

Film Making as A Learning Tool
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During the last seven years, since we shifted from Mumbai to Panchgani, I have been taking classes in Communication Skills as an extra-curricular activity in a boarding school here. Apart from honing creative expression and confidence building; the other objectives of these classes have been media awareness and visual literacy. This is in response to the urgently felt need that the child should no longer remain a passive recipient of the onslaught of media but become a discerning and objective viewer.

In the absence of fixed directives or any curriculum to be followed, the classes evolved their own methodology and content. Initially, we did a lot of theatre-based activities, film appreciation and media analysis. Gradually, we also started making our own short video films. Media Education remains incomplete without actual hands on experience or exposure to the craft of filmmaking.

We realized that film making was not just a wonderful means of creative expression but could also be used effectively for exploring the world around. Although a film records the real, it transcends it for it demands reflection and analysis of the issues depicted. Thus the process of film making lends itself to a teaching/learning methodology where the student tries to make sense from his own real life experience and not rely on the second hand information from books or media.

We did not have proper editing facilities then, hence films were shot in sequence. We undertook many smaller film projects which did not entail editing. For instance, the students had to make a Nature Diary in the form of a short five minute film. We realised that the process of filming as if enlivens all your senses. This was brought out in an exercise on visual poetry where the students made two minute shorts on abstract subjects like shadows, leaves, flowers, wings and water. A simple act of framing became an attempt at making sense of the reality around.

The film “Ads and Food Fads” made in Jan 2004 talks of the effect of advertising on children’s food habits. What better way to understand the impact of media than by creating a film oneself! The process of film making was an eye opener to the students about the manipulative nature of advertising. An interesting exercise which was finally incorporated into the film itself was when children were asked to create ads to sell a non-saleable product like a piece of stone. Apart from laying bare the hype created by media to sell colas and crisps, we also investigated the ill-effects of these on health. A pedodontist was consulted. We also experimented soaking a tooth in cola and observing the deterioration over a period of two months.

As part of our study of the environment, the students helped in creating an awareness campaign on the local practice of setting the hill slopes on fire which is one of the major causes of deforestation in this area. They interviewed the villagers on their compulsions and prejudices and the film was shown on the local cable network

The absence of a fixed syllabus led us to explore different ways of learning each semester. Often one activity led to another in a spontaneous chain reaction. For instance, sometimes a theme or a certain structural approach helped us streamline the varied activities. During one semester, the theme of study given to one set of students in the 11 – 13 years age bracket, was violence. It started with a general brainstorm on the meaning of the term, the images that it evoked, what were its varied shades and textures and the student's own personal interpretations of mental vs. physical forms of violence. This was followed by a group activity where each group had to improvise their own scenes of violence. There was 'TV news reporting' of each performance by other groups and the 'media slant' of each reporting group was analysed. This provided rich insights into how the media colours its news stories.

September 2004 saw us making a film on the changing face of the Ganesh festival in Maharashtra. The film throws light on how this popular religious festival has turned into a consumerist extravaganza. We made three trips to Pune during the fourteen day festival. The students took keen interest in tracing the historical perspective and understanding how the concept of even a God changes with the changing times,

Films thus created can provide not only a rich learning experience to the children involved in the production but can also be used as an interesting resource material for sharing across diverse learning communities. This could lead to networking of ideas and experiences in different parts of the country.

This year we plan to launch a video magazine which will be aired on the cable network. Panchgani being a school town, it could be an inter-school collaborative project. To start with, we hope to trace the history of this place by interviewing some elderly people. The magazine could also document the flora and fauna of this region and focus on issues of environmental concern.

I have found video a very useful tool to improve the productivity of NGO conferences and meetings. My experience has been that in a conference situation, a video helps to bypass diversionary banter and accelerate discussion straight into the core issues. A film has the power to recreate the lived experience in the minds of the viewer much more than a mere talk on the subject.

Deepak Suchde an organic farmer, found it very useful to show a video on the process of making rich topsoil at his showcase, experimental farm near Panvel during a national meet on natural farming. Since the film gave a condensed overall picture of the various stages of the soil development process, it spared the audience lengthy technical explanations. For the viewer it was like living the experience and doubts could be raised and clarified then and there within the time limitations of the conference format.

On a personal note, for me film making has been a journey from the external to the inner world, from observation to reflection. Even though one may say that it belongs to the same spectrum of the thinking process. For the last three years, I have been attempting films which explore this inward journey. In the process, I have travelled to inaccessible

places and reached out to some equally inaccessible recluses! The making of a film has become its own reward. I am reminded of Mary Oliver's lines:

The dream of my life
is to lie down by a slow river
and stare at the light in the trees –
to learn something by being nothing
a little while but the rich
lens of attention.