

Reflections on Open Source Thinking, 2016-2018

Beth Davis



How did I get there?

Alison emailed me during my final year of university and asked if I would like to come to the Tostat gathering that year. I really appreciated being asked! It sounded like a great project, an adventure, and 'meaningful' travel. I can't remember having any worries or suspicions, although I realised that it wasn't a common thing for people of my age to be part of.

What did we do?

Our emerging OST 2016 programme, Tostat, France
Photos: Bob MacKenzie

How did OST make me feel?

My introduction to OST, 2016

My first OST in particular was special for several reasons. At that moment, I had just finished my university education after struggling with it, becoming disappointed with regards to the quality of teaching, community and personal support. I was already looking forward to building for myself a programme of working and learning experiences, and the first tOSTat gathering confirmed to me that I was right to search for a more meaningful, social and relatable way of learning.



Beth, OST2016, middle right, Tostat, France. Photo: Bob MacKenzie

Tostat 2016 was an incredible connective experience which isn't easy to forget. I found it to be a very connected, balanced temporary community and our workshops and activities were wide-ranging. There were several exercises which I didn't believe would 'work', but which I found meaningful and taught me a lot about how we experience relationships and long-distance events, and how these feelings affect us. I really enjoyed the 'silent' walk in the Pyrenees, where we were liberated from the social expectation to speak and instead focussed on our environment and body language towards one another.

Another special aspect about this trip was staying with local (French) hosts, adding another layer to the community and placing our learning experience in context. A memorable, and unexpectedly emotional, moment was our goodbyes and final 'news', symbolically marking the event with a bell. It showed me the importance of celebration or ritual in community relations, for which there need not be logical or traditional reason.

Subsequent experiences

I have had emotional moments during each OST experience. Living Tostat 2017 together supported the strong bond of friendship with a someone I had invited and was travelling with, as well as with other participants. Andalusia 2018 was a moment of much-needed peace, focus and reflection during a hectic, physically and mentally challenging year; an important moment of re-connecting with myself and my environment.



La Burra, photo by Beth Davis

How to explain OST to other people?

In trying to persuade some of my friends to join us, I ended up explaining it in the following way:

What is Open Source Thinking?

A question we regularly ask ourselves!

For me, it's about co-creating a supportive and engaging environment in which to share our individual experiences and knowledge. It's an opportunity to develop your own ideas (professional or social), voicing them to a receptive community and benefiting from critical friendship, as well as considering alternative practices and perspectives. Anyone can be an Open Source contributor!

The residential long weekends very much mix practical communal activities (cooking, cleaning, eating) with physical activities (gardening, walking, tai chi) and discussion sessions, valuing each aspect equally. All contribute to a creative, reflective social experience. There is conscious interaction with the local 'hosting' community: previously, for example, we have visited a local chateau, observed a French election count, and helped with gardening public space in our host village, Tostat. Previous workshops include Constellation work, Reciprocal Relationships, Catalysing Conversations, Nodes of Governance, the Translation of Solidarity... to name just a few of our discussions/workshops!

I also think that it is a valuable experience to explain to employers. I include it on my CV under '[networks](#)', and can be relatable to any type of job. It's international, intergenerational, stands as proof to ourselves and others of good communication, collaboration and motivation.

Delights and challenges of OST

Realising some of these strengths and skills through the OST experience has helped build my personal confidence, particularly at a time when I am transitioning from full-time formal education to searching for a path of 'meaningful endeavour' (discussed by Tim in the *Ikigai* session, Andalusia 2018; see his article in this edition of *e-O&P*) which is fulfilling and makes me happy.

Delights

I would really like to thank the coordinators and other participants for the opportunity to explore and prove 'soft' skills in a creative yet structured learning space. This wouldn't have happened without the supportive temporary communities that we created during the gatherings, and the seemingly intuitive willingness of participants to respect and appreciate others, including questioning and proposing different ideas as part of discussion. As a younger participant, it was really valuable to exchange with people older than me in a very equal way, respecting the life experiences of others and the richness of intergenerational knowledge sharing.

A strength of OST is in offering and accepting opinions, energy, thoughts and appreciation. 'Reciprocity' is a common and recurring theme, as explored by some of the participants in [the Summer 2017 AMED journal](#). Although I had practiced these to an extent before, it has been really useful for me to identify and name these ideas and ways of communicating. They are concepts I can draw on in other areas of my life.

Challenges

A challenge has been in encouraging others to get involved, particularly younger people. I have talked with enthusiasm on several occasions with others, inviting them to get involved. As much as I think it is a shame that we haven't 'succeeded' with everyone, I also appreciate that OST is likely to only be meaningful when it is a personal choice. There is much in its format which doesn't appeal to everyone. Even though many might be interested in its themes and content, it is a very immersive and intense social experience. When someone does accept an invitation, it is difficult to not be concerned with how they live the experience; we can only hope that they generally have a good time!



Beth and Shreyya digging the garden-space, OST2018

I certainly think that the OST experience is not one to be rushed. At Tostat in 2017 I feel that I had less of an emotional connection than in other years, but I did leave before the rest of the group and sandwiched the programme between a couple of weeks of ambitious travelling.

Appreciating OST

Overall, though, OST can be empowering because of the structure, stimulation and social interaction it provides during a period of personal “downtime”. If approached with an open and relaxed mind, OST can be invaluable tool in getting to know yourself better, in relation to community and environment. It showed and convinced me that creativity and emotion are just as important to learning as reading and critiquing, and contributes to a meaningful, holistic learning journey.

My experiences with OST have helped me find a path to social work, a profession which is social and creative as well as principled and regulated, so THANK YOU to everyone involved.



Beth and fellow OST participants with Bayacas gardeners, OST2018. Photo: Alison Piasecka

About Beth

Beth is a French and Arabic language graduate from Norwich, UK. She has spent the past year on a European Voluntary Service placement at a governmental residential centre for asylum seekers in Belgium, and is about to join Suffolk County Council/University of East Anglia as a Trainee Social Worker specialising in young people, children and families. She can be reached at elizabethdavis5@icloud.com.