

## **Title page**

**Title:** SUSTAINABLE THREADS. USING IMMERSIVE NARRATIVES TO TEACH ABOUT THE CLIMATE, WELLBEING AND SOCIAL IMPACTS OF FAST FASHION

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## **SUSTAINABLE THREADS. USING IMMERSIVE NARRATIVES TO TEACH ABOUT THE CLIMATE, WELLBEING AND SOCIAL IMPACTS OF FAST FASHION**

### **ABSTRACT**

In this article Dr Verity Jones, Associate Professor in Education at the University of the West of England, Ruth Millett, Learning and Engagement Officer at Thinktank, Birmingham Science Museum, which is run by Birmingham Museums Trust, and Dr Jessica Pykett, Associate Professor in Human Geography at the University of Birmingham introduce a new collection of lesson plans for Key Stages 2 and 3 geography teaching on sustainable fashion and climate crisis. They reflect on why schools need to teach about fast fashion, and how to support teachers in light of current concerns about children's eco-anxiety. They discuss how teaching through immersive narratives provides a fresh approach to learning about the connections between clothing as an essential part of everyday life, global environmental change and climate justice.

### **Why do we need to teach about fast fashion?**

Our clothing offers a relatable way of connecting learners with global, complex systems relating to contemporary social, economic, political and environmental issues and possible routes to more sustainable futures, in which humans do not exceed the planetary or social boundaries necessary for living. Fast fashion refers to the design, manufacturing and marketing methods used to rapidly produce high volumes of cheap clothing which move quickly in and out of trend, and frequently end up as waste. It's been reported that up to 40% of clothing purchased is never even worn, 93% of brands are not paying workers in their garment factories a living wage, and the fashion industry as a whole is responsible for 10% of global carbon emissions, 20% of global wastewater, and for vast amounts of ocean based plastic pollution as a result of the increasing use of plastics in new fibres (see Further Reading for useful information sources). Students need to learn about the environmental and social impacts of unsustainable forms of consumption to appreciate the interaction between physical and human processes, and to investigate the dynamics of global trade and resource distribution.

### **Developing research informed resources**

Working directly with the Global Goals Centre, a UK sustainability charity which has a curated hub of resources for educators to support and inspire learning and action on climate and equity [<https://globalgoalscentre.org/resource-hub/>], we developed a series of 8 lesson plans with ideas for extension activities for teachers of KS2 and KS3 students- all freely available. These lesson plans cumulatively build on geographical concepts of interconnection and sustainable development, encouraging engagement and action for change as knowledge of linear and circular models of economy are explored. This work was informed by:

- young people and families' existing knowledge,
- a sensitivity to the emotional dimensions of eco-anxiety and other pressures on young people's wellbeing,

- an enquiry-based approach

At thinktank, Birmingham Science Museum we worked with over 150 visiting families during Summer 2021, to try out some imaginative ways to give old clothes new life, show how the fashion industry is impacting on the climate, and explore how our feelings about clothes, fashion and mending are connected with environmental change. We did this through an immersive activity of making and crafting. We focussed the activity on the material properties and impacts of denim, in order to shed light on the environmental impacts of cotton and by contrast, the potential long lasting nature and value of this fabric.

[INSERT Figure 1: the activity]

[INSERT Figure 2: the denim exhibit]

We investigated the source of the clothes worn by visitors to the museum and marked these on a global map which also traced the impacts of the fashion industry. We asked people to write messages on the main changes they'd like to see in the fashion industry and to reflect on who should be responsible for instigating these changes. We found that people – young and older alike – loved to discuss specific stories and memories about their own clothes, some of which they felt very attached to. Some shared stories about their own jobs in the local garment industries, their cultural connections to acts of mending and repair, and the importance of passing down fabric skills and techniques through generations of their families. Many wanted information on which brands were more sustainable than others, or pointers to take local action. We later put everyone's creations together in a wall-hanging full of denim pockets to be used for later workshops.

[INSERT Figure 3: photo of the collaboratively produced wall-hanging]

In thinktank's new gallery space, Our Changing Planet, young people shared not a sense of anxiety, but of anger at the inaction of governments and global corporations. They also spoke of a sense of hope at the potential for schools to provide the space through which to find out about more sustainable forms of consumption, to be able to imagine sustainable futures, to learn new creative skills of mending and waste reduction, and to plan collective actions to support change.

In response to these conversations the lesson plans we developed were committed to anchoring activities through students' (and teacher's) own clothes making the learning relevant. We also embedded skills for mending and longevity thus disrupting the usual linear model of fast fashion to support young people in thinking through more circular models of consumption as seen in figure 4:

[INSERT Figure 4a: diagram of linear model]

[INSERT Figure 4b: diagram of circular model]

Figure 5 shows an overview of the 8 lesson plans – these are underpinned with knowledge about: global trade patterns – linking these to more local histories of the textile industry and working conditions; resource use in the fashion industry; the material and symbolic (trends) properties and impacts of particular fibres and fabrics; advancement of the circular economy as a more sustainable alternative to linear production processes; and future action planning at a school level. These lessons are designed to be used as stand-alone lessons or in combination with each other. They can also accompany a free online game which facilitates the immersive exploration of fast fashion for KS2/3 audiences, available via the Global Goals website.

[INSERT Figure 5: Threads lesson plans]

### **Workshops in action**

In order to develop and evaluate the resources, we have been working with primary and secondary school teachers as well as student teachers in the South West of England and the Midlands. Many schools used the resources as a focus for Earth Week in February, others plan to use them during Fashion Revolution week held annually in April, as part of their ongoing geography focus on trade or as the focus for whole school tutorial discussions.

[INSERT Figure 6: Businesses adopt a circular economy fabric creation]

The response to these resources has been incredibly positive:

“I really like these ideas as they are collaborative, which will make a greater difference, but also achievable.” (KS2 teacher)

“I love this. This is a fantastic project and one that is probably not on very many young people’s radars. Great to get some really high-quality teaching resources in circulation.” (KS3 teacher)

“I had no idea that my clothes had such a story to tell. I know that there’s a lot of bad things about making clothes but today I learned that lots of people are doing stuff to reduce the impact of this industry. It makes me feel a bit more hopeful for the future.” (KS2 student)

“No one in my family knows how to sew or why we should even think about mending clothes. I’m going to go home and make sure I tell them. I’m going to show them how to sew on a button.”(KS3 student)

### **Immersion in fast fashion**

The activities are immersive in a number of ways. By starting with ‘storying’ students’ own attachments and perspectives on clothing and the journey stories of their clothing, the lessons focus on helping them to think through their own immersion in global trade networks, the circulation of physical materials. They are further immersed in particular historical narratives – invited to think about local textile histories and contemporary fashion trends. They can be immersed in the doing of mending and experience first-hand the challenges of making and working with specific materials. They are supported to consider and reflect on issues of wellbeing, including positive actions which can address their own potential worries about climate crisis and ecological change.

[INSERT Figure 7: Young people sewing on buttons]

Another level of immersion relates to how the activities position young people as active decision-makers, informed consumers and as part of collective or social groups. They are signposted to organisations and activities which are supporting change and critically assessing issues of responsibility and accountability. Finally, these activities illustrate the value of geography as a means to explore current, potential and alternative futures – feeding the imagination about plausible scenarios and thinking through what steps are needed to actively shape the futures young people want.

### **Learning through sustainable threads**

Because we are consuming natural resources at an unsustainable pace, we need to consider everything we do and use, including what we wear, what we eat, how we get around, how we use energy, water, soil, electricity, and materials. We also need to think about where these all end up including extreme levels of clothing, food, plastics, electronic waste from computers and mobile phones. By providing information about the impacts of fast fashion and giving students a real experience of repairing, creating and valuing clothing, these resources enable students to consider the limits of linear production and consumption. They will be able to imagine how a more circular economy can achieve sustainability and how to take action together to shape the choices we collectively face.

All websites last accessed 22/3/22

This teaching resource is free to download from the Global Goals Centre Resource Hub:

<https://globalgoalscentre.org/resource-hub/>

## Further Reading and Useful Resources

Ellen Macarthur Foundation “Redesigning the Future of Fashion”:

<https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/topics/fashion/overview>

FutureLearn “Who Made My Clothes”, free 3 week Online Course:

<https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/who-made-my-clothes>

thinktank, Birmingham Science Museum: <https://www.birminghammuseums.org.uk/thinktank>

The World Bank (2019) “How Much Do Our Wardrobes Cost to the Environment?”

[www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2019/09/23/costo-moda-medio-ambiente](http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2019/09/23/costo-moda-medio-ambiente)

Clean Clothes Campaign Fashion Checker: <https://fashionchecker.org/>

McKinsey State of Fashion annual reports: <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/state-of-fashion>

United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (2018) “UN Alliance aims to put fashion on path to sustainability” <https://unece.org/forestry/press/un-alliance-aims-put-fashion-path-sustainability>

United Nations Environment Programme (2019) “Fashion’s tiny hidden secret”

<https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/fashions-tiny-hidden-secret>

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There was a suggestion that GA resources might be added to the ‘Further Reading and Useful Resources’ list:

<https://www.geography.org.uk/Plastic-pollution-resource>

<https://www.geography.org.uk/eBooks-detail/4a02033a-5433-411a-bd00-408e21cdbd3b>