in preparation for whole school evaluations, consultation with parent bodies, for promoting interactive, group and decision making skills among students.

Conclusion

This paper introduces the idea of Open Space Technology as an effective form of consulting with diverse groups on complex issues and also shows how it can be used as a research technique.

OST Resources

For additional information on Open Space Technology, refer to Harrison Owens book, *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide,* (3rd Ed.), available to download free from http://www.bsp.msu.edu/uploads/files/Reading_Resources/Open_Space_Technology.pdf

For additional information on how OST has been used, refer to *Tales from Open Space,* available to download free from http://openspaceworld.com/Tales.pdf

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