

Reflections from La Burra Verde

Anna Fairtlough, Shelagh Doonan and Steve Dilworth



This contribution brings together a range of thoughts arising from a three-way conversation between Shelagh and Anna, who were leading lights at Bayacas, and Steve, who attended the launch of our OST project at Brighton in 2013, and who had not been able to travel to Spain on this occasion.

[Photo by Alison Piasecka.]

Three months on from the event, the conversation between them helped to crystallise some thoughts regarding OST 2018.

Anna and Shelagh described their experience at La Burra Verde ...

[Photo by Beth Davis.]



... while Steve listened for ways in which their descriptions sounded familiar, in the sense of being similar to other gatherings he had attended, and where there were differences that could be particularly described as Open Source Thinking (OST).



Context



[Early morning, Casa Luna, La Burra Verde. Photo by Shelagh Doonan.]

Shelagh recalled how she had:

“slipped out just after six one morning, drawn by the light and the dawn chorus - nightingales, blackbirds, a thrush, and sometimes an unfamiliar fluting call which turned out to be a golden oriole.

The earthy joys of using the compost toilet were enhanced by the thought of being part of a circular chain: the resulting mulch would, in a few years’ time, be helping to fertilise Kate’s olive trees which will produce olive oil.”

Anna commented on how she had prepared for the three-way conversation by asking herself a series of questions that she wanted to explore. At the top of her list was ‘What is Open Source Thinking anyway? Addressing this question was a major theme for all three of us, and our collective answer is summarised in the following section.

What is our view of Open Source Thinking?

One of the purposes of the conversation was to think out loud about a definition or description of OST. To **Steve** it sounded as if this is essentially an emergent group process can only be fully appreciated through experience. Trying to explain in conceptual language is like attempting to convey the taste of Guinness by telling someone about it.

Anna and **Shelagh** agreed that over the long weekend together there was a crystallising of what OST is about. Whilst OST itself sounds a bit grand, as we thought about how we would kick off the 2018 event, we developed a loose working definition. We used this form of words to describe the purpose of our event to others:

“Each time we meet, we ... create a temporary community, where we can learn with and from each other, and from the place we are in.”

Shelagh and **Anna** both thought that abstractions are not always helpful. In their different ways they offer stories and concrete examples of how the ideas were brought into existence. For them, one essential component of the temporary community that we create is to have two-way intergenerational conversations and connections.

Whilst the definition we arrived at provides a really good description of what we were trying to do, the question remains about the abstraction involved in attempting to define defining OST. This may be grounded in or influenced by some of the ways in which it has been talked about in different issues of the journal, for example trying to define it by making some link with the ‘commons technology’ and more generally ideas about the ‘commons’ and various discussions in the first OST meeting in Brighton that took place in 2013.

Anna comments:

“One idea was about challenging ‘critical thinking’. I remember I was quite critical of the idea that we shouldn’t be critical. But what I did take positively from this idea - how we in a conversation and as a community and how we as people in the ‘commons’, in small or big communities how we should listen to each other, respect each other’s ideas, build on each other’s thinking. Not using a kind of House of Commons debating chambers kind of style where you are trying to insult or overpower each other.

I think that is a very important principle of what we are trying to do in OST and how we behave when we meet. But I still think we should be critical of power structures and critical of ideas and critical of ways of thinking and doing things that are abusive or have negative consequences for each other or the environment.”

Shelagh expresses the impact of being part of the gathering in Spain thus:

"It was the day after the close of OST 2018, and I felt that I and we had been through something very dense and rich. It was exhausting, but in a satisfying way. I had a palpable sense that we had been into, through and out the other side of a memorable experience."

The OST2018 Space

The impact of the space in which the group gathered seemed to be a microcosm of the ways in which space has impact on human beings and in which we human beings impact on the places in which we live. The importance of the particular location of our gathering at La Burra Verde shone out of the conversation, and the detail of this was obvious in the later reflections of Anna and Shelagh.

]Anna focuses in on the lived experience of being part of the la Burra Verde gathering:

"I think that one of the things that hasn't really come out in this conversation is the amazing place that we were in. The beauty - the mountains - it had been a fantastic spring - the variety of the wild flowers - at times it was ecstatically beautiful. The power of being somewhere where you shit in a compost toilet, and you know, and you can see where it goes. You know that in seven years' time it is going to be used to fertilise the trees that are providing the olive oil that you are using.

You know that if you leave the electricity on all day you won't have any electricity at night because you have wasted it. You know that the water comes from the mountains because you can see the snow on them and the importance of not wasting this precious resource. And we can see that climate change may very well destroy this beautiful place whose traditions and technologies go back hundreds of years to the Moorish times. If there were a fire it would all be gone.

We can see across the world that people's lives and cultures and traditions and technologies are being destroyed by fires exacerbated by climate change right now. It feels very important to me that we heed this and that we value the beauty and the wonder of what we have and what we could destroy - that's what I want to communicate about what I have learned from being in this place."

Reasons from coming together at OST gatherings

There was some musing on the 'social' reasons for attending an OST event. Both Anna and Shelagh are firm in their commitment.

Anna says:

“It’s quite clear to me that I do want to go. Partly it’s a social thing - it’s fun - it’s a chance to see my friends and make new friends and feel connected with people from different backgrounds and at different ages. Of course, it’s not always the same group. But it’s definitely more than that. After the event I described it as amazing, exhausting, inspiring - the intensity of life lived in those four days is incredible.”

Whilst **Shelagh** describes the centrality of preparing and eating food:

“An integral part of the time together also revolved around our meals. Led by Tanya, we literally had a taste of what it takes to source, prepare, cook and eat our food, especially when you are living off the grid. Tanya was undaunted by cooking a béchamel sauce and a rice pudding on a solar cooker, with clouds approaching!

Living off the grid also faces us directly with the wider questions of how we use life’s basics of food, water and energy.”

[One of Tanya’s wonderful meals. Photo by Alison Piasecka]



OST roles and functions

In listening to Anna and Shelagh during the three-way conversation, **Steve** detected several inter-related themes about who does what at an OST gathering, as follows:

The Art of Hosting (artofhosting.org)

The use of the **facilitator** role was striking - the massively rich variety and depth of connecting exercises used meant that some facilitation was necessary, especially when a new model, approach or concept was being suggested, e.g. the SALT model (see Figure 1 below).

Facilitation was a revolving role, not embodied in one person. At times group time was not formally facilitated, the expectation was that *all present were responsible* for creating and holding boundaries.

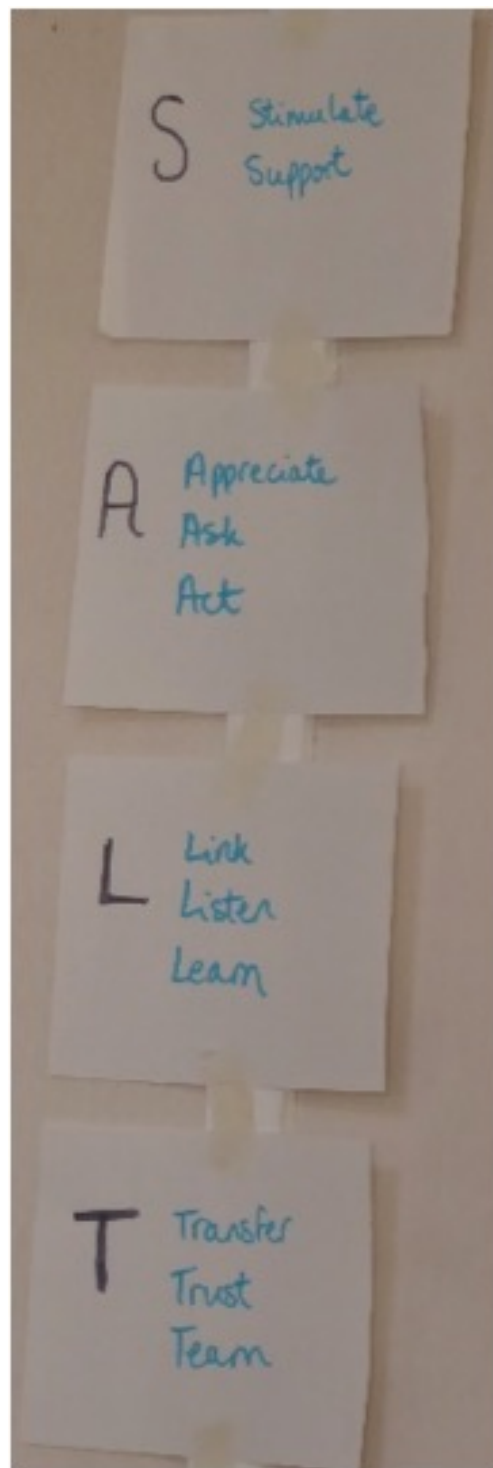
Steve adds: *"I wonder whether some gravitated towards being facilitative, if so, could this be shared more explicitly."*

These sub-themes were picked up by both Anna and Shelagh.

Anna asked herself what it was like to host an event:

"Afterwards I don't think I've ever been so tired - I was also trying to recover from being ill and it returned at the end of it, which was perhaps why I was particularly exhausted. One of the things for me was that it was a version of looking after people and trying to make things all right for people. There was a lot of that in the hosting - possibly I was doing it in an over-parental way, I don't know - that's interesting to me."

But I was worried about people's physical safety and their comfort. I knew that some people might find it quite challenging. And it is. When I wrote the introduction to what the event was about, one of the things I highlighted was that being in this place, on this farm, it does take you right into yourself, your emotions. It can strongly challenge you to face things about yourself. I think it is true. Being there gives you a heightened emotional experience. I was trying to communicate what it feels like to be in it. So I think I was right to be concerned about these things."



[Figure 1: The SALT Model]

Shelagh offers a glimpse of the link between planning for the event and what actually happened. She also highlights the particular importance of communication between those present:

"As in previous OST gatherings, I had been very struck by our numerous connecting conversations. This time, I was particularly aware of the rich range of our conversations and practical activities, both informal and in workshops. There was also a stronger inter-generational element at this year's gathering."

Our offers and requests planning session

At the initial on-site planning session (there had also been a considerable amount of pre-planning), based on our offers and requests, between us we created a four-day programme for learning with and from each other, and from the place, which included:

- hula-hooping
- intercultural learning
- the SALT project planning and review tool
- yoga
- wild flower survey
- surviving war
- sustainable growing on the finca - producing olives and olive oil, permaculture vegetable growing. (During our stay, we also planted up a garden for Kate and the staff in their dining/sitting area).
- a sound diary
- art work
- mapping *your Ikigai/life purpose* (see Tim Whitworth's article in this issue).

Who are we as an OST community?

This is a question that **Anna** mused on during and after our three-way conversation:

"This is a question that came up at La Burra Verde event in relation to the 'SALT' model of community development that Beth and Anastasia presented. One of the aspects of this is the importance of having conversations about who 'we' are in any community. But I remember feeling very ambivalent about getting into a lot of abstract conversations about 'who we are'. Some people had only just arrived, and didn't have any idea of what it was all about - so how could they contribute to a discussion of 'who we are'? Also, it seems to me that 'who we are' only emerges through what we do together and through our practice.

But I still think this is an important question and maybe a question for the future. Who are we? There is a limited degree of openness of who we are - for instance we didn't advertise this event very widely. There was a limited amount of space and the number of people we could have. It's not like a conference centre for a hundred people. There was not enough space or accommodation or resources for that.'

But there are questions about who we are and how we want to take this forward. Are we just a group of people who meet occasionally or are we part of some bigger movement? How do we capture what we are and what we do and continue to learn about how to do this?"

Anticipating OST 2019 (opensourcethinking.org.uk)

Anna's words raise many questions that could be recycled into the next steps, before during and after the 2019 gathering. Further deliberation could include difficulties and learning picked up by **Steve** who noted that:

“There was something about the organisation of the space with little time to be solitary and a sense of tiredness, during and after the event. This led me to wonder if this could this impact on the sustainability. The sense of being a microcosm of life, laced with an intensity, a heightened awareness and deep experience of the way we are all connected, socially, psychologically and ecologically. Since the conversation I have been invited to the next event, in Yorkshire (2019) and have gladly expressed my interest in being there. The conversation with Shelagh and Anna has definitely been part of my decision making, their description of the intention of the OST gathering feels very attractive to me.”

As we look ahead we wonder how we might get the right balance between structure, facilitation and a natural flow to the interactions and conversations. As **Anna** commented:

“A particular issue that came up for us in this event was about what structure to use to enable everybody to speak and participate. It raises questions about whether some people dominate if you don't have a structure but I also wanted to see a human and natural sense of interaction to mirror how humans create communities of conversation and learning that feel organic and rich and natural without a lot of tight rules about who and how you can speak. We have had some challenges about that in this event and that may be something to reflect on in the future.

There was a mixture of more tightly planned and facilitated sessions and also looser and more open ones, without a clearly designated ‘facilitator’, though Shelagh and I did, I think, have a kind of ‘helicopter’ eye on this even in those sessions. Perhaps some of the challenges became more evident in those sessions but still they were amazing, rich, spontaneous sessions. That's what is important in what we are doing.”

Shelagh adds a note of gratitude:

“Thanks to all who contributed time, energy, ideas and resources. The people and the place offered us an optimistic microcosm for connection and learning that we can take beyond those four days. There is already talk of next year's gathering, where we can particularly strengthen the intergenerational aspects of what we do.”

About Anna, Shelagh and Steve

Shelagh has worked in learning and development for forty years. She relishes being part of the AMED Writers' Group and OST for the adventurous thinking, conversations, writing and learning. shelaghdoonan2010@btinternet.com

Anna has spent her working life in social work practice, education, management and research. Alongside her sister Kate she was one of the hosts of the 2018 OST event in La Burra Verde. She found this to be an inspiring, creative, intriguing, sobering, moving, and sometimes challenging experience. Nonetheless she's very glad she did it. a.fairtlough@talktalk.net

Steve is deeply interested in the process of facilitation, and in particular in what helps/hinders facilitator presence. Most of his work is currently in the public sector, often supporting staff in areas where there is a high degree of emotional labour, e.g. end of life care, custodial settings and mental health.

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