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## Not Another Brick in the Wall

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## SUMMARY

Throughout the period of film-making, we emphasize the point that the process is as important as the product: maintaining harmonious relationships within the group, learning from each other, engaging with subjects in an ethical manner that respects their dignity, privacy and right to choose is more important than making a 'good' film.

## FULL ARTICLE

### THE CONTEXT

We have spent most of our lifetime in the classroom. Twenty plus years as students and about forty years as teachers; years that have been so varied: traumatising, boring, interesting, inspiring— a whole gamut of emotions pass through our beings as we run through a life spent in a space that has been variously characterised as a part of the ideological state apparatus (Althusser, 2006), a disciplinary space within which our subjectivities are formed (Foucault, 1995) and a punitive straitjacketing machine dedicated to churning out more and more "bricks in the wall" (Waters, 1979). As people who passed through the educational system in the 1960s and 70s as students, many of us have experienced the punitive side of education (particularly in primary school)- rote learning, corporal punishment, and humiliation; in some

ways, the Pink Floyd song<sup>[1]</sup> resonates with us. And certainly, it gave us the resolve to approach education and the student-teacher relationship very differently when we became teachers within the higher education system.

Our opportunity to explore novel pedagogies and to work with the idea of co-creation and mentoring received an impetus with our media education work in the early 1990s with students of social work and design, where we sought to make critical theory relating to understanding images and media texts relevant and accessible through activity based learning, involving in some cases, the production of media artefacts (K.P. Jayasankar and Anjali Monteiro, 2003). We then extended this in the form of workshops with a diverse range of groups, from school children and teachers to parents and activists. We were able to deepen this involvement with the mentoring of young people when we started an MA programme in Media and Cultural Studies in 2007 at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. We played a key role in designing the programme, whose stated objective was to facilitate the creation of "thinking doers" and "doing thinkers". Working on designing and setting up the programme with a group of colleagues was for us an exciting opportunity where we had a fair amount of freedom to shape it in ways that allowed for introducing modes of learning that emphasized group work, learning from each other, co-creation of media materials of various kinds (often in collaboration with field based processes and organisations) and critical reflection on the self and the world in general and the teaching-learning process in particular. In this paper we will discuss one of the courses we introduced, which involved the collective production of a documentary series by the class in the third semester of the

programme, as a case in point to illustrate the pedagogy that the programme is committed to.

## MENTORING MEDIA PRODUCTION

The size of the class we were working with was small. We started with 12 students and the maximum size we worked with was 28. This allowed for the formation of close relationships, both between the students and between the teachers and the students. For this course, the class is divided into small groups of four or five that work together for the whole semester. When dividing the class, as mentors we keep in mind the requirement that everyone should get a chance to work with everyone else. Hence, we ensure that the groups are different from those made in the previous semester for production group work. Secondly, we try to ensure heterogeneity in the group, in terms of gender and other markers of identity and a good mix of competencies, such as ability to write, technical and graphic design skills, fluency in local languages and ability to work in the field. The process involves the students collectively deciding on a theme related to the city that they might want to make a film on. The theme should be sufficiently broad and complex to allow for a series of films. Sometimes we suggest a theme, but the students may or may not want to work on it. Once the theme is decided, we all collectively (including the students) bring in a range of resources (books, articles, films, websites) and resource people (researchers, local activists) to discuss the theme and help develop a perspective as well as understand what are possible field locations and local groups that the students might work with. Simultaneously, students spend some time visiting various locations and meeting people, in an

effort to narrow down what sub-theme they would like to work on. The collective brainstorming on the theme might also include personal sharing of experiences. For instance, when we worked on the theme *Castemopolitan Mumbai*, exploring the pernicious presence of caste in the city, we started with a session where each one of us, both students and mentors, shared our experiences of becoming aware of caste and caste discrimination or privilege. This helped all of us understand each other and where we were coming from. This first part of the course, working on the concept, ends with the groups each presenting their concept notes and eliciting feedback from the whole class. Subsequently, the work proceeds mainly in groups, with the mentors meeting each group regularly to discuss their progress on their documentary work. The entire class meets at regular intervals, for instance to present their shooting scripts, to share two or three iterations of their rough edit and to present their final films. One of the ground rules we set is that the participants have to use the institutional equipment and not their personal equipment. This is to obviate the potential tension of members with privileged access to their own equipment dictating terms to the group.

Group work has several advantages in terms of helping each student to feel involved in their work and to grow as a person and as a documentary filmmaker. Firstly, it allows group members to mentor and learn from each other. Secondly, it allows each member to build on their strengths and capabilities and contribute to group work. The hierarchies that tend to exist due to class/caste background tend to get questioned, as students who know local languages are more comfortable in interacting with communities that don't speak

English and often lead the field process. However, working together can also lead to group dynamics that are inimical to collective functioning. It is here that by meeting groups regularly we monitor group processes and intervene when necessary to help them resolve their differences. Some issues that arise include domination of the group by one or more members, lack of involvement of some members, and difficulty in arriving at a consensus as to how the film should be made. In these cases, we speak both to the group and to individual members and in most cases the problems are resolved to the point that the work can carry on. There are sometimes simmering differences that continue to persist. There are also difficulties that arise in the field: breakdown of relationship with the subjects, subjects moving away or even being evicted in the midst of documentation, or technical difficulties which end up in students losing the material that they have documented. As mentors, we have to advise the groups about how they tackle these issues. Sometimes it could mean mobilising our contacts in the field to come up with a Plan B so that the film could get completed. Throughout the period of film-making, we emphasize the point that the process is as important as the product: maintaining harmonious relationships within the group, learning from each other, engaging with subjects in an ethical manner that respects their dignity, privacy and right to choose is more important than making a 'good' film. To this end, we insist that our students show their film to their subjects before they finalise it. Also, we have a public screening at the end of the process, usually at the national film festival that the School of Media and Cultural Studies organises, where we invite all the subjects of the various films made to be present and to participate in the discussion. We have seen that this is often an empowering experience for the subjects. The

process of working with communities and producing these films has been an eye-opener for many student participants, changing their relationship with the city and its people. We as mentors of these films also learn something new in the process.

*While I had evidently been aware of divisions and sharp inequalities in Mumbai, I was not directly aware of how deep it ran. This series then became a turning point as my first really critical engagement with the city."<sup>[2]</sup>*

Some of these productions contributed to on-going campaigns in the city like *Bombay Ki Kahani*, *Mumbai Ki Zubani*,<sup>[3]</sup> remembering the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the demolition of the *Babri Masjid* and its aftermath. Some of the films of the *Remembering 1992* were also shown at prime time by NDTV 24/7, thus helping the campaign and taking these films into the public sphere.

*"When our films became a part of a city wide campaign, for us, who have come from different parts of the country, we felt very much a part of the city and felt the responsibility to tell the story in a proper manner so that it could make a difference."<sup>[4]</sup>*

## CHALLENGES FACED BY STUDENTS

In the past few years, we have found that the incidence of depression and other mental health issues is increasing among students. The reasons are probably many and complex, but a predominant one is conflict with the family due to a clash of norms and values and the parents' attempt to impose their expectations

on their daughters and sons; it could be the impatience of parents to get their daughters married, or the family's inability to accept the sexual orientation of their young wards, or just young people's sense of low self-worth due to pressures to succeed. Coping with this situation with sensitivity is a challenge to teachers, given institutional requirements such as attendance and assignments. There is only so much leeway that the teacher-mentor has, to make allowances for difficulties that students face in coping with academic requirements. This also becomes challenging when group work is involved, and the student is unable to participate adequately in group processes.

Though many educational institutions now offer medical and counselling services, these are often unable to deal effectively with the difficulties that students face, particularly students from non-English speaking, low-income backgrounds who are Dalits, Adivasis or members of OBCs. The changes in the scholarship regimes, where they must pay fees and other charges upfront and are later reimbursed by the state (sometimes after they graduate, if at all) also makes surviving in a city like Mumbai very difficult for these students. While the institution and the School they study within do try to help through student aid, the amount that they get is often inadequate. These structural constraints have made education even in state funded institutions increasingly challenging for students from marginalised communities. And if the student drops out due to these circumstances, as has happened in a few cases, we as mentors feel a sense of frustration at our inability to help students beyond a point.



## LEARNINGS AND OUTCOMES

Many of these films that we have mentored have become the spine to a series of web archives around the city under the rubric of *DiverCity* (available [here \(http://diverCity.tiss.edu\)](http://diverCity.tiss.edu)), which contains other crowd-sourced materials such as films, music, poetry, interviews, news reports, academic writing and citizens' reports amongst other materials. The subsequent work of putting together these thematic archives is beyond the scope of the course, though it has in most cases been done by alumni who have stayed on after completion of the programme to work on creating the archive. The attempt in creating these thematic archives (the themes include the 1992 communal violence, the mills in Mumbai, caste, waste and waste workers, Mumbai streets and migrants) is to situate student work in a larger context- exploring new ways of connecting the 'inside' of the university with the 'outside'. This has also enabled us to expand the horizon of the documentary as a form, facilitating its interaction with other texts, taking on the new media ecologies and modes of consumption, where non-linear interaction with texts is the order of the day. As mentors, who have spent our lives in very different mediascapes, we have learnt a lot from our students, alumni and younger colleagues in the course of our work with them on building the archives in a collaborative mode. The archives, which are available for use under a creative commons license, also help students escape regimes of state and market control and facilitate further research as well as multiple entry points in approaching the city of Mumbai. There are of course limitations, given the digital divide: limitations of language and Internet access as also issues of sustainability. However, they offer possibilities for critical pedagogies and research interventions that are informed by

inclusion and social justice. As mentors of this process, we feel we have grown in insights and in our relationships with students through this process. Despite all the constraints mentioned earlier, at the end of the day (or for us, the end of a career of nearly forty years of teaching-mentoring) we feel that co-creation with students, on themes that connect us to the spaces we live and work in, offer immense possibilities for personal growth and for generation of socially relevant knowledge that could be the starting point of further exploration for other learners.

## NOTES

[1] The title of this paper refers to the iconic song 'Another Brick in the Wall', written by Roger Waters and performed by Pink Floyd in 1979, a strong indictment of the formal education system, available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YR5ApYxkU-U>  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YR5ApYxkU-U>)

[2] Quoted in (Faiz Ullah, Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar, 2018)

[3] More here: <https://bombaykikahani.wordpress.com/>  
(<https://bombaykikahani.wordpress.com/>)

[4] Ibid

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