

Designing Slow Fashion¹

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1. Level	UG
2. Pre-requisite knowledge required by educators	D. Specific knowledge required: It would be useful to read the 'Slow Fashion' contribution in this Handbook
3. Pre-requisite knowledge required by students	D. Specific knowledge required: It would be useful to read the 'Slow Fashion' contribution in this Handbook
4. Number of students	A group up to 30 would be ideal
5. Length of time required	If all the tasks were completed this could make up about a week's short project
6. Type of activity	Individual work, Group work, Ideas for projects, assignments and briefs, Discussion and debate, Research related, Practical
7. Discipline	Business, Cross-curricular, Design
8. Topics covered	Care and repair, Consumers, Environment, Fair trade, Second hand clothes, Slow Fashion, Textiles, Working conditions

OBJECTIVES / LEARNING OUTCOMES

- To explore practically a range of speeds and rhythms present in fashion.
- Through this to build insight and understanding about the impact of today's predominant fashion speed.
- To begin to develop design outcomes relating to speeds other than just fast economic speeds.



Designing fashion for speeds other than just a fast commercial pace has the potential to positively influence issues surrounding workers' rights, labour issues and sustainability concerns more broadly. But what are these other speeds and how can awareness of them be raised within fashion design curricula?

INTRODUCTION TO IDEAS OF DIFFERENT SPEEDS

If we look at how speed is dealt with in places other than fashion, we see combinations of fast and slow. The Ancient Greeks, for example, talked of two different kinds of time – one which focused on the moment and the other concerned with ongoing time. And in the case of nature, we see that ecosystems achieve balance and long-term resilience of the larger system by adjusting to change at different paces. Nature typically combines change that happens on a big scale but very slowly (like the time needed to grow a mature, established forest) with fast, small-scale change (such as in the lifecycle of a flowering plant). Here the varying rates of change within the ecosystem effectively help sustain it, allowing it to survive potentially damaging events. This is because the fast parts react while the slower parts maintain system continuityⁱⁱ.

Stewart Brandⁱⁱⁱ in his book *The Clock of the Long Now*, proposes that any resilient human civilization needs similar layers of fast and slow activity to balance each other. He suggests six levels of pace and size. From fast to slow (and of increasing size) the layers are: Art/fashion, Commerce, Infrastructure, Governance, Culture and Nature. The fastest layers, like fashion, bring rapid imaginative change, while the slowest layers maintain constancy and provide a long-term supporting structure. Crucially, the system works when each layer respects the pace of the others.

Yet the fashion industry, as it exists today, has no respect for these other layers. Indeed, a growing body of evidence suggests that it is largely disconnected from the effects of its products on nature and culture, with little recognition of poverty wages, forced overtime, waste mountains and climate change. In fact the commercial agenda in fashion seems to promote the polar opposite of a multi-layered, multi-speed industry. Instead, what is marketed to consumers is a wide range of similar products produced and consumed for economic speed rather than at speeds that represent the interests of workers' rights or an agenda supportive of nature and culture.

How can we design a more multi-speed type of fashion? One place to start is by building an awareness of the speed of current garments. Described below is a series of activities that can be used alone or in a sequence to explore different speeds at use in fashion.

Suggested Task 1

Brainstorm in a group around how/why garments are 'used up' and how long they stay current (or fashionable). Think about a range of types of garments (underwear, jeans, T-shirts, coats, etc.) and look for differences that influence the factors behind consumption, use and disposal.

Suggested Task 2

Give students the task of doing some shop research and analysing the fashion offer of major brands and high street retailers. Are different speeds evident in the range of garments these companies sell? If so, how do pieces vary?

Feedback to group, using visuals and looking for common themes.

Suggested Task 3

Invite students to do some wardrobe research, looking in their drawers and on their hanging rails, and those of their friends. Ask them to look for the different rhythms with which garments are used, collating/sketching various archetypal items. Ask them to look for types of garments that are used and 'retired' quickly and types of garments that have a slower rhythm of use. Look for colour, fibre type, silhouette, fashion level, etc.

Present this research to the group, looking together for patterns and themes that emerge.

Suggested Task 4

Using the information gathered in tasks 1, 2 and 3, give students the task of beginning to explore how these issues relating to the speed of consumption influence issues related to production. Investigate what the effects are, for example, of producing garments with a high fashion level and high consumption speed on workers. Does this differ for different garments? Look for clues on how a focus on the speed of fashion production and consumption can be used to specifically help improve the lives of workers.

Use these clues as insights from which to start to build a design project around issues of worker-friendly speeds in fashion. What characterises a worker-friendly speed? How can worker-friendly speeds be enhanced? How can the negative effects of these speeds on workers be reduced? Design a garment that works with these labour-friendly speeds (they may be a combination of fast and slow).

Suggested Task 5

Ask students to bring items into class that represent fast and slow speed in fashion. In small groups, analyse the differences and similarities between these pieces, drawing up a list of key characteristics, and collating the values that participants/owners ascribe to these pieces and some of the stories linked to their use.

Feed these characteristics, values and stories back to the larger group and collectively develop an understanding of what fast and slow fashion look like in garment form today.

Develop a design brief that is concerned with services or systems (rather than products) that bring out the positive sustainability characteristics of garments that we already own today, without us needing to consume new items. How can designers interface with producers and consumers to slow down consumption but still give people access to fashion?

i This is a part excerpt from Kate Fletcher's book, *Sustainable Fashion and Textiles: Design Journeys* (2008) London: Earthscan.

ii Thorpe, A. (2007) *The Designer's Atlas to Sustainability*, Washington: Island Press, pp48-49.

iii Brand, S. (1999) *The Clock of the Long Now*, London: Phoenix.



This is an excerpt from:

Sustainable Fashion: A Handbook for Educators

Edited by Liz Parker on behalf of Fashioning an Ethical Industry, UK, and Marsha A. Dickson on behalf of Educators for Socially Responsible Apparel Business, USA.

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Publishers

Published in 2009 in the UK by Labour Behind the Label on behalf of Polish Humanitarian Organisation (Poland), Südwind Agentur (Austria), Schone Kleren Campagne (Netherlands) and Educators for Socially Responsible Apparel Business (USA).

Labour Behind the Label is a not for profit company registered in England. No. 4173634 at 10-12 Picton Street, Bristol, BS6 5QA, UK.

Design and layout by: Nick Ellis, Halo Media

www.halomedia.co.uk

Download the complete Handbook, chapters or individual contributions from

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