



VRJWILLIGERS
ACADEMIE Amsterdam

Masterclass

Artistic ways of gaining relational knowledge

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In this masterclass together with Janhavi Dhamankar (artist/performer/researcher) we explore how we can connect through artistic practices: enter new relationships and reflect on the relationships we're in. We are learning to understand each other, to connect through our differences, practice self-reflectivity and uncover our biases through practices of postcard writing and by participating in a tea-ceremony with Indian Chai. This is Janhavi's third masterclass for the Volunteer Academy. Before we worked with the difference of empathy and sympathy-pity-compassion and connecting in times of social isolation.

In this series of masterclasses we explore different types of knowledge. Janhavi Dhamankar is an artist, performer and researcher at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Graz in Austria, and has conducted research in India. Her work focuses on investigating empathy between mainstream society and marginalized groups.

She is affiliated with the Doctoral School of artistic research (KWDS), and does not use classical scientific methods for her research. Her work focuses on empathy, connecting people and re-imagining the mainstream society and our mainstream ways of thinking for which she organizes dialogues between people inside and outside a community. Today we perform two practical forms of empathy: a tea ceremony and a postcard process.

Tea ceremony

With a recipe for classic Indian chai Tea, Janhavi provides a framework for conversation. Not a conversation as we are used to, but a way to get closer to each other.

RECIPE

Each ingredient represents a property and offers opportunities for reflection.

1. Water, that's you - it takes the shape of the pan
2. Sugar, stands for what is inextricably linked to you, (pre)judgments you have grown up with - it dissolves in the water.
3. Ginger, is a structural element, it symbolizes a different view of society, inclusive without hierarchy - the roots grow horizontally, and represent reaching out in all directions and making new connections.
4. Tea, represents the natural ingredient of the times. The brewing of the tea represents the time you spend together. Sufficient time is always required for a dialogue - for the taste to mix.
5. Milk stands for attention, it holds attention and space.

By heating the whole, you ensure flexibility, openness and sharing.

We start the exercise on the basis of a question:

How do you think you came to your bias? In what way does it serve you well? Do you want to change it? Do you need help? Challenge your blind spot and leave your comfort zone.

How does this process work?

The experiences in the group are shared. The ginger ingredient in particular proved to be helpful; it is a simple picture to give and take, and above all not to judge. It is an invitation to look closely and to investigate. Taking the time for this is an important realization. There was the need to allow the (complicated) emotions and the ones that arise. People speak about their frustration about the COVID period, and the lack of connection. At the same time, there is sometimes the need to isolate yourself.

The framework of the tea ceremony makes it possible to really connect, to make a difference. It's not easy, but if it succeeds, it echoes in everything. Drinking the tea helps to be mindfully aware of what is happening, and to process what has been said. The concept of the Chai tea makes the connection and ensures that you are in the moment.

Response-able postcard writing process

Present are a number of cards on which the participants have written down a struggle or dilemma in advance, addressed to a person (family member, friend or someone else). You are asked to respond to this, from the perspective of the addressee. It is about a response, and the possibility to do so. You can choose to connect. This exercise uses the knowledge of others.

What was it like working with these concepts?

In conversation with moderator Renate Schepen, Janhavi talks about her work in the Leprosy community in India. People live there isolated. Not only have they been sick (now cured), but they are also not welcome outside the community. They are no longer seen as people separate from the disease. They were invited to enter another space and, moreover, recognized as artists. The exercise with the postcards made this possible, by asking for a response a connection is made. It also makes people aware of the different roles they have.

For the responder, the challenge is to put himself in the other person's position; an empathy challenge. The tea ceremony is also an empathy challenge. The social interaction in both methods is a work of art. The act of drinking and writing is valuable. It makes the response indirect and lived through. The connection is then a logical next step.

Thanks to Janhavi for the inspiring lessons and experience.

'Aesthetic' explorations - A recipe for warm connections, between you and an-other.

3/4 cup water: which reflects you. Can you see yourself in this water?

1 tsp sugar: once added to the water, you can't separate it. Can you separate your beliefs, attitudes, habits, values from yourself? Find/ search for any one prejudice or bias that you have.

Bring this mixture to a boil. Then turn the heat off.

1 inch of ginger: as you crush/ mince the ginger, try and recall the shape of ginger - always growing in a new direction in search of a possibility (of connection). Remember this image. You will need it when you taste the warmth of the ginger later.

1 tsp tea powder: Like tiny little tea particles that enliven, stimulate & envelop you with fragrance, (here are some questions to brew) brew these questions while the ginger and tea infuses: What led to this prejudice? Is it a positive/ negative bias? Do you want to change it? If yes, why and what help do you need to change it? If not, why not?

1/4th cup milk: Like milk brings everything together and carries all these ingredients, your partner's & your collective imagination will carry the emergent dialogue. Heat the mixture. Then strain it in a cup.

The ginger tea is ready: a fragrant, flavourful, warm emergent/ infused artwork i.e. the 'aesthetic' dialogue.

... A rhizome connects any part to any other part, even without the self-same traits: is composed of dimensions rather than units. It has multiple entryways and exits. - Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

As you sip the tea, take turns to describe what emerged as prejudices and the questions you reflected on with the tea powder. While your partner speaks, feel free to sip on your cup of tea, as you hold the space for the other. If you find yourself dis/agreeing, judging the other person, or going on your own trail of thoughts, try and taste the ginger - allow its warmth to shape your dialogue fluidly, rather than fixing your opinions on what's being shared. Let the rhizome's search for possibility guide your openness and connection to the other. Engage in this response-ability* for 10-15 mins.

Once both of you have shared, please write your experience of the process and email me (if possible, with a photo of you and your partner): jdhamankar@gmail.com

Beyond the ideas of right and wrong, There is a field... Let's meet there. - Rumi

'dia' means through and 'logos' means meaning (if the word). Thus, dialogue is creating shared meaning. - David Bohm

*... 'aesthetic' is the opposite of un-aesthetic... that which colours us, rather than muddies us. - *Muelly Hicks*

On the master

Janhavi Dhamankar works in India within a community of people who had leprosy and found different ways to discuss the stigmatization they are confronted with and creates new connections within the wider community they are a part of. In her research Janhavi is working on ways to re-imagine society, and mainstream ways of thinking.

She is an Odissi (Indian classical dance) performer and teacher, trained under the rigorous Guru-shishya tradition for over 20 years. She completed her B.A. and M.A. in Philosophy from Pune University and her MPhil from K. U. Leuven, Belgium. She now lives in Vienna and is pursuing her doctoral research in Empathy at Kunst Uni, Graz.