

Where does this circle become a point? - Making learning a thoughtful, fun and lifelong journey

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Abstract

Designers play an important role in the area of education. However, educational design as a field is still growing and the need for training designers to think in the field of education and educators to think in the field of design is still grossly underestimated. Some of the key challenges of working in the area of educational design in a country like India are to keep in mind the diversity, the economic challenges of creating products and low literacy levels. However, education provides a space to work with the next generation in areas of human values, leadership, globalization, environment, self-awareness and culture. Hence it becomes essential for designers to innovate and create learning materials, educational products, curriculum/ learning designs that will provide learners with challenging, inspirational and meaningful learning experiences. This paper/presentation looks at the role of content and design in making learning a thoughtful, fun and lifelong journey and approaches the role of the designer as an educational activist. It also questions and unravels the relationships between artist, designer and teacher and the cognitive nature of thinking each of them brings to the field of education. Further building on the interactions between the abstract nature of thinking, and the more concrete nature of products, this paper looks at using arts in educational design as a means to evoke different states of consciousness that engage a student in a personal journey that is rewarding, meaningful and reflective.

Profile

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Srivi is an educator, writer, designer and illustrator. She has written and illustrated several children's books as well as stories for adults. An advocate for the arts with a deep interest in social and community development, she engages with adults and children bringing together the excitement and passion of the arts in simple and thoughtful ways. She has done her Masters in Arts in Education from Harvard and a Masters in Fine arts from Stella Maris College. She has worked as the Creative Director with Sesame Workshop India and taught an undergraduate course at Stella Maris College, Chennai. She has also worked as an arts and social studies teacher at Amber Valley Residential School. She is developing two organizations based in the arts and culture: **Fooniferse- a loony arts universe**, an organization working in and through the arts (www.fooniferse.com); **Art India project**, an organization working to expand awareness about the Indian arts in schools (www.artindiaproject.com). Her works can be viewed on her website: www.sriviliveshere.com

Where does this circle become a point? –

Making learning a thoughtful, fun and lifelong journey

The Metaphor

Circles are fascinating because we can't be sure if they are turning, rotating, moving and if they are, where they start and when they will pause. And as an artist I keep imagining how it might be to sail on an elegant swan on a circle. I wonder how many directions we will all be turning in, the circle, the swan and me. It is quite remarkable to imagine which direction my nose might be pointing in, and which direction the swan's neck would be turned towards, while we make yet another direction change on the circle. And I imagine what kind of directions would be created, if my friend were on a dragon on a smaller or bigger circle instead of me on a swan. The imaginations lead me on to mind-blowing artistic explorations. And this inconceivable set of direction changes makes the circle a beautiful metaphor of education and living. Every individual chooses a different circle, a different moment of time to turn around each point. And yet, all of our circles interact, move into one another's radii, and sometimes pulsate in concentric energies. And while riding on the circle it is inevitable that we begin to notice the enclosed space within it and the ever-spreading space outside of it. And however hard we try; these spaces cannot belong to any one, to any single circle.

Having spent the last ten years in education, art and design, I have been continually drawn into this interconnectedness, where every thought, word and action seems to trigger energies into the vast network of life. I have continually drawn my sources of thinking from diverse fields, to better understand this interconnectedness and to find ways to nurture it in my work. As a designer and educator, a couple of questions that propel me are: What does a designer bring to the platform of educational design? What does design thinking involve? What does an educator bring to the platform? What is it that they can share together to create more meaningful educational experiences? Can they work on a curriculum for life?

Understanding the context

Life is strange. There are no set pathways, no directions, and not much guidance as we live it. Every generation has new challenges and a new world to live in. And while each generation tries to prepare the next one through basic values, philosophies and ways of living, it is easy to forget that the needs and issues of a new generation will always be

different. In today's context, while there has been considerable economic progress for some, others continue to struggle with poverty. Terrorism, religious issues, caste and racial problems, environmental degradation, war and destruction continue to rock all parts of the world. Somewhere, in the course of a struggle to survive through colonialism, world wars and poverty, we have set standards for competition, mass production and values for a fairly selfish world. In order to teach the new generation, it is inevitable that we retrace our steps to look at the world we have created and then begin all over again. Creating an environment, classroom and school culture where a child understands freedom and responsibility, the right to do what he/she desires with an understanding of human values, and builds an aesthetic and affectionate relationship with the environment are the challenges of modern education. In order to create educational spaces that nurture all these, it becomes essential to re-question and redesign education systems, whether they are schools, universities or educational design products.

In this context, is it possible to create a curriculum for life? Is it possible to be an educator, while one continues to be an artist, student and designer? Is it possible to evolve educational spaces for each individual human being and not a mass produced system where both the learning and the learner are dictated and expected to follow?

The Teacher, the Student and the System

And in order to explore these questions, I have spent much time with children and young adults as a classroom teacher, as a workshop coordinator and trainer. These experiences helped me understand the challenges of a teacher as well as a student. As tough as it got along the way, children have constantly encouraged me to create a classroom culture with Freedom, Space, Time, Energy, Democracy, Trust And Leadership - In each of my classes/workshops, there have been moments of pure fun, serious mischief, mistakes, dedication to work, escapades, exasperation, lots of joy and learning. We have pushed the system, and constantly reframed our beliefs about each other, about the role of a teacher and a student. It is a constant process to learn and understand the relationship between teacher and student, while being both an educator and a learner. Each student opens up a new challenge and a new journey. And each student holds an incredible potential for bringing forth new ideas, thoughts and work into the world. However most often, the education system has little time or space to unravel this potential. Often, students are unwilling to explore their own potential and often teachers have little time for anything outside the curriculum or the examination system. And within this vicious circle, we are

time and again creating new parrots to propagate old systems. *“According to Indian folklore, a child taught without taking its instincts into consideration is like a caged parrot which has forgotten its own language, but can go on repeating the words taught to him by his master.”* (Devi Prasad,43)

However in order to break out of this system, both teacher and student need to be alert and aware of themselves and be courageous to re-imagine their futures together. And in order to do that together, it becomes important for them to work on their curriculums together.

Unraveling the idea of a Curriculum

Over my years of working as an educator, as well as a designer of educational products, I realized that a curriculum had to be much more than the content of the course/ product. A curriculum as I began to see - is a framework, for a set of ideas and a group of people who interact with these ideas expanding, reshaping and recreating them.

A curriculum is a dynamic process document that needs to have the space to be recreated, redesigned and if necessary to be completely negated. It is not a printed sheaf of papers, but a living breathing concept constantly reshaping itself.

A curriculum involves the people it is designed for. It is only when the curriculum has a flexibility to incorporate into its design the people and the share of knowledge that they bring to a course can it provide the best deal to all involved.

A curriculum is a space for exploration for the teacher and the students. It is a dialogue based theatrical space and must allow for inclusion, abstraction, and perception of multiple viewpoints.

At the same time, the curriculum must have a character and a form that is unique to its nature and purpose. While new content maybe added, or old content maybe deleted, certain principles and philosophies maybe retained, while they are changed/ transformed to suit the requirements.

A curriculum has several layers of relationship with the one who designs it - Unraveling each layer of this relationship can help in probing further into the meaning, purpose and value of the curriculum and help in making decisions about change, growth and development. A curriculum needs to be a democratic space, where the students can interweave their voices, thoughts and reflections into its original form.

A curriculum is a document of vision, which talks about what it foresees as possibilities of transformation in the people who interact with it. In one sense a curriculum is a space

where people and ideas come together and as a space, it is bound to transform with the energies that people bring into it.

A curriculum is a movement in designing a new culture of thinking that aligns with the course goals, the people involved with it and with the much larger framework of life.

A curriculum is also a space where quality is defined, demanded and expressed in every minute detail.

A curriculum is a framework for me, something that would help me create a system/network of thought about the processes of teaching and learning.

Words and phrases that I would associate with the word curriculum are

Space, dialogue, theatre, flexible, dynamic, people, living breathing document, exploration, democracy, relationship, reflection, vision, form, change, transform, teaching and learning, participation, culture...

Out of all these words, the word 'Culture' becomes a dimension through which I began to interpret the word Curriculum. Be it teaching or designing, I began to work on Cultures of thinking, understanding and relating in the classroom space. I began to further explore these three aspects of culture-building through Cultures of listening, speaking, critique, feedback, participation, self-reflection, expression, communication and conversation in my design thinking as well as teaching.

Loris Malaguzzi, architect of the pedagogical and philosophical thinking that permeates the Reggio experience, once said that we need a teacher who is sometimes the director, sometimes the set designer, sometimes the curtain and the backdrop and sometimes the prompter. A teacher who is both sweet and stern, who is the electrician, who dispenses the paints and who is even the audience who watches, sometimes, claps, sometimes remains silent, full of emotion, who sometimes judges with skepticism, and at other times applauds with enthusiasm .(Rinaldi, 89)



Storybook Designing Workshop at Ilango's ArtSpace, 2009

Interweaving the teacher and the designer

My experience with classroom cultures and a variety of students set me out on a new journey in design. I began to ask myself a new range of questions.

Can a teacher as defined by Loris Malaguzzi and an exciting set of students become a Design product/ Design experience?

Can such a design experience create new meanings in diverse classrooms?

Can such classrooms move towards fun, thoughtful and lifelong learning?

Can students of such classrooms design new and more holistic ways of living?

The Sesame Experience

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With these thoughts, I designed a set of educational products, when I worked at Sesame Workshop India as their Creative director. All three kits elaborated below were co-designed with Ms.Heer Chokshi, the content manager. Both of us brought the ideas of theatre, play and art with creative thinking and storytelling to create a range of products across two years. In the course of our interactions together, we also changed the way content and creative teams work together, by encouraging both teams to think as designers and educators.

The Storypond – is a floor game designed for three to six year old students to learn languages in a fun manner. The gameboard is a 5x5 feet flex sheet that has an abstracted design of a pond with many stones. Each stone has an illustration on it. The objects cover places, people, professions, animals, birds, food items, festivals and seasons. The first level of the game requires students to step on the board and learn basic vocabulary. The second level requires them to construct meaningful sentences about objects. The third level encourages them to build simple stories while crossing the pond.



Storypond, Copyright Sesame Workshop India 2007

Designed for children in slums, the design also acted to serve as a mat for sitting. Also as we were working across several languages, the use of storytelling as a concept to teach a language helped us overcome the barrier of multiple languages in a country as vast as India.

The game gave both the child and the teacher freedom to explore new worlds. As we trained teachers to use the game board, they realized that they had a new power- the power to imagine and create their own stories. While initially they tried to force children to repeat stories, slowly with training, they began to enjoy creating their own stories. The Story Pond also gave the teacher time as children began to play by themselves after initial sessions with the teacher. Since the number of stories that can be created using the game are endless, it opens up the space for exploration, participation, freedom, creative thinking and dynamism.

The game comes with a simple easy to read storybook that can be used to tell stories in the classroom as well as double-up as a guide for the teacher. Since many of our teachers might have only passed high school or just eighth or ninth grade, simplifying the teacher's manual into an engaging storybook, gave them an opportunity to easily access the knowledge within.

Googly's world of Shapes – a math kit, also used the basic concept of story telling. The kit came with hundred pieces of shapes that could be used like a tanagram. It also had a guide storybook and another storybook called King Square. King Square pushed the imaginative boundaries and asked students to rethink how the world would be if we started changing the shapes of things around them. This kit allowed children to learn about shapes as well as create more complex forms using simple shapes.



Copyright Sesame Workshop India 2007

The scribble world – another literacy kit, encouraged pre-writing skills in a playful way. Designed as a package with three storybooks serving as guide books, a blackboard and a pack of chalk, the kit has three levels. In the first level, students imagine moving things around them and create patterns of the movement. For example, a car goes zig zag zig and a child captures the movement through slashes, lines and a zig zag pattern. The second level encourages students to see the potential of hidden forms in simple scribbles. Using the same simple scribble as their base,



Scribble World, Copyright Sesame Workshop India 2008

a class of students comes up with varying images. The third level encourages students to talk about their emotions through scribbles or drawings. Once again, drawing on the strength of storytelling and art, this kit provides opportunities for new ideas every time it is used.

The NCERT experience

Another project that helped me think about design and education together was illustrating primary school math text books for the National council for education, research and training (NCERT). Working on books for grades 2, 3, 4, and 5 across three years, I had a chance to apply design thinking, art history, illustration techniques and social and cultural thinking into each page that I designed. Illustrating lives of fisherwomen, tribal people, mythical stories, lives of children across India, I had the opportunity to understand



math from a very fresh perspective, while also engaging with designing a book that would be used by students across a country as diverse and complex as India. Working closely with Dr. Anita Rampal from the Delhi University, I was able to reflect on how complex ideas like time, numbers and multiplication could be given a complete visual dimension. Also, since these books were illustrated by a number of artists, it gave us all an opportunity to figure out ways to create a unique identity amidst all the diversity.

While all these educational products are some steps towards integrating design and education to create new cultures of learning, there is a long way to go. And it is important that more and more students, educators and designers work together to rethink both education and design.

The Stella Maris Experience

The more challenging of my experiences have always been in working directly with people. Working as a Guest faculty in the Dept of Fine Arts at Stella Maris College, Chennai and working with second and third year undergraduate students raised a lot of new questions. Particularly fascinating were those related to how students perceived freedom and space in the teaching-learning process. What does the responsibility of being creative mean? How does fear and insecurity affect student abilities and understandings of creativity? How can students be encouraged to explore their creativity with both understanding and care?

These questions were some of the most difficult while planning class sessions. While some students warmed up to the idea of a free and open-ended curriculum where the responsibility of their creativity both fascinated and entertained them, for others, the open-ended system was confusing and difficult. Being used to translating given assignments, the idea of evolving their own assignments along a given set of guidelines became difficult tasks. Also a certain layer of insecurity emerged since they were unable to make decisions about the quality of work expected and delivered. Taking ownership of their work and decisions became a complex process to be navigated. This disparity between students who adapted to a flexible curriculum and those who found it a hindrance has made me think about many of the issues of the current educational system and particularly art education.

Arts education in ancient India had a wholesome approach to art and the artist. Though there is no specific documentation that talks about teaching arts to students in their primary years, one of guiding thoughts as mentioned in the chitrasutra of Vishnudharmottara purana is that, in order for an artist to learn painting, he must have learnt sculpture, in order to learn sculpture, he must have learnt the performing arts, dance and in order to learn dance he had to learn music. Hence learning the arts was considered an integrated process, where one art form, affected and informed the other, allowing a student of art to create using the energies and elements of design and art from across all the arts. The approach to arts education also came from a basic philosophy of practising art as yoga and a form of meditation. Hence teaching art did not involve only the intellectual state of development, but was also grounded in awakening spiritual sensitivity. Further arts education was not centred only around creation of art, but also in the experiencing of art. The Rasa theory is highly developed in ancient India and brings out the importance of experiencing art and the qualities required in a listener or observer of art. It is not only important to create art, but also important to share those experiences with the rasika and one of the beautiful concepts developed in traditional Indian art was the concept of ‘sahrudaya’ where the rasika or observer feels one at heart with the performer in order to enjoy the experience. It was also believed that the artist was ready to create only when he was at a state of balance/equilibrium *hrudayavishranti*¹ within himself. In India where art permeated life, every young man and woman with taste had knowledge of

¹ Kapila Vatsyayan, Classical Indian Dance in Literature and the arts, p.6

art, dance and music, as essential factors in literary and aesthetic education.² In fact the amateur artists with knowledge enough to fully appreciate art trends in the country were very numerous and judged the art of the professionals.³ Hence art was not a hobby, or a discipline but a way of life. At the core of artistic training, lay the foundations for building a human consciousness that was rich in the understanding of life, beauty, love and the aesthetics of living.

One of the essential things I find missing in many of today's educational practices is the gentle awakening of the many layers of human consciousness. The role of art and that of design in education lies in this awakening process. Such an awakening of layers of consciousness, leads to a thoughtful, fun and lifelong journey in learning for each individual. Not only does such an experience ensure deeper learning, it also stresses on empathy and relationship with one another. And all these can happen only when there is a conscious attempt to open up the spaces within the educational systems, to create voids and emptiness where each individual can create their own patterns of music, their own directions.

Conclusion

Just like the metaphor of the circle, educational design reaches out in many ways and moves in many directions. Each question and each answer evoke new of many more questions and ideas. A curriculum for life is vast and blends seamlessly with every aspect and time of our lives. And while working on it, it is important to keep the child within ourselves alive. In conclusion, working across the fields of art, design and education, I think it is essential to keep asking how we relate to ourselves and others through these fields, our work, our personality and our values.

I ask myself - Where does a curriculum begin - a curriculum for life; a curriculum that teaches someone to look within and begin to savor the taste of one's own being, one's mind, and the amazing intricacies of human life? Where does a curriculum begin - a curriculum that teaches how to make relationships with people, with the earth, with the worlds within oneself?

Where does this curriculum begin within me? Where are the roots of this curriculum I want to write? What do the branches hold? What is the network behind the twenty pages of any

² Sivaramamurthi, C. (1968), South Indian paintings, Publications Division, Ministry of information and broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhi. p.19

³ Sivaramamurthi, C. (1968), South Indian paintings, Publications Division, Ministry of information and broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhi. p.19

curriculum design that I might ever write? What is its width, span, height? How measurable and how visible is this network? How deep, how profound and how integrated is it with all of life?

And when I finish writing it, will it be a storybook, a puzzle, a game, a music CD, an animation film or an evening with a student?

I wonder...

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