

Eco-Art Practices in Social Studies Education: An Activity-Based Approach from Environmental Awareness to Ecological Citizenship

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Öz

Günümüzde iklim değişikliği, atık sorunu, doğal kaynakların azalması, biyolojik çeşitliliğin kaybı ve çevresel adaletsizlik gibi sorunlar, bireylerin çevreye ilişkin bilgi ve farkındalıklarının ötesinde sorumluluk, katılım ve eylem geliştirmelerini gerekli kılmaktadır. Bu durum çevre eğitiminin yalnızca bilgi aktarımına dayalı olarak değil, öğrencilerin gerçek yaşam problemleriyle karşılaşmalarını, bu problemleri sorgulamalarını ve çözüm süreçlerine aktif olarak katılmalarını sağlayacak deneyimsel yaklaşımlarla ele alınmasını önemli hâle getirmektedir. Disiplinler arası yapısı nedeniyle Sosyal Bilgiler dersi, çevresel sorunların toplumsal, ekonomik, kültürel ve vatandaşlık boyutlarıyla ele alınabileceği önemli bir öğrenme alanıdır. Bu bağlamda eko-sanat, çevre eğitimi ile sanat eğitimi bütünlleştirerek öğrencilerin çevresel sorunları yaratıcı, eleştirel ve deneyimsel yollarla anlamlandırılmalarına olanak sağlayan bir yaklaşım olarak değerlendirilebilir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Sosyal Bilgiler eğitiminde kullanılabilecek eko-sanat temelli etkinlik örnekleri geliştirmek ve bu etkinliklerin çevresel farkındalık, yaratıcılık, eleştirel düşünme, sorumluluk ve ekolojik vatandaşlık açısından pedagojik olanaklarını ortaya koymaktır. Çalışma, kuramsal inceleme ve etkinlik tasarımına dayalı betimsel bir çalışma olarak yapılandırılmıştır. Eko-sanat eğitimi, çevre eğitimi, sanat temelli öğrenme ve çevresel vatandaşlık alanındaki çalışmalar incelenerek Sosyal Bilgiler dersiyle ilişkilendirilebilecek etkinlikler geliştirilmiştir. Önerilen etkinlikler; çevresel problemi fark etme, araştırma ve sorgulama, sanatsal anlamlandırma, paylaşma ve müzakere ve yurttaşlık eylemi olmak üzere beş aşamalı bir süreç üzerine kurulmuştur. Bu kapsamda “Atıktan Sanata: Yaşadığım Çevrenin Ekolojik Portresi”,

“Kırık Parçalar, Bütün Bir Hikâye”, “Geleceğe Mesaj”, “Bir Sorun, Bir Sanat Eseri, Bir Çözüm” ve “Ekolojik Sanat Eylemi” başlıklı beş etkinlik önerilmiştir. Etkinliklerin ortak özelliği, öğrencilerin çevresel sorunları yalnızca öğrenilecek bilgiler olarak değil, gözlemleyebilecekleri, sorgulayabilecekleri, sanatsal yollarla yeniden yorumlayabilecekleri ve çözüm geliştirebilecekleri toplumsal meseleler olarak ele almalarını sağlamaktır. Sonuç olarak eko-sanat temelli etkinliklerin Sosyal Bilgiler eğitiminde çevresel farkındalığı yaratıcılık, sorumluluk, katılım ve yurttaşlık eylemiyle ilişkilendiren işlevsel bir pedagojik yaklaşım olarak kullanılabileceği düşünülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyal Bilgiler Eğitimi, Eko-Sanat, Sanat Temelli Öğrenme, Çevre Eğitimi, Ekolojik Vatandaşlık, Sürdürülebilirlik.

Abstract

Today, issues such as climate change, waste, depletion of natural resources, loss of biodiversity, and environmental injustice require individuals to develop not only knowledge and awareness about the environment but also a sense of responsibility, participation, and action. This situation highlights the importance of addressing environmental education not merely through knowledge transmission but through experiential approaches that enable students to encounter real-life environmental problems, question these problems, and actively participate in developing solutions. Due to its interdisciplinary nature, Social Studies provides an important learning context in which environmental issues can be addressed through their social, economic, cultural, and civic dimensions. In this context, eco-art can be considered an approach that integrates environmental education with art education and enables students to interpret environmental issues through creative, critical, and experiential processes. The aim of this study is to develop eco-art-based activity examples that can be used in Social Studies education and to examine their pedagogical potential in terms of environmental awareness, creativity, critical thinking, responsibility, and ecological citizenship. The study was designed as a descriptive study based on a theoretical review and activity design. Studies on eco-art education, environmental education, arts-based learning, and environmental citizenship were examined, and activities that could be integrated into Social Studies education were developed. The proposed activities were structured around a five-stage process: identifying an environmental problem, researching and questioning, artistic meaning-making, sharing and dialogue, and civic action. Accordingly, five activities were proposed: “From

Waste to Art: An Ecological Portrait of My Environment,” “Broken Pieces, One Whole Story,” “A Message to the Future,” “One Problem, One Artwork, One Solution,” and “Ecological Art Action.” A common feature of these activities is that they enable students to approach environmental issues not merely as information to be learned but as social issues that can be observed, questioned, reinterpreted through artistic means, and addressed through solution-oriented thinking. Overall, eco-art-based activities can be considered a functional pedagogical approach in Social Studies education that connects environmental awareness with creativity, responsibility, participation, and civic action.

Keywords: Social Studies Education, Eco-Art, Arts-Based Learning, Environmental Education, Ecological Citizenship, Sustainability.

Introduction

The increasing complexity of environmental problems necessitates a reconsideration of the scope of environmental education. Issues such as climate change, the degradation of natural areas, increasing waste, the depletion of water resources, and unsustainable consumption patterns affect not only the natural environment but also the ways in which individuals and societies live. Therefore, environmental education should not be reduced merely to providing knowledge about the environment; rather, it should support individuals in recognizing environmental problems, questioning their causes and consequences, and participating in processes aimed at developing solutions.

Structuring environmental education in an experiential and student-centered manner may enable students to address environmental problems within real-life contexts. Engaging with environmental problems through observation, research, discussion, and production can facilitate the connection between environmental knowledge and everyday life. At this point, it is important to position students not merely as individuals who possess knowledge about the environment but as citizens who take responsibility for environmental problems and seek to develop solutions. The environmental citizenship approach likewise emphasizes that addressing environmental problems requires consideration not only of individual responsibility but also of justice, participation, and civic dimensions (Dobson, 2007).

Social Studies education offers important opportunities in this regard. Social Studies is a field of learning that addresses the relationship between individuals, society, and the environment by

drawing on different disciplines. Issues such as the use of natural resources, population and settlement, production and consumption, environmental problems, sustainability, social responsibility, and citizenship provide opportunities to examine environmental issues together with their social dimensions. Accordingly, addressing environmental education within Social Studies may contribute to students' understanding of environmental problems not only as natural or scientific processes but also as social and civic issues.

In this context, incorporating art into the educational process offers significant potential. Art can enable students to make sense of environmental problems through visual, sensory, affective, and creative means rather than expressing them solely through verbal or written forms. Eco-art education, in turn, can be considered an approach that aims to enhance environmental awareness and engagement by integrating art education with environmental education (Inwood, 2013).

Research on eco-art education suggests that integrating art and environmental education may enable students to participate more actively in environmental learning processes. Inwood (2013) conceptualizes eco-art education as an approach based on the integration of art education and environmental education and demonstrates that this approach can support environmental awareness and engagement with the environment. Similarly, approaches in art education that focus on reconsidering the relationship between humans and nature encourage individuals to view themselves not as separate from the natural world but as part of an interconnected whole (Anderson & Suominen Guyas, 2012).

Accordingly, eco-art can transform environmental issues in Social Studies classrooms from topics that are merely explained or discussed into real-life problems that students can investigate, reinterpret through artistic processes, and attempt to address through solution-oriented thinking. The central premise of this study is therefore to develop activity examples that can be implemented in Social Studies education by drawing on this potential of eco-art.

Eco-Art In Social Studies Education

Eco-art can be considered an interdisciplinary approach that goes beyond expressing environmental issues through art and enables individuals to reconsider the relationship between humans and nature. Within this approach, art is not merely a means of representing environmental problems but becomes a learning space in which students question their relationship with the environment and develop alternative meanings.

Inwood's (2013) study demonstrates that eco-art education can integrate art and environmental education and enable students to participate more actively in environmental learning processes. The study examined teachers' experiences in planning, implementing, observing, and evaluating eco-art curricula and demonstrated that arts-based learning can be used in ways that are compatible with the concepts and pedagogy of environmental education.

The materials used in eco-art education are also pedagogically significant. Incorporating waste, recyclable, or natural materials into artistic production can enable students to think about concepts such as consumption and waste not only theoretically but also through direct experience. When an object initially regarded as “waste” acquires a different meaning within a new context, students may be encouraged to reconsider concepts such as value, consumption, reuse, and sustainability.

This approach also draws on the experiential nature of art. Observing an environmental problem, collecting materials associated with that problem, working with these materials, and interpreting the resulting product can make it possible to address the learning process through both cognitive and affective dimensions. Connecting art with environmental learning may support students in perceiving the environment not only through scientific knowledge but also through sensory and aesthetic experiences (Anderson & Suominen Guyas, 2012).

The educational potential of eco-art is not limited to environmental awareness. Students' collaborative production, explanation of their artworks, engagement with different interpretations, and development of solutions to environmental problems may enable them to simultaneously employ communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and citizenship skills.

Ecoart in Action, edited by Geffen et al. (2022), demonstrates how artistic practices addressing environmental issues can be structured through activities, case studies, and practical suggestions that can be used in classroom and community contexts. In this respect, eco-art can be regarded not only as a theoretical approach but also as a practice-oriented field that can be adapted to different educational and community settings.

From the perspective of Social Studies education, one of the important contributions of eco-art is its potential to establish a connection between environmental education and citizenship education. When students identify an environmental problem, they are encouraged to consider not only questions such as “What is this problem?” but also “Who is affected by this problem?”, “Who is responsible for the emergence of this problem?”, “What can I do?”, and “What can we do as a

society?” In this way, artistic production can move beyond raising awareness of environmental problems and become part of a learning process that incorporates responsibility, participation, and action.

The Design Process of Eco-Art Activities

The activities proposed in this study were structured around a five-stage process in order to concretize the pedagogical use of eco-art in Social Studies education Figure 1:

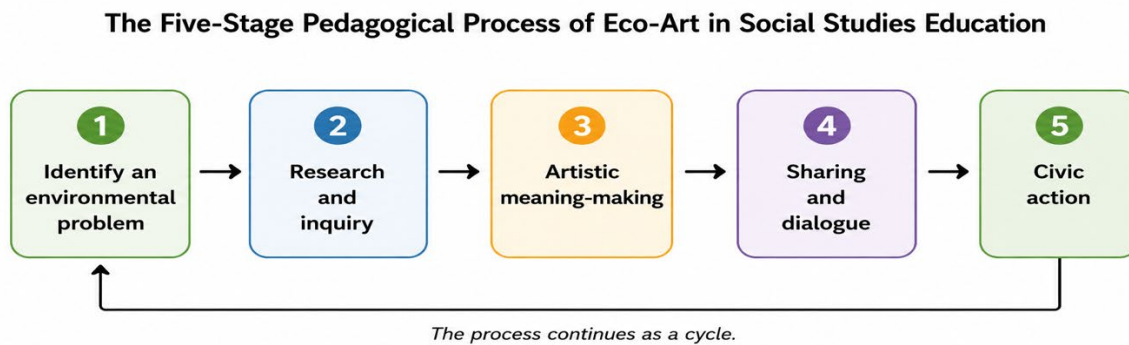


Figure 1. The Five-Stage Pedagogical Process of Eco-Art in Social Studies Education

In the first stage, students are expected to identify an environmental problem they encounter in their immediate surroundings or become aware of through the media. In this way, the environmental problem is connected to students' everyday lives.

In the second stage, the problem is investigated and questioned from different perspectives. Students examine the causes and consequences of the problem, who is affected by it, and possible ways of addressing it.

In the third stage, students transform the knowledge and experiences they have gained into an artistic product. Here, the artwork is considered not merely as an aesthetic object but as a means of expression and meaning-making through which students can make their thoughts about the environmental problem visible.

In the fourth stage, the artworks are shared, and students discuss different perspectives. Thus, individual artistic production becomes part of a process of collective thinking and dialogue within the classroom.

In the final stage, students develop an individual or collective action proposal addressing the environmental problem whenever possible. This stage aims to connect environmental awareness with responsibility and participation. In this respect, the proposed process can be related to approaches that conceptualize environmental citizenship not only in terms of individual attitudes and behaviors but also within the framework of the common good, responsibility, and participation (Dobson, 2007).

This structure aims to prevent eco-art activities from focusing solely on producing an artistic product. Although the artwork remains central to the learning process, it is used as a tool that supports environmental inquiry, communication, the consideration of different perspectives, and social thinking. In this way, eco-art is connected in Social Studies education not only with recognizing and expressing environmental problems but also with thinking about, discussing, and developing solutions to these problems.

Examples of Activities

From Waste to Art: An Ecological Portrait of My Environment

Purpose: To enable students to recognize environmental problems in their immediate surroundings and express these problems artistically through recyclable materials.

Duration: 2–3 class periods

Materials: Cardboard, pieces of newspapers and magazines, packaging materials, plastic bottle caps, fabric scraps, natural materials, paint, glue, and scissors.

Implementation process: Students are asked to identify an environmental problem they encounter in their immediate surroundings. Problems such as the accumulation of waste, plastic consumption, the reduction of green spaces, or water waste may be considered as examples.

First, students conduct a brief investigation into the problem they have identified. They then select waste or recyclable materials that can represent different dimensions of the problem. Using these materials, they create an “ecological portrait” of their environment.

At the end of the activity, students give their artwork a title and prepare a brief artist statement.

Evaluation questions:

- What environmental problem did you address?

- Why did you choose this problem?
- Which aspect of the problem do the materials you used represent?
- What message does your artwork convey about the environment?

This activity is a new pedagogical proposal developed based on experiences gained from previous eco-art practices involving natural and recycled materials. No data or research findings from the previous practices are presented again here; rather, a different instructional activity has been designed based on those experiences.

Broken Pieces, One Whole Story: An Ecological Collage

Purpose: To enable students to interpret an environmental or social problem by bringing together different visual fragments.

Duration: 2 class periods

Materials: Old newspapers and magazines, cardboard, photographs, packaging materials, and waste materials that can be used safely.

The activity begins with the question, “What things are being broken apart in our environment?” Issues such as the loss of natural areas, consumer culture, waste, climate change, or social inequality are discussed.

Groups identify visual materials that represent the problem they have selected and combine these materials to create a collage. The purpose is not merely to create an aesthetically pleasing composition but to establish meaningful relationships among different visual fragments.

At the end of the activity, each group presents its artwork and responds to questions from the other groups.

Discussion questions:

- What pieces have you brought together in your artwork?
- What new meaning emerges when these pieces are combined?
- Who is affected by the problem you addressed?
- What are the roles of individuals and society in addressing this problem?

This activity was designed by drawing on previous eco-art practices in which discarded newspaper materials and different visual elements were combined through the collage technique. However, data from the previous practice are not presented again; rather, a new instructional activity is proposed based on the experience gained from that practice.

A Message to the Future: What Kind of World Do We Want to Leave Behind?

Purpose: To enable students to express their visions of a sustainable future through artistic means.

Duration: 2–3 class periods

The activity begins with the following question:

“What would you like the environment in which we live to be like in 2050?”

Students are asked to develop a positive vision of the future. Different techniques, such as drawing, collage, poster-making, or three-dimensional work, may be used.

After completing their artworks, students give their works a title and write a brief message addressed to people living in the future.

The activity aims not only to represent environmental problems but also to emphasize the concepts of solutions and hope. In this way, students are encouraged not only to develop concern or criticism regarding environmental problems but also to imagine an alternative future.

This activity is a new instructional activity developed from previous eco-art productions in which students brought together visual art elements around the theme of hope. The findings of the previous practice are not presented again in this study; rather, the experience gained from that practice is used solely as a basis for developing a pedagogical activity design.

One Problem, One Artwork, One Solution

In this activity, artistic production is directly connected to problem-solving and citizenship.

The activity is carried out in five steps:

1. Problem: The student identifies an environmental problem in their surroundings.
2. Research: The student investigates the causes and consequences of the problem.
3. Art: The student creates an artwork representing the problem.
4. Solution: The student develops a feasible proposal for addressing the problem.

5. Action: The student transforms the proposal into an action that can be implemented in the classroom, school, or immediate surroundings.

For example, students may design an art poster aimed at reducing unnecessary plastic use at school and connect the poster with an awareness campaign to be conducted within the school.

In this activity, the artwork is not merely a product to be displayed. It also serves as a means of making the environmental problem visible, communicating the proposed solution, and engaging with people in the surrounding community. Thus, artistic production is directly connected to the problem-solving, decision-making, and citizenship dimensions of Social Studies education.

Ecological Art Action

Purpose: To enable students to develop a sense of collective responsibility toward environmental problems and to use art as a means of civic participation.

Students are divided into groups and identify an environmental problem in their school or immediate surroundings that they would like to address. Possible topics may include plastic consumption, paper waste, water use, waste separation, or the protection of green spaces.

Each group designs a small-scale art action addressing the problem they have identified. This action may take the form of a recycled-material sculpture, a photography exhibition, an environmental poster campaign, a temporary installation, or an awareness-raising activity conducted in a public space.

At the end of the activity, students evaluate their work through the following questions:

- What problem did our art action make visible?
- Can it change people's perspectives or attitudes?
- What else could be done about this problem?
- How can our action be sustained or continued?

This approach enables eco-art to move beyond the dimension of individual artistic expression toward civic participation and collective action. Practice-oriented studies such as *Ecoart in Action* also demonstrate that eco-art practices can be connected with concrete activities addressing environmental issues in classroom and community contexts (Geffen et al., 2022).

The Relationship Between the Activities and Social Studies Education

Table 1. The Relationship Between the Activities and Social Studies Education

Activity	Environmental theme	Artistic medium/technique	Social Studies dimension	Supported skills/values
From Waste to Art	Waste and consumption	Collage/mixed media	Human–environment relationship	Creativity, responsibility
Broken Pieces	Environmental and social degradation	Collage	Social issues	Critical thinking
A Message to the Future	Sustainable future	Drawing/collage/po-ster	Future and environment	Creative thinking, hope
One Problem, One Artwork, One Solution	Local environmental problems	Mixed media	Problem-solving and citizenship	Research, decision-making
Ecological Art Action	Environmental responsibility	Installation/poster	Active citizenship	Collaboration, participation

As shown in the table 1, eco-art activities are not limited to a single skill or learning domain. The artistic production process may enable students to employ different skills—including research, problem-solving, communication, collaboration, creativity, and citizenship—within the same learning experience.

Therefore, the function of eco-art in Social Studies is not merely to carry out an artistic activity. Rather, its primary purpose is to integrate the creative forms of expression provided by art with the inquiry, problem-solving, and citizenship dimensions of Social Studies education.

An important aspect of this integration is addressing environmental problems through students' local living environments. Starting from students' own schools, neighborhoods, or immediate surroundings may transform environmental issues from abstract and distant concerns into matters connected to everyday life.

Pedagogical Evaluation

Assessment in eco-art activities should not be based solely on the aesthetic quality of the resulting artwork. Students' ability to define the environmental problem, the research processes they undertake, how they interpret the problem, and how they make meaning of their artistic products should also be incorporated into the assessment process.

Accordingly, teachers may use the following criteria:

1. Ability to identify an environmental problem.
2. Ability to investigate the causes and consequences of the problem.
3. Ability to transform an environmental problem into an artistic form of expression.
4. Ability to explain the message of the artwork.
5. Ability to listen to and discuss different perspectives.
6. Ability to develop a solution to an environmental problem.
7. Ability to recognize individual and collective responsibility.
8. Ability to propose an environmental action.

This form of assessment focuses not only on the product students create but also on their ways of thinking and meaning-making throughout the production process. Thus, the artwork ceases to be the sole criterion of assessment and becomes a visible component of the learning process.

Discussion

Eco-art-based learning offers an approach that moves environmental education beyond the levels of knowledge and awareness and enables students to establish direct relationships with their environment. Inwood (2013) demonstrates that art and environmental education can be integrated within eco-art education and that arts-based learning can be used in ways that are consistent with the aims of environmental education. This suggests that eco-art has the potential to transform environmental learning from a process focused primarily on the transmission of cognitive knowledge into an experiential and creative process.

An important characteristic of the activities proposed in this study is that environmental problems are connected to students' everyday lives. Starting from the environments in which students live may enable environmental problems to be addressed not as abstract topics but as issues that students directly experience.

A second important characteristic is the integration of waste and reuse with artistic production. When students incorporate materials that they perceive as worthless or unused in everyday life into artistic production, they may be encouraged to reconsider concepts such as consumption and waste. In this process, what matters is not only the physical reuse of materials but also the transformation of the meaning's students attach to those materials.

Third, the inclusion of sharing and dialogue in the activities is significant. While the artwork makes an individual's thoughts visible, sharing the artwork within the classroom allows different perspectives to encounter one another. In this way, art can move from being a means of individual expression to becoming a means of collective thinking and communication. Anderson and Suominen Guyas (2012), whose approach to art education emphasizes reconsidering the relationship between humans and nature, likewise suggest that art can be used to encourage individuals to question their relationship with their environment.

Finally, connecting the activities with civic action constitutes an important distinctive feature of eco-art from the perspective of Social Studies education. Students' identification of an environmental problem, making that problem visible through art, and proposing an action to address it establish a meaningful connection between environmental education and citizenship education. Considering the dimensions of responsibility, justice, and participation emphasized within the environmental citizenship approach (Dobson, 2007), eco-art can be said to have the potential to incorporate these dimensions into an experiential learning process.

Nevertheless, there are several limitations to the implementation of eco-art activities. First, teachers need to connect the activities with the learning objectives of Social Studies. Otherwise, an art activity may remain merely a production-oriented exercise independent of the content of the course. Therefore, activities should be planned not only according to the product to be created but also according to the social, environmental, and citizenship-related problem addressed by students. Practical limitations such as time, materials, and classroom management should also be taken into consideration. Accordingly, it may be recommended that activities be designed without requiring expensive art materials and that students make use of waste or natural materials available in their everyday environments.

Another important limitation is that the activities proposed in this study have not yet been tested within a systematic empirical implementation study. Therefore, no direct causal claim is made that these activities increase students' environmental awareness or ecological citizenship. Rather, the purpose is to develop pedagogical recommendations that can be used in classroom settings based on the theoretical literature and practical experiences. Implementing these activities in authentic classroom settings and investigating their effects will be important for evaluating the validity and educational potential of the proposed activities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study proposed five eco-art activities that can be used in Social Studies education. All of the activities were structured to incorporate, at different levels, the stages of identifying an environmental problem, researching and questioning, artistic meaning-making, sharing and dialogue, and civic action.

The primary potential of eco-art in Social Studies education lies in its ability to connect environmental education and art education with citizenship education. Students do not merely learn about an environmental problem; they observe and investigate the problem, interpret it artistically, discuss it with their peers, and consider possible actions to address it. This process may enable environmental awareness to be connected with the dimensions of responsibility and participation.

From this perspective, eco-art can be regarded as a pedagogical approach that may contribute to positioning students not as passive recipients of information but as active citizens who question environmental problems and participate in processes aimed at addressing them. The key point here is not merely for students to acquire knowledge about the environment but also to recognize the social dimensions of environmental problems and question their own position in relation to these problems.

Another important characteristic of the proposed activities is that the artwork is not regarded as the endpoint of the learning process but as a means of environmental thinking and social communication. Thus, art becomes a pedagogical tool that, beyond aesthetic production, supports environmental awareness, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and civic participation.

Accordingly, Social Studies teachers are recommended to integrate eco-art activities with topics such as the environment, sustainability, natural resources, production and consumption, and citizenship. In teacher education programs, it may also be beneficial to address arts-based learning, environmental education, and sustainability through interdisciplinary approaches.

Future research could examine the effects of the proposed activities by implementing them at different grade levels and investigating their potential effects on students' environmental awareness, ecological citizenship, creative thinking, critical thinking, and pro-environmental behaviours. In addition, qualitative research could examine the effects of eco-art-based learning

on students' processes of making meaning of environmental issues by analysing multiple sources of data, such as students' artworks, artist statements, group discussions, and reflective writings.

In conclusion, eco-art-based activities have the potential to transform Social Studies from a learning context in which environmental problems are merely taught into an experiential learning environment in which students recognize and question their environment, make sense of it through artistic means, engage in dialogue with different perspectives, and move toward action as responsible citizens.

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