



Painting pictures
about the group
the first day.

ENGLISH SUMMARY

FROM SHOEBOXES TO CRIME STORIES

96 CONTRIBUTING WITH ARTISTIC ACTION TO RESEARCH
WORK BY MANAGEMENT CONSULTANTS

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IN MY MA THESIS I DESCRIBE AN ENCOUNTER BETWEEN ART EDUCATION AND BUSINESS WORLD, AND THE RESULTS DERIVED FROM THIS EXPERIMENT. THE ARTISTIC ACTION, THE 'SHOEBOX COURSE' WAS ORGANISED BY MYSELF, AND THE BUSINESS POINT OF VIEW WAS REPRESENTED BY FIVE PARTICIPANTS, ALL OF WHOM WERE MANAGEMENT CONSULTANTS AND RESEARCHERS. THEY TOOK PART IN A THREE-DAY ART COURSE WHICH WAS JOINTLY PLANNED AND WHOSE GOALS WERE FORMED BY THE PARTICIPANTS THEMSELVES. THE GOAL OF THE SHOEBOX COURSE WAS TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE PARTICIPANTS' OWN RESEARCH PROJECTS.

I created a brainstorming technique for the planning session, based on visual inspiration from shoeboxes. The participants wrote crime stories about their research questions, and we made pictures about them with different artistic techniques.

The process which I carried out was an action research. I tried to describe and understand the challenges and opportunities in the encounter between me and the researcher-consultants. My aim is not to describe all possible forms of art activities in companies, instead I focus on how these goals and methods worked with this particular group of researcher-consultants. The research material consists of a joint practical experience, questionnaires and interviews.

VISUAL ARTS MEETS BUSINESS

I've been interested in combining art education and business since I began my studies seven years ago. I've accumulated knowledge and experience about both fields, and tried out combining them by organising some experimental courses. This approach is new in the University of Art and Design. Even though encounters between art education and business are desired, they haven't been concretised as courses and study projects in the Department of Art Education.

It has become trendy to talk about arts-in-business. Several writings have been published on how business world could use arts to increase innovation and creativity, or social well-being in organisations (Florida 2002, TAO 2002, Brandenburg 2003, Wilenius 2004). On the other hand, few actual research reports have been written about this topic. In Finland, artistic actions have not yet found their place in companies.

Darsø (2004) has described the field of arts-in-business and formed a theoretical framework from the point of view of learning processes. Brandenburg (2003) has examined how art could increase the social and mental well-being of personnel in companies. Some research has been done about the use of cultural activities and sponsorship in organisations (Oesh 2002, Viitanen 1999, Ilmonen 1994), the use of art as a tool to influence organisational changes (Nuutinen 2003), and about the encounter of arts and science (Varto et al 2003).

STARTING POINT

It seems that neither art education nor teaching is a correct term to be used in business world. Until I find a better term, I will use the term 'artistic action' to describe my activity, and 'visual arts trainer' as my title in order to distinguish my role from art teaching. With my choice of term I want to point out that as context and methods change, terminology should follow.

I assumed that the consultants were professionals in forming goals, giving feedback and having reflective discussions. I expected them to be persons who want everything to be effective, and thought that they would make sure that whatever we did was going to be useful to them.

Based on my previous experience and literature, I expected the language of art to appeal to us in both emotional and cognitive ways. In an artistic process, working with intuition takes often turns with reasoning, and the tacit knowledge of the participant is brought to surface. Because of this, art can help us understand and reconstruct our thoughts and conceptions (Räsänen 2000, Karisto 2003, Brandenburg 2003, Hamm 2003.) The idea of contributing to the research work of the participants was based on this starting point.

I also assumed the Shoebox course to be able to influence the self-image of the researcher-consultants, and their conception of the research group; to encourage them to self-expression, and to give pleasure and relaxation. I knew it might not be an easy process to go through: the results would depend on the extent of each person's own contribution.

The participants' goal, set by themselves, was that everything we did should contribute to their research work. This meant new ideas and perspectives, inspiration, learning from each other, a clearer image of the joint research ideas, and getting experienced with the methods of visual arts. It was stated more clearly after the course that the success of the process should be measured by how much the participants actually wrote.

MANAGEMENT CONSULTANTS AS PARTICIPANTS

Four out of the five participants worked in the same management consulting company. They were starting their own PhD thesis related to their work as consultants. The fifth researcher-consultant was their research coach, a professor of Helsinki School of Economics. The research group had been formed a year earlier.

The participants were all highly educated and had a long work experience. All of them had used some visualisation techniques in their work, for example art post cards and drawings, but they also indicated not to be very experienced with art activities. They showed a high amount of interest and curiosity, and a general positive attitude towards the Shoebox course.

ACTION RESEARCH AS A METHOD

The Shoebox course aimed to get the researcher-consultants involved in the goal setting, planning, action, reflection and evaluation phases of the course. This participatory approach has much in common with the constructivist education theory but it also fits the concept of action research.

I analysed the research material by using a method based on content analysis. All material was transcribed to text. I read through these text fragments and divided them into labeled envelopes, forming categories, which were sometimes split or combined.

I was greatly involved in this action research process myself. I have tried to bring forth my subjectivity in addition to the point of view of the researcher-consultants in my account of the process. I have tried not to present new tools ready for business use but to help getting oriented and becoming aware of the challenges and opportunities brought by artistic action.

SHOEBOX COURSE

The Shoebox course took three days, the first of which was a planning day in August 2004. On the second day, about a month later, we worked with Photoshop. On the third day, one month later, we printed pictures on t-shirts. Each of these sessions focused on the research of one of the participants.

FIRST DAY: BRAINSTORMING

The planning took place on a small island in Helsinki. At first, each participant made a small painting about how he or she saw the group at that moment. Then we had a conversation about the paintings and our goals. I had thought that the group could make this kind of paintings in the morning and in the afternoon. I assumed that the paintings could work as a warm-up exercise, and they might let us see things that nobody says out aloud. We made paintings also in the afternoon and talked about them. Later this didn't seem to be the most important thing as there was little time. On the third day in November we didn't make group paintings any more.

The planning of the art course was based on a brainstorming technique which I named Shoeboxing. I decorated 15 shoeboxes to give visual inspiration for the planning (pg 43-44).

The participants were allowed to decide themselves how they wanted the shoeboxes to be opened: how many boxes and in which order they opened them. Ideas arising from the boxes were said out aloud so that they could form chains of ideas and feed each other. Once an idea was expressed, anyone was allowed to write it down on a coloured paper. A special meaning was given to each color by categorising them (ideas related to technique, place, research, material, etc). During the second phase we had a look at all ideas produced this way and started to group and evaluate them.

After the planning day, I made a detailed plan of the art course, based on ideas from our joint planning session. One of the ideas was 'a crime story'. The participants were given a task to write a crime story about their own research, and to send the stories to each other and read them.

SECOND DAY: WORKING WITH PHOTOSHOP

The participants learnt the basics of Photoshop, and they made a set of three or more collages about one of the crime stories. The pictures were interpretations of the story. The participants realised that the making of pictures happened through intuition, which is a different

process from discussing them. After that they made collages about another crime story, and we had a discussion about them. One of the participants commented that this method was useful: it helped him to reach some core points in his research. Another participant was more confused about the results. At the end of the day we had a reflective discussion where we concluded that the link between pictures, stories and research questions should have been highlighted more.

THIRD DAY: PRINTING ON T-SHIRTS

In November we made drawings based on the third crime story. This time we paid more attention to the direct link between the pictures and the research question at hand. The writer of the story did not yet know what his research question was, so he tried to point it out with the pictures. The whole group made a large number of drawings to assist him. The images became finally so simple that they could be printed on t-shirts.

In the end discussion we found out that none of the participants had written much about their research during the whole autumn. This was because research had not reached the top of their priority lists. They could not leave their daily jobs as consultants, as they didn't have funding for the research yet.

RESULTS

I divide the outcomes of the Shoebox course to three categories: what the researcher-consultants got from the course, what I learned from it, and how this kind of encounters should be further developed.

The participants felt that the goals had not been reached. They found it difficult to define what were the ultimate effects of the Shoebox course. The course had not really moved their research ahead, nor had it stood on their way: It had been their own choice to write or not to write. It seemed to me afterwards that the goals had not been defined and evaluated well enough, and that there may have been too little time to reach the goals.

The participants had expressed a need of inspiration in the beginning of the course. It appeared to me during the course that they were not as far in their research as I had expected: they hardly even knew their research questions. It seemed to me that they really needed motivation to carry out their research instead of new ideas and writing exercises. A stronger motivation could have solved the problem of not reaching the goals. The agenda of the Shoebox course would have been different had it been based on motivating the participants to carry out their research.

The participants concluded that what the Shoebox course had achieved was to organise their thoughts and assist them in seeing the overall view. One of them decided afterwards that he was not going to continue with his doctoral research, instead he wanted to incorporate research in his work as a consultant. Another participant concluded that they might have needed a more academic approach instead of trying to generate ideas. They had got new ideas for their work as consultants, and a positive experience of artistic action. What these statements actually showed was that the participants had reached an important learning result – they had realised what they really needed and wanted.

The Shoebox course showed me how pictures and crime stories could be used better to contribute to research work. An area of development is schedule: the course should be more intensive as now things were forgotten during the weeks in between. Furthermore, the link between research and artistic action should be clearly pointed out during the process. To make this transference more probable, participants could be assigned to write how the pictures they had made were related to their own research question, and what they had learned from the group. Another (writing or discussion) workshop could be organised after the artistic encounter, to continue with issues first dealt with pictures. The connection between these workshops should be planned carefully beforehand.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE ENCOUNTER

Sometimes people need more ideas, sometimes more focusing. The main challenge in beginning an artistic action is to bring the true needs of the participants to the surface, and to evaluate the goals arising from them. The activity should match the purpose of the encounter. It should be a conscious choice to go painting in order to write more, instead of simply taking a writing course. A separate workshop, possibly by another trainer can be used to assist with goal setting.

The researcher-consultants believed that artistic action could be used as tool for organisational development and learning projects; in facilitation and product design projects; and to support research projects in organisations. Artistic action could give new perspectives, show the overall picture and crystallize goals in this kind of projects.

When art education is taken to business context, art teachers clearly need new skills. They could supplement their artistic and pedagogic skills with consultative skills, and become familiar with group dynamics, organisational processes, and guiding goal setting and reflection. They could also co-operate with professionals of those fields.

The researcher-consultants who took part in the course had some experience of both art therapy and the facilitation of organisational processes. The way I acted as a visual arts trainer was different from their expectations, which caused some confusion. A facilitator only guides the process and does not get involved with its content in any way. An art therapist doesn't usually analyse pictures but lets the person do it herself. My role was neither of these. Discussing pictures involves both visual aspects and meaning. This approach appeared to awake some

expectations of me guiding the contents of the research, which was obviously their mentor's task. I developed a new way of discussing pictures, and approached the role of a facilitator, guiding the process more with specific questions than with my opinions or comments.

The biggest challenges in encounters between arts and business are related to the true understanding of creative process. It needs incubation (time of no visible action), for which there seems to be no time in business world. Goals can be set to guide creative processes, but their outcome cannot be predicted. This is risky for business. Artistic action should be described in a way which gives even business-minded people an opportunity to appreciate the meaning of these actions. In the evaluation of effects, the duration of the artistic action should be taken into account.

Having completed this thesis, some further research topics appeared to me. Firstly, I would like to find out what visual methods management consultants use in their work. Secondly, the learning environments and the processes provided by art courses in companies could be specified in depth. Most of all, I would like to organise another Shoebox course to really see how visual arts can contribute to work by academic research teams. This would involve the development of new visual tools that takes the issues related to goal setting, time span, formulation of meanings, and the role of visual arts trainer into account.