

**OPEN SPACE TECHNOLOGY**

**NEW STORIES FROM THE FIELD**

**EDITED BY**

**HOLGER NAUHEIMER**

**THE CHANGE MANAGEMENT TOOLBOOK**



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Open Space Technology  
New Stories from the Field

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# INTRODUCTION

Since the gift of Open Space Technology (OST) was discovered by Harrison Owen more than 20 years ago, this method for facilitation of smaller and larger groups has found its way into all parts of the world. Nobody knows how many people actually apply it in their work as facilitators, teachers, managers, priests, community activists, consultants, etc. Even less is known about the number of workshops that have been facilitated either entirely or partly by using OST. My conservative estimation is that more than 1000 facilitators have applied OST on more than 20,000 occasions. Fortunately, we have some indicators - thanks to the work of Michael M Pannwitz. In his world map (which can be accessed at [www.openspaceworldmap.org](http://www.openspaceworldmap.org)), you will find 113 countries highlighted as "OST countries", i.e. countries in which OST has been applied, by 237 practitioners. This is just the tip of the iceberg. The international OST mailing list counts 456 subscribers (<http://listserv.boisestate.edu/archives/oslist.html>). And there are many, many more (I know at least 70 of them in Germany who do not all subscribe to the international mailing list...).

For those of us, who think more in quality than in quantity terms and those who will not be convinced of the potential and the power of Open Space by sheer numbers, I have collected a series of case studies - reports from the field. They have been published by Open Space practitioners in the OST mailing list or elsewhere. They demonstrate the spectrum of cultural, thematic and organizational settings in which OST is applied - and the passion and creativity with which the facilitators have approached their task. These are stories from all continents about how to motivate a high-performance staff in an Israeli technology company, how to mitigate the traumas of war in Chechnia, how to plan for social housing scheme in Canada, how to organize a district plan in Northern Mozambique, how to give 1700 street kids in Bogotá hope for their future, how to network for multi-cultural adult education in South-Eastern Europe, and many more.

This is not a streamlined publication. I have done little editing of the original articles which in most cases were never meant for a broader public but rather for a small group of OST maniacs (or "spaceniks"). In fact, I like the informal tone in which most of them are written.

These stories do not only show that the spectrum of occasions in which OST can be applied is probably wider than for any other Change Management methodology - they also reveal some of the challenges you will face, once you decide to work with Open Space Technology. Overall, they provide evidence for the old mantra of Open Space facilitators: "Open Space works!", without denying that the process and the outcome of an Open Space conference often deviate from what the client and the facilitator had expected. Open Space is building on self-organizing forces of a social system; you can't put these forces into a box, shake it and get exactly the cocktail you had ordered. On the other hand there is no other methodology, except maybe Appreciative Inquiry, which gives so much room for new ideas and innovation. That is why OST is the approach of choice for clients who have are fed up of doing "more of the same", i.e. responding to new challenges with old solutions.

I appreciate all the contributions and hope that this document will help to make OST even more popular as it is already today. If this publication has just watered your mouth, you can find much more of the early tales from OST, which have been collected by Harrison Owen at <http://www.openspaceworld.com/tales.htm>

For those you who are not familiar with OST, we have added a short introduction into the background and the principles. Those who are familiar with this approach might skip this section and go directly to the Stories from the Field.

Enjoy reading.  
Holger Nauheimer

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# A SHORT INTRODUCTION INTO OPEN SPACE TECHNOLOGY

## Background: Why We Need New Tools

We all experience our life and the world in which we operate as increasingly complex and uncertain. The need for instruments dealing with this uncertainty has never been more pressing than now. On January 23, 2000 the world known theoretical physicist Stephen Hawkins told the SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS: "I think the next century will be the century of complexity." The famous butterfly effect, which suggests that small interventions into a system can have unpredictable, large effects has now become mainstream and was even the subject of a Hollywood movie released in 2004, in which the main actor intends to influence his and other people's destiny by changing his personal history.

Complexity theory, although in practice having an influence on many parts of our daily life (such as in meteorology or the stock exchange) has only recently entered the sphere of management. It probably started once people recognized that the engineering approach to project management ("objectives+activities+inputs=project success") did not work out in case of many complex projects<sup>1</sup>. And this is not about small deviations from the original plan, but about projects that did not meet at all the original goals. It has recently been estimated that in Germany alone the loss that can be attributed to failed projects amounts to more than \$ 100 billion annually<sup>2</sup>. Leaving beside many other macro and micro economic factors that influence the project outcome (and influence each other in an unpredictable way), the most critical variable for the success or failure of change processes is the human factor. The more people you have and the more diversity – the higher the probability that things develop their own dynamics.

Multiple leadership and stakeholder participation are other buzzwords which dominate many discussions in the corporate as well as in the political sphere:

*As in the Renaissance, it will be an exciting time, a time of great opportunities for those who can see and seize them, but of a great threat and fear for many. It will be more difficult to hold organizations and societies together. The softer words of leadership and vision and common purpose will replace the tougher words of control and authority because the tough words won't bite anymore. Organizations will have to become communities rather than properties, with members, not employees, because few will be content to be owned by others. Societies will break down into smaller units but will also regroup into even larger ones than now for particular purposes. (Charles Handy, 1995: Beyond Certainty. The changing worlds of organizations).*

It is this background which has stimulated the development of new tools and approaches that can help social systems of any size to transform. These methodologies utilize the general properties of complex systems such as self-organization as well as the concept of mental models. This idea has been introduced as a basic principle of organization by neurobiologists and cognitive psychologists: organizations are open books; they are continually created and re-created by the way people think and talk about them. If all people in an organization think that it is a torture chamber, the organization will be a torture chamber. If all members of this organization think it is a great place to work, it will be...

One of these new tools is Open Space Technology (OST).

---

<sup>1</sup> the word "project" is used here in a very broad sense and includes any kind of innovative processes, e.g., mergers and acquisitions, political and societal reforms, organizational development, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Harvard Business Manager, May 2005

## What Are the Application Fields of OST?

In simple words, OST is an approach to facilitate meetings, seminars, workshops, conferences or any other form of gatherings which are described by the following characteristics<sup>3</sup>:

- high levels of complexity
- high levels of diversity
- high potential or actual conflict
- a decision time of yesterday

OST events can last from a few hours to a maximum of three days and can involve from 5 to more than 2,000 folks. In fact, it seems that the maximum number is only limited by logistical concerns, mainly space and the availability of a good supportive team. For a long time, 500 people were considered the maximum. Some years ago, this figure was corrected to 1,000, until two brave teams of facilitators (Michael M Pannwitz/Harrison Owen in Germany and Peggy Holman/Andrés Agudelo in Colombia) facilitated events of more than 2,000 (the story of the OST with 1,700 street kids and 300 adults in Bogotá is included in this documentation).

The opportunities for application of OST are not unlimited but manifold. A non-exhaustive list of good reasons to organize an Open Space could include:

- project identification, implementation or participatory evaluation
- change processes in organizations and societies
- cultural change in organizations such as mergers and acquisitions
- development of an organization's vision
- urban, rural or regional development and other multi-stakeholder processes
- design of innovative products or product features
- critical decisions in teams
- collaborative learning processes / networking
- initiation and consolidation of peace processes
- school development
- etc.

As OST event is taking participation of stakeholders in their own affairs serious, the approach cannot be applied if there is somebody who has all the answers and a master plan in mind. Therefore the task of consultants or facilitators starts long before the actual event: they have to make sure that the mentioned characteristics and pre-conditions apply.



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<sup>3</sup> Harrison Owen, 1997: Expanding Our Now. The Story of Open Space Technology. Berret-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco

## How Does It Work?

Harrison Owen has once described the entire methodology in one page, using 5 headlines and 15 bullet points. A lot of practical experience has been collected over the past 20 years and has been added to the toolbox of the global community of OST facilitators. Those folks can draw from many resources that help them to plan and implement an OS event and to help the sponsor of the event to follow up with the results. However, the original 5 headlines and 15 bullet points still apply and explain the basic processes through which any Open Space conference goes:<sup>4</sup>

### 1. The Four Mechanisms

- **Circle**

Any OST event starts and ends with a circle. If you have more than 50 participants, you will have several concentric circles. The circle is a symbol for community and for mutual respect of all individuals who made their way into the assembly. It is an ancient form that encourages people to dialogue. In Open Space, it is this initial circle where the facilitators explains the basic rules before they give way for self-organization.

- **Breath**

“Breath” is a metaphor and signals that an OST event cannot be understood from a mechanistical viewpoint but rather resembles life. It is organic and follows the pace of the group instead of a predetermined agenda.

- **Bulletin Board**

Although any OS event has a theme which confirms the four conditions for use (see below), not a single Open Space has an agenda but the Bulletin Board. This is a huge blank board, which indicates not more than time slots and designated breakout rooms as a framework for the sessions to be announced by the participants. The actual number of working groups and in particular their subjects are determined in a session at the beginning of an OS event, in which the facilitator encourages participants to identify their passion and to take responsibility. Depending on the size of the conference, this detailed agenda is usually established within one or two hours after the inauguration of the event.

- **Marketplace**

After the agenda has been established, all participants move towards the Bulletin Board to comprehend the complexity of the original theme and to make their choices. Like in any market place, negotiations are made; in this case these negotiations are about convergence or re-scheduling of working groups. Like in any other market place of the world, it is the contributor who decides on whether a deal is made or not.

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<sup>4</sup> Harrison Owen, 1997: *ibid.*

## **2. The Four Principles**

The Four Principles apply naturally in any Open Space event. Nobody needs to observe them, they just happen.

- **Whoever comes is the right person**

OST is based on passion and responsibility (see below). Those who happen to show up in a working group are those who take interest in the subject at the given moment in time; we assume that the likelihood of those folks taking the issue a step further is much higher than in traditional meetings where people are forced to work on something that has been imposed on them. Working groups can have any size from one to several hundreds, although in practice it is often a manageable size of three to twenty. It also happens that nobody shows up, including the convenor. Then, something more important is happening at the same time, but at another place (see principle 2).

- **Whatever happens is the only thing that could have**

The beauty of self-organization is that predetermined agendas are only of limited value. Instead, in Open Space those things happen that would have happened naturally if no external force or threat was applied. Therefore, a working group is as good as the passion, and the responsibility people are ready to commit. OST shows where the energy for change is located – and what issues the organization that is sponsoring the event should take seriously. Against common sense, in Open Space people are ready to take responsibility – that is why the outcome and the follow-up of an OS event regularly has a higher impact on the intended change than traditional approaches.

- **It starts at the right time**

Although the Bulletin Board indicates time slots for working groups, this does not mean that they start on time. They might start earlier, when people cannot wait to get into dialogue. They might start late, when other, more important things happen, and they might not start at all, in which case Principles 1 and 2 apply.

- **When it's over, it's over (when it's not over, it's not over)**

Although the steering group decides, prior to the event, on the designated time slots (usually between 30 and 90 minutes), participants are encouraged to (i) to close their discussion and adjourn the group early if everything significant has been said, or (ii) to continue their discussion if at the end of the time slot much more needs to be said. In the latter case, they need to decide whether they want to continue right away or to schedule a new meeting for further elaboration of their topic.

## **3. The Law of the Two Feet**

- If you find yourself in a working group discovering that you are neither contributing or learning (i.e. you are bored), use your two feet and move on.

#### **4. The Four Conditions for Use**

OST works for events to which the following conditions apply

- high levels of complexity
- high levels of diversity
- high potential or actual conflict
- a decision time of yesterday

#### **5. Two Engines to Drive With**

- **Passion**

OST assumes that if people are encouraged to work on what they are genuinely interested in, their entire passion and creativity will unfold. No passion, no issue.

- **Responsibility**

Those who convene a session in an OS event take responsibility for (i) assigning time and space (i.e., announcing when and where their subject will be explored), and (ii) taking care for the documentation of the working group's discussion, agreements, results and further steps. The full documentation of all results is handed out to all participants at the end of the conference. In Open Space this is usually called "The Book of Proceedings".

### **Convergence and Follow-Up of an OS event**

The principles described above outline the essentials of OST. Everything else done before and afterwards depends on the circumstances and the skills of the facilitator. Open Space conferences can stand-alone or be part of a larger process. Like for other Change Management approaches the same applies for OST: it is not the methodology which drives the process but the type of the process determines which approach should be applied, or as Abraham Maslov said: "If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail". Rarely, clients ask for Open Space, but want a task to be completed. It is part of essential consulting skills to assess the client's needs before and to find out whether a participatory process such as OST fits into the present or desired organizational culture.

After the party is over, there is more to do. Often, OS conferences are concluded with a convergence phase, in which the subjects discussed during the event are ranked according to their significance for the change process. Also regularly, projects are devised to deal with these issues, and action plans are elaborated to put things into practice. However, even in such a phase it is pertinent that participants of the OS event take over responsibility and don't delegate it to others. Usually 3-6 months after an Open Space conference there is a follow-up meeting in which the progress of projects is assessed. At the same time, the project groups that have been established during the OS conference self-organize their own agenda.

You never step into the same river twice – organizations that have experienced OST are transformed in one or another way. It is an important leadership task to create framework conditions in which further self-organization can blossom. Otherwise, the momentum created in an Open Space conference will be lost in a short time.

**NEW STORIES FROM THE FIELD**

## **Russia: Recovering our families' health**

**Client: Agency for Rehabilitation and Development (ARD)**

**Place: Chechen refugee camp MTF-6 (Dairy Farm #6), Karabulak, Ingushetia (Russia)**

**Participants: 13 refugee women**

**Story told by Raffi Aftandelian on 21 May 2003**

Happy to report that the 4-hour OS with Chechen refugee women living at MTF-6 (Dairy Farm #6), near Karabulak, Ingushetia took place yesterday. Indeed, they live in a converted barn. They personally cleaned out the barn when they came in 1999-2000 to flee the horrors of the second war in Chechnya. Still, these are very unhygienic conditions to live in. Some children have died of measles there. One mother of ten (!) children has been especially enterprising, built a wood oven for those times when the gas is turned off. The gas is turned off either because it is not available or as a measure by the authorities to pressure refugees to return back to Chechnya. That way the authorities can pretend that the situation in Chechnya has "normalized." The oven is available to bake bread and the like.

The OS took place in a youth drop-in center at MTF – a thin wood structure built quickly by the international humanitarian aid organization CARE-Canada. The center had wood-patterned linoleum flooring. We sat on plastic stools, and heated up water in a huge kettle. The 10-13 women who came attend a psychological support group run by a local nonprofit, Agency for Rehabilitation and Development (ARD). ARD cut its teeth on psychosocial rehabilitation in the first Chechen War (they were established in 1995). The current group of women the two psychologists (Madina and Toma) from this camp work with are a lot more active than other groups. Still, they have lost so much of their dignity and ability to see (at first) that change comes from themselves.

The theme of the OS was "Recovering our Families' Health". There were three themes:

- the psychological atmosphere in families
- lonely women (divorced, abandoned, widowed)
- the relationship between parents and children in families (much about the aggressiveness of youth and disrespect of elders, something that was unheard-of before the war)

It helped to have the psychologists re-explain the opening in Chechen (I had worked with the psychologists -- not just the women-- beforehand extensively). The women themselves were so busy that it was not possible to meet with them beforehand to set a theme with them in pre-planning.

It was a very modest start, but in the closing (we ended about an hour early) people noted what I would call an opening in their heart. No problems as such were resolved, few new ideas were expressed, but still this meeting brought a shift, however subtle. I would call it Breema for the soul.

In debriefing the OS with the sponsors, Toma and Madina, they saw that it might be worthwhile to continue this work with ARD psychologists. ARD psychologists are meeting soon to develop a set of principles and guidelines on doing family counseling in the tent camps and in Chechnya. They had planned to commit a day to this meeting.

*This spring, Raffi Aftandelian started a training and consulting firm, essenceworks consulting group, ([www.essenceworks.ru](http://www.essenceworks.ru), [www.essenceworks.net](http://www.essenceworks.net)) which offers OST and other elements of the Genuine Contact Program ([www.genuinecontact.net](http://www.genuinecontact.net)) to communities, companies, government, and NGO's in Russia and Russia's "near abroad."*



*Prior to starting his own firm, he had been a trainer and facilitator in the NGO sector in Russia and the United States. His work with NGO's has been primarily in the area of disability, internally displaced persons (as a consequence of the war in Chechnya), and peacemaking.*

*His aim is to build a community of OST facilitators (and facilitators who work with value-compatible sister group facilitation methods) in Russia. He is seeking to together with colleagues stumble upon the next paradigm, attitude, and (perhaps) tool (probably) destined to come after OST.*

*As part of this search, he has taken the small step of creating an open space to explore what might be asking to come after OST. This exploration is taking place in the form of two electronic discussion groups: a breathing circle, a breathing marketplace. All are welcome to participate.*

*Raffi is also known in many parts of the world for the world's (second) best salad and the world's best spiced popcorn. This gastronomic knowledge is freely available just like OST.*

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## **Israel: Motivating and retaining people in a high tech organization – the story of a division gathering around the question:" Creating a division in which we would love to work and be proud and happy to belong to – How shall we do it?"**

**Client: A high-tech company**

**Participants: 180 engineers, managers, etc.**

**Story told by Tova Averbuch on 27 Feb 2004**

As I was preparing for Practice Of Peace conference on Whidbey island on November 2003 I got a phone call inviting me to consider working with a division of an Israeli high-tech global company "to promote motivation" after very hard three years in the High tech business-market in general and for those people in particular. Since I do not do "promote motivation" work I was trying to look for the picture of the desired future the person talking to me had in mind and we both became more and more interested in exploring working together. We met a month later, when I was back from the US. They were eager and impatient to move on. I was in the beginning.

The way I generally view my work with organizations is as short term interventions with the intention of transformation. OS gathering is a very powerful and preferred practice I incorporate in this process and the most visible one. Because Open Space is about inviting and about choosing it is very important for me to provide it both in my very being and in doing, so... after meeting the HR people and the CEO and the management we moved from "promoting motivation" to "creation of a division we would like to work in and be happy to belong to.." They were ready to move on. My gut was that it was too soon. My clear sense was that 'what OS actually is' didn't seem to get through and their everyday culture was 180 degrees deferent. Another barrier was that this management who, until recently, was a management of subsidiary company now became management of a division, much more dependent on the mother company feeling limited in what they can do by themselves and for themselves. Following my senses I insisted on the regular process we use: having a diagonal preparatory committee as means of still questioning if OS is what they really choose and distilling the unique way to do about it. Meet again with the management team in an OS format (this I usually do not do) to learn more and explore their issues and challenges as managers/management in this process and particular situation.

In the preparatory comity people were very reserved, skeptical, cautious and cynical. Sooner than later – I was in the middle of a battle field with this or that person from senior management in front of 20 other people (stirring or steering? committee). Anxiety of letting go was very high, fear to raise expectations and fail them was enormous so ideas like: "let the preparatory committee be the OS event" or: "we can guide it a little, who said we have to do it exactly the way you say?" were offered along the process. Let me tell you I was defiantly bruised in this battle. For those of you who know me personally this will not come as a surprise that I wished I was not so direct and I wished I could shut up ...neither the client nor I were sure we can make it together or that we are a good fit but thanks god we stayed together long enough. Slowly but surly too things emerged very clearly:

- No way a management can go to OS 'to see and get ideas' and then do whatever they wish, regardless (not because I say so but because through the preparatory committee and the talk about trust, management commitment etc. it became very clear)
- One can confront high rank and stay alive (bruised but alive): maybe everyone can choose to make a difference, after all.

People from preparatory committee decided they go for OS and "dare hope". They created a remarkable process of invitation formulation and talks to inform everyone in

the deviation (750 people) in 2-3 days (50-70 every time with a member of the committee who is not 'the boss' of those who listen and question – it was the first time I had people create such a process). After the talk was over the person who was in charge beautifully informed everyone else that had still to go, of what were the challenges of the meeting and how was it resolved. It was so lovely to be on their list and witness these little tips and care. When they decided the OS will be for 150 people after crossing 150 I prefer working together so I had asked Avner to join in and had the pleasure to learn again how beautiful and fun it is to work together!

170 people from all departments registered and 180 showed up on the morning of the first day. How shall I sum it up in "bottom Line" language? (We made a joke out of how they will report to those who chose not to come): "In the beginning people were very skeptical!" ye' but what happened at the end? – "they were not skeptical!"...

I opened the space asking them to do something revolutionary, something they do not usually do – to take 3 breaths... (thank you Gerard, Harrison and Brigitt for building in me the courage to actually dare start this very way with 180 people, technical people, mainly men...). Like taking a lid off a steaming pot 50 out of the 180 people, who were seating very quietly (too quietly) for the first half an hour, jumped out off their chairs to create their agenda for 4 breakout sessions that day and one the next day. Wonderful energy of finding one another again as people, after three years of survival mode on the personal and organizational level, they began to shade prickly porcupine skin and try on new, softer modes. 44 conversations, 44 summaries attended with care by the evening and collected as a book of proceedings from 'everything-culture' to 'working patterns' in general and in specific. Trust... open, candid, genuine words were spoken and heard. One participant put it beautifully: 'we had told them every thing before this event. We talk it in the corridors, in 'round table talks', everywhere! So what difference will it make?' Another, standing by, said: (this could be a day of grace) 'you know what the definition of a psychologist is: a person to whom you pay for hearing all the things your wife has been telling you for so long ..., maybe today it will sink in'. Evening news with a shift: transparent, open to all public. Evening decision meeting together (some traps we glided through) also added a pillar of trust and transparency.

Most amazing was the depth of wisdom on day two (10 more groups added their conversation proceedings in writing and orally (in 10 minutes, all together!). All an all, 54 active and vibrant ideas merged into 16 implementation groups who had their first session in the afternoon. That was just blooming energies – seeding and harvesting work together. Being the action-biased people they are – they came up with wonderful ideas, fun, appreciation, recognition, and programs and it is on its way....!

Up in the sky Avner and I drove home. Knowing this is a very unique time in this industry, they are in a turning point, seems they chose to turn.

Last one: This morning the CEO called me saying "thank you, you know I don't speak much and I am very cynical but it seems to genuinely matter for many people; the sales man's singing, in the closing circle, "you and I will change the world" (a Hebrew song, like 'Imagine') was moving even for me. We may have some challenges in the coming six months; we shall need a little your help from you during this 'crossing the minefield'. And- if you need recommendation I will be glad to do it." I didn't believe this phone call; he hardly ever had the time (or preference) to talk one sentence to me...



*Tova Averbuch is a weathered Organizational Development consultant with academic background of social work (BSW) and organizational behavior (MSc). She is especially committed to the wellness, effectiveness, and leadership of people in organizational and community setting; as well as the wellness and effectiveness of the organizational system itself. Born in Poland, living in Israel since 1957, resided in the US for two periods of two years (Rochester NY, Rockville, MD). She carries a special interest in the creative dialogue and relationship between 'center' and 'edge' of human*

*systems, in their emergent and the self organizing nature. Tova was the first to Pioneer with OST in the three sectors in Israel.*

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## **Colombia: How can I contribute to employers not cancelling work for us now and in the future?**

**Place: Bogota, Colombia**

**Participants: 2,000 (1,700 street kids and 300 adults)**

**Story told by Peggy Holman on 8 Nov 2004**

GOOD WORK FOR 2,000 COLOMBIAN STREET KIDS

Where to begin to tell this story? I hope to channel two of my favorite story tellers, Harrison Owen and Chris Corrigan, who always seem to capture the vibrant aliveness of the event itself.

### THE SET-UP

I was already on my way to Bogota, Colombia, to teach a class at Los Andes University on Whole Systems Change. About five weeks before leaving, I received an e-mail from Andrés Agudelo, one of my contacts in Bogota:

```
> Hi Peggy,  
>  
> Just a quick note to let you know some good news. I had a meeting  
> with an italian priest, Javier de Nicolo who has worked in the  
> streets of Bogota helping kids who are abandoned by their families,  
> and get into drugs and prostitution (or the guerrilla) to survive.  
>  
>  
> What he has been doing is training them in different skills, and he  
> gets them jobs, or makes team of youngsters to pave the streets of  
> the city, financed by the mayors office and some private funds. He  
> agreed to make an OST in order to motivate the kids: they start  
> working with energy, and then fade out.  
>  
> What do you think? Would it be interesting for you when you come  
>next october?  
>  
> Best regards,  
> Andrés Agudelo
```

Of course I said yes. The next message, two weeks before the event, added one interesting and challenging wrinkle - this Open Space would be for 2,000 people:

```
> Hi Peggy,  
>  
> The priest would like to do an OS for two thousand of the  
> kids/adolescents,  
> including three hundred of the people who work with them, if  
> possible oct 31st and Nov. 1st. Would this be fine for you?  
>  
>  
> When would be a good time to talk by phone?  
>  
> Ciao,  
> Andrés
```

I remember thinking, "2,000 people? Is that for real? I'm sure when we dig into the details, it will be a more 'normal' size. And if not, it will be fine (I hope)."

We talked the next day. And sure enough, they wanted 2,000 people present. The context and questions all sounded straightforward enough. I trusted Andrés' judgment and made the leap. It was a go.

A few days later, 12 days before the event was scheduled was my first conversation with the sponsor; actually the sponsor's right hand-Helena. As I later learned, Helena is a

remarkable dynamo with an extraordinarily competent staff that is used to dealing with very large numbers of kids.

I should mention a couple interesting twists to this story. Since we were in Bogota, the OS would be in Spanish, a language in which I can count to ten and name a few colors. While I had met Andrés during my first trip to Colombia during the summer, this would be our first work together.

During our conference call, I learned that Helena's exposure to OS consisted of what she had learned through Andrés and one 50-person self-conducted experiment with some of the adults who work with this jobs program. They loved the experience and the results and they were completely committed.

I arranged to fly in a day early to see the site. Andrés was going to be out of town, so I was on my own in sorting through the logistics. I was still a bit in denial that there might be anything special that I needed to consider for an OS this size.

## THE SITE

My first impression was of the sheer beauty of the place. I learned that Fr. Javier de Nicolo was 75 and has been working with street kids for 40 years, helping tens of thousands find a better life. Through the years, he has attracted the resources to build about 8 facilities around the city to house and educate the young people. The site of the OS was primarily for young girls, ages 8-12, many of whom had experienced physical and/or sexual abuse. The plan was to take them off campus when the OS participants, ages 16-22, mostly male, arrived.



My next impression gave me great reason to question my sanity in saying yes. I saw the room planned for the OS. Unlike the US, in Bogota, there's no handy sign posted with the room capacity. I did a bit of walking and counting and my best estimate was the main floor would hold 750 people sitting on the floor with a tiny circle in the center. The stage could accommodate perhaps another couple hundred and the balcony, with no inside access for posting sessions might hold another couple hundred. Helena seemed completely unfazed by the seeming impossibility of putting 2,000 people in a space that, by her own admission, had never held more than 1,000. That's when I took the leap and thought to myself, "I'm working with a religious organization. We're in god's hands."

The courtyard leading to the room was big, square and could easily accommodate 2,000. We agreed to prepare both the room and the courtyard and would be outside if the weather made that possible.

Ah, the weather. We were in the rainy season. Bogota is a lush, green place, much like my home town, Seattle. That meant I knew and appreciated the price paid to live in such a beautiful, green place. It rains a lot. I had looked at weather.com and saw nothing but rain in the future.

We talked about tape on the floor to mark aisle ways. We made one accommodation for the limited space inside and windiness outside. Rather than putting the paper and markers on the ground in the center of the circle, lots of volunteers would pass out paper and markers to everyone who wanted them. Conveners would come to the center to announce their issues. That enabled us to keep the center circle small, maximizing sitting space.

They had 40 computers on site and volunteer teachers to support the kids with entering their reports. Plus, they had plans to prepare 2,000 breakfasts and lunches for the two days.

We talked about the theme. The priest had just gotten some devastating news: the jobs they had from public and private sources for the work program were in jeopardy because kids were showing up stoned and were stealing. The theme took on a new urgency and a decidedly fear-based twist: from the best possible job opportunities now and in the future, it became saving the jobs they had. I did my best to open the theme to be more affirmative, future focused. In the end, saving jobs won. The theme:

"Como puedo colaborar YO para que los empleadores nos sigan dando trabajo ahora y en el futuro?"

Loosely translated (I think): How can I contribute to employers not canceling work for us now and in the future?

The oddest part to me is that I never panicked. Rain seemed inevitable and in no way could I picture 2,000 people fitting in the room. The theme was the most fear-based I'd ever work with. And I was calm. Some part of me thought that was very odd. Most of me just knew it would work. Perhaps it was because I was VERY clearly working with people who had handled huge crowds before. While they needed my expertise on the OS logistics, it was clear the kids and I were all in good hands in every other way.

I didn't actually see Andrés until the day before the event. I had just finished an intense three-day course and he was returning from running an equally consuming multiple day workshop in Ecuador. He saw our OS site for the first time that afternoon. He thought it could hold 1,500, still not the 2,000 we expected. We were both pretty tired. We reviewed a few logistical items that evening but didn't actually agree to how we would work until the next morning as we drove to the site. And still I was calm. So was Andrés.

For the opening, I'd speak in English, Andrés in Spanish. He wouldn't do exact translation, rather he'd speak the OS rituals in his own way. We took it a step further—since the number of English speakers was tiny, I would speak one line and he'd add all of the specifics in Spanish. (I actually suggested not appearing at all. Ultimately, we agreed that while they wouldn't understand my words, there was something important about the presence of this stranger coming from another country to work with them.)



DAY ONE

After gloomy, grey skies and constant rain since I'd arrived, the day, October 31st, dawned with blues skies and sun shine. As far as I was concerned, it was a minor miracle.

We convened in the courtyard, with huge letters put together on the sides of the buildings spelling out the law of two feet, the four principles, the conference theme. It was spectacular. The priest spoke (at length) then turned the microphone over to us. We began.

In recent years, I've begun asking for a brief silence anytime the whole group gathers. At a minimum, it is a chance for people to collect their thoughts. More subtly, there is

something very powerful about groups, particularly very large groups sitting together in silence. We were curious how these young people, with their drug-addicted backgrounds and reputation for violence would respond. It was AWESOME! Two thousand young people so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

We took them through the opening and then it was time to post sessions. And I got my only big surprise. EVERYONE stood up and started milling around. I wasn't sure what was happening or whether anyone would post anything. And then it began. Andrés was suddenly surrounded by kids with topics on their papers. For the next forty minutes, he stood, rock solid, holding the microphone as one by one, 300+ sessions were announced and posted. So much for our neatly taped aisle ways! The kids entered the hall to look at the agenda wall. And they were on their way.

One theme was named over and over: taking responsibility for their actions. The sessions themselves were filled with remarkable conversations:

- Is it time to end the "code of silence" and speak out when someone shows up to work stoned?
- How do we handle people who don't obey the rules of the program? Should they be kicked out? Helped back into drug rehab?

The kids were deeply engaged. And our challenge was the teachers! They were so used to keeping the kids under control, fearful of violence if they didn't, that some were taking over moderating groups! Wherever we could, we coached the teachers in real time to participate but not take over. We expressed our distress to Helena and ultimately agreed that we would meet with the teachers in the morning before we opened the space on day 2.

Our concern reached its peak when we heard Helena's voice over the loud-speaker system that reached the entire campus announcing that it was time to change sessions. And then she kept talking. Andrés went to take the mike from her and returned empty handed. I went out, found her talking to a young man, just holding the mike, and I said, "I'll take that," removed it and left. A few minutes later, she joined Andrés and me. We talked to her about how important it was for the young people to experience taking responsibility. She thanked us for the reminder that she was doing exactly what she often told the teachers not to do!

A few minutes later, our blood pressure was raised again. We heard the priest, midday, lecturing over the loud-speaker, telling everyone they should go to work. So much for butterflies! I knew it was my responsibility to keep the space open for the kids. Andrés, as my translator, and I, as someone from completely outside the system, took off to find the priest. I took (respectfully) the microphone out of his hands as he was about to launch into yet another lecture over the loud speaker system. I told him that he was talking to them about responsibility but not giving them the chance to practice it. The process we were using supports people in taking responsibility for what they love, helping them learn to embrace responsibility from within themselves rather than it being imposed by others outside themselves. He told me he wanted what was best for the kids. I said we wanted the same thing. It was a defining moment. He not only took what I said very graciously but the next day, he came with a completely different attitude and no longer a need to lecture at length! I thanked him for his support at lunch on day 2. He said, "Day 1 was the apocalypse. Day 2, we are in heaven." It is my favorite line from the whole event.



## DAY TWO

The clear weather held. We began the day meeting in a circle with the teachers. We asked them how they saw things going. Some were quite distressed, feeling the young people needed better guidance. Others were thrilled with the thoughtfulness and initiative. In the end, we encouraged them to listen as much as possible; to assume that even if what they saw wasn't the way they'd approach the work, that it was just fine; and if they couldn't resist intervening, that they do it with a question.

Another 140 sessions went up in the morning and 40 in the afternoon's action planning OS. The dynamics were much the same as the day before. No orderly queuing in aisles, just a mob, respectfully waiting their turn to announce their sessions.

The kids were quite amazing. I felt a bit like Mother Theresa. Whenever I walked through the square, they surrounded me. Mostly, they wanted to try their 3 or 4 words of English and ask me questions. On the second day, I joined the film crew (yes, we had a professional videographer with us) and started asking the kids questions. They told me that they definitely want to do more OS. When I asked why, one of these hard-core young men (no doubt carrying a knife or a gun somewhere in all that baggy clothing) said it gave him a feeling of family.

One young man approached me right after the space opened to tell me that he had left early on day one but was committed to staying all day today. I wondered if he'd just told me indirectly that he wouldn't leave to get stoned today.

The man who ran the program was thrilled. He told us that he had learned so much from this. The kids had told him that the program was far too easy on offenders, the rules should be much tougher! His solution: he would ask the kids to define the rules and the consequences. What an incredible shift!

A teacher found me to say that she had gone into a room where the kids were playing cards. Her first impulse was to tell them to get to work. Instead, she remembered the suggestion of asking a question. "Did they need anything?" "No," they replied, "we're just fine. We're taking a break and will get the work done just fine." The teacher left, a bit bemused, but satisfied that she'd done the right thing.

As you can imagine, there was incredible support from many, many people to pull this off. The kitchen baked 8,000 loaves of bread for day 1. I understand that 2,300 lunches were served that day, making the official count of 1,800 low. (We may have a new OS record! They're re-counting the number registered.) The team working the computers posted reports as they came in. The last I saw of the report, it was at least 600 pages. None of it would have been possible without my extraordinary colleague in this adventure, Andrés Agudelo. While relatively new to OS, he has many years as a Gestalt therapist and exudes calm even when deluged by several hundred kids surrounding him with sessions to announce.

## AFTERWARDS

I left for home the next morning, the weather gray and drizzly, leaving a request for Andrés to let me know what happens. We were quite sure that Pandora's box was wide open and nothing would be the same.

Diary: 6 May 2005

I just heard from my contact in Bogota. Below is Andres' message about the effect of the OS we did last November with the street kids.

> Hi Peggy,  
> I finally had the chance to briefly talk to Helena. The changes  
> that the process unleashed are still unstoppable. Most of the boys  
> have a much more responsible attitude towards their job. The use of  
> drugs have not stopped, but they tend to do it out of their work.  
> Lateness, laziness, disrespect are almost gone. It seems from what  
> I heard that the OST had a profound impact in the kids approach to  
> their life.  
>  
> Helena did not go into much detail, but apparently there were many  
> structural changes in the schools, and in the relationship with the  
> working  
> kids: much more respect from their bosses, and much better working  
> results.  
> Many corrupt engineers were fired (with excuses -downsizing- since  
> corruption was not opened to the public).  
> An official controlling entity recently made an evaluation: Helena  
> received a 5, the highest score for her job; the woman who wanted  
> to stop the OST received a 2.  
>  
> So, in fact, I think the OST was very useful! I have more news, I  
> will let you know immediately.  
> Helena sends you all her best regards.  
>  
> I hope I will be able to see you soon. Take care.  
> Andres  
>



*Peggy consults with organizations and communities, increasing their ability to achieve what is most important to them through growing their capacity for inviting the emergence of new ideas and relationships. She is acknowledged as a leader in generative processes for whole system change. Her work encourages people to take responsibility for what they love, resulting in stronger organizations, communities and individuals. Open Space Technology, Appreciative Inquiry, and Dialogue are integral to her work because she believes in their great promise to unleash the human spirit for individual and collective good. Peggy is a co-founder of the Open Space Institute (US). Her first book, *The Change Handbook: Group Methods for Shaping the Future* (Berrett-Koehler, 1999), co-edited*

*with Tom Devane, has been warmly received as an aid to people wishing to increase the impact of their organizations and communities. Peggy co-hosted an international conference, *The Practice of Peace*, bringing together 130 people from 25 countries, including Israel, India, Colombia, Haiti, Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Nigeria, and Nepal, to examine the threads of peace building that transcend specific cultures*

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## **Haiti: How do we use the education we are receiving to help our country?**

**Client: Louverture Cleary School**

**Place: Port au Prince, Haiti**

**Participants: 83 students of a boarding school and 4 teachers**

**Story told by John Engle on 14 April 2003**

We opened space in a way that was new to me last Thursday. I have shared with you other Open Space experiences at The Louverture Cleary School in Haiti, a private boarding school for kids who have been assessed as being academically gifted and who come from desperately poor neighborhoods and households. I wish to share with you this new experience.



The school director and its principal convened on the basketball court at 7:05 am all 220 students. The students simply stood on the outdoor court while the director and principal stood on a bench so that their messages could be heard.

They invited the students to choose between several options regarding how they would spend their day. Their message had also been shared in writing earlier in the week. Both principal and director shared: "Each option represents an important way to serve the school community and to glorify God." Its a Catholic school.

The options were:

- 1) Attend classes as normal and participate in "work hour" immediately following school as normal. (Students are responsible for cleaning school and doing upkeep on school grounds as well as participating in school improvement construction projects).
- 2) Attend classes as normal in the morning, and being excused from work hour so that they can participate in afternoon Open Space.
- 3) Attend Open Space in the morning and participate in work hour in the afternoon.
- 4) Have a full day of work detail which included having the opportunity to work alongside several skilled tradesmen.

The theme for the formal Open Space meetings (one in the morning and one in the afternoon) was: "How do we use the education we are receiving to help our country?"

We tailored this particular program with so many options for two reasons:

- 1) There are no microphones and no places large enough inside or outside, to have all students in a circle and protected from the intense tropical sun.
- 2) The School director wanted to give students options to ensure that those who came to the formal Open Space were there because they really wanted to be there.

At 7:45 35 students convened for the first Open Space meeting. There was time for two different one hour sessions and we reconvened at 11 am, taking 40 minutes to do report backs and an additional 12 minutes for the talking stick exercise.

Students present were primarily from grades 6 - 10. They posted 22 subjects, convened in about 15 small groups and 12 reports were submitted. The school principal and

director visited us from time to time to show their support. At one point the principal, Garry Delice, a Haitian man, expressed to me with a beaming smile as he watched students choosing from among the 22 subjects: "It thrills me that the students are experiencing Open Space. Not only are they practicing a democratic process, they are also learning that they--their ideas and intentions--are important to us. In fact, the students are the essence of this school. They need to shape who we are together and what we become."

This comment from a student from the 6th grade was one of the many positive remarks in the closing circle: "I've learned from my classmates today. I hope we do Open Space more often because of the way it helps us to work and learn together."

At 1:20 48 students and several teachers convened for the second Open Space meeting. There was only time for one-one hour session. 20 subjects were posted. Students were getting so excited about posting subjects that the chaos became greater than what I am accustomed to dealing with. I decided that it would be futile to try to bring this ecstatic group of kids to silence so that I could invite everyone to choose their subjects and then get started with small groups. I simply walked around and shared this message in a calm voice with clusters of kids until I felt enough had heard me.



Then, I walked away from the chaos and shared with the teachers present, "Better that we allow this energy to pass instead of try to take control." I came back about 10 minutes later to find that the excited mob had self-organized into small groups throughout the school courtyard. 9 reports were submitted after the one hour session.

From 3:00 to 3:50 students shared reports. While I rarely provide opportunities for small groups to give reports in Open Space meetings, the principle and director felt that it was important with the students and I believe they were right. There were profound ideas being shared in these reports and some discussion about them.

Here are two of the comments shared during the talking stick exercise (from 3:50 to 4:15):

"An experience like we've lived today in Open Space develops one's spirit. It helps us to think better, to better understand others as well as ourselves. These are the types of activities we need to turn our ideas into concrete actions." (Edwide Marcelin, 9th grade)

"I hope that other schools will do Open Space. It is important for students to apply their knowledge in dialogue. But, in addition to Open Space being done with students in schools, it should be done with adults too. It provides us with a new way of thinking and working together." (Taylor Jackson, 10th grade).



*John Engle is cofounder of U.S.-based Beyond Borders & Haiti-based Limye Lavi Foundation. Using Open Space and other participative methods he promotes in Haiti and elsewhere education and leadership that is characterized by shared authority & responsibility.*

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## **Canada: Aboriginal Friendship Centres and Self-Government in British Columbia**

**Client: British Columbia Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres**

**Place: British Columbia, Canada**

**Participants: 41 stakeholders of aboriginal friendship centres**

**Story told by Chris Corrigan on 13 Sep 2000**

I have just completed a 2.5 day open space with an Aboriginal organization here in British Columbia with excellent results. It was an interesting exercise on a number of fronts, and so as usual I am writing to share the results and some of my learnings.

The British Columbia Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres (BCAAFC) represents almost 30 "Friendship Centres" here in BC. Friendship Centres are organizations that have been around since the 1950s, providing services to Aboriginal people in the towns and cities of Canada. During the 1950s, there was a mass migration of First Nations people away from isolated and remote reserve communities to the cities as people set out to look for jobs and better lives for their families. In short order, these people formed communities and then community organizations. Friendship Centres were among the first to be formed, to provide assistance to individuals and families making the transition from reserve life to city life. These days Friendship Centres provide a huge range of services and programs and in many ways, look like Aboriginal YMCAs, although not as well funded, and generally not attracting as much of a middle class clientele.

Here in British Columbia we are embroiled in disputes about land rights, aboriginal title and self-government. Friendship Centres, as Aboriginal organizations, are trying to find a role for themselves in this debate. In order to further their ideas and vision, the BCAAFC hired me to facilitate a 2.5 day Open Space around the theme: "Aboriginal Friendship Centres and Self-government in BC." Executive Directors and Presidents from each Centre were invited as was the BCAAFC Executive Committee and the staff. In short, most of the BC Friendship Centre leadership was gathered in one place.

### **DAY ONE**

We had 41 people, who proposed 36 topics during the opening on day 1 (31 topics were eventually reported upon). I had the two meeting days divided in the four sessions of 1.5 hours each with 1.5 hours for lunch. My opening was complimented by a prayer from our Elder and an official welcome to the territory of the Lil'wat Nation, on whose land we met in Whistler, BC, north of Vancouver. (We were actually meeting in the same facility where I first experienced OST five years ago). As has been my experience, people took to the process immediately and got down to work on the issues with no trouble at all. I had a partner working with me who was learning OST, and he helped to organize the agenda wall and see about an even distribution of topics throughout the 8 time slots we had available. He also remained in charge of the proceedings for the entire event.

I received several comments during the first day about the process including comments about how well it allows everybody to participate and how free of conflict the discussions were. One woman said that she had been coming to these meetings for years and met the same people and never heard any of them speak. This was the first time she heard from some of them. I asked her why she thought that is and she said it had to do with the safety that was created. She felt that because individuals proposed topics that they were passionate about, a great deal of respect was brought to the discussions, and that the whole group held the space, not just the facilitator. When facilitators work in controlling processes, participants sometimes feel that they can lose themselves in conflict. Not so in Open Space, where the whole group takes responsibility for keeping the space safe and therefore, conflict is often eliminated, as was the case for this meeting. And there were some contentious issues!

Another interesting comment came for a seasoned veteran of the Friendship Centre movement, an Elder who has served on the Executive at all levels, local, provincial and national. He said that this was the first meeting where he learned something.

(As an aside, and by way of demonstrating how easy it is to get into Open Space, comes this story: My three year old daughter was with me and at one point, while groups were moving around, she came into the room with her mother, and asked what the paper and the nice coloured markers were doing on the floor in the centre. I told her that people used the markers to write down things that they wanted to talk about on the paper. She then proceeded to dictate to me a list of topics she wanted discussed. She was interested in the following:

- How pens work
- How she can get her friend's allergies to go away
- How buildings are built
- How colour goes in
- How the inside of your body works
- How hinges work
- How bones grow back together crooked.

She then returned to our hotel room with my partner where I am told that they held their own discussion groups on these topics. I relate this to make the point that OST is easy enough for a three year old to understand with very little instruction.)

We gathered in the circle for a closing prayer at the end of the day, as is our tradition.

## DAY TWO

Day two began in a novel way for me, because we had to change rooms. Our large meeting room had been overtaken by a conference of a fast food restaurant's managers from Western Canada. We moved to a smaller room which involved some work to prepare, but, despite my anxieties, worked out fine. Day two began early with a sage smudge and a prayer.

Playing fast and loose with time, the groups met at 9 instead of 9:30 and finished at 10:30 for the first session, taking a half hour break before convening the 11:00 sessions on time. As the news started to go up on the wall, one woman commented how different the reports were from the actual discussions in the groups. I have always suspected that this is the case and I wonder if anyone else has figured out how to capture the energy and passion that forms in the groups and is not reflected in the reports?

It seemed as the second day progressed, that the group discussions became more intense and the breaks between discussions became lighter. This was in contrast to day one, when people seemed to be feeling their way around, and were more aloof in both the groups and the breaks. I can really see how extending the discussions over two days brings a totally different quality of experience to people. It is deeper and richer and the relationships become stronger so that people feel freer with each other outside of the meeting.

The whole notion of personal responsibility intensified over day two. One participant, who missed convening her session because she was actually attending to another participant who was suffering a nasty reaction to a bee sting, used the evening news to apologize for "acting irresponsibly" by not convening her session. The apology was offered with great respect and humility to the group. It opened my eyes to how serious the "responsibility" part can get taken.

As day two came to a close, I checked my "Open Space Evaluation" sheet: a piece of blank chart paper with the question "What do you think of Open Space?" on the top. The

paper contained a couple of doodles of a happy face and a light bulb and these telling words: "It's really round!"

### DAY THREE

Again, we opened with a smudge and a prayer. I'm lucky to have these openings available to me as it aligns people's thoughts nicely at the beginning of the day and helps ground the crown for the work ahead of them.

Convergence consisted of the following steps:

- posters with topic names and numbers were placed around the room
- participants read reports (roughly 50 pages) for a half hour
- reflect and use the dots to indicate passion
- some topics were converged
- top dot getters were brought off the wall and placed in the centre of the circle (there were ten of them)
- I invited champions to come forward to see these through the action planning phase
- Nine champions came forward and a few more topics were converged. Convergence was highly conservative, as is my preference. Only topics that were closely related were converged.
- The orphaned topic was placed with the others with a meeting space post it note on it in case anyone wanted to take the issue forward. As it turned out, no one did.
- Discussions lasted 45 minutes. Several participants wished that they could have had the whole day to actions plan.

(Note to OST facilitators who may be working with Carrier speaking people: the word "dot" sounds a lot like the Carrier word "D'ogh" which is a rather vulgar term for female genitalia. So when I suggested that folks grab seven dots and indicate where their passion lay, it resulted in a truly inspired outburst of belly laughs from one person!)

The closing circle was profound. I had wanted to use a talking stick (a real one!) for the closing circle, but the organization did not bring theirs. Instead I used a piece of lava rock. The Whistler area is covered in old lava flows and the rocks lie everywhere, pitted from air bubbles that were trapped in the molten lava. As it turns out these rocks are great for using in sweatlodges as they hold heat. So when a number of people went out on day two to collect sweat rocks for future use, the BCAAFC ED gave me one. And I used it for the closing circle.

I opened by stating that lava is rock made from material that has welled up from deep within the earth and taken form. It does not crack under extreme heat and it is malleable and flexible. In my mind this summed up the organization nicely.

As the rock went around, people shared very deeply. I was especially touched by the Elder who said that the process was a new role model for First Nations communities to show us how we could be together. Another participant said that she was tired from the mental strain of the past few days, and had even forgotten where we were in the month ("somewhere in the middle!" she said). Later the ED of the organization remarked that he thought that this comment represented the fact that she was no longer thinking literally. In fact, the ED recognized OST as a tool with tremendous possibility for decolonizing First Nations people and communities because it creates the environment for people to THINK in traditional ways. I have said that before, and I am buttressed in that belief now.

Several people saw possibilities for using OST and have vowed to use it. There was an almost fiercely protective sense that came over the group regarding the process. They

recognized it as theirs, as one which is, in both form and content, real indigenous self-government.



*Chris Corrigan works with organizations seeking to improve their work, communities seeking to improve their future, people looking to improve their lives. He holds and cares for process - the ways in which we work together - to encourage people to make their best possible contributions. Chris has an unflagging belief that the answers and leadership we need arise out of collaboration and conversation. By facilitating skilful dialogue, Chris does his best to hold space for futures to emerge.*

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## **Italy: An Open Space to Explore Possibilities of Peace Between Israelis and Palestinians**

**Client: Dionysia International Center**

**Place: Rome, Italy**

**50 Palestinians and Israelis**

**Story told by Harrison Owen and Avner Haramati on 11 June 2002**

This is a story in two parts, told by the two facilitators, Harrison Owen and Avner Haramati

### **This is Avner's story**

I would like to use our experience in Rome for sharing some learning (in addition to Harrison`s) about using open space in extreme situations of conflict.

First I would like to use this opportunity to thank Harrison for the great work that he has done in Rome, being completely neutral, caring to people and sensitive to the tides, gliding with the energies and enable the participants to be fully and genuinely there. Starting the 3rd day with closure that enable people to work through what happened to them in the last 2 days was brilliant. It freed the energies of the people to use all the afternoon, evening and some of the day after to take full responsibility and to plan very significant projects.

Preparing the meeting was extremely complicated and took so much energy from many people. I will try to give a simplified taste and learning from it.

Sponsorship: The initiator was an Italian NGO manager (Nicoletta from Dionysia international center) that together with the Italian foreign ministry were interested in bringing 20 Israelis and Palestinians on the issue of forgiveness. A local sponsor- Daniel Kropf (an Italian businessman) who participated in our training was added later and offered the open space. He enabled to enlarge the number to 50 because he trusted that OS can create intimacy with larger numbers of people. The topic was changed to building trust because we are not yet in a position of forgive - we still shoot.

Building the groups: This process took more than 2 months with a lot of pulling and pushing from all sides. On the Israelis the trend was to bring people you know and only in the last week we managed to enlarge significantly the variety to represent almost all sectors of society. On the Palestinian side there were different groups because the Italian initiator invited one Palestinian leader to choose the rest of the group and the local sponsor chose another. It took them some time (and crisis) to create a joint list of participants. The groups consisted from people from the business sector, writers and media, public figures, education, government officials, university and facilitators.

Facilitators: At the beginning Tova and myself were invited. Then we thought to bring Carol, an Israeli Palestinian (that took the OS training this year) to work with us to create a balance. Eventually it seemed to better to go abroad and hesitated between non Jews Americans and Europeans (Europeans are perceived by Palestinians as more neutral than Americans). Harrison recommended on Michael Pannwitz but since he couldn't come Harrison changed his plans and came. It was decided that together with a `real` untrained Palestinian woman we will assist Harrison as natives to keep the space open. Tova and Carol came as participants.

Steering comity: It was a real Chaos, we never met all of them to work together. Some we didn't see at all because they could not get out of their city.

The day before: We wondered if and how much preparation/training the people need

before they start. At the end Nada, a Serbian woman and the expert (to my taste) in non violent communication (Marshal Rosenberg) gave us only 1 hour of participative lesson on needs: The existence of honorable and valued need behind all manifestations of anger and hostility and the benefits in acknowledge that. She drew a lot on her experiences in working with children and adults during and after the war in Yugoslavia. Nada participated in the OS, and the people found that what they learned from her as very meaningful.

The press: The group decided not to cover the meetings in order to ensure free speech. A press conference was scheduled to the end with the intention that the group will decide what to say. They decided not to tell who was there and what were the issues. The reasons were the fear of sabotage and refraining to reduce the experience to words.

There were many incidents of the cruel reality along the meeting, as invading twice to the home city of some of the Palestinians participants, and killing of Israeli citizens. Finally as an illustration that on coming back to Israel/Palestine Israeli members of the group arranged from Rome a military escort to accompany some of their Palestinians new friends to their homes (in the middle of a combat there), and also brought back to Jerusalem family members of another friend.

Summary: The event was a big success to compare with other Israeli-Palestinians meetings which are usually (so I heard) very much in control of exact planning who, what, when. The group decided not to reveal so the only thing I can say is that it was the first time that the Palestinians met not only the humanistic left but almost all the dimensions of Israeli society. For many Israelis it was the first time to meet and talk with Palestinians. This brought to much deeper levels of mutual understandings and friendships, and freed a lot of energies to actualize meaningful passions that can make a difference.

I came back with a heavy burden of responsibility. It seems that someone turned on the light at the end of the tunnel.



It is long but I hope it is useful.

*Avner Haramati: As a volunteer, one of the founders and former chairman of `Besod-Siach` (The Enigma of Dialogue), an NGO that promotes dialogue between groups in conflicts within the Israeli society. The initiator and today chairman of “ The Inter Cultural Center of Jerusalem ” an NGO that promotes co-living of all the communities in Jerusalem. Creates projects and facilitate meetings between Israelis and Palestinians, to promote trust and partnerships between the two nations.*

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### **This is Harrison's story**

Fifty Palestinians and Israelis gathered in Rome to talk about themselves, their future, and the possibilities of peace. They met in Open Space.

Two days before the opening of the gathering, yet another “incident” took place. I do not know the details, and they really don't matter, but in a moment the possibility of the

convergence in Rome hung on a thread. The Israeli government moved on Ramallah and only by very quick actions were the delegates from that city moved to Jerusalem a day early so that they could make the trip. Once in Rome, all 50 came to the Centro Dionsyia – a marvelous 500 year old villa which over looks the Basilica of St. Peters. We thought to meet in a large pavilion located in the gardens, but upon arrival the rains came too. Not just a little rain but sheets and torrents, dark clouds, high winds, thunder, lightening.

The dripping participants moved inside the villa for the opening ceremonies, but the time was late, and they were tired, some having been on their feet for 24 hours. So the opening remarks by the Italian minister for the Middle East were put to the side, as were the greetings from the conference organizers. We began with some powerful comments by Nada, a Serbian who has been working ceaselessly in that troubled part of the world. How to deal with your anger, pain and despair -- all spoken from the heart and from experience. We ate and went to bed.

The next morning 50 Palestinians and Israelis sat in a circle under the pavilion. I opened the space asking each person to look around the circle and notice the people. It was quite a group. Not just your standard peacenics – but people from the right and the left politically and religiously.

I began by saying that I had come because I cared for my friends in Palestine and Israel, and also for myself and my children. And although the people in that circle may feel themselves isolated and alone in their own private Hell with their own agonizing story, that story was also the story of our world. Like it or not they were in the hot crucible of the future of humankind. The future of all of us is being created in that strange place known as the Holy Land, even as it has been for millennia. So I cared, but I was also on the edge of despair or beyond. I could not think of any way out. The issues were so deep and intractable that movement appeared denied. Space was closed. But still I came, and still I cared – as I presumed was true for each of them as well.

When the present is closed, and the future confused, sometimes the past can be helpful, and I recalled a time 10 years ago when I happened to be in South Africa as Mandela was released from prison. We did an Open space then in Capetown, and people sat in a circle fearing a future that appeared all too dark and bloody. Over the several years following Mandela's release, as I came and went, my friends in the US and Europe would ask me what I thought about the possibilities. To their surprise and mine too, I said I thought that South Africa would make it. Not without problems for sure, but they would make it. When asked why, I responded that there were two things I know about every South African I knew. They all loved their land with something approaching mystic intensity. And secondly, they all loved to sing. I felt that people who loved their land and loved to sing would find the way, as they seem to be doing. I knew that each person sitting in that circle in Rome also loved their land. They too loved to sing. Maybe we would find a way. But that way would not be easy, having many dark and fearful places. But we could not avoid the dark, or we would never see the light. We had to go deep. Each one of us must make that journey by ourselves, but it always helps to have a friend. So I invited them to find a friend, best of all a new friend, and don't forget to sing. And so we started.

The open circle quickly filled with people posting issues. In 20 min flat, the work for the next two days was on the wall. It was not a pretty picture, and hard work in abundance lay ahead, but we were under way. All day long, in the usual way of Open Space, the conversation continued. Sessions convened and dispersed. The details of those conversations are known only to the participants, but sitting in that space, I felt an incredible flow of passion and desire, hope and exasperation, fear and no small amount of trembling. It was all coming out. But as we came to the end of the day, there was a peace which did not exclude conflict, but somehow transcended it. We gathered in the circle for Evening news. An olive tree had given me a branch for our talking stick. And we

shared. 50 Palestinians and Israelis sitting in a circle, passing an olive branch each to the other.

The next morning broke clear. Not a cloud in the sky. The warm Italian Sun gave energy to the place, and we began again. New issues were posted, conversations commenced, but there was an edge. It seemed that on this day we would go into those dark and frightful places that had perhaps been visited before, but now it would go deeply. To set the tone, one of our number noted that there had been yet more killing in that land they called home. As the morning progressed, the clouds came, and by noon the Sun was completely hidden. A cool breeze brought a chill. Over the afternoon, it became darker and colder in stark contrast to the heat and intensity of the conversations. By late afternoon, I found myself sitting on a banks of steps in front of the villa between two large groups in heated debate. I could hear some of the words, but didn't need to listen in order to catch the tones of anger, despair, fear, frustration – all came rolling towards me like a heavy surf – acid discontent and pain. It was deep and it went deeper.

Shortly after 5 pm, I rang the Temple Bells signaling Evening News. Nobody was listening, and the waves of pain and fear rolled on. There was nothing to do, but simply be there with it all. After all this was why we came together.

Sometime later – I do not know exactly when – the conversation ceased only to be replaced with an awesome silence. For practical reasons, it was not possible to return to the pavilion for Evening News, instead we gathered in a garden, sitting formally in white lawn chairs. The circle was no bigger or smaller than previously – but the distance between us all was huge. It appeared almost as the Theater of the Absurd, surreal and menacing. Dark clouds, chilled air, white chairs, green grass, somber people. I passed the talking stick – an olive branch – wondering whether it would simply wilt in the atmosphere. Most people simply passed it along without saying a word. Many of those who spoke noted the difference between that moment and the evening before. Some voiced a feeling that all of us had. Yesterday had been but an illusion, a phantasm, a terrible ironic dream which would haunt us even as it disappeared. Evening News was over, and the group scattered, some walking alone – others with a friend or two. It was very quiet.

That night, after a meal I would hardly touch, I went to my room, which was located just to one side of our pavilion where once again we would meet in the morning. The pavilion was lighted all through the night illuminating a silent circle of 50 chairs. And over the top of the pavilion, I could see the dome of St. Peter's bathed in floodlights standing silently as it had for centuries. If I slept that night, I can't remember. I do not know what the others felt as they wrestled with the night, but I knew waves of fear and anger, fear and desperation. What had started as a glimmer of hope just two days before now seemed but a haunting, ironic nightmare.

And yet through it all I knew that the hope had been real, the space had been open, we had seen some light. But all of that had been followed by a forbidding darkness which threatened, or perhaps had succeeded – in quenching the light. It became clear that the end to our story was a matter of our choosing. We could see only light quenched by darkness and choose to live in that darkness. Or we could see that it was only because we had known the light and hope that we had been able to go deeply into the darkness. And so we could carry both the light and the darkness and continue the journey with a friend(s) – remembering to sing. Our choice. Some words from Rumi, the Suffi poet came to my mind. "There is a field, beyond right thinking and wrong thinking. I will meet you there."

The night ended and the dawn broke, and once again we were sitting in a circle. 50 Palestinians and Israelis, on our final day together. I opened the circle with a few words. Exactly what they were, I can't remember – but something like... We have known some hope and light together. We have entered into the darkness. This is a day of choosing. I

propose that we take the next hour to be with our selves and/or talk with our friends. In one hour, I will ring the bells. Those who wish to return to our circle, please do so. Those who find that they cannot come back – for whatever reason, know that their choice is honored and respected. Then I said the words of Rumi one more time. “There is a field beyond right thinking and wrong thinking. I will meet you there.” And I left.

Over the hour, I walked the grounds, past the olive trees, down the many paths, pausing to gaze at the looming Basilica of St Peters. Strangely silent. Strangely comforting. Others were around, but I spoke to no one, and no one spoke to me. As the hour ended, I passed an olive tree. It gave me a fresh branch. I started ringing the bell and slowly returned to the circle of 50 chairs, not having a clue as to what might happen next.

I was surprised to see all the chairs full. My words were few – something like – We have known the light and walked in the darkness. And where are you my friends? Where are you going, and what are you going to do? I passed the fresh olive branch to my right.

For the next several hours, people spoke, one at a time...with respect. As the hours past, people came and went as they needed, but the always returned. There were tears and laughter. New projects were announced, and old ones revisited. Commitments were made to continue, and the roughness of the journey ahead acknowledged. On this last day we had been joined by a special guest, the head of the Islamic community in Rome. And after all had spoken, I invited him to speak. He was introduced by David Rosen, a leading Orthodox Rabbi from Jerusalem. As I remember his words were something like, “The Koran teaches us that to kill one person is to kill us all. And to save one person is to save the world. We must take whatever steps we can.” When he finished, there was absolute silence, and I asked the group to stand, and one more time look into the eyes of each of their fellows. It was a long look. And then I asked that they turn in place so that each person faced outwards to all points of the compass. I wished them well on their journey, and asked that they remember, when they felt lonely and discouraged, that there was much love and respect behind them, at least at this moment. The circle broke. We had lunch.

The afternoon was an incredible flow of informal discussions, moments of reflection, relaxation. Dinner came, musicians from Palestine and Israel performed, people danced. And in the morning busses and taxis departed. I returned from Rome last night, and this morning I read that more have been killed. The struggle goes on, but I do not think it is hopeless. At the very least we all have a choice.



*Harrison Owen is President of H.H.Owen and Co. His academic background and training centered on the nature and function of myth, ritual and culture. In the middle '60s, he left academe to work with a variety of organizations including small West African villages, urban (American and African) community organizations, Peace Corps, Regional Medical Programs, National Institutes of Health, and Veterans Administration. Along the way he discovered that his study of myth, ritual and culture had direct application to these social systems. In*

*1979 he created H.H.Owen and Company in order to explore the culture of organizations in transformation as a theorist and practicing consultant. Harrison is the originator of Open Space Technology.*

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## **Israel: Working for a Better Jerusalem - Opportunities and Challenges**

**Place: East Jerusalem, Israel**

**Participants: 17 Palestinian social activists**

**Story told by Carol Daniel Kasbari on 1 Oct 2003**

I opened space on Sunday for a group of Palestinian social activists in East Jerusalem who were gathered under the title of "working for a better Jerusalem- opportunities and challenges". This wonderful Palestinian group had gathered twice previously in a spontaneous way to try to make a difference in East Jerusalem. During our meetings we were so ambitious to change and had so much energy but felt like we don't know how to use it. So it was then when I suggested using Open Space in order to make the discussions more efficient. They were



hesitant at the beginning, I gave a short introduction on OS, I didn't want to explain much because I find out that every time I try to persuade people to use it, they oppose to it or they become very suspicious, they would say something like "if it is so good why aren't the politicians using it here", I have received this answer many times, so I stopped persuading! The group were excited and agreed that the next meeting will be "different".

We were around 17 people from different backgrounds and places, most of them don't even know each other, there were students, two University professors, some were Christians, some were Moslems, one was a Hamas sympathizer, two were very liberal actors, and three different women. We all shared one thing, our deep feeling/concern about Jerusalem and its Palestinian population. We had no sponsor or any organization supporting us, so I wrote an open invitation and sent it to all the people who were in the previous meetings but also to others who were not and asked to spread the word.

Our OS was scheduled for the 28th of September, the day of the breakout of the "Intifada" or uprising three years ago, I expected to hear politics, and declarations and so on. But it wasn't there at all; I have experienced the concept of "be prepared to be surprised" very strongly. I heard a deep commitment to serve the poor, the uneducated, the young students and the unused talents of people in Jerusalem.

People were very enthusiastic to start. After explaining how it works, the space was wide open but I heard nothing, it was silent so I wasn't sure if I made myself clear about "grabbing a piece of paper from the middle and writing anything you have passion for that is related to the main theme". No body moved and my feelings were that they were waiting for more instructions. Again I explained in few words what we are going to do and then sat on the side. I believe that they were in misbelieve that there was no agenda, and that they can discuss anything they want. One of them bravely approached and grabbed a piece of paper and asked if he can write anything he wants, I replied of course you could. Then all of them at once moved quickly to the middle and grabbed more than one piece of paper. They were enthusiastic and each of the 17 members fixed a topic on the community board. We had only three sessions: two for dialogue, and the last one for the selection of the working groups.

The negotiation process took its time in the marketplace and some agreed to mix their topics due to the short time, so we had 3 dialogue groups in the first hour, one about the unemployment problem and lack of work opportunities for the youth that turns them to

alcohol and drugs, violence, crime, etc. The second group dealt with a very serious issue of the social extremism, solidarity, the need for self enlightenment, they discussed the lack of the social and self awareness of people in this area, they didn't blame only the Israeli occupation for all this but they admit that Palestinians has a big part of responsibility. The third group discussed the role of the theatre in building a better society, and the need to work on the national structure and not only the infrastructure. These three groups have gathered all the 17 topics and mixed them together in a magical way, each of the participants discussed his/her topic that hung on the wall within these three groups, I could hear their discussions and I can say that no one gave up on his passion. Some of the topics that were hung on the marketplaces were:

- The Fence, the social, economic and political danger behind it.
- Living in a tense mood and stretched nerves all the time in Jerusalem.
- Improving the quality of life through better education.
- Social and self-awareness.

I managed somehow to get them back to the big circle after the two sessions and two hours before the end, to try to get some sort of synthesis and self select into working groups. They organized themselves into 5 working groups, and some of them were in two working groups at the same time, they used the law of the two feet in every possible way, they jumped from one group to another in order to contribute and be part of both groups. They loved the idea to be constantly moving from one place to another.

After an hour and half they announced their big projects/plans in writing and agreed to a series of future meetings for the working groups and a monthly meeting for the whole group. Some said that they would encourage more members to attend the next meeting.

We had the last half an hour some reflections on the experience; no one missed his or her turn to speak. The reflections were so positive and enthusiastic, something that I didn't predict before starting, the theatre guy said that he was waiting for such an experience since years, he never felt so free and open to others and that he found what he was looking for. Many of them loved the idea of "the law of the two feet", as they expressed that they didn't feel that they were pushed or obliged to participate or to stay where they don't feel like staying. Many others appreciated the quality of work that has been done in such short time (5 hours), getting to 5 projects, and getting to know each other closely without having to go through the formal traditional way.

I felt lucky to work with such a group on such important issues and to make a difference in Jerusalem, and it is my pleasure to share this experience with all of you.



*Carol Daniel- Kasbari is born and raised in Nazareth in a Palestinian family. A graduate of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem with an M.A. in Management of Community Organizations, Non-profit Organizations and Public Policy, a B.A. in Sociology and Anthropology, and another B.A. in French Literature. Bilingual in Arabic and Hebrew, has studied and conducted various courses in facilitation for groups in conflict. Worked and initiated many projects for Israelis and Palestinians, together and separately through different organizations like IPCRI (Israel /Palestine Centre for Research and Information), IPMF (Israeli Palestinian Media Forum), and the Israeli Association of Community Centers. Besides my freelance work in facilitation for different organizations I am presently working as a consultant with the UNESCO department of Freedom of Expression on media dialogue projects and on strengthening the Palestinian media.*

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# **Bulgaria: Creating Networks for Social Transformation through Intercultural Learning**

**Client: Institute for International Cooperation of the German Adult Education Association**

**Place: Sofia, Bulgaria**

**Participants: 45 adult educators from 10 South-East European countries**

**Story told by Holger Nauheimer and Emilia Ilieva on 30 March 2005**

This is a story in two parts, told by the facilitator, Holger Nauheimer and the client, Emilia Ilieva

## **This is Holger's story**

### 1. Sponsor, Preparation, Participants and Topic

Beginning 2005, I received an email from Bulgaria, inviting me to facilitate an Open Space for an international group of adult educators in Sofia, Bulgaria. Unfortunately, the tight budget did not allow me to travel to Sofia for in-depth discussion with the organizer of the workshop. So, all agreements between Emilia and myself were done by telephone and mail. We took several rounds of communication until we came up with the topic of the event:

"Creating Networks for Social Transformation through Intercultural Learning"

Convener was the German Association for Adult Education which is implementing various projects for adult education in South-East Europe. About 60 network partner were invited – 30 from Bulgaria and 30 from Romania, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Greece, Turkey, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, Kosovo, USA and Germany. Finally, 45 folks turned up.

### 2. Structure of the Event

In the preparation of the workshop, a couple of different explicit and implicit objectives of the conference emerged:

- exchange about the topic
- networking
- identification of projects
- learning about OST as a methodology

This was the design I came up with to satisfy these different agendas:

Day 1: Open Space (3 rounds of 90 minutes)

Day 2: continuation of the OS (2 rounds of 90 minutes); after lunch opening of an action space in which the participants were encouraged to come up with projects (2 rounds of 60 minutes)

Day 3 (half day): reading round, action planning, questions about OST, closing round and lunch.

### 3. Logistics und Material

Prior to the event, I had mailed a material list to Emilia. Most of the requested material was available locally – except pin boards. After having seen photos of the venue, I decided to go ahead



without any surrogates for pin boards and to paste everything to the walls. With 447 square meters, the room offered sufficient space. The disadvantage of not having windows was compensated by the fact that we could use all four walls (at least that was what we thought...). In any case I brought some strong newsprint and good quality adhesive tape with me.

While organizing the room, something happened which brought me close to a heart attack. Once we had the first sheets pasted to the wall, the banquet manager rushed in, shouting a decisive "Njet!" – she would not allow us to use the walls because she feared damages to remain after the conference. Emilia solved the conflict by signing a contract in which we took the responsibility for any damages that would be caused by using the walls as a big board.

#### 4. The Conference

##### DAY 1

Few of the participants knew Open Space. However, like in any other Open Space I experienced the method was quickly comprehended and adopted. There were 24 topics on the Bulletin Board, most of them were covered by working groups. I had six breakout spaces prepared, all in the same room, but we never used more than five. Participants quickly went to work and enjoyed themselves. We had three rounds of 90 minutes each.



At dinner, I committed a mistake which had a serious impact on my psychological well-being: I asked Emilia whether she was content with the first day. "Not exactly" was her response. She was not satisfied with the quality of reporting and did not yet see the conference yielding palpable results. Some of the topics she considered not related to the topic, e.g., "Night Life in Sofia" (in which I participated – against the eternal rules for OST facilitators). She also doubted whether projects would come up during the second and third day.

For the night, I was a little bit shaken but on the next morning, I returned to normality and to trusting the process.

##### DAY 2

The day started with two more rounds of 90 minutes. During lunch, we cleared the walls and prepared a fresh Bulletin Board.

The Action Space in which I encouraged people to come up with projects, was a shock. There were "only" 7 projects announced, of which 4 weren't really projects but affirmations or questions. The remaining 3 groups that were spread over two time slots of 60 minutes basically covered the same issue, which was virtual networking and the creation of electronic platforms.



At the end of day 2, I was more frustrated than the day before. Amazing though, Emilia was very happy.

## DAY 3

Based on the experiences of day 2, I had no idea whether action planning would work – it was basically a repetition of the Action Space. On top of it, I expected participants to come late, not at all or without energy, because they had tested the nightlife of Sofia (practical application of the results of day 1). Again, the old mantra of Open Space, “be prepared for surprises”, worked perfectly: I hadn’t really finished my introduction to action planning while a run started on the prepared templates (What? When? Who? First Steps? Next Meeting?). It reminded me of Harrison’s metaphor on the stampede you can expect when you open the Bulletin Board.

Suddenly, we had more than a dozen realistic projects and several agreements on cooperation were made. Another evidence for the assumption that OST works best when people have two nights to digest the process.

Everybody was happy at the end, including the participants, Emilia and myself. Two months after this event, she and her team conducted their first own Open Space workshop with 50 teachers. I predict that the Balkans will be an area where Open Space will flourish in the near future.



*Holger Nauheimer has a long experience as a technical and management consultant for private and public organizations, having worked in more than 30 countries on all continents. He specializes in the transformation of organizations and the people who work in those organizations. He is the author of the Change Management Toolbook ([www.change-management-toolbook.com](http://www.change-management-toolbook.com)), an Internet resource on approaches and methodologies for change management, and the founder of Change Facilitation s.r.o., a Bratislava based international company. Holger has been teaching consulting and advisory skills for several years.*

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### **This is Emilia’s story**

On March 18-20 2005, fifty participants from across South Eastern Europe (SEE) gathered in Sofia, Bulgaria for an Open Space Technology Conference with the goal of discussing and developing projects for networking and intercultural learning.

The participants came from different backgrounds, and brought a wealth of knowledge and experience to the conference. They included students, teachers, adult educators from local and regional NGOs, and university professors.

The nature of networks is to bring people together and offer them the opportunity to be connected in order to exchange ideas and expertise. Networks imply transferability of knowledge, and the possibility of having a larger picture in mind while focusing on resolving local issues, and vice versa. Hence, they are particularly needed in fostering

regional cooperation, as networks can play the vital role of supporting the processes of social transformation where personal contributions influence regional solution within a common framework.

During this conference, participants:

- Met and worked with other people involved in intercultural learning from across SEE;
- Reflected on common issues and collaborated on possible solutions;
- Discussed existing resources, and how to best maximise their potential;

### **The Results of Our Open Space**

The Open Space Conference on “Creating Networks for Social Transformation through Intercultural Learning” began with the participants gathered into a circle, an introduction of the topic, and information on the methodology. The circle and the empty schedule on the wall served as the “Marketplace of Ideas,” which is central to the organisation of the Open Space.

The “Marketplace of Ideas” is borrowed from public spaces in small villages. It allows information to be shared collectively. Participants were invited to write their workshop on A3 paper, introduce the topic, and post their workshops on the schedule. This process generated a variety of idea for discussion and future action, and in total, there were 22 workshops held over the first day and a half. Some of the participant suggested and respectively managed workshops including various topics such as:

- What are the theoretical foundations of Open Space Conference?
- How do we promote education for peace through history teaching?
- What a new European curriculum for intercultural education could be?
- What is the potential of intercultural tourism?
- How could we use ICT for networking?

From there, the participants moved on to the seven breakout spaces, were scattered around the room. At each of these spaces, there were chairs, and chart paper. Participants ran their workshops as they saw fit. In each workshop, someone kept track of the discussion, and wrote down the minutes of the meeting. These minutes were copied, enlarged, and posted on the wall for participants to look at, and make comments on. All of these papers were later compiled into a documentation, which was distributed before the end of the conference.

A second half-day session (Action Space) allowed for the creation of projects based on the topics that had been discussed during the initial half of the Open Space Conference. These included the following:

- SEE e-network for intercultural learning
- Regional improvement of Early Childhood Education through community action
- Intercultural educators forum in SEE
- Youth network in SEE
- Educational consultants network

Participants left the conference both pleased and provoked, as they saw the importance of their own inspiration and creativity, and its potential for achieving social transformation. Furthermore, they could see the value of self-organized activity, and its relevance to developing projects and proposals.

During the final day of the conference, participants created concrete action plans based of their project ideas and discussions. Some participants were deeply enthusiastic about developing regional youth exchanges, and made a commitment to creating such a system. Others left determined to create an electronic network for intercultural education

and educational consulting. In addition, participants from Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria also developed proposals for disseminating Open Space in their countries, and to use the system in other contexts.

### **Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Implementation**

From our experience, Open Space Technology is an effective way of planning and managing large meetings in specific circumstances. It offers some key advantages, including:

- Drawing on the expertise and potential of participants, thus bringing in their core needs and concerns.
- Producing a book of proceedings which summarises the results of the conference.
- Allowing for cross-fertilisation of ideas across a broad range of disciplines.

However, it should be noted that Open Space is not suitable for every circumstance. In particular:

- Participants should have a deep, vested interest in the topic under discussion, and is thus most effective at addressing concrete issues that they have personal experience with.
- Open Space Technology makes use of the present potential of the participants, and is therefore less suited as a means of conveying new information. It can, however, be used as part of a training, particularly as a means of asking participants to decide on how to best implement their new skills.
- If specific topics need to be addressed, then a separate time period (preferably before the Open Space conference) can be allocated to deal with them.



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## **Canada: Getting Community Housing Units Up and Running**

**Client: Social Housing Provider**

**Place: Toronto, Canada**

**Participants: 225 members of a social housing provider**

**Story told by Judy Gast on 28 May 2003**

It feels good to recommend an approach that not only is the best to 'get the job done', but also, per the CEO of our client, 'will be the watershed event that turns the tide on the culture of our organization'. It is also fulfilling to work with an organization to plan and implement OS event, with minimal hype, fanfare or organizational politics, while applying "Open Space" values (invite all the stakeholders, voluntary self selection, simplicity, etc.).

Some background information to set the context - I am an Organizational Development consultant who recently decided to join the world of external consulting due to space opening in ways that I hadn't anticipated (corporate layoff with a severance package). After having "tried everything" with my corporate clients, I am pretty much convinced that Open Space is 'as good as it gets' in terms of an approach to get a job done. While not universally applicable, certainly the best approach I'd come across for many of the situations clients had asked me to help them with.

This story is about our client, a social housing provider for the city of Toronto. They are in the beginning stages of implementing a three-year strategic plan that entails a major organizational shift. They are decentralizing by implementing a 'Community Model', where services will be provided by 27 new 'Community Housing Units' (CHUs), rather than the head office. The theme of the Open Space was "Getting the CHUs Up and Running". The sponsor wanted to engage the staff members impacted by the new CHUs to talk about and decide what needs to happen, and to work together after the event to make it happen. Perfect application...

In all appearances, this Open Space planning and event were typical. Larry Peterson and I worked with a sponsor and a team to organize the event. The team and sponsor decided to send the invitation to everyone in the organization and accept anyone who 'volunteered' to attend. We originally planned for 150, however by the deadline (a week before the event) we had 242 'volunteers' and 225 showed up! The proceedings included 60 reports, including detailed discussions and plans for the day of the turnover, and recommendations for addressing longer-term systemic issues.

What impressed me about this situation and event was the simplicity, how it came together quickly and naturally. All the basics were taken care of and there was minimal embellishment. The power of the principles of self-organization were evident, genuine community emerged, and the participants demonstrated leadership, passion and responsibility. While I have seen the impact before, I am always amazed and impressed with what happens during Open Space.

While one event does not change a culture, it certainly appears to have created a jump-start for this organization. We met yesterday with the planning team, the CEO, sponsors and the leaders of the top topics (those topics that were voted as most important for organizational attention right now). The CEO opened by saying that he couldn't imagine having a meeting of this group of people prior to the Open Space. Typically work has been organized through the hierarchical structure and this was the first meeting with a group of people from different levels and organizations - all committed to work together toward the same goal. He challenged the group to move forward with implementation. He outlined his role (and the planning team's) in supporting the individuals and their teams' efforts. He talked about unleashing the creative energy in the organization and creating/being the kind of organization they want to become - an "Open Space" organization. All the right stuff...

Obviously, this story is just beginning. It will be interesting to see how it evolves and, hopefully, be a part of 'whatever happens'. No doubt there will be chaos, confusion and conflict. And from that will emerge the creative energy, ideas and the commitment to act.



*Judy Gast was introduced to Open Space in June 1994 when she took a course from Harrison Owen, Larry Peterson and Birgitt Williams. Since then she has been a convert, promoting the approach to family, friends, neighbors and unsuspecting clients, and utilising the approach in her work and the Open Space values in her life.*

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## **Mozambique: Participatory District Developing Plan Initialitation**

**Place: Dondo District, Sofala Province Mozambique**

**No. of Participants: 150**

**Story told by Bernd Weber on 25 Sep 2003**

I just came back from a one day Open Space in Dondo District (Sofala Province, Mozambique). Dondo is about to produce a District Development Plan. They work together with an Austrian Development Project, which adopted a highly participatory rapid approach.

A stakeholder-balanced Planning, Preparation and Logistics (Equipa PPL Dondo) team had met 10 times. I orientated the team installation and coached them twice. They met 10 times and then again for a very intensive last day preparation session with me. There were some additional coachings by Dona F., a national consultant. She is the animator and coordinator of the district teams and operational representative of my client. I also did some short telephone coachings with her during the process

Today 140-150 participants (half of them had been personally invited according to the stakeholder analysis which the PPL team had done, others came because they where informed by radio, public announcements and local community meetings) arrived at the building of the district administration. A wonderful mix. Absolutely the right people.

The following people met to discuss development problems of various stakeholders in the district and to make practical recommendations for actions or projects to be initialized: 2 chiefs ("regulos" de Mafambisse and Savane), 6 children, 2 professors from Universidade Católica de Mozambique (UCM), 2 professors from the University for Pedagogics, 2 from the Provincial Government, 2 District Administrators from neighbour districts ("distritos fronteiros"), 2 admin. clarks from Buzi District (they run another type of participatory DD planning and wanted to learn), 9 District Directors from the various sectors of Dondo (Agriculture and Rural Development, Health, Education, Plan & Finance,...), 8 people from NGOs and associations, 1 student from Beira University (who said he tries to make sense of what he is studying for and heard in the radio about the Participatory Planning Event). Two municipality secretaries ("vereadores") and the president of the Dondo Town Council, some people from the opposition party from Mafambisse District. The District Police Chief, some middle level management people from bigger enterprises, some journalists, who participated in the same way as all the others at the "whole-system-1 day exercise". And the working climate was influenced to the best by of a many of women "from the interior", more than 60 small farmers ("camponesas", mainly from Mafambisse and Savane (this had not been planned at the beginning, but they accepted most of my recommendations regarding stakeholder representativity.



The PPL team has also had the function to intensify the communication with the stakeholder groups, they had written a letter and produced material for public announcements at various levels.

Lots of things went wrong: The transport logistics had forgotten a whole truckload of people from the interior, from an area which already feels permanently forgotten by the

district administration, so we waited and started the Open Space Introduction 2 hours later than originally planned (which means for local conditions, that we were 1 hour late related to the time schedule because 1 hour delay had already been part of the plan). The PPL team had no real idea about the next steps, because there had been integration problems of a new member, one of those who had been invited because if not invited he could have become a 'saboteur' as our first stakeholder analysis had shown, so instead of doing an Open Space on "What do we have to do to until the event". So I could only 'simulate' the generation of the agenda with them. Well, and so on.

But then: The Administradora do Distrito de Dondo opened the space in a traditional way, motivating each and everybody to work together on the development and a better future for the District of Dondo. After my introduction on the steps to go the 150 participants generated about 140 working themes.

I had prepared a bulletin board for 4 timeslots and 17 breakout spaces. So the board was 'overwhelmed' by "temas de paixao". There came pressure from my client to only allow one item per person, but I had guaranteed in my opening statement, that each and every voice would be heard and nothing would be decided by somebody else then them, and as OS facilitator my function was, of course, to withstand the pressure to hold the space "open". So we put all the incoming pages with name and tema de paixao of each group convener all around the bulletin board.

I explained that the "problem" was caused by the richness in individual contributions. "You produced it, you solve it in a cooperative way. The solution it, to fold the 140 items together into not more than  $3 \times 17 = 51$  working groups" (the 4th timeslot had already been lost at that moment, because the whole procedure was quite a slow one: I spoke a sentence in Portuguese, then the translators brought it to Chisena and Chindao, the two mainly spoken local languages).

This was the moment, when the client and the event convener (district admin.) became quite nervous. The district administrator's feet wanted to go out of the room with her, but could not, because she had invited everybody to come here. Her perception was: first a very late start, then a slow tri-lingual explanation of the daily program, of the logistics and on working steps from building the agenda on. Then: a quantity of first results, which had obviously not been foreseen by the facilitator. Everybody seemed to be stuck. And then: from one moment to the other, like a tropical storm: A hell of working noise, everything went out of control; people running to and fro in front of the bulletin board. My client and the district administrator showed big distress in their body language, and told me, that the event seems to end in a disaster. While both talked to me, the other participants cleared things rapidly: with 17 minutes everything was condensed to 32 groups. And off they went: down to work.

I had to accept, that nobody cared any longer for the bulletin board, the defined timeslots were forgotten. I saw 6 big clusters of people working more or less all the time in the same configuration, but at 3 p.m. they fixed 20 reports on 20 different themes on the walls.

The market of results was a big event. Everybody here knows markets. But nobody had ever done a market during a meeting. They loved it. Some "sellers" invested all their everyday knowledge about market presentation. The fears of the district administrator lady and my client (Austrian Development Cooperation) had evaporated. When my "sino chinês" (Chinese bell) announced that everybody can now buy - according to his/her scarce resources of 5 MU's (monetary units = sticky dots) they really went to it. 18 group results were 'bought'.



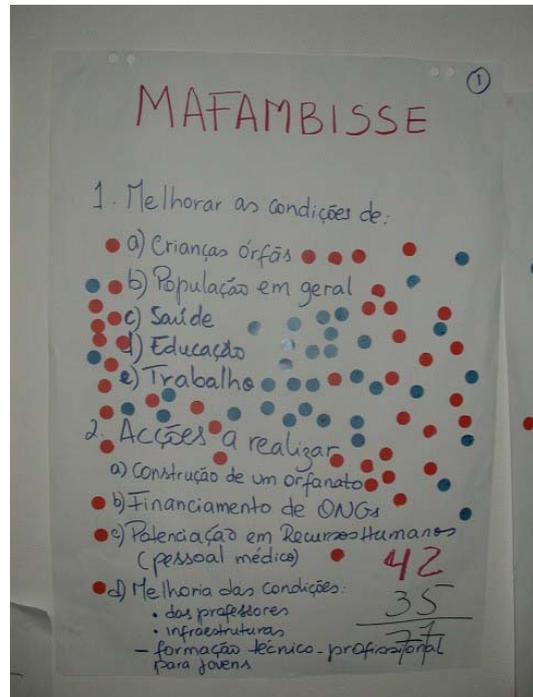
### Priority I:

The result of one group, which plans an integrated action for a really disadvantaged zone (from the "forgotten" Mafambisse) was the ladies hit: It got 42 red points, and 35 blue ones from the gentlemen. It is an action mix: building an orphanage; create an NGO, vocational training for young people, improving the working conditions of teachers...

### Priority II

A "men's" project. 34 masculine MU's for street and bridge building, only 6 women's MUs.

A great moment, when I perceived, that priority One had been given to a "tema de paixao" of a lady, who had come during the end of her group work to tell me that she has a good idea and a ardent feeling for doing something to resolve some of the basic problems in Mafambisse. But her group would not let her develop it, because there were so many other convenors there. And she felt so left alone with her "tema de paixao". I told her, that she does not perceive what the one law says. And then I pushed her a little (not really knowing why): "You have 7 minutes left until the market opens. So if you really want to fight for your theme, be your own group and sell your result to the whole community, as all the others do!" What she did. With 77 prioritization votes she evidently stopped to believe, that she was left alone by the others. But she could hardly believe it. Well, that was her problem.



For the final circle one of the participants lent me his crutched stick. (Since the necessary participation of the vulnerable groups of society was one of the results of the planning group, there were also some handicapped/challenged people there). It was a perfect talking stick. People stood up and leaned comfortably on his crutch and talked about their (actually good) feelings. The circle lasted for three quarters of an hour. He was the last one to talk, took back his crutch and went then away, like all the others. But hidden in his crutch, he had all the good feelings of those, who had given their final words to the Open Space of everybody. Most of the participants got a copy of the digital photos of the groups' result before leaving and going back to the "interior".

I have to admit one thing. Let's go back to the introduction: The explanation of the bulletin board is not easy for illiterate people. They have to read it in two ways: horizontally and vertically at the same time. So the procedure of explanation - trilingual - costs a lot of energy. I felt that it went down and down. And people wanted to eat. So I skipped the explanation of the principles and the law at that point. After lunch I felt, we had to go to action. So the agenda was produced. I hoped to be able to explain the principles, laws, animals later. I should have known better though. When the market had digested the complexity of 140 themes, they did not care for me any longer, they simply went to work (This may partly explain the immobile clusters which I observed later on).

But there had been a good presentation of the givens. The message: this workshop will deal with your "temas de paixao" and "what you will not do, will not be done here" had come through. So - not as paradoxally as my first thought had seen it - I could perceive the principles and the law emerge during the ongoing group work. And of course there were both animals around. Simply because they knew what they wanted and of course also because the event was not controlled after the groups had started their work.

Today more than anytime before, I felt, how robust a technique this open space thing is. I would call each OST practitioner, who forgets to explain the basic principles of open space a hopeless case. But it worked anyway.

I still feel the 'taste' of today's Open Space on my tongue.

Very sweet.



*Bernd Weber is a Organization Development and Change Management Consultant of Austrian nationality who lives and works as an expatriate in sub-saharian Africa since 1995 in various sectors, mainly education, rural area development and public sector reform. He reserves a considerable part of his working capacity for pro bono consultancy, mainly for micro-entrepreneurs to be in his everyday environment.*

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**Open Space Technology Facilitation - International Training Course  
Bratislava, Slovakia September 4-7, 2005  
with Valerie Morris and Holger Nauheimer**

**Programme and Content**

**Day 1: Background (13.00-18.30 hrs)**

- What is Open Space?
- History of Open Space Technology
- Theory: Change in complex systems
- Working with the client to prepare an Open Space event.

**Day 2: Open Space conference (9.00-18.00 hrs)**

- A full day Open Space event on a topic chosen by the participants.  
Facilitator: Valerie Morris

**Day 3: How to plan, prepare and conduct an Open Space event (9.00-18.00 hrs)**

- Logistics and preparation
- A half day Open Space event on Open Space Technology  
Facilitator: Holger Nauheimer

**Day 4: Roles and Responsibilities (9.00-16.00)**

- The role of the Open Space Facilitator
- Applications of OST
- Preconditions of OST
- Action planning and conversion of results

**The Trainers:**



**Valerie Morris, South Africa**, founder of Renaissance Business Associates (RBA) in South Africa in 1985 is a Management Consultancy committed to personal development and organizational change. Valerie's key focus of interest is the maximising of the flow of information, communication, and inclusivity in organizations. She is also a committed net-worker. She is considered the South African expert in Open Space Technology as a large group process for the enhancement of dialogue and deep listening which is used for strategic planning, restructuring, releasing creativity and involving as many people as possible in an organization.



**Holger Nauheimer, Germany and Slovakia**, has a long experience as a technical and management consultant for private and public organizations in Germany and worldwide. He has supported Change Management Processes in more than 30 countries, among them Germany, Italy, Argentina, Pakistan, Nepal, South Africa, etc, applying and teaching Open Space Technology, Future Search Conferences, Appreciative Inquiry and other Change Management Approaches. He is director of Change Facilitation s.r.o., Bratislava, Slovakia, and regularly advises international projects in Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas.

**More information and registration at**  
[www.change-management-toolbook.com](http://www.change-management-toolbook.com)