A recycling project – creating clothing from discarded items

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School profile: a large 11–18 comprehensive school with Specialist Sports College status

What did the school want to achieve?

GCSE students in the department had already used materials imaginatively but staff wanted them to further consider the properties of discarded materials and apply these findings skilfully and thoughtfully to their own ideas. There was an ambition to start using the Virtual Learning Environment as a resource centre for research, which would develop student's independence and willingness to share ideas. It was also intended to make students aware of how industry and particularly charities have used 'history' as a selling point for vintage and customised clothing.


How was learning organised to achieve these aims?

This was a 48 hour project completed over 16 weeks. Learning was organised into four blocks of four weeks for recording, experimenting, designing and creating. Students had three hours of art and design each week divided into one long and one short session. 'Thinking time' was built into the project and a high standard of craft was expected.

Students collected and discussed clothes from past and present, some with provenance. This helped to motivate, and engage students with their past. It also addressed any prejudice they might have had for second hand articles.

Prior to the project the whole school had been asked to collect washed and flattened packaging so everyone had a large bank of materials to inspire them. This led to discussions on sustainable development reflecting on the amount society discards and the responsibility of citizens to recycle.

Tasks were adapted to suit individual learners' needs. Ideas were developed for creating complex surfaces, joining smaller items together with inventive techniques and materials. This helped all students to realise the impact that could be achieved through a focus on pattern, colour and repetition. Linking and joining became differentiated problem solving exercises.

Students used the Virtual Learning Environment to comment on, and respond to, others opinions of the work of African artists who used recycled materials to make jewellery and clothing. Artists and designers were introduced to students. Mimi Smith covered the dimension of cultural diversity and identity and students responded positively to her witty work.
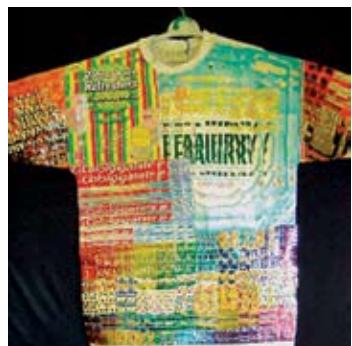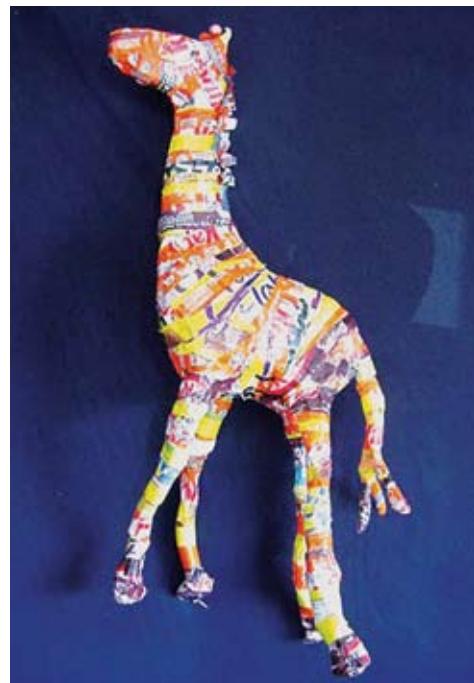
A working designer also visited the school, bringing in examples of her own work customising donated clothes for TRAID (Textile Recycling for Aid and International Development). She worked with able students after a session personalizing clothes through ripping, sewing and screen printing

How well did the school achieve its aims?

Technology and new media helped students to view and discuss their own and others' work. This resulted eventually in more resources being provided by students for each other than were introduced by teachers. The extended length of time and the quality of research and discussion ensured that pupils were able to direct their own and others learning. Responding to this opportunity in some cases guided the project away from clothes towards other art forms.

Students who completed this project have subsequently demonstrated a more sensitive approach to sourcing and recycling materials, being more discerning in what they throw away. They are more creative in collecting items for their own art, exhibiting greater independence rather than relying on the teacher.

Students photographed both work in progress and final outcomes and uploaded it to the Virtual Learning Environment allowing other students and parents to access the site from home and comment on it. This instant feedback engendered pride in their achievements.

Discussions on re-using items and customization have now become embedded into the art curriculum of this year group.