

Open Space Technology and the legacy of Education **Chris Corrigan**

Open Space Technology

Open Space Technology is a meeting process developed by Harrison Owen, an American consultant. At its heart, it's a simple way of meeting, but on a deeper level it embodies a number of profound implications for leadership, organization and community.

An Open Space Technology meeting is distinct for a number of reasons. The most interesting of these perhaps, is the fact that OST meetings have no predetermined agenda: issues are identified by participants, discussed in self-organized and self facilitated work groups and moved forward by participants taking personal responsibility.

To provide some context, an Open Space Technology meeting unfolds as follows:

1. The group begins in a circle, with no tables in the room. One wall of the room is left blank, and in the centre of the circle is a pile of papers, felt pens and the facilitator.
2. The facilitator "opens the space" by explaining the process, stating the theme of the event and inviting those with a passion for a particular topic to come forward and place that topic on the agenda.
3. Participants come forward, identify a topic, write it on a large piece of paper, post it on the blank wall and choose a time and a place for the discussion to begin on the topic.
4. When there are no more topics, the group moves to the wall to see what is on offer and each person decides how they will spend their own time for the duration of the meeting.
5. Groups organize and meet at predetermined times and locations and self-facilitate. A report is generated and posted on a news wall in the room. Over the course of the meeting, the news wall fills with reports of completed sessions.
6. At the conclusion of the meeting, the group re-convenes in a circle and shares thoughts on about the meeting. The reports are gathered up and copied for each participant.
7. In certain situations where concrete action plans are desired, a "convergence" and action planning activity takes place, whereby participants prioritize actions and take personal responsibility for seeing them through.

At the heart of an Open Space Technology meeting are four principles and one Law. They are commonly articulated as follows.

1. Whoever comes is the right people.
2. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened.
3. When it starts is the right time.

4. When it's over it's over

The Law of Two Feet

If you find yourself in a situation where you are neither learning nor contributing, move somewhere where you can.

Because these principles and the Law give participants so much power, freedom and responsibility, the facilitator's role shifts from controlling the process to "holding the space," which can loosely be defined as ensuring that the space is fully open for creativity and freedom to unfold.

These principles, the Law of Two Feet and the process of self-organization create a powerful space in which participants are free to choose where they will go, what they will work on and how that work will be carried out. It generates leadership, structure, efficiency and effectiveness in amounts not generally seen in other meeting process and facilitation tools.

Freedom Shock

Open Space Technology deals in empowerment. Not empowerment currently fashionable in today's corporate world where a manager declares his or her staff to be "empowered" only to retain control and decision making authority. The empowerment in Open Space stems from the fact that at the outset of the meeting, the facilitator acknowledges the power in the room and invites participants to take for them themselves. Power, in an OST meeting, is not meted out like a ration, but rather is left for people to take as little or as much as they want. Control over outcomes is non-existent. The group will decide where it needs to go and will take responsibility for getting there. This is true empowerment, because participants are invited to become empowered to the extent that they wish.

One interesting side effect that some participants experience in Open Space Technology meetings, is something that Owen has dubbed "freedom shock." Essentially freedom shock is a state of anxiety generated by having unprecedented amounts of freedom over ones choices and responsibilities. Freedom is such a strange and unfamiliar concept in many workplaces and communities that the shock of it comes as no surprise to seasoned Open Space Technology facilitators. Freedom shock often manifests itself in a number of ways including:

- A need to control something
- Anxiety over whether the process will work or not
- Anger at the facilitator for not taking more control over the process.
- Asserting strongly that the process won't work.
- Anxiously searching for an authority figure.

Freedom shock is a result of the fact that despite claims to the contrary, very few people are truly free in their own lives. So when freedom presents itself to them as an opportunity, "shock" sets in.

There are a number of reasons for this, not the least of which is that North Americans have been conditioned to believe that they are free, when in fact everything they are

taught through their school years points to the contrary. North American culture and society is predicated on a foundation of principles learned during 12 critical years in almost every citizen's life. And these principles are so at odds with the principles of Open Space and indeed the principles of true freedom that "freedom shock" is a natural reaction to the notion of emancipation.

This paper will look at the legacy of North American education, and outline how Open Space Technology contains the potential to "deschool" citizens and give them a taste of freedom.

The Legacy of Education

John Taylor Gatto is a revered figure in the homeschooling and education reform movements in both Canada and the United States. He first came to world prominence in 1991 when, upon accepting an award for the "New York State Teacher of the Year" he delivered a speech that was shattering in its indictment of the modern North American education system.

The speech was titled "The Seven Lesson Schoolteacher" and it outlined the seven essential lessons that all school teachers are compelled to teach because of the structural limitation of the formal education system.

In brief the seven lessons are:

1. **Confusion.** This lesson is manifest by the disjointed nature of education. Everything that is taught in schools is taught out of context. Facts are related with no connection to each other or an overall sense of meaning. Learning does not unfold naturally, but rather randomly, with knowledge related in small chunks of limited relevance. Subjects are learned, if they are learned at all, by rote memorization, and all that remains is the knowledge of a specialized jargon rather than the deeper meanings and profound learnings.
2. **Class Position.** Students are taught that they must stay in the class where they belong. There is no interaction between people of different ages or common passions. Once assigned to a class, students are numbered and are "there to stay." There is no way of moving between classes, despite being exhorted to higher and higher degrees of excellence by testing and other rewards programs. Students are essentially taught to know their place.
3. **Indifference.** Students are taught not to care too much about any one thing. Predetermined class times marked by the ringing of bells interrupt the natural flow of learning and engaging with material. As a result, students are rarely able to general enough passion for something that they will truly engage in it and care about it. A student in the middle of writing a poem at one moment must be in another space learning about sulphur the next. Things rarely get finished and passion develops against the odds.
4. **Emotional Dependency.** In school, students are largely dependant on authority figures for their self-worth. Approval and disapproval come at high cost for the developing egos of children and adolescents. Good students figure out how to get approval from teachers and bad students don't. The legacy of marking

systems, praise and evaluation leads to severe depression, anxiety and low self-esteem, or conversely, artificially inflated self-esteem that does not prepare a student for the confidence required in the world. Students are entirely dependant on teachers and other authority figures for their emotional fulfillment at school.

5. **Intellectual dependency.** Good students wait for a teacher to tell them what to do. Creativity is stifled and individuality discouraged. Students receive high marks for regurgitating what the authority figure has said. They only have time to learn what is on the test, and they are then tested on how well they have memorized the facts. Passions are stifled, because there is simply not enough time to devote oneself to the pursuit of an esoteric interest and still memorize enough material to gain the approval of the educational authority figures.
6. **Provisional Self-Esteem.** Grades may measure the results of a student's ability to memorize facts relevant to the test, but they go further than that. Grades are often taken as a guide to how dissatisfied a parent and a teacher should be with a child. The cumulative weight of grading compels students to arrive at certain decisions about themselves and their futures. Ultimately, grading creates a compulsion throughout life to be told what we are worth.
7. **One Can't Hide.** There is no freedom in schools. Every act is monitored and watched. Students are taught to snitch on others to keep the authority of the school intact. Students are not given free time. Homework ensures that the authority of the classroom intrudes even into the time that students may spend with their families. Failure to complete homework is punished and thus students learn that there is no time or space that belongs to them.

Gatto's analysis describes a system that creates a population that is essentially dependant, stifled and indifferent. It is a population so ill prepared for Open Space that "freedom shock" is an inevitable result.

But the power of Open Space Technology lies in how the process pries apart the seven lessons taught in school. OST becomes a transformative tool because it opens people's eyes to the possibilities of freedom. This is how Open Space undermines the lessons of school:

1. Confusion

On the surface, there is little that appears more confusing than an Open Space Technology meeting. There are times, especially when the group has broken out of the circle and is standing at the wall looking at what is on offer that genuine chaos reigns. There is no order, there is some confusion as people try to figure out what to do, where to go and how the whole process works. But Open Space Technology is a very natural process and in a short time groups begin to form, almost always in small circles, and people begin to make sense of the task at hand. This self-organizing aspect of Open Space is one of its most powerful contributions. It allows people to organize themselves in ways that make sense for the topic and it creates the conditions for appropriate structure to emerge to move these issues forward. Confusion reigns for only a very short time. People quickly engage in deep conversations and grow appropriate structure to deal with the issues at hand.

Freedom shock results when people realize that they must take responsibility for engaging in work deeply and organize themselves to take responsibility for moving things forward.

2. Class Position

In Open Space, two things conspire to undermine the sentiment that one belongs only in a certain place. First, the essential geometry of an Open Space Technology meeting is the circle. The circle implies that everyone is equal and that all contributions matter. There are no tables, stages or platforms to indicate where the power resides in the group. It is assumed that the power resides in everyone.

Second, the Law of Two Feet means that people are responsible for their own learning and contributions. This means that everyone is free to create the agenda. For some people who have never created an agenda before, this is a powerful activity. The Law of Two Feet is also “death to egoists” as Owen has noted. Those who are compelled to dominate discussions and meetings and who enjoy lecturing others often find themselves at the wrong end of a stampede. They watch helplessly as people drift away to engage in more productive pursuits.

With most meetings and conferences, small groups are formed because people are told where to go. Often people are assigned a number or a colour which predetermines where they will meet. Sometimes, a predetermined agenda contains workshops which people feel compelled to attend even if they have no interest in the topic. In Open Space, no one tells you where to go, no one tells you what you can or cannot do. Groups form because people share common interests, and not some other arbitrary criteria. Freedom shock results from not being equipped to choose.

3. Indifference

Open Space is fuelled by passion. Participants are constantly invited to do things that are important to them, and nobody is compelled to do anything. The agenda results from people speaking out of passion. Groups gather and are formed by people of similar passions. The first principle, “whoever comes is the right people” acknowledges this important fact. In Open Space, nothing happens without passion. Because the agenda is not pre set, it is uncommon for people to complain that there was nothing on offer that interested them. Responsibility for setting the agenda lies with the individual. The Law of Two Feet imbues passion with the responsibility for making this happen. Indifferent participants usually leave, realizing that they are in the wrong place. And their loss is rarely mourned, because “whoever comes is the right people.”

Likewise, Open Space Technology explicitly gives people the time and space to explore their passions. No one will cut off a discussion or tell people that they have to move on to something else. As a result, very deep discussions and learning result, and indifference is banished. Unless, of course, one chooses to be indifferent.

Freedom shock results from people being schooled in indifference. We learn to expect an impromptu “nap break” after lunch with most meetings. In Open Space, people are certainly free to nap, but it rarely happens.

4. Emotional Dependency

In school, emotional dependency arises from authority figures having the power to grant or deny privileges. There is no such authority in Open Space, because participants are truly empowered. Choices are left to individuals and no authority figure will intervene to indicate whether those choices are good or bad ones. As a result, people in Open Space become emotionally independent. They are free to engage in issues to the extent that they wish to.

Because there is no facilitator in Open Space, people must take responsibility for their own emotions. Often, in more controlled processes, people will allow their emotions to get out of control because they know the facilitator will step in to manage the process or resolve the conflict. In Open Space, conflicts have to be managed by the people in conflict, and the Law of Two Feet allows a safety valve for irresolvable conflict: one party simply leaves.

Freedom shock results from having to take responsibility for one's own emotions and the effect that they have on others. There is no authority figure to solve problems. Participants seek the solutions themselves and respect one another in the process.

5. Intellectual Dependency

Open Space Technology creates the conditions for extremely creative thinking to take place because it allows a myriad of problem solving techniques to be used. These range from dialogue, brainstorming, mediation, discussion, storytelling, through to play, art and drama. There is no one way to solve a problem or create a solution and so "whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened." This acknowledges the contributions of all who are there and encourages people to let go of expectations about how the discussion will unfold.

Freedom shock results because people often expect things to happen in a certain way. We are conditioned to surrender our responsibility for outcomes to an authority figure or to have someone pass judgement on our work. The second principle ensures that no judgement will be cast and that people are free to examine issues in ways that make sense for them.

6. Provisional self-esteem

Self evaluation is the essence of Open Space. There is no authority figure telling participants that their discussions have been good or bad, nor will the facilitator judge a group's worth based on their work. The group is free to evaluate its own work, using the principle of "whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened."

(This is why voting doesn't always feel right for convergence and action planning. People should be asked to choose which topics they want to work on, converge related topics and get together to go to work – one less thing.)

Freedom shock results from the expectation that one's ego will be reinforced by an authority figure. A good facilitator will not do this, allowing people to judge themselves.

7. One Can't Hide

In Open Space, one can hide if one wants to. If one requires personal time and space, one can create that. In fact, Open Space practitioners call these people “butterflies” because they sit on fringe of the event and appear to be doing nothing.

In Open Space one does not have to be anywhere at any time. People are free to do what they want to, even if this means leaving the meeting altogether. Judgement is never cast by the facilitator, and there is no monitoring of activity. Even within discussion groups, the reports are created by those who attended. Nobody will check up on the work of the recorders or the conveners.

Freedom shock stems from the notion that people need to be watched at all times. Someone making a choice to leave is often perceived as a threat to the group, when in reality, they have found the need to create a personal space for themselves. What they choose to do with that space is up to them.

Conclusion

Open Space Technology is a powerful tool because it undoes the cultural and societal norms that are created by schooling. In this respect the power of Open Space Technology lies beyond the results of the meeting, and instead resides in the ability of the process to open people’s eyes to freedom, to how it feels and what it’s potential is for personal transformation. Open Space facilitators all have stories of personal transformation after working with the process for a few years. And many often report that their clients have experienced similar personal transformation as a result of this fleeting acquaintance with freedom. For those who are deeply embedded in the social norms created by schooling, freedom shock is a palpable emotional experience, overcome only after significant reflection and personal transformation.