

# From that Place of Power-With

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## *Interacting - Engaging - Developing*

That's basically what we are doing over here, at our new organisation / training centre / performance laboratory in Utrecht, the Netherlands, appropriately titled Engage! InterAct. Through our engagement and interaction with people, we are developing a theoretical and practical approach to training, non-formal and life-long learning that aims to underpin many of the key elements that our society finds itself challenged by – e.g. multiculturalism, citizenship & participation, the "knowledge society", the suffering and threatened extinction of the human race and other beautiful species...

## *Open Source Learning*

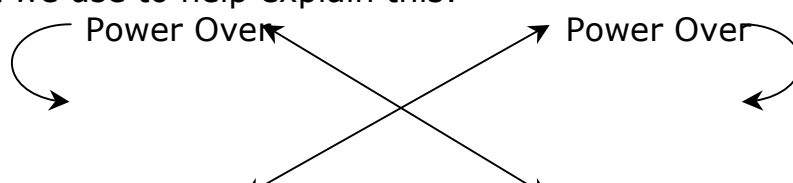
We have called the approach "Open Source Learning". Open Source Learning promotes a relationship between participant and educator in which certain values are inherent – including power-with, partnership, enabling, flexibility, open-mindedness, responsibility, creativity and transformation.

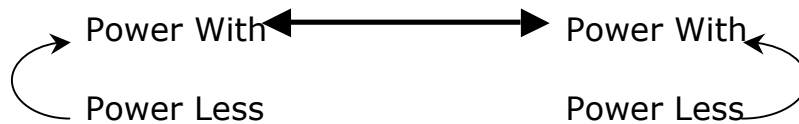
If the approach to learning is based on these kind of values, we believe it will encourage people to see the world in a way that goes beyond an insecure and ultimately unrealisable quest for simple solutions. It will help people to let go of the need they feel for control, and allow them to open up and deal with the continually changing reality of diversity and uncertainty. On a fundamental level, it aims to transform narrow-minded and stagnating societies, organisations and institutions into open, dynamic and engaging places to live and work.

## *Changing the rules of engagement*

However, it also goes beyond the structured learning environment, to any situation where people are interacting with each other in some kind of dialogue / negotiation, where the aim of one or both parties is to end up somewhere different to where they started. This could be teacher-pupil, parent-child, doctor-patient, development worker – target group, politician-citizen, social change activist – mainstream policy-maker...

In terms of social change, the key element is not to end up playing the game which is inherent to the very system you are trying to change. In the work we have been doing on conflict management, it has become very apparent that the only way to fundamentally transform situations of destructive conflict is to lift both sides out of the negative spiral of domination-submission/rebellion that we so easily seem to slip into. There is a model that we use to help explain this:





When we enter into negotiation with someone about something (which we are doing in most of our interactions with people), we tend to find ourselves caught up in a mythic power game, where we all struggle for Power Over. The task is to try to get the relationship onto one of Power With, as it is from that place that we can realise our full human potential.

If we find ourselves in a position of Power Less, we tend to find it hard not to respond in that role – usually either through fight or flight. Both those responses keep the other comfortably in their role of Power Over. If we are able to centre ourselves, and respond to the other from a position of Power With, their domination role is suddenly undermined – their victim is no longer there and they are thrashing at thin air. It is very hard for someone to maintain their Power Over role when they are being approached from a position of Power With. Sometimes it happens instantaneously, sometimes it takes much patience, strength and persistence, but that person will eventually come round to Power With – and what a revealing and beautiful transformation takes place! The same is true the other way round – if someone puts us in a role of Power Over, because they take a role of Power Less, we can help lift them up to Power With by acting from that place ourselves.

#### *A lesson from the front-line*

I was recently in Bethlehem, Palestine (a couple of weeks after the recent conflict had started to escalate) working with an international youth group which contained eight young Palestinian men, on the themes of nonviolence and intercultural learning. As we grappled with the challenges of nonviolence, one of the Palestinians told a story that illustrated the above theory perfectly. He had himself been crippled in an attack in a Mosque in Hebron by an Israeli right-wing extremist a few years earlier and was now in a wheelchair. He told the story of how they had arrived at an Israeli checkpoint one time, when a flustered soldier came over to them shouting questions and waving his gun.

Our friend asked gently “Why are you talking to me like that?”. The Israeli soldier stopped in his tracks, his face transformed, he lost all his aggression, and proceeded to apologise and explain how difficult he was finding everything. During the exchange, he accepted a banana and bottle of water that our friend offered him, and by the end they were together bemoaning the terrible situation. By refusing to play the role the soldier was expecting, by refusing to accept the role that the soldier had taken on himself, our friend transformed both the situation and the person by speaking to him from a place of Power With.

For me this is a lesson that has resonances at all levels – whether we are concerned with empowering forms of education or achieving fundamental and sustainable social, cultural and individual transformation. It is a challenge we must face up to in both our personal and work life if we are to create lasting change for the better.

If you would like a copy of the papers “Open Source Learning – a key to multiculturalism, citizenship and the knowledge society” or “Engaging the Mythical – a need for healing in the green movement”, or would like to know more about our work, please contact Peter Merry, [peter@engagency.nl](mailto:peter@engagency.nl) [www.engagency.nl](http://www.engagency.nl) , tel / fax: 00 31 70 360 2060.

September 2001