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Accessing the Power of Open Space Technology for Systemic Change – My Experience with the Hypatia Association

By Donna Clark

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Back in 1999 my business partner and I were approached by Nan Armour, a science educator and consultant who had been working for over 25 years to increase the participation of women in science and technology. She and many of her colleagues were frustrated with the lack of progress that had been made. While girls represented approximately 50% of participants in high school science and math programs, they were not staying with science and moving into science and technology careers in significant numbers. And if they did continue with college or university education in science and technology, they were not staying in these careers. In Nova Scotia, women represent only about 21% of students enrolled in engineering and applied science programs at universities, about 15% of students in engineering and technology programs at the Nova Scotia Community College, and only 15% of Nova Scotians employed in applied science and engineering occupations. (Source: [http://www.hypatiaassociation.ca/Enrolment in S%26 T .doc](http://www.hypatiaassociation.ca/Enrolment%20in%20T.doc))

Many projects were seeking to change the girls, others worked with teachers or with employers, but Nan was anxious to find better mechanisms to work with the systemic issues – issues that could not be worked at in isolation. She invited us to help her design forums for the Hypatia Project, to bring together people from the school system, post-secondary education, workplaces and communities to see what was possible. After her first experiences with these Open Space Technology forums Nan says that “The process provided hope because it engaged people from across the system and acted as a catalyst for the emergence of relationships for action. Through using this process we have been able to have people in the system go below the surface and identify the systemic issues and strategies for working on them.”

The Hypatia Project has since evolved to the Hypatia Association, a not-for-profit organization in Nova Scotia that works with employers, employees, education institutions, students, educators and community members to address the policies, systemic barriers, and institutional practices that limit the participation of women in science and technology. The Association has continued to regularly use Open Space Technology as a preferred meeting process for bringing representatives of the whole system together. Looking back over the five years from the first of several forums held since 2000, Nan sees how these meetings were one of the key mechanisms that allowed many successful integrated projects to be identified, funded and delivered. “New voices were heard at these forums. School teachers heard new information and perspectives from community college and industry. Future employers heard new perspectives from employment equity candidates. The quality of the reflection and understanding that emerges from an Open Space meeting is different. There is a deeper understanding of the issues, one that opens the possibility for energized responses.”

Yet over this same period, members of the Hypatia team including me, have been involved with other contracted events/projects that have utilized OST in working with diversity initiatives. There have been great meetings and we have gotten wonderful responses from participants. However there is a big difference in the long term and systemic impact of these projects. Sponsorship was not by an organization that had a long-term commitment to following up from



the event. Follow-up has not been tracked. Was there an impact? Were there new partnerships for action? We may never know what actions of individuals or groups were inspired and undertaken.

Ultimately the Hypatia Association wants to see follow through from their forums, real institutional changes that will bring more equitable opportunities for women in science and technology. There are days when this still seems illusive. Yet the Hypatia Association experience continues to inspire our effort and commitment. At one of our cross-sectoral forums last year, the program evaluator for several Hypatia projects, Anne Martell, noted that she was amazed at the progress that was being made and the shift that she could see in who was participating in our forums. She noted that our ability to engage employers in the process and begin to get diversity on their agenda was a big step. Anne believes that the ability of the forums to have people identify for themselves what are the issues helps them make sense of employment equity, a process that is far more powerful than telling them about it.

The Hypatia cross-sectoral OST forums have led to the birth of several partnerships and the creation of tangible products that provide a local Nova Scotian response to the challenges facing girls and women, responses that are starting to change the systems. (See www.hypatiaassociation.ca for examples of the products.) Why is this working? One of the critical factors that led to these projects being implemented was very much the energy and passion of Nan Armour, Executive Director of the Hypatia Association. But she needed a collective process that would resonate with this work. Nan provided the courageous leadership and commitment to continuous learning and emergence of the process that is essential for sustaining action. Open Space Technology provided the mechanism that helped give life to her dream and find partners committed to getting out there and just doing it.

Based on my experience with the Hypatia Association, I am excited by the potential of Open Space Technology when used on multiple occasions with courageous leadership to catalyze systemic change. The use of the process has stimulated deeper reflection, surfaced existing beliefs, supported understanding by the multiple players in the system and restored hope that real institutional changes are possible. Open Space technology is a powerful process for creating connections, building relationships and catalyzing actions for the evolution of our institutions. Our challenge now is to make better use of this process to institutionalize these changes.