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Graphic facilitators at the Tool fair - A portrait

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Last year, the Tool fair in Tallinn was graced by the presence of two people who drew what was happening. This was an innovation for many of us who had never seen that happening in educational events before.

We felt it would be good to have a discussion with Siiri Taimla and Tanel Rannala about how they came up with the idea and what is it like in practice to draw like this. They are separate artists with their own specific work and together they make up JoonMeedia - joon is the line which you draw and so its very simple 'one line' which is very zen.

So one sunny day in Tallinn and rainy day in Strasbourg we agreed to meet by skype and had a great discussion which went much further than I'd expected.

First thing which we had to clarify was the terminology to be used about what they do: I had been referring to them as "cartoonists" and what they produce as "cartoons" and this did not fit into their world view at all.

We call the activity we do "graphic facilitating" because cartoonists make stories or caricatures and we take drawings from real life events, and we visualise ideas but we are not telling stories as such. Being graphic facilitators really explains better what we do in helping people understand something in a visual form.

When and how did you discover that drawings could be useful in educational settings, seminars, etc.

We started in 2009 when we were both teachers in the Estonian Academy of Arts, we had a lesson in our apartment with students looking at a film called "will there be life after capitalism?" which was quite a complicated topic and we found that making small drawings made it easier to understand, to digest. And it was funny too and easier to talk about it. So we developed this method further to help people learn things, to get the information through a different medium.

How is it to work together as graphic facilitators?

We started as colleagues and gradually we produced a baby - a real graphic illustration of our cooperation! One of the things we discovered was in drawing over each other's work - it is much easier to make new things in there, its more creative to play! Usually that's a tabu among artists. There's just one rule: don't lose the drawing, don't draw so much that you can't see both drawings. We even do this with our students - go to an event with ten people and we start to share our drawings, so one drawing might be constructed by five others, as all give their own experience into it. If you are the one that started the drawing you can then look at it and think 'wow, that's great that they managed to make such wonderful things with it!' Draw a balloon at first, then the next person might make that into the head of a dog and you can think 'oh! I didn't see that in there!'

What do you think people learn from your drawings?

From our BIG pictures especially people can really get connected information in a way that they cannot just through hearing. The drawing acts like a memory, helping you to catch the most important ideas.

For those people who were NOT present at a particular event, our drawings give them a special kind of overview. At first we didn't use words in our work, only pictures. So people get inspiration and interest through these 'visual protocol'.

What is the funniest or strangest thing that ever happened to you when being graphic facilitators?

There was never anything really BIG – we had lots of 'micro-funnies'!! In one conference about non-profit organisations there was one man who was talking about how you could gain a lot from doing certain things. I can't remember exactly what he was talking about, but I drew this picture of him having a little dog on his head and this was really really funny (for me!) and I could not keep my laughter in! And we who are drawing can have a lot of fun with this kind of thing!

How did you approach graphic facilitators at the Toolfair in Tallinn last year?

We had meetings with Üllý the organiser beforehand and had to choose where we would attend in order to get to see as much as possible with all those workshops. We asked about expectations and I really need the 'bigger picture' in my head, what are the goals, what kinds of people are coming, or I get lost.

How did you decide what to choose to make as drawings? Was it ever difficult for you to choose?

Our experience is that whenever someone is inspiring then it's very easy to draw and sometimes it happens that someone is not very interesting and then it's quite hard and you start to draw things that are around you. You know Sir Ken Robinson? Well, I was drawing him in an event called eksperimenta and he was really talking quite quickly and I caught the ideas in words and then if there

was a pause I would transfer that idea into pictures. I think it's important to understand what is being said, otherwise you can't draw. Sometimes people say something and you can't believe it – so you draw it to make sure that others will be more aware about that! When we know some of the topics will be talked about beforehand, then I like to practise drawing some of those things – for example to prepare for a conference on cycling I will be trying to draw a bicycle very quickly which makes our work then easier..

What are the rules you have in drawing and how did you develop them (I noticed for example in Tallinn that you said 'one drawing, two minutes')?

It's more taken from experience. So, if you spend 10 minutes on one drawing then you miss maybe five other ideas; so it's better to make it very simple and very quick. With our students we also teach them how to draw basic things very fast – so they can be more creative and amazing things can be drawn.

How was it different to work with this group of international people compared to working with Estonians?

The main difference was more structural as there were so many workshops – I couldn't just sit in one place and draw, I had to move and participate in many things. And all the people were very energetic

and very spontaneous and that's why we made so many drawings!

Did anybody challenge you about the content of your drawings? I see, for example, that you do not censor swear words...

Yes, in fact, one person said to me that I drew one lady too fat! She's not so fat as that! Otherwise not. In different events it has happened that someone comes up to correct facts...

I see from your blog that you do not only do single drawings, but also make big picture notes about what is happening in a seminar or meeting - what is that like for you?

Usually then its one of us making such drawings and the other one will take photos or make a film out of it. If you have one big drawing then its very difficult for another to add to it at the same time.

What do you think is the future for drawing and Joonmeedia?

For us, its our future! Now I can't imagine not doing it! Nowadays people pay us for doing this more and we hope that this will increase. It started as a hobby. So we are thinking of making a kind of enterprise to make this mission connected to education, to teach this tool and make this method more popular.

Websites:

<http://joonMeedia.Blogspot.com> [2]

Sir Ken Robinson (and many more) drawn by Siiri Taimla and others:

<http://www.eksperimenta.net/idea-labs/idealaboratory-2011/> [3]

And with that we had to end our conversation.

We wish them well and hope to be able to cooperate with them again in the future!

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[3] <http://www.eksperimenta.net/idea-labs/idealaboratory-2011/>

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