

My Found Object

A Lesson for Young People about Sustainability

Background Information

Teaching the 3R's of waste management is old news! Reduce-Reuse-Recycle has been the gold standard of sustainability education however, the overemphasis on recycling does not promote true sustainability.

The reality is, recycling is not widely practiced. It requires the cleaning and sorting of waste by consumers and it is costly for waste management companies. Only about 5% of post-consumer waste in the US is actually recycled.

So we have to stop teaching children that recycling is the best, most sustainable choice for our personal waste management. This class project is one way to encourage your students to start considering their practices and the effect their practices have on the environment. It is designed for any age group. You, as the teacher, can adjust this to fit your individual needs. It is written to inspire a shift in thinking for both teachers and students. You can learn more about sustainable classroom management at "[The Borrowed Classroom.](#)"

The 7 R's of Sustainability (to replace the recycling focused 3R's)

Refuse: to buy or use products that aren't good for the environment

Reduce: your use of harmful, wasteful and non-recyclable materials

Reuse: Is it clean and still in good condition? Can it be washed? If so, use it again.

Repair: Electronics, furniture, clothes, and appliances are all examples of things that can be repaired to be almost new again!

Repurpose/Upcycle: taking items that were meant for one purpose but can be used for other ones; different from reusing for the same purpose

Rot: keep organic food scraps and yard waste out of our landfills where they produce methane, a dangerous greenhouse gas.

Recycle: After you've made quality efforts to go through all the previous steps, recycling is a great final option. Check which items are able to be recycled where you are as it varies by locality. Check your local government or waste management websites.

Push back against disposable culture and overconsumption.

Learning Objectives & Vocabulary

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- 1) Students can identify single-use plastics and reflect on their own use of such items
- 2) Students consider the effect(s) litter (and single-use plastics) have on a natural system
- 3) Students consider the sources of litter



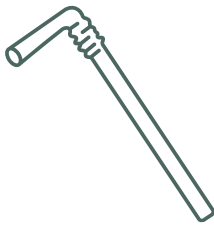
Litter

trash, such as paper, cans, and bottles, that is left lying in an open or public place



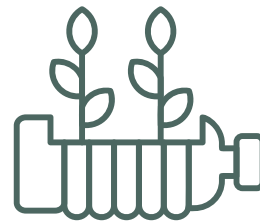
Plastic

a synthetic material usually made from petroleum that can be molded into shape while soft



Single-Use Plastic

Plastics used once or for a short period of time before being discarded



Upcycle

to reuse in such a way as to create a product of higher quality or value than the original.

Activity Plan Day 1

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Materials: trash bag, gloves, camera or phone

Prepare for your group walk by planning the route, preferably to a natural area. Walk the route ahead of time to check for the presence of litter.

If going on a group walk isn't possible, do this ahead of time and collect pictures to share with students. Students can be asked to do this on their own depending on grade level.



Go for a Walk

The goal is to enjoy being outside, but also to be on the lookout for litter. If there is a natural space available to you, head that way. Ask students if they know what the word litter means. Define it for them if necessary. Ask for examples of litter.



Spot Litter

When you find litter, stop. Take photos of the trash and photos of the surrounding area. Have students assemble around your found object for discussion (see sample questions below) Collect the litter before moving on. Repeat this as often as you like on your walk.



Discussion

- What is this object?
- How was it used? What was its value?
- How did it get to this spot?
- What effect does it have in this natural area, positive or negative?
- Where does it belong?

Activity Plan Day 2

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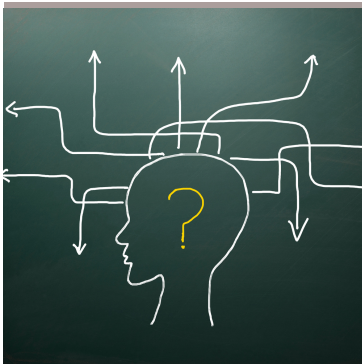
This part of the activity can be done directly after your walk or on a later date. For older students grades 4-12: This whole activity can be designed as a group or individual project. You can go on a class walk or you can assign the students to do the whole assignment outside of the classroom. Each group would present their findings to the class.

*photos are available on the "[My Found Object Photo Gallery](#)"



Display & Investigate

Clean your found objects from Day 1 or display in a clear container. display the photos from Day 1 electronically or print out. Have examples of single-use plastic products and their alternatives ready for demonstration.



Define & Decide

Define single-use plastics and show examples. Define plastics and how they are made from petroleum. Go through your found object(s). Are they single-use plastic? If not, what are they made of?



Reflect & Rethink

Show the photo* of the broken down plastics. Explain that plastics don't go away, they break-up into smaller and smaller pieces. Discuss what may happen to them then. Choose at least 1 of your objects to discuss: How could it have been reused or repurposed? Could it have been recycled? Is this an item we can refuse to use? Etc.

Optional Extension: upcycled art

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Teaching the "art" of repurposing waste



Go to the [photo gallery "My Found Object"](#). There you will find photos of how different groups and artists have displayed found objects or turned them into works of art. There are short explanations with each photo. Share these with your students by displaying electronically or by printing.

Decide what to do with your found objects:

- Can they be displayed and shown to parents and other classrooms?
- Can they be repurposed or reused?
- Can they be used in an art project?

Or decide on an art project for your classroom that uses at least 90% reused/repurposed materials. Display along with photos of other repurposed art pieces.

The activity "My Found Object" was inspired by the book "Plasticus Maritimus" written by Ana Pego. Follow her work on her [social media blog](#).