



Open-space Learning in Real World Contexts*

Workshop Practice: Theory Building

1. Description:

Theory building is an activity that requires the tutor or facilitator to prepare, in advance, a series of laminated images and/or fragments of text. 12-15 is enough. Each laminate should address some aspect of the session's subject matter either directly or tangentially. It is important, however, that the information does not lead participants in too specific a direction, but also that it is appropriate to their levels of knowledge and ability. The exercise is for groups of 8-30. The facilitator divides the larger group into several appropriately-sized smaller groups. The groups are then provided with a set of identical laminates each. Each group are required to create a "theory" from the materials and represent this as a pattern on the floor of the space. The facilitator should be ready to step in at various moments to clarify, for example, what the images represent, and from where the quotations are taken. Each group, when they are ready, invite the other groups, in turn, to enter their space and "read" the theories. This part of the exercise is complete when every group has "read" every other group's work. This above lasts anywhere from 40 minutes to an hour and can be concluded with a plenary of whatever length the facilitator determines is appropriate – this would usually involve the entire group of participants. It is possible to add a further 2 stages to the process in which, firstly, participants form a *tableaux* or *still image* of their theory then, secondly, add movement through an *improvised performance*. It is possible, also, to conclude a theory building exercise with a writing session in which participants articulate in their smaller groups, in 500 words, their theory.

2. Learning possibilities:

Participants are forced by the nature of the activity to engage. It both promotes collective action and encourages a sense of individual responsibility. It deepens understanding of the subject matter and provides a platform for later, more detailed, material.

3. Examples:

For a module on Literatures of the American Southwest. Laminates might include images of: uranium ore, rifles, the border with Mexico along the Rio Grande, Native Americans, the Roswell alien, 1950s television cowboys/girls, Anasazi ruins. Also quotations from writers whose work is associated with the region: Cormac McCarthy, Leslie Silko, Gloria Anzaldua, and Thomas Kenneally, for example.

For Health and Safety training for 1st year Engineering undergraduates. Images of equipment, ancient constructions (the pyramids), industrial injuries, fragments of text from manuals, fragments of poetry.

*A National Teaching Fellowship Scheme project, funded by the Higher Education Academy, 2009-11.