

Open-space Learning – A Challenge (0283)

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The focus of this paper is the development of Open-space Learning (OSL) at the University of Warwick's CAPITAL Centre.¹ OSL uses techniques developed in non-traditional teaching spaces (theatrical studios and rehearsal rooms principally) to offer a practical pedagogy that allows participants to discover their own knowledge and create their own understanding. OSL has been used successfully with disciplines as varied as English, Philosophy, Chemistry, Law, and Business. Each of the spaces used for OSL exists in its first incarnation "without chairs" which forces any group entering the spaces to address their own physicality in relation to that of the space – there is no longer the security and reassurance of traditionally arranged furniture. The spaces, therefore, are no more seminar rooms and lecture theatres, for the purposes of OSL pedagogy, than they are theatrical spaces. They exist in a space that is always "open", both figuratively and actually. What this permits is a particular freedom in which, if carefully managed by facilitator/tutor, individuals exist as neither performer nor passive listener, but full participant in the discovery and creation of knowledge. This kind of open and provisional space between established realities is precisely the environment in which creative learning might best flourish because learning in such a space is not demarcated by the rigidly imposed intellectual parameters of a tightly worded lecture, nor is it's pedagogy determined by the presence of the usual trappings and configuration of the seminar room – not just chairs, and tables, but the whiteboard, and the omnipotent tutor at the head of the room facing her acolytes. Frequently, therefore, what emerges from these OSL environments is work that is entirely dependent on this central notion of "openness" which refers to both the physical characteristics of the spaces in which the work takes place and a metaphorical space that is liminal", "empty" and exists "between" and "trans" other spaces.

The prefix "trans" is a particularly important secondary term in theorising OSL as it operates in close conjunction with the central notion of "openness". "Trans" expresses the notion that once open spaces have been established they become sites in which barriers to creative learning might be deconstructed and the divisions between disciplines and modes bridged. The open space becomes *transgressive*, as traditional barriers between facilitator and participant are suspended in the active and reciprocal engagement of participants, and the idea of "failure" is honoured; *transcendent*, as the work moves beyond the typical focus on auditory learning styles that dominates the modern university; *trans-rational*, as the space offers a mode of understanding that relies equally on an intuitive and physical response as it does on the rational processing of information; *transactional*, in the sense of an open and free exchange of ideas in which participants do not compete to bank knowledge as private capital but freely exchange and collectivise their learning; and *transdisciplinary*, as normally stable discipline boundaries are suspended in the interaction of participants' subject knowledge with OSL methodology. Perhaps most significantly, however, OSL moves students towards a third space that is neither specifically the realm of the academy nor that of work, but is a space of *transition*, in which individuals can acquire, practice and develop, in a safe but challenging environment, a range of those skills that they will need in an increasingly complex and competitive employment landscape.

A tutor or facilitator who is brave enough to set aside power in these environments, and tolerate the measure of unruliness this may demand, is likely to be rewarded with engaged and committed responses from students who are thoroughly invested in the work

they are doing because they have determined its nature. To ‘uncrown power’ in this way, to temporarily suspend hierarchies in the spaces, to create a laboratory in which knowledge is discovered and owned by the group as a whole is to promote creative learning and to foreground the role of student as producer. As participants work as a group through experiment and play to make creative progress – a combination of ‘mindfulness’ and ‘playfulness’ – their ownership of the knowledge they have created becomes more fully embedded in their consciousness than might otherwise be possible. Properly socially contextualised in this fashion students have the opportunity to test hypotheses without fear of ridicule, to reflect in a group, and to rapidly extend their knowledge. In a university environment in which students are now increasingly required to come up with ‘a question worth answering’ (Jackson: xviii), OSL offers methodologies that actively help them to do precisely this.²

It is our contention that OSL is capable of altering radically the student experience as well as changing the ways in which teaching and learning is viewed by academics. In spite of the work done in the CETL initiative, however, and the increasing numbers of teaching spaces being designed and built around the UK, recent reports indicate that the dominant model continues to be the lecture theatre and seminar room. The download model of teaching continues, necessarily therefore, to hold sway. There remains more than a suspicion that this is not for sound pedagogic reasons, but for sound economic ones: plainly it is cheaper to ask an academic to lecture a single session of two or three hundred students every week than it is to ask that same academic to run seven or eight workshops. It is difficult to see how OSL or related pedagogies can wholly disrupt this situation without a sea-change in the way the efficacy of higher education is perceived in this country – and elsewhere for that matter. It is our task, therefore, to help with the task of persuading those allocating and distributing funding for British universities that pedagogies like OSL genuinely produce better educated students – both in the sense that they are both better equipped for the complexities of work in contemporary society, and are simply “better educated” in the old liberal humanist sense that individuals should be, as far as possible, the free and autonomous authors of their own thought.

¹ CAPITAL, standing for ‘Creativity and Performance in Teaching and Learning’, is one of HEFCE’s (the Higher Education Funding Council of England) Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs), and a collaboration between the University of Warwick, the Royal Shakespeare Company, and other theatrical organisations. Funding was provided for two “open” spaces – a version of a theatrical studio, and a version of a theatrical rehearsal room.

² Jackson, N. Oliver, M. Shaw, M. Wisdom, J. (2006), *Developing Creativity in Higher Education: An Imaginative Curriculum*, Routledge: London.