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# Unlearning Together

by Mitha Budhyarto

**Collective efforts are key in art education for the future**

**T**he future of education is a topic of heated debate, with questions raised about who it is serving today, what kind of directions it needs to take, and the renewed forms of institutions that need to be created in order to support it. Art, in creating spaces where critical speculations about education may take place, becomes a necessary part of these current debates. From within the region, collective practices are expanding the reach of education by experimenting with issues such as what could (or should) be the aims of education, its institutional structures, organisational sustainability and pedagogical models.

## **KUNCI's School of Improper Education (SIE)**

KUNCI Cultural Studies Center (established in 1999) is a non-profit cultural organisation in Yogyakarta, founded by then-students of Gajah Mada University: Antariksa, Nuraini Juliastuti and Ferdiansyah Thajib. Initially formed as a student activist press through newsletter publications, KUNCI then took on a more formalised institutional structure as a research centre for cultural studies. Today, KUNCI has gained local, regional and international respect by producing projects of topics that are always carefully thought through in its approach and execution.

In 2016, KUNCI released an open call for participation for 'School of Improper Education' (SIE). SIE was to be a project about vernacular education in informal

settings, where weekly classes that run throughout the year will be held in various locations and for durations that suit the participants' commitments and needs. Since then, they continue to create different projects that experiment with the different aspects of education.

In formulating SIE's approach, Indonesia's own histories of education play an important role. In different articles, Antariksa and Juliastuti refer to both *nyantrik* and the *sanggar*, traditional models of education where living, learning and creating are done together. This implies that collectivity has a rich lineage in Indonesia's education history. Elsewhere, Thajib writes that the methods employed at Taman Siswa, an anti-colonial educational movement founded in 1922, is also relevant for SIE; such as in the lack of division between "study time" and "play time".

At the same time, SIE is also critical of historical aspects that are no longer relevant, and may even be dangerous if perpetuated today. Taman Siswa's positioning of the teacher-student relationship as "parent-child", for instance, created a social hierarchy based on age. In a similar vein, under Soeharto's New Order regime, "family values" were appropriated to instrumentalise national curriculum as a mode of social control towards achieving developmentalist political agendas.

In addition to references to local educational histories, SIE also points to a model outlined by 19th century French educationalist Joseph Jacotot as discussed by

the philosopher Jacques Rancière in 'The Ignorant Schoolmaster'. Jacotot, through his belief that a teacher is able to teach his students things that he does not have knowledge of, is an often cited figure of "intellectual emancipation". Rancière's interpretation of Jacotot's case emphasised the idea of an "egalitarian pedagogy", as noted down by KUNCI member Brigitta Isabella. The understanding that all people have the same capacity to teach and to learn is appealing for SIE, as it opens a way to unpack the different hierarchies that are often embedded in education.

During SIE's development stage, KUNCI noted the four pedagogical methods that they wished to put to test to arrive at varied understandings about "teacher", "classroom", "curriculum" and so on. There is the "no teacher" method, echoing Jacotot-Rancière. The participants decided as a group to study a topic or skill that none of them know about, so that no one person could act as the "teacher"; as an experiment, they chose to study sign language, which they completed in April 2017. The aim here was to position all participants as equals in the learning process. This method is seen as an appropriate way for circumventing the teacher-student hierarchy that puts the teacher as the "source" and the student as the "recipient" of knowledge.

SIE also wishes to renew conceptions about *turba*, an acronym for *turun ke bawah* or "descent from above", a method initially conceptualised by the Indonesian literary and social group Institute for the People's

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Culture (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat or LEKRA) in the late 1950s to early 1960s. This method in particular necessitates having classes in various locations with different communities. In relation to the *turba* method, considerations about how to negotiate various socio-economic conditions, manage durations of projects so they remain substantial while temporary, and ways to materialise findings from these classes, seem to preoccupy SIE. An example of a “class” with the *turba* method involved direct involvement with the communities of Ngandong Village at the slope of Mount Merapi in October 2017. Currently, SIE is open to further proposals that are in line with the aim of collectively questioning what education is, could and should be today.

The different methods that SIE wishes to test are drawn from different sources: the historical events and philosophical concepts as mentioned above, but also the day-to-day realities of their own practice as an independent research centre. In the same article, Thajib writes of KUNCI’s “habit” of questioning their own modes of collectivity, from its previous life as a student-activist press, to current iterations as a research centre and informal school. At a time where various walls are being built, creating new forms of segregation, much may indeed be learnt from the collective models of working as exemplified by KUNCI’s SIE.

### **ANCER Research Camp: Collective Creative Practices in Southeast Asia**

It was precisely this intention of finding more information about

collectivity in the context of creative practices in the region that motivated ‘ANCER Research Camp: Collective Creative Practices in Southeast Asia’. The event was a three-day workshop held at LASALLE College of the Arts in Singapore in 2016, organised by lecturers from two different faculties: Aleksandar Brkic (then Lecturer in Arts Management, now at Goldsmiths College London), and myself, a lecturer under the Faculty of Design. To this end, we made use of the college’s already existing network, ANCER (Asia Pacific’s Network for Cultural Education and Research), which was an invaluable resource for our aim of connecting with practitioners in the fields of arts and culture from within the region.

Representatives from seven collectives from four different countries participated in the workshop: Serrum (Indonesia), Postmuseum (Singapore), Not all Dreams (Vietnam), Jatiwangi art Factory (Indonesia), Para Sa Sining (Phillipines), Live with Bambi (Indonesia), Hysteria Collective (Indonesia). Additionally, there were invited speakers/moderators/“provocateurs”, whose role was to push our discussions and problematise our ideas: Antariksa (KUNCI Cultural Studies Center, Indonesia), Amitesh Grover (Shiv Nadar University, India), Janet Pillai (Malaysia) and Professor Giep Hagoort (Amsterdam School of Management, Netherlands). The workshop series were treated as a platform to share various perspectives, visions, challenges and strategies for collectivity. Furthermore, we also wanted to use this as an opportunity to probe into the idea of the “region” through the

lens of these collective practices.

The presentations on the first day, entitled ‘Framing’, allowed all involved to learn about each others’ works, finding out commonalities and differences in our interests, struggles and approaches, with the goal of coming up with questions that could lead to further studies about collective work in the region. These questions were then unpacked in ‘In the Lab’, the name of the second day’s activities. The last day, ‘Reflection Room’ were spent assessing the possible implications and applications of the information that we gathered together from the previous days.

As educators working in formal educational institutions, the event became a chance for us to consider how knowledge may be produced and shared beyond our academic routines. Instead of classrooms, our discussions happened in hallways and corridors. Alex and I moved away from the role of “teachers” that we normally take, and became “co-actors” in knowledge-creation. This was evident in the way that the “research questions” were formulated together by this group of new friends, rather than formulated in advance by the organisers. It was also compelling to witness how diversity—rather than unity—was a crucial part of working together; the discussions that happened were nuanced because we quickly learnt to co-exist even with our different opinions and temperaments. Aware that the event was temporary and that conversations may not carry on beyond the time spent together then, there was an unspoken consensus among us to participate and contribute as much as we could while we were still together.

From an organiser’s perspective, the event, though perhaps small in scale, gave us rich insights into collective creative work in the context of education that we would not have access to otherwise. This takeaway is still relevant for us today, as educators who are continuously in search for new ways to form knowledge beyond the individuated, solitary practices that we are so accustomed to. ■