

The Role of Sustainable Art Pedagogies in Developing Creative Resilience

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Aditi Jain
Visual Arts Educator,
IB-Certified Teaching Practitioner
& Independent Researcher, India

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Abstract

In an era of environmental degradation and climate consciousness, sustainable practices in education—particularly in the arts—have emerged as powerful tools for instilling ecological awareness and fostering creative resilience. This paper explores how sustainable art lesson plans, specifically those that incorporate natural, recycled, or ephemeral materials, not only contribute to environmental stewardship but also nurture risk-taking behaviours by reducing the pressure of permanence. From ephemeral practices such as painting with water on raw surfaces to material innovations like replacing synthetic adhesives with homemade plant-based glue in papier-mâché, these approaches help children connect with nature, challenge norms, and experiment freely. Drawing on theories of art education, environmental psychology, and pedagogical practice, the paper presents varied examples of sustainable projects that reposition the art room as a space of innovation, process-oriented learning, and transformation, offering students a low-stakes environment to explore, imagine, and reimagine.

Introduction

Sustainability in education has gained increasing importance over the past two decades, particularly in response to global ecological crises. Art education, long rooted in material exploration and personal expression, offers unique opportunities for integrating sustainable practices into teaching and learning (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). While the environmental benefits of using recycled and natural materials are well-recognised, this paper argues that sustainable art lesson plans also contribute meaningfully to the development of creative risk-taking in students. By removing the expectation of permanence and perfection, these lessons allow students to engage with the artistic process more freely and reflectively. Recent contemporary art exhibitions have further illuminated the potential of ephemeral and recycled materials as vehicles for environmental consciousness and creative inquiry. The São Paulo Biennial (2025), Kassel Documenta 15, and the Korea Biennial showcased numerous artists who reimagined waste, organic matter, and found objects as expressive mediums—transforming disposability into dialogue. Artists such as El Anatsui, known for his monumental installations made from discarded bottle caps, and Tadashi Kawamata, who constructs temporary architectures from reclaimed wood, exemplify this ethos of impermanence and renewal. Their practices highlight how transient materials can provoke reflection on consumption, sustainability, and the temporality of human impact on the environment.

This paper draws on constructivist and experiential learning theories (Dewey, 1934; Kolb, 1984) that emphasise the importance of hands-on engagement, reflection, and iteration in learning. Additionally, the concept of “slow pedagogy” in art education (Lindstrom, 2011) underscores the value of mindful making, material awareness, and environmental connection. Risk-taking, as framed by Hetland et al. (2007), is considered a core studio habit of mind and a necessary component of artistic growth. When students are not burdened by the expectation of creating a lasting, polished product, they are more inclined to take creative risks, embrace ambiguity, and persist through failure.

Sustainable Art Practices in the Classroom

Sustainable art practices involve the use of materials that are either naturally available, recycled, or destined for waste. These include cardboard, fabric remnants, bottle caps, dried leaves, scrap paper, and biodegradable adhesives. Beyond reducing waste, these materials carry a sense of impermanence that subtly alters student expectations and engagement. A prominent example is the act of painting with water on raw cement or tiled floors. The resulting images—often fleeting as they evaporate—invite students to experience art as a temporal expression rather than a static object. This transience, rather than diminishing the value of the work, elevates the process of making as the core of the learning experience.

Case studies

1. Painting with Water

In a recent classroom project, young learners were invited to use large brushes and bowls of water to “paint” on the raw stone floors of an open veranda. The activity required no pigments, paper, or expensive supplies—only imagination,

observation, and immediacy. As students created their calligraphic quotes on the floor, they quickly realised the temporary nature of their art. Within minutes, the images faded with the heat, creating a sense of wonder rather than frustration. This experience sparked a rich discussion about change, impermanence, and process. It also revealed the power of sustainable artmaking to engage students emotionally and intellectually without reliance on physical artifacts.





2. Nature mandala

Another compelling example involved the creation of mandalas using only fallen leaves, twigs, and flower petals. A mandala, derived from the Sanskrit word for “circle,” is a symbolic design used across many Eastern traditions—particularly in Hinduism and Buddhism—to represent harmony, unity, and the cyclical nature of life. Traditionally, mandalas serve as tools for meditation and spiritual reflection, emphasizing balance and interconnectedness between the individual and the cosmos.

Students worked outdoors in small groups, gathering materials respectfully from the environment without causing harm. Arranged on the ground, their symmetrical, colorful patterns connected students to both geometry and natural beauty while reflecting the spiritual and meditative essence of mandala-making. As wind and time naturally dismantled the designs, learners experienced first-hand how impermanence can be an integral—and beautiful—part of the artistic process.

3. Cardboard Sculptures

Older primary students engaged in a sustainable sculpture project using only cardboard boxes collected from home and school. Without glue or paint, they explored methods of cutting, folding, scoring, and interlocking the material to build abstract and functional forms. The limitations of the material encouraged creative problem-solving and iterative thinking. Several students reported feeling less intimidated to attempt ambitious structures, knowing that the cardboard was both abundant and easily recyclable. The temporary gallery of sculptures was displayed outdoors and later dismantled by students for re-use in future projects.



4. Biodegradable Clay Figures and Plant-Based Adhesives - In a unit exploring human connection with nature, students sculpted small figures using biodegradable clay made from flour, salt, and water. This simple mixture—long used by traditional artisans and craftspeople before the industrialization of art materials—reflects centuries-old knowledge of natural binders and pastes derived from kitchen and earth-based ingredients. Prior to the advent of synthetic glues and commercial modeling compounds, artists and builders across cultures relied on plant starches, animal glues, and mineral pigments to create sustainable, locally sourced materials. By reintroducing such pre-industrial methods, the project invited students to appreciate the ingenuity of earlier craft traditions that prioritized environmental harmony and material resourcefulness.

These figures were installed in the school garden, where they slowly dissolved or returned to the earth over time. The process opened dialogue about decay, natural cycles, and letting go. Students documented their figures' transformations through photography and weekly reflections, embracing the loss of their creations as part of a larger learning arc. Teachers noted increased emotional investment and resilience among students during the project.

Additionally, in another sustainable approach, students replaced synthetic adhesives like Fevicol with a plant-based glue made from boiled flour and water during papier-mâché activities. This glue, while slightly less durable, proved sufficient for lightweight sculptural forms and emphasized the biodegradable, safe-to-make aspect of the art process. The shift invited discussions about the environmental impact of everyday classroom materials and prompted students to question commonly accepted resources. Many students noted how this change made their work feel more connected to the earth and less harmful in the long term.

Risk-Taking and the Removal of Permanence

Conventional art education often emphasizes the finished product—one that can be displayed, evaluated, or preserved. This emphasis, while important in some contexts, can discourage students from experimenting or making bold choices for fear of “ruining” their work (Thompson, 2015). Sustainable art practices mitigate this fear by shifting the focus from end result to ongoing exploration. The impermanence of materials such as found objects or natural elements supports a mindset where failure is redefined as a step in learning. Students are encouraged to try new techniques, manipulate unfamiliar materials, and take aesthetic and conceptual risks without the weight of finality.

Environmental Awareness

Through Art In addition to promoting risk-taking, sustainable art lessons foster a deeper understanding of environmental issues. When students repurpose materials that would otherwise become waste, they engage in a form of ecological activism. They begin to see art not just as a form of self-expression, but as a practice of stewardship and care. Art educators play a crucial role in guiding students to reflect on the sources, life cycles, and potential reuse of their materials. This awareness contributes to the development of environmentally literate citizens who understand the impact of their choices.



Implications for Educators

Educators adopting sustainable art practices must be willing to rethink traditional metrics of success and value in the art classroom. Flexibility, process documentation, and reflective dialogue become central components of assessment. Moreover, educators must model comfort with ambiguity and change, showing students that art can be meaningful even when it leaves no physical trace. By creating an environment that honours experimentation and ecological mindfulness, teachers can nurture both the artistic and ethical dimensions of their students.

Conclusion

Sustainable art education offers more than an eco-friendly alternative to traditional art making—it redefines the role of art in learning. By embracing impermanence, educators can cultivate an environment where students feel safe to take risks, experiment freely, and engage deeply with the world around them. Practices like painting with water on stone floors or creating from recycled materials demonstrate that meaningful artistic expression need not rely on permanence. In fact, the fleeting nature of these works may be what makes them most powerful—reminding us that creativity, like the planet we inhabit, is a dynamic and ever-changing force.

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