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## Learning to see, awakening the senses

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The biggest concern about the present main stream education is that it kills creativity.

The frenzy with which 'art' is being introduced seems like an attempt to counter these damages. But 'schooling' not only kills creativity, it also kills authenticity, cultural diversity and aesthetic sensibility.

It will be worthwhile to look at what has been the impact of teaching art, architecture and design in this country. This could give us lessons as to what not to do in schools.

The visual experience of modern spaces all over the world is beginning to look alike- Architecture, signage, hoardings, products, colour sense. About a century ago we had diverse cultures with distinct way of life and aesthetic sensibilities that created contextually rooted architecture and artifacts. The present education has created total homogenization all over the world. Design and architectural education can be blamed as one of the most destructive agent for destroying diversity, leading to similar lifestyles. Courses taken from the experience of western cultures - Bauhaus, Ulm (first design education institution set up in Germany in the nineteen twenties) being the foundation of design education all over the world has psychologically damaged the being at all levels - aping the west, inferiority complex, cultural insensitivity and other cognitive damages.

This is true of art education also. Even today the basic inspiration is from the art movements that happened in the west. With art education becoming more formal it is also becoming very rigid and is getting preoccupied with rules, information, history etc. More illusionary is the connection art education has

with creativity and beauty as if every other subject is uncreative and devoid of beauty.

Distinct feature of all authentic cultures has been the central role of beauty, knowledge and creativity in everything it does. So the real issue then is to understand how to retain the cultural rootedness and help the learner to retain their original, authentic sense of beauty which is in true sense based on the experience of the real context in which they lead their lives.

So we may start off by asking some basic questions.

What is the purpose of beauty in life? How is it developed? Is it inborn? What is its connection with knowledge? Or how is it connected with cognition? Do senses play any role in this? What role does sense have in the present educational set up? What is authenticity? Originality? How does not being authentic impact what we do or make, etc.? What is culture and how is it formed? What is the connection between beauty, creativity and culture? How culture creates conditions for the blossoming of creativity and beauty? Do we have to teach art to develop sense of beauty in us or is beauty inherent to our being?

It was during my study at NID (National Institute of Design), India, a premier design institute that I began to explore certain fundamental questions regarding beauty, aesthetic sense, spontaneity, creativity, culture etc.

At NID, the dichotomy was that the process of learning design is completely and clearly west oriented. The courses responsible for creating design sense or aesthetic sense like elements of design, composition, various courses related to colour, form etc. are still based on Bauhaus and even today it is taught



more or less in the same manner. After a period of conflict, the three years I spent at the institute became an intense period of self- exploration. What came sharply into focus and was exemplified in the ‘education system’ at the institute was the direct relationship that existed between colonized minds, cultural and spiritual alienation and formal schooling/education. If ones sense of beauty is conditioned and colonized then what is the meaning of culture and what is left to be called as one’s own?



Education has been the most powerful tool to condition and colonize the people as it has completely overturned the worldview of the so-called educated people of the world all over. Schooling just replaced religious superstition to scientific superstition. It turned us into believers of a different kind. It turned us from active creators and inventors of knowledge to passive believers of text and experts. We no longer use our senses and feelings and experience to know the world.

This is true of all educational institutions in this country. All aspects of our being are subjected to this false conditioning. At the level of information all we learn is about the west. At emotional level we feel inferior to the west and become imitators and our aesthetic sense is also transformed as we learn the western aesthetic sense. At the same time all true qualities of a learner are also destroyed by the schooling process. One learns to compete, lie, to cheat, to project oneself, etc. Thus a student of design, what I questioned is: how do I become a true representative of my culture. And that led to asking what culture is? What is the connection between aesthetic sense and culture, cognition and culture?

Two people who have helped me to understand beauty are the non-literate artisans of this country and children.

I have been living with rural and tribal communities for the last twenty odd years now. I did not go to them with intentions of ‘developing’ them or educating them. I went to them to recover my own

cultural roots which I had lost in the process of getting educated. I went to learn from them. For having escaped ‘education’ and ‘development’ they are still original and authentic and are holding on to the culture and world view which sustained them for centuries.

This unique stand point gives me a different picture of the rural tribal communities as being wise and evolved and it is only by learning from them that we can learn to lead a sustainable life. Of course, understanding the traditional knowledge has been a very difficult task for me as my framework or categories for understanding itself are western and reason oriented. So in the process of de colonizing and recovering my authenticity I have been able to get glimpses of the process of knowing or being among the non-literates (sense literates).

The most important lesson has been that beauty, cognition and value are innate and are rooted in our biological make up and in the process of being in the world under right conditions these qualities are awakened. There may be neither formal nor informal act of ‘teaching’ but learning is happening all the time like breathing.

I discovered this in the process of working with artisans to make new designs. I believed that all people are creative and as a designer with western sensibility



my design would only make matters worse. Hence I began to create situations for the artisans themselves to design and develop new products. Surely enough I saw very original and beautiful creations in what they made. This made me look deeper into the learning process within the artisan communities.

What I saw there was diametrically opposite to what we the so called educated and civilized do.

Children learn their craft not as a result of teaching or formal, organized learning but by playing and re-enacting what adults do spontaneously. I found them very good observers with good imagination, creativity, determination and dexterity. The use of sense is the primary tools for learning and unlike us words are seldom used. Doing and experiencing is the basis for learning. There is total freedom and hence the internal autonomy and self-initiative of the child is at work in almost everything it does.

The basic difference between modern ‘knowledge’ system and non-literate ‘knowing’ is that we are learning world through words, reasoning, under an expert now masked as ‘guide’ and as noun and they are learning the world through sense, intuition, unguided or self-initiated and as verb.

Modern education seems to have reversed all the natural process and rewired the cognitive framework to comprehend the world. Reasoning which is the end product of knowing in natural processes is used for processing and understanding in modern knowledge process. Insight and intuition has no role.

Sensing Nature; Knowing Nature is a workshop we have been conducting at Aruvacode, Nilambur during the summer holidays – April and May with the children from the potter’s colony on realizing the importance of senses and autonomy. My role was that of a peon who would just provide minimum facility and initiate them to see things that they normally do

not see, not by instructing but by doing myself.

The fundamental issues we raise through this event are the ‘nature of learning, biologically embedded aesthetic sense in children, role of the ‘teacher’ etc.

It looks like that we are already born with aesthetic sense.

The workshop on sensing nature is for providing space to come together to listen, to see, to taste, to touch, feel, to make etc. There is no teaching.

But art education is also becoming top down and information oriented where children have to remember the details of so called masters etc. Once I came across a school where children were being asked to copy paintings of Van Gogh. In fact the trend in art education in UK is along this line. Tests are conducted to see whether children are able to identify works of Monet, Paul Klee etc. Art is being turned into history.

Art is the only activity within the school curriculum that has the potential for subverting the harm done by other subjects.

School is a strange place where children are being prepared for a distant ‘future’ by teaching them things that happened in the ‘past’. (They are turned into historians of a different sort or storage bins of information with different names - science, English, social, math etc.).

To learn/to make sense of the world children need to





Works done by non-literate potter woman Lakshmi

engage with what is happening/the concrete event or phenomenon.

To my mind 'art' education has the potential for making children authentic and original learners/creators if that is treated as awakening the sense and to connect to the context of the learner's lives?

Every generation needs to relive, relearn, recreate and reinvent certain aspects of its cultural sensibilities by engaging with the reality around them. Contextually rooted aesthetic sense is what once created the diverse cultures around the globe.

Senses which is our doors to the outer world and also to the inner world is what needs to be addressed and that too in a manner that would enhance the inherent, natural, biological tendency in all human beings.

Sensitivity in a way, is a matter of awakening the senses and feelings.

Development or awakening of aesthetic sense and creativity is not only the basis for all art forms but also the central feature of all our activities.

Rather than teaching skills to sing, paint, draw, this awakening would make a qualitative and an attitudinal change. Mere teaching of skill would only help the learner to focus on the outer form and often they are left without any content. Authentic seeing helps

one to focus on the content.

So real task is to see how to address beauty and creativity to everything we do - be it mathematics, physics or history.

And the greater challenge is how do provide the environment that would allow the natural in us to come forth.

This would require sensitivity, trust and indeed careful planning for the unplanned to happen.





Collage from coloured paper



Art by Children



Geometrical pattern with mud, ash, etc

## Bibliography

The main write up is from my personal experience of living with the rural tribal communities and from the documentation and research done to understand how children as well as non-literate artisans learn. Many philosophers, thinkers, scientists and teachers have helped me to understand these issues.

Among them the prominent are as follows:

Ivan Illich, Dr. Humberto Maturana (the Chilean School of Biology of Cognition),

Semir Zeki , professor of Neuroesthetics at University College London.

Ellen Dissanayake, Affiliate Professor, School of Music, University of Washington

Vilayanur Ramachandran Director of the Center for Brain and Cognition, Professor in the Psychology Department and Neurosciences Program at the University of California, San Diego, and Adjunct Professor of Biology at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies.

JINAN has lived and worked with non-literate artisans for about 20 years, to study the biological foundations of cognition, creativity, beauty and various damages of modern schooling. He is currently involved in developing a school, based on these understandings ([www.reimaginationschools.wordpress.com](http://www.reimaginationschools.wordpress.com)) and also conducting workshops with teachers and parents about learning from children ([www.awakeningaestheticawareness.blogspot.com](http://www.awakeningaestheticawareness.blogspot.com)). He has a degree in Mechanical engineering from MACT, Bhopal and done his Post-graduation in Design from NID, Ahmedabad. He can be contacted at [jinankb@gmail.com](mailto:jinankb@gmail.com)