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Integrating open space technology and dynamic facilitation

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Open space technology is a very successful participatory process, but it has two potential shortcomings: it is difficult to produce documentation of discussions in meetings lasting less than two days, and the process does not always encourage empathic listening among participants. Integrating open space with another participatory process, dynamic facilitation, could address these weaknesses when modest additional resources are available.

Introduction

Two hundred people from across the state of Illinois met in November of 2001, with no pre-planned agenda and no invited speakers. They had only a theme – food security, or ensuring access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food to all people at all times. In less than an hour they generated 50 workshops, self-managed them over a period of two days, and left with a written summary of all of these discussions, more than 100 pages long. The proceedings of this event are still referred to as the ‘food security bible in Illinois’ (Herman, 2004). Perhaps most remarkable was how typical the results were compared to other events using the same format. The organisers employed open space technology, a method first developed by Harrison Owen in the 1980s. It can be used in groups of nearly any size. One event

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with street kids in Bogotá, Columbia involved more than 2,000 participants! Meetings begin when a facilitator gathers the group in a circle and describes the process, and from that point on the participants bear the burden of ensuring that their issues are discussed.

Open space encourages people to take responsibility for issues that they are passionate about. Meetings can be very effective for encouraging action. However, it is most effective when held for two and half days, which can be exces-

sive when an issue requires broad public involvement. In practice, shorter meeting lengths usually result in productive discussions, but not in written proceedings (Owen, 1997). This is unfortunate, because as the example above suggests, a written document can serve as a useful roadmap for implementing the ideas generated at a meeting.

One criticism of open space in comparison to other forms of meeting facilitation is that the discussions can have a 'transactional' quality (Martin, 2002). Participants tend not to listen to each other empathetically, and instead just talk past each other. This limits opportunities for real change because a true consensus involves not just a formal agreement on a particular issue, but a meeting of both hearts and minds (Zubizarreta and Rough, 2002).

We hypothesised that combining open space with another participatory methodology, dynamic facilitation, could address these two weaknesses. Dynamic facilitation is a process developed by Jim Rough and aims to elicit true dialogue and creative problem solving (Zubizarreta and Rough, 2002). The process also involves taking notes on large flipcharts, which can easily be compiled into a written proceeding. Like open space technology, dynamic facilitation is an 'emergent' process. It first appears very chaotic, but eventually results in order. The shape that this order takes is impossible to predict. So both approaches are only appropriate for situations where meeting organisers have not made decisions, or limited the potential options, in advance. In comparison with other processes such as citizens' panels or future search, both open space technology and dynamic facilitation require minimal training for the organisers, and are easier and less expensive to implement.

This article is an evaluation of the potential for integrating dynamic facilitation with open space technology based on our experience organising two such meetings, both held in Santa Cruz County, California, USA in 2005. A day-long meeting in February was organised to explore a vision for the Santa Cruz County food system, and another one and a half day meeting in May addressed the future of biofuels.

Open space technology

Harrison Owen's impetus for developing open space technology was his experience of organising a conference. When it was over he asked for feedback from attendees. He learnt that most people said the best part of the conference was the coffee breaks (1997). His insight was that there might be a better way to organise meetings, to encourage the types of interactions that occurred during coffee breaks. He attempted to make this as simple as possible in his experiments, and

Participants in an open space technology meeting begin by gathering in a circle to listen to a brief explanation of the process. The agenda for this meeting on the future of biofuels later took shape as participants moved to the centre of the circle and announced the topics of the breakout sessions they wanted to convene.



Photo: Tim White

continued to remove elements until all that was necessary remained. So in its current form, the facilitator of an open space meeting speaks for no more than fifteen minutes.

The event begins with all participants seated in one big circle. The facilitator stands in the middle and explains the process. Within a few minutes people are announcing topics for breakout sessions. The facilitator invites those who are passionate about a topic related to the theme – and willing to take responsibility for convening a meeting to discuss this topic – to come to the centre of the circle when they are ready. These participants then write down an issue or opportunity (or several) and announce them to the group, and say their name. They then tape the paper to a wall called the 'bulletin board,' along with a specific time and place to meet, before returning to the circle. When all topics have been announced, everyone moves to the bulletin board for a 'market place', which involves signing up for the sessions they want to attend.

At the outset the facilitator briefly explains some guiding principles for an open space technology meeting. These are:

- whoever comes is the right person;
- whatever happens is the only thing that could have;
- whenever it starts is the right time;
- when it is over it is over.

(Owen, 1997)

These principles help participants understand that it is important that the people who are attending breakouts want to be there, even if this means that no one else comes to a proposed session. They also encourage people to let go of preconceptions about what will be accomplished at the

meeting, and that it is important to pay attention to the group's energy, rather than the clock. If they accomplish what they want before the time allotted is over, they are encouraged to move on. Conversely they are encouraged to continue working past the allotted time if desired (although they may have to move if their space is reserved by another convener).

There is one 'law' in open space and that is the law of mobility. People are encouraged to leave a session if they are neither learning nor participating. This law helps keep long-winded people in check: if they talk for too long, other participants may simply leave. It also creates 'bumblebees' and 'butterflies'. Bumblebees are people who flit from one session to another, cross-pollinating ideas. Butterflies may not go to any sessions, but create centres of stillness, and the opportunity to engage in a conversation. Such conversations may trigger a thought that can have an influence on a larger group.

When the meeting lasts at least two days, conveners typically type up notes of their sessions on one of a handful of computers provided there. This produces an overall summary document, distributed before the participants leave the next day. With another half day, participants can also prioritise issues arising. Meetings (and days in multi-day events) end with a closing circle, which allows participants to share their experiences with the whole group.

O'Connor and Cooper suggest that open space technology has a strong applicability to policy processes because it can facilitate rapid, yet thorough, consultations with very large numbers of stakeholders (2005). Its collaborative nature often leads to widespread buy-in for proposals that emerge. O'Connor and Cooper also state that 'the process has no hierarchy; everyone has the same opportunity to participate and contribute', therefore responsibility for implementing these solutions is placed on all who create them, not just on public officials. As a result, open space technology has been used by 'national, regional and municipal governments in North America, Europe, Africa and Australia' (O'Connor and Cooper, 2005).

Dynamic facilitation

The dynamic facilitation approach to holding meetings was developed in the 1990s by Jim Rough. It often leads to 'breakthroughs'. A designated facilitator attempts to write down everything participants say on four charts. These charts are labelled 'enquiries/problem statements', 'difficulties/concerns', 'information/perspectives', and 'options/ideas'. The dynamic facilitator does not attempt to direct the conversation. This is usually explained to the participants with a jigsaw puzzle analogy; the group may jump around while

Box 1: Breakthroughs

For example, a group of loggers used this process to solve an 'impossible' problem: management had turned down their request for new radios. Their current radios made it difficult to communicate, so that moving logs on the mountainside was unsafe. When the facilitator asked why they wanted to improve safety, one answer was that the loggers were held responsible for safety at their sites. Their breakthrough was to realise that they were not given full responsibility and that their level of responsibility required greater decision-making authority. After discussing this new perspective with management they received new radios, as well as a greater voice in other workplace issues (Zubizarreta and Rough, 2002).

working on various parts of a bigger picture.

The facilitator's most important role is to make sure everyone feels they are being heard, and to draw people out by asking them questions to clarify or further explain their comments. The facilitator may need to ensure that one person speaks at a time, and that opposing viewpoints are encouraged. All statements are listed in one of the four categories. The emphasis is not making sure that the statements are listed in exactly the right category, but that everyone's contributions are written down.

Zubizarreta and Rough suggest that as participants feel fully heard, they begin to expand their focus and listen to others for their contributions to the bigger picture (2002). Participants first express what is already on their mind, or what they already know. After 'dumping' this information and feeling that the facilitator values their input, it is easier to begin listening to other perspectives. As participants recognise the complexity of the situation when considering multiple points of view they begin to suggest creative solutions.

A fifth chart is used to record breakthroughs, or to bookmark where the group is at when the meeting ends. The facilitator does not try to push for a decision or consensus, and should make sure that no one is holding back when there seems to be an agreement. Because points of convergence can quickly move to points of divergence, the facilitator's role is to ensure that these convergences are identified, and to help the group recognise their progress.

Dynamic facilitation does encourage people to 'be themselves'. The facilitator does not ask anyone to modify their behaviour or adhere to any ground rules, but does ask participants to speak up when they feel 'out of step' with the rest of the group, because 'their unique perspective may well turn out to be the missing piece of the puzzle' (Zubizarreta and Rough, 2002). They can be passionate and emotional and still their contributions are valued.

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Rough has advocated and practiced the use of dynamic facilitation to inform policy processes (2002). He suggests that governments from local to national level should charter randomly selected groups of people to develop non-binding consensus statements, using the methodology. The consensus statements are then communicated to the larger community for further discussion and potential implementation. Rough facilitated one of these ‘wisdom councils’ in conjunction with the city of Port Townsend, Washington in 2000, focusing on regulating retail chains.

Integrating open space technology and dynamic facilitation

To integrate the two methods, we made some modifications. First, we needed to have multiple trained dynamic facilitators available, since open space often results in a number of sessions occurring simultaneously. It was difficult to predict the exact number and depended upon the number of people attending, and how many workshops were proposed. So we recruited students enrolled at the University of California, Santa Cruz as volunteer facilitators, giving them the option of a course credit if desired. We estimated the number of volunteers needed and held trainings lasting approximately two hours to introduce them to open space technology and dynamic facilitation, and to explain how we would integrate these two methods.

Our biggest concern was how to maintain open space technology’s emphasis on participants taking responsibility during the meeting. The open space facilitator usually explains this as ‘you are in charge’. So we modified the terminology. We asked the volunteer dynamic facilitators to think of themselves as both note takers and ‘designated listeners’ rather than more traditional ‘facilitators’.

Dynamic facilitation may begin with a brief introduction to the process. However, we chose not to do this, in keeping with our desire to leave the initiative with the participants. Because dynamic facilitation was optional for the session

conveners, we did not mention how this process would work. Instead, we introduced these note takers as an available resource. We explained that conveners could take their own notes for inclusion in the proceedings, or take no notes at all. In practice, most conveners were grateful to have someone else take notes.

One modification to dynamic facilitation was to include an additional flipchart to record the session title, the convener and participant’s names, and the convener’s introduction or background to the issue. The ‘note taker’ either began taking notes when the convener started talking, or if necessary, encouraged them to start with the background of the topic.

Because meetings can extend past their scheduled time in open space, and to avoid conflicts with the next scheduled group, we asked the note takers to let participants know when there was 15 to 20 minutes left to go. If they wished to continue their discussion, they would have to move elsewhere. Note takers encouraged the group to consider summarising their discussion at this point. Where there was agreement this was recorded on the bookmark chart, and where there was not it was recorded in the other four categories.

Effectiveness for proceedings

Both our experiments with combining open space technology and dynamic facilitation were successful in producing a written proceeding. The notes for sessions using dynamic facilitation were much more extensive than those that were summarised by the conveners. Integrating these two approaches could even work for meetings shorter than a full day, perhaps just a few hours long.

Although successful for documenting proceedings when this would not otherwise occur, it required more resources and raised new issues. In contrast to multi-day open space technology meetings, where participants produce the proceedings, our integrated approach required more materials (e.g. flip chart paper, markers) and personnel. Formal training in dynamic facilitation involves a three or four day seminar costing \$800 (US) or more per person. However, an inexpensive manual explaining the process is available (Zubizarreta and Rough, 2002), and the basics can be communicated in a brief training for motivated volunteers.

Relying on volunteers had several downsides though. Some had difficulty grasping the importance of the designated listener role. Those who did find it difficult at times because they were interested in the issues being discussed and wanted to provide their own input. Also, many who signed up did not attend the trainings. Some who attended

Participants in a breakout session at a meeting on the local food system engage in a conversation, as a volunteer trained in dynamic facilitation takes notes on multiple flip charts. The process helps participants feel that their input is valued, and improves the quality of the dialogue.



Photo: Laura Tanaka

the trainings were absent at the events, and those who attended found taking notes for multiple sessions tiring.

We advise organisers to either plan for this or to select volunteers more carefully. Recruit enough so that volunteers do not need to take notes in back-to-back sessions. Or have two note takers in each session, to share the workload, and to allow volunteers to step out of the designated listener role when desired.

Although written proceedings were produced, we relied on the volunteers to type up their notes. The proceedings were compiled and printed two to three weeks later, rather than before the meeting ended. This delay may inhibit implementing agreed upon actions right away. It also prevents participants from seeing notes from all the sessions they did not attend while the meeting is taking place, which would help them to grasp the bigger picture. Full distribution of the proceedings also became more difficult after everyone had dispersed. So we suggest that rather than collecting the flip charts when sessions are over as we did, place them on a wall where everyone can see them during the event instead.

Effectiveness for dialogue

Both experiments integrating dynamic facilitation with open space technology successfully generated true dialogue. We

observed that reviewing the items on the flip charts during discussions led to a greater synthesis in thought and creativity. The dynamic facilitation process seemed to help people say what was really on their minds, in some cases allowing the group to get past hidden agendas. It was also helpful for dealing with difficult people, because their criticisms were welcomed as contributions to the concerns chart. Often these concerns were reoriented in a positive direction, particularly if the note taker specifically asked for potential options.

When group members felt listened to and had their input recorded, they had more enthusiasm and commitment to group decisions. At least three breakout sessions in the food system meeting catalysed community development efforts that were ongoing prior to the meeting, and contributed to much more rapid progress toward the initiators' goals. For example, a group wishing to institutionalise food security planning at the county level had met for nearly seven months with little success. In the breakout session, participants decided to form an organisation and contact policy makers about the new group's goals. They have since accomplished both of these tasks.

In many cases the integration of dynamic facilitation led to breakthroughs on complex issues. In one session, summarising or bookmarking the session helped the group to recog-

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nise their breakthroughs and to bring up action items. However, there is not always time to achieve this, and in future we may extend the length of scheduled breakout sessions beyond an hour and a half. The use of note takers can also slow down conversations, e.g. if the note takers are not familiar with the language or concepts used by the group, taking longer to document the participants' comments. This was not always a disadvantage, as it gave participants more time to reflect on what other group members said.

But a potential area of tension is the mobility encouraged by open space technology and the emphasis on encouraging divergent views in dynamic facilitation. Participants who dislike conflict may leave a breakout session, rather than bringing their contrasting viewpoints to a dialogue. They may potentially miss contributing significantly to a breakthrough.

In practice, the two methods appeared to complement each other by reducing status inequalities. Dynamic facilitation encouraged greater participation by drawing out those who may have been more reluctant to speak up in a traditional open space meeting. Open space technology's law of mobility allowed people the freedom to leave a breakout session when it failed to fully engage them, rather than conforming to norms of politeness that often serve to reinforce hierarchy.

Conclusions

Integrating dynamic facilitation with open space technology was beneficial for creating written proceedings in a shorter meeting, and for fostering high quality dialogue. But is important to consider the demands for more material and personal resources than open space technology requires alone.

An integrated approach could be particularly useful for shorter, but more frequent meetings. This would allow for follow-up of ideas and actions from the first meeting, and for recruiting and involving more people. It also holds promise for informing policy processes, as long as organisers and government officials are genuinely interested in cooperatively developing creative proposals to address complex problems. An added benefit is that citizen initiatives may be undertaken in conjunction with government responses as a result of the spirit of collaboration and consensus the process fosters. We suggest that future meetings integrating open space technology and dynamic facilitation be evaluated for their long-term potential to impact people's livelihoods.

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