

Teaching Fine Arts in the 21st Century: What Teachers Can Do

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Fine Arts education in India is in doldrums. This is not a recent phenomenon. The first fine arts institute- The Mechanics Institute was founded in Calcutta to provide training in mechanical arts and furnish junior level workers like draftsman, surveyor-artists, illustrators for record keeping for the British empire. Since then we have not been able to give higher education in fine arts such a direction as was fit for a country with a rich heritage in arts since ancient times. In spite of fine arts claiming a place of prestige in the society in our earlier history, and despite the significance of fine arts in shaping the sensibilities of the society, unfortunately, we find no statesman or leader in the recent past who gave fine arts education its due importance. We can only mention Rabindranath Tagore who set up Santiniketan and emphatically gave impetus to education of all fine arts by innovative teaching methodology, novel study courses and by bringing in legendary teachers like Nandalal Bose. We also know that his actions shaped entire generations in the last one hundred years and gave us some of the greatest sculptors, painters, writers, poets, musicians and individuals. Save this, we find no intentional effort to improve fine arts education in our country either by our society or by the government. This has resulted in a haphazard but stunted growth of the discipline in our country where we have sacrificed many valuable aspects like quality and excellence.

On top of this several misunderstandings and misconceptions have hastened the present pathetic condition. Some of the wrong notions held today by parents, students, teachers and society and even fine arts teachers themselves regarding the discipline of fine arts are

- Creativity is inborn and cannot be cultivated. Studying fine arts does not make one a good artist. Inborn talent and aptitude for art are sufficient to become a successful artist.
- Studying fine arts is for students who are not good at studies.
- Fine arts is not a serious discipline and does not call for much intellectual input.
- One does not have to work hard to get a degree in fine arts.
- Fine arts is OK as a hobby but not preferred as a full time academic career.

These notions have seriously harmed the growth of the discipline as the negative effects have percolated down to the institutions teaching fine arts and affected teacher quality, student quality, teaching methodology/content and curriculum and the whole approach towards fine arts teaching and learning.

A complete overhaul of this system is long overdue. Some of the issues in fine arts higher education that need to be immediately addressed have been listed in this paper. It is acknowledged that any drastic change needs active contribution from society, government, policy-makers, parents, students, market and other stakeholders. However, this paper explores only those aspects, which can be improved/ worked on by teachers themselves by bringing a change in their teaching methodology or a slight shift in their perspective.

1. Strengthen the basics:

Updation of curriculum and bringing it at par with international level has become an excuse for deleting the basics which need a lot of effort

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on part of the teachers to teach and hard work on part of the students to master that skill. Basic courses such as drawing, modeling, design sense and aesthetics are rapidly being replaced by cosmetic and relatively easy courses such as photography or computer courses. Fine arts is a discipline which needs a balanced mix of talent, technical skills and sharp intellectual faculties and the courses that we prescribe, the curriculum that we design should aim to enhance all these three capabilities of the students. At least for the first two years students should undergo a rigorous training in basic courses. Basic courses, which prepare the foundation, should never be optional.

2. Limit use of technology It is a strange suggestion to give in the 21st century but limiting our use of technology is necessary in case we want to retain originality and freshness in fine arts teaching. The reason is – technology is an overpowering tool. While using computers and exploring infinite possibilities of unimaginable software our students tend to forget that it is only a tool to achieve the ultimate goal in mastering the discipline. No doubt digital cameras, handy cams, televisions, LCD projectors have revolutionized the way we look at fine arts. Technology has even given rise to a new branch of digital art. However, the downside is that students often find these gadgets and their use so fascinating that it is difficult to wean them away and make them focus on the job at hand. That mastering fine arts is mastering a good hand eye coordination, practicing long hours and having an open mind which is a long and painful process is often lost to them as their minds get addicted to the swiftness of tasks performed using the latest gadgets. Teachers have a significant role to play in making the students understand the difference between mastering a skill and becoming a slave to technology.

3. Enhance natural abilities: On the other end of the spectrum of using technology is- using and enhancing our natural abilities. In Santiniketan. Rabindranath Tagore would often make the students guess how much a particular distance measured. This was an

exercise to enhance the observation skills and increase natural faculties of brain and eye. Over dependence on technology and the tendency to use tools and devices for activities that can be easily done through natural ways destroy our innate abilities. As teachers we must be sensitive to the natural potential of our students and should find out ways to nurture them.

4. Bring seriousness/professionalism Though a lack of professionalism and seriousness is eclipsing higher education in all disciplines but it is especially detrimental to fine arts since self-discipline and a professional approach towards work highly enhances the prospects of a fine arts pass out. The students must get the fact clear that the stream they have chosen is highly significant and they can serve the society more effectively if they think, speak and behave like a true professional. While professionalism among teachers and students is on the wane commercialization of fine arts is at its peak. Students after learning a few tricks of the trade hanker after petty commercial assignments to earn quick money. This hampers the teaching learning process immensely. Patience and hard work to learn which will ultimately help them in the long run is not their priority. As a result they soon burn out and fail to achieve anything of substance in life. In this case the teacher can only lead by example and assure the student of a secure future if he/she masters the discipline because many factors out of our control are at work in making the students value the monetary aspect of their learning.

5. Be Indian Before, we can tell our students and society we have to ourselves believe that we with our unique history, diversity and approaches to life as Indians have the capability and intellectual strength to carry out our own art movements. We do not have to tow the line of commerce driven approach of the west to be acceptable in our own country. Not that we have to rest on our past laurels and harp on the rich heritage in painting and sculpture, but we must advocate the fact that our heritage provides us with unending themes, perspectives, techniques, and approaches to tackle the world with originality and need not borrow or steal

from others to become successful in the true sense.

6. Nourish the mind Fine arts education today is totally devoid of intellectual nourishment. What to say of students even teachers cannot hold an academic discussion on different aspects of fine arts discipline! One of the reasons for this poor show is lack of good research in the field. For the last few years a trend of earning Ph.D. in fine arts is in vogue. Most of such research is substandard and has no value at all, academic or otherwise. These works are banal descriptions, history or explanations of some works of arts and do not raise any original issue, debate on philosophy, ideas or concepts of fine arts. To my mind, the first thing that should be inculcated in the students is the need to have a strong academic grounding in the subject. He/ she should be well versed in philosophy and aesthetics of

fine arts. Teachers must not forget that our aim is not to produce technician but artists of the highest grade.

7. Write books When we talk of giving academic inputs to our students, we also have to keep in mind the paucity of literature available to students on different areas of fine arts. Today, if we do not count the books written by foreign authors on fine arts, we are left with a dismal number of good books on the subjects. The books available are substandard and do not stimulate thinking. It is extremely needed that we write vigorously, innovatively and present original ideas.

8. Advocacy Fine arts is a serious discipline and it has serious and far-reaching implications in our society. Fine art is not for people who want to skip academics or want to shirk hard work. This is what we as teachers of fine arts should believe ourselves and should advocate. Otherwise the misconceptions in the society cannot be dispelled.

We must devise ways to sharpen the ******* intellect, potential and merit of our students who are the best ambassadors of our discipline.

Generations should be trained in such a manner that they develop bones of steel and muscles of iron then only they are ready to face the hardships of life

Swami Vivekananda