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Who Needs Bollywood?

... an arts-based lecturer's musing – in fragments ...

Birgit Wildt
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Who Needs Bollywood? ... an arts-based lecturer's musing – in fragments ...

Something seemed disruptive, but the students got it, got them, The Actors, clinging, hanging on to their success in the entertainment world of Bollywood. Pretty hot, racy sisters overwhelmed by so much flattering attention adding yet another narrative to the course. B students were not used to such a package, but the hip of Bollywood was taken.

For B students, a brand new world opened. They loved it, loved ethnographic trips to Southall, to streets full of shimmering saris, spicy samosas, head massages and henna tattoos before hitting the dance floor at Z – an extra treat. Getting to know Bollywood left dazzling impressions as did the trailers on offer. Joining the private viewing of the latest Hindi teaser, I enjoyed watching the students, but less the teaser, wondering why these guys are so attached to this flashy show-biz thing?

The course morphed into edutainment that allowed for forming and transforming ideas where learning seemed to happen anywhere from street cafés, to bars and clubs, from gallery spaces to pop-up shops and theatre sites.

“That’s right! Rehearsals don't go smoothly and the script isn't a free ride.”

The Actors had a point.

They scrutinized, dissected, first the students, then the script, broke it up into pieces, dismantled it while I got used to it, to them, The Actors.

I got used to artistic practices complementing traditional courses, an unconventional move, perhaps, which intrigued faculty but seduced students who seemed not bound by a world, steady and secure, but one constantly shifting and changing.

B students became travellers and explorers developing roots in temporary territories connecting to a wider geography of business education where “East met West”, displayed on stage and screen, triggered a self-determination in the name of content - artistic content.

The course was setting out in a new direction, which wasn't a direction at all but an escape into the unknown, the yet-not-known, leaving space for the unthought – who would have thought that L would sing so passionately and P flirtatiously took over the crowd cracking one joke after the other while M twirled with G in ballroom style leaving the audience stunned?

These emerging traits of B students exhibited through speech, song and dance kept the audience bewitched and The Actors attached to their show-biz world. A rhythm of togetherness developed as characters emerged then re-emerged providing a wider set of artistic practices.

B students became co-producers facilitating collaboration and unfamiliar delivery – a warehouse under railway arches captured the bohemian decadence of cool Britannia – urban and rough. An experience of the so called beautiful, an imperfection yet a perfect match for an art / fashion composition. Gigantic paintings featuring teardrops in bright colours, a mix of pop art and kitsch, where texture and colour added to the latest catwalk collection in stock – a collective piece!

The Artists enjoyed themselves in the spotlight, charmingly framed and named by B students providing directions, channeling questions adding to the swinging atmosphere of people coming and going – the unruly energy of the art world experienced as a liberated world, one which played fast and loose.

Act–process–happening moved centre-stage where thought-provoking art provoked entertainment – as art can be anything or anything at all – a negotiated environment transparent to those who understood their rules and inhabited that space.

But Faculty didn't.

They didn't speak their language either.

"International Art English" where the artists' work subverts or imbricates, a language which united them, The Artists, who, like The Actors, were brought in to promote, or even provoke, on the programmes yet seen as add-ons, belonging to a different tribe or caste, uncommitted to understanding the constraining structures of academia.

A certain disinterest became obvious.

We kept ourselves to ourselves, lucky to be left out, left to our own devices until the economics of the business school kicked in with enhanced opportunities for some, but for us, control.

Management cried for output, measurable output and testing our limits we wondered how these could be crossed – transgressed.

"Could you design educational experiences that lead to something more economically useful?" They asked.

"We all do," I said backing The Actors. "We all take responsibility for the development of a prospering society." The Actors looked at me – puzzled.

I tried to justify the spaces we'd created, defending knowledge which wasn't framed but spread beyond conventions. "New forms of social learning," I said, "through collaborative artistic practice," I pronounced, "producing something more undefined, unforeseeable, unpredictable ..." I stopped, realizing, in my zest, I had shot myself in the foot.

That's not what management wanted to hear.

The Actors chuckled, but management didn't, as they stood in the middle of a brand building exercise. "What about making an impact through more enterprise-friendly clusters?" "That's what we do!" The Actors stepped in.

But no, we didn't as we weren't members of the business academic community conforming to bureaucratic intentions or contributing to the institution of business education.

Positioning ourselves "appropriately", we had to step up and become entrepreneurs aiming for a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in co-operation with City Sponsors.

Signatures added to the artistry on display, a computer-animated design installation, an artefact not only presented but also experienced, a work in process or progress – wasn't that what management wanted?

"How can you instrumentalize the art to socially useful ends?" The Actors asked quizzically. "It all seems like a big compromise." They felt compromised while I stayed in the background, as I often did these days.

Then the Edinburgh Short-Film Festival popped up, an opportunity to shine, to sell our ideas and benefit from industry knowledge. But we didn't shine or sell. We failed to perform as we failed to conform. We didn't realize that we weren't even legitimized to speak, lacking both the technical and social competence.

"In the City our work received rave reviews," I said, following their knowing exchange of glances.

The conflict was me.

"Some of the films were also published," I tried. It was the speech of a stranger as I failed to trade our beliefs and values, or what we thought we valued or believed. I was the outsider, one, who didn't see what they saw, not the complex, but the guileless, banal even – pseudo products for self-indulgent consumption ...

"Can we borrow them," they finally said, "your B students?" they smiled, "Perhaps, they can make money for us" ...

I didn't reply, not to this tone of voice telling me not to overstep boundaries. But, we did. We had stepped over, assumed and communicated nothing ...

Back in academia I realized that each discipline has its own assumptions, questions and reference points. Artless, they must have thought, not steeped in any history and naively presented, for sure, only to be perceived as irrelevant.

I felt defeated but hoped to re-engage.

"Let's work on the societal," I overheard The Actors joking, who, like me, detested relationship building exercises – this "community-as-togetherness" ...

In the end we did as we were told – delivering facts instead of fiction, not artefacts yet case studies, the "mantras" of the mainstream which management wanted, as they wanted stability, unlike The Actors who looked outside and beyond symbiotic relationships and playing to an alien set of rules.

They left and I carried on responding to this temporarily engaged scholarship where disobedient modes of knowledge production were finally swept away ...

About the Author

Birgit is currently researching at CMCI, King's College London, working on "The Pedagogy of Ambiguity" project. Starting from an arts education, Birgit developed management programmes working with creative industries towards learning in *uncertain* environments. Her research grew out of the interface between arts and business education using fiction-based methodologies. Birgit was awarded her doctorate at King's College London in August 2015.