

## **I'll Show You the Change: A Transformative Moment and the Complex Art of Personally Evaluating Open Space Technology** by Ellen Regos

*In the past I have found storytelling to be a very powerful tool. This is my story of a transformative moment at a recent conference I attended in Melbourne. Like all stories there is a beginning...*

It is Tuesday morning and I am on my way to the Abbotsford Convent to attend the 'Show Me the Change: Complexity & the Art of Evaluation' conference. I and four other colleagues from work are booked into the first two days. I arrive in time for the official welcome: a line of speakers and sponsors. I wonder if there are other ways of conducting the opening formalities that include humorous anecdotes, personal reflections or theatrical performances. Not this time however, it is the formulaic speaking into a microphone and the tick box approach to mentioning the funding and collaborating bodies that have put together the event. The 'welcome to country' which in principle I support rarely feels authentic or integrated, although as I shut my eyes to the sound of the 'didge', I feel the powerful vibrations of the instrument resonate through out my body. I imagine myself outside, feet touching the ground, surrounded by nature, back in time, when people lived in harmony with the earth.

I look about the room. There must be around two hundred people here, mostly women it seems, I recognise about a dozen or so people. I have experienced Open Space Technology before, once, with less than half the number of people, most of whom I knew. This time it is different. There are 5 facilitators, some having travelled from other parts of the world, to begin the introductions. It is time to open up to complexity.

To start with we are asked to write on the back of our name tag a question, in fact, 'the question', the question that we will hold with us throughout the two days of the event. Hopefully by the end of the two days it will be answered. I think hard, very, very hard. I don't have a question. Nope, no question I can think of. I don't really know why I am here other than work booked in our entire education and engagement team as a team building exercise. Of course I am very interested in evaluation but today I am unsure as to whether a conference will benefit my work in any way, especially when back at the office I have a mountainous workload awaiting me. But here I sit, without a question. So, if I don't have a question what do I do? It seems as though this question is integral to the morning session, so I scrawl down four words: 'what is the question?' in black biro. That will do.

Personally, I have never tried facilitating 200 people in a small room, but at a guess I would envisage that it would generate a lot of noise, which it did. Asked to introduce ourselves to other people through reading out our question and moving around the room, I was totally overwhelmed by the noise. It was physically painful. I tried my best to listen, but the reverberation of conversation dominated and all I could do was attempt to lip read. My discomfort led me to the doorway where I could linger with others and where I could just manage to hear what was being said. Visually impaired by the crowd, I missed a lot of what the facilitators were saying and doing, so like a sheep I followed the crowd. I tried lining up as told, finding my place in the group, doing the exercises as best I could. But for me it wasn't working. My options were clear; I could either leave or speak up. I chose to ask the facilitators for some 'open space'. Wasn't this what it was all about anyway?

It was much easier outside. I could sit on the grass and hear what people were saying. It was a discussion about what would be impossible to achieve today. Our group of six introduced ourselves, shared our questions and our opinions on the two questions we were asked to address. I have no memory of what the other question for discussion was. Interesting how some things are forgotten...

Back together again, the process and the accompanying five principles of open space were explained to the entire group. Although familiar with the process I sat there with the memory of my past experience of standing up and voicing my passion and theme for discussion and then having on that occasion no-one turn up until very late in the piece. Not sure if I wanted to put myself forward I sat and listened to what others were presenting as topics for discussion. I wasn't sure what I wanted to discuss (just remember that I was attending this conference not really knowing why with a question that I was yet to understand). As I sat quietly listening to others, the spark of inspiration hit me. I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I walked to the centre of the room, picked up a texta and began to draw a tree. Not any tree, but the 'old' oak tree that lay at the back of the convent that I visit every time I come here. Around the tree I wrote a series of words that inspired me and that related to my own experiences of understanding the complexity of change and the art of evaluation. The words were: magic, creativity, inspiration, innovation and listening.

I walked to the facilitator, held the microphone and bravely read out my words. I felt very self-conscious and uncomfortable speaking up in front of a group of strangers. Never the less I did it anyway.

Pinning my sheet of paper on the cork board made it official. I would facilitate the second session outside. I had intended to run it straight off, but had not seen where the first session had been posted. I decided to leave it to fate rather than move it into the first one. Luckily, as I read over the offerings first up, I noticed that a conversation on story telling was taking place. So off I went to the Bishop's Chamber for my first discussion. I was very interested in attending the session on storytelling.

I have a bias towards sitting in circles. I think it evolved when I was a young child and would sit my teddies and dolls in a circle and play 'teacher'. I have noticed that there is equality in the space, with each person sitting the same distance from the centre. I like that. About 30 or so people gather for this session. The facilitator who leads the discussion obviously has a passion for the subject having spent the past year interviewing people affected by the Black Saturday bushfires, collecting and collating their stories. The discussion is diverse. Two themes appear to emerge: stories as a tool for evaluation and as a means of facilitating change and action. I observe the discussion and notice that the mental body is dominating and that what is lacking is what I would term embodied wisdom. Being the sort of person that I am I attempt the 'frog and flamingo' effect. A term I have created to describe the act whereby I add an unacceptable, unspeakable or unknown into the equation to see what happens or what new course the discussion may take. I notice that the same people continue to bring the conversation back, like a scratched record that continues to replay what it already knows. I wonder what the people who don't speak think and feel. I sense the underlying and unconscious feelings of the participants. The session is about to end so I ask the facilitator the final question 'how have you been affected by listening to the stories of the people affected by the fires'? She is genuinely surprised by the question: she has never 'thought' about that before, she thinks it is a good question. Wow, I am absolutely flabbergasted by this response. How can a person listen to

stories of tragedy and not be aware of the personal impact? As she answers the question I notice the sadness well up in her eyes.

Lunch is outside by the south facing garden. It is a beautiful day. The forecast is for rain but there is no sign of it as yet. I enjoy chatting to some people I have met while eating. The falafel is delicious! I bump into an acquaintance I have recently met and ask if she would like to take a walk to the 'old' oak tree. I have been eagerly waiting to visit the tree. There is something very special about it. I feel it every time I go visit.

The second session for the day: it is hard to believe how the weather can change so dramatically in such a short time. No sign of blue sky now. Grey clouds and the beginning of rain. I probably should have gone to the car to get my jacket, hat and scarf. Instead I decide to go to the tree for my session. The wind is cold and there is a light drizzle. My sense is that no-one will turn up, not in this weather. I turn up anyhow. I find a spot to sit and wait. As the rain starts to penetrate the canopy I relocate to the trunk where it is driest. I sit and remember the last time when I sat alone in 'open space'. It is like déjà vu. The facilitators said that if no-one attends your session it means that you are a vanguard or something to that affect. My ego would like to believe this story. Last time I sat alone I wrote a couple of pages until late in the piece I was joined by one other to whom I shared a lovely honest and thoughtful discussion. I doubted the likelihood of it this time. I recall the first principle of open space "whoever comes are the right people". What does it mean when no-one shows up? The rain was getting heavier and I was getting cold. Had I had a rain coat and warm clothes I would have sat contemplating the theme I had intended. I did try to be present and content, overcome my physicality for a while, but the cold and damp won out. I went back inside.

Exercising the 'law of two feet' as I sat in on nearly every discussion until at last I ended up back in the Bishop's Chamber coming in on a tail end of a discussion on values. There was a woman who spoke and her words resonated with my experience of change. There was much opposition to her position. It appeared that many were of the opinion that it was necessary to find effective ways of changing people's behaviour quickly. At that moment I realised that this was not the sort of discussion I wanted to be having at this conference. After the session I stayed back and thanked the woman for speaking her truth and sharing her own perspective on change. This was the sort of conversation I wanted to create.

With the work for day one concluded a group met up for drinks and nibbles at a colleague's nearby residence. This 'in between' space provided a forum to debrief and share our experiences of the day. Overall, there was dissatisfaction with the process and the content. A part of me just wanted to hang out and skip the dinner. This felt intimate and comfortable. I was yet to process my own feelings of the day's events.

Dinner did eventuate. I ended up sitting with work colleagues and acquaintances. The food was sensational and the attention to detail beautiful (I was very impressed by the sculptural floral centrepieces that were wrapped in paper bark). The students from the National Institute for Circus Arts (NICA) provided a lovely interlude to the meal as the event was being held at their centre in Prahran. There was thoughtfulness to the evening, from the way in which the students presented the menu to the integration of sustainability principles into those 'little' choices: food sourced locally, vegetarian fare, reuse of a plate and cutlery. Conversation at the table centred on work and family. I noticed my tiredness. It had been a long day.

*In most stories there is a middle; a time or event when something happens that changes what 'was' to what 'will be'. In my case it was dream, a dream I can't even now remember...*

I awoke abruptly in the night with an answer. It was not as if on going to bed I had asked a question, however, my unconscious mind must have processed the previous day making sense of the events and piecing together my feelings. It was 3 am in the morning and I had a strong sense that I needed to run my session again. It was very clear that this was what I had to do. Damn. Did I really want to put myself 'out there' again? Humiliation at having no-one turn up a second time was not an outcome I wanted to repeat. So how would I go about this differently? Firstly I would need to reframe my session into the common jargon of the conference. Secondly, I would need to make it clear how to find the location. I had realised yesterday that my directions would have made finding the tree almost impossible. So at 6am when my alarm rang and I was still awake I called on my courage to step into my vision of the day ahead. Sometimes things turn out differently to how you envisage them. But as I have learnt that is life!

Day 2 began with me being the first to make an announcement. I explained that my session had been cancelled yesterday due to the weather and that I would be holding it instead this morning. Luckily there was no sign of rain so I decided to schedule the discussion straight up. The way I framed the session was that it would be a conversation around how our personal experiences of change inform our own work on evaluation. I indicated that I would stand by the cork board and walk with people to the venue, which in this case was outside under the 'old' oak tree. One person came over to me, the first woman I had spoken to on day one while undertaking the exercise of sharing our question and attempting to lip read her answer. I made a few announcements to try and encourage participation. But after around ten minutes as the crowd dwindled, I realised that this was it. On walking out I noticed someone looking lost and asked her to join the session which she did. So, the three of us walked over to the 'old' oak tree. I recall the second principle: "whenever it starts is the right time". Obviously the time was now.

Anyone undertaking an evaluation at this point would wonder what the value of holding a session with just two people would be. A quantitative analysis would diminish the importance of this undertaking when compared to a conversation with 50 or more people who turned up to a concurrent session on the 'toolbox for evaluating change' for example. However, quantitatively, in regards to my previous session last year when only one person turned up, this was a 100% increase in numbers, so that in itself was an improvement. Luckily, my self-esteem wasn't riding on numbers. Yes, it would have been 'nice' to facilitate a larger group. I had facilitated larger groups at conferences before. For instance, last year when I ran a similar session at the Victorian Association for Environmental Education annual conference around half a dozen attended and similarly at the Environmental Education in Early Childhood conference I had over 50 people attend. What was it that made my session so alienating to this group? Was it the concept that the personal is political? Were people afraid of sharing their personal experiences? Is it not 'ok' to discuss feelings as a valid form of evaluation? Or is it true, am I just light years ahead of where the current understanding of theory and practice reside?

The exercise I had intended to begin with would not work with three, so I pocketed that. Instead I began with a visualisation. I asked the two participants to find a comfortable spot to sit as I took them on an inward journey aimed at clearing old and limiting beliefs, stuck and painful feelings. The

intention was to bring them into their body and unconsciously allow them to discover their own inner jewels that they had discovered along the way on their journey in life. Having completed the visual we moved into a sunny spot where we sat and talked for the next hour or so. We shared recent experiences of change and what we had learnt about ourselves in the process. We then translated this knowledge into our belief and practice around evaluation: what worked and what didn't from our own experience of conducting evaluation. It wasn't as though the conversation was enlightening, but it was real. There was a level 'grounding' to the discourse that respected the wisdom of each individual. I listened carefully to what was said. At times I was inspired, felt humility or was interested in learning more on what was said. I would seek clarification and reflect upon the conversation bringing it back to my own understanding. There were differences and similarities, stories and theories, the personal and political themes. I learnt that I am a 'reflective learner', a term I wasn't aware of. I witnessed a person speaking on her triumph of making a small but meaningful change in her life. We discussed different forms of evaluation and tried to make distinctions in the terminology that was being used. I still needed to clarify my own understanding of what evaluation is and what it is not. 'Value' seemed to be a reoccurring theme for me to explore further. We ended with an expression of gratitude and an end of session evaluation before heading back for morning tea.

Principle 3: "whatever happens is the only thing that could have".

I met up with a woman whom I had had an interesting discussion with at the conference the day before. I was very intrigued by her approach and understanding of the complexity of evaluating change. She informed me that she was holding a session on 'iterative evaluation' (I think that is what she termed it). I was realising that there was a whole language around evaluation that had emerged that I was not 'up' on. I didn't have the theoretical framework for my own practice. And yet, there were truths I had learnt from the art of just doing it and learning from the experience. The validity of my approach, perhaps there was a term for it, I was not sure? It ended up being a very small and intimate group. I had attended not only because the topic was of interest but also because I wanted to support this person. I had felt the disappointment of no one showing up to my first session and I sensed her fear. So I decided to sit in for moral support even though there were other sessions running that I was interested in attending. For me the discussion was interesting, although I sensed that the facilitator did not get from the session what she had wanted. I realised that I had a lot to share on the topic from my own experiments which made me realise that I had some limited but valuable expertise to contribute to the conversation. That felt good. Perhaps it had been the roll on effect from the previous session I had facilitated. I enjoyed listening to the range of views expressed and the questions that were being asked. I ended up staying for the entire session. It was a satisfying way to end before lunch. "When it's over, it's over", principle four I recall. But was it over yet?

Lunch wasn't that good today: runny soup and crumbly vegetable timbales. Yuk!

I was busy conversing with people when a discussion with a woman from Daylesford on nature led me to invite her outside to the 'old' oak tree. You may be beginning to notice the theme around this tree (okay it is VERY obvious, I know, I know, it was as if I had a strong desire to share this tree with everyone, unconscious as to why at this stage of the event). Anyhow, we went outside and I explained my fascination with the nature of this 'old' oak that had been allowed to grow naturally. Its lower limbs rambling across the ground, there was wildness to its growth, not stunted by pruning

or excessive maintenance. There were small pockets of biodiversity amongst the uncultivated places that intrigued me immensely. At last, a person to share this tree that got it like I did. Choosing a nature lover probably helped. Time seemed to be suspended as we shared our passion for the natural world, our love of bird watching. It felt like magic when a flock of yellow tailed black cockatoos flew overhead. Their cacophonous screeching a musical backdrop to our intense conversation. Then something strange happened. She began to record our discussion as if it mattered. As if there was a wisdom that needed to be shared, questions that needed to be asked. The connection was intense and the ideas were flowing. Unimagined possibilities came to the surface. Imagine if there was a celebration of the natural world as a part of this conference. Wasn't this why we were really here anyway? Wasn't this the real reason for our work? Or was this a totally incorrect assumption? Was this just a part of my imagination? This conference had created a doubt.

We returned late having missed the convergence. I had missed the activity outline so I asked a few people what was happening and what I was supposed to be doing. The funny thing was that everyone gave me slightly different instructions based upon their own understanding and interpretation of what was asked. I got a sense that I was to walk around and reflect upon the two days, what I had got from it and what I intended to do when I returned to work next week. When I felt that I had finished my contemplation I was to find or create a small group to share my new self-awareness. I knew there was a person I wanted to share this with so when I found her I asked if I could join her discussion. My learning at this stage had not been great, day one had been difficult and today more enjoyable, but as to the value of attending this conference I was very unsure. Nothing life changing, no great learning in this process, not that I was expecting anything anyway...until...

It was time to return to the group for the final evaluation of the conference. I had never heard of 'Playback Theatre' nor it seemed had many others in the group. The format was very simple: a facilitator, five actors dressed in black sitting on yellow crates, another woman with around fifty instruments within her reach, all ready to perform for our benefit. It started with a few words. The actors would perform, or sing or dramatize what was said. They had an uncanny ability to embody the emotions and lace their performance with wit and humour. It was brilliant. I was mesmerised by the process. This was fun! I had never seen an evaluation like this before. My measure of a good evaluation had just exploded into oblivion. Then came the understanding of 'the' question, my original question from yesterday: 'what is the question?' The facilitator asked: 'who would like to come up and share their story?' That was it; this was 'the' question I had been waiting for. As soon as it was asked I knew the answer, it was me. I was supposed to get up and tell my story, and I knew it with all my being.

For someone who finds it extremely uncomfortable getting up in front of very large crowds, it felt amazingly simple. I was astonished by the ease at which I stood and walked up on centre stage. Had I been asked yesterday I would have sat super glued to my seat, cringing at the thought of being chosen let alone volunteer to undertake such an act. But today something was different. Something had changed. I had felt courageous in the morning, validated after lunch and unconventionally brave in this moment as I walked up to the spotlight. Speaking was remarkably easy. The facilitator asked me a series of questions about my experience at the conference. I was nakedly honest: starting with my dream which led me to running a session under the 'old' oak tree on personal experiences of change. He asked me what I saw my role as, and I answered that I saw myself as a 'catalyst' for

change. What had I got from this conference? Each person I spoke to presented me with a treasure which I collected during the two days, I now had a bag full of gemstones to explore and admire at a later date. My aim in life has always been to embody the change I wish to see in the world. Gandhi would be proud. I spoke more about sitting under the tree and about listening to people. And this is when the transformative moment began...

I was asked to select an actor who would play me. Interesting, I had a choice whether to be male or female, a quick thought, I like being a woman, so I decided to select a woman. I couldn't remember the names, but I was grabbed by the red hair. I had always wondered what it would be like to have red hair. The actor was named 'Petra'. I only mention this because when I looked it up, I found that it means 'the rock' in Greek. Interesting because my heritage is primarily Greek, and I have had many remarkably transformative experiences when climbing mountains. The actors have only a couple of minutes to prepare before they act out my story. From the moment the performance begins I am moved. They start with the tree and 'me' sitting under it, the listening, the sounds, the sowing of seeds, the watching things grow, the disturbance of the man with the jack hammer that passed by saying out loud, 'that's not real work' or something to that effect. As I watch I feel a strong rising wave of emotion come to the surface. I feel remarkably moved, overwhelmed in fact by the feelings rising: I put my hand over my heart as the tears come to the surface. I wouldn't say that I was sobbing, but the strong emotion was clearly visible for all to see. It was like watching my essence on stage, witnessing my truth, seeing myself how other people see me. It was a transformative moment.

Wow, amazing...at the end of the performance I sit with my emotions. I have no need to understand them, just feel them at this stage. The facilitator slash interviewer asks me a few more questions; I think he wants me to explain the strong reaction. But my feelings are raw and all I can elaborate is how blown away I have been by the process and how uncannily the actors have picked up on my own personal metaphors. I move back to my seat and watch the next two stories unfold.

The third story is brilliant; I am moved again by the power of storytelling (a strong theme for me at this conference). This is the story of two farmers: one who evaluates his crop by pulling out the plants which causes them to die by examining their roots. The second farmer does things differently: he lets his crop grow, strategically planting and carefully observing change. He notices the biodiversity that is created and works in collaboration with the natural world. Unfortunately his methods are not approved upon. A council official has a form that must be filled in and his methods do not fit into the evaluation criteria. The 'person'ified form (a brilliant concept) has an anxiety attack at the thought of being changed. This final metaphoric illustration on the potential danger of evaluation is very poignant. Even though I am very aware of the value of right/left brain integration: this performative method of evaluating the conference has changed what was only a moment ago an average conference into what is now a transformative experience. I am not sure whether other participants have had a similar experience. But for me personally, the change has been profound.

The closing circle is simple yet very powerful. Every participant has the opportunity to speak her or his truth. I am one of the first to speak. My emotions are still high and so I babble something about the 'power of the people'. This process takes time due to the number of participants present. I enjoy listening to the wisdom in the room. I notice that there are less people here today than yesterday. I wonder if some people had chosen not to attend because they had had a similar experience to me

day one or whether they didn't see the benefit of spending two days out of the office. Perhaps they weren't meant to witness this moment. I recall one of the rules of open space, the people who are here are meant to be here. I am glad that I have stayed for this moment. The threads of the conference have been pulled together. The wisdom of a few people standing out, one especially: 'that change will happen whether we measure it or not', sometimes when we don't even expect it.

The Canadian facilitator took the wisdom of the room by creating a poem which he read aloud to close the conference: a remarkable end to a very chaotic beginning.

But was this the finish?

I gathered myself together. The impact of my story had affected others; I could sense that, even from the truths spoken at the end. People I had not met before were coming up to me, I received hugs from people I had just met and noticed a change, not only in others but in myself. My heart felt more open. I also felt exposed and shock at what I had just done, baring my soul on stage. How did this happen?

I walked back by the river to the train station to journey home, it was time to integrate this transformative moment into my being. I didn't fully understand what had happened or why. I could sense many layers. One thing I realised was that I had turned one of my strengths on myself. I am very good at listening to other people and during this conference I started to listen to myself, both my thoughts and my feelings. I had started to speak my truth; I witnessed first-hand the impact of that choice right up on stage. And then I realised something quite profound: I had wanted to share the 'old' oak tree with everyone at the conference by offering a session outside and in a way I did what I intended, not how I had originally planned, but in a much more meaningful and profound way: that was the surprise for me. I had given the conference a connection to the natural world and shared my love of 'trees', in essence I had given my whole and true self.

"Work hard, pay attention, but be prepared to be surprised!" Yes, the final principle of open space and the end of **this story**.

*Sometimes the end of the story is just the beginning; the beginning of a new chapter, another transformative moment, a continuum of learning that continues throughout time, an exploration of space both inner and outer and the correlation of that relationship. Fundamentally it is an integration and expansion of self.*