



The Other Worlds Educational Project and the Challenges and Possibilities of ‘Open Spaces’

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abstract

This paper explores an educator’s hands-on experience of working with the ‘Open Space’ methodology in the context of the ‘Other Worlds’ Project, a reflexive educational programme addressing development education and uncritical discourses of global citizenship.

The educational project Other Worlds was funded by Department for International Development (DFID – Development Awareness Fund – mini-grants scheme) from March to October 2004, is hosted by Mundi (a ‘development education centre’ in Nottingham with charity status) and was developed by a collective of activists, educators and academics from the UK, Brazil and India. It proposes an approach to transnational (global/political) literacy¹ based on ‘reflexive ethics’,² in which participants are encouraged to engage critically with issues related to global and local contexts and think about how their way of seeing the world and acting in it are connected to justice and injustice.

In this paper, I intend to reflect on the development process of the project and its ‘open space’ methodology as political interventions in the field of education. As the coordinator of the Other Worlds project, I feel the need to locate my perspective and myself in this reflection. The Other Worlds initiative stems from my attendance at the World Social Forum, where April Biccum and I documented perspectives from activists and participants in order to set up an educational website and contribute to a special issue of an academic journal called *Situation Analysis*. It also originates from the challenges and difficulties we faced in our attempt to create a WSF awareness network (mainly in Nottingham) after we got back from Mumbai, trying to work in partnership with regional and local student and activist groups.

1 Transnational Literacy is a concept described by Gayatri Spivak, summarised by Diana Brydon as an understanding of how globalisation works and how it can be negotiated.

2 This concept is constructed in opposition to the concept of prescriptive ethics that sets values, behaviours and understandings as prescribed outcomes for learning processes.

I was first introduced to the World Social Forum in November 2003, when I saw the documentary ‘Testimonies of the Twenty-First Century’ screened in Nottingham. After a career in teaching in the South of Brazil, I had been working with educational NGOs in England for five years, trying to advance the agenda of more critical approaches to the areas of development and citizenship education. I interpreted the idea of the open space of the Forum described in the documentary as a space where people would come to listen to and engage with one another regardless of age, background or gender to develop together a vision of a different world, a world that would be undivided, but that would welcome difference and include everyone in its continuous creation, something that was in line with what I thought ‘education for change’ should be about. So, I decided to go to Mumbai in early 2004 to see and feel the Forum for myself.

Like other participants in the Forum, I was really inspired and touched by the explosion of colour and ‘difference’ and the feeling of unity and hope in the streets of the Nesco grounds where the WSF took place. There were moments when I felt as if I had lost my identity and become part of something much greater and powerful – something that went beyond my ‘rational’ understanding of reality. However, the contradictions became evident very early as well: how power operated within the space and in the seminars and workshops, who had the answers and was allowed to speak, who should listen, who was considered an insider, who the outsiders were... I also noticed that the moment we stepped out of the Nesco grounds, into the streets of Mumbai, the ‘magic’ of the Forum disappeared and the reality and consequences of poverty and exploitation continued untouched – beggars kept being ignored by passer-byes, people kept dreaming of social mobility for themselves, the divisions of the space of the city based on class, gender or caste were stronger than ever: how could we, the self declared ‘activist’ participants of the WSF, think we could transform the world without engaging with the people outside and keep the contradictions within our own space unexamined? How could we reach out and realise the potential of ‘open spaces’ in a way that the wider society would also be affected by it?

Towards the end of the Forum, I incidentally met two people who were also asking similar questions. Jai Sen (one of the editors of *WSF: Challenging Empires*³) and Madhuresh Kumar had organised, together with Mukul Mangalik, a series of seminars on the World Social Forum (under the auspices of the History Society Ramjas College – University of New Delhi) proposing an attitude of ‘critical engagement’ with the Forum itself and the issues discussed within it. The series was implemented successfully at different colleges at Delhi University during August-December 2003 and one of the outcomes of this initiative was the publication of the book *Are Other worlds Possible? – The Open Space Reader* compiled by Jai Sen and Madhuresh Kumar with a collection of texts discussed in the seminars. The framework used in the series became the foundational stone of the original Other Worlds project proposal submitted to DFID

3 Sen, J., A. Anand, A. Escobar, and P. Waterman (eds.) (2003) *World Social Forum: Challenging Empires*. New Delhi: The Viveka Foundation.

The Original Proposal

The aim of the original proposal of the project was 'to enable young people in England to engage critically with the processes of the World and European Social Forums and the issues discussed within it'.

This proposal stated that:

The idea of the World Social Forum as a 'Southern' initiative and a pedagogical space for the collective construction of 'Another Possible World' poses important questions for young people in the UK: What is the significance and the implications of the WSF and its related forums in the world and for people in the UK? Whose world is being envisaged? What is the role of people from more developed countries in its construction? In what ways is the so called 'North' seen in the events? What are the implications of this image for people who originated and live in 'Northern' countries, as well as those who have migrated to such countries but in a sense have dual (or even multiple) identities? What are the implications of this image for people who happen to live in 'Northern' countries but belong to a larger interdependent / interconnected world made up of myriad migrations? Is there room for dialogue and critical engagement?⁴

The content framework of the series of seminars in Delhi was adopted in the project and the justification of the Indian organisers was also generalised for the UK context:

This series of seminars is proposed in a context where the Forum is yet hardly known in India, neither as an organization / initiative or as a movement it is widely seen to be elsewhere, nor in terms of the interesting culture of politics it appears to offer, the culture of 'open space'. There has been very little critical public examination in India as yet of the Forum, either as an idea or as a significant world institution.⁵

The proposal of a position of critical engagement (as opposed to critical disengagement and uncritical engagement) was seen as one of the major strengths of the Delhi initiative and was adopted as one of the pillars of the Other Worlds project as well:

Given the volatile world context within which the Forum is taking shape, the important initiatives and also positions that it itself is taking, as well as the major challenges it is facing, there is reason to think that the WSF is at a critical juncture. Maybe the Forum as well as the thousands of organizations from across the world that are participating in and supporting it, would do well to take a step back and get a view of the larger picture of which it is one part, one frame.⁶

The proposal also described the way in which the initiative in Delhi and the Other Worlds project were different:

Different from the New Delhi initiative this application proposes a pilot project in Nottingham that will lead to a semi-distance structured educational programme that will be made available to self-organised groups of young adults through the web for their independent use. It will consist of a series of proposed 'open space sessions' supported by online input materials that should be

4 Original proposal for the Other Worlds Project submitted to DfID.

5 Sen, J. and M. Kumar (2003) *Are Other Worlds Possible? The Open Space Reader on the World Social Forum and Its Engagement with Empire*. New Delhi: National Foundation for India, 7.

6 Sen, J., and M. Kumar (2003) *Are Other Worlds Possible? The Open Space Reader on the World Social Forum and Its Engagement with Empire*. New Delhi: National Foundation for India, 8.

discussed by the groups themselves following the methodology of the 'Open space' (with or without an external moderator).⁷

A design and development research approach was proposed for the project development process. The objective was to work collaboratively in designing a framework for educational intervention that would support the development of an understanding of the Forum process and the issues dealt within it and develop critical and analytical skills in a 'non-indoctrinating' and participatory way. The second stage would be to pilot this framework in different contexts and modify it according to the outcomes and feedback from participants and external or internal 'critical friends', so that we could come close to an optimal learning trajectory for potential participants. Therefore, rather than a series of seminars, the Other Worlds project proposed an educational programme which would make a set of educational materials available online based on the methodology of 'open space' (which served as the framework for intervention). The initial idea was to create an entry point into the Forum, so that more people could take part in the Social Forum initiative, more particularly in the European Social Forum.

Different Conceptualisations of 'Open Spaces'

The proposed methodology of the Other Worlds project was based on the premises of the 'open space' methodology of the World Social Forum and slogan: 'Another world is possible'. However, as the development process progressed, the Social Forums became less central to the project and more emphasis was placed on the issues discussed within it. The idea of an open space was re-deployed using a different framework. This happened because of the perception that the kind of space that the Forum (more specifically the European Social Forum) was becoming due to internal power struggles was incompatible with the notion of open space we were working with in the pedagogical arena.

Within the current project framework, an open space is considered an educational 'safe space' where people are relatively protected from subjugation and can participate in a kind of dialogue that welcomes different ideas and 'critical engagement' with diverse worldviews. This concept is based on the principles that:

Everyone has knowledge (we all have got our own lenses to look through at the world);

Every knowledge deserves respect (these lenses are legitimate, but they are constantly reconstructed and bound to particular contexts);

Every knowledge is partial and incomplete (as the lenses are constructed within particular contexts, they are informed by particular assumptions and they lack information from other contexts and other assumptions);

All knowledge can and should be questioned (the assumptions that inform the construction of the lenses should be examined, as well as their implications and other possibilities of assumptions).⁸

7 Original proposal for the Other Worlds Project submitted to DfID.

Therefore asking questions and challenging assumptions in a responsible way becomes a sign of respect for others and can be a way of going beyond the boundaries of acquired/constructed perspectives, beliefs and cultures. Thus, the project promotes and supports the creation of open spaces where participants can talk about issues that affect their lives, reclaim the right to question received knowledge, explore the implications of assumptions and positions without being told what they should think or do, and participate in collective constructions of alternative visions of the future. This participation, though, is not based on consensus.⁹ The aim is not to create a collective vision of another world, but to explore possibilities together, relying on individual differences to avoid the reification of a collectively agreed 'ideal' future. These explorations do not depend on a commitment to a group identity or ideology, which is the mainstream strategy of community formation, but they do rely on a commitment to a process of de- and re- construction of 'self' and 'other' and of ontological and epistemological assumptions (of the nature of reality and knowledge respectively).

This understanding of open space is theoretically different from the perceived dominant understanding of the open space of the Social Forums and even to its conceptual description of

an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neo-liberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a planetary society directed towards fruitful relationships among Mankind and between it and the Earth.¹⁰

In order to maintain an open atmosphere, the purpose of the pedagogical space of the Other Worlds project does not emphasise 'effective action' or foster consensus in relation to what this new planetary society should look like. Neither does it portray neo-liberalism or the domination of the world by capital or imperialism as an 'enemy' to be defeated. The notion of Open Space in the project is best described as the idea of a 'pedagogical open space', that is open to all who are willing to look at things from different perspectives, to open up their minds to different (and also partial/incomplete) forms of knowing and being and to the complex nature of the 'system' we are all part of. This pedagogical strategy implies a recognition that the 'Empires' we would like to change do not exist only outside of us – their violence operates in a complex way and is reproduced on a daily basis even by the people who see themselves as the ones who are challenging them. These Empires have historically shaped the way we see the world, the way we think and the way we relate to others. In a pedagogical process, this recognition demands a productive acknowledgement of complicity with 'the system' and shifts the focus of the intervention from a politics of hostility (of 'us versus them') towards a politics of 'friendship to come' (or 'us all').¹¹ Within this framework, answers, solutions and alternatives, as well as collectivities, 'cultures' and associations will always be

8 These principles are prompted in the introductory unit of the project which is reproduced at the end of this paper.

9 See Colin Wright's article in this issue.

10 WSF Charter of Principles.

11 See Spivak, G. (2003) *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia University Press.

contingent and temporary. The utopia promoted in the project is of an undivided world that is not monolithic, nor homogeneous, but that transcends current divisions and promotes a call for relationship – ‘ethical relation to the other’ as an embrace of difference – an act of love.¹² The project can be seen as an intervention towards this goal which attempts to create the possibility for the reinvention of ways of thinking, relating and imagining the world.

The conceptual framework of the project is based on concepts related to postcolonial pedagogies, to what is often called ‘continental philosophy’, as well as to a social-historical constructivist understanding of the learning process. Amongst the perspectives that inform this framework are those of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Michel Foucault, Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Jacques Derrida and the later work of Paulo Freire.¹³ Although this methodology has parallels with the area commonly referred to as ‘critical pedagogy’, it differs insofar as it attempts to avoid normalising agency or subjectivities. Therefore, what participants ‘should do or be’ is left for them to decide. This is defined in the project as a reflexive ethic, which, as suggested by Foucault in one of his last interviews, seeks not to “suggest what people ought to be, what they ought to do, what they ought to think and believe”,¹⁴ but to enable the construction of an awareness about how social mechanisms have, up to now, been able to work and how, therefore, these systems have conditioned the way we think, evaluate, act and relate to others. And then, starting from there, leave to the people themselves, knowing all the above, the possibility of self-determination and the choice of their own existence.¹⁵

The emphasis on critical engagement and the focus on self-reflexivity and on ‘sanctioned ignorances’¹⁶ in the project aims to prompt a process of unlearning privilege¹⁷ that may have the potential to enable the construction of more ‘ethical relations to the other’, as well as more ‘accountable reasoning’ – features that could be seen as essential for the ideal of participatory democracy, which also seems to be the essence of some of the conceptualisation of the Social Forums phenomena.

The Other Worlds Educational Rationale

In the first phase of the project a set of learning materials were developed by a group of educators, academics and activists from India, Brazil and England around thirteen themes or ‘open space units’:

12 Spivak, in D. Landry and G. MacLean (eds.) (1995) *The Spivak Reader*. London: Routledge.

13 See Freire, P. (1998) *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

14 Foucault quoted in Spivak’s essay ‘More on Power/Knowledge’, in D. Landry and G. MacLean (eds.) (1995) *The Spivak Reader*. London: Routledge, 156.

15 *Ibid.*

16 See Spivak, G. (1988) ‘Can the Subaltern speak?’ In: C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds.) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 271-313.

17 Unlearning is defined by Gayatri Spivak as the ability to question how truths are produced, descending to the level of the cultural and political formations that produce them. See D. Landry and G. MacLean (eds.) (1995) *The Spivak Reader*. London: Routledge.

- Knowledge and perspectives
- Globalisation and its effects
- The World Social Forum
- Agents of change
- War and terrorism
- Violence and non-violence
- Nationalism and fundamentalism
- Representation and exclusion
- Identity and multiculturalism
- Reform or revolution?
- Battle for resources
- Transnational solidarity
- Whose struggle?

The choice of themes was based on the structure of the Delhi initiative.

Each unit was designed to serve as an entry point into the issues and questions related to each theme. The project team has tried to cover a variety of language and political literacy levels, but the primary intended audience were 16 to 24 year olds, who might be curious or sceptical about political issues, but who do not describe themselves as 'politicised'.

The starting point was the perception that learners need to be equipped to deal with difficult issues and questions related to themselves, their contexts – their identities, cultures, power, privilege, exclusion – and to other people and other contexts in order to take responsibility for their choices in relation to how they think, act and relate to others. However, in order to create the conditions for informed choice, learners (and teachers/educators) need to have the skills to deal with the complexity of global processes and with different kinds of knowledge in a 'globalised' world. Within the project, this set of skills and the knowledge about how global processes work and how they can be negotiated is called 'transnational literacy'. These critical and analytical skills relate to the ability to perceive the origins and implications of assumptions that inform the choices that individuals and collectives make. Amongst these skills, the project privileges 'self-reflexivity', which relates to the ability to perceive and question how one's own assumptions are/were constructed and the openness and willingness to listen (critically) to other possible ways of thinking about things which opens possibilities of different forms of agency (possibilities of intervention), of dialogue across difference and of transnational and transcultural solidarity.

The development of these skills require a move away from education seen as 'knowledge transmission' or 'banking education' as conceptualised by Paulo Freire, through which knowledge is deposited in students' minds and withdrawn on tests, assignments and exams. The principle is that students need to construct the understanding of their places in the world through exposure to difference and critical engagement with it – so that they can learn to think independently and responsibly, becoming aware of their accountability for their reasoning and decisions. In order to achieve this teachers/educators cannot impose on learners what they believe learners

should think or do. This generally works the same way as tests and exams: learners will reproduce what has been taught them as long as there is surveillance and a system of reward and punishment in place. But outside the classroom, outside the school, the surveillance and imposition are exercised by other groups and if learners do not develop the skills to challenge these impositions and think independently, they will be less likely to choose to think in different ways. We suggest that a process that develops these skills can ‘empower’ students to negotiate their own subjectivities and identities and enable them to challenge and go beyond cultural practices that produce oppression, divisions, hate and inequalities in their contexts and in the world in a more effective and sustainable way than processes in which the choices are made for learners and in which learners are expected to conform to what has been decided without understanding the implications and responsibilities involved in all the options available.

The methodology of this project invites learners and educators to create open spaces – that are relatively safe from oppressive power relations – where students do not feel afraid to express their views freely and without fear in order to be able to challenge and go beyond them ‘in dialogue’ with other people. This does not mean that the authority of teachers/educators will be denied or nonexistent, but it does require this authority to be problematised and exercised in a more democratic and responsible way, so that students also share the responsibility of the creation of the space.

The methodology also invites learners and educators to engage critically and respectfully with their own views and the views of others. This implies a recognition that teachers and learners have and construct their own knowledge and that all knowledge is partial and incomplete. This strategic relativisation of the teachers’ views is necessary to make learners comfortable about expressing their perspectives without the fear of being looked down or silenced, about learning with one another and about developing an attitude of respect for different views. However, this respect does not mean an absolute relativisation of perspectives where ‘everything goes’. As knowledge and perspectives – or the lenses we look through at the world – are seen as always partial and incomplete, different perspectives are needed for transforming these lenses and therefore, critical engagement for the examination of assumptions and implications of perspectives is essential for this transformation to happen in a responsible and informed way.

The Development Process

The development process relied on a content group, an advisory group and a piloting group. All groups consisted of educators, academics, activists and students from different ‘persuasions’ – mostly working voluntarily or semi-voluntarily.¹⁸ The content group developed the basic materials for each of the ‘open space units’ on an online collaborative virtual environment (wiki). Some members (and also ‘outsiders’) took the formal role of ‘critical friends’ whose objective was to read the texts produced (and the

18 The rates paid per hour were ‘flattened’ in the project to £10 p/h. Some of us called this type of work ‘financially compensated activism’.

development process) in a critical way. The materials produced and the methodology, were then piloted with three pilot groups along the way (from May to September 2004) and the feedback collected through learning diaries, focus groups and interviews informed the re-constructions and re-directions of the project.¹⁹

Besides informing the re-directions, the evidence collected so far also suggests that this approach to transnational literacy has been successful in inspiring and engaging young people who did not define themselves as politicised or had an interest in 'politics' prior to the project. It also indicates that it has led participants to:

- Examine the origins and implications of their assumptions (develop self-reflexivity),
- Transform these assumptions through dialogue 'in difference', changing the ways they perceived themselves and other people
- Empower participants to negotiate their positions more effectively in social processes building on the notion of interconnectedness
- Feel they are able to intervene in the world in a more responsible way

There were seven steering meetings from March to October 2004 where the content, advisory and piloting groups met to reflect on the process and piloting results and re-define the framework for the project. Due to the diverse constitution of the three groups, the negotiations in the steering meetings were problematic at times,²⁰ but the balance of focus on the process and on contingent outcomes guaranteed a 'final product' of the first phase of the project that was carefully and responsibly produced, but is still unfinished and even contradictory. This product can be described as an online resource bank and a set of procedures for pedagogical interventions that are based on the conceptual framework already described.

Online Content²¹

The online content can be found on the website: www.mundi.org.uk/otherworlds. The materials selected or produced for this project portray 'non-mainstream' perspectives that challenge 'common sense' assumptions, in order to develop critical and analytical skills. By inviting participants to engage critically with the materials, we acknowledge that we do not necessarily endorse any of the perspectives presented – we use them strategically as aids for the kinds of learning processes that this project intends to initiate and support.

19 Language (in terms of accessibility) was by far (and in many senses still is) the greatest challenge that the project team had to face.

20 This learning process deserves further consideration, but this remains outside the remit of this paper.

21 This section was copied from the 'Educational Rationale' section on the Other Worlds website.

The introductions available on the site, written in the first phase of the project, were meant to provide readers with an 'activist perspective' on the themes. However, the outcomes of the first piloting schemes have provided evidence that they are not necessarily effective as 'entry points' due to the type of language used and previous knowledge assumed. Therefore, new introductions are being written following the model of the introductory unit. These should be available by the end of 2004.

The question section is divided into: self-reflexive questions, open space questions and further questions. We suggest that the self-reflexive questions should be dealt with by participants themselves as they address issues that might be too personal for an open space discussion. The 'open space' questions, though, were designed to stimulate dialogue and discussion and to encourage thought processes beyond what is perceived as 'common sense'. In many ways we perceive this as the most effective component of the project as it is through the questions that participants identify their own assumptions and recognise and consider other ways of knowing and being. Participants should not view the questions as a list to be answered – they are rather prompts for dialogue that may lead to directions defined by the participants themselves. The 'further questions' were designed with more politicised audiences in mind and therefore their language and the background knowledge required for discussions are of a different level.

The online interviews are an attempt to provide perspectives using a more attractive kind of media. We have tried to include the perspectives of activists, educators, academics and students from different backgrounds, but the process of collection of video-statements was limited to the availability of people, resources and language skills of the interviewees. We hope that in the future we will be able to develop a more comprehensive video-statement library that will go beyond the current limitations.

The texts section is divided into: selected texts, books, articles and films. The 'selected texts' were chosen for their degree of provocation. They (should) show a relatively wide range of 'non-mainstream' perspectives and different levels of language, but they are currently being revised together with the introductions. We welcome suggestions for articles, books and films for each of the themes – as well as for the introduction/selected text revisions.

We believe it is through the questions, introduction, interviews and texts that students are exposed to 'difference' (different perspectives about reality, power and knowledge) and are supported in their learning processes for the development of critical and analytical skills.

One feature that is currently being piloted to make the connection between questioning and action stronger is the introduction of problem solving tasks based on case studies related to challenges faced by NGOs, social movements or civil society groups, in which participants need to use the critical/analytical skills developed in the project to tackle real life-like problems. If effective, this new feature will be available on the website in February 2005.

Other features of the website include:

- A links section for each unit – where users will find a collection of websites of NGOs, special reports, global governance institutions, direct action groups and civil society networks and campaigns related to the specific themes;
- An ‘exchange ideas’ section with a discussion forum which can be used to foster dialogue in a virtual environment and a collaborative tool called ‘wiki’ which takes users to the virtual environment where the units are being revised and re-written. Anyone can use this development tool to participate in the construction of this project. We welcome and value contributions from teachers/educators and students;
- An ‘evaluation’ section – inviting educators from around the world to take part in a comparative research exercise to analyse and discuss the challenges and possibilities of the methodology proposed by the project;
- A newsletter with the latest information about the project;
- A general links section that connects this project to similar initiatives in other subject areas and parts of the world.

The project team encourages teachers/educators to evaluate each unit critically and choose or adapt whatever is useful for their contexts.

Conclusions

The project is one possible strategy for pedagogical interventions attempting to deal with complexity and uncertainty in a responsible way. This strategy tries to avoid normalising subjectivities and does not propose consensual outcomes for dialogue,²² which can be seen as an innovative aspect for pedagogical processes, but which by no means offers a universal or ‘ultimate’ solution for all educational challenges. The project should be read critically: the methodology might not work in certain contexts, the content was designed with a very specific target audience in mind and (despite all planning and evaluation) may be contradictory at times and the process prompted by what is proposed in the project *might* lead to individual confusion, internal conflict and frustration,²³ depending on the facilitation/moderation offered and/or participants’ learning processes.²⁴

Therefore, the Other Worlds is a limited and unfinished project, characteristics that can be seen, from the perspective promoted within the project itself, as consonant with what the project wants to do. By being unfinished, it can inspire individuals to ‘react’ to its limitations and attempt to go beyond them, sharing the ownership of this ‘adventure’ of

22 On the other hand, the project does not go against collective or individual action emerging from the group itself.

23 However, we do not necessarily see these things as inherently bad.

24 No educational process is actually immune to this.

reconstructing things that are perceived as important. At present, the project is an open collective initiative run by volunteers that always welcomes new contributors (educators /teachers /activists /students /academics /‘ordinary people’) who are interested in this methodology and think that they would like to work with people from this group or within their contexts and groups in a kind of partnership with the project

It is recognised, within the ‘loose collective’ that made this project possible, that what has been done needs to be taken further.²⁵ Therefore some members of this collective have put forward different proposals for its continuation, two of which for interventions in the formal education sector: one for a ‘transnational literacy’ programme for teacher training and 6th forms in the East Midlands and eight partner countries (hosted by MUNDI – the same NGO that hosted the Other Worlds project) and one for an international comparative research project which will try to collect evidence and map the learning processes of participants in the transnational literacy programme in different countries and contexts. The first proposal has been successful and the second is under way. More information about the two initiatives, the methodology and how to become involved can be found at www.mundi.org.uk/learningaboutothers.

Appendix



Open Space Introductory Unit: Knowledge and Perspectives

“Believe nothing because it is written in books.
Believe nothing because wise men say so.
Believe nothing because it is religious doctrine.
Believe it only because you yourself know it to be true.”
-Siddharta Gautama Buddha (573-483 B.C.)

²⁵ A mid-term official report of the development and outcomes of the project was submitted to DFID in October and can also be found on the evaluation section of the website.

“On the one hand, the necessity of resisting the power of a closed knowledge creates in me an attitude of permanent openness towards others, towards the world. On the other hand it generates in me a continuing attitude of questioning myself that prevents me from becoming absolutely certain of being right. To protect myself from the dangers of closed knowledge, I cannot and must not close myself off to others or choose to think that only my truth is valid. On the contrary, the right way to keep awake and alert my capacity of right thinking, to improve my perception and to hear with respect is to be open to differences and to refuse the idea that I am absolutely right, which makes me incapable of learning anything new. In essence, the correct attitude of one who does not consider him or herself the ‘owner of truth’ is the attitude of permanent openness – openness to approaching and being approached, to questioning and being questioned, to agreeing and disagreeing.” – Adapted from Paulo Freire (1998)

**What do the two quotations tell you about knowledge and the person who knows?
Do you agree with what they say? Is it possible to agree with both?**

In academia (or the university environment), some people say that knowledge is objective and neutral. These people are usually called ‘modernists’ or ‘positivists’. They tend to believe that everything can be known and tested scientifically to produce a universal truth that is complete in itself (something that anyone could see in the same way). This is the most common approach in the natural sciences and is related to the idea that progress and development can be achieved through the use of science and technology to control the natural environment in order to build the perfect society.

Other people think that this idea of control cannot and should not be applied to people. They believe that human beings are different from one another and extremely complex, therefore they cannot be treated as objects. In addition, they believe that knowledge is not objective (there is no possibility of complete ‘neutrality’), as what is observed (even through scientific experiments) depends on the interpretation of the person who ‘sees’ it. Like a pair of glasses we wear, they think each of us has different lenses to look through at the world. These lenses determine what we see as real, ideal, true, good and bad. Rather than being constructed by each individual, these lenses are produced collectively in social interactions (in families, education, the media, religion, the government). These are the ‘constructivists’ and ‘critical theorists’ (amongst others) who are concerned about how our knowledges affect the way we see and relate to others, how others see and relate to us and (in some areas), how knowledge is related to power and how it affects the way wealth and labour are distributed in the world.

- a) **That each individual brings valid knowledge to the open space**(everyone is a pot of knowledge!)
- b) **That this knowledge deserves respect**(everyone should have the right to express themselves without fear of being ‘looked down’ by others and should be committed to listening to others with respect)
- c) **That all knowledge is related to who you are and where you come from**(we construct the lenses we look through at the world in our contexts and interactions with others)
- d) **That all knowledge is partial and incomplete**(we all see the world through different lenses that continuously change and there are no universally better or clearer lenses)
- e) **That all knowledge can and should be questioned through dialogue**(we should engage critically with actions, thoughts and beliefs of both ourselves and others as we need different lenses – other perspectives – to challenge and transform our own views).

In this project, **being critical is a positive thing**. Engaging critically with others (as opposed to engaging uncritically or disengaging critically) means opening up to dialogue with different perspectives in a process of sharing knowledge that has the potential to affect and transform everybody involved. It requires a willingness to think outside your normal thoughts, to ask questions you have never asked before, to expand and enrich your horizons and to experiment with new ways of thinking and doing things. **Do you agree with these ideas?**

Reflexive Questions (for personal reflections):

1. What makes you think the way you do?
2. How sure are you of what you think?
3. Are your ideas of what is good and what is true the same as other people's or do they differ? Why is this so?
4. Where do your perspectives come from?
5. What are the similarities and differences between what you think and what your parents think? Have you ever questioned why these similarities and differences exist?

Open Space Question (to be discussed in the group):

1. Do people in different parts of the world see things in the same way? Do you think there is something that is fundamentally true for everybody, regardless of where they come from or what their background is?
2. Where does our knowledge about the world come from? For example, think about how you conceive differences to rich and poor, powerful and powerless or respect and fear.
3. Who or what shapes our understanding of what is real? For instance, would you say that what the media presents is necessarily true and neutral?
4. Does anyone control the sources of your knowledge? What are the dangers of this situation?
5. Do you think any group (of 'experts' for example) should have the power to decide for other people (or for everyone) what a good society is? Who should decide what a good society is?
6. Some people believe that there is a better, 'more developed' way of seeing and relating to the world (a more developed culture) – as there are more backward and underdeveloped ways of seeing as well. Do you agree with that? What are the implications of accepting that as true?

Some people think that an expanding culture of competition, consumerism and individualism, that is sometimes said to be the most 'developed', has not brought a just and good society for everyone. Do you agree with that? Do you think this culture has the potential to do so? How can the common good be achieved?

the author

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