

# Sustainable threads: Using immersive narratives to teach about the impacts of fast fashion

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

An investigation of our clothing offers a relatable way of connecting learners with complex global systems relating to contemporary social, economic, political and environmental issues. It also suggests 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 that 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 'References and further reading' for 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 with the Global Goals Centre, a UK sustainability charity that 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 eight lesson plans, with ideas for extension activities, for teachers of key stages 2 and 3 students – all freely available. These lesson plans build cumulatively 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
- sensitivity to the emotional dimensions of eco-anxiety and other pressures on young people's wellbeing
- an enquiry-based approach.

During the summer of 2021 at Thinktank, Birmingham Science Museum, we worked with over 150 visiting families to try out some imaginative ways to give old clothes new life. We showed the effect of the fashion industry on the climate, and explored how our feelings about clothes, fashion and mending are connected with environmental change. We did this through an immersive activity of making and crafting (Figure 1). We focused on

*Verity, Ruth and Jessica introduce a collection of lesson plans for key stages 2 and 3 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.*



Accompanying  
online materials



**Figure 1:** Giving old clothes new life. **Photo:** © Jessica Pykett.

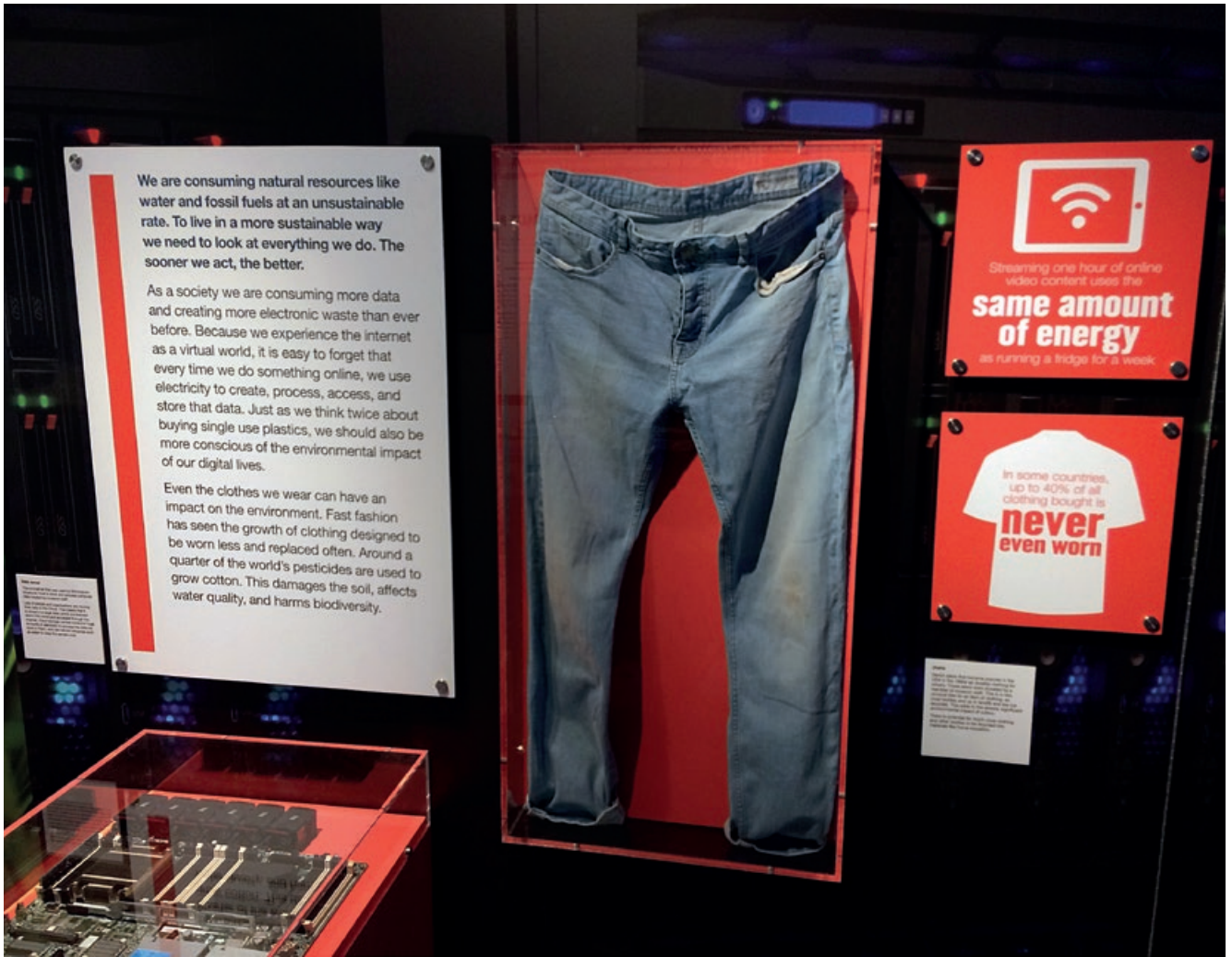


Figure 2: The denim exhibit.  
Photo: © Jessica Pykett.

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 (Figure 2).

**Immersive learning** is a method in which students are ‘immersed’ in a learning environment. The more life-like and realistic the students’ experiences, the more detailed and inspired their work.

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 old 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 mending and repair, and the importance of passing down fabric skills and techniques through generations of their own families. Many wanted information on which brands were more sustainable than others, or pointers to take local action. Subsequently, we put everyone’s creations together in a wall-hanging full of denim pockets to be used for later workshops (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Collaboratively produced wall hanging. Photo: © Jessica Pykett.

In Thinktank's new gallery space, Our Changing Planet, young people shared not their anxiety, but their 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.

The lesson plans we developed in response to these conversations were committed to anchoring activities through students' (and teachers') own clothes, making the learning relevant. To support young people in thinking through more circular models of consumption, as seen in Figure 4, we also embedded mending skills, thus disrupting the usual linear model of fast fashion.

The eight lesson plans (an overview is available to download from the GA website. The full teaching resource is free to download from the Global Goals Centre Resource Hub: <https://globalgoalscentre.org/resource-hub>) are underpinned by:

- 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
- future action planning at school level.

They are designed to be stand-alone lessons or in combination with each other, or to accompany a free online game that facilitates the immersive exploration of fast fashion for key stages 2/3 audiences, available via the Global Goals website.

## Workshops in action

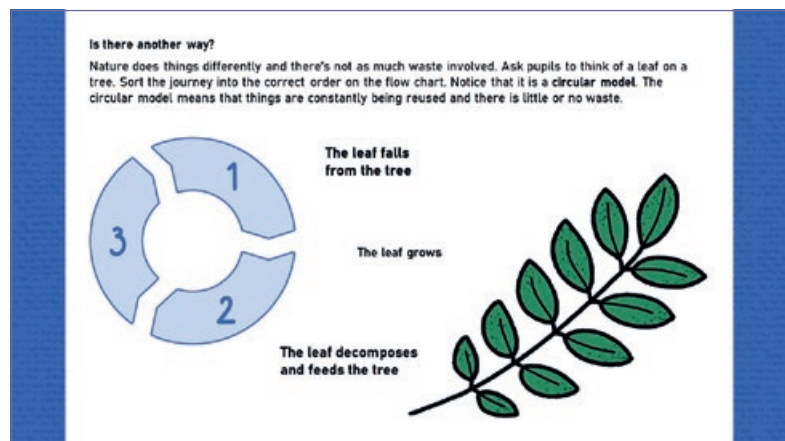
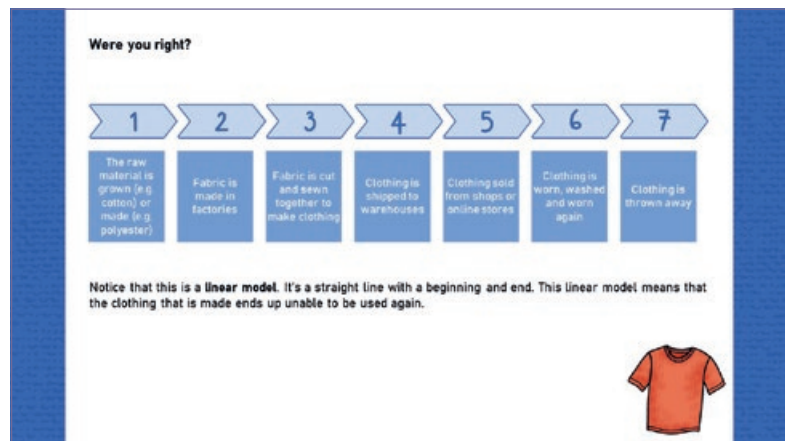
We have been working with primary and secondary school teachers, as well as student teachers, in southwest England and the Midlands to develop and evaluate the resources. Many schools used the resources as a focus for Earth Week in February; others plan to use them during Fashion Revolution week, held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

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. (Key stage 2 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. (Key stage 3 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. (Key stage 2 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. (Key stage 3 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 help them to think through their own immersion in global trade networks and 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 mending, and experience first-hand the challenges of working with specific materials (Figure 5). This supports them to consider and reflect on issues of wellbeing, including positive actions that can address their own potential worries about climate crisis and ecological change.

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 that support change and critically assess issues of responsibility and accountability.

**Figures 4a:** Diagram of a linear model and **4b:** Diagram of a circular model. **Source:** Global Goals Centre Resource Hub

**Figure 5:** Young people sewing on buttons. **Photo:** © Verity Jones.



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 waste 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 taking action together we can shape the choices we collectively face. | **TG**

#### Online resources

This teaching resource is free to download from the Global Goals Centre Resource Hub: <https://globalgoalscentre.org/resource/threads-lesson-plans/>

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