

Writing Workshop

“When I write, I can see my thoughts on paper. When I put together all that I think in writing, you can read me too”, said 13 year old Gulnaz of Bowbazar. Puja from Chetla felt the same way.

At Shikshamitra, we strongly believe that writing is a powerful means of self-expression. It makes a person confident and strengthens communication. In July, Development Action Society (DAS) approached us to design a writing programme for their budding peer-leaders. The group met twice a week for two hours over a span of three months, and together with Sudeshna Sinha and Ankur Roychoudhury, the two facilitators from Shikshamitra, they created stories with the help of pictures, songs, poetry, games, discussions etc. The ultimate aim was to enable each child to think critically on her own, and develop good written communication skills which will help her function in her society as a peer leader. She would have to learn how to write critical reports, case studies, conduct interviews and offer effective presentations of their plans and activities.

- In the beginning, the students continuously consulted each other for support as they found it difficult to do the worksheets alone. Unconditional acceptance and continuous encouragement gradually made the children give up this practice.
- We also found that making homogeneous groups gave better results. In a heterogeneous group, there



was a tendency among the good students to dominate while the weak ones took a back seat.

Thirteen students completed the course. The valedictory function held on 13th December, 2007 comprised of a display of the students' "work". The book "Amader Lekha" was specially brought out for this occasion; it provides a selection of the best writings of all the students. Each student was given a copy of the book. The programme ended with each student reading out the text that he or she had contributed to the book.

আমি ভালো লিখতে পারিনা, তাই আমি লিখি : চৈতালি
I do not write well, so I write: Chaitali

Whenever we have imagined an alternative school, choice of appropriate content intrigued us all the time. However, cooking as a subject has been an all time favourite.

Cooking is closest to life. It teaches measurement, accounts & marketing skills.

Cooking Class

History, geography, nutrition become an intrinsic part of cooking.

Gender roles are challenged. Boys who do not help with household chores expect girls to do things for them. Many girls are even ready to please them. Cooking class often disappoints both, helping them to redefine their roles.

From early November, the children have been cooking a sumptuous dish every Monday. It is shared among all the children and the staff of Shikshamitra together. Some of the interesting dishes were: Alu Bharta, Vegetable Fried Rice, Roti with Vegetable Tarka, Tomato Soup and Chicken Pie, Upma. On the day they learnt how to make Mixed Vegetable Roti, they learnt about Root Vegetables (potatoes and carrots were the main vegetables added), Tap Roots and their functions in the theory class. Similarly while making



Jhalmuri they learnt the basic facts about Leguminous plants that were used – chana, peanut, sprouted moong.

Pre-Vocational Training



As part of the curriculum, it is necessary to think about how the children will make a living. Although the school does not provide any vocational training which will directly make them employable, the students are exposed to various trades and handicrafts. They are given

training that prepares them for learning suitable activities as and when opportunities arise.

Twice a week Hasna, Bikey, Noor Islam and Shantanu stay back after school for an hour and learn the rudiments of book-binding from Bali Raj Das. At times they manage to get small assignments from the community. On 11th January these children visited Bali's workshop where they met the other members of his unit and saw the equipment used for book-binding work. They also visited Baithakkhana Bazar

and learnt how to procure good quality material at a reasonable rate.



Computer classes are held in the evening for adolescent children. One batch has already completed the one year basic course in computer applications. The second batch will take their examination in March, 2008. The third batch started with 12 new students in January, who meet thrice a week for one hour. A few of the old students also come back to practice on the computer for a nominal fee.



The Learn and Earn programme started in April, 2007. All the children of the school and 4 other girls from the community come in the afternoon. They spend a few hours doing painting, embroidery, and making other things. At times, external experts are invited to do workshops with the children. Thus they have learnt block-printing on rice-paper from Ms Ratnabali Ray. The students have had two opportunities to sell their own products -- eco-bags, book-marks, coasters, handmade cards etc. From packaging the items to keeping accounts, the entire sale process is managed by the children. The children have also been taken on field trips to see how certain trades are taught.

Outdoor Activities

Learning is never confined to the four walls of the class-rooms. It happens everywhere. Both

teachers and students of Shikshamitra unanimously agree on this. Therefore the students along with their teachers are often seen in various parts of the city – totally immersed in the paintings of K. G. Subramanian at Seagull Art Gallery. Not only do they see the art gallery, they make



their own drawings and quickly note down their impressions of the gallery in a few lines.

On some other occasion, they go to the other end of the city to see the blooming flower

garden at their art teacher Maura Hurley's residence and document the beauty of nature as they see it.

At times they play with colours and transform the dull walls of their Principal's house with their imagination. This also gives them practice for future assignments in



which they can, in small groups, make some contribution in the community.

On 13th January'08, children of Shikshamitra participated in Sishu Mela organized by the Dept. of Social Work, at St. Xavier's College. They took part in various games and drawing contest, and bagged several prizes in drawing. Chaitali & Babai came first and third respectively in the 7-10 age group; Noor Islam came first 11-13 age group; and Shajahan and Mohan got the second and third prizes in 14-16 age group. Hasna got a special prize in this group.



A two-day workshop on Leadership Training was conducted at Shikshamitra by Biswajit Chitrakar and Sukhendu Santra for children who are 14 years and above. Some of these children have already left school, but came with great enthusiasm. There were 17 children who took part in the workshop.

On 23rd January, the children gathered at school at 9:30 am. They were not told the purpose of the meeting. After a brief introduction, Sukhendu started the session with specially chosen games. Each game was followed by a discussion. The games were chosen in such a way that it involved discussion, following instruction, paying attention, working in groups, taking responsibility, trusting others and finally choosing a leader for that particular activity. The children highlighted some of the problems they encountered. These are --inability to discuss among themselves and follow instructions, inability to work together, inability to take responsibility, trust other. Behavioural problems were also pointed out.

Leadership Training



The second day began with that note. A sharp difference was observed in the attitude of the children. It was noticed that they gradually started discussing strategies among themselves, doing things together, taking each other's opinion, leading and guiding others.

By afternoon the children understood the objective of this two-day exercise. At this point two clear groups emerged. When asked how they can utilize this skill for the benefit of the school as well as the community the children came up with two suggestions—(a) how to increase the enrolment in the school, and (b) how to convince the neighbours to use the dustbin on the other side of the road and keep the front part of the school clean. The children discussed the project

in their respective teams and came up with action plans to implement their ideas.

New Experiment

Shikshamitra was set up as an experimental middle school to evolve a new curriculum, and appropriate teaching-learning-classroom methods for children who do not fit into the super academic current Indian school system.

When we started in April 2005, we were hoping that around 50 children who had finished primary education would join our school. In the 3 years that the school has been running the largest number we have ever had for a brief period was 30. The regular number has hovered between 20-25. Most of them are from the nearby slums. Children came in with Class II, III, IV, V certificates. But in most cases they had very poor reading-writing skills and some had virtually none. They had also been battered, pained, humiliated in their previous schools and had a lot of mistrust for teachers and for each other. At any point we also had almost one-third students with problems like dyslexia, slow learning, and severe emotional problems. The percentage was much higher than we had bargained for. In January 2008 we have 22 students out of which 9 are from the original batch of 2005-06.

From the beginning we divided the children into three "Groups" approximating their abilities and not age. Whenever necessary we allowed switchovers between groups. We also continuously experimented with the school routine. Although various "subjects" were taught, our emphasis was on breaking the barriers. So there has been tremendous amount of mixing up of the teaching of Language, Science, Environment, Maths, Social Studies, Art, Craft, Music,

Theatre, Film, Library classes. Intensive dialogue in classroom; insisting on original & independent thinking- writing-drawing and not "copying" ; going outside the school to investigate; working in groups; pushing students towards self



learning --- these were some of the features which we were trying to incorporate. It was very difficult for many students, but even more for teachers. Most of the children who stuck with us for at least six months caught the essence of what we were trying, started enjoying, and also their learning curve showed a sharp rise.

But running three separate classes, incorporating so many "non-traditional" subjects in the regular school routine, dealing with inattentive violence-prone slum children, handling "difficult children"; doing all these intensive experiments required quite a few sharp teachers who were willing to "unlearn and learn". That has been our biggest problem and sometimes a near disaster.

In Nov 2007 we decided to let go of half the teachers and reorient the school. Currently there are 3 full time and 3 part time teachers and 22 students

- There are no separate classes. Most of the time all 22 students are in one room with one teacher as facilitator. Other teachers get to spend quality

time making and designing materials and courses.

- For computer classes children have been divided into two groups. There are also special "remedial" classes for those who need them. There are some separate periods for the oldest advanced group.
- The periods are of variable length (50 min to 2 hours) depending upon whether it is Problem Solving , Story , Issues , Independent Zone, Art-Craft , Film, Cooking .
- In most classes children are working independently using books and worksheets.
- There is a lot of group work, mutual help and cooperation. Older children help out younger ones in language, maths. Often in solving puzzles it is the other way around where younger children help out the older ones.

Although this has been going on for only 3 months, we feel that children have become even better "motivated-independent-cooperative" learners. The differently talented children are getting more scope to develop themselves; and the teachers are getting more time to read – learn – develop ideas and materials. This is quite important as one of our mandates is also to give inputs to other schools.



The education resource centre of Shikshamitra has initiated a process to collate information about organizations and institutions in Kolkata who are working mainly in the area of education. The primary

ERC Directory Launched



database was prepared by Shikshamitra through contacts over phone and email. A group of three volunteers from SP Jain Institute of Management and Research, Mumbai -- Aishi Dipta Lahiri, Soumya Kanti Pal and Soumya Chattopadhyay – spent a month visiting over 35 organizations in person and collected specific information about them. They have prepared a directory of information about the organizations they have visited. Follow up visits are planned to liaise with these organizations more effectively. We plan to extend this to the entire state after the initial networking in the city. The Kolkata Education Resource Group (KERG) – part of ERC – has launched a weekly update of education news for individuals and organizations who share these interests.