

What Open Source Thinking means to me

Rosemary Cairns



Editor's note

Rosemary has been a key member of the OST family since before 2013, and together with Bob, Andy and Alison, she is part of the core curating team - the team who hold the principles and emerging understanding of OST on behalf of us all. Like Bob in Southampton, Rosemary wasn't able to get to OST2018 from her home in Serbia this year. This slightly updated extract is taken from an article that Rosemary, Alison, Andy and Bob co-wrote for [the Summer 2017 edition of e-O&P](#) called 'Reciprocity in OST praxis'. These reflections are part of what Rosemary wrote in preparation for OST2017, and are a good reminder of what we are trying to do when we host OST gatherings. As such, we think they serve as a helpful prelude for OST2019 in Yorkshire.

Rosemary writes

Our very first ideas for an OST workshop were more traditional: put together a programme that would illuminate some of the exciting thinking that is going on in this area. But then we realised that being true to the principles of 'open source thinking' meant operating differently. Drawing upon those discussions and on our experiences of OST 2016 in Tostat, I began to reflect on how those principles might shape – and distinguish – Open Source Thinking events. In my view, there are at least seven such principles, which are:

- Questioning taken-for-granted assumptions
- Self-organisation needs a framework, within which people can contribute as they wish.
- Sharing practical tasks helps to create community
- Working with emergent properties
- Integrating the role of a hosting team
- Ceremony is important.
- Each event is uniquely shaped by those who choose to come, and by what they bring.

Each of these principles is developed in a little more detail below.



Rosemary [top right] facilitating the composition of the 2016 programme. Photo by Bob MacKenz1ie

Some emerging ideas about principles of OST

Questioning taken-for-granted assumptions

While an OST gathering is rooted firmly in a local setting, it explores ideas that are global in nature. Nevertheless, the local setting keeps the discussions grounded. Thus, OST is 'glocal' - local and global at the same time. Our 2016 event was uniquely shaped by being held in Tostat village, in the foothills of the French Pyrenees, with participants staying in village homes, having a chance to explore the village and its history, and an opportunity to walk in the Pyrenees. While many of us as participants from 'away' were used to facilitative techniques, indigenous Tostat residents were not. So, having to explain what we were doing and trying to do, and why, especially for the Tostat residents who took part in our project, meant explaining things we take for granted. This required us to reappraise both our ways of doing things and our cultural assumptions.

Self-organisation needs a framework, within which people can contribute as they wish.

Our OST framework encompasses food, lodging, meeting space, meeting structure, and translation/interpretation, and is created by the hosting team. The programme contents are brought by the participants. Like Open Space Technology, we four members of the hosting team (Alison, Andy, Rosemary and Bob) created the overarching programme outline, and the participants populated it as they chose.

Sharing practical tasks helps to create community

Unlike traditional workshops in which the bulk of the arrangements are done *for* participants, OST creates community by deliberately sharing the work - cooking, cleaning, and gardening, as well as inviting their offers to facilitate and take part in sessions. This requires a lot of pre-planning, of course: Alison, for example, whose family home in Tostat was our focal venue, prepared meal instructions and obtained culinary ingredients in advance. For several months beforehand, the hosting team engaged in countless conversations via Skype and e-mail (as well as in a prior f2f residential session in Tostat in 2015). This is part of creating the framework for self-management. Sharing tasks offers a wider range of possibilities for spontaneous conversation than can be offered within specific workshop sessions.

Working with emergent properties

The offerings that people bring create a far wider range of possibilities than would a programme that had been fixed in advance. This is, in fact, the insight that led Harrison Owen to create [Open Space Technology](#) decades ago. He had spent several years planning a conference, and then realised that delegates were most engaged, and the conversations were most passionate, during the coffee breaks. So, he set out to create a model for a meeting that would be, in essence, all coffee breaks. At Tostat 2016, for example, a [Constellations](#) session brought unexpected insights as we explored future possibilities for OST.



OST2016 Constellations workshop. Photo by Bob MacKenzie

Integrating the role of a hosting team

A hosting team, especially one that has spent much time exploring and debating ideas, offers possibilities for ‘managing’ the event that go far beyond most traditional facilitation – what we have called ‘holding up a blank canvas’ (or possibly, as Bob later suggested, a blank *screen*, onto which the hosting team and others can project different ways of embodying OST and reciprocity). This is the insight that [the Art of Hosting community](#) grew from more than a decade ago. A hosting team enables participants to draw on the skills and interests of each other, to hand off tasks to one another smoothly and effortlessly, and to review each day’s events and make changes if needed. The team ‘hosts’ the participants, but does not direct them. This can be quite an exacting and sensitive responsibility.



OST2016: Exhausted hosting team at breakfast on the last day. Photo by Elizabeth McDonnell

Ceremony is important.

At Tostat 2016, the local mayor opened the event - and it turned out that he had grown up in the house now owned by Alison and Andy, where our gathering was centred. One day was set aside for walking in the Pyrenees, enjoying the magnificent scenery. We had, as in Open Space Technology, the 'morning news' over coffee and the 'evening news' over dinner. And we ended with a ceremony, in which each person talked about their experience of OST, rang the old school bell in the hallway, then walked out one door and came back into the room. We also recorded a number of highlights over our time together, and subsequently made these openly available via the internet.

Each event is uniquely shaped by those who choose to come, and by what they bring.

So [OST2019](#), while sharing many features of OST2018 and OST2017, will be a different experience, as will each and every OST event that grows from it.

About Rosemary

Rosemary writes: 'I am a peacebuilder, an observer, a person who sees patterns. Small experiments like this one, which bring together a self-selected group of people to explore the things about which they are passionate, offer a way for us to explore how this a new society might emerge'.

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