Understanding Ethnography
**Professor Alka Hingorani**
Lecture - 5
Participative Design for Language Learning

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Alka Hingorani is an Architect/ Art historian, with interests in art and identity, storytelling as academic practice, and pedagogy at the cusp of classroom teaching and technology.

Dr. Alka Hingorani
Associate Professor,
IDC School of Design, IIT Bombay

Professor: Now, we have a presentation by Professor Alka Hingorani, who teaches at the IDC School of Design, IIT Bombay. Professor Hingorani's area of interest includes film, photography, storytelling, and visual narratives. She has used ethnographic research as a method of inquiry in many of these areas.

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An ethnographic study of the Mohras of Himachal Pradesh
COURTESY: ALKA HINGORANI AND TEAM
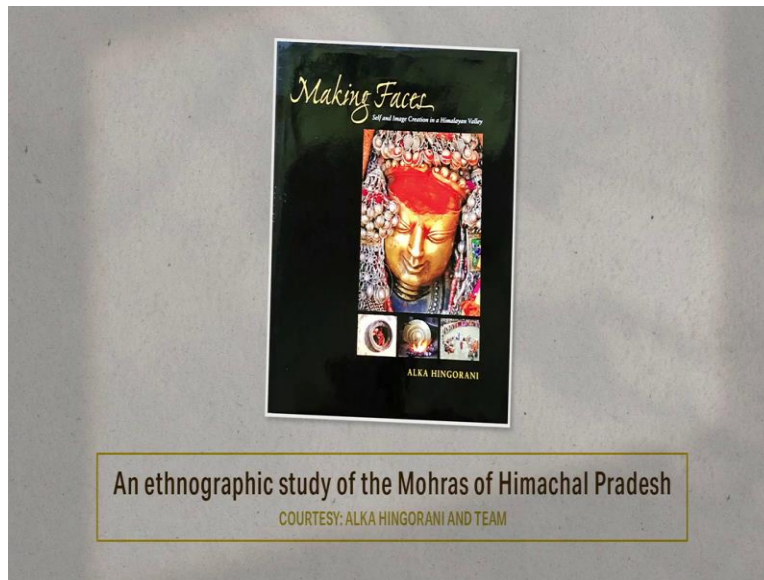
Among these is a study of the makers of sacred mask called Mohras in the Kullu Valley in Himachal Pradesh. In this section, she will share with us a project that she has been working on for some time now.

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LETS: Learn English Through Stories
COURTESY: ALKA HINGORANI AND TEAM
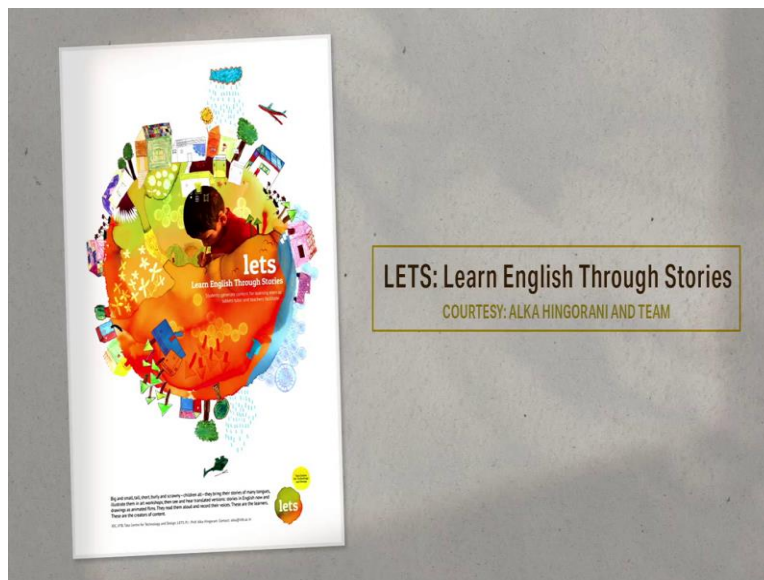
It is called LETS, Learn English Through Stories; LETS. In this project, she uses an ethnographic approach and takes it a step further towards participation and collaboration. Let us hear about it from her.

Professor Alka Hingorani: There is a project that I am going to talk about for a little while; it is called LETS, which is an acronym that stands for Learn English Through Stories.

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It began four years ago on my visit to a tiny village at about 10,000 feet above sea level in Himachal Pradesh. A village called Khun, and a High School, a Government Senior Secondary High School in Khun, where a teacher approached me to say that the resources that they had at hand, in order to teach English to the children of the school were really limited.

Their own English was limited, and an important reason for that was that it did not have much use, it did not serve much purpose in that context. So far, even though it had been a subject that the government imposed as part of the curriculum, they had not felt any real urge to learn or teach it well.
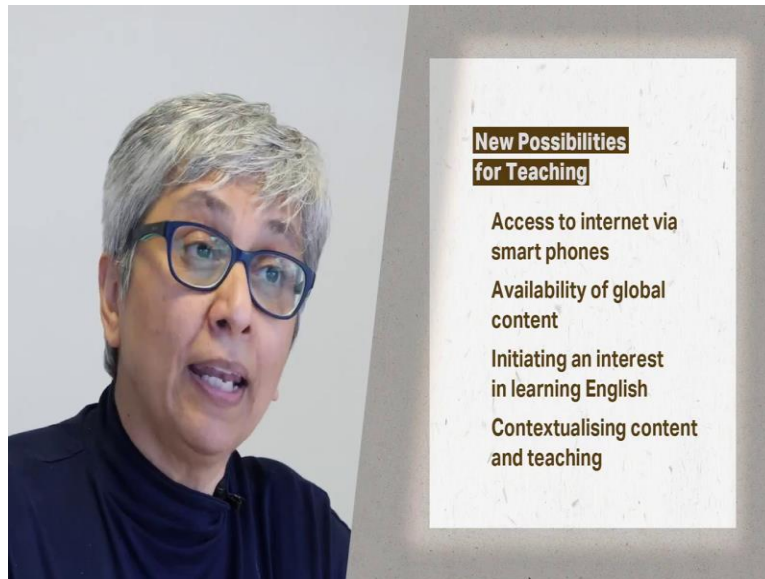
But now, with access to the Internet and with smartphones that all these teachers owned, they realised that it was possible to add interest through different pedagogical tools in a classroom by using some of the material that was available on the web, to teach students different subjects. But more of that material on the web is in English. To this day, I think two-thirds of the material that is available in the web or near about is in English, and so a lack of knowledge of English became a real barrier to learning other things.

They knew that English as a second language or English as a foreign language had been taught forever and more, there are hundreds, tens of hundreds of pedagogies that are available on the web for English as second language and English as foreign language. The request was to cull from those pedagogies, those that might work for them in their context.

And that is how we began this project. It seemed like a small exercise, maybe 6 months to a year, and we began to look at what was available.

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One of the early beautiful interventions, design interventions that we came across is something called Bookbox. This is a project run by Professor Brij Kothari, who used to be at the IIM Ahmadabad and has now returned to the U.S., in which he used highlighted captions at the bottom of television screens when popular programs ran on TV in order to increase reading efficacy of the viewing audience.

So, Bookbox is a company that makes animated shorts of Pan-Indic stories, and there are voiceovers that read that story out with highlighted captions going at the bottom of the screen. That seemed like a wonderful idea; these were Pan-Indic stories; they belonged to us. So in some ways, they spoke of our context is what we thought.

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Art workshop, Khun, Himachal Pradesh
COURTESY: ALKA HINGORANI AND TEAM

When we took these things back to the village in Himachal Pradesh, the young people in those schools, of course, jumped on it. In order for us to understand the efficacy of this intervention, we wanted to run an experiment, and we wanted both teachers and students to be responsible for data gathering. And so we ran an artwork shop in Himachal Pradesh then.

The results of that art workshop astounded us. We had just asked them to write short stories and illustrate them as they liked. It is not so much that they did this that surprised me; it was that I was surprised by what they did. That surprised me.

I was not aware of the prejudices that I was carrying there. We pay lip service all the time to the idea that everybody has potential, everybody has the capacity to convert on that potential, given the opportunity to do so. I thought I believed it and I think most of us sincerely believe that we do.

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And yet when we encounter it in areas that we think of as resource-constraint, we are taken aback by that potential being expressed. I was. And so we wondered whether it would not be a good idea to become facilitators in an exercise where the people who were learning had a greater participation in the content that they used to learn.

And the seed of that idea began in that first artwork shop in Khun, in Himachal Pradesh. That was our very first workshop.

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Gram Mangal School, Dahanu, Maharashtra
COURTESY: ALKA HINGORANI AND TEAM

Gram Mangal School, Dahanu, Maharashtra
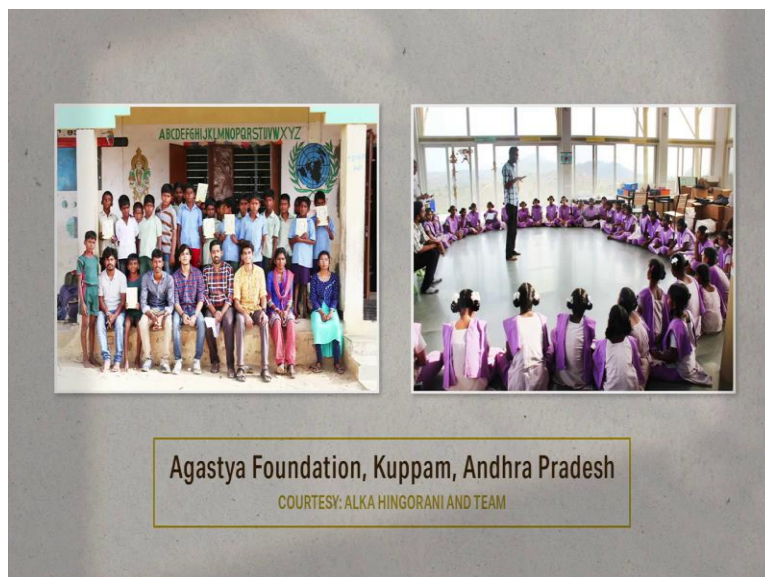COURTESY: ALKA HINGORANI AND TEAM

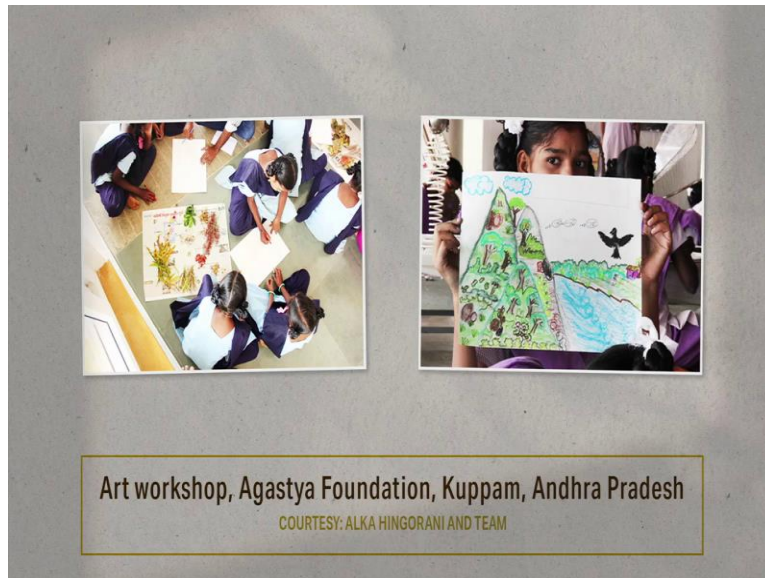Art workshop, Gram Mangal School, Dahanu, Maharashtra
COURTESY: ALKA HINGORANI AND TEAM

And from there, we connected with schools closer home. The Gram Mangal School in Dahanu in the village Aina was one of them.

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Agastya Foundation, Kuppam, Andhra Pradesh
COURTESY: ALKA HINGORANI AND TEAM

Art workshop, Agastya Foundation, Kuppam, Andhra Pradesh
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Art workshop, Agastya Foundation, Kuppam, Andhra Pradesh
COURTESY: ALKA HINGORANI AND TEAM

We also collaborated with an organisation called the Agastya International Foundation, which is based in Kuppam in Andhra Pradesh. We introduced these story gathering, storytelling workshops, and also these art workshops with students from different schools through Agastya International Foundation and began to create books with these young people.
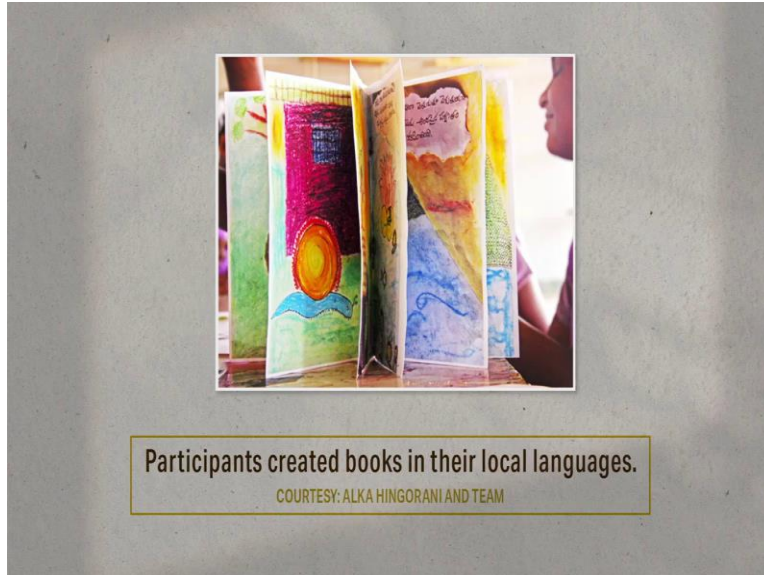
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Books made by participants
COURTESY: ALKA HINGORANI AND TEAM

Books made by participants
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Participants created books in their local languages.
COURTESY: ALKA HINGORANI AND TEAM

Mostly these were students from Sixth to Eighth standard, and they would bring their stories to us in their native language. So it was Varli in Dahanu, Pahadi or Hindi in Himachal Pradesh, Telugu in Andhra, and the teachers would translate them for us into either standard Hindi, Marathi, Telugu, or if possible, into English like a basic translation.

We would bring those stories back with us, dozens of them; select two or three that lent themselves very easily to a sort of visual representation and return to these places in order to hold art workshops.

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Multiple representations of trees
COURTESY: ALKA HINGORANI AND TEAM

Multiple representations of monsters
COURTESY: ALKA HINGORANI AND TEAM

Multiple representations of houses
COURTESY: ALKA HINGORANI AND TEAM
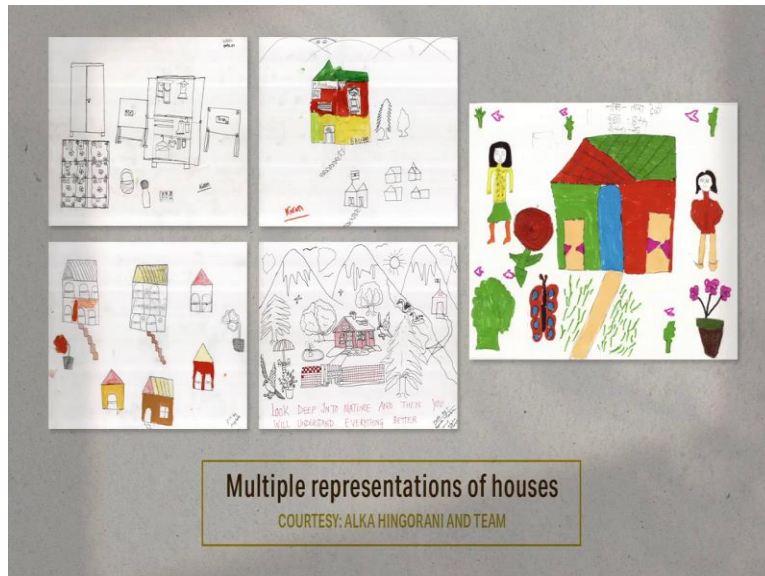
There was a book designer, there was a language expert working with these young people and when we liked somebody's drawing, say we liked a tree that someone had drawn or a monster that another student had drawn, we would make them draw 40 trees or 400; make them draw house, 40 houses; a monster walking backwards and forwards, a sideways look from the monster, a straight-on, a head-on look from the monster.

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The finished books were taken back to the children.
COURTESY: ALKA HINGORANI AND TEAM

And we collected all these bits and pieces that these people had made and the book designer sat down with background illustrations, with trees and houses and monster and protagonist, and built a book around that story.

When we took these books back to them, once they had jumped out of their skin seeing their work in published form, they had very little to do with the book itself. Once that book was ready, we realised two things.

One was that when we translated from their story to our story, to a story that was shared, theirs and mine, we have worked more on the basis of someone who understood English very well. We were not entirely aware of how limited their access to, and therefore, their comfort with English was.

Because we are talking about populations and places where since the language is neither heard nor spoken, you could often meet a 12 or 14-year-old who barely knew the alphabet and could not read at all. How do you approach a person of that age with just the alphabet? Their mind is developed enough to understand complexity; storytelling, narrative form, is something that they can easily grasp, and they could give you a run for your money. But language is the stumbling block.

And so we thought that if we could create books in which language was graded within a single book, where we went from really simple text, small words, short sentences, in the first few pages, to increasing the complexity of language as it went forward, perhaps the excitement to know what the story was going to be like, would be the impulse, the driving impulse to turn the page and struggle with language. And so that is what we began to do.

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Each book was split into three parts, with progressively difficult language.
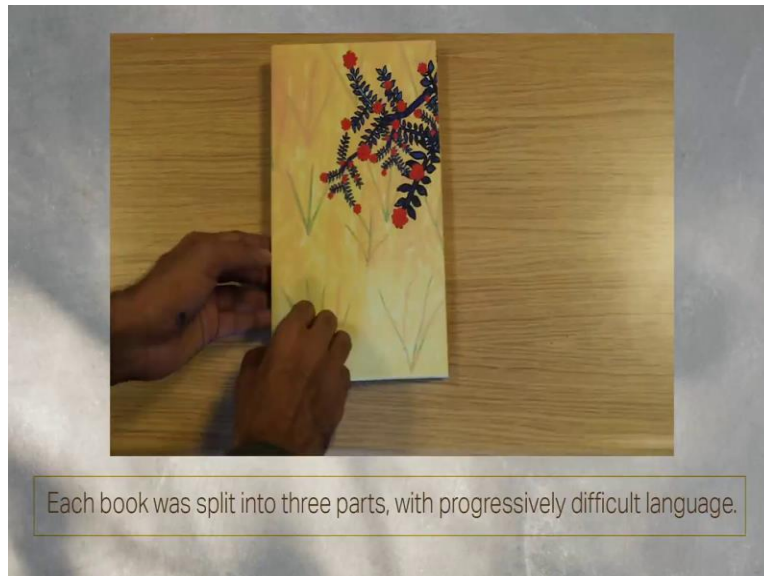
And so we split the same book into three different parts. The illustrations remained the same, but we had an easy language, a moderately difficult language, and a difficult or complex language version.

It also did not make sense to have three different grades of language with exactly the same illustration. Why would a child or a young person who already has difficulty with language return to the same story, the same characters, the same narrative arc, with language that is difficult? It did not make sense at all.

But these were all things that we learned as we went, we returned to these people over and over again. They took us by our hands in some sense, walked us slowly on the path that they were walking to showcase to us where we were stumbling. One of the ways in which this worked even better was when, for instance, some of us tried to learn Varli, encountering a language that we knew nothing of, which maps itself to some extent to Marathi, but not really; gave those young people the confidence to laugh at us.

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And in that laughter was the first connection that was fearless. This is the other thing that ethnography allows you to stay with and learn. Already by this time, we are beginning to understand how complex design can be and what are the ways in which knowing the people that you are working with, that you are working for, and that you are working beside, can make all the difference, both in the efficacy of design intervention and in the sustainability of design that design change, or the change that design brings.

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Researchers with participants
COURTESY: ALKA HINGORANI AND TEAM

Through our various workshops, we realised more and more, how much less we wanted to be present in the solution making. And so from treating these young people as assembly line

workers, drawing 40 trees or 400 houses, or 4 different ways of encountering a monster, we began to work with them to teach them storyboarding, to teach them to visualise the stories that they were telling us to, figure out what were dramatic moments or the key points in a story, where does it turn and how, and to pin those down on paper.

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Discussing layouts
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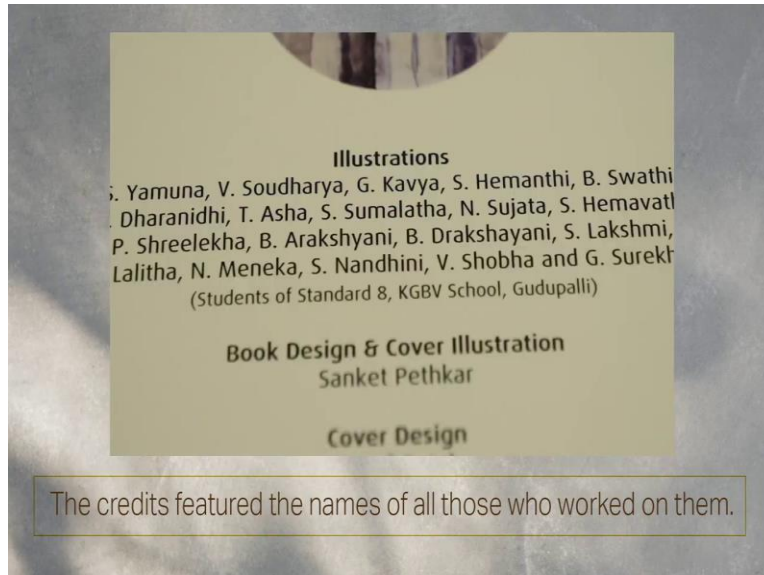

Making their own books
COURTESY: ALKA HINGORANI AND TEAM

As they worked with key moments, or dramatic moments in the story, we also worked with them on the text-image relationship, on page design, on what they needed to do where in order to

entice the interest of the viewer who is going to look at books that they were already seeing produced in quality or in value that sort of shocked them out of their skins.

As they worked with key moments, or dramatic moments in the story, we also worked with them

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Illustrations
S. Yamuna, V. Soudharya, G. Kavya, S. Hemanthi, B. Swathi
Dharanidhi, T. Asha, S. Sumalatha, N. Sujata, S. Hemavatl
P. Shreelekha, B. Arakshyani, B. Drakshayani, S. Lakshmi,
Lalitha, N. Meneka, S. Nandhini, V. Shobha and G. Surekh
(Students of Standard 8, KGBV School, Gudupalli)

Book Design & Cover Illustration
Sanket Pethkar

Cover Design

The credits featured the names of all those who worked on them.

Not because they had never seen books like that, which was also sometimes the case, but they had never seen books like that, that had their names on them. And that changed the picture entirely. That is also when we realised that co-creation is such a powerful tool, that co-creation implicates the learner in the learning process, through creation of content and then a study of that content. The things that we have realised in these four years through working with different groups of children have also transformed us.

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It has made us realise that we need to step further and further back from the process, we need to become facilitators that provide the resources that are unavailable on the ground and then to watch the drama unfold in the place where the learning is to happen.

We have come a way wanting to fight with them over their stories, we have come a way wanting to own their stories, and that is where we feel that conversation is now beginning to happen on equal ground. This was not always the case. This was not a case that was recognised by us, or by the people that were working within these villages.
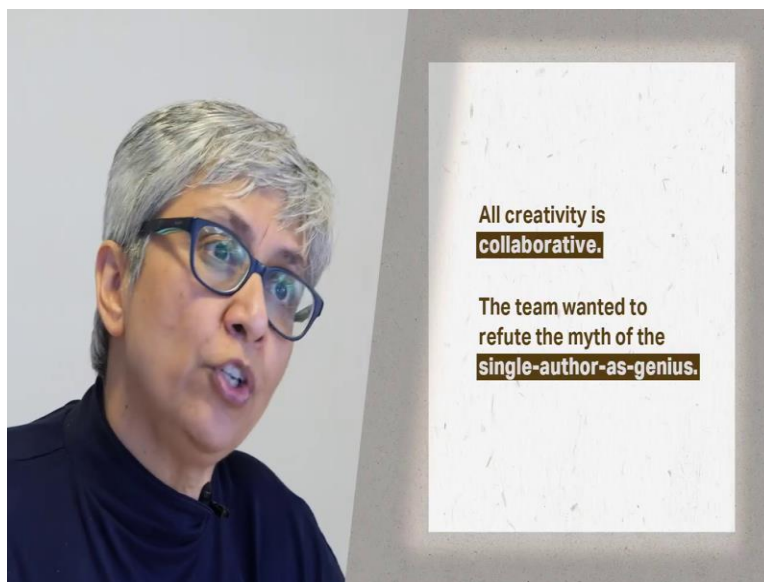
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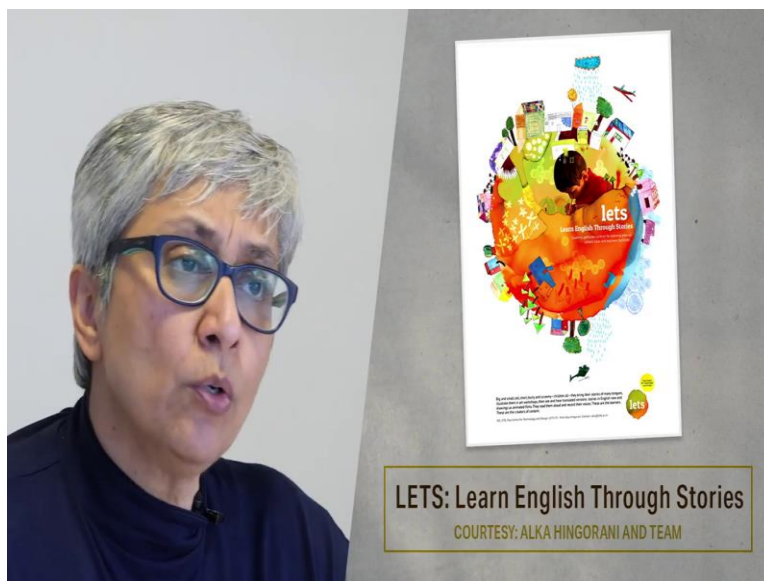
We also wanted them to become independent of us as they created more content, so that LETS, Learn English Through Stories, could knock its E down to a lowercase and become Learn Through Stories.

We understand that as designers, we have access to certain skill sets that can be transferred quite easily, and others that are specialist or specialised skill sets. So we began to separate the project into pieces where this could happen. Portions of this pipeline of creating books could move to the area where the learning had to happen. The students of the school, the teachers of that school, could work together in order to create the books.

Once those books came to us, we would be allowed to work with those stories and with the illustrations using our design team to translate those books from native languages into English and then send them back published in a polished way. It is the kind of thing that would happen to anybody who writes a book.

If I were to write a book, I would expect that there would be a team that would be, that would include an editor, a publisher, a jacket designer, perhaps a book designer who would put together pictures and text for me and yet, authorship would be mine. We wanted to change that.

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We wanted to change the idea that there is a single author as a genius that has any truth to it. Most creativity is collaborative, you know this, and I know this.

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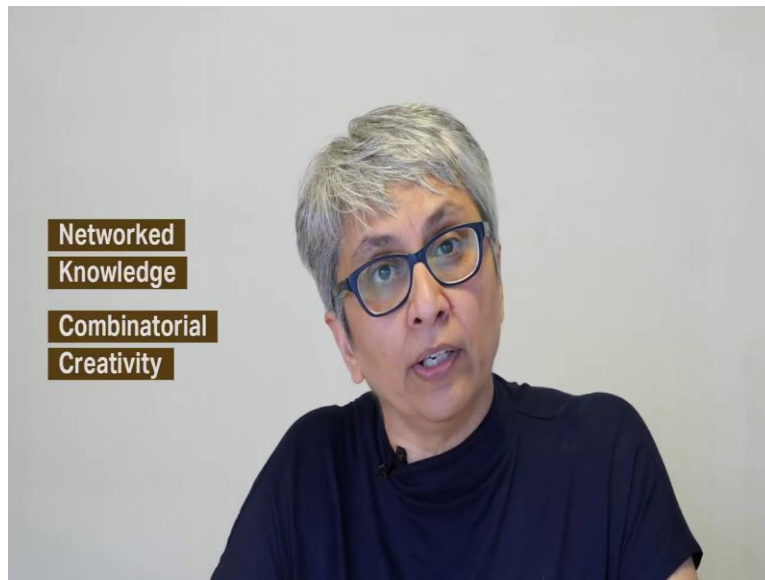
We are now beginning to let it enter the world of our language, which we have not permitted it so far. But networked knowledge and combinatorial creativity are phrases that are becoming commonplace.

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What you see in our books on the front pages is an expression of that combinatorial creativity. We are involved in teacher-training workshops right now so that they can take charge entirely of the bookmaking process until the design team steps in to, as I said, polish and publish it.

As we are transferring this process entirely to schools, the design team remains part of the project still.

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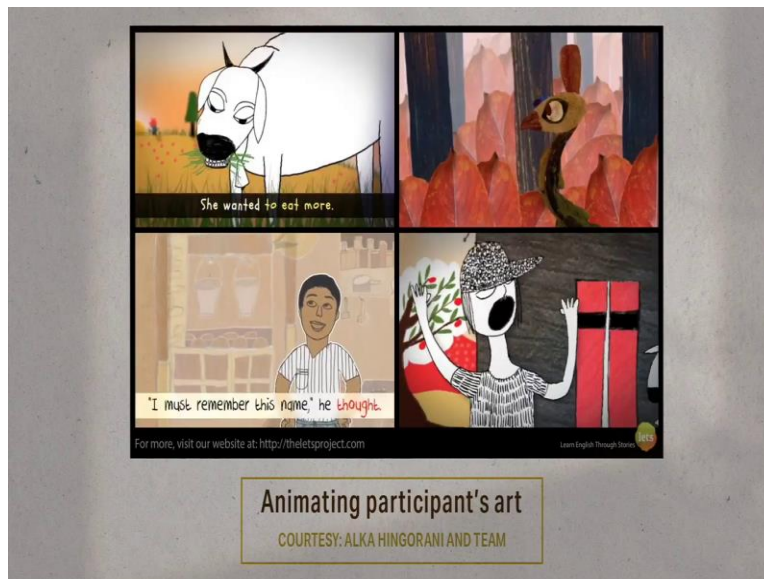
These books are converted into animated shots, again with highlighted captions running beneath so that they become pedagogical tools for language learning. They are also being transformed into a mobile app, which can be downloaded on mobile phones, in village libraries, in rural schools all over the country. The idea, and it is an ambitious idea, no way for it to be completed by a design team as small as ours, but certainly possible to be completed by all the people who have begun to contribute to this process and participate in it.

The idea is for schools around the country, to create their own books, to illustrate them using the talent, the skill, the joy, and the energy of these young children, and to contribute to design studios, again around the country, so that they can translate these books into animation films, perhaps, and mobile apps and use those things as pedagogic tools for learning all kinds of things.

In the first instance, now it is language learning, but it could move, as I said, to other subjects as well. As I speak about this project and as I think about where it has brought us through this project, it seems to me that ethnography is not merely a study of other people, other places, other cultures, other context. Ethnography is something that reminds you of your own place in the world.

The way in which we are wired in our brains, we cannot speak of ourselves without speaking of distinction, a kind of othering that is benign, a kind of othering, that does not diminish but that allows us to grow into a greater sense of who we are. Ethnography is almost an outward exercise of that inward process. It tells me my place in the world. There is no way that design exists without the people for whom it does what it does. And there is no way to know those people without knowing who they are and our own relationship to them.

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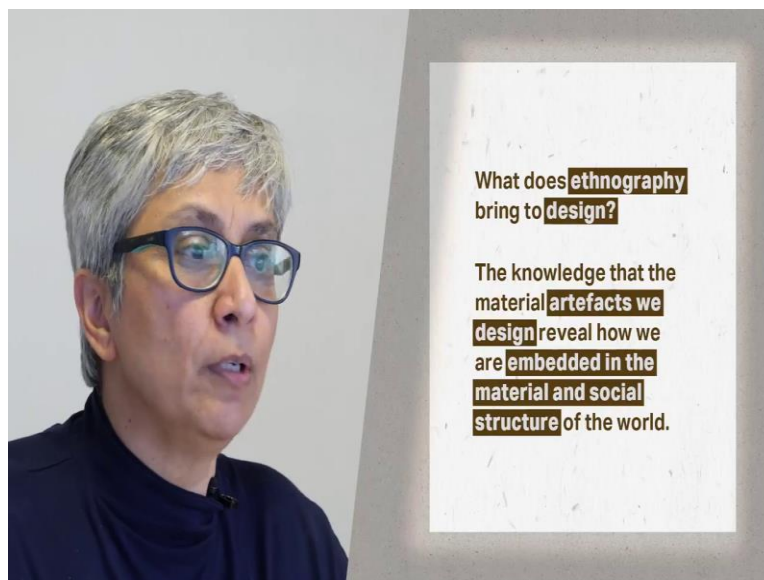
What we do with design is to create, as I said, manifest evidence of how, what we are, and our lives are embedded in the material and social structure of this world. All of this is visible to us in the world around us. And a study of all of this is what is both, design and ethnography.

Professor: That was a really thought-provoking presentation. It made me think of the importance of reflecting on what we learned from our participants. As we heard in the presentation, Professor Hingorani's team had started out with the idea of making books based on stories told by the participant children. Each story would be made into books with different levels of

language complexity. They had hoped that the children would be motivated to read these books because they contained stories told by the children. And the children were excited to see their work in print.

However, they were not as excited to grapple with the language of the books again and again. And the team asked themselves, why would someone read the same story again and again and that too in a language they found difficult. These are the kinds of insights that we gain by spending extended periods of time with our participants.

This particular insight pushed the LETS team to question their assumptions and change their ideas. And they decided to make books in which the complexity of the language gradually increased as the story progressed. So as children read the story and became curious about what happens next, they were motivated to engage with the language.

We see the value of emersion and engagement in another moment in the journey of LETS. This the moment where the team recognised the need to make the process more participatory. This made them revise their process as well as their expected outcomes. For me, it was so interesting to see that concepts such as empathy and relevance to context were not limited to the research alone. They extended the process of making the books and their design.

Earlier, the team had asked children to make piecemeal illustrations that designers would put together as they thought right. But taking the participatory approach, the team started to work with the children to make storyboards, layouts, and so on. So as the project progressed, it gave more agency to the participants to create for themselves. The project team and the participants became collaborators.

This points to a sense of equality and mutual respect between the team and the participants, and it is something that you may have noticed in the works of Professor Joshi and Professor at Athwanker as well. Each of them emphasised in different ways, the importance of respecting their participants, their knowledge, and their agency. We see this idea being applied in the design of their research engagements, and in the products and services, we have created.

And with this, we end our series of case studies. In our next section, we will look back at our entire journey.