The arts, in my opinion can address three areas of learning – curricular, artistic and what we can call ‘life lessons’. Each is as important as the other and a balanced growth in all can be called ‘holistic education’. The strength of the arts is that it can address all these areas of learning in a single session. In this note I will define each of these areas as I see them and explore their implications on the understanding of art and on educational practices as I go along. However, I will limit this note to a discussion of the performing arts, as this is my area of experience and from where I will draw my examples. Therefore when I speak of the arts here I mean the performing arts only. However, I am sure that similar ways of thinking and arguments are relevant to the visual and other arts as well.

**Art as a tool: De-emphasising skill**

For some time there has been talk in educational circles of using the arts to teach math, language, history, science or other curricular subjects. Here, the arts are conceptualised as a tool. This way of thinking can be aligned with Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences and other such approaches. The relevance of this is apparent in education as it offers children, who may be more kinaesthetic or musically inclined, a way in which to understand cognitive concepts. For example a teacher might like to illustrate the solar system in movement, thus encouraging students to have a bodily and visual experience of orbits, rotations and revolutions. This is an approach that I have used extensively in my own work and have had amazing results. Here the focus is on the topic or concept under study; artistry plays a relatively small part. My own reason for exploring this way of teaching has been that despite long and intensive hours of technical training, in both Kathak and Contemporary dance, I find technique is not my strongest asset. So my concern was to make movement accessible and interesting to the whole class and not just the most ‘talented’. This brings us to some of the most important philosophical questions underpinning one’s practice as an arts educator.

First, does our understanding of ‘excellence’ in art change from when we place it in a professional context to when we put it in an educational context? In other words, does what we look for and value change when we use the arts in education? In my understanding when a student attends a music, dance or drama class outside school because he/she is interested in learning that particular form, the demands made on the student should be different from when he/she is in a performing art class in school. In the first scenario the teacher might demand an adherence to the particular stylistic language, the rules of the form, and the ability to work within that form. I believe that art, when taught in a school should be accessible to the whole class. Therefore, when a topic, and not the skill, is the focus there is a greater chance of engaging all the students.

However this approach might have a negative impact on arts education advocacy. When we have to make a case for the arts in schools, often one argument that is used is ‘doing music will help with skills in math’, or something to that effect. K. V. Akshara, Director
of Ninasam Theatre School, has a lot to say about this, “The arts should not be the ‘sugar coating’ that makes learning other subjects easier, what we do is not merely a ‘capsule’ that makes the ingesting of other content easier! We are not just a vehicle to convey concepts in Maths.” He is concerned that artistic merit is being trivialised in favour of the utility of the arts. My response to this is that there is evidence (mostly anecdotal) to show that when children engage in the arts there is an overall improvement in their ability to grasp concepts in other areas, and certainly students who learn better through the arts are benefited. But if we place too much emphasis on the utility of the arts we are sure to lose out because when the ‘utility’ of art is weighed against the ‘utility’ of say math, it does not take a genius to conclude which is going to get that extra slot in the timetable, or what is going to take the brunt of the cut in funding! By ‘utility’ I mean what is going to get one a job or into higher education. Of course one can question the utility of learning quadratic equations, but at a purely functional level the fact remains that if I have a basic qualification in math there is a better chance of my getting a job than if I had a basic qualification in an art. However, this is an issue that takes us into the sociology of education which is beyond the scope of this note.

**The place of Artistry in learning**

This brings us to the second area of learning, and indeed the next philosophical question of interest to me. Generally in the debate of arts education one area of concern is the place of the ‘artistry’, or to put it another way how do we balance content with form; skills with concepts. Art cannot be used or taught without artistic considerations coming up. When we work with art we have to make ‘artistic’ choices and have to enable our students to do the same with conviction and commitment. Thus when using a particular formal language, for example, students have to be made sensitive to the aesthetics of that particular form. Surupa Sen, Artistic Director of Nrityagram says that the aim of the arts in schools should be to make a generation of ‘rasikas’ or people who appreciate art and are able to distinguish the extraordinary from the ordinary. For this to happen students have to be able to appreciate the artistic choices made by an artist. And for them to gain fluency in this, the best way is to participate in this process themselves. Learning a skill, practicing and extending yourself technically, creating material and making artistic choices are all part of the learning that goes on in an art class. So whether or not a student is able to perform a perfect ‘jati’ or sing a perfect scale should not be the criteria of participation in the arts. There are several questions that need to be addressed in depth when such an approach is taken, such as how does one bring rigour to participation in the arts, and on what basis can we asses and evaluate the work produced. Still, being inclusive and accessible is very important in an educational context, because the aim is not to make professional performance artists but to give each student the opportunity to engage with the arts in a way that is meaningful to that individual.

Indeed, this is also the primary difference between activity-based learning and arts-based learning. Educators agree that when students ‘do’ things they tend to understand the ideas presented better and this leads to better recall and application thereafter. This stance has led to widespread changes in our approach to education. When we look at the arts within this framework we realise that not only is it an opportunity to learn through doing, as
explored earlier, but that it adds a whole new dimension to learning: that of developing an artistic sensibility. As Pam Musil, Associate Professor, Department of Dance, Brigham Young University says in an article “It is, above all, a process of development that engages the student in inquiring, thinking, sensing, observing, feeling, inventing, responding and evaluating.” Thus the arts have value in just being art – not because of its utility, indeed despite it. It is essential that students have an opportunity to engage with a creative process as part of education. This leads to an ability to appreciate creativity and to be creative oneself, no matter what one chooses to do in life. Engagement with the arts is an enriching experience that promotes both personal growth and societal cohesion. Art is something that helps us find an identity, both as individuals and as communities.

Not everything in human life has or can have a monetary value attached to it. In today’s education, especially in India – where everybody is trying to get ahead, we need to also show our students this other side of life – which cannot be measured with money but which tends to get ignored, or at least undervalued. Put another way, it urges us and our students to think not only of what is going to help bring in the money, but of what is going to bring happiness. This is not easy to learn in our current education system.

**Learning about Life**

Another aspect of learning in which our schools consistently fail is preparing students for ‘Life’. In a few pockets there is a realisation of something called ‘Life Skills’, or skills needed to negotiate the complex emotional, inter and intra-personal landscapes of our lives. “Close your eyes and recall one important lesson you have learnt.” This is how Maya Rao a Theatre Educator from Delhi opened a session. Unsurprisingly, all the examples that came up were not from classroom lessons but rather from experiences in Life. Maya’s next question was: is there a way to bring those experiences into the class such that students can learn about and process these things? By bringing life situations into the class, and living them – not acting them out, children are given an opportunity to learn about emotions, choices, negotiation, strategising, communication, introspection and reflection and many other skills that are crucial for life. Maya calls these ‘invisible lessons’ in a class. However she is very clear that while they might be ‘invisible’ to the students, the teacher needs to have a very clear plan to address issues such as these. Here again, students are invited to make emotional choices, put themselves in moral situations, and thus question and explore their assumptions. This forces students to be able to see a certain situation from multiple perspectives and shows them there are many ways to ‘resolve’ a life situation. “Arts give students the ability to empathise” says Marin Leggat from Brigham Young University.

**The ‘Real’ Value of Art**

In the end the question to be asked is what do we want our education system to enable students to do? Or is that the beginning?! Perhaps we have to start with that question. To me education is about learning how to navigate through all the emotions, information and situations that constantly assault us. To be able to sift through these and make clear choices that we can commit to is indeed something to strive for. As the human race
continues on its journey of discovery and invention there will only be more and more ‘stuff’ for our students to learn. Even now the constant refrain heard in most schools is that there is no time to ‘complete the portions for the exam’! Therefore it seems obvious that we can not simply feed students ‘facts’. For one, there are too many facts, secondly even the facts are changing all the time and third information is now so easily available to most people. We have to focus on how to deal with all this information. If this approach to education is adopted, the arts cannot fail to have a central position in schools and our lives. The arts compel us and our students to think, feel, do, reflect and learn!

So perhaps the question we have to deal with as arts educators and advocates for arts in education, is ‘will engagement with the arts help me make more money’? This is crude and oversimplified way of putting it, but I think this is a question that sits at the root of most decisions with regard to art in schools and art as a profession. Art is commonly viewed as a luxury that is available only to the elite, something that is not of ‘real’ value and can thus be done away with if resources are scarce. My answer to the above question is – it might help make money, because it gives one a sense of confidence, helps one be articulate, see things from different perspectives, and any number of other things examined above. However, the risk we take is that it just might make us question the importance we place on ‘making money’ and seeing that as the only measure of value. It just might make us a more humane people, placing sensitivity, creativity, aesthetics, innovation, and the mistakes and learning that come with it, above the need to be rich.