

Reflections: Anni Kumari on Artreach India's First Teaching Fellowship

When I began with the fellowship programme, my very first objective was to establish a connection with the children. This was important to ensure that they continue to turn up for the subsequent twelve workshops over the next six months. So even before thinking about teaching then art, I had to think about questions like –what is it that these children / 'young artists' desire from the programme. I knew it had to be fun, engaging, simple and educative. But I also knew that it would be challenging for sure.

I only had a year's experience as an educator, interacting with graduate and postgraduate students at the College of Art, Delhi. But I had been keenly working on a gender related project (ABOUT TURN) that involved outreach activities with children in the age of 10-15 years. For that reason the Artreach fellowship programme seemed like an interesting opportunity to me. At the trial workshop at Kilkari, I was testing my ability to create a sense of self discovery for the participants through an exercise on self-portraits. I had this belief that if I could facilitate them to connect with themselves through art materials, they will be able to connect with me. Luckily, it worked!

The next thing was to create the plan for the next four workshops along with a list of the materials required. The programme had a few basic considerations that I had to keep in mind. Firstly, to create a mix of different approaches and skills by incorporating drawing, painting, print making, photography, sculpture and assemblage. Secondly, to mark the distinction of art from craft by introducing them to basic art history, artists and art movements. Thirdly, knowing that only a few of them would opt for art or art related career options, create an experience of empowerment.

Hence I structured the workshops in a manner so that there could be a blend of observations, techniques, self expression and reinterpretation. Spanned over 2-4 hours, each workshop module was divided into an introductory video/images, a demonstration, exercise, discussion and feedback and of course scope for on-the-spot improvisation.

Implementation was the next challenge and the brainstorming session with the advisory board members gave me considerable clarity. I think it was quite critical to debate certain aspects of art education/ art as a career choice/art as a self-actualization process and the broader meaning and purpose of art. I realized at that point the vital role I had to play as an instructor and the kind of decision making that will be involved at different stages.

All set to meet 20 children from three different homes twice a month for a three/four hour session, I had dreams to be shared. But there was a lot of effort from the coordinators, project manager, children and myself that had to be put in. To begin with getting the materials, setting up the studio space before each workshop and ensuring that the participants from all the three homes reach on time was itself a big task. Then of course, with the infrastructure being very basic and the time constraints involved, there was a constant need for ingenuity. I also had no clue about their background in art since I had no role in the selection process.

While we grappled with these, there were also an attitude shift that I was hoping to bring forth by questioning the ideas of 'good' and 'bad' , 'beautiful' and 'interesting' , 'real' and 'copy'. I was prepared to hold hands and demonstrate, to sweat along with them, to inspire them to take the leap. But I knew things would take time and I had to be patient.

Their confident and smiling faces, their eagerness to learn, persistence and receptiveness to new ideas kept me motivated. In no time, they took me as their own. I loved their chattering, their fashionable dressing and the bonding among themselves. There were also a few oddities that I could never make sense of –their penchant for cine stars, their desire for fair skin and their quest to create artworks that “looked real”. I noticed that many of them could draw (particularly portraits) very well from 2D images in newspapers and books but struggled to draw form life. Most loved to include text with images, giving a bold black outline to their image. As I observed the different skills and aptitude that the children displayed, I knew that I must constantly reconnect with these to help them learn new skills and techniques. But the difficulty of my task was compounded by three factors: firstly, majority of them had no time for art practice owing to the pressure of academics; secondly, I met them only after a gap of two weeks and every time I had to struggle to reconnect them to art and thirdly, baring two girls none thought of art as a career option.

To get them interested I started showing them short videos on artists and art movements. But there was also the issues of language barrier since most good videos/films are in English, whereas most participants could understand only Hindi. It was really disheartening to know that there is very little good writing or documentation about artists (even of Indian Origin) in Hindi, readily accessible to people.

So I showed them images instead, and explained in Hind the context of the work. It was really exciting to see how attentively they heard my narrations about great artists and their

accomplishments, repeating aloud names and admiring works. In a very small way, it felt rewarding to hear them refer to artists or artworks when they explained their own work.

While the first few sessions were meant to be individual exercises that explored ideas of dimensions, mass, volume, light and shadow, color and imagination; the next ones were about making connections with our surroundings, materials and people. It was quite moving to see them use it in a cathartic way to create images from past moments with their family or to project their dreams and aspirations of a successful career. Some of their images subtly hinted at their incomprehensibility of caste, class and gender divides. I observed that they also voiced these concerns during their visit to the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, Shiv Nadar University and British School. They were particularly curious to know about the possibilities of new media, including photography and video art. So in the subsequent workshops, we incorporated group activities relating to digital art so that they learn to complement each other akin to an atelier system.

I think it proved fundamentally important during the five day intensive with Susanta Mandal wherein as an exercise on verisimilitude we managed to paint a large (approx. 16X10 feet) mural with record speed. Both the intensive and the final display gave them hands-on experience about planning and executing a large project, mounting, framing and displaying the works in the space. This was an incredible point in the success of the programme since all the different aspects were being put together by all the people involved. Reflecting back I feel that only because I had all the support and freedom to make choices that I could deliver such an overwhelming task with great satisfaction. Needless to say I have learned incredibly from the children. As their mentor, I gained a lot of clarity in communicating ideas effectively in the most simplified manner. It also strengthened my belief in art as an active agent of change (however miniscule) in society. I hope and believe that there could be support for the children to continue their practice post the programme, especially for those who aspire for an art related career.