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Open Space Learning: A Study in Transdisciplinary Pedagogy

Monk, Nicholas; Rutter, Carol Chillington; Neelands, Jonathan; and Heron, Jonathan
Bloomsbury Publishing Inc. , 2011

Book Review

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Open-Space Learning (OSL), a “transdisciplinary pedagogy” as practiced at the University of Warwick, challenges assumptions about the boundaries of disciplinary knowledge, the organization of teaching spaces and resources, and the power arrangements that order the roles of teachers and students. This book bears witness to the efficacy of learning in spaces that assume students are engaged in embodied risk-taking, problem-based play, personal responsibility, group collaboration, and open-ended exploration within boundaries and expectations that yield demonstrated competence. The essential prefix for this learning space is “trans-”; it is asserted to be transgressive, transcendent, transitional, trans-rational, transactional, transdisciplinary, and transcultural. OSL draws from the learning theories of Boal, Freire, Vygotsky, Gardner, and Kolb and from the work of Clark and Damasio in neuroscience.

In 2005 the University of Warwick received a grant from the Higher Education Funding Counsel of England to create its center for Creativity and Performance in Teaching and Learning (CAPITAL) in partnership with the Royal Shakespeare Company. Principles of theater pedagogy and performance studies opened new learning possibilities for disciplines not normally associated with embodied performance. The OSL website at the university notes collaborations between CAPITAL and students in business, chemistry, cultural studies, theater studies, philosophy, math, and psychiatry programs. The authors indicate that hundreds of students have been exposed to their learning pedagogies between 2007 and 2011.

Four case studies create the backbone for the book. (1) An undergraduate module “without

chairs” for literature majors brought twelve of Shakespeare’s plays to life and assessed student learning in comparison with students in the “with chairs” version of the module. (2) Law students argued cases found in four plays and analyzed their legal implications. (3) The learning gained by participants in the Certificate in Teaching Shakespeare program and the Postgraduate Award in Teaching Shakespeare for Actors is assessed using several measures. (4) Three “practice as research” projects focused on theatrical productions, practical workshops, and performance process for undergraduate students or post-graduates who were teaching Shakespeare. These studies provide descriptions and interpretations of the projects, but they do not offer much detail about the pedagogy’s methods for those without a theater background.

The book publisher provides videos and outlines for specific OSL activities on its website. (I was not successful in getting a number of the links to work.) The OSL site at the University of Warwick provides similar links as well as some others. (This website has not been updated since fall 2013, which also raises questions about the current state of OSL at Warwick.) This book was published as a paperback in 2015. *Open Space Learning* reads like a report for university or funding organization officials. The authors give significant attention to student assessment of their learning and their performance on various required assignments.

Classroom lectures and seminars, characterized negatively as contexts of “knowledge download,” were the dominant forms of teaching when CAPITAL began. OSL intentionally changes, at least in theory, the relationship between teachers and students, “dethroning” or “uncrowning” the power of the teacher that is reinforced by physical classroom spaces and presentation formats.

I am not satisfied that the authors grappled with the power dynamics that remain present in OSL environments. While a teacher’s authority and expertise are expressed differently in the OSL context, teachers are still structuring the environment in which learning occurs. They are evaluating student work. They determine who passes or fails the modules. While teachers may have been “dethroned” from the traditionally hierarchical ways of exercising authority, they still have power, and perhaps disguised power, in the exploratory OSL context.

The expressions of open space learning reported in this book depend heavily on the plays of Shakespeare. These applications of OSL for religious or theological educators are not immediately obvious, but imaginative teachers, especially those with a performing arts background, will draw inspiration from *Open Space Learning* and develop possibilities for performing the narrative-based texts from their disciplines in their teaching.

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