

# The Sustainable Art Studio

*Finding the voice of art in education for sustainable development*



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by Iván Asin

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**WE WERE WARNED** over a decade ago that about two thirds of the systems that sustain our basic needs are either collapsing, on the verge of collapsing or beyond the point of retrieval.<sup>1</sup> Yet, this information has not had any significant effect in education policy – at least in the United States – and therefore it is safe to assume that it has not been a priority in our schools either. Actually, it is unlikely to ever happen. Policy-makers and school administrators are generally uninterested in committing to efforts that do not award them short-term or quantifiable results. Therefore – and sadly – the programs that encourage environmentally conscious patterns of behavior among our students are typically viewed as undesirable.<sup>2</sup> With this problem in mind, I began to think about ways in which I could work around this obstacle through my teaching area, the visual arts. More specifically, my focus as an educator has been on investigating and developing ways in which my students can develop their own art materials and tools made from local resources. This approach of learning has hopefully made my students more aware of the environmental, social and economic implications of the projects they take on, and thus allowed them to learn about visual arts in a sustainable manner.

My own experimentation led me to realize that in order

to develop a sustainable art studio, art and science had to be re-connected.<sup>3</sup> It was only then – and through the study of pre-modern art processes that a meaningful connection between art and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)<sup>4</sup> could be established.

What follows are three examples of how a sustainable art program can be implemented in different settings, as well as some of the art processes that could be considered. First, I will share ways in which sustainable art practices can be carried out in a traditional inner-city school setting, and how members of the community — inside and outside the school — can become important players in the process. Second, I will discuss the deep connections that art processes can generate among people in rural settings and the wealth of possibilities that those settings offer. And lastly, I will provide ideas for developing a sustainable art studio in schools or settings with limited funding and resources.

## Raw Materials in the City

Through my experience teaching sustainable art processes, I have run into the common misconception that raw materials can only be collected in natural settings. Undoubtedly, urban settings do not offer the same range of opportunities for obtaining raw materials that rural settings do. As a result — and given the fewer opportunities for exploring natural environments — inner city students typically have a limited

access to environmental education.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it is common to see that in these settings art teachers typically explore the use of found objects or recycled materials as a way of promoting values such as recycling and conservation. These projects are certainly a great way to begin creating a culture of environmental awareness. However, the creation of a sustainable art studio in a city will require a broader and deeper understanding of the resources available.

In most cities one can find flowers, seeds or leaves from which we can potentially extract pigments or fibers. However, given the limited natural elements, a key to developing a sustainable studio is to reach outside our educational setting and create relationships with community members. For example, one can form solid relationships with a farmer's market vendor or a supermarket manager. These individuals can easily save scraps or expired items (expired eggs and onion skins are king and queen) and they are often curious and eager to help once we explain what we hope to do. Obtaining raw materials this way involves the use of non-local resources, but when the access to nature is limited these collaborations are the next best thing and provide equally exciting opportunities. Ultimately, there is a mindset we are after, an attitude towards the environment, a way of thinking that is more important than where the resources actually came from or what we do with them. An example of this approach was my experience in a public junior high school in Queens, New York. There, my students were able to produce a variety of art materials by using a hybrid of local and external resources. The ethnic diversity of Queens allowed us to obtain a large selection of pigments and fibers from fruits and vegetables from Indian, Hispanic and Nepalese supermarkets. Acorn and honey locust were harvested locally from around trees and used to make inks and watercolors. We also reached out to the school aides, so they could start saving discarded paper from the main office. That paper was later processed by my students and turned into wonderful sheets of handmade paper.

The reason why many environmental education initiatives in schools fall short, is simply because they often fail to penetrate the culture of local communities. As a result, they remain as mere slogans. That is why it is so important that we create a genuine environmental consciousness so that our students feel compelled to act on what they have learned beyond the walls of the classroom. Fostering that consciousness is only possible when our teaching fosters meaningful connections with our students' lives. Having the participation of

other community members in the process can strengthen our initiatives and keep us in touch with local environmental concerns.

*"The simplicity of using elements from our own environment is fascinating. I never thought that so much of what is around could be used for so much"*

Melany Hernández, student.

## Connecting Rural Communities

Students in rural settings are generally more perceptive of their natural resources and the dangers those resources face. Still, the use of nature for the development of art materials can present them with an opportunity to see their environment with a new set of eyes. While working with a rural community on a mountainside in Medellín,<sup>6</sup> Colombia, I was able to observe how my students experienced a sort of 're-acquainting' with their common spaces. While surveying the neighborhood, many were perhaps for the first time observing rather than merely seeing. In this regard, the study of visual arts is quite unique, as it fosters visual literacy and enables people to think critically about the aesthetic qualities of their environment.

In my experience, the development of a sustainable art studio in rural communities presents an opportunity for its members to interact with each other — and with the environment — in more intimate ways. In that regard, there are two important elements to consider: First, that many times people in these sorts of settings pass each other by on a daily basis, but without ever taking the time to really know each other. Near Medellín for example, the consensus among





my students was that they felt that they knew very little about each other and that the process of developing sustainable art materials gave them an opportunity to get to know each other in deeper ways. And second, that they assess the local resources collectively, therefore, everyone's interests and sensitivities were considered before proceeding.

As a result of this experience, my students in Medellin learned how to make inks and handmade paper, which they later used to produce paintings. Additionally, their soil was very rich in clay, which gave us the opportunity to explore ceramics as well. In the process, my students learned how to extract clay and process it. They later experimented with the medium and learned the ancient process of smoke-firing, which requires only a steel drum and sawdust, making it a very simple alternative to a kiln.

*"It was a very inspirational week. We were together, working as a community, children, young adults, the elderly... that was beautiful"*  
Marina Echavarría, student.

## No Materials, No Problem

Art educators working in schools or settings of extreme poverty might find great interest in learning that art materials can be produced by their students and by using resources from their own environment. Some study of art processes and a bit of imagination, can allow any teacher — in any setting — to set up a sustainable art studio. In Peru, I had the opportunity to work with a group of girls in an orphanage in Puente Piedra, one of the largest slums of Lima. Given the rudimentary conditions of the orphanage, we had to build an oven and a stove (fire is essential in most processes I teach). In this case, we were lucky to have found everything we needed in the grounds of the orphanage: old bricks, firewood, and

a metal sheet. Simple drawing materials can be produced with very little. For example, in Lima my students collected sticks from the ground and peeled them, placed them in a tin container, secured it with wire and tossed it in the fire so they could be turned into charcoal sticks (which

normally occurs within an hour). Also, the girls in the orphanage were surprised to learn that *Tara* seeds — abundant in their grounds — were an incredible source for pigments and dyes. Both, the charcoal sticks project and the seed-collection, are great examples of resources that fall from trees and that we can pick up from the ground and use for our sustainable art processes, most importantly without harming nature.

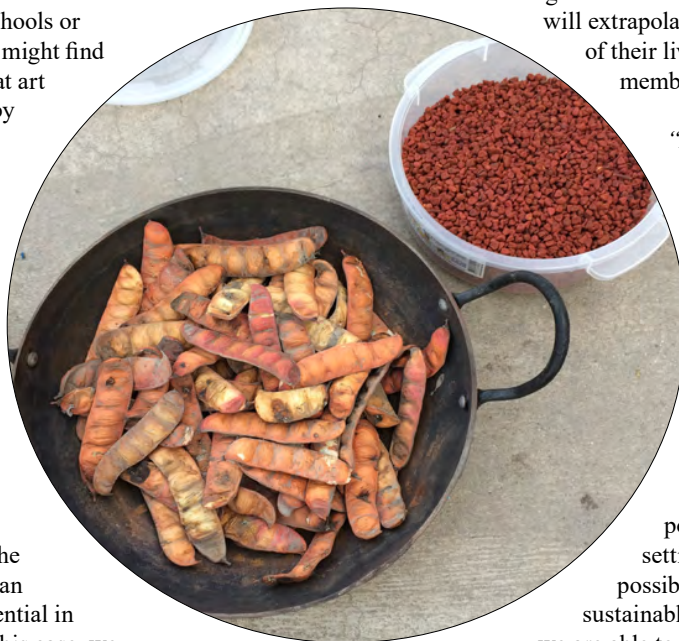
In these settings, it is crucial that we provide our students — regardless of their age — with enough intellectual tools, so they can continue exploring the possibilities for developing the sustainable art studio on their own.

We have to remember that our main goal is not to just teach them how to make paint or their own paper. Our goal is to promote way of thinking, an idea, a lifestyle. We hope that if they understand the reasons for needing to create a sustainable art studio, they will extrapolate that mindset to other areas of their lives and to other community members.

*"I thought this workshop was different and innovative. We were able to use everything that our context offers. These art processes are lasting and accessible to everyone"*

Estefanía Bedoya, student.

Whether working with inner-city youths, rural communities, underserved populations or any other setting, there are plenty of possibilities for developing a sustainable art studio. In doing so, we are able to build the foundations for an education for sustainable development that regards the visual arts as important.



By encouraging community-centered and environmental forms of art education, we do not want to abandon *pure* aesthetics or discourage individual forms of artistic expression in favor of a more collective model. However, the environmental issues of our time demand that we consider art as a transformative social practice<sup>7</sup> and promote environmentally-conscious habits among our students, so they can spread those patterns of behavior within their communities.

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#### Notes

1. Nolet, V. (2009). Preparing sustainability-literate teachers. *Teachers College Record*, 111(2), 409-442; United Nations Statistics Division (2005). *Living beyond our means: Natural assets and human well-being. Millennium ecosystems assessment*. New York: Author.
2. Palmer, J. (2002). *Environmental education in the 21st century: Theory, practice, progress and promise*. Routledge; UNESCO (1975). *The International Workshop on Environmental Education Final Report*, Belgrade, Yugoslavia. Paris: UNESCO/UNEP.
3. Artists typically produced their own materials until the industrial revolution. Until then, art and science walked together.
4. Education for Sustainable Development is one of the main undertakings of the United Nations. Also known as "Learning for the Future"
5. Inwood, H. J. (2009). *Artistic approaches to environmental education: Developing eco-art education in elementary classrooms* (Order No. NR67360). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
6. The group of students in Medellín was very heterogeneous. The youngest was twelve-years-old and the oldest eighty-five.
7. Gablik, S. (1991). *The reenchancement of art* (Vol. 500). New York: Thames and Hudson.

#### References

- Gablik, S. (1991). *The reenchancement of art* (Vol. 500). New York: Thames and Hudson.
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