



23

Facilitating a Journey

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I was observing her. She stood there confidently, connected the camera to the projector, and pressed the ‘play’ button. Puttamma cooking millet porridge played out. Well composed shots from attractive angles and the fact that there wasn’t any camera shake suggested that the shots were the handiwork of somebody who has been a long time user of video cameras. “Which team shot this video?” I asked with some excitement. “I did it”, Rashmi said proudly. “We needed this shot for our film and since the others in my team were busy this morning; I went alone at 6.30 am to shoot this”. I looked at the other kids in her team, they all nodded. It was still difficult for me to process this.

Only two weeks ago I was passing video cameras to the children, asking them to hold, feel and explore the camera as I explained its parts and functions to them. Of all the children present Rashmi was the only one who appeared very nervous and was scared to even touch the camera. When egged by her peers to handle the camera, she just passed it onto the next person without even looking at it. Later I made four groups on the basis of the class they were studying in. Each group was given a video camera and was asked to shoot whatever they find interesting, with a rider that everyone in the team should get to use the camera. It was a fun-for-all session and everyone freaked out with the camera in hand. A screening and feedback session followed where everybody showed what they had shot and others shared their

thoughts on those images. When Rashmi’s turn came she had nothing to show. I thought she would come up with some excuse for not doing her work; instead she just kept staring at the floor. The next day saw a repeat of the same scene. As Rashmi is extremely nervous and introverted, I presumed that the others in her team were not giving her the opportunity to handle the camera. On day three, I asked the team to ensure Rashmi’s involvement in the entire process of shooting. They were also cautioned that if Rashmi didn’t shoot any footage; their group will not get to lay their hands on the camera anymore. Suddenly for these 7th standard kids, the issue had become existential! I could see them discussing the issue very seriously within their group. Sometime later when they walked out with the camera, I could read from their looks that they had worked out a crisis management strategy. I was curious to find out how they’ll solve the issue, and followed them. What I saw was astonishing. All other members of Rashmi’s group had become her mentors! They were encouraging her, guiding her, helping her understand the camera! Rashmi was finally operating the camera.

All the teams came back and screened the videos they shot. Then it was Rashmi’s turn to show her shots. Everybody burst into laughter upon seeing the first shot itself. The shots were extremely unsteady and some of the shots were even upside down. I shifted my look from the screen to Rashmi, she wasn’t there! She had just disappeared when everybody burst into

laughter. I asked my co-facilitator Ini to look for Rashmi. A few minutes later Rashmi walked in hesitantly, holding onto Ini for support. Her eyes were filled with tears, looked tense and uneasy, and kept staring at her safe haven - the floor.

It was hard to believe that it is the very same Rashmi who is bubbling with confidence now. That too in just two weeks! She had managed the shoot all alone, had taken shots with steady hands, and now was proudly showing the video to others! It was a moment of revelation for me. The space in front me was filled with immense possibilities of change, transformation and growth. No doubt the visual medium is a powerful communication tool, but the space and the skills provided to master the language of visual communication can do so much more I thought.

It all started with a phone call. Sandeep Dinker from OnePeople Productions of Wales called me to share his thoughts on their International Schools Project. It sounded interesting. He also mentioned that they were looking for a partner school in India. The institution that came to my mind was Deenabandhu Children's Home in Chamarajanagar. When the idea was shared with the founder of Deenabandhu Trust, Mr. Jayadev, he welcomed it saying 'it will be a wonderful programme for knowledge enhancement and will broaden the horizons of our children'. He immediately arranged a meeting with the teachers and children of Deenabandhu School. They seemed more than happy to be part of the project. Thus began the International Schools project.

What is this International Schools project?

OnePeople Productions, is a collective founded in Wales, which uses media to educate people on various issues. The collective believes very strongly in the ideology that People across the globe are fundamentally one, despite the differences in culture, language, ethnicity and class. One People believe that for this understanding to develop, interaction

between people from different cultures is necessary. Their pursuit of space for interaction culminated in the International Schools Project (ISP). ISP provides students with the space and opportunity to interact and communicate through the medium of film and the new media. It gives them the tools and imparts necessary skills to make a short film. The objectives of the project are:

- Understanding of different world views and perspectives.
- Changed world view and understanding cultural differences between people in different countries
- Understanding of Interconnectedness
- Empowerment to take action
- Improved language skills/communication skills
- Understanding the importance of team work and co-operation
- Learning project planning
- Developing interpersonal skills/building relations and networking(local and global)
- Initiating Critical thinking and reflection
- Development of technical skills - Film/Editing/IT

A school each in Wales and Sweden and two in India were to participate in the project. All participants from these four schools were to make video films on a theme of their choice by the end of a set time period. In the process they would learn how to choose the topic, do research on these topics, plan, shoot, edit as a team. Another important component of the project was communication/ interactions among these four schools through Skype and Facebook where they could share their thoughts and experiences with their counterparts, even provide feedback on raw footage, interviews, trailers uploaded. The project would end with a film festival, planned and designed by the students in each of the schools where all 12 films produced by the four schools involved in the International Schools Project are screened.



I volunteered as a facilitator. My responsibility was to facilitate the creation of an environment where students are able to participate in all aspects of the project, through discussion and by doing. It was a simple task of encouraging a bunch of 7th to 10th standard students to use the camera, think for themselves and to reflect on films, participate in discussions and the process of filmmaking for an audience removed from them.

Though in Sweden and Wales the project became part of the regular school process with a few dedicated hours every week for the video project, we couldn't afford to do the same at Chamarajanagar due to a lack of resources to engage a full time person and my inability to give dedicated time to the project owing to professional reasons. (Not to mention the 5 hour journey that I had to undertake to reach the project location.) So the summer holidays became a natural choice for all of us. Themes were chosen with the intent to explore and introduce their culture to an audience far away. The topics chosen by the Deenabandhu children were 'Our Folklore', 'Our Food', 'Subsidiary sources of income' and 'Jaggery making'. The first few days were spent on learning to film. After that they had to collect information on the topic chosen by them by reading, field visits and talking to people/subject experts. This they had to do on their own, without any adult support. If at all any adult accompanied the team it was for safety reasons, since the children sometimes had to move in unfamiliar terrains. Once they felt that they had enough information they sat down in groups for script development and production design. Though all of them were equally responsible for camera work and content creation, to facilitate the smooth flow of work each person in the team had to shoulder one responsibility like, Team Leader, Production Manager, Equipment-in-charge and Accountant. To facilitate effective production planning each team was allocated an imaginary sum of Rs. 25000 as working capital and they had to fix a value for equipment usage and use of

any other resource. The accountant's job was to keep track of expenses and caution the team if they were tending to overshoot the budget. They had to design the entire production keeping in mind the 'sum allocated' to them. I wasn't sure whether it was right to use word 'money' for calculating expenses, but it worked to some extent. I could see them calculating at the end of each day, and redesigning their production accordingly. But later on two of the teams didn't want to be disciplined and overshot the budget, and just smiled when I asked them why they are not in control of their production. But everyday all of them went through the footage they shot, had long discussions on missing elements, things that went wrong, and planned for the next day's production, even reaching out to unfamiliar adults they needed for the shoot.

The process of editing began using the school computers. After getting familiarised with the nuances of editing they went through their script/shots and planned the edit. After a few days the team which was working on 'Jaggery Making' realised that they didn't have enough shots, and asked me whether they can shoot for one more day. They didn't forget to point out that they were still within their allocated budget! "Fine, if other teams agree and if you have a list of shots you require", I said. Within an hour the required shot list was produced and consent from other teams taken!

The 10th std. Team, which was making a film on "Subsidiary Sources of Income", realised during the editing that all their shots were actually on the main source of income of the people they had documented. After a bout of despair, they asked me whether they can rewrite their script to weave a different film. I agreed and the next day they come back to me saying it was not working out as they can't find a thread to weave the story. I asked them to sit together and review the footage looking for a common element. When they came back I could see their eyes shining, "Every activity we have shot is nature friendly,



doesn't harm the environment and some of the activities are production of daily use items from waste". So "Subsidiary Sources of Income" became "Working Hands" and talked about local initiatives which recycled waste and created employment for many.

With the films completed, it was time to organise the film festival. Some volunteered to manage the event, some did the publicity work (designing the invitations, posters, writing the press note and holding/addressing the press meet), and others took the responsibility of translating and dubbing the films from the Swedish and Welsh schools to Kannada. They planned the event meticulously, rehearsed every bit of it and on the day - presented their films and the dubbed films for a 300 strong crowd comprised of children, their parents and others from nearby villages. Lokesh, the boy who had taken the responsibility of organising the event, had bargained hard with the service providers while hiring chairs, the public address system, etc., followed up to see that press was in attendance, and a zillion other things - said that the entire experience has given him so much of confidence that he felt confident about organising any event thereon.

This year was the second year of ISP and at Deenabandhu four teams again (including a new batch of 7th Std children) made four films in keeping with the broader theme provided by OnePeople -Environmental Problems, Equality and Justice. After three days of intensive discussion the kids decided on topics - Air Pollution, Water Pollution and Child Labour, the 4th team decided to make a music video on childhood. They attempted to contextu-

alise their understanding of the themes to their local reality. They just didn't look at symptoms but also explored underlying issues and searched for solutions. Exploring and an exposure to various people, institutions, and experiences helped them widen their perspective as well as clarify their conceptions. They never hesitated to track and investigate any new lead they got which was relevant to their chosen theme.

What unfolded before me was much more than films. All learning was happening through experience and reflection. They were observing, thinking, discovering, examining and acting upon their understandings. They exchanged ideas and enjoyed challenges. They had become confident and self-reliant. Through the process I realised that it was not about handing them a specific device or a medium, it was about ensuring the space and freedom for learning. It was their journey and I was just a fellow traveller, sometimes only an observer in a journey towards contextualising their understanding. Jayadev, Ini and I were constantly challenged to assist them to think and to reach their own conclusions, with as much stimulation, information and debate as we could muster. Over the past two years, as the kids at Deenabandhu explored issues with a video camera and kept reflecting on what they experienced, I have slowly begun to truly understand the meaning of the oft used words - facilitating children's learning.

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