

Open Space Learning Circle and Active Learning in English Communication Class

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Abstract

The study intended to propose an open space learning circle (OSLC) classroom management to modify the traditional classroom structures and instructions in order to motivate students' interest in class participation. The open space learning circle was derived from Owen's open space technology. Through learning circle, talking sticks, empowerment, dialogism, and the law of mobility, students could have their voices heard in class discussion, hence transforming passive class learning environment to active one. The purpose of this study was to investigate whether students under the open space learning circle can experience greater satisfaction in English communication class than those under traditional classroom arrangement. Student satisfaction questionnaire and interviews were conducted to elicit students' learning reflection toward the class. The results showed that those students under the open space learning circle attained greater satisfaction in class than those under traditional class in terms of instructional objective, instruction material/method, teacher's qualities, class climate/environment, assessment, and overall satisfaction.

Keywords: Open space learning circle, active learning, classroom management

1. Introduction

In traditional classroom management, the classroom structure is a hierarchical, top-down structure. In this structure, instructors serve as professional authority, considering students ignorant. Students passively receive what professors know and what they intend to lecture in class; all students can do is listening, taking notes, memorizing, and in suitable times, giving it back to professors in order to get good grades. Freire (1970) called this kind of one-way instruction the "banking" education. Based on Freire's banking concept of education, knowledge becomes the goods being deposited by the depositor (instructors) to the depositories (students). Accepting the passive roles imposed to them, in order to adapt to instructors' teaching styles, all students can do is making their effort to keep silent and follow the authority's instructions. Without doubt, this traditional classroom instruction would minimize students' creative power and reflection ability.

In this paper, the author proposed an open space learning circle (OSLC) classroom management to modify the traditional classroom structures and instructions to motivate students' interest in class participation. Through learning circle, talking sticks, empowerment, dialogism, and the law of mobility, students have their voices heard in class discussion, hence transforming passive class learning environment to active one.

2. Open Space Technology

The concept of open space technology was developed by Owen (1997). According to Owen, while planning and carrying out the discussion, there are four principles and one Law serving as the heart of Open Space Technology.

The four principles are described as follows:

Four Principles

- Whoever comes is the right people.
- This principle emphasizes that a quality discussion lies in the participants who share a passion toward a certain discussion issue. Anyone coming to the discussion sessions is the “right” person, for he/she cares about that issue under discussion.
- Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.
- Because every participant coming into the discussion session is the right person, there is no need to remind him/her what he/she “should” do or “must” do. Hence, the participants can immediately take part in the discussion session, needless to care about what might have been, what could have been, or what should have been, because whatever happens is the only thing that happens.
- Whenever it starts is the right time.
- This principle intends to put people at ease in discussion sessions. Breaking the tyranny of the clock, participants’ creativity and learning may take place at any moment.
- When it’s over, it’s over.
- This principle is closely related to the third principle, “Whenever it starts is the right time.” Because there is no guarantee that something will take place at that initial moment, there is also no guarantee that something substantial will also take place at that ending moment. Hence, when it’s over, it’s over (Owen, 1997, p. 95).

The Law of Two Feet

According to The Law of Two Feet, participants are free to move around from discussion to discussion. When participants find themselves in a situation where they can neither learn nor contribute, they can move to somewhere else where they can learn from or contribute to the discussion (Owen, 1997, p. 98).

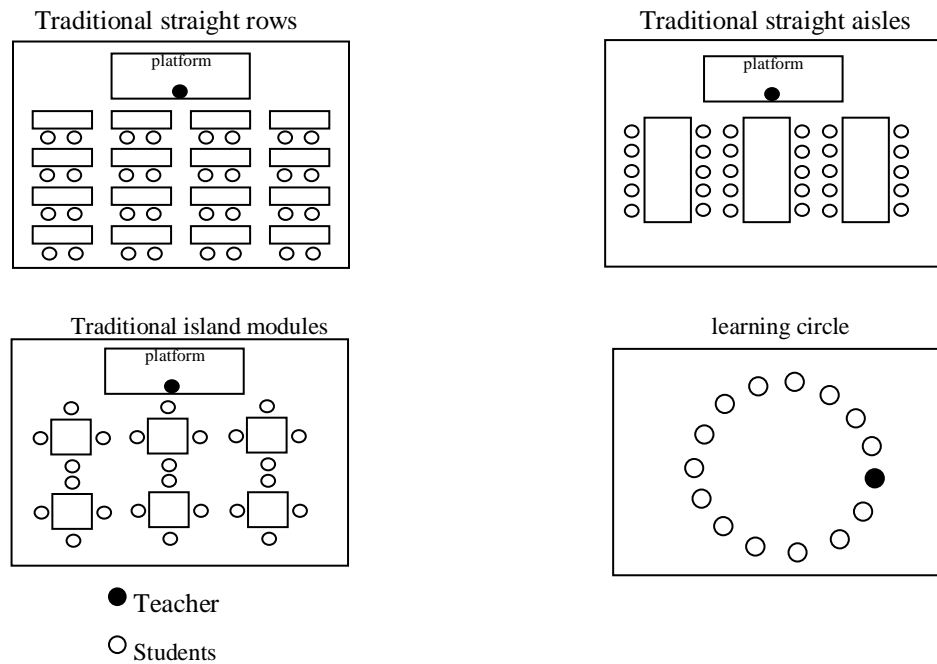
3. Application and Implementation of Open Space Learning Circle (OSLC)

In this paper, the author proposed the Open Space Learning Circle (OSLC), which was modified from Owen’s Open Space Technology, to classroom management. In addition to the above-mentioned four principles and one Law serving as the spirit of the OSLC, the following methods and tools—learning circle, talking stick, empowerment, dialogism, the law of mobility—are used to initiate and facilitate the application and implementation of OSLC in class participation.

Learning Circle

In traditional teaching-learning structures, traditional straight rows, traditional straight aisles, and traditional island modules, instructors stand on the platform in the front of the classroom, alienating their students and playing as the head (the authority) of the classroom (See Figure1).

Figure 1: Traditional Classroom Structures vs. Learning Circle



In these structures, it is assumed that instructor-student relationship lies in a top-down hierarchical system in which instructors, with their expertise and professional knowledge, have power and authority over students. Instructors, the authority, are expected to instill rational ideas and universal knowledge to students, the receptacles. In this way, instructors serve as knowledge producers while students serve as knowledge consumers. Unlike traditional teaching-learning structures in which the instructor acts as authority and subject; students act as objects and receivers, the learning circle, adapted from traditional classroom hierarchical structures, is an open learning environment created for facilitating each learner to engage in group discussion and class interaction. Owen (1997) viewed a circle as a form without head or foot, without higher or lower position, and without sides to take; it is a form of fundamental geometry of open human communication and decision-making. In this learning circle (See Figure 1), instructors stay within the circle and with students; both the instructor and students, being partners, share their intellectual ownership of teaching and learning experiences. Both of them blur the role boundary. In some way, instructors become part of learners; learners become part of instructors. They simultaneously serve as both the roles of knowledge producers and consumers. This learning circle, breaking the hierarchical order, creates an open learning environment in which instructors and students are partners and co-learners; they can cooperate, collaborate, and, through dialogue communication, struggle to pursue knowledge.

Talking Stick

According to Knockwood (1992), in Mi'kmaw culture, talking stick is a piece of wood used in Talking Stick Ceremony. Anyone with the talking stick would have the right to talk as long as they need to say without fear of being interrupted with questions, criticisms, or scolding. Hence, the talking stick becomes a signifier of democracy. In OSLC classroom, the talking stick could be any ordinary stick of any kind or any size. Whoever has the talking stick has the right to talk, and else would keep silent and listen. Furthermore, in OSLC, with talking stick in hand, all participants, either instructors or students, would have the right to choose to be silent or to say something. If the participants are not ready or not willing to take part in class discussion, they would never be forced to engage in class discussion. When

the participants feel secured and comfortable to respond, they may respond and give their comments on discussion issues. For instance, when the talking stick is passed onto them, if they have nothing to say, they may pass the talking stick to the person on their left. If the participants would like to say something, with talking stick in hand, they may express their opinions and raise their problems, without repeating what has been said. There is neither time limit nor interruption. When they are through, they pass the talking stick to the person on their left. Also, in order to show the ethics of respect, instructors shall not give any interventions or directions until the talking stick returns to them. The application of talking stick indicates not only a kind of democracy but also a kind of sharing and empowerment.

Empowerment

In order to gain maximal academic contribution and commitment, students must be given an open and free space in which they feel passionate and comfortable to learn. In OSLC environment, the instructor does not serve as professional authority but a facilitator who honors and maintains the secured and comfortable space for students. Moreover, they are motivators. By stimulating students' interest and curiosity, the instructors help their students free up their thinking and speak up their diverse experiences. By saying little and doing less, instead of helping students choose, the facilitators try to empower students to choose what they want to say or want to do. Being facilitators, instructors shall always watch themselves and turn the freedom and responsibility of learning to their students. Unlike traditional classroom structures, in which instructors have limitless power over students, in OSLC, instructors share power with students. Through this power shift, instructors empower students to liberate their own thoughts in the learning process and to assume responsibility for their active learning.

Dialogism

For Bakhtin (1981), "dialogism," indicating an interrelatedness of self and Other, is conceived of as a ceaseless struggle between centrifugal forces and centripetal forces. Centrifugal forces strive to keep things diverse and different from each other, while centripetal forces strive to keep things together, unified, and same. OSLC environment gives students an opportunity to have their voices heard, either centrifugal voices or centripetal voice, in a safer classroom, compared to traditional classroom structures, which always silence students. OSLC promotes dialogue interaction, a negotiated way and reflective communication, for the purpose of constructing meaning and knowledge. According to Freire (1970), true knowledge is not carried on by "A" for "B" or by "A" about "B." It is carried on by "A" with "B." That is, true knowledge shall be carried on by dialogue communication, not by monological communication, which is always used in traditional classrooms. The central goal of dialogism is to be open to multiple viewpoints through communication and interaction. It is required that both instructors and students be open and willing to listen reflectively to alternative views. Sometimes, it is uncomfortable to confront opposing ideas and viewpoints. However, dialogue communication makes the teaching and learning process more active, reflective, and constructive. In contrast to the traditional classroom structures, in which anti-dialogical and non-communicative banking education is implemented (Freire, 1970), OSLC encourages problem-posing and dialogical interaction. Meaning or true knowledge would never be achieved unless it is through a process of dialogic communication, which is a process of negotiation among contested ideologies and positions (of instructors-students or students-students). Through discussion, negotiation, and dialogical communication between instructors and students, or between students and students, the knowledge will be expanded and renews itself.

The Law of Mobility

In order to let students achieve optimal performance, OSLC classroom allows students to come and go to any groups as they please. In OSLC, if students find that they are bored by a situation in which they cannot learn or contribute, they may use their two feet to work out of certain learning circle and go to some more productive learning group whose discussion issue is interesting to them. They may go to participate in another discussion group if they feel they need to. The law of mobility stresses the voluntary and flexible nature of open space learning circle, for it is no use keeping students staying in the same learning circle as prisoners if they feel that they have neither passion nor responsibility toward that discussion issue. Owen said that there were two fundamentals in Open Space Technology: passion and responsibility (1997). If students have no passion or responsibility to commit in their group discussion, there would be no learning outcomes. Moreover, diverse students would feel passionate in different discussion topics. It is difficult to let students participate effectively in something they feel bored or exhausted, not to mention to ask them to take responsibility for it. The usefulness of this law is that students are not only empowered to decide whether they want to stay or choose another discussion they want to go but also empowered to take the responsibility of their learning outcomes and using their time effectively. Hence, it means that students can have another possibility of moving into another level of awareness and participation. In addition, it is also helpful for instructors to have some reflection, learning why students want to leave.

4. Methodology

In order to test the effects of the OSLC classroom, two homogeneous and normally distributed classes, totaling 83 students, were selected as the experimental group and the control group. These participants were freshmen at one university in the central part of Taiwan. By flipping a coin, class B1 (42 students) was chosen as the experimental group, while class B2 (41 students) was regarded as the control group. All incoming freshmen in this university were required to take the English placement test at the beginning of the academic year to demonstrate students' general level of English. Based on the test results, students were placed into one of the four levels: basic level, intermediate level, high intermediate level, or advanced level. The students in the experimental group and control group were placed in the intermediate level class, which indicated that they were at about the same proficiency level. Therefore, they were homogeneous. Both the control group and the experimental group received the same teaching material from *Communication Strategies* by Thomson Learning. The difference between the experimental group and control group was the manipulation of the OSLC in English communication class. The students participating in the control group are arranged and seated in traditional isles, while the experimental students are grouped into seven different learning circles with seven different discussion issues. In other words, initially each learning circle has six students seated. In each learning circle, a talking stick is used to pass around the circle. People with stick in hand can share their thoughts on the discussion issue if they wish or simply pass the stick onto the person on their left. During the discussion, the teacher, serving as a facilitator and seated in the circle, shall not respond or give comments until they get the talking stick in hand. Also, in order to reduce students' pressure and increase their participation, students can come and go to any learning circles whose discussion topics are interesting to them. For instance, if they get bored in a certain discussion issue, they can leave that learning circle and go to participate another learning circle with a discussion topic that attracts them.

This study took place during the fall semester of 2008, lasting for sixteen weeks. After the completion of the course, a student satisfaction questionnaire was administered to realize whether the students under the OSLC classroom experience greater satisfaction than those under the traditional classroom. Students' evaluation of the coursework is important for teachers, for it indicates not only students' willingness to recommend this course to others but also a feedback for the teacher to improve the quality of class instruction (Chadwick & Wick, 1987). The student satisfaction questionnaire, made

up of 34 items on a 5-point Likert scale varying from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). A pilot study showed that the reliability coefficients for the categories in the student satisfaction questionnaire were 0.82, 0.89, 0.89, 0.88, 0.83, and 0.95 in terms of the instructional objective, instructional material/method, teacher’s qualities, class climate/environment, assessment, and overall sections, when 120 students were tested.

In-depth student interviews were also used to triangulate the quantitative results of the student satisfaction questionnaire as well as to collect possible difficulties and advantages in the open space learning circle. Pseudonyms were used in order to encourage honest response and protect the students’ privacy. All the interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese and tape-recorded to help the researcher understand the students’ opinions and reflections upon the English communication class while the open space learning circle was conducted. In addition, in order to generate convincing interpretations, after translating the interviews, the researcher asked a bilingual teacher to examine the translated data.

5. Results

After the administration of student satisfaction questionnaire, the results of the survey were analyzed. The research results showed that the students going through the OSLC class attained a greater level of satisfaction than those not going through the class. Examined by t-tests, the results of student satisfaction were illustrated and compared in Table 1. As shown in Table 1, in the instructional objective section, the mean score of the experimental group (Means = 12.45) was significantly higher than the mean score of the control group (Means = 11.02; $p < 0.001$). In instructional material/method section, the mean score of the experimental group (Means = 61.14) was significantly higher than the mean score of the control group (Means = 52.80; $p < 0.001$). In the teacher’s qualities section, the mean score of the experimental group (Means = 22.76) was significantly higher than the mean score of the control group (Means = 19.31; $p < 0.001$). In the class climate section, the mean score of the experimental group (Means = 36.05) was significantly higher than the mean score of the control group (Means = 29.46; $p < 0.001$). Regarding assessment, the mean score of the experimental group (Means = 17.24) was significantly higher than the mean score of the control group (Means = 15.31; $p < 0.001$). As for overall student satisfaction, the mean score of the experimental group (Means = 149.64) was significantly higher than the mean score of the control group (Means = 127.92; $p < 0.001$).

Table 1: Independent t-test results of the student satisfaction questionnaire

| Test | Group | Mean | S.D | t | p-value |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|----------|
| Instructional Objective | Experiment | 12.45 | 1.35 | 4.420 | 0.000*** |
| | Control | 11.02 | 1.59 | | |
| Instructional Material/Method | Experiment | 61.14 | 4.93 | 7.698 | 0.000*** |
| | Control | 52.80 | 4.94 | | |
| Teacher’s Qualities | Experiment | 22.76 | 2.17 | 5.366 | 0.000*** |
| | Control | 19.31 | 3.53 | | |
| Class Climate/ Environment | Experiment | 36.05 | 2.90 | 8.604 | 0.000*** |
| | Control | 29.46 | 4.00 | | |
| Assessment | Experiment | 17.24 | 1.56 | 5.815 | 0.000*** |
| | Control | 15.31 | 1.45 | | |
| Overall | Experiment | 149.64 | 10.37 | 8.772 | 0.000*** |
| | Control | 127.92 | 12.14 | | |

Experimental group: N=42; control group: N=41

S.D.=Standard Deviation

***p-value < 0.001

Based on the above statistic test results for student satisfaction questionnaire shown in Table 1, it could be demonstrated that the students going through OSLC class could attain greater student satisfaction than those not going through the class.

The results of the interviews also demonstrated that OSLC class could bring positive effect on students' learning performance. The students enjoyed being actively involved in the interactive learning process. Some interview excerpts are shown as follows.

- It's interesting to stay in this open space learning circle. Although I am shy, it's good to have a chance to share my experience with my peers. I like this class.
- In this circle, everyone has more chances to interact with others. With the stick in my hand, I can express whatever I want to say. Unlike the class before, I do not fall asleep in this class any more.
- Though still a little bit afraid of being criticized or laughed at, it is nice to have a chance to say what I want to say.
- If we are not interested in the topic issue in the circle, we can move around to another circle whose topic we are interested in. We feel so motivated in this class, for we can move around and around for discussion.
- At the beginning of the class, I was always silent. Gradually, knowing that the circle is open to multiple perspectives. I enjoy staying in this circle and sharing opinions with my classmates and my teacher.
- It's nice to have a chance to listen to others' opinion from different perspective and have a way to express our own opinions. In this circle, our opinions as well as others' opinions are appreciated.
- I am scared to speak up in class. However, in this open space learning circle, if I am not ready to say something, I can pass over the stick to the next person until I am ready to speak up. I feel so secured in this class. Little by little, after knowing that it is a safe circle, in which nobody will be criticized, I dare to say something in this class.
- It is free to go to any discussion circle where I like to take part in. I like it.
- In this open learning circle, I feel empowered and respected.

Based on the above interview responses, it is demonstrated that the open space learning circle can bring positive learning effect on students learning process. Moreover, after going through the open space learning circle instruction, the students in the experimental group attained significantly better student satisfaction than those in the control group.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study intended to survey whether the implementation of OSLC could bring positive effects on the student satisfaction. The statistic test results show that the students going through OSLC class attain greater student satisfaction in terms of instructional objective, instructional material/method, teacher's qualities, class climate/environment, assessment, and overall satisfaction.

In traditional classroom arrangements (traditional straight rows, traditional straight aisles, and traditional island modules, shown in Figure 1), instructors stand on the platform in the front of the classroom, and students face the source of professional authority (instructors). These hierarchical top-down classroom structures place control of classroom and knowledge ownership largely in the hands of instructors. In these kinds of classroom structures, instructors functioning as professionals and dominators, students passively get involved in classroom participation. From these classroom arrangements, it is clear to see who are the speakers (instructors) and who are the listeners (students). Without doubt, this traditional classroom instruction would minimize students' critical thinking and reflection ability. Only in an open space learning circle would an open, free, and equal communication between students and instructors occur. In OSLC classroom, the classroom structure is a democratic side-by-side structure, in which both teachers and students actively and equally get involved in issues

to be discussed and promote interaction among participants. While meaningfully participating in instruction process, both instructors and students cooperate with and support each other to maximize the learning outcome. Through learning circle, talking stick, empowerment, dialogism, and the law of mobility, with the face-to-face, verbal interaction in OSLC, students are provided with opportunities for equal social relationship and optimal academic profitability. Accordingly, the students going through the OSLC class attain greater student satisfaction in terms of instructional objective, instructional material/method, teacher's qualities, class climate/environment, assessment, and overall sections.

Nowadays, authoritarian learning structures (traditional straight rows, traditional straight aisles, and traditional island modules, shown in figure 1) are not working anymore. OSLC shifts the teacher-centered learning environment to student-centered environment. Students can have their voices guide the direction of class discussion through dialogues, a two-way communication, with instructors. Learning is by no means a passive activity in which instructors give (teach) and students take (learn). On the contrary, the teaching-learning relationship shall be an interactive relationship. The power of OSLC resides in its elimination of subject/object, producer/consumer, giving/receiving, and teaching/learning boundaries. Moreover, unlike traditional learning structures, open space learning circle breaks the hierarchical order, creating an open learning environment in which instructors and students can cooperate, collaborate, and, through dialogue communication, struggle to pursue knowledge. By blurring the boundaries, instructors become part of learners; learners part of instructors. Hence, instructors and students are partners and co-learners in learning process. Also, through the power shift flowing from instructors to students, from students to students, and students to instructors, there is a flexible and egalitarian teacher-student relationship. Being motivated by OSLC, students are self-driven to transform passive school learning environment to active one.

On the other hand, in the process of OSLC, instructors would never function as authority but as facilitator to help students participate in the classroom interaction. Unlike the traditional classroom in which instructors intend to control the instructional process and minimizing students' critical thinking and reflection ability, the instructors in OSLC give students much power and ensure that the space is fully open for creativity and freedom. Consequently, instructors must learn to facilitate participation, discussion, and dialogue rather than instruct the students or train them to be a repository of information. In addition, by co-learning with students, instructors could identify and respond to their teaching problems in order to achieve better learning outcomes. Hence, the open space learning circle, physically and metaphorically, becomes a symbol of sharing power and open communication between instructors and students, and the teacher-student relationship is much more like a democratic co-learning relationship.

The usefulness of the application of OSLC lies in its egalitarianism, democracy, and empowerment to students. In the learning circle, there is nothing breaking the line of eye contact. Both instructors and students are in equal participation in class discussion. Within this open learning circle, through face-to-face and verbal dialogical interaction, both instructors and students need to learn to listen to and to interact with each other in a respectful way. When students propose their viewpoints, they empower themselves some certain freedom to engage dialogically with one another. As Freire (1970) said that through dialogue communication, the hierarchical teacher-student relationship would cease to exist. Hence, the teacher-student relationship is much more like a democratic co-learning relationship.

Still, there are some difficulties confronted while applying learning circle and talking stick to OSLC classroom instruction. For instance, in the OSLC class, every learner has the right to keep silent or participate at any time in class discussion. Within a circular structure, sometimes, certain students, especially boys, would dominate the discussion while certain students, especially girls, choose to listen rather than talk. However, after realizing that the open space learning circle is a learning environment full of safety, security, comfort, and respect, little by little, the reticent students feel confident and eager to participate in class discussion. The OSLC class becomes a class encouraging participants, in

which both instructors and students are open to other learners' viewpoints. By listening to other learners' viewpoints attentively, they would also learn to respect for other learners' viewpoints (Sams, 1990).

7. Suggestion for Future Research

The further research can focus on the application of OSLC to English language instructions, workshops, and seminar practices. Also, future research in OSLC shall attempt to develop a more exhaustive set of survey items to examine the effects of the practice on students' learning performance.

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