



Designing for Children

- With focus on 'Play + Learn'

At School with Design

Early Explorations in Introducing Design in the Curriculum at The School,
Krishnamurti Foundation of India (KFI), Chennai

Aarti Kawlra, Indian Institute of Technology Madras, India aarti@tenet.res.in

Deepa Kamath, Graphic Design Consultant, Chennai & Mumbai, deepa.kudvakamath@gmail.com

Abstract:

"As teachers we have recognized that space that lends itself to use in multiple ways is far more valuable than space which can be used only in one way... A room with a few mats and possibly chaulkies will not only remain clean but also provide infinite opportunities for small group work, music and dance, sitting in a circle, reading separately, etc. Thus setting space free of heavy structure appears to be one of the key elements of design ..."

G. Gautama, Principal, The School KFI, Chennai 1995

As parents of The School, we had, on many occasions, talked with Gautama about introducing design to students at the high school level. The teachers had already been thinking of this for some time and were only too willing to support the introduction of a program that could eventually develop into a regular course offered in Std XI and XII. This paper outlines the authors' experience in developing and teaching 'Design Studies' at The School, KFI Chennai for two Class XI batches during the years 2001-2003. The experiment, we believe, was perhaps a few years ahead of its time. More than eight years later, speaking to some of the students who had taken the course revealed interesting observations pertaining to the introduction of design within school curricula.

While inputs for the course were taken from vastly diverse subjects - fractals, architecture, fashion, visual communication, basic design skills, art history and culture studies - the direction the experiment finally took was an outcome of active reflection amongst the three of us who taught the course, students' feedback in class and from the experience of some teachers at the School. A summer apprenticeship was introduced as part of the course and continues to be a format available to high school students to expose themselves to the professional practice of design.

The emergent approach at the end of the second year was to view "design" as an exciting means for the unraveling of order and complexity in one's wider environment - nature, society and the built environment. A combination of illustrated lectures, demonstrations, field trips and projects enabled the students to engage with these contexts. The pedagogic practice of "design" involved the facilitation of *spontaneous critical thinking* and in establishing *meaningful connections* between materials, technologies, products, places, people and processes. The guiding principle behind the learning objectives outlined was not to look for neat answers but rather at the depth of explorations and questions emerging from the students' own initiative.

This paper is aimed as a sharing for any future initiative to bring design into school curricula and hopes to provide some key learning and recommendations for the same.

Key words: Design, Curriculum, Experiment, Pedagogic Practice

1. Introduction

The tree lined, flower strewn lane leading to the school complex is perhaps the most contemplative of walking paths in the school. It is flanked by Besant Avenue and the Blue Cross building to one side and the school's pond and open air theater on the opposite side. Chance meetings often led to long conversations here and it was during one such dappled and fragrant afternoon, that Kalpana, Deepa and I decided to put our energies together in developing a syllabus and teaching program to introduce design to students of The Krishnamurti School in Chennai.

The fact that all three of us were parents of The School ensured that at the heart of our endeavor was the shared belief in education as the space and time to "learn how to learn" rather than to pursue knowledge for its own sake. We also complemented each other in terms of our individual interests, skills and backgrounds - together we had competencies in architecture and space design, graphic design and visual communication, sociology, research methodology, crafts, textiles and fashion. The fact that we were neighbors permitted many creative discussions around walks and cups of tea. Our own children and their friends, often in the vicinity of these sessions, provided many a stray drops of wisdom in the early stages of the development of the program.

2. The Space in the Curriculum

The most important aspect of the Design Studies course was the curricular space within which it was offered. It is well known that contingencies of national level curricula, and the final exams associated with them at the class X and class XII levels, rarely permit experimentation. Most schools are under pressure to provide syllabus focused teaching and learning programs for the high school years. At The School, however, some very open and innovative responses to the Class XI program were being discussed and implemented.

The then Principal, G. Gautama, ruminates on its evolution:

"In the year 1995 we had only two students writing the ISC examination. We had to rethink the situation and come up with a viable answer. The only other alternative was to close down classes XI and XI. We had to offer something that would talk to the spirit of the students at this age. Abandoning the traditional wisdom that when academics get intense, the curriculum should be lightened, we took the counterintuitive position of making the curricula more demanding. Three weeks stay on the farm, one week in a place of

wilderness and a two-week trip to a place of environmental and social struggle. Students responded with great enthusiasm!"

Given the backdrop of a liberal and spirited curricular space within which experiments were already taking place, we entered this window of trial with a sense of ease and shared understanding. The boundaries were defined by the Class XI schedule. The course was located within the weekly timetable and students were given a clear choice of subjects to opt from which included Design Studies. It was made clear to the students that the course was not certified by the national Examination Board but it was being offered as a supplement for those who were interested along with another course on Health Studies.

The students were visibly intrigued and excited about the upcoming experiment. We set about creating a formal syllabus complete with weekly lesson plans and semester based modules. We also set about outlining the learning objectives, readings, class room and home exercises, model exams and assessments including criteria for evaluation of the same.

3. Evolution of the Course

The initial draft and format of the syllabus that was implemented for the first batch of students was academically very comprehensive. It covered "theory", "method" and "practice". However it did so in linear progression. The course was to unfold with theory and cascade into the practical application of what was learnt. It was an exercise from head to foot literally. We began with history, followed by lectures on methods of data collection and analysis and ended with individual design projects and internships for an exposure into one or another area of professional design practice such as advertising, fashion, architecture and so on. Our teaching methodology was predominantly didactic and as we moved into the next year we were clearly rethinking both the course structure and its mode of delivery.

Active reflection and analysis of the first year's lesson plans, assignments and student assessments led us to the realization that we had to adopt a more creative approach to make it more meaningful to both the students and to ourselves. In our initial course design theoretical inputs had been structured along three contexts or milieu for comprehending thought and action at the individual and collective levels - nature, society and the built-environment. It became obvious to us that these were not just contexts for studying cognitive patterns - e.g. symmetry in nature, development of human tools in different

cultures and shelters and dwellings, but would also form the basis for all our explorations in design processes and applications. Our own skills and expertise also fit into this pattern and the course developed a fresh approach in its second year of implementation. Table 1 provides a snapshot of this evolution.

Syllabus Format Year 1	Iteration Year 2	Explanation with Lesson Plan examples
Theory		
<p><i>Lectures on</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Individual & Collective: Nature, Society & the Built Environment 2. Design History and Art Appreciation: World and India 	<p><i>Group Projects on</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patterns in Nature, eg. Symmetry • Material Culture Tools - Form & Use; • Correlation between Design and Nature - eg. in History • Human Dwellings Patterns in India 	<p>Theory, Method and Application become integrated into Lesson Plans centered on contexts meaningful for the students - the classroom, the school, the home, the neighborhood and the country</p>
Methodology		
<p><i>Lectures on</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data Collection • Analysis & Definition of the Problem • Design Synthesis 	<p><i>Group Projects</i> On understanding Design Processes—divergence, convergence and synthesis with examples from the three environments</p>	<p>Understanding design processes by taking examples from art and design history, eg Art Nouveau and its inspiration from Nature</p> <p>Toys Module: Research: Collect, Classify, Observe Audit: Compare, Contrast, Analyze Redesign: Improve, Alter, Range Development</p> <p>Space and Built Environment: "Take a Walk", "Go find Something"</p>
Application		
<p><i>Classroom exercises on</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visualization Skills • Materials Exploration • Media Technology 	<p><i>Independent Projects</i> Design Audit, design or redesign of a product, space or social system or service integrating design thinking and design process</p>	<p>The aim was to empower students to research and design a product/service/system or space such in any of the 3 contexts - nature, society and built space</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Design of Postcards inspired by an artist/design movement /nature – Locks and Keys – Quilter’s Dream – Kitchen process flow in a local restaurant – Photo Essay on People and Faces in and around the Mylapore Temple – Redesign of the School Meals Washing Area

Table 1. Design Studies: Evolution of the Classroom and pedagogic practice

4. The Emergent Approach

We soon realized that the course needed to center around the three key environments - nature - society - built environment/space. The engagement within each of these contexts was based on individual preferences and meaning. We had specified the boundaries and creativity was given a free hand within the same. So our classroom interactions evolved from being instructive and assignment oriented to those that were predominantly self-directed and student-centric. The course moved from lecture based pedagogic practice to facilitation and guidance in group projects and independent assignments. It had become what The School had envisioned the Class XI space to be - "... an atmosphere where students would learn the art of self-directed learning? ... an atmosphere where the role of the teacher would be that of an educator learner? ... an atmosphere where the student is the learner educator." G. Gautama

5. Student Feedback

After a nearly eight year hiatus we decided to contact some of the students who had taken the course. We drafted a set of broad questions and reproduced below are some of the responses:

STUDENT 1

Q. What made you join the design course when it was being offered at The School?

A. It was said to be the first of its kind, at the high school level - this was exciting enough!

Q. What did you like most -the theory part or the "doing" bits?

A. Both really. The exposure to the theory helped the practical. For instance, I recall the class on 'The Great Artists' where we were exposed to the work of Manet, Monet, Renoir and Van Gogh. Learning that a blue sky in a painting did not only have shades of blue in it opened a little door in my head - because until then, I knew this only passively

Q. Is there anything you learnt in the design course that still comes in use today - either at your workplace or in your daily life?

That what you finally create is a result of many things that you work on, that may not seem to be directly related to it but will enrich it anyway. And that the real art is in doing some unromantic things consistently. Such as color charts which I just did not enjoy working on - but did help a lot in looking and learning to see things.

Q. *Did learning about design in your plus 2 influence your choice of career?*

Without a doubt!

STUDENT 2

Q. *What module did you enjoy the most?*

There were 2 modules actually, that I enjoyed the most. The first being one of the introductory classes, where we were exposed to various design exercises that encouraged us to draw what we saw and eliminate pre-conceived mental images. The second, was the module on re-design- the idea of designing a product around functionality and comfort and not merely aesthetics, was a brilliant revelation to me! Both modules provided me with a wonderfully new perspective to design and art.

STUDENT 3

Q. *Can you share your views on the Design Studies course?*

A. The course merely demanded that we look, observe and question. Now, looking back, I cannot imagine a thing more valuable than this! There were no right answers, no mistakes and no formulas whatsoever; this for me suitably crammed the void that science left in me. There is no way I would have ever opted out of that course. It felt good!

The design course was versatile. Over the year we were exposed to several aspects of design, design history and art movements through which I evolved an understanding of my own. Objects around me were no longer impassive - they were ideas.

I truly believe it was this one module that gave me the courage to venture into the field of art & design. It drew me to loving and appreciating furniture design & photography. I went on to apprentice under a revered photographer, and then joined an advertising firm, all of this only because the course stirred a little something in me!

6. Conclusion

The Design Studies course was an experiment that is extremely relevant in the present times. Not only is this reflected in the student feedback it is increasingly a requirement in the current age of information, images and interaction. For Jayashree Nambiar, present principal and teacher of The School for more than two decades, "Design reflects intent".

It is only when perceived structures and forms are broken and re-aligned or re-structured that one realizes that design is indeed empowering. Design Studies offered this “play with structures” for students - be it the wash area near the dining hall, the class room seating plan and furniture, the color in a painting, the form of a given toy All this, when done in collaboration with those involved, can lead to dramatic change. The course, even if unwittingly, made the students aware of the possibility of their own participation in wider change processes.

In our view it was a demonstration of the fact that design “allows one to open-up to questioning,” and enables one to deal with the abstract in a more tangible and meaningful manner. The fact that it was able to provide students with a way of thinking, seeing and acting in order to make sense of the myriad complexities around them, is reason enough to highlight its significance and value at the school level even today.

Acknowledgements

Kalpana Korwar, a practicing architect from CEPT, Ahmedabad, parent of the School and co-teacher of the course, complemented our work with vital inputs on how students could be sensitized to space and the built environment around them. Her special lateral approach to learning was always refreshing!

The Design Studies course would have remained a syllabus on paper but for the encouragement to experiment with it, offered by The School. G Gautama and Jayashree Nambiar had the vision to see its value in education and were consistently engaged in design thinking within their own pedagogic and organizational practice. Their thoughts and suggestions have been invaluable in the present reflections on the course.

Finally, this paper acknowledges all our students who opted for this course and trusted us with their time and effort unconditionally.

Select References

- Edwards, B. (1993) *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, Harper Collins Publishers, London.
- Feagin, S. and P. Maynard eds. (1997) *Aesthetics*. Oxford Readers. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Hall, E.T. (1966) *The Hidden Dimension*. Anchor Books, New York.
- Itten, J (1975) *Design and Form*. The Basic Course at the Bauhaus. Revised Edition. Thames and Hudson, London

Kawira, A. (2003) "At School with Design" in Journal of the Krishnamurti Schools, No.7 July KFI, Chennai, pp. 95-97.

Levi-Strauss, C. (1963) "Social Structure" in Structural Anthropology. French transl. by C. Jacobson and B.G. Schoepf, Penguin Books.

Papanek, V. (1972) Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change. (Paperback 1999) Thames & Hudson, London.

Schumacher, E.F. (1973) Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered. Abacus Book, London.

Thapan, M. ed. (1998) Anthropological Journeys. Reflections on Fieldwork. Orient Longman, Chennai.