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Open Space Technology is alive, growing and developing all over Eastern Europe

by Csaba Császár, Bohdan Maslych, Igor Ovchinniko and Jo Toepfer

If there is truth in the old saying that “You can neither teach Open Space, nor learn Open Space – but maybe we all can remember it”, then there should be a training design that is congruent with this idea. By experiencing the method, rather than by “learning” it by consuming presentations, speeches, exercises and lectures, participants will “remember” it and realise that it has been part of their lives all along.

Some practitioners in the worldwide Open Space community have been exploring such an Open Space Technology (OST) Training design for years, and have tested it over 25 times with more than 800 participants all over the world, including Russia, Hun-

gary and Ukraine. This article tells you about this unique training program and its effects, consequences, and follow-up activities in those three countries.

The training design

Working with OST requires radically different approaches than those of traditional consulting and management work. To meet this challenge, completely new ways of “training” had to be designed. Over the years, OST practitioners in Europe and elsewhere have developed a design that takes seriously the old saying: “Open Space can neither be taught nor learned but can possibly be remembered”.

This has led to a radically new approach of training that provides time and space for optimally “remembering” open space by relying on the forces of self-organisation. The training design consists of three consecutive OST events each with a specific focus (experience, reflection and practice) and a number of parallel activities that support self organised learning, spread over six days.



Participants post issues during Moscow training

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Trainees practising the role of the facilitator, during Ukraine training.

Experience as participant

In the first OST event, participants experience themselves in an Open Space event. It consists of a Planning Session in which the whole group arrives at the theme for the first Open Space that they will engage in. The three-hour Planning Session takes place in the first afternoon immediately after a brief introduction to the Training Design.

The evening of day 1 is spent in small reflection groups with assigned tasks. These small groups meet every evening during the course of the training. Day 2 and the morning of day 3 are spent in a full OST event including:

- Opening of the space by the sponsor (one of the participants),
- Introduction of the methodology by the facilitator (one of the trainers),
- Identification of and work on the issues by

the participants,

- Documentation of the results, and
- Planning next steps.

Everybody experiences the role of participant in an OST event, a key prerequisite of “remembering” open space and getting into the spirit of this technology. During this 1.5-day event, participants post their questions on flip chart paper at the “Questions and Answers Wall”.

This creates the first “learning space” while supporting the focus of being a participant, without losing track of questions to be dealt with when participants are reflecting on the methodology.



Playful remembering at the Hungarian training



Ukraine participants browse task cards that help them remember.



Break-out session, during Moscow training

Reflecting on the Methodology

The second OST event is an "Open Space on Open Space" (OSonOS) following immediately the event just experienced. It allows participants to reflect on the methodology and dig into the "nuts and bolts" of OST. This is also an opportunity to deal with the questions gathered during the first OST event. It takes place on the afternoon of day 3 and the morning of day 4.

At this point, a number of "learning spaces" are opened up for participants to delve into everything they are interested in about OST. These "learning spaces" are:

- OST cinema with films of Open Space events and trainings
- OST exhibition with artefacts from Open Space events: posters, photos, documentations, drawings, newspaper clippings etc.
- OST library with books, articles, dissertations, etc.
- OST cyberspace with computers and access to the Internet to investigate websites, mailing lists, blogs, wikis, etc.
- Questions and Answers Wall to reflect the current experience
- Reflection groups with assigned tasks to look at the learning journey during each day.

Focus on the facilitator

The third OST event is an Open Space set up and conducted by the participants themselves with the title "I, Open Space Facilitator". The fo-

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cus is on the role of the facilitator. It is prepared by several small teams that work simultaneously in the morning of day 4. The Open Space takes place in the afternoon of day 4, facilitated by one of the teams selected by lot. The morning of day 5 is used to offer feedback to the facilitation team. In a similar process, Action Planning is prepared by several teams in the morning and carried out in the afternoon of day 5 with feedback for the facilitation team.

After the three OST events and the parallel study in the "learning spaces" and reflection groups, the morning of day 6 is spent in evalua-

tion and planning the participant's ongoing journey towards becoming an OST practitioner. The training concludes at noon of day 6 with a Closing Circle, and passing out the certificates of participation.

To sum it up, the training is about 90% experiential, self-organised learning in the Open Space format, 5% coaching, 5% discussion and dialogue, 0% presentation, 0% speeches and 0% lecture, pretty much 0% boredom and pretty close to 100% fun.

Experience with the OST Training design in Russia, June 2000 (by Igor Ovchinnikov)

My first encounter with OST happened in June 2000 on the outskirts of Moscow where about 50 colleagues of mine and I attended the annual conference of InterTraining (IT), a Moscow-based international network of trainers and consultants. It had been a tradition with IT since the mid-1990's to invite external trainers to each annual conference.

OST was quite new to almost all of us. Little did we know then how long-lasting the effects of this event would be, eventually changing even the IT tradition itself. While we continued to invite new people with new trainings each year, all the following conferences themselves incorporated the OST format at least to some extent. In my "advocacy" speeches for OST these days, I often use this example to illustrate how "contagious" this technology can be once you are



More issues are posted on the Bulletin Board, Ukraine

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Connections made in open space bridge cultural differences, Hungary

exposed to it.

Like all new (and I dare say revolutionary) things, OST didn't occupy a place in all of our minds and hearts instantly. I clearly recall how I myself went through a fairly painful process of scrutinizing (and finally accepting) this new method, before I could truly call it "mine". However, it was just a month or two later when I made my first attempt (quite cautiously at first) to incorporate OST into my own practice in the Far East of Russia — a first step in a long journey that has already lasted for more than eight years and will continue.

Over the years, I have noticed that one of the intrinsic features of OST — a certain unpredictability of the final outcome (captured by the admonition "Be prepared to be surprised") — has wider implications than just at any given OST

event. Indeed with OST, we can hardly predict how this technology will play out in our own lives in the long term — or even just a year or two from today.

Over the last eight years, my own company (Golubka Training Centre) has facilitated dozens of OST events for various groups both in the NGO and business world. We have shared the technology with many other trainers and facilitators all over Russia and some parts of the ex-USSR. I imagine that many of our colleagues and fellow trainers from that OST event in 2000 have done



Issues are posted driven by passion and responsibility, Russia



The Moscow training group with people from all over the former USSR

the same.

This means the technology lives, grows, develops and keeps surprising people pretty much all over Eastern Europe and beyond. The good news is that this region (let alone the planet) is big enough for OST to remain a “new and revolutionary” catalyst for many more people in our lifetime.

Experience with the OST Training design in Hungary, November 2000 (by Csaba Császár)

We in Hungary conducted a small survey among the participants of the training course eight years after it was actually conducted, asking

about follow-up activities, impact on their professional life, and consequences of the training. Eleven of 34 participants answered our questions, and here is the summary of their responses:

The training had a lasting effect on the approach used by the participants: they rely more comfortably on the group's capacities and they work more consciously with the forces of self-organisation. Participants also gained confidence to work with the process facilitation approach. Even for those who do not work directly with OST, the principles and the “law of two feet” were mentioned in all cases when working with groups or organisations in general, not just regarding OST events.

The 11 respondents reported about 45 OST



Intense conversation in a break-out session, Ukraine

events between 2001 and 2008 with a 60/40 distribution between business and non profit sectors. Some themes: "The school of the future", "How should we implement our plan for this year?", "What should we work on at our planned conference?", "How to reorganise our unit?" and "What are we proud of in our region?"

OST is often a solution when it comes to "classical" difficulties in the work of the facilitator. But managers often resist letting go of control over the outcome even after a proper preparation process and invitation. When the group starts to work in OST format, managers sometimes get nervous about the process and express scepticism towards the facilitator when she/he is no longer in charge of the process.

In 2004, one local OSoS was organised with 22 participants to share experiences from the

field and learn from each other.

Experience with the OST Training design in Ukraine, May 2005 (by Bohdan Maslych)

Stage 1: Excitement About 40 Ukrainian facilitators took part in the training in Ukraine in May 2005. They could not hide their excitement about OST. "Now we know what it's all about... Now we know how to make our business/life/organisation better ..." could be heard on the way back home from the training. In the first OST Learning Exchange in November 2005, the majority of facilitators were still optimistic and excited: "OST will definitely improve life in our country! OST always works! Real life showed – it is true, but not everybody is aware of it..."



Opening by a sponsor during the 3rd OST event of the Ukrainian training



People negotiate time and place for the issues, Ukraine

Stage 2: Confusion The first real confusion happened during the second Ukrainian OST Learning Exchange in June 2006. Of six participants, only three came from Ukraine! Nevertheless, OST kept — and keeps — spreading across Ukraine. The Ukrainian facilitators faced real challenges to promote OST and many of them were disappointed by those potential clients who were not aware that OST always works. When the Worldwide OSoNOS XV was held in Kiev in May 2007, it was attended by OST facilitators from 17 countries. Thirteen Ukrainians showed up probably the most optimistic ones...

Stage 3: Reality check The good news is that Ukrainian facilitators promote OST in very different areas, and step by step, it is being used more and more. By now we have our own success stories — like the biggest OST event in Ukraine with



Towards becoming OST facilitators, Ukraine.

more than 2,000 participants sponsored by a church in 2007, or an OST event aimed at establishing a corporate university sponsored by the biggest insurance company in Ukraine in 2008. But, even more importantly, OST is being used in small towns or villages to enhance community development and to address social care issues. OST does always work, and more and more people in Ukraine are becoming aware of it!

Conclusion

As we see from the three cases, the training had a genuine effect on the professional life of the participants and transformed their role, responsibility and approach towards groups and organisations. And, more importantly, those who feel passion and responsibility work together to share experiences and support each other along their journey towards becoming an OST facilitator.

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Although the notion of self-organisation does not fit into the traditional concept of training, people are able to organise the training process by themselves without speeches, presentations and external input, and to have fun doing it. Normally, after a short period of confusion, creativity and learning breaks out and continues to grow over the course of the training week.

What the participants, during the training itself, often describe as a “brainwashing” exercise, turns into a transformative experience in retro-

spect. People who have gone through this process often challenge their own paradigms and assumptions regarding structure, control and performance of groups and organisations.

The question that we all struggle with, in one form or the other, on our journey towards becoming an OST facilitator is: Might it be true that we are part of a self-organising cosmos and control is just an illusion? The answer you have to find for yourself and you are invited to join this journey.

About the Authors



From left to right: Jo Toepfer, Bohdan Maslych, Csaba Császár, Igor Ovtchinnikov

Jo Toepfer, born in 1968 in Germany, works as a consultant in organisational transformation, mainly focusing on large group work using Open Space Technology, Future Search and Appreciative Inquiry. He works mainly in Eastern Europe and CIS countries. He is a member of the Russian Association of Management and OD Consultants, the Future Search Network and the Berlin Open Space Cooperative. See www.boscop.org

Bohdan Maslych (1973, Ukraine) works as a project manager and capacity building consultant in Ukraine, CEE and Central Asia since 1995. His clients are businesses, governmental

agencies, international development organizations and NGOs. He is a director of Management Training Promotion Company Ltd., which offers tailored solutions in marketing and organizational development. See: www.mtp.com.ua

Csaba Császár, 42, works as a consultant in Hungary and in the neighboring countries. His main field of work is organisational transformation and leadership development, his clients come mostly from the business sector. He is one of the founders of OD Partner, a company of likeminded consultants. See www.odpartner.hu

Igor Ovtchinnikov is deputy director of the Golubka Training Center, in Moscow, responsible for designing and facilitating NGO training programs throughout the former Soviet Union. He has been active in civic education for about 20 years, and specializes in training, non-violent conflict resolution, group process and facilitation, democratic leadership, business and NGO organizational development and management, and community participation. See www.golubka.org/

Note: The OST practitioners who worked in the three trainings mentioned here as trainers were Michael M Pannwitz mmpanne@boscop.org and Jo Toepfer jotoepfer@boscop.org. Both conduct OST trainings all over the world.