

Open Space for Futures: A Brief Introduction*

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An Open Space Conversation

A large stone farmhouse, in northern England. Rolling hills surround it, verdant pastures are neatly segmented by dry stone walls; black-faced sheep graze peacefully, clouds drift overhead. It's cold outside, on this Saturday morning in December 2004, but it's warm by the living room fireplace as a group of people of diverse backgrounds, ages and nationalities gathers in a circle to discuss a big idea. NGO workers, environmentalists, academics, teachers, journalists – more than 20 in all – will devote this weekend to meeting, socialising, and working out how to bring a compelling vision to life.

Before they begin, a facilitator reminds them of the purpose of the exercise, and their responsibilities, which really boil down to making the most of the time they'll spend together. This is not a boardroom meeting, and there is to be no series of monologues and resolutions, and no chairman. In fact, rather than an agenda decided in advance, now the participants themselves will each name an aspect of the overall theme which is of greatest interest to them, on the basis of which a timetable can be outlined. A few moments later they will break into smaller groups, free to attend any of the four or five sessions concurrently taking place in differ-

ent rooms. Some people may remain in one location for much of the time, others will choose to drift between conversations, cross-fertilising, making connections. It's up to each of them how to spend their time. They're all working on the same problem, but dealing with various aspects of it according to their expertise and passions. This is an Open Space meeting.

Open Space Technology, or OST, is a way of organising gatherings for the purposes of conversation, consultation and problem-solving. It is intended to be a participant-centred and therefore democratic process, as everyone contributes to and helps construct the event. The techniques involved have been evolving around the world under this name in many settings and for many purposes for about twenty years.¹ Rather than being unstructured, which is how it may sound, OST has a "minimalist structure"² that depends on a few simple guidelines. Once these have been explained, the facilitator can stand back while participants run the event themselves. For people accustomed to meetings that are highly controlled and scheduled in detail, at first this can feel alarmingly like chaos. But it soon becomes clear that this is a *productive* kind of chaos, where people's energies are channelled into the issues that really matter to them. The fact that they're working in parallel on different aspects of the problem allows them to be

* It is beyond the scope of this brief paper to do justice to the procedure involved in Open Space Technology, however a longer article about OST as a futures methodology is forthcoming. Thanks to Jose Ramos and Tony Stevenson for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper. In the meantime, the author would welcome correspondence from anyone interested in sharing their experiences using Open Space or similar processes in futures work.

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more productive as a group than when, as happens all too often in meetings and conferences, some in the room aren't really interested in what's going on. At an Open Space event, by contrast, those people would have the freedom – or, more accurately, the responsibility – to go and spend their time on some issue of importance to them. Although actually, at such an event, it's much less likely that anyone will get bored in the first place.

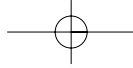
In this case, the topic under discussion is the creation of a new "trans-boundary protected area", much like a national park, but one operating in an ecological area that straddles international borders. It is apposite that the meeting should occur here, in the Yorkshire Dales National Park, which has been in place for over half a century. But the area in focus today is the mountainous meeting point of the borders of northern Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo ("Kosova" in Albanian). The First Balkans Peace Park (B3P), as the project is called, is envisaged as a sort of monument to the common future of the different cultural groups that live there, and also as a basis for establishing an ecotourism industry in the region, the main asset of which is its natural beauty. The idea is that the area be managed in pursuit of two goals: the preservation of a beautiful and rugged wilderness, and the reconciliation and mutual understanding of peoples long divided not only by political borders, but more poignantly by a history of ethnic tensions and periodic violence.

There is an unabashed idealism about this project which may strike some as whimsical or quixotic, but it has already come a long way in the five years since an English anthropologist, who has specialised for some decades in this part of the Balkans, first had the idea. She sought others with whom to form a small committee, and shortly before this particular Open Space meeting, the group officially acquired registered charity status in Great Britain. In recent years, the founder and her husband, a professor of Peace Studies, have organised or supported events such as international groups hiking and cycling in the region, presentations to local people, visits to the Yorkshire Dales National Park for representatives from the

Balkans to see how the environmental and tourist challenges are managed there, and photo exhibitions to promote the Peace Park area in Europe and the United States. The project has generated interest from a broad cross-section of people, and brought together a group with perhaps little else in common. Some members have an intimate familiarity with and affection for this part of southern Europe; others know it less well but are simply intrigued by a vision whose significance they feel intuitively.

This workshop has arisen from a consensus that it is time to shift efforts up a gear, to increase the group's professionalism, and to augment its involvement in the Peace Park region. The organisation needs to clarify its priorities, an urgent task in light of rapid economic development of this mountain area, which is threatened with irreversible ecological harm if not managed mindfully. The eventual goal is to have the Peace Park initiative adopted and run by people from the area itself. But the strategic shift of responsibility from a British-based charity to a locally embedded movement in the Balkans must begin here, with a transformation of the charity from an informal agglomeration running on goodwill and spare time, into an effective and sustained organisation with clear purposes and the means to achieve them.

Over the two days, discussions cover a great many topics. One group looks at potential collaborations with a conference centre close by, which has some experience in hosting interfaith community initiatives. A large group in the living room works through the complexities of deciding the park's borders, and strategies to bridge the divisions, both political and cultural, in this region. Another conversation revolves around the information and advice required for travellers going to the area, while others address the communications and fundraising strategies of the charity itself. A long list is compiled of potential cultural and exchange activities that could promote sustainability and reconciliation, emphasising interaction between different communities in the region. The group periodically reconvenes to share lessons learned, ideas generated, and



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decisions made. Notes on each session are made by whoever suggested its topic, and at the end they are collated and distributed to all participants.

After two days, there has been much progress. Some frustrations about earlier work have been shared, and addressed; the uncertainty about self-organising sessions has disappeared. With representatives from Tirana, Belgrade and Prishtina present during the event, the expertise and energy of the group have fused to produce a key document: a draft statement for the three Environment Ministries in the region, outlining the project's background, objectives, and action plan. This is a breakthrough for the initiative. Above all, despite the great diversity of perspectives, there is a distinct sense of consensus emerging, of its shape being resolved and the path ahead coming into focus – the vision is shared by all present. Even some new people, who had not been officially involved beforehand, have come on board with fresh energy, areas of knowledge and ideas to share: the meeting has provided scope for them to integrate their expertise and interests into the project immediately.

Here, OST became a sort of large-scale brainstorming exercise, a chance for all ideas to be considered at a moment when the exact shape of the Project's future was still up for grabs. All proposals were heard, and, lapses in note-taking aside, put on the record. It was an opportunity for the commitment of each individual to the network, and the project as a whole, to be reaffirmed. There is a genuineness about Open Space interaction that is often lacking from a more closely managed kind of meeting; which imports two key benefits. At the event level, it generates tremendous creative energy and offered a springboard for new actions; and at the organisational level, it represents the development of a community driven by a common interest, collectively constructing and working in pursuit of its shared vision. Indeed, as the B3P moves forward, there is talk of holding an event sometime soon, drawing upon this format, with a view to building just such a community across the three parts of the Peace Park region itself.

In the few months since this workshop, people have returned to their homes and jobs, scattered back across Europe from Yorkshire to Kosovo. Much work remains to be done, but on the path from vision to reality the Open Space weekend described here will stand as a landmark of concerted and effective teambuilding and collective exploration of possibilities for the Balkans Peace Park Project.

Reflections on Open Space as a Futures Process

As the case described above suggests, OST is a participant-centred group process, which can result in the generation of common agendas and vision where nothing of the kind existed before. In methodological terms it can be seen as sharing some features with anticipatory action learning (AAL).³ In Open Space we find an important attribute of AAL interventions, its *diachronous* character: "the goals and the means for achieving them are decided during the participation process itself".⁴ OST is not necessarily as systematic a process as AAL, although it certainly could be incorporated into an AAL exercise.

As for anticipatory action learning processes generally, conversation is at the heart of Open Space.⁵ The key factor in situating it within the futures toolkit is that it's not an investigatory procedure leading exclusively to abstract knowledge and understanding. Instead, it is oriented to generating action and change: it's a process tool rather than a content one. OST is participatory and democratic, blurring the distinction between the simple discussion of futures and the active creation of them. This is because the emergence, through conversation, of communities with future-oriented interests, as well as the airing of differences, and the building of agreements might be regarded as *constituting future-creating processes* that are significant in themselves.

If Open Space is a possible route to conflict resolution and consensus based agenda-creation, it deserves the attention of futurists on that basis alone. The founder of Open Space,

Harrison Owen, has written extensively on OST as a peace-building process. He writes: "The problem, I suggest, is not the conflict, but rather that there is insufficient space to work things out. Destructive conflict occurs when you run out of room – physically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually. And the answer would seem to be – open more space."⁶ The pool of experience and case studies which facilitators and users of Open Space both contribute to and draw from, in a spirit of community learning and collaboration which mirrors the philosophy of OST itself, can be seen at the website <http://www.openspaceworld.org>. It is a highly popular but non-proprietary process, and the emergence of this reflexively open and dynamic community of OST practitioners is one of the most striking aspects about its rise since the mid-1980s.

Any method of research or social facilitation carries with it certain risks and limitations. Stevenson has identified a number of them in relation to AAL:⁷

- It is often less practical on a larger scale
- Both those in authority, with the capacity to make the event happen, and those actively involved as volunteers may have many other demands on their time
- It can be time-consuming
- There may be concern that only elected representatives have a right to make decisions for a community
- Small stakeholders may be overlooked
- Even representative groups arriving at sound decisions may be constrained at the implementation stage
- Futures thinking may be subject to false optimism
- "Groupthink" can set in and the visions or futures devised excessively constrained by entrenched assumptions

Some of these pitfalls can be avoided: with good advance planning, both those in authority and small stakeholders can be targeted for strategic inclusion in the process. And, resources permitting, an event may be run several times around the same theme, but with different cross-sections of participants, optimising

group size each time. As for the possible problem of taking too much time; it will admittedly take longer than an executive decree, but actually OST has frequently been credited for allowing groups to reach unanimous decisions much more rapidly than conventional meeting formats. However, the vulnerability of the process to people withdrawing their time, funding or moral support is inevitable, as with anything else: the obverse of this highly democratic process is its unpredictability, and Open Space may well represent a threat to those who would sooner retain top-down control of the political process.

One inescapable tension that should be appreciated, arising as early as the preparatory stage of identifying participants, is the trade-off between the degree of democratic openness of the process and the quality of information underpinning the substantive content of discussion. An Open Space event comprising leaders of a field may be more potent in shaping the future, but at the cost of being less democratic. On the other hand, a futures forum that is more open to all comers may result in unclear, clichéd or unrealistic results. Breaking out of what Stevenson calls "groupthink" and "false optimism" (each an example of poor quality futures thinking) is where Open Space may, in my view, benefit from the input of experienced futurists. These dangers highlight both a need and an opportunity to guide the process from within. One way to alleviate this problem could be for futurists called on to facilitate OST events to seek other individuals experienced in futures thinking to make a contribution.

If Open Space as a method can benefit from futures, the converse is also true. Futures practitioners need to maintain and promote a range of tools or methods that empower people to generate and choose their own futures, complementing the content-oriented pursuits of improving forecasting and foresight. Here it has been possible only to outline one case study and a handful of methodological challenges. There are others worthy of close attention in their own right (such as the applicability of participant-centred processes in non-Western cultures) but I want to mention why I

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think that futurists ought to look more closely at how to develop this particular tool.

There is a powerful symmetry between the purpose and philosophy of Open Space and that of futures studies: the organic, participant-centred approach to conversation mirrors the fact that the future is itself an "open space" which we bring into existence through our actions. Johan Galtung, first president of the World Futures Studies Federation, coined the term "Futurelandia" as a way of thinking about futures:⁸

Galtung invites us to imagine the future as a kind of country to which we are travelling and to try first to see it as a kind of open space. It might be, that as we try to think about the future, we imagine science and technology as the main factor influencing the future. Then, says Galtung and others, it's as if science and technology has already landed in this future country, and already colonised it, so that seeing the future in other ways becomes quite difficult.

Open Space springs from a desire to consider plural perspectives, with a corresponding reluctance to pre-empt or colonise the space of discussion. This is what makes it an ideal way to facilitate conversation about multiple possible futures. Futurists will immediately recognise the value offered by keeping open multiple perspectives about tomorrow, allowing room for creative or minority points of view to be heard today. Open Space, then, can be a very promising "process tool"⁹ for facilitating groups to explore possible futures, especially as a first step. In this light, the challenge becomes less to maintain the quality or rigour of futures thinking in the Open Space conversation, and more about unchaining people's imaginations so that the widest range of possibilities may be given due consideration. The power of conversation to build bridges of understanding should not be underestimated,¹⁰ and the case study sketched here helps illustrate the value of discussing futures (whatever the specific topic might be) using an OST approach of participant-led conversation.

Conclusion

In closing, there is just one point I would like to make: Open Space and similar approaches ought to be developed more fully as tools for futures practitioners, through sharing and reflecting upon our experiences with them.¹¹ I have been surprised to find quite a high proportion of practising futurists (at least in Europe) to whom, when asked, Open Space was completely unfamiliar.¹² In my view it ought to be part of our methodological repertoire and certainly recognised as an option for anyone facilitating future-oriented group processes. It is of course not the only way to achieve results such as consensus generation, exchange of ideas, and building communities of interest around futures issues. There are similar, semi-formal, conversation-based processes for exploring issues, such as World Café,¹³ which may be preferable in some circumstances; likewise, there are more methodologically rigorous Action Learning processes that integrate knowledge-generation with social interaction. In our capacity as facilitators for social futures generation and selection, futures practitioners ought ideally to be aware of elements across this spectrum, and as a community, we might develop a greater sensitivity to the contexts in which each is best implemented, or avoided.

This genre of hands-off, creative meeting space, when contrasted with the more hierarchical, controlling models of interaction (still preferred in many organisations) suggests a promising direction for future organisational decision-making, and perhaps the further democratisation of political processes. Although certain elements (such as advance planning for participants' invitations, and the provision of appropriate meeting space) are indispensable, part of the usefulness of Open Space is that it does not necessitate any special training, expensive equipment, or extensive experience to make it work – this makes it highly accessible. A more comprehensive manual needs to be developed if we are to add it to the futures toolbox. The use of Open Space-type processes could, and should, be more compre-

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hensively informed by futures theory and practice, which could benefit both the futures community and the much broader circle of those whom it serves. The description provided here of the Balkans Peace Park Project meeting is, therefore, a minor contribution to what could become a very useful corpus of case studies, enabling the refinement of Open Space and similar processes, all the better to serve the ongoing challenge of turning our worthy dreams into lived realities.

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Notes

1. Judith Richardson, "Igniting Self-Expression: Open Space Technology", *Master Facilitator Journal.com*, May 2004, <http://www.master-facilitatorjournal.com/archives/skill151.html> ; Harrison Owen, "Opening Space for Emerging Order", *OpenSpaceWorld.com*, undated, http://www.openspaceworld.com/brief_history.htm. For those wanting to learn more about Open Space, these are good introductory reading. Owen, as founder of OST, has written extensively on both the philosophy and applications of Open Space.
2. Peggy Holman, Open Circle Company, Seattle USA, speaking in *OSonOSinOz*, a film by David Smith, Imagination Films, Melbourne, 2002.
3. Tony Stevenson 2002, "Anticipatory Action Learning: Conversations About the Future", *Futures*, vol. 34, issue 5, pp. 417-425.
4. *Ibid*, p. 420. This stands in contrast to *synchronous* or "top-down" processes, in which the goals and means are decided beforehand.
5. *Ibid*, p. 421.
6. Harrison Owen 2003, *The Practice of Peace*, Chapter 1, p. 8, linked from <http://www.knowledgeboard.com/cgi-bin/item.cgi?id=120832&d=pnd>
7. Provided in personal correspondence: see also Stevenson, T. "From vision into action", *Futures*, Elsevier, London, forthcoming 2005/06
8. Rosaleen Love, "Writing About the Future", Talk given to the 4th Freelance Journalists, Artists and Photographers conference of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, Sydney, 28 April 2001, *Metafuture.org*, <http://www.metafuture.org/articlesbycolleagues/rosaleenlove/writingthefuture.htm>
9. It is described as such by Wendy Schultz on her webpage dealing with futures methodologies: <http://www.infinitefutures.com/tools.shtml> It is classed under heading of "Group Process Skill" in the *Master Facilitator Journal* (see above, note 2).
10. Theodore Zeldin's thought-provoking work on this topic, *Conversation*, Harvill Press, 1998, is short, easy to follow and very well written.
11. Further introductory material, as well as an entrée into the substantial body of work based on facilitators' experiences using Open Space, can be found at the international Open Space website <http://www.openspaceworld.org>.
12. During the preparation of this paper, at futures methodology presentations by the author in the Czech Republic and Belgium, only a handful of futurists in each audience had heard of Open Space Technology.
13. <http://www.theworldcafe.com/>