

Notes on Hosting the Creativity Adda Girls Summer Camp

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On May 21st, 2018 four classrooms lined with desks, dusted with pigeon droppings transformed into open spaces for the Creativity Adda team and a 100+ girls to co-design over the coming month. After a successful three and a half years running Creativity Adda for boys in government school (classes 6–12) in Mukherjee Nagar, I joined the team this year as Director of a second Creativity Adda focused specifically on girls at Lancer Road Senior Secondary School, North Delhi. We started the process by running a summer camp for the students as a prototype to give the school community a taste of what to expect for the coming year.

Co-founder, Manish Jain explains Creativity Adda as, “A space where government school-going children have [the] freedom to pursue and develop their interests everyday without textbooks, exams, competition or marks...where they collaborate with each other and undertake practical experiments...where they initiate real world projects and interact with diverse people around the city...where they are provided exposure and guidance into new and different ways of living holistically!” (Vikalpsangam, 2016)

Over the course of the month, the girls were introduced to a variety of workshops curated particularly to break stereotypes, such as sewing, mehndi, cooking, etc., of what girls are expected to do and even like. From across the city, guest facilitators came in to explore with the girls (and the intrigued school staff) new skills from skateboarding to hoola-hooping, from breakdancing to pizza making, from flashlight photography to sound-healing, from Parkour (a form of street-style acrobatics) to robotics, and many, many more. The goal of these workshops was to encourage the girls to build their confidence to trying new things, and also for us to understand what the girls are drawn towards/limited by as to cater to them better in the long-term program.

Creativity Adda is structured in such a way that it allows for self-organising — students are free to move in and out of different workshops or “hubs”, such as the Design Hub or Dance Hub, as per their particular interest or attention span. This free-form design was new to the students who are so used to being overly-directed and trained for obedience. But as each new workshop was introduced, the girls who at first cautiously stepped into Adda, began pouring in with their friends as word-of-mouth spread that this was no “normal” summer camp. By the end of the month, the walls of each room were covered in collage, handprints and painted tiles. The floors and shelves decorated with cardboard houses, “Art-Robots” and musical instruments.

Setting up an “unschool,” as we often use to describe the spirit of Creativity Adda, inherently has its own challenges — but trying to do this within a government school takes it to a whole new level. Government schools are continuously struggling for space as enrolment numbers rise in Delhi so requesting space is a particularly sensitive ask, yet we continue to stress the need for permanent rooms with permanent hours so that the students can take ownership of the space and in turn allow our hubs to develop over time. By having properly dedicated rooms and timings for Creativity Adda this enables us to continually shape the space with our alternative mission and values while also allowing our free-learning invitation to reach into the community: to the parents, neighbours and street children who are also welcomed into the space. We have learned that just doing a few workshops with kids in government schools is not enough to transform the overall learning culture. This requires sustained efforts. After jumping through a series of bureaucratic loops with the help of School Management Committee and local MLA Pankaj Pushkar, we were eventually allotted four classrooms to use this summer, as school was not in session — but as space is highly valued commodity, this is proving to be a much tougher struggle for a year-round program. Fortunately, this summer I also learned that if the students, parents and SMC are excited enough about a program, there can be ways to make it happen.

All eyes were on us when we started. The principal, teachers and members of the School Management Committee (SMC) understandably dropped in for routine visits — which in fact worked to our advantage because the visitors who walked in, at first with faces of skepticism, left with big smiles, wide-eyed at the self-organizing chaos flowing between hubs, often having learned a new dance step or having played a new game. One particular SMC member took off his shoes and sat straight down in front of the harmonium to play his favourite ragas on his first visit. At another time, Mr. Gopal, the School's Coordinator came in to learn a couple dance moves as to gain the confidence to dance with his friends at weddings. This immediate interaction and feeling of welcome is exactly what the Creativity Adda encourages. After engaging with our camp, both the parents and SMC members have decided Creativity Adda should be run year-long program, and we are excited to work with the community to make this happen!

“I haven't seen a program like this before in a government school,” says Mr. Rajender, the father of two girls. “Actually I haven't seen a program like this in the whole of India — not outside of an elite private school.”

Mr. Rajender brings up an important point. Alternative education and interest-based learning is often seen as something for the privileged, with afterschool programs, sports and hobby development activities available to children in Delhi at a steep price. However, our aim is to spread the understanding that creativity and free learning spaces need not and should not be limited to the upper class. This freedom to experiment and pursue self-designed learning is important for all children — and the kinds of out-of-the-box activities we offered are especially important for girls.

By running a Creativity Adda focused on accessibility for girls, our main goals are to challenge the idea that girls should spend more time on housework than on developing personal interests, to question the excessive protectiveness coming from schools and parents that limit the time girls spend outside their homes and to challenge the culture of genderised fear. In Delhi, this is particularly prevalent with the media hyping up stories of rape, which has created a perception that women and girls must fear all men and not venture into the city. This in turn feeds into making schools more afraid and conservative when it comes to creating opportunities for girls.

This summer, as part of our camp we had the chance to have conversations with parents and the SMC about how, though safety is a concern, the solution does not lie in denying opportunities to the girls. I have also found it important to stress that by allowing the children to explore their interests, it is not merely “time pass” — that exploring personal interests and building their self-confidence and self-awareness can actually help their children do better in house- and school work.

We saw one such shift in perception when a conservative Muslim father brought his daughter to sign up for the camp. At first he forbade his daughter, Fatima, from taking part in the dance workshops, giving permission only for robotics and art. I let him make the call with his child but explained how Creativity Adda works as an open learning space — that his daughter would have the opportunity to take part in all workshops, to understand how to mix skills between hubs and collaborate with students with different skills. He stood around skeptically for a moment, watching the children go past him on skates, then made his way back home. Then on the culmination day, when his daughter stood center stage for her solo in the dance performance — perfectly showcasing her new skills in Flow Arts with a giant green ribbon — he watched with a beaming smile and eagerly requested our program to run for a longer period of time.

Because the children's experiences gave us as facilitators the biggest joy and the biggest learnings, here are a few student spotlights to give you a taste of our summer:

Nabila: On the first day of the girl's Adda, eleven-year-old Nabila watched as I carried in a skateboard and didn't take her eyes off it for the rest of the month. Within a week she was riding with ease, within two weeks could navigate her turns and by the third week she was doing flips and tricks like a pro.

"I saw a skateboard for the first time in a Hollywood movie when I was seven," she said when I asked where this passion came from. "I never thought I would be able to ride one until I saw this board here at school!"

Nabila is part of her school's year-long Sports Camp where the children are trained in volleyball, badminton and running, but after learning how to skateboard at Adda she requested her school to integrate skateboarding into the curriculum. The response she got was, "What will come of that? What opportunities are there for skateboarders?" For Creativity Adda, this is a golden moment — when a student shares their new interests over with elders to bring them new learnings. On June 22nd, a day after the international day of skateboarding, Creativity Adda took Nabila and a group of girls to the Delhi Skateboarding Academy where they learned how to answer these questions and found out what a future as a professional skateboarder can look like. Best of all, they got to skate the fist few ramps and half pipes available in Delhi!

Anachal: Like a lot of the girls at Adda, Anachal was infatuated with the rollerblades for a good part of the month, coming in from the sunshine only occasionally to drink water or draw a picture in the Art Hub. But when Boxout.fm, a local community radio station, donated hundreds of excess posters and stickers to the kids, a new collaging culture was born. During a "Meaning Making With Images" workshop the students learned about how a picture could tell many stories and how meanings could be remixed by joining images together. They also learned about how paper is a valuable resource and can be recycled into beautiful pieces of art.

At first Anachal simply loved the freedom of cutting up a magazine without any consequences but she eventually got pulled into the images, finding an acute interest in cutting out the animals and trees from National Geographic. And when she saw the others resorting back to drawing the classic two-windowed house with a background of pointy mountains, she became the Ambassador of Collaging, challenging the girls to make something they had never seen before by mixing media on the page. Slowly, as I started introducing new materials to the kids, Anachal started pairing her cut-out creatures with toffee wrappers, posters from Boxout.fm and waste paper found on the floor. Within a day she had drew together a group of girls and together they created a funky wall ganging for the radio station as a thank you for the posters —including a t-shirt wearing flying swan. And by the end of the camp, a previously sweat stained classroom wall was filled with the students' collaged work, complete with a seven-foot wall hanging with 3D flowers made from recycled paper cups — courtesy of Anachal.

Monita: When we introduced the first robotics workshop to the girls, I got blank stares. The girls seemed doubtful that they as children, and that too girls, would be able to build robots. But when the facilitator, Ankit Dialani of Banana House, and I explained how exciting it could be to make robots like those seen in movies with flashing eyes and moving arms, six curious girls joined in. When the wires and batteries came out for building the "Light Bots" (cartoon characters lit up with colourful light bulb eyes), eleven-year-old Monita took the lead. She eagerly showed her friends how to connect the positive and negative wires and encouraged the other, seemingly uninterested girls in the Art Hub, to explore beyond their simple drawings — to make their pictures light up by attaching the tiny light bulbs to the paper.

The next day, I was faced with an internal assumption I didn't realize I had — that boys were just simply more into machines and robotics than girls. I had assumed that, because the robotics workshop was not as popular as the dance or craft workshops, that the girls would not want to work with the materials again. However, right from the minute we opened that day, Monita and her friends ran up asking to build their own robots again. They stayed focused in one corner of the Art Hub through the day and at the end of session excitedly showed everyone their new creations; a Teddy bear with red flashing eyes and a polka-dotted butterfly with light-up wings! Seeing this made the other girls excited to learn more so we brought in another robotics workshop for the coming week.

The second workshop, making "Art-Bots" with paper cups and sketch pens, was a huge hit with fifteen girls and a few eager schoolteachers joining in. To build an "Art-Bot" the cups are turned upside down and three pens are taped on as legs to the rim. By attaching a motor, the "Art-Bots" scuttle along making multicolour tracks on the paper. The kids had a blast racing the mini-robots against each other and mixing and matching the many colours their tracks made on the paper, which eventually led to filling another classroom wall with interesting works of art. Though the adults stood and watched in amazement at the little moving machines, by the end of the workshop the girls were gleefully shouting, "That was too easy! We want to make more difficult robots!" And we are excited to take up this challenge and see what the girls make next!

Katrina — During a session on Circle Dances and Community Games with Manish Freeman the students played a name game where they matched their names up with an action. Among the bunny ears and silly faces, thirteen-year-old Katrina pulled out a perfect breakdancing move: the wave. The group stared in awe as she moved energy seamlessly from her left to right hand by rolling it through her body. With a little encouragement from peers and facilitators, Katrina began opening up and pulling out these moves at all times — sneakingly making robot hands above the music facilitator's head during a workshop, riding the skateboard and even as she painted a mural. Because Katrina's keen interest, matched by that of the other girls, we were excited to introduce our students to two vastly different workshops: Contact Improvisation and Breakdancing. The goal of this was to help the students improve their self-confidence and learn about body awareness, which is highly important for pre-teen girls, by introducing them to a variety of dance styles and methodologies.

Contact Improvisation, held by Harsh Mittel and Priyanka Barua, was at first vastly alien to the students — with its free-flow style and body-to-body touching. At first the room was filled with awkward giggles and girls shuffled into corners, but after a few introductory exercises that helped them open up with their bodies and feel comfortable with each other, the room was filled with whirling partners moving in tune and purring cats crawling on all fours. Definitely a sight to see. The skilled facilitators also held daily discussions on how dance can be more than flashy Bollywood numbers and be used as an important tool for healing and self-expression.

The second workshop was held by B-Boy Makkhan, one of Delhi's few professional break-dancers. During his four-day intensive Hip-Hop workshop, the students learned how to do headstands, kicks and flips — all while keeping to the beat on the dance floor. But more importantly, they learned of how there are only ten "B-Girls", or "breakdancing girls", in the whole of India because of how it is considered a male dominated industry. Girls are often discouraged from joining in as it is not considered "gentle" or "lady-like" dance form. However a huge take away from this workshop was that by learning new skills, especially those not stereotypically for girls, the students need not only imagine a future where all girls can pursue their dreams, not matter how out of the ordinary it may seem, but they can begin to create it. For the final few weeks of camp the girls worked with the our main dance facilitator, Radha Gurung Chetrie, a professional dancer with Dance Kabila, to create a performance that integrated all the new forms of movement learned during the camp, from Hip-hop to Parkour, Contact Improvisation to Capoeira, from Flow Arts to skateboarding.

The summer camp came to a close with three exciting field trips into the city. On the first day we visited the Kiran Nadar Art Museum where the girls got a chance to explore the Geeli Mitti exhibition put on by Artreach India and the youth of Salaam Balaak, mentored by artist Sonam Chaturvedi. The interactive elements, like shadow drawing and animated videos, were a big hit with our students and they felt so inspired seeing work by fellow kids in a museum that they are now eager to put on an exhibition of their own. On the second day trip we visited Delhi Skateboarding Academy in Saket were, after a month of practicing balance and turns on the flat surfaces of their school, the girls finally had a chance to try out jumping off ramps and dropping down the half pipes! And, girls who had been too timid to try at school finally took up the challenge seeing other young skaters show off their tricks at the teaching oriented, community skate park. Our final trip was to the National Science Museum, which the girls absolutely loved. They were mesmerized by the floors and floors of interactive exhibits and especially loved the experimental science games, roaring dinosaur models, and hearing their heartbeats through loudspeakers at the Human Body exhibit. This trip was particularly important as it gave the girls a chance to become excited about science — to think of it as something fun and useful for daily life, instead of simply a boring classroom subject.

Though the summer camp has come to a close, Creativity Adda is working on running a full time experimental unschool for girls in the government school and is inviting in ideas, projects and collaborations to grow our community and strengthen our program. We want to especially cultivate creative, out-of-the-box workshops that can target issues related to self-confidence and self-care, body image and media, safety and self-defence, and gendered societal and familial prejudice. We want to encourage our students to dream up alternate, positively charged futures for themselves and the world.

If you wish to get involved, please visit our Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/creativityaddadelhi/> or email us at pi4br4r@gmail.com with the subject line, "Creativity Adda Girls".