



Open-space Learning in Real World Contexts*

Workshop Practice: Coffee and Papers

1. Description:

Coffee and Papers requires the tutor or facilitator to prepare (photocopy), in advance, ten or so newspaper, magazine, or scholarly articles. These should be tangentially related to the subject matter of the session and not address it specifically. There should be roughly enough copies of each article to supply half the total size of the group. The articles should be of a length that makes it possible to read one or two in an hour. The tutor/facilitator provides tea/coffee and pastries/biscuits/cakes for the participants. Participants arriving at the session should be unaware of the nature of the activity before they arrive. Participants should be asked to switch off all mobile phones, i-pods etc for the duration of the session. They are then asked to choose one or two articles, take coffee and biscuits, and find a suitably quiet place to read for an hour. After an hour the tutor/facilitator reconvenes the group and participants are asked, in turn, to talk about the experience itself, the content of the articles, and connections they may have found to the typical subject matter of their standard sessions. The idea of an “open” space is both literal and figurative, here, as participants are using materials that are “open” in the sense that they are not commenting directly on course or module content, and it is necessary for them to find a space that is neither seminar room nor home.

2. Learning possibilities:

Participants are forced by the nature of the activity to engage in close reading. Changes the typical reading environment and offers a different way of experiencing text. Simulates an environment in which learning is a choice, not a chore. Deepens understanding of the subject matter and promotes active reflection.

3. Examples:

For a module on “North American Women Writers”. articles might include a piece on the Bering Strait land bridge, David Foster Wallace’s “Consider the Lobster”, something on the 2000 presidential election, an extract from Krakauer’s *Under the Banner of Heaven*, articles from the latest *New York Review of Books*, or *Harpers*, or something from the right-wing arm of the US media.

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