

From Tahrir Square to Open Space

The Upheaval in Egypt promotes New Forms of Political Discussion

Claudia Gross and Andreas Jacobs

"This is like on Tahrir Square" says Kazem as he looks at a painted poster with the slogan "Whenever it starts, is the right time". Kazem, who works as a Business Development Manager in a youth initiative that creates political awareness amongst young Egyptians, is one participant of the supposedly first Open Space in Egypt. "This was unknown to us: No program, no speakers. I had never believed that this would work". After three days of conversations, discussions and harvesting ideas, he is amazed. As the majority of the youth activists who have met following the invitation of the Egyptian Youth Federation (EYF) and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), he is keen to apply this new format to his own initiative. "We young Egyptians have started this revolution because we'd had enough of others dictating us what to do and what to think", says May, who works in a political youth initiative in Alexandria in her free time. "The Open Space method suits us since it requires and fosters creativity, openness and initiative".

What is Open Space about?

Open Space is a simple form of group facilitation discovered in the US in the 1980s by the consultant and facilitator Harrison Owen.

As many others, Owen has observed during conferences that the really interesting talks take place during the coffee breaks. So why not make that coffee break the actual event and drop everything else?



A form of group facilitation that invites to talk and to be creative is a new experience for young Egyptians.

Owen called his idea 'Open Space' since his main concern was to establish a space in which movement and action were possible, topics could be defined without constraints, issues could be talked over, and solutions could be developed. An Open Space knows no speakers, group facilitators, defined talking times or predefined topics of conversation. The only thing that is fixed is a proper introduction by a preparatory committee, which also explains the few principles that should be abided by. What is essential is voluntariness, openness, concern, heterogeneity and a broad and complex guiding theme.

The few ground rules painted on big posters are explained quickly: Everyone comes and goes, no one is forced or obliged to do anything. There is no fixed timeline; instead there are time slots, which provide room for real conversations and discussions. One poster close to the door sends the participants on their way with a well-intentioned admonition: "Be prepared to be surprised".

The idea for the first Open Space in Egypt was born in the fall of 2010, at a time when civic education was rapidly reaching its limits. An authoritarian rule had the country firmly in its grasp, as did traditional thinking and structures. Hierarchy, seniority and surveillance were the order of the day. Professors or experts lecture 'ex cathedra', after which the often young listeners would be allowed to ask questions. This begged the question 'Why not introduce a new format that attracts young people, overcomes hierarchies, encourages self-organization and opens space for creativity?' In other words: Why not create an Open Space? In the midst of the preparations, the Egyptian revolution of January 25th broke out. Suddenly, Egyptians could say what they thought and were called upon to reshape and reform the future of their country. It was quite plain: The Open Space method matched the revolutionary atmosphere to a tee. The motto was obvious: "Egypt at the Crossroads".

Less than two months after Mubarak's removal, 20 young Egyptians and ten young Germans sat together to test the Open Space format for the first time. First, the participants were familiarized with the Open Space Technology and its principles were explained.

Then, every participant had the opportunity to write down his/her topics of interest and announce them, together with a chosen time slot on the "Community Bulletin Board", a message wall set up specifically for this purpose. After the first round, the participants had defined 22 issues, to which more were added later. With every round of conversation sessions, the Breaking News Wall, located close to the continuous break buffet, received more documentation sheets. Over a cup of coffee or tea, the participants read what had been discussed so far. Additionally, a contact list was created. Every morning and evening, the participants gathered to talk about the daily news and announcements.



22 issues and many more ideas.
Open Space also means keeping a clear overview.

After three days, 22 documentations of the conversation sessions were on hand, 13 new project ideas had been born and their next steps recorded, a video clip had been taped, a Facebook group established, and 30 new friendships gained.

Analogue to the 'Model UN', Moataz wants to develop a 'Model Tahrir', representing and reflecting the positions of different political and social groups and associations in Egypt in a role play. Hala wants to use the idea in her work regarding women's rights: "Open Space is ideal for tackling taboo issues training gender equality, especially in Upper Egypt."



Discussion without dress code, another novelty in Egypt.



Mutaz and Kazem want to do more than dream – they want to help shape reality.

Mahmoud plans to use the method to reduce prejudice. "We Egyptians all too often believe in conspiracy and hidden agendas. But a format that, by definition, has no agenda, certainly doesn't have a *hidden* agenda. I'm sure everyone can see that. Open Space will allow us to reach people with a fundamental skepticism towards everything new or foreign".

Three weeks after the event, Anna's idea of freeing a Cairo rooftop from its waste to create a space for leisure has been put into practice.

For countries like Egypt, with a culture hinged on conversation and debate, the Open Space method seems the most valuable and logical way forward. Many Egyptians are frustrated by events in which they are sidelined and have no real voice. In government schools and universities, knowledge is passed down from the elder to the younger. Education is tantamount to rote learning and memorizing. In public institutions and even in families the situation is similar. Under these circumstances, a discussion method that focuses on voicing own issues and discussing them openly falls on fertile soil.

Supposedly, the Open Space Technology would have worked out *before* the Tahrir demonstrations. But after the revolution, with the gained freedom and the drive to test new things, it now seems a more fitting format than ever.

The consent regarding the first Open Space in Egypt is also a thought-provoking impulse for the international support for civic education.

Especially in phases of political transformation, Open Spaces seem to be important, not only to reflect topics, but also to form them and act as a method to impart them. 'Conventional' conferences, seminars and workshops are crucial to share and exchange specific knowledge. This is not something Open Space can do.



What it *can* do, however, is awaken creative potential, train soft skills and reflect the structural issues of a society. Moreover, it does so in a new and cost-effective way. It was a stroke of luck that in Egypt a whole nation found its Open Space right there on Tahrir Square. On that square (or was it a circle?), the new democratic rules of the game were tested and practiced. And what works in Egypt can also function in Tunisia – and hopefully soon in Syria, Jordan and Libya too. That is why political foundations and institutions active in development cooperation should use the opportunity to train local facilitators and trainers, develop an Arabic Open Space manual, and systematically support Open Space initiatives. At present, no region of the world is more in need of open spaces to discuss its societies' political future than the Arab world.

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