



Designing for Children

- With focus on 'Play + Learn'

A different perspective towards "Teaching & Learning"

Need to create 'Thinkers' who 'Do'.

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Abstract: The paper elaborates on our vision to create a classroom outside books where every child's brain is set free to think and hence create!

Key words: Involvement, satisfaction and implementation of knowledge.

1. Introduction

Education in its broadest sense is any act or experience that has a formative effect on the mind, character, or physical ability of an individual Education in turn happens through a learning methodology, which can be divided into: Visual: Learning based on observation and seeing what is being learned, Auditory: Learning based on listening to instructions /information, Kinesthetic: Learning based on hands-on work and engaging in activities. For further reading on visual, auditory and kinesthetic learning, please refer to (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Learning>, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education>, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinesthetic_learning)

However in its broadest perspective as can be seen and like most of us have experienced, the last and somehow the most interesting aspect of 'educating' (Kinesthetic learning) has always been given a back seat. We for sure had the so-called practical's (mostly for science subjects) which by all means couldn't have been any further from being 'practical education'. Our aim is to let children learn and explore at the same time.

2. The big Question

According to the educational system in India, majority of schools impart knowledge as and through books. They never look beyond or above it. So the real knowledge which a child

could gain by 'the learning by doing method' involving all the 5 senses is never an option. As designers we believe that children need to be developed into thinkers rather than just doers. Our educational system has helped us develop into doers who follow instructions which has lead us to become outsourcing giants. But the main thought related activities are basically governed by others. This is because our system has developed us to stop thinking and asking the questions Why, Where, What, When, Who, How? With globalization, innovation has become the key word for development, growth and success. But are our children being molded into innovators or are we just thrusting the ocean of knowledge into their little brains so that they get drained as soon as it gets injected?

2.1 A point to ponder

For the sake of a thought, we all know that we never forget how to wear a T-shirt, how to ride a bicycle, play our favorite game, the sequence of a much loved movie and the list could go on. But why is it that we cannot quite easily remember the number of bones in various parts of our body or something as mundane as why is the color of sky blue! As a matter of fact we have even mugged up the latter and faced exams for the same, while the former wasn't put through all that. The simple underlying fact is the sheer interest and practicality with which we dealt the former. Whereas, the latter was done more for others (parents, teachers and competition to reach the 1st rank etc.)

Learning is basically about experiences. But our educational system has not yet woven the experience bit into its curriculum, so the learning gets easily forgotten. Also if we look around ourselves, we would definitely come across a lot of people who have been successful in life without being top-rankers in their academic life. Of course the top rankers too have reached high may be higher, but when we compare the level of satisfaction and pleasure derived from their work, the former ranks higher. The reason being that the former group has chosen their way of life by their choice, it wasn't shoved on them. They might have been listed the last rankers, the good-for nothings and a lot more for a long time, before they realized their potential and lived their dream. What needs to be mentioned here is the time they lose compared to the high-ranking achievers and also that many of them in fact never realize their dreams. It is here that our thought and vision comes to play!

3 Our Vision

We wish and thrive to achieve a state of education where every child is given the freedom to think, explore and then do. Everyone who has ever dealt with children would definitely agree that children have queries and doubts much more than we could imagine answering.

So it goes without saying that more often we avoid or close the flow with very dim-witted answers.

We as designers felt a need to bring out this creative thirst in children and nurture them through some workshops.

4 Our Workshops

We started by conducting workshops on language development. We developed a method where children become story writers, directors, narrators, character developers etc. The whole process has been worked out so that children work together in a team. We always try to group children of varied age and from different walks of life, so that they learn to bridge their differences and come out of their comfort level. Even at a young age we can see the team player, the innovator, the thinker, manager etc grow in them. Their future starts getting molded way before we can imagine it does.

4.1.0 Story-book making We brief them about the elements that form a story and then they are asked to develop a story of their own. And it ends by them creating a complete story book by them. Through this process children actually start developing their writing and communication skills, vocabulary (from their peers, elders and educators), grammar and presentation skills. Refer Pictures 01 and 02.



Picture 01: Story book making workshop, Chennai



Picture 02: Pages from a Story book "The Tiger's Stripes" made by one of the participants of Story book making workshop, Chennai.

4.1.1 Puppet for characters We take it one step ahead by teaching them, how to make puppets .The children then develop a puppet of their story-characters and enact the story out for an audience. By adding the element of making puppets, there is a sense of weaving the learning by doing method. Children while making the characters on their own would be able to weave the characters and enact the story better, it imbibes into their mind. Thus we connect the Visual & Kinesthetic learning.



Picture 03: Finger puppet and Story Telling workshop, Bangalore

The way they convince us of every sequence in the story and their level of imagination in a given time is remarkable! Refer Pictures 03 and 04



Picture 04: children with their backdrop and finger puppets

4.1.2 Working under a constriction Another method is to give the children characters and ask them to build a story with it. Here there is a constraint (with the characters). We need to develop children to come up with solutions under any kind of constraint or adversity. It's very interesting to see the kind of stories they come up with and how they connect the given characters. They are also emphasized to come up with stories that have a moral. For example, in a workshop at Bangalore, we gave random characters to a group of children, the characters given to them were: priest, a boy, dinosaur, dog and bell. The children were asked to come up with a story using these characters. The characters further being developed into finger puppets for enacting the story out. We wondered how the kids would manage to connect these objects into a story in the given time! Refer to picture 05.

Here goes the story in short: "Once there lived a priest who meditated below a banyan tree, a naughty boy playing near by, would always play pranks to distract and disturb him. He wouldn't give in to any of the priest's request or threat. Finally the priest decided to punish him and cursed him to become an animal next time the bell rang in the nearby temple! The boy realized his mistake after he lived an animal's life and apologized to the priest. He learnt the moral that one shouldn't disturb people at work".

The age group of the team which created this story was 7 to 12 yrs.



Picture 05: Stand-up puppets made by children, where the characters were given by us but the story was weaved by them.

In the whole process the children do face various levels and kinds of difficulties, like the appropriate word to be used, the way to narrate a speech, the formation of paragraphs and how best to begin and end the story so that the interest of the reader is maintained. This is where we came in to help and imparted some language skills, an urge to develop vocabulary, improved writing, communication, presentation skills and lots more. In fact we were able to even detect some children who had incredible imagination power but were laid back in their mode of expression. We are happy that we could help them come out of their “i-can-never-do-this” mode to “wow-i-have-written-a-book” sense of accomplishment. The children are encouraged to illustrate their story, this helps them put their thoughts on to paper. For most us would still find it difficult to give a clear picture to the face of characters in our imaginary stories (like the one’s most us would have made up for our children at some point of time!). So, leave alone, putting those characters on paper! But as a matter of fact no thought, no creation is complete unless it is tangible or useful and the first step to it is its depiction. This would create a mind block and an upcoming idea is submerged and thus dissolved into oblivion. It’s because we have somehow cut off the link between the mind and the hand. We need to see that the younger generation can keep this link alive. Thus we see to it that each child at the end of the workshop carried home a complete book (which includes the illustrations) created by them, which would constantly remind them of what they were able to do and what more they can do in future. This is what we miss out on a normal educational format!

4.2.0 Game Design workshop The other workshop we have conducted was on children developing their own games. We all know and could unanimously agree on how good these kids are with games in any form (board or digital). So here we tried to utilize the potential strategist (in every child) to create games, on various topics, by working in groups.

Children developed games on diverse topics, ranging from how to teach math, to memory development, general knowledge etc. Refer pictures 06.



Picture 06: Children at the Game Design workshop, Coimbatore.

This particular workshop not just triggered the creativity in those children, but went a long way in them doing an in depth research on a particular topic, coordinating a chain of facts in one game, learning about strategy development, creating and giving instructions and last but not the least, instilling a great sense of accomplishment, which can never be matched by just winning a game. At the end of this workshop each child could carry home a game they have created and would have at least played 5 new games (created by the other teams). We believe that the parents also need to open up and spend more time with children. In most of our workshops we do encourage parents to participate. Some, such as the game workshops had some parents participating. Here children formed groups with parents and develop games together. While these kind of interactive sessions always helps children learn a lot. It's the parents who have been benefited by being able to appreciate a child's potential while comprehend their weakness too. Standing as an equal, parents are able to gauge and guide their children better. Parents can have such activities at home with their kids. With every new session the parent-child gap only gets shorter.

5 Conclusions

In a normal school a child's potential is marked by just marks and recorded by the corresponding report cards, but in our system every child has achieved and hence is an achiever! It goes without mentioning that this achievement also remains and reminds not

just the child but also the parents about their child's budding future, so that they can deal with them better.

We wish to confirm once again that this is not a complete alternative to the present education system, but is a fresh outlet to make those words in the books more effective and have a lasting impact.

Our motto and vision has been further strengthened by this innocent voice raised by a student Umberno Maturana. Maturana is the young son of a Chilean biologist, he felt unhappy at school because he felt his teachers were making it impossible for him to 'learn'. They wanted to teach him what they knew, rather than drawing out what he needed to learn. As a result Maturana wrote "The Student's Prayer", of which this translation is an abridged version.

The Student's Prayer

"Don't impose on me what you know,

I want to explore the unknown

And be the source of my own discoveries.

Let the known be my liberation, not my slavery.

The world of your truth can be my limitation;

Your wisdom my negation.

Don't instruct me; let's walk together.

Let my richness begin where yours ends.

Show me so that I can stand

On your shoulders.

Reveal yourself so that I can be

Something different.

You believe that every human being

Can love and create.

I understand, then, your fear

When I ask you to live according to your wisdom.

You will not know who I am

By listening to yourself.

Don't instruct me; let me be.

Your failure is that I be identical to you" . . . Maturana.

The following link

(<http://www.hindu.com/op/2009/11/08/stories/2009110851351400.htm>)

has an article "I only want to enjoy my childhood ma" by Inumella Sesikala which is like a glimpse of every child's mind. Also at (<http://beta.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/article47027.ece>) Maturana's poem is mentioned and Sir Abdul Kalam's insight on the need for creative learning can be read.

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