

O.S.T and processoriented groupwork

The connection between Harrison Owens O.S.T. and Mindells Processoriented Groupwork

O.S.T. (Open Space Technology) developed by Harrison Owen in the eighties, is a revolutionary form of „leading“ large groups of people without aiming for, nor fighting against change. O.S.T. simply goes with the flow of life, with that what is present right at this very moment.

The technique is intimately connected to the acknowledgments from Chaos-research and system-theory. O.S.T. is also connected to different methods of process-oriented work, specifically to the process-oriented way of working with groups like Arnold Mindell does.

Mindells work, on its turn, integrates actual knowledge of other scientific disciplines like Quantum physics. Also the more recently developed „worldwork“, the sociological sister of Processwork, grounds on these elements.

Beside the „Modern scientific parts, all of these methods contain indigenous¹ knowledge about the connection between people and their environment, shamanic² elements and parts of the great wise teachings like the Tao³.

In fact, the development of this work describes the transition of the tightly established meaning about the necessity for firm leading structures to achieve development and growth, towards the discoveries and formulation from Chaos research and system theory. These new scientific disciplines have produced discoveries leading to controversial statements.

Chaos suddenly seemed to be a very complex order, systems were developing and organising themselves from the inside.

These new insights were revolutionary by presenting the contrary of the main view in which order was a product of human activity, something that had to be brought into the chaotic, unordered nature.

All these years since the founding of nature science by Descartes, people tried to control fate and searched for the apparent defects in the „World machinery“. Nowadays highly ordered and complex structures reveal themselves and show that organic systems have a inner plan for development, organising themselves systematically from their inside.

Terms like „organicity“ (self organisation) or „deterministic chaos“ make the round and confront us with our, since 400 years⁴, developed and settled idea of linear development and the desire for controlling the events in nature and humans.

¹ The term „indigenous“ is a collective for original habitants of all continents.

² The translations of the term „Shaman“ is spread from „the knowing“ to „working with heat and fire“. Popular it determines a human who wanders „between the worlds“. This means: someone who acknowledges the existence, and applies the forces and energies not yet scientifically proved.

³ Taoism is the wise learning taught by LaoTse, who lived in the 4th century B.C.

⁴ Rene Descartes lived in the 16th Century (1596-1650) and is known as the founder of the mechanistic, also called „Kartesian“ world model.



Chaosresearch observed and described events in nature whose dynamics seemed to depend on defined initial factors. In event though they more and more seemed to develop under influence of so called „strange attractors“ thereby showing a highly complex order, behaving in a unpredictable „non-linear“ way of development. As an example I would like to point on the so called „fractals“, graphics of immense beauty, produced by iteration of simple mathematical products. These appearances could be transmitted to certain happenings in nature like the weather, coastlines, winds, erosion of the earth as well as economical structures and human behaviour.

The science of „system theory“ played a part in this game by verifying and describing system inherent development. It quoted that systems develop out of themselves following an own master plan for evolution in a non-linear form showing itself in form of non-predictable evolutionary leaps.

The term „autopoiese“ was stated by the neurobiologists Maturana and Valera (Writers of the book: Der Baum der Erkenntnis) describing these unpredictable developments of organisms.

Other books that I can recommend for those who are interested in „System theory and Biology“ as well as Quantum physics“ the following books could be of interest: David F. Peat: Synchronizität - die verborgene Ordnung“, Rupert Sheldrake: „Das schöpferische Universum“ and Fritjof Capra: „Wendezeit“, Erich Jantsch: „Die Selbstorganisation des Universums“.

All the statements quoted above are in a strong contradiction to the popular assumption that systems should be brought onto linear development by controlling them. This view on how life functions was transmitted on Weather forecast, fighting diseases as well as education and growing children.

As most of us know by now this view of life is no longer up to date. Children develop not because of us educating them, but luckily, even though we educate them.

The development of the Open Space Technology (O.S.T.)

Harrison Owen was a Anglican priest (specialised on the subjects „Myths and Rituals of the Near East“) and Epistemologist (science that researches how man reaches knowledge), who came in touch with organisations for civil rights in the 60's. After this first contact he was engaged in community programs in America and the Near East and at last worked in the National Institute of Health (NIH), the American Institute of health.

As he worked as counsellor and organisational developer he noticed that organisations themselves behaved somehow curious. They didn't develop orderly and steady but instead showed discontinuous leaps of evolution.

At first it was his intention to control this development. What he looked for was development (what at that time meant „thoroughly planned“), what he had to notice was „Transformation“ (a term that states a system inherent development).

As he states himself, he and his colleges didn't understand anything of what was going on.



The development of O.S.T. thus began by observing that all the really important events leading to transformation in organisations and firms happened in the breaks. After all the years of trying to force structure in committees and conferences, this acknowledgement shocked him deeply.

In general it was thought that leadership was there to bring purpose into chaos, to transform doubt into security and to design positive action solving paradoxes. Good leaders would create order.

All the achievements that people made in these many meetings were things that were not in anyway connected to Owen or his colleges.

All discussions and plans for change about “what would be right to do next”, didn’t lead to a satisfying result.

As an example I would like to describe the happenings at an American (or elsewhere) college. Students walked about the ground leaving the planned paths. What could be done to keep them on the roads? None of the measurements, like raising borders or fences, showed any effect. Not even by leaving them comfortable rooms at disposables showed an effect. People took their road and met each other where they wanted to do so. Students went their own, at first glance aimless way.

These observations lead to the later definition of O.S.T.: that the goal of leading is not the establishment of a thought of a perfect state (or the right case) but the recognition of a higher quality in „being on the way“. - For me this seems a wonderful description of an old Taoist saying: “The way is the goal”.

Science from this moment on spoke about chaos as a complex kind of order, highly unpredictable. Leadership by trying to create order, from this kind of view, seemed to be damned to failure. The established way of organisational development seemed to have come to its end. Transformation is that what happens right at this moment, not sooner nor later, out of it self. The attempt to diminish chaos seems to equal the attempt to dissolve life itself.

Another term used in the work of Harrison Owen is „Spirit“. Owen defined Spirit as the force, working hidden out of the underground. For Owen the word spirit stated the force that connects and support all creatures, every being. Owen himself doesn’t like to define the term Spirit exactly. Trying to define a word exactly contains the danger of diminishing its meaning. At the moment we give a name to something we restrict its meaning leaving no more space for further extensions. Definitions always seem to exclude other possible understandings.

So from now on the term Spirit used in the OST defined the driving force that makes systems develop out of them selves.

The Facilitator

Change is not always a pleasant happening, sometimes it is even scary. Change means that the old form of living is pushed aside what often leads to fear and uncertainty. On the other hand it opens a possibility, a space in which new expressions are possible and new things can unfold. For them who only see a sense in forms and structures of life, planning everything, this experience can be very



frightening. It is as if they lose the ground under their feet, threatening to extinguish their life. For those however, who recognize the „spirit“ behind this happening it is a possibility. It is a different kind of handling changes of every kind.

This capacity to observe their own path of life with quietness makes them capable to lead the changing processes in single people as well as in couples, or in organizations of variable size.

To follow changing processes is a role that differs very strongly from that what society expected us to do up to these days. To do is no longer the central issue. The change showed itself in the shift from active doing and influencing to „let things happen“. Thrust in the rightness of that what is happening, without knowing about where it leads to. There are no clearly defined goals to achieve. It's all about offering a space in which events can unfold out of themselves. These characteristics of a „facilitator“ are present in Arnold Mindell as well as in Owen's work. To facilitate in this context means, „to ease“ or to „support“. Also definitions like „possibility“, „skill“, or „right moment“.

The word „Begleiter/in“ used in I.P.B. comes very near the definition „facilitator“. Another definition could be „the witness“ or „observer“, often used in meditative disciplines. In this case it means a supporting presence, something that „does“ not much but „can be“ a lot.

A facilitator opens space and tries to keep it that way, open for all possibilities. He opens a room so „Spirit“ can show itself, keeps it open for „Spirit“ to unfold his work.

The „Rank“ of the facilitator

A further specialty of O.S.T is how it handles „rank“, especially the rank of the facilitator. The „mainstream“ interpretation of the role of a person who works with other people differs very from the role of the facilitator as known in O.S.T, in Process work or IPB.

Even though the position and role of the facilitator are very special he or she never takes the role of someone who decides in which direction a process goes. The facilitator initially starts a process (opens the space) that further on follows its own inner rules and lines. His or her role exists in the form of preserving the energy (keeping the room open) and at certain moments sorting or „emphasizing“ from special positions in the group.

Everybody who likes to know more about O.S.T and Harrison Owen I like to recommend his book „The spirit of leadership“. Finally I like to state the principles in O.S.T who, as I think, describe the inner posture of a facilitator:

- 1) It is equal who comes, they are always the right ones
- 2) It is equal what happens, it is always the single thing that was able to happen.
- 3) It doesn't mind when it begins, it's always in the right moment
- 4) When it reaches an end, it is done.

Process oriented Group work

The entire field of process oriented work, be it with single persons, partners or in groups, grounds on the basic assumption that events, things, unfold themselves out of themselves.

This vision is not entirely new. It is the very ancient understanding of Native people and all kinds of religion all over the entire earth. Tao, the 2500 years old teaching for example, speaks of beginning and becoming of all things out of themselves.

The second verse of TAO TE KING says:

*„When everybody on earth recognizes the beauty as beauty,
The ugly will be placed hereby.
When all the good on earth will be recognized as good,
The not-good will be placed.
Being and not-being generate each other.
Heavy and light make each other perfect.
Long and short create each other.
High and low turn each other.
Silence and tone matrimony together.
Before and after follow each other.”*

Because of its complexity, the partial enormous dynamic as well as the unpredictability, the work with groups is a very special and delicate field in the process oriented work.

Courage is needed (beside thrust, grown through experience) to work in a process oriented way. All secure and prefabricated concepts are no longer valid here. Even the sometimes hard earned position of leader shrinks into seemingly inessential actions like opening and holding an open space.

In fact this is the point in which this kind of work shows that the “how” is more important as the “what”. Surely there are certain techniques in process work and O.S.T, varying from method to method, all are based on the, as said in IPB, “the inner posture” of the facilitator.

In Mindells process work it is the metaskills that enable the „spirit“ to lead, - to let a flow happen between single roles. Also always again connecting us to the trust that happenings follow their own inherent principle.

If you like to read more about the inner posture as well as metaskills I like to mind the book: „ The wisdom of feelings“ from Amy Mindell, my article „ Metaskills - the „what“ and the „how“, or the article „the inner posture of a process facilitator“ from Susanne Ahrens-Engemann.



The work of a facilitator

The role of the facilitator is to facilitate the dialogue between roles and voices. To create a space in which processes can unfold.

Also it is his role to position roles, give them a certain place and to encourage the participants in their roles. In process work roles are connected to a certain view of roles.

- Every single role is non-local. That means it is not connected solely to one defined person. The person can define itself by the role as well as represent a happening or person outside the group or even a certain person/feeling/happening inside the group. The certain person that defines a role (or you may call it: energy) only gives it a voice, a possible expression.
- Every single role is bigger as one person and needs more persons to be filled.
- At the same hand every single person is bigger than a role, because every person carries every possible role within itself.

Stations of process oriented Group work

Further there are different stations or aspects in a group process, at which a facilitator full fills certain tasks that follow a chronological line, perhaps thereby performing a natural inherent process or structure.

These aspects serve the goal to give the group a feeling of security that on its hand enhances the unfolding of the process by taking over certain roles.

Sorting

A group process is being started by collecting issues of interest, certain themes. It is the role of the facilitator to start this process, to invite the group as well as to write down and discover the single themes on sub themes.

Very important in this phase is to notice the atmosphere in the group and by stating the personal observation by speaking about it without evaluating it.

Please note that the observed atmosphere is a product of all feelings in the entire group. That can lead to very rapid changes of atmosphere.

Finding a consens

After the themes are collected it has to be found a consens about theme has priority and has to be looked at. This consens is a momentary group agreement. The spirit itself will take care for bringing up marginalised themes.

Even stating and presenting them can bring the group to an agreement about which theme should be looked after.

Roles and ghostroles

After selecting one theme, one must be aware of the different roles in the field of the group. Because of the non-locality of every possible role she is not representing the person who brings the role into live. Important here is to offer the single persons the possibility to get in, as well as to get out of a certain role. Sometimes this role-play



seems to be artificial. This gives us the opportunity to speak about themes/things that normally wouldn't be talked about.

Every role is bigger than a single person and therefore needs more than one person to be filled. On the same hand every single person is more as a role by carrying all the roles inside oneself. Speak about this point to make sure that a person doesn't feel guilty about its behaviour.

Beside the obvious and visible roles there are also ghostroles. Roles that are being filled without being consciously noticed. Making a ghostrole visible and conscious can be of very high importance for the group.

Barriers (Edges) and Hot Spots

As in single persons also groups show barriers which seem to be not accessible. We might say that at the moment when a new identity shows itself the group feels as if she is being threatened. This point is what Mindell in his work calls „Edges“. Although these moments cause a certain amount of fear they also contain a high potential for growth. At this point the process often seems to get out of control. By allowing it space and by addressing it, these edges can unfold their potential for development as soon as they appear.

A further important issue is the so called „Hot Spot“. Hot spots are intensive emotional moments. They often pop up when a role, not accepted by the group, shows itself. The Hot Spots are often indicated by sudden quietness, laughing or restlessness. The hot spot can be supported by granting it to take place in the group. This enables the process to go deeper, hereby revealing the basic convictions, feelings and essence underlying the conflict.

In fact a hot spot is the representation of a groups limit. The hot spot shows itself at the very moment when something is about to happen, a moment, which contains a high amount of energy.

Equal to a single person also a group tends to avoid the unknown. Deepening the process and staying with the hot spot, facilitating the discovery of „new land“ is very important.

Momentary solutions

It is no longer the duty of the facilitator to find a solution. Our goal in this kind of work is to enable the development to a higher degree of consciousness, attention, communication and understanding concerning a certain theme.

Sometimes solutions come up spontaneous, unfolding themselves out of the process. A solution is achieved when an agreement is reached between the different sides or roles, which at first where polarized. It is very important for the facilitator to recognize this certain moment and appreciate the groups work by mentioning it before going on to the next point.

Metacommunication and framing

The overall supporting skill is „metacommunication“. Our ability to speak about that was is happening right at this very moment. We hereby create a „frame“ which gives the group enough safety to continue with whatever is going on. Naming the atmosphere in the group, the sudden unrest or the silence can be a key to growing consciousness.



At certain moments it can be helpful to make a summary of the group process. At other places the group might concentrate on the history or perceived background of a single person in the group. This might be called the „individual level“ worked out by the entire group.

Also the process can unfold on a „relational level“, a process between two persons. On the „group level“ the focus is on a theme concerning the entire group. Themes could be ethnic problems, gender problems as well as the specific roles and tasks of an organisation.

On the systemic level the identity of the group in society and outer changes are herewith involved.

The Eldest

The inner posture also here is the most important item. The foundation in our inner posture takes care that we trust in the process or spirit even when things seem to get out of control. Even in difficult situations the consciousness that all the upcoming voices are a part of the group (the facilitator included) and are needed to find a higher wholeness, is of great help to us.

The term eldest describes a level in us which is wiser and deeper as we can ever be. We all carry an eldest in ourselves. The eldest was already there before us and remains its trust in the process even then when our personal confidence and fate seem to diminish.

By remembering that we carry this part inside ourselves, as well as by actively working with this part by learning more and more about it, we can connect to it at every moment.

Worldwork

Every group process follows its own inherent rules. This makes it an adventure. In his book „sitting in the fire“ Mindell says that a special form of work is needed to transform us into „Eldest“ with the ability to sit in the fire. This work is about learning to know oneself and ones own valuation system as well as the work with barriers or edges. Every valuation excludes another part, leading to marginalisation of an important part of a holistic happening. We have to „burn the wood of our personality“ to achieve access to the „eldest“ within us.

Perhaps the question that remains is why we should go into a group process and the conflicts connected to them. The answer probably exists in the recognition that we all habit one world and when we can recognize that in every voice of another person a part of our inner voices sound through.

If we do acknowledge the non-local aspects of process oriented group work then we must also acknowledge that we work beyond the local borders by working with single individuals or couples.



One night Mindell dreamt the world was a client of him. This was the moment in which worldwork was born. Also the definition „deep democracy“ was carried further. Deep democracy states the rights for every part of the whole to be present, every single voice to be heard when it wants to be heard. At the end everything is a part of a whole.

Perhaps this realisation is a possible transition to find another way of dealing with future conflicts. Till now it seems to be as if we were depressing conflict rather than give it an opportunity to express. We marginalised groups as well as individuals in case of a conflict.

By presenting ourselves open and not valuating there is a chance. Our common future depends on the minorities of this world, in the quiet or silent voices. We can approach and encourage them to speak to us, hereby creating a bigger holistic world and a true society.

Literature:

Harrison Owen

"The Spirit of Leadership"

Arnold Mindell

"Der Weg durch den Sturm"

"Sitting in the Fire"

"Das Pferd rückwärts reiten"

Amy Mindell

"Die Weisheit der Gefühle"

"Metaskills"

