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As Shikshamitra happened in 2005, art started happening around it. Shikshamitra was an alternative school/learning centre for 8-16 year old boys and girls from a slum community. Experiments in learning processes, class durations, contents, forms and modes of evaluations highlighted its span of existence from April 2005 to January 2011.

Among other subjects, drawing, painting, various crafts, viewing art shows and films, listening to and trying music, theatre and dance happened every day in some form or the other. These artistic activities took between one and a half to two hours of the total learning time (6 hours) in a day – the same as Math or English.

Art, and all that it encompassed, simply became a way of living for us as it took root in the lives of both children and teachers. Art was not merely a ‘class’ or an ‘extra-curricular’, it was everywhere: on walls, on doors, on our notebooks, on paper and on cloth, it even entered most of the exams. If drawing, singing and theatre were parts of English and Art classes, they were parts of Geography and Math classes as well.



Group collage inspired by Picasso's Guernica



“Drawing, clay work, sewing, theatre, singing, dancing are essential to studying because there are many who do not like to and cannot just read.” - Anita

The art that resulted was not just on paper with coloured pens. Here, cloth and clay were constant companions and paintbrushes, glue and scissors were ready at hand for the kids to take as needed. We consciously tried to implement the practice of re-use. Aside from paints, new materials were rarely bought. Used papers, thongas (envelopes made of newsprint), discarded paper boxes, old clothing were all recreated and re-used for drawing, painting, displays and stitching projects.

Borrowing ideas from school, the teachers started to create their own cards, wrapping paper, bags and envelopes out of old greeting cards, cloth, newspaper, magazines and of course, colour. Everyday objects at home got a touch of colour and an ‘arty look’. Aesthetics was touching people’s lives and recycling came more naturally to many.



Door painted by Bikey



The Art Teachers

The very first art teacher in Shikshamitra sowed the spirit of originality, recycling, and clean up after art. Atreyee could fleet through stories as well as arts and craft, while helping children to pick up the basic skills of drawing at the same time. She would encourage every individual style, inculcate that there was no “right” or “wrong” in art, ask children to keep drawing or colouring beyond the limits of a single sheet of paper (she simply had the child add on

another sheet, if the child had to continue her line of thought). Her task was difficult – to get the students out of their habit of copying from books and draw completely on their own. Sharing colours, restricting drawing to two colours, or even painting by mixing the leftover colours challenged children to appreciate and make the best of available resources.

Atreyee left within a year. Shortly after Shikshamitra started, Maura had joined. She came in once a week to do spoken English with the students. She brought a lot of energy, movement, songs, colours, books, figurines and drawings – all for the sake of speaking English. The first year in Shikshamitra, however, witnessed rowdiness, destruction, defiance and an unsettling discomfort among the students. Maura kept returning home from Shikshamitra thinking she wouldn’t come back the next week, but she returned every time to this mad school. The children often giggled more than they spoke, using Maura’s class as time for some fun. While they did learn some English, they didn’t use it very often. It came out spontaneously in bits and pieces when Maura did some colouring or a fun worksheet.



Invitation card for an exhibition at Shikshamitra was made of recycled materials and original artwork

Was there a message in this for us?

After a year, when Atreyee had left, Maura took up as the art teacher. Technically, she wasn’t an art teacher. A creative teacher who is sensitive to children’s responses, doodles, writing, emotions, craft and art, Maura focused on her art classes using the same energy, her love for movement, fun, colour and



Painting of a kettle with leftover colors; Painting with two colors and encouraging every individual style; Learning English with lots of dancing and song

books – her whole self. The focus was art, and this meant finding the artist within each child and helping her or him to realize that.

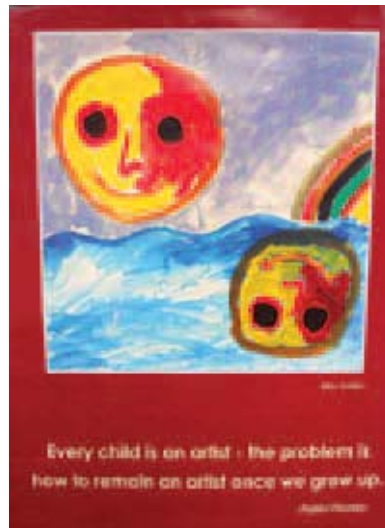
What evaded us in the previous year suddenly became clear. Children concentrated and settled in the art class (though it really took two years), listening well for the first time to what Maura was trying to say. The more they listened, the more they talked.

They had to speak up to ask for colours or help, or if they wanted to express an idea. *English was now happening more in our art classes.* Soon, the spoken English class that Maura had been taking lost its meaning and was discontinued.

Maura’s art classes embraced Life; the lessons connected the children to themselves, to the world around them and to the languages (English and Bengali); most importantly, they crossed the limits of the classroom. The classes extended into visits to art galleries (exhibitions of K. G. Subramanyam, contemporary artists or even Gond Art of Madhya Pradesh), streets, parks, a local potter’s kiln and Maura’s own garden. They were thankfully more than art classes: students were exposed to a range of possible art media, including oil pastels, the various types of paints, papers, ‘found’ objects (like feathers, wrappers, stamps, etc), brushes, clay, needle and thread, baking, music, and more. She also invited many artists and artisans. The classes touched upon the fundamentals of recycling, conservation, symbiosis, and also the connectivity of art and life.

Learn and Earn Project emerged out of a two-month long theme-teaching

session on cloth at Shikshamitra. We strove to find new products that showcased the individuality of our students on bags, diary covers, bookmarks, coasters, jewelry. Mixing art and needlework on cloth, saleable items were designed, produced and finished – reaching a point of perfection. There was quality control, too. Children learned to price an item, pack, display, sell and deliver products while also keeping track of the sales money at fairs or exhibitions inside and outside Shikshamitra. At the same time, they were saving money in their student accounts.



Poster designed by Shikshamitra



Selling Shikshamitra products;



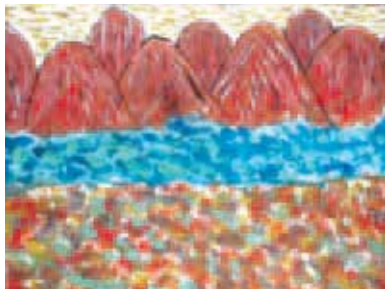
Sketching on the street; Observing and taking notes at the K.G. Subramanyan exhibition; Pencil sketching and water colors in Maura’s garden



Comparing hairstyles of two students; EVS metamorphosis of a cockroach



Each piece a one-off work of art



Rohit's try at Van Gogh style



Series of Raj's drawing progress

“Find your own style – don't copy”

Shikshamitra tried to lay its foundation on the above words. Every child was encouraged to find her/his own style whether it was in language, EVS or art. One could be inspired by Van Gogh or Picasso, the style of an author, an interesting worksheet or even the way a teacher narrated a story. Students would learn to see and think differently, and then become

inspired to come up with their own original idea or thought.

Raj Naskar had stayed out of school by choice. He joined Shikshamitra in search of novelty and to “learn something,” as he put it. Raj loved to draw but he insisted on copying from books, calendars or advertisements. No requests, coaxing, or explanations could change him. One afternoon, Raj came to me holding a picture copied from an English primer. “It looks fine,” I nodded. “Since you insist on copying, why don't you copy that tree outside?”

He sat and drew the tree. He drew as much as he could see within the window frame. “I cannot see more than that,” he said, “if I look outside there is more to that tree. I will draw as much as the frame permits,” Raj declared. I nodded. Next, I saw him sitting at my door drawing my profile as I worked at the table. That afternoon he added originality to his drawing by “copying.” He was copying real life. Since then, he tried to draw his own pieces, and there was less and less copying.

Sk. Samrat, like Raj, refused to stop copying. Orphaned at the age of 5, Samrat defied instructions. He would rather tear up his “copied drawing” than make one on his own when the art teacher insisted. The art teacher insisted, and kept losing her temper. The insistent art teacher left. Maura came in with fresh energy, breathing life into art. Children were creating their own designs using colour, thread, sequins. Samrat was found to be busy embroidering along his own drawing – an original

piece drawn for the sake of that embroidery. And then - he did lose his urge to copy. He found a new passion for creating his own drawing embroidery designs, murals on the walls, and even started illustrating his own story.

We began to notice that each child had a tendency to draw the same thing over and over again, not unlike the kind of studies a professional artist might create. We encouraged many of them to make a small drawing book by stapling old A4 sheets of paper together so the backs could be used. Chaitali made flowers, Mohan drew colourful faces, Rohit did cats, Babai painted mountains, and Ador made swirly “wave” designs... Over and over in new colours and designs.

We have painted our classroom walls, what about painting other people’s walls?

Just before school let out for the summer one year - in order to clean up the school a bit - we partitioned parts of the wall along the corridor (with pencil lines) and asked each child to sit on the floor and do a painting. By this time, the children felt comfortable with the different kinds of paints and paintbrushes. They were always encouraged to paint from their hearts - after making some plan in their minds - and their art was never done using pencils, scales or erasers.

It was a crazy idea. I approached Maura and the students to come over to my house. Would they like to

paint my walls? But why? Wouldn’t it be a bit risky? I had my own list of reasons why:

- The walls would look pretty and different.
- Instead of hanging framed pictures, murals by children would look much better.
- The space around the switchboards gets dirty. Paintings around these would cover the dirt and prevent further mess.
- It will also be a trial run for the students to paint someone’s walls according to her wishes and not theirs. It would be like delivering an order.
- For a change, the art class would happen at someone’s house.
- The work would be paid for in kinds. There would be hot lunch for all and a donation to buy colours.

The students poured into my house, armed with paintbrushes, beaming confidently. I explained what I wanted and showed them the specific walls, where I wanted the work done.

Maura made rectangles in pencil on the dining space wall. 12 such rectangular spaces accommodated 9 students. 3 students were absent but they would come over later, sometime, and fill in their reserved spaces. They stood in rows with palettes of colours staring hard at their wall space. No pencil used, they started painting right away into their wall bit. Maura and I kept exchanging worried glances. The inmates of my house shuddered, fearing the spoiled outcomes.



Embroidered painting by Sk. Samrat



Beautifying a dirty switchboard



Getting started on the wall



Little did they know what surprises awaited them. Meanwhile, girls had grouped in pairs and had started painting around the switchboards. As they finished, they added a few dabs here and there, and a border to make it look prominent. My bedroom wall had been taken over by a team of 5 and two more artists beautified the switchboards. Sajahan was one student who always stood out by his presence, his involvement with Shikshamitra and was a natural leader. He just stood there and observed. Soon he singled out a prominent wall space (not considered part of the artable walls by me) and started dabbing brown paint onto the clean, white wall. Having shocked the skeptical onlookers, gradually a tiger emerged in a marshy setting (interestingly, this boy comes from Sunderbans).

The painting spell lasted for about three hours, ending in a simple lunch and a lot of singing and dancing. Looking at the walls, a natural dialogue and critique took place. The children were assessing their own work. At the end, some observant students noticed that a few areas had become quite dark because of too much colour mixing or dirtied paints, etc. We asked

some of the children who understood the concept of ‘fixing up’ to put the finishing touches on certain areas, straightening out lines around a light switch by mixing a similar colour, adding a bright colour over a dark patch where a younger boy lost control of his mixing abilities, cleaning up a splotch or two that wasn’t meant to be there. All cleaned up the rooms, washed and packed the art materials.

And what emerged?

We knew that here was a group of confident, young artists who could manage space and do up people’s walls. They had the ideas in their heads and could express them in paint without prior pencil work. We felt that some of the students could be grouped together for the best results in future. They could form a team and take up ‘wall orders’ and finish it beautifully – from start to finish.

Much later, these students - in a team with or without Maura - went over to other schools and organizations to teach students and teachers there how to paint up their walls. Quite a few government schools in rural West Bengal now have a rich, colourful façade created by their teachers and students. Shelters for railway platform children can boast of beautiful interiors done up by the children themselves – motivated by the children of Shikshamitra.



A spotted tiger emerged out of the brown squiggles



A colourful wall by young artists nearly done



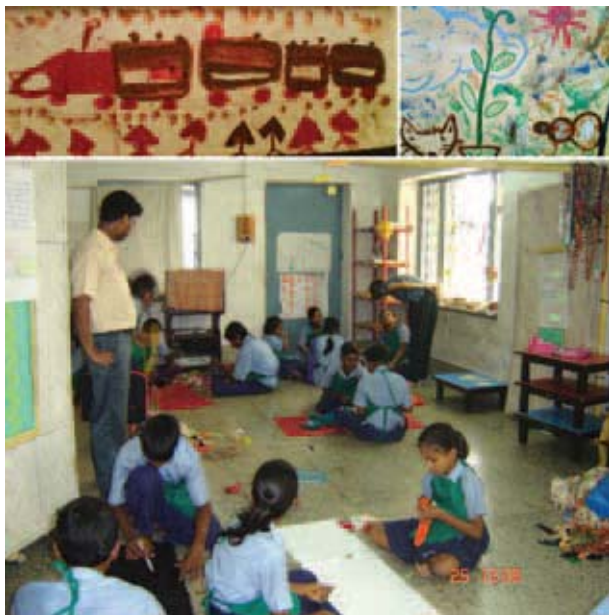
Wall mural done by children of shelter at Kharagpur platform

Art with responsibility

Painting or drawing does not only mean sitting still and using colours, the proverbial “sit and draw.” It is saving up colours and not wasting. Painting and drawing mean looking after the art materials: colours, brushes, glue, paper, scissors, and cloth – they all need care and they want a room of their own. They want to return to their own spaces, like we return home. That’s why in art class we recycle just the right size boxes to fit each of the various art supplies. Later, we don’t have to search for them. We can easily share them. And what is most important, we don’t have to wait for our teachers to give them out. We can all help ourselves.

I asked one student, Rohit, to list out how we do things differently at our school. Here’s what he came up with:

- We used to draw in a drawing book, now we use the back of used paper for our pictures.
- Paper that is used on both sides is made into recycled envelopes we use around school.



Two wall murals done by children of shelter at Kharagpur platform; Art classes always encouraged students to share materials

- We cover our books with newsprint and then decorate them.
- Once we have finished painting, we mix up all the leftover paint and create new colours to experiment with.
- We store paper scraps, bottles, corks, plastic packets, buttons, wood, pencil shavings, etc. All of these are sure to be useful later on.
- We keep our belongings in an old paper box after decorating it up a bit.
- We put used tea leaves in our flower pots.
- We create decorations out of scrap for Saraswati Puja.
- We try to use plastic as little as possible – but we don’t manage to do it properly all the time.

The art shelf

When we rearranged the library/resource room to fit more items we had to get rid of a shelf that had been on the wall. The shelf made its way into the main room where the children did their art classes most of the time. We took one art class to have the kids go out and find small boxes that would fit like a puzzle onto the shelves and house the various supplies we wanted them to have access to: scissors, string, tape, colour pencils, sketch pens, one-sided reusable paper, newspapers, paintbrushes, erasers, drawing pencils, sewing supplies, etc. We consistently asked the children to use things and return them to their boxes so that other people could use the same items. For clean up, we’d line the boxes up, fill them with things strewn about the workspace and then pop them back on the shelves. Of course, it didn’t always work and kids were putting things in the wrong places and then there were no scissors or all the glue was completely finished, or... but the children were learning the concept that things could be shared more efficiently if we took care to return them to their proper places, and if we maintained them well.



“Clean-up is equally important as the art project”

After each class, Maura would spread newspaper and the children would wash their brushes and water vessels well, bring them back and place them in a certain way in order to let them dry. We encouraged the girls NOT to help the boys with their clean up, a natural instinct. Everyone was to clean up their own area and then look around and help out with other jobs like sweeping and scrubbing paint from the floor. All paintbrushes had to be placed with the brush end facing one way and when these were dry the teacher would put them away with brush end up for the next class. The kids learned the hard way first, ruining a lot of brushes by putting them away wet with brush side down. All the water vessels were dried on the newsprint facing down and put away later so that the box they are kept in wouldn't become wet. Now all the kids at Shikshamitra use this method and we see Sajahan teaching his little students in the community library project.

So what did we learn?

Organically, we were doing and saying things around art that closely coincided with the art experts and pedagogues. The children did not read the experts, nor did we consciously go through them prior to our art classes.

But, when asked to tell their views on art one of our students, Dolly, wrote:

“I believe children want to draw more than adults do. When children cannot express in words, they say all that by drawing. Drawing means colours. There is colour in every man, animal and bird. We can express anything through colour, but adults don't agree with that. When a child grows up, she starts listening to others and does what others do, so she decides not to draw anymore. She loses her identity.”

And the quote by Herbert Read in *Art: The Basis of Education* by Devi Prasad, says:

“A child's art, therefore, is its passport to freedom, to the full fruition of all its gifts and talents, to its true and stable happiness in adult life. Art leads the child out of itself. It may begin as a lonely, individual activity, as the self-absorbed scribbling of a baby on a piece of paper. But the child scribbles in order to communicate its inner world to a sympathetic spectator, the parent from whom it expects a sympathetic response.”

Art in Shikshamitra grew as we watched the children grow up. Many outsiders thought it was an art school; it was in fact a school where we all learned art and its manifestations organically. We nearly always began with only a loose idea for the art class but soon the mood of the class, or the spirit of the day, lent its hue. A language class in the morning could influence a whole day in Shikshamitra. Interesting observations gave us new ideas and we always remained flexible enough to try them out right away. We let children illustrate their own stories, personal history booklets, or even math sheets and book reviews because it was clear that art helped them find their identities and be themselves.



The school had to be wound up in 2011 for various reasons, finance being an important one. But the spirit of art that developed in Shikshamitra spread to different schools, centres, individual teachers and trainers.

It visibly continues through our students and different outreach programs that we continue to offer.



A photo album of Shikshmitra's art classes can be seen at:
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/tik-tiki/sets/72157601353116588/>

SUDESHNA SINHA has been working in the field of innovative alternative education for the past 17 years. Since 2005, Sudeshna has been the founder-member and coordinator of Shikshamitra, an alternative school for 9 -16 years old first generation school goers. Currently Shikshamitra is an Innovative Learning-cum-Resource and Training Centre, which she continues to head. Trained as a special educator from the University of Mumbai, she has worked in special and formal schools as a special teacher for several years. She was instrumental in setting up and running an innovative Hindi medium school, Aashirvad, for the migrant slum and street children in Central Kolkata. Sudeshna has intervened as an educator and advisor in organizations that work with hard-to-reach children and those with mental health issues for children and adults. Her special interests are in Language, Creativity and Motivation of children, teachers and parents. She can be contacted at shikshamitra.kolkata@gmail.com