

# Encouraging Independent Research through Examining Contentious Issues

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1. Level	UG
2. Pre-requisite knowledge required by educators	A. No background knowledge required
3. Pre-requisite knowledge required by students	A. No background knowledge required
4. Number of students	15 to 40
5. Length of time required	6 to 12 weeks
6. Type of activity	Group work, Student presentations, Course outlines and learning goals, Discussion and debate, Research related
7. Discipline	Cross-curricular, Design
8. Topics covered	Student / educator defined

## OBJECTIVES / LEARNING OUTCOMES

- The student will be able to conduct independent research appropriate to their discipline.
- The student will be able to articulate viewpoints and opinions regarding the range of contemporary influences covered by the module.

As educationalists and interested parties in exploring the ethical debate in all areas of design, we co-developed a module and brief, 'Contentious Issues', in July 2006, as a multidisciplinary tool to fit into any design programme or school within the university. The brief has been run with first year university students studying Product Design Technology and Fashion Communication. The brief invites students to identify a contentious issue and conduct independent research. Through a series of set tasks, they produce a fully referenced and educated argument, giving a holistic view of the issue through a visual presentation, supported by a written document that highlights their assigned role/character's opinion on the subject. Students are encouraged to develop their understanding of professional practice in the design industries, within the context of social, cultural, political, economic and technological change.

This module and brief were written to help first year students make the transition from learning in school to research and learning at university where they are required to question, challenge, hypothesise and synthesise their findings and become confident, independent, lifelong learners. It has been observed that student intakes from schools and further education establishments were often unprepared for the task of carrying out independent in-depth research in their chosen fields. An increasing reliance on webbased research for school projects has left many students without the knowledge to access other sources of information and research. As well as aiding students' understanding of contentious issues, the module aims to help prepare students to understand and partake in research for their academic studies at university.

The module forms part of a wider series taught within the Design School on different programmes at Northumbria University of Contemporary Design Influences (CDI). It explores any influence that can have cause and effect on the outcome of a product or service design such as technology, sociology, politics, philosophy (ethics), ecology, arts, media, geography or any pertaining world issues. These influences shift as society evolves and students are made aware of trends and circumstances that they should research and develop when designing and considering different markets.

Contentious issues that students have addressed have been wide ranging and have included current political issues impacting on society and different design disciplines. Issues relating to fashion and clothing that have been discussed include: fast fashion, size 0, politics of fake, ethics of labour, trade tariffs, authenticity of brand, reporting and news, sustainable fashion and ecology of fashion textiles. A manual explaining how educators can deliver the module of study has been developed alongside a student workbook outlining the brief and activities required to complete the module (available from the authors).

## OUTLINE OF STUDENT ASSIGNMENT

Working in a team of between 4 and 6 members over the module, students are asked to investigate any contentious issue (contemporary, political, environmental, social, ethical, technological or economic) of interest to the group. Students are asked to make a 15 minute presentation of their well researched and supported argument to justify individual or shared opinions on the issue, and be prepared to answer questions and accept debate. The presentation should be based on both theoretical literature and factual information such as statistics, current news and events, and students' own informed opinions. The more controversial the subject the more interesting the debate may be. Each member of the group presents an argument from one of the following standpoints:

- *Designer*
- *Environmentalist – Eco Warrior*
- *Investor*
- *Managing Director – Responsible to Shareholders*
- *Man or Woman in the Street*
- *Wild Card*

The framework of choosing a role, whether it is of their own ethical standpoint or not, helps them explore the issues in safety without feeling exposed or under personal criticism for their beliefs.

Students are encouraged to practice taking on these roles and discussing what their 'character' motives might be within their designated groups. Students are asked to take into account that the 'character' view may not be their own and to consider an 'in their shoes' approach, an empathic response, to enable a depth of research. This will give scaffolding for students to then apply this to their own selected contentious issue later.

The instructor discusses with each group what contentious issue ideas they are considering and facilitates the group in their decision-making process.

Students are introduced to research techniques and examine the relevance of sources, explaining how they make informed judgements from research carried out with reference to the motives of each of the different stakeholders/characters examined. Students are asked to find one journalist or author with a slant towards their chosen issue and one with an opposing view, and investigate which organisations or corporations they support. Students are invited to apply the notion of Who, What, Where, Why, When and How when regarding reference material and putting together their own arguments. **Who** wrote the item? **What** was their motive for writing the piece? **Where** was the article published? **Who** was the designated audience? **Why** did they write the article and who did they want to influence? **When** did they write the article and has the article stood the test of time, has more information come to light that would change the meaning of the initial article? **How** can the truth of the article be checked more fully?

## SUPPORTIVE LECTURES

The learning schedule takes 8 to 12 weeks to run depending on student numbers and supporting lectures chosen by the instructor such as contextual lectures on globalisation and ethical issues within the professional discipline.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The student will:

- have a willingness to lay aside preconceptions to seek and consider all arguments when investigating topics;
- construct a personal framework of information and references which can substantiate written, visual and verbal debate regarding contemporary influences (any influence that can have cause and effect on the outcome of a product or service design such as technology, sociology, politics, philosophy (ethics), ecology, arts, media, geography or any pertaining world issues);
- understand and utilize research methodologies;
- investigate the relationship between theory and practice;
- develop a critical understanding of the contemporary debate concerning subjects covered by the module;
- develop a basic understanding in the use of relevant software.

## ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

The qualities looked for in students' work are based on their ability:

- to carry out a thorough search for information on the chosen topic;
- to select, organise and present information effectively;
- to understand and discuss relevant issues;
- to structure an argument leading to a conclusion;
- to answer questions intelligently.

In addition, the following qualities are considered: professionalism, quality of visual presentation style, clear and verbal delivery, basic understanding of relevant software.

Both formative and summative assessments are given to students as a group and individually, as per university guidelines.

## READING LIST

Byrne, D. (2003) *Envisioning Emotional Epistemological Information*, Steidl

Ednay, A. (2007) *PowerPoint 2007 in Easy Steps*, Computer Step

Law, J. (2004) *After Method*, Routledge, an imprint of Taylor and Francis Books Ltd

## REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING THE MODULE

Students have brought new and insightful approaches to different contentious issues including fast fashion, fur, animal testing for cosmetics, and youth crime and design. The group presentations given to their peers enable the sharing of material and increase the knowledge and understanding of students in areas that they themselves have not explored. The more diverse the areas under discussion the more informative and captured the audience has been. Students have managed the process well, but still put too much information on slides without considering the oratory and visual imagery aspects that capture the viewer. Still more exposure and clarification on presentation is needed to be put in place by the instructors to help students convey their messages. Both instructors have been ready to help students in aspects of respecting different individuals' perspectives but have not as yet had to 'police' this aspect. We hope and presume that we manage these aspects before any issues in diversity of opinion arise in the group discussions and requests that students respect each other. It helps that students can actually play roles that do not reflect their own opinions to elicit deeper understanding of all aspects of an issue covered.



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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