

Cultivating Connection: How a 'Wall of Whispers' Weaved Empathy and Ecology into Learning

In the back of a taxi in Beijing, crochet hooks clicked, and yarn intertwined as eco-artist Niamh Cunningham shared a stitch with me. "One for the road," she said, a neat mnemonic for an extra wrap of the yarn. The phrase was serendipitous, as we were literally on the road to visit an ink artist's studio. This moment, a "yarn with a yarn," was a microcosm of the project to come—an exploration of the very "pattern that connects" us to each other and the natural world.

This journey culminated many months later, in "Wall of Whispers," a collaborative fibre-based installation at the International School of Beijing (ISB), created with our students and artist Niamh Cunningham. The project became a living laboratory for exploring a central question: How can we, as educators, nurture the complex, symbiotic systems that bring us together, much like the mycelial networks that connect trees in a forest?

The Mycelium Metaphor: From Concept to Curriculum



We framed the project around the powerful image of mycelium—the vast, underground fungal networks that facilitate communication between trees. This metaphor became our guiding principle, moving us away from individualistic creation and toward a collaborative, systems-thinking approach.

Our driving questions were:

- How can we, like mycelium, use our channels of communication productively?
- What connections exist between us and the natural world, and how can art illuminate them?
- How can we connect our ideas with an audience in a meaningful way?

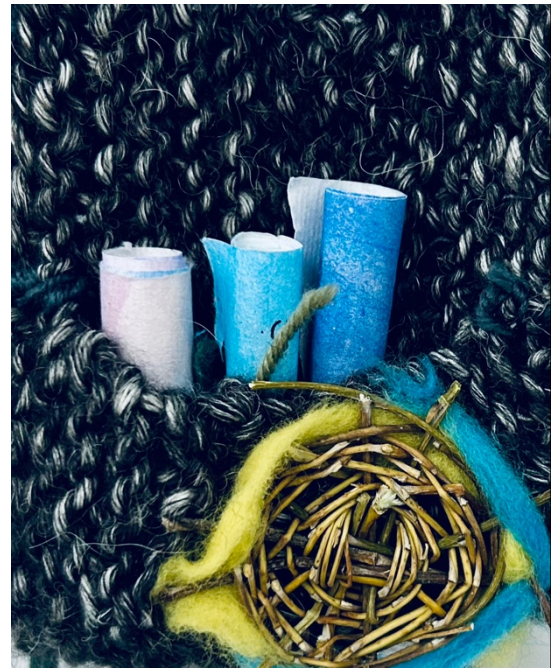
We embraced an inductive research model, which can feel ambiguous at first but allows student voice to genuinely direct the artistic outcome. Students began by experimenting with sustainable materials: weaving and braiding with recycled wool, forming hoops from our campus willow trees, and wrapping stones from a decommissioned design lab aquarium. This low-stakes, exploratory phase was crucial for building patient curiosity and allowing the project's final form to emerge organically.

Weaving Collaboration into the Fabric of the Work

The "Wall of Whispers" itself was a cascade of textured fibres, felted mushrooms, and willow loops. It's true magic, however, lay in its interactive and inclusive nature. We challenged students to incorporate text, and they ended up hiding tiny, scroll-bound messages within the woven threads. These "whispers" ranged from mushroom-themed jokes to profound quotes, transforming the installation from a static piece into a dialogue with its audience.

One student-selected quote by the late systems thinker Joanna Macy perfectly encapsulated the project's heart: "A mycelial network teaches us that survival is not about competition, but collaboration, resilience and an unseen harmony."

This was not merely an art project; it was a practice in eco-literacy and empathy. The collaborative norms already established at ISB provided a foundation of trust and compassion, which proved essential. Students with varying skill levels found their place—whether in knitting, crochet, or rock wrapping—and saw their individual contributions valued as part of a beautiful, interconnected whole.



Key Takeaways for the Classroom

1. Embrace the Inductive Journey: Starting a project without a predetermined final product can be daunting, but it fosters authentic student agency. Partnering with an artist who shares your educational philosophy provides a vital safety net for navigating this ambiguity.
2. Sustainability as a Creative Launchpad: Using recycled and natural materials isn't just ecologically sound; it provides creative constraints that spark innovation. The skills learned—weaving, mending, constructing—are practical and transferable, ensuring the learning extends beyond the classroom.
3. Make the Connection Tangible: By using the mycelium metaphor, we gave students a powerful, visual framework for understanding abstract concepts like systems thinking, collaboration, and communication. The project became a meta-commentary on its own creation.

In an era of entrenched, unsustainable pathways, this project offered an empowering alternative. It demonstrated that change is cultivated not in isolation, but through connection—by patiently weaving together individual threads of curiosity, skill, and compassion to reveal the vibrant, resilient pattern that connects us all.



The unit plan and collaborative norms for "Wall of Whispers" are available for adaptation at [\[Link to provided resource\]](#).

