

Sharing the Art of Possibilities

West Bengal, India

Ringling College of Art and Design

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[https://turiyofoundation.com/arts-learning-](https://turiyofoundation.com/arts-learning-alternatives/?fbclid=IwAR38GM8_ehXvXJkSR403B6v_lyQzCk7inZ6cMecYVgpErXHqpO1mYPYa8hM)

[alternatives/?fbclid=IwAR38GM8_ehXvXJkSR403B6v_lyQzCk7inZ6cMecYVgpErXHqpO1mYPYa8hM](https://turiyofoundation.com/arts-learning-alternatives/?fbclid=IwAR38GM8_ehXvXJkSR403B6v_lyQzCk7inZ6cMecYVgpErXHqpO1mYPYa8hM)

Initiated as a search for educational alternatives and holistic learning frameworks, FALA responds to the urgent learning crisis by attempting to develop a self-sustaining community driven creative space that fosters self-directed learning. This one-month intensive workshop funded by the Davis foundation, enabled us to study potential frameworks to help identify self-learners in a rural community of West Bengal, who were capable of sustaining the mission of self-directed learning.

As access to education is increased, the learning crisis continues to permeate rural communities who are neglected in the process of implementing educational reforms successfully. With an increasingly uncertain socio-economic landscape, the future generation needs an education that does not deprive them of the skills and knowledge of the world of tomorrow. In India, like many other developing countries, this has been a perpetual struggle for the last few decades. The Pratichi Primary Education- an intensive study of educational reforms in West Bengal, reports how by applying macro-scale reforms and funding to systems that are foundationally broken, the present issues of gender inequality, mental attitudes, economic instability, lack of teachers and more, are only exacerbated. Even after COVID-19, the UNICEF Education Sustainable Development Goals Report, published how 20 years of educational gains had been wiped out due to the effects of COVID on schools. This emphasized the urgent need to develop more sustainable forms of education that are able to withstand the many challenges of the 21st Century.

Eventually leading us to develop the concept for Future Arts and Learning Alternatives (or FALA), in the rural village of Chauddachuli, which is found in a cluster of villages in the Purba Medinipur District of West Bengal. Having shared 9 generations of ancestors with the land in Chauddachuli, Rohini Maiti was able to experience the drastic differences of living standards in a village, versus a metropolitan city such as Mumbai, where she grew up. Jithesh Beeharry on the other hand had personally experienced the challenges of the public schooling system in Mauritius, making him resort to Homeschooling- the beginning of his journey in becoming a self-learner himself. The personal connection to the location of the project, coupled with the vastly different educational backgrounds both team members shared resulted in a project that focused back on the primary goal of education- learning. Through a combination of successful methodologies, we experienced in our own educational journeys, we created a community driven, interactive and fluid framework for a creative learning environment.

Taking resources, support and inspiration from already renowned educational strategies such as International Baccalaureate, United World College and UNICEF's Peace Education, we were able to develop frameworks involved in the process of self-learning that were critical to the execution and data collection of the project. These involved frameworks around, but not limited to, identifying self-learners, assessing when learning is occurring, how to format classes and the importance of interdisciplinary thinking. However, much of the intensive planning revolved around structuring the workshop sessions and creating detailed lesson plans for each class in the pre-production phase of the project. Our planning was met with the attitudes of people in the village and the response of the students to the project content. We realized very quickly how we could not have predicted how the community members would have responded to the format and structure of such a foreign way of learning, and had to abandon many of our old plans in lieu of new ones that were developed along the way of gathering research. This was largely due to the community engagement of the village being much more active than we had expected. As victims of the exhausting wait for educational reforms, and locked school gates for 2 years after COVID, they were starved for an opportunity to learn about new, unknown things, in a creative and dynamic way.

In our perspective, the concept of Peace has always boiled down to mutual understanding. Mutual understanding originates from the ability to receive and process information and knowledge with empathy. Where there is a lack of knowledge, we often substitute in fear or preconceived judgement which leads to hostility or conflict. Hence, we looked at UNICEF's Peace Education, a primary guiding force in developing our workshop curriculum. A large component of the Peace Education mission, is for all to develop the skills, knowledge and attitudes to resolve conflict peacefully. We incorporated this into our workshop through 2 main ways. The first was to introduce content and topics that were relevant to the future generation such as, Technology and Internet, Climate crisis and Environmental awareness, Mental and Physical Wellness, and Creative Thinking. These tracks enabled the students to gain information on relevant future conflicts that are going to occur, and equip them with the knowledge and skills on how to understand it, i.e. confront the issues they bring. The second way was by integrating a facet of empathy and socializing skills as a key component into every session. Through group activities, reflection time, and sharing personal experiences with peers, the students were able to be open to different perspectives. Both of these methods were of a short term result, as we saw the students respond very quickly and habitually change their attitudes in the span of a month. Before they did not understand life beyond the village, and this knowledge changed the way they looked at the world around them. However, the goal of the project overall, sits in the box of long term results. We did not anticipate this project to make long term changes in the span of the month, as our mission statement believes in real change occurring in hyper-local communities over a long period of dedicated time given to it. FALA was an intervention, not to make change, but rather foster change-makers. Through our post workshop sustenance programs of mentorship and remote learning, we hope to have left the village of Chauddachuli with even a handful of changemakers, who will be of resource to their communities in times of strife. But that goal will only be answered over the course of many years, as we develop and grow the foundation of mentorship and relationships with each student. The challenges of adolescence and increasing economic pressures will be difficult to overcome. However, we believe that the foundation of strength against such challenges will be derived from being a powerful self learner, who is curious, creative and empathetic to the world around them.

After planning FALA for over a year due to getting deferred after the first wave of COVID-19, we were only able to understand the urgent need and value of alternative educational frameworks once we got to the execution of the project. The more research we did through secondary sources and primary interaction with the community, the more we realized the dramatic impact of the learning crisis in a rural community that had left most of the children exhausted and hopeless in their own lives. Additionally, any students that had will and determination, had been beaten down with the obstacles of school being closed for 2 years and a crippled healthcare system. With the second wave of COVID-19 in 2021, India suffered tremendous loss of life and faced many challenges in fostering a Covid-safe environment and following necessary precautions. One of the ways they tackled this was by prohibiting any non-residents from flying into the country. Due to this, only Rohini Maiti was able to enter the country and execute the workshop in person, while collaborators and other team members had to contribute remotely to the planning and direction of the project. While remotely working with people had challenges in coordination, communication and sharing content/media, we were able to overcome them by having distinct role delegation as there were many facets of project management whether it was the website launch, the documentary film or the lesson planning and workshop sessions. Despite these efforts, one of the team members had to resign due to travel and extreme difficulty in coordinating time differences. However, one of the largest gains from this situation was the increase in community engagement that was observed due to the only new person they interacted with being Rohini Maiti, a locally known individual due to her father's residence there. If the entire initial team of international entities had entered the community, it may have taken a much longer time for them to trust and seriously engage with the prospects of the project. Additionally, Rohini was able to form much deeper and long term relationships with the local group of volunteers (Transformational Leaders) that are sustaining the post-workshop phase. This established a foundational belief in the execution of a project in a post pandemic world- that a completely remote intervention would be extremely difficult. There has to be a hybrid or in-person interaction at least

on some level, otherwise the community, which is often uneducated to the pros of technology, will have much difficulty in using the tools and knowledge in a productive manner. There are many variables which would almost be impossible to identify and work with if you are not living, breathing and learning with the community. Our advice to future PfP grantees would be to pick countries where at least one of the team members is able to enter the space, so that there can be a hybrid environment developed for the project.

Initially, FALA aimed to tackle the problem around the educational system failing the very students it once promised to serve. However, we were focusing on the wrong problem. This project taught us that we need to shift back to addressing the learning crisis and find ways to create more creative and dynamic spaces for a student to grow in.

“For every individual, learning occurs in a uniquely nuanced way. To foster learning, we must foster the individual, who understands the value of being curious, creative and empathetic. To foster education, we must foster Self-learning. Only then will we have students, who despite the infinite challenges of the educational system, will thrive to listen, learn and grow with the world around them.” Rohini Maiti, Team Leader, romaitiofficial@gmail.com

