Open-space Learning in Real World Contexts

A Report on Open Space Learning

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Introduction

1. This report is divided into two sections. Section 1 offers an account of three different Open Space Learning (OSL) projects which took place in the academic year 2010 – 2011. Each part introduces the structure of a particular project and then proceeds to a short commentary, addressing some of the key issues raised by the student feedback and my own observations. Section 2 is more discursive, and takes up the following core questions, which I believe impact upon the success and understanding of OSL:

1. Is OSL rigorous enough?
2. Does the effectiveness and applicability of OSL vary by subject?
3. What should be the relationship between OSL and conventional learning formats?
4. How well can OSL encourage participation and collaboration?

Of course, these are complex questions which cannot be answered satisfactorily here, but hopefully the discussion will outline some salient points.

2. The report is written on the basis of a miscellany of qualitative and quantitative data, observation and participation. Emphasis is placed on student feedback, as this is a valuable source of information for any teaching and learning programme, especially one that is still in its infancy. I have also addressed some of the negative feedback, though this was by no means representative of the majority student experience, to provide some analysis of the criticisms faced by OSL.

3. Finally, a few words on definitions. As indicated on the University of Warwick's OSL website, OSL is an example of the 'workshop' model of teaching and learning, which promotes active and practical engagement with core material. The key point to note here, which will become more relevant later on, is that although OSL tends to employ techniques related to applied drama and theatre, it is not necessarily restricted to these. The breadth of the definition is important, since I will suggest that OSL is most effective when it utilises the variety of techniques and approaches that fall within its ambit, customised to the material under study. In the course of this report, OSL will occasionally be compared to conventional learning formats (CLF), by which will typically be meant the seminars and lectures that comprise the majority of taught university courses, and the structures and relationships that characterise them.

Section 1

Part A

Structure of 'Diary of a Madman' Workshop

1) The first activity requires students to choose a significant or interesting moment from the set text, *Diary of a Madman* by Gogol.
2) Students are then encouraged to walk around the room, make eye-contact with one another and engage in casual conversation.
3) Students choose a 'moment' from the text and create a freeze-frame intended to embody it.
4) Other students attempt to interpret the freeze-frames, commenting on visual cues and discussing their possible relations to the text.
5) Students are the asked to put freeze-frames into an order that represents a change undergone by a character.
6) Next, students put together a storyboard of freeze-frames which represents the short story in chronological order.
7) Each student is asked to utter a single word which indicates a character's feelings.
8) There is a reflective discussion in which students talk about their attempts to connect the text with more universal themes.
9) Students discuss the adaption of text to drama. They are shown a copy of text in which speech and action are erased, so only prosaic parts remain.
10) Students perform the physical action of a chosen character.
11) Students discuss what lines of dialogue from the story they would transfer from speech to action, and what lines they would discard in the process of adaption.
12) Students commit their chosen lines to drama.

Structure of 'Ideas of Freedom' Workshop

1) On entry, a video of Samuel Beckett's *Not I* is played.
2) Students write a single word or phrase summarising their personal or emotional response to video.
3) Various Beckett quotations are laid out on the floor and participants are asked to choose one that draws their attention.
4) Students are asked to state what they find interesting or appealing about their chosen quotation.
5) Students write a phrase on a white board connecting their chosen quotation to the set material (Plato or Collingwood).
6) Students speak aloud simultaneously on any topic of their choice.
7) A performance scale is introduced. The scale goes from one to ten; ten denotes the most intense performance, one denotes the least intense performance, and numbers

two to nine denote increasing degrees of intensity. Students perform the previous exercise at level ten followed by level one.

8) A copy of the first page of *Not I* is handed out. Students are encouraged to use the performance scale as an exploratory tool.

9) In pairs, students perform an extract from the text. First, students utter one phrase each, switching when they reach an ellipsis. Second, one student plays the 'auditor', responding to each phrase with a physical movement. Third, 'auditor' must ask a question between each utterance. Finally, students are asked to discuss the relationship between 'mouth' and 'auditor'.

10) Students perform a freeze-frame that represents the relationship between 'mouth' and 'auditor'.

11) An extract from one of the set texts – Plato's *Ion* – is read out, after which students repeat the freeze-frame exercise.

12) Final statements are written on the board.

Commentary

1. The activities featured in the philosophy workshops used a variety of dramatic exercises in their treatment of philosophical and literary texts. These explored various uses of the voice (volume, pitch, and intensity), the body (freeze-frames, movement, body language and facial expressions) and the interpretation of dramatic texts. These were interspersed with periods of reflection in which students discussed their experience of the exercises and considered how they could enhance their understanding of the text. Sometimes this reflective activity consisted of voluntary verbal discussion, but occasionally it took a more practical form. In the 'Ideas of Freedom' workshop, for example, participants wrote their responses on a white board as a series of slogans, prompting group discussion.

2. The activities introduced each aspect of the dramatic form incrementally. In the Gogol workshop, the students were asked to focus on a single moment of the story, which they developed into a freeze-frame. These freeze-frames were then joined together to create chronological and thematic orderings of the text. A minimal amount of verbal content was added, in which students uttered a word describing their character's state of mind. Towards the end of the session, short pieces involving full lines of dialogue were performed. Each layer of performance was added gradually, giving each one an individual focus and allowing students a more finely-tuned appreciation of the elements of the dramatic medium. This methodical construction of a short piece of drama invited students to reflect on how each aspect of performance might aid and deepen their understanding of the text. This was a unique advantage to the workshop – the relation of performance to the text is unlikely to be considered in this way in a CLF.

3. A crucial question is whether this string of activities, incorporating different aspects of performance, was a useful method of exploring the text. Student comments during the session revealed some immediate reflection about their value as a way of examining characters. Some students touched upon the idea that purely visual forms of representation – such as freeze-frames – could put a distance between the audience and the character's psychological experiences by removing the first person narrative through which the original story is told. On the other hand, there is also a sense in which the audience is brought closer to the characters by observing the minutiae of their body language and facial expressions: visual representation of the characters required consideration of contextual details about their lives which would otherwise be ignored.

4. Following the session, in interviews conducted by the lead learner, some students claimed that the workshops helped them to remember the text as a whole, and some suggested that they had gained a greater understanding of it. One student stated that '*having it acted out,*

and gone through, and going over all the different parts and dynamics and then seeing how they linked up chronologically, you get a much better idea of the text, because you see it... in action'. A number of interviewees agreed that the activities had made aspects of the text more vivid or memorable. From my perspective as an observer, it is perhaps true that I would have received a more informative introduction to *Diary of a Madman* by attending a lecture, but I gained a number of insights into the characters and themes by observing the presentations, which had been thoughtfully created by the students. In the interviews, a number of students expressed the opinion that the workshops would work especially well in combination with lectures. One task for the OSL project therefore, and one to which I will return, is to adequately describe how OSL can combine with and complement CLFs.

5. In the 'Ideas of Freedom' workshop, most of the activities were based on a video and a textual extract from Samuel Beckett's *Not I*. Students were also asked to make connections between the exercises and their prior study of Plato and Collingwood by writing their thoughts on a white board. Following the workshop, there was a small amount of negative feedback, to which I will return in part 2, but the majority of students stated that they had gained a greater understanding the set texts and the connections between them. To follow up this student response, what follows is a brief discussion of the value of the workshop, based primarily on observation.

6. After watching a video of *Not I*, Beckett quotations were scattered around the floor and students were asked to select one and explain why they found it interesting. The opening of the workshop was therefore fairly conventional, with students offering readings of set pieces of text. Like the Gogol workshop, aspects of performance were introduced through a series of activities. The first set involved experimenting with different uses of the voice, while the second saw students performing the opening sequence of *Not I* with a partner. Finally, students formed freeze-frames which represented the relationship between 'mouth' and 'auditor'.

7. Most participants felt that the workshops afforded them a greater understanding of *Not I*, and this is unsurprising given that the activities were carefully constructed to explore certain themes of the play. The relationship between 'mouth' and 'auditor' was explored using a series of exercises in which the 'auditor' was given increasing control over the flow of 'mouth's' monologue, effectively punctuating it, forging an inextricable link between the characters. Students were thus able to gain a practical appreciation of different ways in which 'auditor' may limit 'mouth's' freedom in the play. As both participant and observer, I found the experience enlightening. Having never read the play, the exercises opened up a series of interpretations of the extract, informed by the role of 'auditor' as a constraint on the freedom of 'mouth'. The feedback questionnaires indicated that the students had a similar experience. When asked what they learnt or discovered during the course of the session, a number of students gave positive replies:

Student A: *Deeper insight into Beckett's Not I, particularly as a performance piece.*

Student B: *I really felt I gained a deeper understanding of the texts which I didn't feel I had solely from the lecture.*

8. The workshop also encouraged students to consider the link between Beckett and the Plato and Collingwood texts that they had previously studied. In the feedback, nine students specifically claimed to have acquired a greater understanding of the *link* between *Not I* and the set material. The students were urged to think about these connections by formulating a sentence linking the Beckett material to either Plato or Collingwood and writing it on a white board. This exercise was repeated several times throughout the workshop, giving the students an opportunity to develop their thoughts in response to the various exercises.

9. Overall, the two workshops appeared to be successful and received largely positive feedback from the participants. Based on feedback and observation, it is suggested that the following were key factors in their success, and can be seen as general strengths of OSL. First, the workshops were well planned and the exercises involved were carefully constructed to encourage students to think about specific themes, such as the relationship between 'mouth' and 'auditor' in the play and the relationship between the play and the other set texts. Although the exercises were practical and explorative, they had been designed to stimulate analysis of themes which were directly relevant to the module. This provided an analytic focus, as well as a purely creative one, to which the students responded positively. Second, a number of students commented that the workshop gave them access to the thoughts and work of other students, which they would not usually have the opportunity to encounter. Of course, conventional seminars should provide this too, but it is instructive that several students identified this as their memorable learning experience. In this sense, it is true to say that the participants generally found these sessions to be more positively collaborative than a standard seminar. Third, the workshops were effective as a stimulus for creative thinking and brainstorming. As a participant myself, and one who was wholly ignorant of the rest of the course, I found the activities very useful in this manner. A number of ideas that emerged from the students in these sessions could no doubt be developed into high quality work.

Part B

Overview of 'Representing Otherness ' Workshops

The following is an overview of the 'Representing Otherness' workshops taken from the OSL website. It provides a rough account of the aims and content of the workshops.

1) **Self-Reflexivity/ The Personal vs the Private in Representation of Otherness.** In this workshop we will explore what our ethnicity means to us and how we might represent ourselves and our experiences within the contemporary context. We will work with creating our own ethnicity questionnaires; languages we are not currently using; neutral mask.
2) **Otherness, Lack, & the Performance of Self.** In this workshop we will explore theories of 'lack' created by otherness (with reference to Lacan, Irigaray and Cixous), the performance of self in the face of the foreign other, and how the tracing and observation of these occurrences can be brought into exploring creativity. We will be working with different creative media to represent and explore these issues, such as movement, painting/drawing, sound and lighting. Other creative media may be proposed by participants.
3) **Dynamics of Observation, Representation and Difference in Performance.** In this workshop we will explore the worlds of difference between experience, memory and observation. By creating clay landscapes in-the-moment, peer observation and exploration of the gap between representation and intention, we will start to question and develop our own creative representational practice.
4) **Ethnography in the Academy.** Following this 40-minute seminar, we will have the chance to ask questions of a current performance practitioner.
5) **From Interview to Stage.** In this workshop we will explore alternative methods of interview including the re-writing of our own questionnaires and testing research methods we would like to explore in the studio. Here we will have the opportunity to try out new technologies and new approaches to research collection.
6) **Creation/Rehearsal Workshop.** In this workshop we will create and rehearse our own Verbatim piece based on our interviews, self-reflexive/autobiographical work, and the physical/artistic performance practices and transpositions we have explored

throughout the workshop series. We will also have the opportunity to give and receive feedback.

7) **Performance.** We will perform or present our Verbatim pieces to an invited audience and have the opportunity to give and receive feedback on our work.

Commentary

1. Unlike the other OSL projects, 'Representing Otherness' was a voluntary and non-assessed series of workshops which included both undergraduate and postgraduate students – approximately a 50/50 breakdown. Furthermore, these students were drawn from a variety of different departments, including Philosophy, Sociology, English and Law. Generally, they had decided to participate in the workshop as a result of their personal and/or academic interest in dual heritage and cultural identity.

2. Despite the fact that a cross section of students I interviewed at an early stage of the course had no previous experience of such workshops, and that they were perceived as complementary rather than integral to their university education, at the end of the series all respondents felt the teaching offered was as good or better than standard teaching.

3. The activities in the earlier workshops were effective in encouraging the students to discuss cultural identity with reference to their own experiences. These activities began by facilitating a discussion of the students' personal experiences with cultural identity, and then encouraged them to consider the identity of others by designing a questionnaire that would retrieve any desired information about their peers. The theme of the workshops was introduced gently via these activities, which were practical and inclusive. They urged students to think about aspects of performance such as body language and posture, but without demanding any performance from them.

4. The workshops also used a variety of media to explore cultural identity and to introduce Verbatim Theatre, including footage of a Verbatim Theatre production and a performance of Billie Holliday's Strange Fruit by Nina Simone. This approach stimulated the discussion effectively, which went on to consider a number of questions relating to the topic. The devised pieces were not introduced until later in the workshop series. As the director of the workshops, Annouchka Bayley, commented in a subsequent interview, it was important to introduce the students to Verbatim Theatre gradually, to ensure they were as comfortable as possible with the activities. On the other hand, the workshop series was relatively short, and dedicating more time to the course would have enabled students to develop a final performance with which they could be more confident.

5. The student response to the 'Representing Otherness' workshops was overwhelmingly positive. One of its most significant successes was its ability to elicit student participation and enthusiasm, although this is probably partly accounted for by the fact that all students participated voluntarily, and most had a personal as well as academic interest in the subject. One difficulty with embedding this series of workshops in an assessed module is the need to include sufficient critical content. It will be difficult to set out coherent assessment criteria if group activities are largely based on personal expression and individual experiences. In an interview, Annouchka Bayley made the following comments:

It is a bit of a misnomer to say that... academic research is somehow dispassionate.

What do we exclude? How can we label this as therapeutic and this as academic when clearly the two are merging.

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One challenge for this module will be to ensure that an academic assessment of student work can be undertaken, which is not unfairly focussed on dramatic ability. Perhaps it is a *non sequitur* to assume that 'therapeutic' and 'academic' are fundamentally distinct, and it is surely true that dispassionate work is not necessarily of a higher quality. However, the crux of the charge that academic work should not be therapeutic is not that it should be impersonal, dispassionate or inexpressive, but that it should not be totally lacking in *discernment*.

6. This raises questions about the epistemology of OSL. If workshops allow participants to become producers of their own knowledge, can there be any criteria with to evaluate the output? Is practical or experiential learning an alternative *way* of attaining knowledge, which is more efficacious for students who are receptive to different learning methods, or does it also produce a different *type* of knowledge? If the latter, how is this knowledge best described and can it be evaluated? One might suppose that if its content is *defined* in terms of a student's personal experiences, there will be no way to interpret its academic quality, since personal experiences cannot be coherently categorised into gradations of quality. If this is the case, whatever benefits may accrue to the students as a result of their participation, it will be difficult to combine OSL with conventionally assessed courses. I will return to this issue in section 2.1.

Part C

Structure of 'Critical Issues in Law and Management' Module

Here is a brief overview of the design and methods of the module, taken from the project description:

'In the core module 'Critical Issues in Law and Management' case presentation workshops and 'text' based seminars will be facilitated by students in the Business School and Graduate practitioners from CAPITAL, Theatre Studies and/or Education. These sessions will be practical and experimental. Film evidence, digital social networking through blogs etc and student involvement in design and content decisions will increase the reflective and active practitioner processes of the performance coaches, the PG facilitators and the student performers. Working with the e-learning/technology NTF the project will explore possibilities for blended OSL, especially in the areas of creative reflection, performance itself and the functioning of a creative performance social learning network.'

Commentary

1. The CILM module is a fairly complex amalgam of presentational and dramatic activities, open space seminars, group work, student research and an array of different teachers and facilitators. These include academics from the Business School, dramatic practitioners and postgraduate 'facilitutors'. This commentary is based on an interview and two focus groups with students. The following points about the structure and design of the course arose during these discussions.

2. The CILM module involved the writing of a reflective piece, in which each student had the opportunity to record their thoughts and observations about the module thus far. A number of students stated that they were initially confused when asked to write them:

Student A: *At first, I thought 'what am I expected to do here?' because I was quite worried, we hadn't done one before. With essays, you've done them before so you know what to expect but with this one I was thinking 'what do I actually need to do?'*

Student B: *I think it requires a different level of formality to some of the other things we've done, so you don't really know – is this too casual? Too creative?*

The question to be answered is 'how much guidance is it appropriate to give students in writing reflective pieces?' Two students stated that they would have appreciated some indication of what type of reflections were appropriate. This is probably going too far. It is crucial that reflective pieces allow students the scope to record reflections that naturally come to mind, rather than pre-emptively influencing their work by providing overly rigid guidance. It might, however, be appropriate to discuss the pieces with students so that they understand their purpose and character, without giving guidance about specific content. This might include assurance that negative reflections are perfectly appropriate and will not be marked down – a worry mentioned by two of the students. This might have hastened their learning curve, especially since many found that their ability to write the reflective pieces improved throughout the module (with one student dissenting).

3. Some students recognised the value of the reflective pieces to the module:

Student A: *I think it brings together parts of the module really well because having to write a reflective piece it does force you to use the models that we've been taught in relation to what we've been doing throughout the weeks.*

Nevertheless, a number of students were confused about how the pieces would be assessed. Given that they are different to most other assessments in Warwick, it is understandable that students are concerned about how they will be marked. This confusion may also be allayed by dedicating some time to a general discussion about the nature of reflective thinking and writing. Such discussion might cover the value of identifying how one's thoughts and responses have changed, and providing a well-thought out explanation of why this is the case; the need to explain and justify one's opinions, whether negative or positive; to give an account of what one has learnt, and so on. Such guidance would not be intended to influence the content of student writing, but to afford them a better understanding of reflection and reflective writing in an academic context.

4. One of the tutors who assisted the students in developing their presentations was a dramatic practitioner. Discussion in the focus groups about this feature of the course raised questions about how the dramatic/presentational aspects should be integrated with the subject-based content in OSL. Some students expressed the opinion that there was too great an emphasis on drama:

Student A: *(The sessions) sometimes detracted from our vision that we had because we felt the emphasis was too much on acting and dramaticising whereas I felt those were the elements we were more or less comfortable with and we would have sought more guidance on other things, maybe structure, or flow or transitioning, something like that. I think the emphasis was more on dramatic effect.*

Student B: *I feel like in our presentation especially, we felt fairly comfortable with the presenting side of it, but we almost fell into a trap of focusing on that too much and we lacked content and that's why our presentation did suffer for that.*

The students more or less agreed that they would have preferred a tutor who could provide feedback on *both* the content and the dramatic aspects. However, it is part of the setup of OSL that students with different specialisations should incorporate elements of drama,

performance and theatre into their work. The students can be expected to have reasonable knowledge of their subject and relative inexperience with drama, so it is natural that additional expertise is provided by drama experts, while the students are expected to provide the subject-based content themselves. To pursue this point, I asked the students how they dealt with this issue:

Convener: *So the onus was on you to take the relatively pure dramatic techniques you were getting from Rachel and to apply them to the content, because you were really the providers of that content. Did you feel as though you learned anything from having to do that?*

Student A: *It did teach us how to be independent in assessing the relative importance of different things. When somebody tells you we want this, this and this, it's easy to just follow that, whereas, especially for that final presentation, we knew that the emphasis should be content, but our focus in learning was drama, we learned to make our own judgment calls and at the end of the day we are at university and we're taking a law course so we should emphasise that. It does make you independent.*

It is important for the participants in CILM to be actively engaged in the process of combining set material with OSL, as this forms the backbone of OSL's involvement in CILM. This aim may be frustrated by giving students too much assistance, rather than urging them to come up with their own ways of creatively and critically combining these elements.

5. Another issue with which students in the focus groups were concerned was the methods and criteria of assessment used in CILM. One student recommended giving rough grades to the provisional presentation to buttress the verbal feedback. Others felt they received mixed messages about the relative significance of drama to legal content, and had difficulty developing their presentations in accordance with the relevant assessment criteria. The question of assessment criteria raises something of a dilemma for OSL. On the one hand, students are entitled to receive some guidance as to how they will be assessed and what skills they are expected to exercise and develop; not only this, but the existence of adequate assessment criteria reflect the fact that the learning objectives of OSL (at least for the module in question) are sufficiently well thought out. On the other hand, originality, creativity and freedom are crucial to OSL and any assessment scheme that is too prescriptive will inhibit these.

6. The solution may lie in an efficient compromise. The best guidance given to students will be that which defines the learning objectives and assessment criteria as clearly as possible without dictating the creative procedure or content of student projects. Students could be informed of the relevant criteria, which might include the ability to work in a group, ability to reflect on progress, ability to communicate through dramatic techniques, ability to creatively integrate core content with drama, and so on. Guidance should be informative and helpful without being overly regulatory. Hopefully, this will dispel minor confusions and concerns about formal assessment and allow students of focus on creatively engaging with the work.

7. Finally, the assessment criteria should avoid giving the impression that they represent discreet boxes on a checklist, without having any relation to one another. On the contrary, an objective of OSL should be to encourage students to think of ways in which, say, critical content and dramatic techniques can be fused to create a single piece of work. I put this thought to the students in the focus group:

Convener: *So far we've been talking about a dichotomy between presentation on the one hand and critical skills and content on the other. At any point in the module did you feel you were able to see a way in which they could be combined so you could have the critical content… embodied in the way you were presenting?*

Student A: *I think we did that in our actual presentations.*

Student B: *We thought in our group how do we actually convey this criticism, or this issue, but as you go along you try and explore and get new ideas, play around with the issue itself, the drama does come out of presenting it well.*

Student C: *I think that drama is a very good tool to bring out the content. Of course there's a bit of a hurdle to getting from having the content to turning it into the drama but once you overcome that… a whole area of doors open for you and you can do a lot of different critical things.*

Most of the students interviewed felt they had achieved the synthesis of dramatic methods and critical content discussed. In fact, as the above comments indicate, some students were enthusiastic about the application of OSL to their subject, and believed the module offered more than the provision of 'soft skills' – it offered an opportunity to explore the legal subject matter in a unique and fruitful way. The central criticisms offered by students in the focus groups did not pertain to the overall objectives, innovations or methods of OSL, but to the organisational structure of the module. Although some of these criticisms are more valid than others, it is probable that the students I interviewed would have been very satisfied with the module with only minor modifications to its organisation and design.

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/iatl/projects/osl

Section 2

1. Is OSL rigorous enough?

1. In the feedback for the Philosophy module 'Ideas of Freedom', one student delivered a damning indictment of the workshop he/she attended:

Student A: *The monotony of interesting questions and issues without rigour is all that is untenable in philosophy.*

Although this participant was the only student across all departments to register this criticism, it is not specific to Philosophy, since rigour is considered a virtue in most areas of academic discourse, and it is an objection that theorists and supporters of OSL must address if its place in university education is to be justified. The question is complicated by the fact that 'academic rigour' is an umbrella term which refers to a collection of qualities and practices commonly valued in academia. With the approval of our dissenting student, we will approach the issue analytically, by unpacking some of these components one by one and considering them in relation to OSL.

2. A preliminary point is that, as noted in the introduction, OSL is defined broadly, and a number of different techniques may be adopted in any given workshop. This was demonstrated by the diversity of projects that took place this year: the CILM module had greater soft skills focus and the performed pieces were often described as *presentational* rather than *dramatic*, while the Representing Otherness workshop made direct use of Verbatim theatre. This means that OSL has the malleability to modify itself in response to any constructive criticism, and even integrate some more traditional discussion with practical exercises, which a number of OSL projects have done this year. Nevertheless, OSL places a distinct emphasis on dramatic techniques and practical activities, and must therefore provide an adequate response to the objection.

3. One reason why OSL may be thought to lack rigour is that it is not *systematic*. Systematic thinking is often held to be *comprehensive* and *methodical*. With regard to former, it is generally true that OSL workshops are not able to cover as much ground as a typical lecture or article, and the dramatic pieces produced by student groups are not complete in their treatment of the material. However, it is equally clear that OSL does not purport be comprehensive. This may mean that it has inherent limitations; it might not, for instance, be the most efficient way to provide an overview of a subject. But this need not be a problem – OSL is not a replacement for more comprehensive approaches to higher education, but a supplement. In accordance with this role, it should explore and optimise the ways in which it differs from CLFs (see part 2.2) and must not be judged for its success on exactly the same criteria. With regard to the latter, it is also true that workshop exercises seldom apply methodical reasoning, but not all objects of study call for this approach. The workshops this year carefully chose their topics to ensure that they are as rewarding as possible. In any case, as I shall show in para. 5, this is not a necessary property of OSL, and there are in fact many ways it can embody methodical reasoning. More generally, systematising is only one feature of academic rigour, so we need not concede the objection yet.

4. A second facet of the objection may be that OSL is not sufficiently *critical*. It must be noted that this charge may be levelled either at particular workshops or OSL itself. The distinction is important because even if a given workshop is uncritical it does not follow that this is an essential property of OSL, especially given its diversity and adaptability. But the objection is also questionable for a number of reasons. First, drama is often probing and critical, and the process of writing, producing and rehearsing involves critical thinking, though this may not be discernable in the final product. The key difference is that critical content is not always *explicit* in a dramatic performance as it is in a well written essay or lecture, but it would be a mistake to infer from this that the project has not involved any critical thinking. Second, improving students' critical capacities cannot be achieved merely by undertaking critical work, but also requires developing certain skills. These include brainstorming, idea development, creativity and originality – skills that OSL endeavours to improve and which can be neglected by CLFs. These are fundamental. Good academic work is not a deluge of criticism, it supplies creative solutions to practical and theoretical problems, and some of the skills that facilitate this are emphasised by OSL. Others such as close reading, essay writing and memorisation are equally important, and are arguably instilled in students more effectively by other means, but a well-rounded higher education may call for a division of labour between methods, rather than a single, all-encompassing approach that could ultimately be impossible to realise. Third, seminars and lectures can also be uncritical. There is nothing intrinsic to the seminar/lecture format – the essay-like illocution of a lecture, the discursive character of a seminar – that is especially conducive to critical thought. A good seminar or lecture will encourage critical thinking as a result of the quality of the content communicated to the students or the efficient conducting of a discussion. Similarly, OSL is capable of fostering critical thinking, but practitioners must give careful thought to how this is best done.

5. An example may help to illustrate how embodied learning need not lack any critical content, and can promote rigorous and methodical reasoning. The example will be taken from Philosophy, as this is the subject of the student's objection. Philosophers often devise thought experiments to clarify and explore abstract concepts. This is usually done by constructing a hypothetical scenario and thinking through its consequences. An alternative and potentially illuminating approach would be to perform these experiments using OSL. One of the most famous thought experiments of the 20th century was proposed by the political philosopher John Rawls, who wanted to formulate principles of justice to govern the basic structure of society. Rawls' fundamental concern was to ensure that these principles would be fair, and in order to achieve this he devised a thought experiment which aimed to generate such principles by excluding morally irrelevant (unfair) determinants. So Rawls imagined a hypothetical arrangement called the 'original position', in which potential members of society forge a social contract, but under conditions of ignorance which exclude unfair advantages. Students who have studied the text and are aware of the specific architecture of the original position could attempt to 'occupy' it, abide by its constraints, and enter negotiations with other students (either improvised or rehearsed) in order reach an agreement on principles of justice. This exercise could even be done *before* students have learnt Rawls' conclusions so that they could compare their own results to Rawls'. Clearly this exercise is not lacking in critical content. On the contrary, it encourages students to explore the thought experiment more thoroughly than they otherwise would, to consider as many alternatives as possible and to adduce fully articulated reasons for their chosen principles. Students would turn Rawls' hypothetical negotiation into an embodied conversation, and from this they may glean new critical perspectives on the text. This also satisfies OSL's commitment against the 'banking' model of teaching, where information is simply 'decanted' from teacher to student. In this exercise, students are actively pursuing their own thoughts, ideas and arguments, to generate original analyses and conclusions from the same starting point as the author. This is only one example: there are many other thought experiments within Philosophy that could be adapted to equivalent exercises, and many other subjects which may benefit from a similar technique.
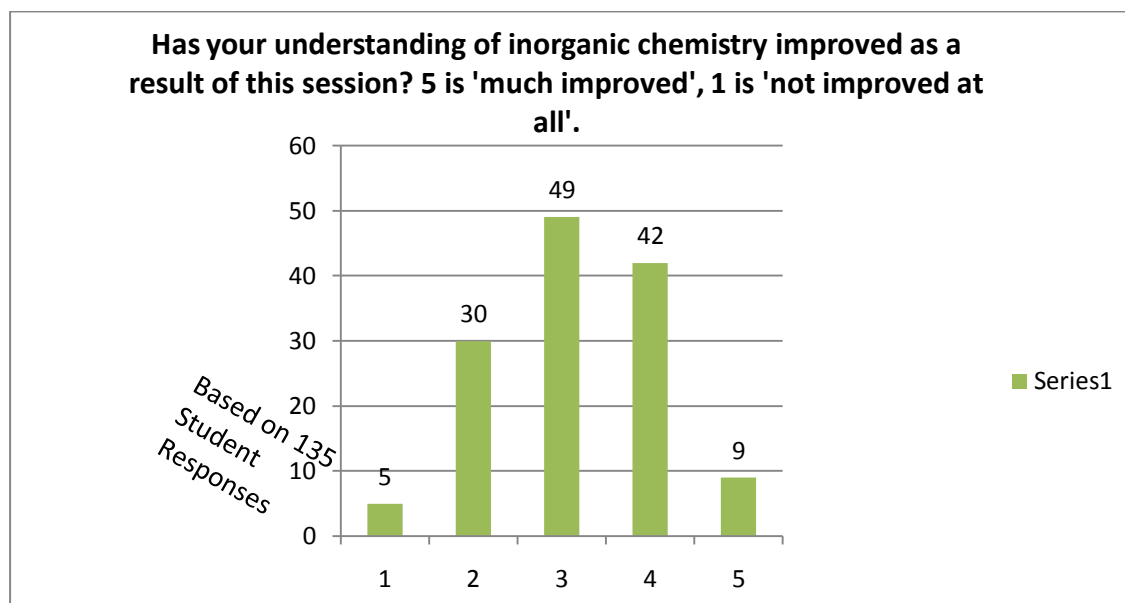
6. Another issue, which is related to the problem of assessment criteria, is the extent to which student projects and activities in OSL can be meaningfully *evaluated.* If student work cannot be judged positively or negatively according to some valid academic standard, perhaps it can be said to lack rigour. This is an important objection, since OSL projects must be assessable if they are to form an integral part of university degrees rather than operating as an add-on, and it is made more pertinent by the fact that it would clearly be unfair to judge participants by the standards of actors or drama experts. Nevertheless, it must also be noted that OSL projects need not be evaluable in the same way as conventional academic work; in fact, to do so may render OSL superfluous, since it would be attempting to duplicate the function of CLFs. To show that the objection can be met, the following examples are ways in which the quality of OSL projects might be evaluated. First, students can be marked on their reflective process by writing a diary or a reflective piece. The assessment criteria would be based on the development of the students' creative process and the theory underpinning it, as well as their ability to coherently evaluate their experiences and come to a conclusion as to what was successful, what could be improved, and so on. It is clearly possible to assess a student's ability to justify their creative decisions and to reflect on any perceived difficulties. Second, it is possible to assess the students' ability to creatively and effectively embody critical issues in dramatic form. This will involve elements that are assessable in the context of OSL (and important in many forms of academic work), such as articulation, persuasion, structure and originality. These examples are brief and underdeveloped, but hopefully they show that satisfactory ways to evaluate OSL are feasible. That is, there are forms of assessment which provide an (overlapping) alternative to those of conventional academic work, but without adopting a lower academic standard.

7. We have identified three possible constituents of academic rigour – systematising, criticising and evaluating, and discussed them in relation to OSL. OSL does not always provide a systematic or logically methodical way of analysing core content or solving problems, but it is not an inferior form of teaching and learning for this reason, though it should be a supplementary one. Moreover, there is no theoretical reason why OSL modules should be insufficiently critical or incapable of discriminating between poor and good quality work. In fact, it is possible for the practical activities and embodied learning favoured by OSL to be even more conducive to critical thought than CLFs. Whether or not this is case will hinge on the specific exercises and subjects in question, emphasising the need for careful thought to be invested in the design of OSL workshops, which should include some case by case consideration of how OSL methods might be best used to explore particular ideas or texts. Ultimately, it is not necessary for OSL to justify itself on the grounds that it is as rigorous as conventional formats, as long as it can make a distinctive, valuable contribution to higher education that conventional formats cannot. Despite this, it would be mistaken to conclude that OSL cannot be sufficiently rigorous, since well-designed modules and workshops can champion some the most crucial elements of academic rigour.

2. Does the effectiveness and applicability of OSL vary by subject?

1. One important question to consider is whether OSL is a more effective teaching and learning method for some subjects compared with others. A plausible hypothesis is that OSL is more effective when applied to subjects in the Arts than the sciences. OSL modules frequently involve the production of short pieces of drama, or build towards an overall performance. One might think that some subjects admit of dramatic representation and exploration more than others since they can be easily framed in the dramatic medium, using narratives, character conflict, dialogue, symbolism and so forth. The dramatic embodiment of ideas makes them vivid and places them in context, but cannot communicate quantitative data or scientific and mathematical reasoning.
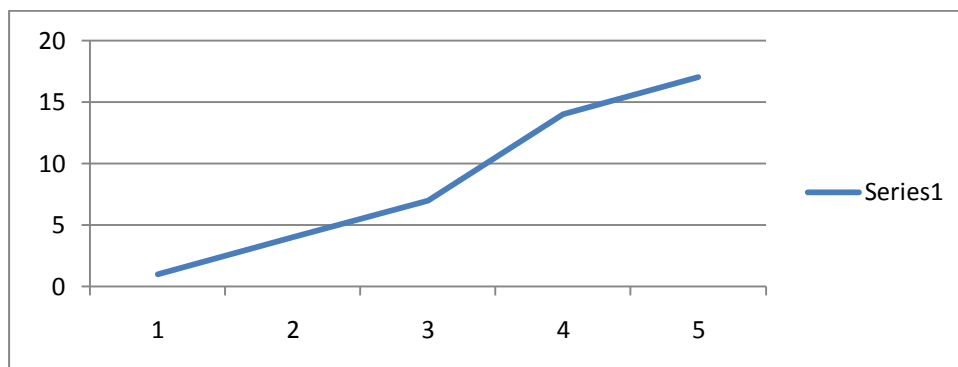
2. This question is largely theoretical, but a good place to begin might be to compare the student feedback of projects in different departments. In all projects in which student feedback was collected, the majority of students felt they had had a positive learning experience. Generally, students in each project also stated that they had learnt more about their specialist subject. In the Real World Chemistry project, 92% of students (11 out of 12) either agreed or strongly agreed that the sessions offered a distinctive way of understanding their subject, and 100% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that it is valuable to use a variety of teaching and learning methods beyond the traditional seminar and lecture format. However, this should be compared with the other Chemistry module:

Has your understanding of inorganic chemistry improved as a result of this session? 5 is 'much improved', 1 is 'not improved at all'.

Based on 135 Student Responses

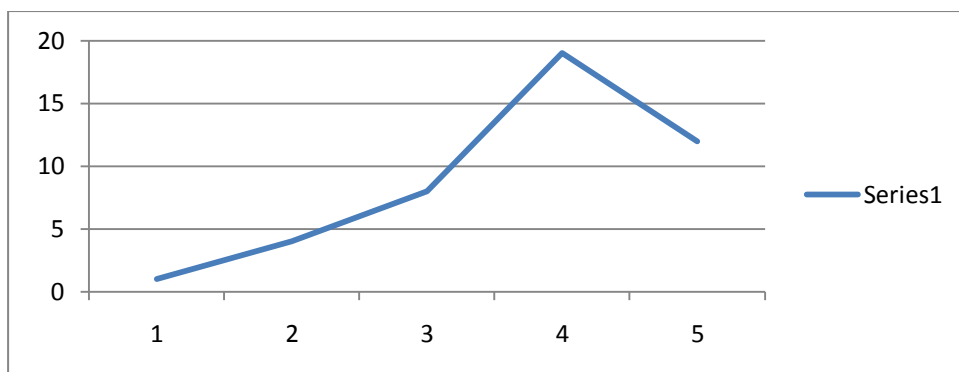| Value	Count
1	5
2	30
3	49
4	42
5	9

Series1

These results are more modest, and more difficult to interpret. Only 5 students claimed that their understanding of inorganic Chemistry did not improve at all, while all others saw some improvement. However, 79 students (59%) only reported an improvement of '2' or '3', compared to 51 students (38%) who registered '4' or '5'. Note too, that this data was taken from a significantly larger sample.

3. The Philosophy feedback told a similar story to Real World Chemistry, as indicated by the following graphs (5 denotes 'strong agreement' and 1 denotes 'strong disagreement').

It is valuable to use a variety of teaching and learning methods beyond the traditional seminar and lecture format.

Series1

This kind of session offers a distinctive way of understanding my academic subject.

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/iatl/projects/osl

3. Here are two tables comparing the responses of the Philosophy students and the Chemistry students to two statements.

This kind of session offers a distinctive way of understanding my academic subject. 5 is 'strongly agree', 1 is 'strongly disagree'.

	Real World Chemistry	Philosophy
5	58.%	27%
4	33.%	43%
3	0%	18%
2	8%	9%
1	0%	2%

It is valuable to use a variety of teaching and learning methods beyond the traditional lecture and seminar. 5 is 'strongly agree', 1 is 'strongly disagree'.

	Real World Chemistry	Philosophy
5	50%	40%
4	50%	33%
3	0%	16%
2	0%	9%
1	0%	2%

(All figures to the nearest per cent. Philosophy sample size: 44 students, Real World Chemistry sample size: 12 students.)

As the tables indicate, the majority of students (70% or more) from the Philosophy and Real World Chemistry modules either agreed or strongly agreed with both statements.

4. Generally, the students responded positively to the above statements in both Chemistry and Philosophy. These results are interesting given our initial expectation that students in the sciences will be more sceptical about the value of OSL than students in the Arts. That this expectation has not been confirmed suggests that such a view is not tenable. However, three things must be borne in mind. First, this information should be compared to the less positive result in the Periodic Table module. Second, this is student feedback, and other points of view must also be taken into account, including that of the course convenor. Third, this information is very general, and we cannot infer that students believe OSL to be equally effective in every aspect of their subject. A number of students in the Chemistry projects claimed to have learnt more about the elements in the Periodic Table and the History of Chemistry, but they may not agree that all areas of their subject can be effectively taught using OSL. The History of Chemistry and the lives of famous Chemists lend themselves to dramatic representation, because they have a historical context and can be formulated into

narratives. Other areas of Chemistry, as well as the sciences more generally, do not share these features.

5. This is not to say that no OSL method can be of use, since there are many practical exercises which do not directly involve drama. It is an advantage of OSL, which should be capitalised upon, that it can provide a variety of different practical methods and ways of using open space, which can be geared towards specific subjects. Insofar as OSL entails *doing* rather than merely *listening* and passively processing information, there are many possibilities for workshop-based learning which do not necessarily involve dramatic performance. The variety of OSL helps to allay some doubts over whether it can be a fruitful approach to any subject at university level. For instance, in the Philosophy feedback, one student commented:

Student A: *Not sure how this workshop could apply to different kinds of philosophy.*

In section 2.1. I gave an example of a practical way in which students can explore a famous thought-experiment, one which is central to almost every undergraduate course in Political Philosophy. I argued that the exercise can be relevant, critical, thorough and fruitful, and can be (though it need not be) developed into a dramatic performance. The versatility of OSL makes it possible to construct useful and targeted workshops, and so overcome doubts like this student's. Equally, the quality of OSL will suffer if we assume without further consideration that there is one set of techniques and exercises that can be applied with equal effectiveness to any subject.

3. What should be the relationship between OSL and conventional tertiary learning formats?

1. If OSL is to justify its place in tertiary education, its supporters should be able to elucidate what it can offer and how this relates to conventional learning. As I argued in section 2.1., well constructed exercises need not lack any of the rigour or intellectual content of a standard seminar, and so OSL can often match CLFs in this respect. This is important for those who believe that tertiary level education of any form should meet certain standard requirements. However, part of the *raison d'être* of OSL should be to offer something that CLFs cannot.

2. OSL seeks to place practical or embodied learning at the heart of its workshops. This is frequently done using applied drama and generally demands an increased creative engagement from students. According to the preponderance of student feedback, this is a promising approach to education. In the Philosophy feedback, 78% of students either agreed or strongly agreed that creativity is an important feature of education in all subjects and 57% either agreed or strongly agreed that they could be more creative in the OSL workshop than a standard seminar or lecture. In Real World Chemistry, 83% of students either agreed or strongly agreed with the first proposition and 92% either agreed or strongly agreed with the second.

3. Of course, lectures and seminars should also stimulate students to be creative, so one must not presuppose a false dichotomy between OSL and non-creative learning. Nevertheless, OSL appears to have a number of benefits over CLFs. For example, it confers on students a greater freedom over the projects they undertake. Undergraduate modules usually prescribe a list of assessment questions which do not allow much scope for students to pursue their own areas of interest. To some extent, this is necessary, since it is important that core areas of the syllabus are covered. On the other hand, it eschews a central facet of real research – choosing a question from a broad academic domain and distilling a coherent project from initial brainstorming and research. OSL affords students this opportunity by

permitting them the kind of creative freedom that conventional undergraduate modules do not.

4. This creative process also requires students to work collaboratively (see section 2.4.) and therefore introduces them to the advantages and pitfalls of teamwork, an experience which can be all too rare in undergraduate education. OSL can make two further contributions which it may be easy to underestimate: the provision of soft skills and the fostering of a co-operative working community between students. Soft skills, including articulation, improvisation, presentation and illocution, are refined by OSL and play an undeniable role in a variety of academic and professional contexts, a claim with which all students agreed in the focus groups. These skills are developed by seminars, but sometimes only tentatively. Presentations delivered to entire groups in addition to more explorative and ambitious uses of the voice and body language is often missing from CLFs. This portrays an inaccurate picture of real working environments, for which student can be inadequately prepared.

5. OSL also increases students' engagement with each other. Instead of discussion being moderated by a seminar tutor, collaboration in OSL is often left to the students themselves. The tutor's role as a structuring device may be important in seminars, but it is also illuminating to dispense with it and allow students to conduct their own discussions, planning, drafting and rehearsals. This gives greater responsibility to students and forces them to utilise each other as resources rather than an individual of perceived academic authority. Students in this situation may agree, disagree or even feel that their aims are frustrated, but in each case the exercise may constitute a valuable and self-forged learning experience which cannot simply be transferred from teacher to student via a lecture.

6. These are not the only achievements to which OSL aspires. Workshops aim to explore topics within a syllabus in a unique and fruitful way, in order to learn something about the topic in question. There tend to be significant structural differences between OSL workshops and CLFs. In the Gogol workshop, for example, there was little emphasis on summary; the focus was on particular moments and experiences in the text. A series of exercises encouraged the students to delve into the contingencies and contextual details of these moments, using embodied learning to elicit dramatic content from the material. This attempt to understand particular moments of the story in greater depth, caching out the contexts in which they occur, offers an alternative structural approach, a new *modus operandi* with which to address the text. It renders it vivid, immediate and more evocative, bringing aspects of the text to life through dramatic representation. The difference may be compared to that between reading a map and exploring the mapped area itself – the latter approach generates a more proximate and visual experience of the territory. This approach may therefore provide a new perspective on the material which cannot be achieved by CLFs.

7. Furthermore, the workshop did not apply a standard set of critical perspectives to the text, but rather allowed students to explore it on their own terms. Building upon the original material, students created freeze-frames and short lines of dialogue, making their own contributions to the *Diary of a Madman*. In this way, they occupied the position of the author, adding extra layers to the story and characters, gradually extending and supplementing the text. This also raised issues of adaption: what must be kept and what can be lost in transmuting the prose into drama? During the workshop, the students actively shaped the original material rather than studying it from the outside, allowing them to develop their own original perspectives on the text. By stepping into the writer's shoes, students may also gain insights which are not immediately or easily obtainable by a straightforward reading of the text into how the story or project can be conceived. This facet of OSL has interesting exegetical implications, and may be applied to a variety of different texts. Perhaps Philosophy students will appreciate the first-personal nature of Descartes' project of pure inquiry into the foundations of knowledge if they attempt the use the Method of Doubt for themselves – Descartes himself believed that this method must be *performed* privately, since the veridicality of the senses is the first target of his methodological scepticism. As

Bernard Williams remarks, Descartes' project in *The Meditations* is 'not a description but an enactment of philosophical thought.'[1]

8. The crux of the argument for OSL's place in higher education will be to justify its status as a supplement to CLFs, rather than a weaker alternative. I have adumbrated a few features of OSL which, I have submitted, can make a contribution that is not merely duplicative of CLFs but possesses distinct advantages. I have also suggested that, with a little ingenuity, these techniques can enjoy a wide application to different subjects in university education.

4. How well can OSL encourage participation and collaboration?

1. By reshaping the relationship between student and teacher in various ways, OSL aims to dismantle the hierarchy which is built into the structure of CLFs. Diminishing the prerogative of the academic figure to direct student output, and investing more creative power in the students, places the onus on them to work together. Many group activities also call for unanimous participation, whereas students in conventional seminars sometimes become observers of the proceedings rather than active participants. Students will also use their own ideas and opinions, as well as those of their peers, as the basic resources with which to proceed. They will have to tackle both the creative and logistical tasks inherent in OSL projects themselves, without recourse to a central authority, and so must work together towards a common goal.

2. These effects, achieved by the restructuring of student involvement and the substitution of a 'vertical' power structure by a 'horizontal' one, have corresponding implications. Equality between students is no longer predicated on joint compliance with an academic authority figure, but on the common obligation to produce student-authored work. This form of equality is not purely symbolic, but is concretised by the increased creative power possessed by students. Hopefully, this will also encourage unanimous involvement. Here then are two closely related features of OSL by virtue of which it can be said to have a different *political* status within education, and, to the extent that educational experience and practice have broader influences, within wider society. First, OSL is *collaborative*, in that student projects are collective enterprises and as such are grounded in cooperation. Second, OSL is *participatory*, in that it encourages joint involvement and in so doing promotes a more proactive attitude among students.

3. The extent to which OSL, as an innovative form of teaching and learning, has political implications both inside and outside the institution of education will largely turn on the success of the aforementioned aims. What follows is a brief outline of some of the challenges OSL faces in this respect.

4. First, if OSL is embedded in undergraduate modules, student work must be assessed for the purposes of the course, and so a central authority is still operating more remotely. To some extent, this problem can be met by the fact that the assessment criteria of OSL differ from those of CLFs, but as the CILM focus group suggests, students will attempt to determine the assessment criteria as far as possible. Students may still feel that their work must conform to rigid conventions, against which they will be tested, but ones that are more obscure and elusive than those of CLFs. Perhaps a better response is that the complete removal of any central academic authority is not necessary to implement the aims of OSL. Indeed, as I have previously argued, it is important for OSL to formulate criteria by which work can be meaningfully evaluated and which reflect its learning aims. What is important is that students should be relatively unimpeded during the creative process, which must rely on student cooperation rather than direction from an academic authority.

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[1] Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*, 1978, Penguin: London at p. 20.

5. Clearly the relationship between teacher and student is a complex one. It inevitably involves a process of assessment which immediately imposes a power hierarchy, of which students can be acutely aware. On the other hand, it could still be the case that this power hierarchy can and should be retrenched in certain ways. One of the most important ways in which OSL does this is by operating within the environment of the theatre ensemble. Both the physical setup and the atmosphere of OSL workshops are more informal and less hierarchical than CLFs, and thereby weaken the traditional relationship between teacher and student that is *implied* by these features of conventional learning. Furthermore, the duty to assess student work is only one part of the teacher's role. Beyond this, there are many possibilities as to how a teacher should interact and involve herself in the students' work. This provides ample scope to reinvent the interface between teacher and student in accordance with the aims of OSL.

6. The second problem is more disquieting, since it undercuts some of the fundamental premises of OSL. The aspiration to promote collaboration and participation relies on the removal of certain power dynamics which inhibit these, some of which (between student and teacher) have already been mentioned. However, it also requires the absence of power dynamics between students, in order to ensure that there is wide participation on an equal footing. The problem is that the techniques employed by OSL – practical exercises and dramatic exploration – naturally appeal to some students more than others, especially those who possess qualities constitutive of dramatic talent, such as confidence, expressiveness and so forth. The differences in ability and proclivity which naturally exist between students import pre-existing power dynamics into the workshop, which can be just as influential as the ones between the student and teacher that OSL seeks to eliminate. Paradoxically, the emphasis on student centred learning can remove one set of power dynamics at the cost of replacing it with a more potent and damaging one.

7. These power dynamics can infiltrate all aspects of OSL. Some students can come to dominate the creative process, perhaps as a result of their commanding character or resistance to compromise, thus stifling the creative input of other members of the group. Other students may feel intimidated by the prospect of dramatic participation, and may find it more difficult than others to overcome this initial impediment. They may also feel unable to improvise creatively, something which many OSL exercises require, compounding their apprehensiveness. The problem is somewhat tempered by the fact that students are not expected to have any prior dramatic experience, and this is taken into account, but this does not remove those natural characteristics which engender power dynamics within student groups, and so does not resolve the issue.

8. The first thing to say in response to this problem is that taking part in projects which lack mutual participation and cooperation may still be an important learning experience. They may, indeed, still have positive political significance, since they introduce students to the realities of teamwork, confronting them with some of the problems involved, and so prepare them for similar interactions in the professional and political spheres. Most members of the CILM focus group, despite complaining about some of the internal group dynamics, claimed to have gained useful insights into the potential pitfalls of collaborative work, which better equipped them to undertaking similar work in future.

9. Nevertheless, practitioners should still take steps to ensure that the effect of these dynamics are lessened, in order to give all students the opportunity to glean the most from their experience of OSL. Basic techniques, which were employed to good effect in some of the OSL workshops, can be of assistance here: gradually easing students into the more daunting tasks, beginning with exercises designed to make students comfortable with each other and their surroundings, encouraging all students to voice their ideas, and so on. In this way, practitioners will hopefully be able to alleviate some of these problems. What is perhaps most important is that practitioners should be aware of the ways in which power relations that affect the success of OSL's learning outcomes can change depending on the

structure of the teaching and learning environment. Attentiveness to these difficulties in itself increases one's ability to overcome them.

Conclusion

1. In this report, I hope to have outlined and briefly discussed what I take to be some of the key issues raised by OSL. I have set out some challenges faced by proponents of OSL which should be addressed if we are to offer a sound practical and theoretical framework in which its place in higher education can be justified and understood. I have also made some *ad hoc* suggestions, admittedly tentative and underdeveloped, about how this might be achieved. Ultimately, it should be clear from both the student feedback and my own perspective that OSL has a great deal to offer higher education, both in terms of the personal and intellectual development of students and the academic understanding of the subjects to which it is applied.

2. One must not underestimate the importance of developing soft skills, a service which OSL undoubtedly provides. Not only are skills such as public speaking, articulation and creativity helpful in professional contexts, they are also vital in education and academia. One's academic standard is not merely a product of private study and reflection, but of one's interaction and contribution to a wider academic community. OSL promotes collaboration of this sort, helping to foster an academic community of students.

3. Finally, OSL can provide vivid focus and contextual detail to core material, as demonstrated by the Gogol workshop. By exploring a text in an active and visually memorable way, many students felt they had gained some important insights into their subject. Moreover, the enactment of ideas, arguments and modes of reasoning rather than their abstract study is a profoundly useful approach to many subjects. This does not necessarily involve the production of a piece of drama, in the traditional sense, but more generally the embodiment of an element of text in practical form. In a very literal sense, this allows students to approach the text as a kind of author, whether they are creatively extending a piece of fiction or acting as an advocate for a particular conclusion, enabling them to gain a more direct and immediate appreciation of the concepts they are studying.