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The Tree of Life

Educational Design: Making learning a thoughtful, fun and lifelong journey

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.

Profile

Srivi Kalyan

Srivi is an educator, writer, designer, illustrator. She has authored, co-authored and illustrated books and stories for children and adults.. She uses the arts in education to create meaningful learning experiences. She is the Founder-Director of Fooniferse Arts Pvt. Ltd (www.fooniferse.com). You can view her works on her website: www.sriviliveshere.com. She can be reached at srivikalyan@fooniferse.com

The Tree of Life

Making learning a thoughtful, fun and lifelong journey

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? Keeping these questions in mind, I decided to work with my favorite metaphor "The tree of life" to understand and unravel the thought processes that go into educational design.

The Metaphor

The tree of life has been represented by several cultures through their art. It is a beautiful metaphor that stresses on the interconnectedness of life. 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 seem 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?

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)



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.



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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. d simple stories while crossing the pond.

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.

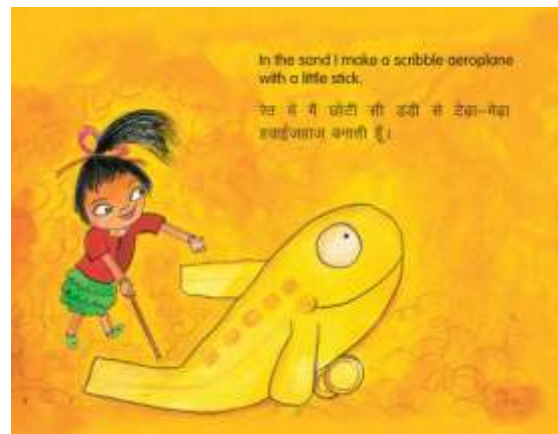
Googly's world of Shapes – a math kit, also used the basic concept of story telling. The kit came with hundred pieces of shapes that could be used like a tanagram. It also had a guide storybook and another storybook called King Square. King Square pushed the imaginative boundaries and asked students 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



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le shapes.

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, 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 opportunity used.



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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.

Conclusion

Just like the metaphor of the tree of life, educational design reaches out in many ways. Each question and each answer branch out into 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. In short, from trees I learn to let

my roots dig deeper into the earth, and my branches spread further into the sky...

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 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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