

Facilitating the Open Space for Learning!

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In this article we go deeper into the application of Open Space to facilitate learning and extend the thinking to consider how teachers and students might plan collaboratively in order to co-create 'best learning moments'. It might be helpful to access our original article at http://learningteachernet.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/the_learning_teacher_magazine_1_2017.pdf, in order to appreciate the depth and complexity of Open Space as a concept. We define best learning moments as referred to within the recent Open University report 'Innovating Pedagogy 2021'.

Managing Open Space for optimum learning

The concept of Open Space applies to many aspects of our work and our lives in general but for the purposes of this article, we are concentrating on Open Space for Learning only. In practical terms, the objective is to enable the learner to increasingly take more control of how, where, when and with whom they learn best so that each person can be 'the best learner that I can be'.

The idea is to have a mutual system of managing the optimum conditions for learning, so that 'best learning moments' can be planned intentionally. It is vital that both teacher and student are conscious of what conditions enable each individual to make the most of the learning opportunity or experience.

The key then is to consider how the teacher and the student can jointly control those conditions so that everyone has an equal opportunity to learn as quickly and effectively as others and every learning experience can be a 'best learning moment'.



For example, using Open Space Principles, we would not explore learning outcomes without inviting students to include their own 'intended learning outcomes'. Without this kind of involvement in the process of learning, it is difficult to create an authentic state of 'self-directed learning' or achieve true 'best learning moments'.

Applying Open Space in practice

In terms of applying the Open Space Principles¹ to any learning situation, it depends on the perspective that teacher and student adopts towards how learning might be optimised. What we have found from our own experiences is that these perspectives enable us to consider how Open Space can contribute to 'best learning moments'. Our suggested process starts with teachers' own reflections and then follows this pathway....

1. Self-reflecting as a teacher

In your mind "organise" your thoughts first - do you think Open Space concept might give added value to learning, could make learning more effective? If you think "perhaps" or "don't know", then leave Open Space as a concept for the time being. In the case you really think "yes", go for it.



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¹ Open Space Principles are listed in the article 'The importance of Open Space for Learning'

2. Readiness for Open Space

What are the key objectives and focus when planning teaching and learning with Open Space Principles? For a teacher to make best use of Open Space he or she needs to organise their own thinking first rather than organise the classroom – what learning theories are they applying to their teaching? Are learners ready? To what extent are learners socially and collaboratively ready? Is the climate for learning appropriate for the learners? Are relationships, group dynamics and atmosphere right? Putting learners at ease, making them feel interested, able and ready for learning is a key part of using Open Space.

3. Helping students to get started

In order to achieve the right balance and depth of Open Space Principles that might be applied, learners' own self-awareness is key and may include their own self-reflection as a starting point. But to be able to be self-directed in this way, students also need to have self-knowledge of their own learning (metacognitive) processes. Effective learning is a very personal, learner-centred process. Every student needs to be aware of their own patterns and preferences of learning and how they learn most effectively.

4. Designing class-based, online and remote/home learning activities and planning learning outcomes



Take time to explain the idea of Open Space to students and their role as co-managers of optimum conditions for 'best learning moments'. Let students familiarise themselves with Open Space Principles when discussing with them the implementation of a course of study.

A good application of Open Space Principles is to encourage students to suggest their own intended learning outcomes, in addition to those planned for them.

A step forward towards engaging learners in the use of Open Space Principles would be to design a reflective questionnaire or checklist to enable teacher and students to make Stage 3 'Helping students to get started' more effective. This is our next step...