

Sustainability Portraits – Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Timo Jokela¹, Peter Berliner² and Annamari Manninen¹

¹University of Lapland, Finland and ²Association Siunissaq, Greenland

The Sustainability Portrait–Art, Location and Social Responsibility for Sustainable Development in the Arctic (shorthand: Sustainability Portraits) is a development project with the goal of creating a hybrid implementation model (both digital and onsite) for international seminars and workshops targeted at art educators, researchers and master’s and doctoral students in art education at four universities. The network is organised as a collaboration between the University of Lapland, Nord University, Umeå University and Siunissaq; at the beginning of the project, it is a part of the Ilisimatusarfik–University of Greenland and is now an independent research and art-and-community association. The development project is a crucial part of a broader New Genre Arctic Art Education (AAE) initiative among the partners (Jokela et al., 2024). From the outset, the goals and methods of the Sustainable Portraits collaboration have been guided by the fact that the initiative was a partnership between two thematic networks of the University of the Arctic: Arctic Sustainable Art and Design (ASAD) and Children of the

Arctic. These thematic networks join together their disciplines, interests and forces.

The project’s goal is to develop preliminary content and an approach for long-term interdisciplinary partnerships between Arctic universities and organisations in the fields of visual arts, art and design education and psychosocial work; this initiative aims to address the challenges arising from changes in the Arctic that have been driven by megatrends such as urbanisation, globalisation and the impacts of climate and environmental changes on the social and cultural lives of local communities. Our approach seeks to support knowledge sharing and collaboration by establishing a network structure that aligns with our long-term objectives: fostering connections; facilitating the exchange of knowledge, ideas and skills; and promoting practical collaboration in the communities of the North and Arctic regions.

Sustainability is central to this project. The approach is realised through dialogical and participatory methods applied in Sustainability

Portrait activities. Initially, the project implements and further develops a hybrid university course that conducts a field workshop in a selected community. These workshops serve as development pilots in which the activities are assessed and evaluated, with students from partner universities participating in facilitator roles as part of their studies.

This chapter outlines the theoretical foundation and activities of our project in a field-relevant manner. It summarises our achievements, learning and recommendations for future Sustainability Portrait activities. The project’s development spans various interactions with children, youth, teachers, communities and organisations, but impact studies will follow later. Here, we review the first two years of the Sustainability Portraits project, which was conducted from a university higher education perspective via arts-based action research (ABAR) methodologies.

ABAR combines action research principles with creative practices to address real-world issues and generate new knowledge. In our project and in the art education field more generally, ABAR is also a developmental area, with students conducting extensive study projects, master’s theses and texts within doctoral research. A key aspect of ABAR’s evolution involves agile, democratic planning and execution of exhibitions that involve diverse participants and audiences.

Our Sustainability Portraits project has undergone continuous evaluation and development from its inception through all stages of implementation—meetings, workshops, field courses, artworks, exhibitions, academic writing, visual essays and until publication layouts.

Based on dialogues, reflective discussions and collected reflective data, we have made observations and outlined directions for the future development of both Sustainability Portraits and the broader framework of the New Genre AAE initiative.

Jokela and Hiltunen (2024) conceptualised the steps for New Genre AAE activities, and their article helps in understanding the nature of Sustainability Portraits as part of it, particularly in the context of contemporary art and Arctic sociocultural situations. Berliner and de Casas (2024) highlighted the background of the Sustainability Portraits initiative and its connections to psychosocial well-being and social sustainability, especially from a Greenlandic perspective. In a sister publication, Jokela et al. (2024) shared their insights and recommendations based on the arts-based development work and action research conducted in the New Genre Art Education in the Arctic project. The proposals they presented for integrating art and research-based teaching into university curricula are also well justified from the perspective of the analysis of the Sustainability Portrait Project.

Universities and Curriculum – Art and Multidisciplinary Research

To integrate the Sustainability Portraits initiative into university art and craft teacher education, we must merge artistic practice with academic research. This is especially beneficial in the Arctic because it addresses psychosocial well-being amid rapid changes. We suggest adopting ABAR to equip staff and students with methods that blend artistic and traditional research approaches, tackling northern- and Arctic-specific issues.

The artistic expression included in ABAR is a valid form of research, offering unique insights into Arctic social and cultural dynamics. University projects should involve participants as coresearchers, fostering collaboration between students, researchers, local communities and stakeholders. These partnerships can produce knowledge that is both academically sound and socially impactful, enhancing our understanding of well-being while fostering resilience.

A participatory process that encourages collective problem solving and empowerment must be central to this effort. We can achieve this through ABAR, which prioritises transformation and change by using art as a catalyst for action-oriented research. The goal is to improve educational settings, community well-being and organisational practices by integrating research findings with artistic and art-based processes. This ensures that the outcomes not only contribute to theoretical knowledge but also address real-world needs in the Arctic, making research more impactful and grounded in lived experiences.

Reflective practice is essential here. We need to incorporate ongoing art-based reflection into research and learning, where students, educators and community members critically evaluate artistic processes, actions taken and outcomes achieved. This level of reflection enables the continuous refinement of research questions, artistic methods and project goals. Valuing diverse forms of knowledge production, such as artworks, performances or other creative outputs, enhances the understanding of research questions and provides alternative ways of engaging with psychosocial well-being issues.

Flexibility is essential. It is important to adopt context- and situation-specific methods, allowing art-based research approaches to adapt to the unique needs and challenges of Arctic research settings. This adaptive approach allows research strategies to evolve, here being shaped by interactions and insights that emerge during the project. In this manner, the research remains responsive to the changing realities of the Arctic, fostering innovation and relevance.

The recommendations for developing art-based educational models have shown effectiveness in ongoing projects. Integrating artistic practices into research has created a dynamic and creative learning environment, prompted change, generated new insights and meaningfully engaged participants. For example, the sustainable portrait model has successfully connected artmaking, research and social action, thus enhancing the relevance and impact of academic learning.

However, there are challenges. The flexible nature of study modules, such as Sustainable Portraits, can conflict with the rigid structures of standard university curricula, making students study pathways that are more complex and limiting the participation of university staff. Currently, sustainability portrait studies are available in a flexible format at the University of Lapland, being facilitated by its curriculum's inclusion of community project credits. To expand this model, we recommend exploring collaboration with the University of the Arctic to establish a common framework for integrating Sustainability Portraits across partner universities. This step would facilitate student engagement in studies addressing the specific needs of the North and Arctic, strengthening the impact of art-based research on psychosocial well-being.

By fostering collaboration between art and research, we can create an educational environment that is not only academically rigorous but also deeply connected with the lived experiences of Arctic communities, empowering students and communities to address the challenges of a rapidly changing world.

Sustainability Portraits as University Course for Art Educators

Based on our experiences and activities with Sustainability Portraits, we have outlined guidelines on how participatory contemporary art and psychosocial work should be integrated into university education to increase the capacity to support the sustainability and well-being of North and Arctic regions. We see significant potential in this integration if the following five key principles are included in the course implementation:

The first key point is strengthening cultural and personal expression through art. The Sustainability Portraits approach prepares art educators to use contemporary and participatory visual art as a platform for individuals and communities to creatively express their cultural identities, experiences and emotions. In regions where traditions are deeply connected to the ecoculture, such as North and the Arctic, art can help illustrate the impacts of social, environmental and cultural changes. Educators should be prepared to facilitate projects such as Sustainability Portraits, which provide individuals with opportunities to share their stories, reflect on their experiences and strengthen their connection to their heritage, thereby supporting psychosocial well-being.

The second is enhancing community cohesion and social resilience. During the project, diverse methods were developed for creating Sustainability Portraits based on collaboration and dialogue, either individually or as members of the community. Art educators should be equipped to design projects that bring people together to address shared challenges, such as mental health issues, social isolation or environmental concerns. Training should emphasise participatory approaches that foster dialogue, mutual support and empowerment, strengthening community cohesion and collective resilience. This requires that the course and training be conducted in a project-based interactive manner with the community, as outlined in the guidelines created in the Sustainability Portraits project.

The third is facilitating emotional processing and addressing the psychosocial dimension. Although the primary task of art educators and visual arts is not to provide therapeutic support, the training should include using art as a nonverbal tool for processing trauma, grief or stress, especially for those facing unique stress factors, such as anxiety related to climate change or cultural loss. Educators should learn to facilitate artmaking in a way that provides a safe space for emotional expression and healing, helping individuals build social support, mental health and long-term well-being.

Fourth, Sustainability Portraits should emphasise open learning processes (coformation and intra-action) over predetermined learning outcomes. Given the diverse cultural backgrounds and varying needs in the Arctic, a flexible approach to learning is essential. Education should prioritise practical experiences and local knowledge rather than content that is based solely on

conventional academic disciplines. This requires project-based learning, which allows students to immerse themselves in the subject while acquiring new skills relevant to their contexts.

Fifth, because one of the key starting points for New Genre AAE is the use of public spaces as learning environments, this could also be worth considering in Sustainable Portraits. In North and the Arctic, the land itself is an essential part of cultural identity and learning. Workshop activities and education can take place in natural settings—such as forests, riverbanks, coastal areas, tundra and mountains—where students can learn traditional ways of life and cultural practices through first-hand experiences in addition to art-based studies. Community centres, cultural festivals and other public events can also serve as dynamic learning spaces for sustainable portraits that blend traditional and contemporary art and knowledge, reinforcing a sense of place and belonging.

By incorporating these principles into art educator training programmes, universities can help future educators support the psychosocial health of northern and Arctic communities, promoting well-being, cultural continuity, renewal, resilience and support for sustainability transitions through creative collaboration. The principles of Sustainability Portraits align with the broader goals of the New Genre AAE initiative but specifically focus on psychosocial areas and social sustainability. Therefore, we will examine the role of psychosocial aspects in more detail.

The Role of Psychosocial Activities in the Sustainability Portrait Project

The Sustainability Portrait is a vivid illustration of how art, community engagement and en-

vironmental stewardship intertwine to foster sustainable development in the Arctic. One of the core concepts of this project is psychosocial activities, which play key roles in ensuring the holistic well-being and connectedness of young people to their environment, community and culture. The multifaceted psychosocial activities embedded within the project are significant in shaping socially resilient and sustainable Arctic communities.

Understanding the nature of psychosocial activities is crucial. Psychosocial activities engage individuals at both the psychological and social levels, influencing their mental health, social interactions and overall well-being. Within the context of the Sustainability Portrait Project, these activities encompass a range of creative and communal endeavours that facilitate self-expression, cultural identity and social cohesion. By participating in these activities, young people in Arctic localities can reflect on their personal and collective identities, fostering a sense of belonging and responsibility toward their community and environment.

The role of art in psychosocial activities is important. Art serves as a powerful medium for psychosocial engagement in our project. Through various artistic expressions, such as snow sculptures, winter sound recordings, handicrafts, landscape photographs and sea and animal imagery, young people can explore and articulate their connectedness to the Arctic environment. These creative endeavours are deeply embedded in the cultural and social fabric of communities, reflecting their shared histories, traditions and values.

For instance, the emphasis on clothing in Sweden highlights the importance of cultural

identity and social resilience. By using everyday materials to create art of self-expression, young people can challenge narratives of mass consumption and commercial globalisation, asserting their unique cultural landscape. Similarly, in Finland, the focus on rivers, water and local cultural traditions underscores the intimate relationship between people and their environment. These artistic activities provide a platform for young people to express their identities and envision sustainable futures.

Community engagement and social responsibility are central. Psychosocial activities within the project apply artistic expression to encompass community engagement and social responsibility. By involving young people in workshops, community events and dialogues, the project fosters a sense of collective responsibility and active participation in shaping sustainable communities. The concept of 'activism', or activist art, is central to this engagement because it empowers young people to use art as a tool for social change and environmental stewardship.

In Norway, the strong emphasis on the ocean and landscape in project activities highlights the community's role in environmental stewardship. Young people are encouraged to engage with their surroundings actively, understanding the impact of their actions on the environment and their community. This engagement nurtures a sense of responsibility and agency, empowering them to contribute to the sustainability of their localities.

The psychosocial activities within the Sustainability Portrait Project also play a vital role in enhancing cultural resilience and social support. In Greenland, for example, the project's

social focus includes cultural sustainability and, to some extent, economic sustainability. By opening access to formal education and providing income opportunities for marginalised youth, the project fostered social inclusion and resilience.

These activities create a supportive network that connects young people with their peers, families and communities. Through the collective experience of participating in the project, young people can build meaningful relationships, share knowledge and support each other in their journey toward sustainability. This network of support is crucial in fostering resilience and ensuring the well-being of young people in the Arctic.

The Sustainability Portrait emphasises the performative aspect of sustainability, highlighting the active role of individuals and communities in shaping sustainable futures. Engagement, commitment, responsibility and visions of a viable future are seen as actions involving both human and nonhuman actants. Through psychosocial activities, young people perform sustainability, embodying the principles of environmental stewardship, cultural resilience and social responsibility in their daily lives.

As the project evolves into an experience, it becomes a living testament to the power of collective action and shared visions. The activities, workshops and community events provide a formative feedback loop, allowing participants to reflect on their journey and chart their path toward sustainability. This performative aspect ensures that sustainability is not merely a theoretical concept but also a lived experience that is deeply embedded in the cultural and social fabric of the Arctic communities.

Based on the review of Sustainability Portraits, we recommend deeply integrating psychosocial activities into the project. To achieve a holistic approach to sustainable development in the Arctic, the project should prioritise psychosocial activities that incorporate artistic expression, community engagement, cultural resilience and performative sustainability. These elements will empower young people to envision and build a sustainable future. Integrating psychosocial components will not only enhance individual well-being but also strengthen the social and cultural fabric of communities, ensuring a resilient and sustainable Arctic for future generations.

Guiding Principles for Sustainability Portraits Workshop in Local Communities

Sustainability portraits, such as university courses and student training, should be implemented in well-planned hands-on field schools in local communities, where students can engage with the phenomenon and methods in real-life settings. Although tutors will naturally make the necessary preparations, in line with the principles of participatory action, students are full members of the planning and implementation teams as early as possible.

When Sustainability Portraits are designed as participatory contemporary art workshops in northern and Arctic communities, we recommend four key points to support social and cultural sustainability and well-being.

The first is the integration of contemporary art practices with local ways of life. Workshops should incorporate northern ecocultural knowledge, indigenous knowledge, cultural prac-

tices and local ecoculture by using traditional materials, techniques and themes that reflect cultural identity. Although the sustainability portrait theme is often associated with photography, video and modern digital techniques, it is essential that photographic sessions and environments connect to local ecocultures and places of personal or communal significance. Respecting cultural protocols is vital when individuals collaborate with indigenous communities. It is essential to ensure that activities are culturally appropriate and that all documentation is done with permission and used respectfully. This approach helps preserve cultural heritage, fosters cultural pride and ensures that traditional practices are passed on to younger generations, strengthening community cohesion.

The second focus is on local themes and sustainability issues. Importantly, northern and Arctic communities are not museums. Emphasis should be placed on local environmental themes and sustainability concerns, guiding participants to explore topics such as climate change and sustainable living and their relationships with these issues. Addressing these themes reinforces the connection to the local environment, raises awareness about ecological challenges and promotes sustainable practices relevant to the community and the Arctic context.

The third is the promotion of intergenerational activities. Regardless of the age group, it is important to encourage intergenerational collaboration by designing workshops that bring different generations together to work in shared spaces, hence combining the traditional knowledge of older generations with contemporary artistic perspectives. Intergen-

erational projects enhance social sustainability by strengthening relationships, reducing isolation and promoting the transfer of cultural knowledge across generations. This provides a channel for young people to be heard in their communities.

The fourth is the use of Sustainability Portraits for social dialogue and emotional well-being. Safe spaces should be created where participants can express subjective experiences, emotions and social issues through art. Sustainability portraits workshops should be understood as performative situations that allow diverse participation in a dialogue that promotes healing and supports community resilience. Although the goals of sustainability transitions are planetary, addressing them can support individual mental health by providing an outlet for self-expression and fostering dialogue on social challenges. This is particularly important in Arctic communities, where art can help address mental health issues often rooted in a legacy of colonialism and enhance emotional well-being.

Sharing Portraits for Dialogical Learning on Digital Platforms

Sustainable portraits have developed through circumpolar collaboration characterised by vast distances. In a region, it is common to work across linguistic and cultural boundaries. When participants from various fields are included, dialogue is needed to share and understand different perspectives on the location, community and subject matter of the work, fostering a sense of equal belonging. Hence, one of the development areas in the Sustainable Portraits project has been online collaboration between partners and

students. Development pilots carried out in different countries have facilitated dialogue on themes of sustainability and identity. This has been experimented with not only through shared online meetings but also by sharing digital portraits and videos in online environments.

The results encourage the belief that similar methods could be applied in other art-based and transnational, multidisciplinary contexts. The workshops have revealed how receiving, viewing and analysing others' artworks sparked discussions while promoting collaboration, creativity and a sense of connection among young people, despite the long distances between them.

The experiences demonstrate that involving Arctic universities, stakeholders and communities in interactions on digital platforms supports learning. The technology and connections needed for this interaction are already available. The time zone differences that often complicate real-time online collaboration are still manageable from Greenland to Scandinavia to Finland. Going forward, it is essential to develop ways to communicate directly with local communities to broaden participation in art-based dialogues.

Although the activities occur in specific locations and communities, creating and exhibiting artworks are important for initiating dialogue. Sharing artworks online with other groups adds a new dimension to the dialogue and allows new audiences to interact with the works. Presenting sustainable portraits for young people in other Arctic regions emphasises the goal in a unique way. It also offers an opportunity to take pride in one's culture and identity.

The digital tools needed to share videos and photos are available to everyone, and several platforms support online dialogue. Artworks provide more personal perspectives and frames to express reflections on Arctic sustainability, which may not be expressed verbally but are conveyed through images. Based on project experiences, creating artworks is seen as an essential way to provide the space for expressing emotions and diverse perspectives, conveying information in different ways and getting to know the participants behind the screens. Thus, we can encourage the use and further exploration of collaboration and online sharing of Sustainability Portraits alongside exhibitions.

An international dialogue is recommended to open a new level of sharing and learning through the Sustainability Portraits process, from creating one's own artwork to sharing and receiving those of others.

Interwoven Perspectives of Intra-action in Sustainable Portraits Learning

In Sustainable Portraits, we have designed and developed a university course for students, including an online preparatory component and a field course component in a chosen northern community. The development involved a multidisciplinary team, such as art educators, natural science teachers, social psychologists, museum staff, craftspeople and artists. Students studying diverse subjects participated as well.

During the project, we used the term 'intra-action' from Barad (2007). This concept extends the traditional idea of interaction and educa-

tional integration, suggesting that entities emerge through relationships, not pre-existing independently. In intra-action, students, teachers, materials and the environment mutually shape each other through dynamic engagement. Recognising intra-action is crucial to the formation of ecocultural knowledge in northern contexts. It should also be central in interdisciplinary academic collaboration when renewing conventional educational and operational approaches.

Adopting intra-action for sustainable portrait activity means that the learners, teachers, content and methods are intertwined, entangled and emerging from their mutual relationships. This approach shifts the focus from traditional models of knowledge transfer to viewing knowledge as arising from these entangled intra-actions. Pedagogy then emphasises the intertwining of social, cultural and material factors in education rather than the transfer of pre-existing knowledge or skills.

Intra-action also acknowledges nonhuman elements in learning, which are vital not only in northern ecocultures but also in digital environments. Cameras, devices and learning spaces actively shape how sustainable portraits are created. This is not only about representing identities but also about transforming them through intra-action with the tools. The digital platforms used with students also engage in intra-action, influencing the learning experience in real time. Therefore, a Sustainable Portrait activity requires the pedagogical consideration of these multidimensional entanglements.

In conclusion, the Sustainability Portrait Project stands as a testament to the dynamic interplay between individuals and their environments in

the pursuit of sustainable futures. The performative aspect of the project highlights the active roles played by both human and nonhuman actants, demonstrating that sustainability is not just a theoretical concept but a lived reality. Through collective action and shared visions, the participants engage in a transformative intra-active loop that deeply embeds the principles of environmental stewardship, cultural resilience and social responsibility within the fabric of Arctic communities. This ongoing dialogue and reflection foster an enduring commitment to sustainability, making it a tangible and impactful part of everyday life. ●

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