

Artistic Actions for Sustainability in a University Setting

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Biography

Dr. Ásthildur Jónsdóttir (1970), is an artist, curator and independent scholar living in Geneva Switzerland. She has studied artistic actions for sustainability and participatory art practices in finding a balance between well-being and the integrity of nature. For several years, she has been involved in the ecology of the planet. In her work, she is concerned about issues such as environment and places, memories, recollection and identity through authorship and collaboration, exploring what is unique and what is common and questioning individuality.

Abstract

This chapter introduces a case entitled *Walk the Space*. Webster University in Geneva took the opportunity to invite an artist to work with their students to rethink their ideas of what we can do to meet sustainability global challenges. The artistic activities aimed to promote greater ecological consciousness through different forms of participation and awareness activities, helping the participants to discover the connection to the nature that surrounds them. *Walk the Space* created a platform for sharing ideas about sustainability,

both individual and collective. Participants, both staff and students alike, exchanged ideas through dialogues, exercises including walking, memory work, and through developing slogans that were subsequently embroidered and exhibited in the woods surrounding the university. This collaboration provided a space for transformative learning and active engagement, giving the potential for social change. This article gives insights into how artistic actions can strengthen community building and ecological consciousness.

Keywords

Education for sustainability, Well-being, Ecological Consciousness, Artistic actions, Transformative learning

Introduction

There are many ways to work towards sustainability; focusing on ecological consciousness through artistic actions is one such way. There is a growing societal awareness of the importance of getting people outdoors to connect body and mind with nature (Ives et al., 2018). Ecological consciousness is important in education for sustainability (EfS). It provides a focus for the learner as it helps to develop a relationship with nature. This focus includes discovering the intrinsic integrity of nature. In discussing nature's agency, normativity and the worth of nature, the learner has the potential to develop a sense of exactly what "being-in-nature" can give us (Bonnett, 2021). These experiences can drive learners to consider how a relationship with nature aligns with problems of sustainability. We can view ecological consciousness in terms of a balance between a world of people, objects and nature. Research has shown that there is an increasing disconnection between humans and nature. Some scholars have argued that discon-

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nection from nature is the root cause of unsustainability (Folke et al., 2011; Dorninger et al., 2017). Studies indicate that environmental consciousness requires a complex mental education involving cognitive, regulatory, emotional and ethical experiences, among other aspects.

In general terms the ecological consciousness is understood as a reflection of the psyche of a variety of man's relationship with nature, which mediate its behaviour in the "natural world", and express axiological position of the subject of consciousness in relation to the natural world. (Panov, 2013, p. 380)

Artistic action can create a dialogue about the need for harmony to reach ecological consciousness. Art-making can also influence how we think about our planet and it can stimulate the development of our values. This is in complete agreement with the EfS goals developed at UNESCO (2012, p. 12) as it seeks to enable global citizens to find a balance within the complexities, controversies and inequities arising out of issues relevant to the environment, natural heritage, culture, society, and economy. The ABAR (Art-Based Action Research) approach was used in this research. It is a case-specific, developmental qualitative method. The process follows the traditions of action research (Jokela, Hiltunen, & Härkönen, 2015; Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2019) when gathering data, resulting in findings that add to an understanding of the potential of the project, and the potential consequences of the actions taken when connecting these to theories. In the process of planning, designing, organising, developing, and observing actions and concluding with evaluation, the research cycle developed at the University of Lapland was followed when seeking answers to: How can artistic actions can strengthen community building and ecological consciousness in university settings? The documentary photos included in this article are presented with the consent of the participants.

Creative transformative education for sustainability in university settings

Sustainability and EfS are complex concepts that have been studied by a wide range of scholars (Tang et al., 2018). In EfS it is important to examine the interaction between the factors influencing human survival and well-being. Giddings, Hopwood and O'Brien (2002) proposed that the connection between human activity and well-being should be linked to ecological issues and the environmental limits of the earth. Well-being itself takes several different forms, including well-being as a state of mind or as a state of the earth, capability for action or a basic needs approach (Dodds, 1997). In EfS it is imperative to keep in mind that what is considered well-being and/or good life varies between individuals themselves, and between different societies and cultures.

Every school setting must develop its own goals towards EfS because it would be misleading to take the concept of the good life developed in one cultural context and apply it to other cultures (Jucker & Mathar, 2015).

Artistic actions can be based on value-judgements inherent in the 'good life' approach to sustainability (Jónsdóttir, 2017). When positioning well-being at the core of community discussions the role of sustainability within it can become more clearly visible (Kjell, 2011). Ideas of scholars such as Ingold (2019), Ryan and Deci (2000), Giddings, Hopwood, and O'Brien (2002) and Kjell (2011) include the term well-being in their definition of sustainability and discuss different interpretations of it, including how what counts as the good life can have a great influence on creative transformative projects. These scholars are all in line with Bonnett's (2021) focus on the emphasis on reframing and rethinking our own place in nature as this forms the fundamental implication for holistic education. The potential to become active members of society increases as people learn more about their local environment and become more caring about the places they live in (Sobel, 2005).

When setting sustainability goals in university settings, building a sense of community is

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vital (SDSN, n.d.). Research confirms that when students in schools have a strong sense of community; they are more likely to develop strong environmental values that can support them to become academically motivated, resulting in student-driven initiatives (Durlak et al., 2011; Schaps et al., 1997; Solomon et al., 2000). University students need to be motivated to take personal actions to engage in sustainability related issues. Everyone needs to feel that it is important we all participate (Kestin et al., 2018). They should be encouraged to become the generation that changes the world as active citizens. Through the transformative learning experience of EfS the students experience shifts in their values as sustainable changes are generated. The learners and the teachers work together, and everyone's beliefs and attitudes develop (Sterling, 2001, 2008). Lawy and Biesta have advocated the idea of citizenship as practice. They argue that:

[Citizenship is] not a status or a possession, nor it is the outcome of a developmental and/or educational trajectory that can be socially engineered. It is a practice, embedded within the day-to-day reality of people's lives, interwoven and transformed over time in all the distinctive and different dimensions of their lives. (Lawy & Biesta, 2006, p. 47)

In transformative learning for sustainability, the learner builds on his or her prior lived experience, thus making the educational process relevant to the learners' lives. In order to learn to understand themselves and their environment the learner needs to get a sense of their own place. Both in the context of the environment and their physical place or home in the world. A deeper knowledge of the local environment, increases learners' potential to become active members of society because it encourages them to care about the places where people live (Sobel, 2005). To do so the focus is placed on reflecting upon solutions to real problems that people are experiencing (UNESCO, 2012).

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Studies indicate that there are many ways to engage communities in sustainability (Jónsdóttir, 2017). The role of sustainability can be enhanced by positioning the concept of well-being clearly within sustainability discussions. EfS, therefore, benefits from an interdisciplinary approach with one activity consisting of several components; this could include activities based in literacy, equality, or citizenship. Research has shown that art is a perfect forum for creating a personal connection to the task through transformative learning settings (Brookfield, 2003; Jónsdóttir, 2017; Mezirow, 2009).

A critical creative approach has potential for both practical and transformative elements. The approach is designed to break away from mere theorizing and instead actively engage with the society we are examining for real transformation. Transformative learning using a critical approach that focuses on local settings allows students to learn to connect to places in meaningful ways (Wakeman, 2015). “We need new ways of thinking about our place in the world and the ways in which we relate to natural systems in order to be able to develop a sustainable world for our children and grandchildren.” (Raven, 2002, p. 957) This kind of relation is transformative learning, and can be described as a process in which individuals alter their frames of reference for understanding the world. In transformative learning, all learning processes point towards the need for change. Transformative learning opens up new lenses of awareness and strengthens our competence for understanding diverse knowledge (Mezirow, 2009).

When organising artistic actions for sustainability and well-being, it can be useful to employ ecological consciousness. Students learn to have a deep commitment to nature and to care for it because it feels natural for them to do it (Naess, 1993). To learn about ecology, you need to experience nature in depth; from this you learn to develop a commitment to revealing, looking after, respecting, and conserving nature (Harding, n.d.). When focusing on commitment with heart and mind in harmony with nature and the world, students learn to be agents of change for

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a more sustainable society (ChangeNow, 2020). This change is for the future but also about the present, because both the present and the past are vital (UNESCO, 2012) to our ability to build up community well-being wherein the integrity of nature is respected.

The project *Walk the Space*

In 2019 I was asked to be part of the lecture series Meet the Artist initiated by Dr. Julianna Sandholm-Bark located at the Geneva campus of Webster University located. The lecture series aimed to introduce critical thinking to the 490 students from many different countries. Before accepting the offer, I suggested creating a participatory work which would then become a follow up to the lecture. By inviting interested students and staff to participate in the project I was able to weave together artistic actions for sustainability in general, with the specific sustainability role of the university; this gave the project a focus on finding a balance between well-being and the integrity of nature. Tim Ingold (2020) has stressed that the purpose of universities is to educate future generations of citizens to sustain a just and prosperous world. In universities, students should extend the learning process beyond their own courses to consider the very nature of things, including ways of living, justice, peace, ecology, and responsibility. I wanted to create settings where the participants would learn to weigh different sustainability facts against their personal experience and to translate them into principles, values, and practices.

In organising the project, I collaborated closely with both teachers and students. In this way, I reached out to diverse groups within the university. With this work, the aim was to develop ecological consciousness by bringing attention to how human interaction can further both the understanding and practice of creating well-being in the integrity of nature. The participants were first encouraged to rethink their own attitude towards nature because attitude is the one small thing that can make a tremendous impact in the way we live our lives; attitude can also have an impact on all areas of human lives. If we all have the right attitude towards life and the

living organisms around us, the earth can thrive and flourish.

The 6-P framework for community engagement

In the project, the 6P community framework was used to organise settings that engage students in sustainability (Too & Bajracharya, 2015). This framework helps identify the major factors used to address the issue and engage a university campus community towards sustainability. Introducing this framework to students gave them the opportunity to get familiar with a useful tool that can serve as the foundation for their future work practice, using dominant factors that drive community participation in sustainability projects (Too & Bajracharya, 2015).

The 6-P framework for community engagement is in line with the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network suggestions for developing community engagement (Too & Bajracharya, 2015). It perfectly fulfils the vision of a sustainable campus and is applicable to any university community. This framework is also useful for the students once they leave the university and take up their careers since it can be applied to most workplaces. The framework includes factors that should be kept in mind when organising activities, and includes a) psychological needs that provide community members with knowledge and values concerning the environment; b) physical facilities that connect availability to green surroundings; c) participants' motivations which help organisers to focus on time availability and performance requirements; d) public perception regarding the social norms in the community settings; e) price mechanisms that look at the cost of choosing green; f) policies relating to regulatory and management support in the community as shown in figure 1.

The process

I used participatory art to interlink together artistic actions for sustainability and the role of universities, with a focus on finding a balance between well-being and the integrity of na-

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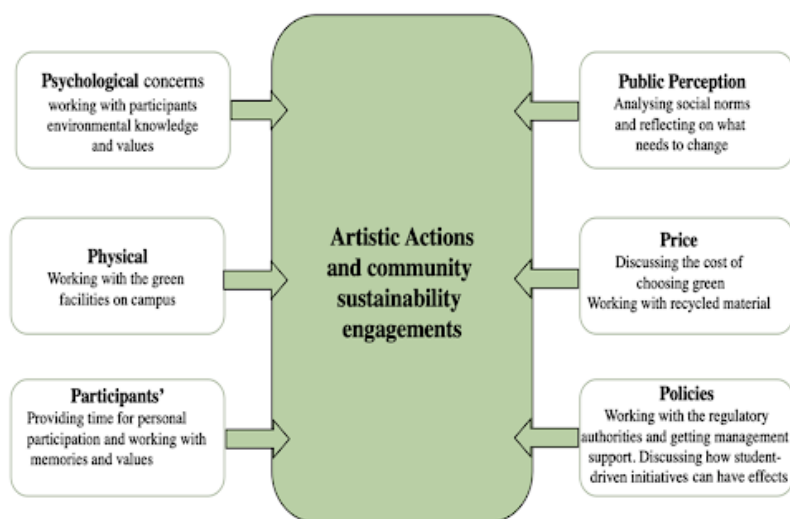


Figure 1. 6P community engagement framework for understanding artistic actions Based on Bajracharya Too and Isara Khanjanasthiti, 2013, p. 62.

ture. When community-based art is created in university settings it is often used to develop an awareness of social issues, in this case, sustainability. It fosters a creative approach to problems; through the process of making art the participants find different ways to solve issues collaboratively (Krensky & Steffen, 2009).

The community art form was used to initiate dialogue and collaboration which allowed me to examine and develop students social cooperation while at the same time allowing for new dialogues among people experiencing the work. By their very nature, community-based art activities have the potential to create new information, as the participants continuously develop their attitudes through cooperation and discussions. It was not possible for me to project the effects and the result of the processes I used in advance (Sederholm, 1998) as the aesthetic of the participants' conclusions, supported by their sense of community, only materialised through the process.

Three different groups took part in the project. I was connected to the student-led environmental group which included both students and staff. In addition, I worked with a natural

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science class and an art history class because staff from those two departments had been instrumental in setting up the lecture series. Both the classes are elective courses comprised of students from different degree programs. Each group began with a discussion of sustainability through the means of an interactive lecture. The concept of community-based art was introduced to the participants. The six principles in the P6 framework guided both my talk and our discussions when introducing sustainability to the students. By putting the well-being concept in the centre of the approach to sustainability the aim was to create a setting for awareness of both sustainability and well-being. This included discussions on how well-being can exist if we see or know our actions are harmful to our environment or other human beings. The discussion developed to consider how we as individuals can contribute to sustainable developments.

Many artists have used their work to communicate important insights into the relationships humans have with the natural environment (Pollak & MacNabb, 2000). Different artists were introduced, and we discussed how artworks can encourage the observer to rethink their perspectives and their connection to nature. I introduced ecological consciousness by telling the participants about the ideas of different philosophers such as Deep Ecology by Arne Naess (1993) and the ideas of the German biologist and philosopher, Andreas Weber. Weber displays a highly unconventional way of describing the natural world around him and how we as humans need to learn to communicate with nature. He puts love in the forefront as a foundational principle of biology, and asserts that this opens up a profoundly sensual understanding of the world. He is the spokesman for a tender practise of forging relationships, yearning for connections, and of expressing these desires through our bodies. “To love means to be fully alive... This is true of all realities — physical reality and the reality of thought, but also especially the reality of the biosphere, the reality of bodies.” (Weber, 2017, p. 43)

We discussed Weber’s hope for the world which is to see where nature and people live in greater harmony, more equitably and sustainably. We discussed and collectively created mind-

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maps reflecting on what we can do to fulfil this wish. Several short exercises were organised involving students walking in the wood outside the university. Walking was used to engage them in diverse learning opportunities connected to aesthetic experiences and memories from other places that have significant meaning to them. Being outside the university buildings encouraged the participants to get to know the local environment around the university better and this measure, I hoped, would increase their potential to become active members of the university community while at the same time encouraging them to care about its spaces. During the walks outside we selected spaces and a situation where it was practical and possible to take action. It was also necessary to create a situation in which the participants would feel at ease, which is important for the dialogue (Hiltunen, 2008). Place-specific art must be considered from the participants' perspectives, respecting the community and its environment (Lippard, 1997).

Through these exercises, scholarly approaches were connected to emotional and tacit knowledge. By being out in the open air, discussing what causes unsustainable practices for the earth and reflecting on our experience we worked towards a common understanding. The personal relevance made it easier for the students to connect to their morals and values. Students proved themselves to be more enthusiastic when positive methods were used to search for alternatives to a current situation that was leading to unsustainable actions. Methods such as these allow holistic and creative thinking about both values and about solutions for the future (Jónsdóttir, 2017).

When organising artistic action, the artist acts as a guide for the group, and at the same time has to step back to allow the participants' concerns and knowledge to inspire the process based on their own interests (Knight & Schwarzman, 2017). We discussed how slogans can point out solutions and lead to a change in values and attitudes right now.

Discussions and connection to memories

An important part of the work was the dialogue. The role of the dialogue for the artistic actions was tangible because we all learned from the interactions (Kester, 2004). The participants brought with them prior knowledge and were able to refer to their experiences of nature concerning societal interventions. Some participants explained how being in nature can nourish awareness when others noted that they had never spent time out in nature.

As an outsider, I entered the field of sustainability through the perspective of art, a perspective that was new to the participants. I built a bridge between different communities of practice through the sharing of different stories, and I drew out their compassion, awareness, curiosity, and engagement; all of these perspectives were important for the group dynamics given that the participants all came from different programmes within the university. The discussions in the workshop were based on a transformative ideology (Mezirow, 2009), where the dialogue stimulated active, not passive learning, and encouraged the students to be critical, creative thinkers, with the capacity to engage in future learning. This means not only transmitting knowledge but also transforming and extending it as well (Boyer, 1990).

We began the discussions with an open lecture about my art and sustainability. Then, through dialogue, we started to make mind maps, reflecting on what the participants themselves could do to become more sustainable in their daily activities. The challenge was to create an atmosphere that allowed for sharing and developing knowledge, skill and ability. I encouraged the students to look at their findings about others and asked them to reflect on the importance of working together (SDG 17) through finding common experiences and exploring their daily lives.

In one of the walking exercises, I instructed the participants to go outside into the woods and take a photograph of a natural object that reminded them of a positive “home” experience in which they had felt connected to nature. When they came back inside, we looked at how our

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experiences were connected. By allowing time for a moment of uncertainty the participants had the opportunity to discuss and decide what is meaningful in their life and living environment. This was an important step as the participants jointly defined the meaning of the process in which we were engaged. In the context of critical pedagogy, this exercise is an example of how walking can engage participants to become more attentive in society. Reflecting on our walking experience in connection to memories gives countless possibilities to discuss significant issues, both small and large, and to find and think about structures of power in our surroundings. By its nature, walking is interdisciplinary and allows the potential of discovering new and unexpected connections. The discussions also brought interaction into the process so that participants could connect to common desires to create a better future.

My aim was to create settings where the participants would be encouraged to think creatively about the ecology of the planet. I divided them into small groups where they discussed both the objects they had found and the photographs, discovering ways to connect them together. In the small group discussions, they showed concern about places and their environment, recollection, and identity through collaboration while questioning their values and ways of living. I used the dialogue to emphasise the importance of students selecting words that had special meaning to them and they thought were worth fighting for. They then used those words to form slogans. Some wrote down slogans in their own words while others used well-known environmental slogans. Freire (2000, p. 88) believed words had constitutive elements and the power to define our thinking. “Words are never politically neutral but have the power to both limit and expand social reality through the concepts and values they supply.” (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2011, p. 95)

By using their handwriting, and their stitchwork (figure 2) the work also became more personalised as each piece was unique.

Embroidering and exhibiting selected statements

The embroidery method was used as a tool to make the participants conclusions visible. Embroidery was introduced (figure 2) as the students wrote down their slogans on the fabric. Embroidered banners used the perception of embroidery as a creative outlet to communicate social messages. Through the process of making the banners, we worked with the ideas developed by the students through dialogue and their creative imagination to give voice to artistic expression. The embroidered messages aimed to transform and challenge preconceived notions within our society.



Figure 2. Collage of students working on their statements. Photographs Ásthildur Jónsdóttir, 2019.

Art has often been used in this way as a tool of emancipation and transformation (Koczanowicz, 2015). Collectively they contributed to the search for their understanding of sustainability. Working with ecological consciousness as a part of developing values and meanings has been proven to raise sustainable awareness (Dahl, 2016).

An outdoor installation was created transmitting the participants' voices. A small creek

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runs through the wood around the university, providing rich flora and fauna. Installing the messages in natural surroundings aimed at captivating the visitors' attention with sensory input, creating settings for them to experience themselves as relational beings, and where they could receive meaning. By positioning the installation in a community setting, the participants' voices interacted with the people walking around the area, thus potentially bringing the participants into further dialogues with the community.

Most of the materials used were recycled or reclaimed, which acts as a commentary on consumerist "throwaway" culture; focusing on natural fabrics that can later return to their natural cycles. One participant stated in a later event that she found the project so inspiring that she is now upcycling clothes and different textiles herself. This corresponds to Ingold's (2011) ideas of focusing on alternative ways of working with materials, on being part of the materials, learning to appreciate their quality and their possibilities rather than translating from the virtual to the actual. Through the act of embroidering, some of the participants also created personal connections to family, including linking this activity to memories of their mothers or grandmothers.

Ecological thinking, consciousness, responsibility

Participants' embroidery can be divided into different themes. Some of the slogans included ecological facts about the relationship between man and nature that could lead to sustainability (figure 3). Some slogans suggested people should spend more time in nature (figure 4). Other works involved warnings. If people did not change their behaviour, the danger would be clear (figure 5). People interacting with the installation were encouraged to take action and change their way of living (figure 6–7). One participant's work was influenced by Weber's idea of the imbalance between humans and other living creatures (figure 8).

Many of the participants reflected on the 17th UN SDG - that it is important to work col-

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Figure 3. Facts about sustainability, Photographs Ásthildur Jónsdóttir, 2019.



Figure 4. Slogans that encourage people to connect to nature. Photographs Ásthildur Jónsdóttir, 2019.

lectively towards sustainability with an overarching ecological consciousness. Visitors were encouraged to act (figure 9). The experience of the participants was diverse and at its best enabled an objective common point of view. It thus influenced the attitudes and values of the recipients positively. The process made learning relevant to the participants: “I was working with memories but did not realise it, when doing it. I realize my values can have more or a deeper meaning because I’m passing on something to the next generation.” (student interview)

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Figure 5. Embroidered slogans with doomsday prediction. Photographs Ásthildur Jónsdóttir, 2019.



Figure 6. Embroidery suggesting way of living. Photographs Ásthildur Jónsdóttir, 2019.

Understanding and attachment to places varied from one participant to another and through dialogue, they found what united them and what made them different. Using the idea of walking around the university surroundings as a pedagogical tool resulted in engaged students, diverse learning opportunities and an aesthetic experience because there was both space and place for exploration.

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Figure 7. Embroidery suggesting way of living. Photographs Ásthildur Jónsdóttir, 2019.



Figure 8. Plants compared to humans. Photographs Ásthildur Jónsdóttir, 2019

Conclusions

When the goal is to strengthen a community through artistic actions employing a community-based approach is vital in maintaining individuality and the locality, but acceptance of differences is essential to support the transition to sustainability (Hiltunen, 2008). The aim of the project *Walk the space* was to encourage the students to become conscious about the local ecology while at the same time learning about sustainability issues. In the project, this setting was

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Figure 9. The importance of collective approach to ecological consciousness. Photographs Ásthildur Jónsdóttir, 2019.

used by the participants to experience meaningful dialogue within the natural environment, and it was very successful. The aim of bringing students from different departments together to discuss their visions for their community and its significance for their living environment was fully achieved.

The results of the project can be seen not only in the objects that were created but in the artistic actions and the process. Joint decision making ensured that the artwork would represent the principles of the participants in a place-specific artwork. The aim of the project was not to provide one final answer, but instead to develop new questions on how to respond to the ethical ecological challenges we are facing through the use of an art form that gives space for natural encounters and dialogue.

This community-based art project brought together different groups within Webster University Geneva. It stimulated connections and built bridges, both between individuals themselves, and also with the community. Hence, the process and the interaction, including the discussions, were as meaningful as the embroidered banners the more visible result. There was an overall sense of the importance of working together towards sustainable development which

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is also proposed in the 17th SDG goal. For the participants, the process of developing ideas on how to implement changes in their community by working collectively encouraged them to discuss their ideas in a safe and secure environment. Different elements were used to connect participants to nature and each other, inspiring collective creativity and environmental action.

Both the local media and the university newspaper covered the community-based project which encouraged the students and the local people to visit the exhibition. This project supports the conclusion that by combining artistic actions and connecting practice to theory, art has great potential in EfS. The leader of the local University environmental group said he had discovered the strong potential of art to address environmental issues and added that he wanted more projects like this one to address sustainability challenges within the community. Participatory community-based artistic actions can create settings for community stakeholders to work together. *Walk the Space* encouraged students to visit nature around the university and promised severance from busy daily lives. This created distance from the “real world” and allowed participants to actively engage in the process of changing their perspective. Overall, the installation addressed the urgent issues of our times and the importance of participation in finding solutions to the widespread environmental issues affecting our planet; this included the opportunity to reflect on our personal values and motivations, and raising the collective ecological consciousness of participants, and the larger community.

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