



VRJWILLIGERS
ACADEMIE Amsterdam

Masterclass Performing Empathy

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Janhavi Dhamankar 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.

Content

Last year we worked with the difference of empathy and sympathy-pity-compassion. In this masterclass we now explored the actual step-by-step process to engage empathically with another person in the here and now, especially in times of social and physical isolation.

Janhavi refers to this as employing the performativity of empathy. She compares the processes to an infusion for e.g. tea: the materials and artistic methods Janhavi designs will be like the tea powder and our collective imagination as a group/pair is the medium like water. If we linger together long enough, our interaction is bound to be infused with empathy.

Therefore, we first enter virtually in the same Zoom space.

Janhavi took her cup in front of the camera, took a sip and virtually passed it on to the next person by pronouncing their name. In this way we continued until everybody had shared the drink virtually. This created a space in which we were connected as a group.

Following she explained how she learned from her Indian dance background the practice of empathy in exchange with the audience. By having a sense of the various parts of her body, she was able to create different intensities and meanings of a simple “no”, which the audience could ‘read’ in her gestures.

As not everybody who was present now had participated in the first workshop, she gave the definition of empathy she used

Empathy is a 3-step process where one:

1. Sees another person in an emotional state e.g. my neighbour is happy
2. Tries to understand the cause of this emotional state (in-his-shoes imagining) e.g. my neighbour bought a new car.
3. I understand the emotion “as his”, not my own happiness. This is the most crucial step for empathy.

This explanation was based on Edith Stein, the book “On the Problem of Empathy” (1989).

Following one of the volunteers asked how to engage with people or create empathy when you feel this is not there. Another participant asked how this is different from non-violent communication and the process of feedback. Janhavi mentioned that this could best be experienced by practicing, for which she had designed the following practice, based on the work of sculpture practitioner and artist Shelly Sacks

Postcard practise

- a. First take some time to connect with yourself and explore within yourself what this time meant for you and if there were moments you felt lonely or isolated
- b. address it to a person – representative of group you would like to share this feeling with
- c. Write a postcard about a moment when you felt lonely or isolated during the pandemic and send this to somebody you would like to share this with (don't mention the name, but mention the relation you have with that person, e.g best friend).
- d. Following, share the postcard in the group (which was difficult on Zoom as the group was big) and later people discussed this together in break-out rooms and wrote a reply to each other as if they were the other person.

This enabled to feel empathic, but still not taking over the feeling

Superpower practice

Relating the concept of superpower to Goethe's “new organs of perception” as also used by Otto Sharmar, Janhavi floated the question of how can we develop new capacities to see and interact with the world around us.

Therefore, she also designed an exercise

What is my superpower? exercise

She asked people to think about a superpower they have which they might not have considered before as superpower, e.g. she gave the example of ignorance

This gave them an opportunity to discover their own skills/ unique tendencies and potentials which the world needs today and how they can use these in multiple ways. Everybody shared a superpower, like: being curious, asking questions, making people feel good, being happy and enthusiastic, connecting - with people/ the field/ within, listening, hearing myself and other people, positive thinking, replace pain with love and hope, etc.

Afterwards she asked us to think how our own superpower could connect with the superpower of others

It was clear that two hours was too short and that a lot came up in the exercises and people wanted to connect more or have more time to round up the conversations they engaged in. Afterwards many participants send us postcard to forward to the other person which they had met for the first time in this workshop.

We did not have much time left to discuss how people can use this in their work as volunteer or professional engaging with others to create a more inclusive city, but some reflections afterwards by Janhavi on what happened and how we could use this in the work of the Volunteer Academy:

'What is most valuable to me (as a designer and researcher) about these processes/ infusions is the intangible thought processes that each participant carries with them after the session. What emerges from the collective work, spills over in many ways (other than using these practices directly) e.g. the shifts in awareness of the participants, as they engage further with more people.'