

The Elephant in the Room: Contextualising the Ethical within Fashion Excellence

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| 1. Level | FE, UG, PG |
| 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 | Any number |
| 5. Length of time required | 20 minutes (reading only) |
| 6. Type of activity | Article |
| 7. Discipline | Design, Pedagogy |
| 8. Topics covered | All |

Fashion is, by its nature and definition, about clothes as more than just protection from the elements or modesty. It is a vehicle for individual definition, whether as part of a clan identity, a professional uniform or as self-expression at a basic level that touches most people. At its most expressive, it can be a creative instrument that comes close to artistry. For most students of fashion design or related subjects, engagement with the subject originates in an inspiration with the creative side of fashion rather than an interest in or awareness of the industrial systems that make high street fashion possible. The “elephant in the room” is the underside to the fun, creative side of fashion that engages most fashion students and young consumers; it is the unseen cycle of the garment, from yarn, through processing stages, through its journey to the store, and its afterlife - post fashionability. The nuts and bolts of the industry can seem to be unrelated to the creative and sometimes egocentric core of the fashion elite, as experienced at fashion weeks in London, New York, Milan and Paris; but producing and delivering the goods, keeping turnover up and limiting product lifecycles are all part of what defines the fashion business. Of the few who will make it big, those designers destined to find success on the runway or red carpet, many will sign lucrative deals with mainstream fashion (high street) retail chains and brands; for the vast majority of fashion graduates, mass market fashion is the business model in which they will become stakeholders at some stage in their careers. The creative process is often segregated from the sourcing of garments, both in college and in industry. As students, fledgling designers often look to a past era of slower fashion and couture as a means of production, naturally focusing away from notions of mass production or sweatshops - perhaps a reflection of the fact that in fashion we are all in the business of selling fantasies on some level.

Despite the perception of a kind of democratization of fashion that has come about via the growth of cheap, on trend fast fashion - a phenomenon in which the majority of fashion students, as consumers, are enthusiastic participants - there is simultaneously a disconnect between the high aesthetic goals at the creative end of the fashion industry, the growing interest in the ethics of contemporary consumption among fashion students, and the hunger for faster and faster lifecycles with high margins that is generated by fast fashion brands in particular (though not exclusively). This has created a business model in which commercial demands often override “considerate

production” - quality of materials, craftsmanship, ecological thoughtfulness, but most of all human rights in production chains where often invisible subcontracting can be an unavoidable consequence of the demands of short lifecycle fashion. Is there, or can there be, a link between the quality and creative integrity of a finished product and the socio-economic integrity that is embedded in the way it has been produced? Is this something that can successfully be addressed within fashion schools that may share a parallel disconnect - simultaneously striving for creative excellence and innovation alongside the desire to build real links with industry to create greater depth in the student experience and to build career pathway links?

Ethical considerations can be an alien fit within a set of learning criteria designed to deliver creative excellence - the communication of ethical concepts alongside fulfilment of aesthetic objectives in a way that is relevant and might really influence student practice is no doubt challenging. Many students and staff find an easier engagement with sustainability issues through the exploration of “eco” fashion, and there has been more success in the delivery of sustainability through learning criteria related to environmental factors, where there may be more obvious links to the creative; for example, innovative fibre and yarn bases, greener ways to create or finish fabric, ideas of slow fashion, the re-creation of vintage in garment or yarn recyclage, etc., presenting potential for really tangible and visible results that are embedded in the creative process. As such, the “eco” option offers a more comfortable fit for delivering debates around sustainability within existing curricula, in terms of impacting on the design of the garment, accessing opportunities to inspire marketing the collection or influencing communication with the consumer, in a way that supply chain ethics or corporate social responsibility methodology and its implementation simply cannot deliver within a design course.

While clearly many fashion students dream of couture, slow, hand finished or unique as the pinnacle of their creative ambition, few, when considering a career in fashion, dream of sweatshops in China or Bangladesh, or short lifecycle fast fashion; who wants to design rags for a throwaway consumer? Discussion of supply chains, codes of conduct, subcontracting or the human plight within the business of fashion is difficult on several layers for the fashion design student, particularly as, in the first instance, a student may have a limited concept of the way supply



chains work, and how they may differ across models of production. Instilling in the student an understanding that an item produced at the high end - such as couture, high quality tailored or hand finished ready-to-wear; where the highest quality is essential to the product - is likely to have a shorter, more traceable supply chain but be more expensive than a fast fashion cut and sew supply chain that requires lower skill resources, and where the end product is likely to be finished at a lower quality, can create a foundation to relating socio-economic considerations to product and therefore to design. Asking creative fashion students to consider human rights and ethics in the supply chain within a typical set design project defies the accepted boundaries that govern a creative fashion course. In some ways, the consideration of supply chain might be seen as a limitation to creativity, so can, in essence, be seen to actually confront the standard learning criteria. There is a parallel in industry, where studio designers are sometimes deliberately shielded from sourcing or costing limitations in order to maximize creative expression (within commercial confines defined by brand or product managers), so that the brand managers and buyers are empowered with not only the sourcing choices but the creative choices that become subordinate to financial and logistical restrictions.

Without including the context of the key business models that drive the industry within curricula, a discussion of ethics relating to the design or the product management role can be hollow. In order for students to grasp the ethics and politics of fashion production, they must first understand the fashion industry and the business choices it faces; why, for instance, a fast fashion model might lead to chains of subcontracting, impossible delivery demands and sweatshops, contrasted with historic perspectives on slower business and production models that may offer a vision for the future - building an understanding that it was not ever thus! It is important to build into creative development an understanding of the whole product cycle, pre-production through to post-consumption, a holistic approach to the fashion product that goes beyond design. This knowledge may offer potential for creative collision and transformation in unexpected ways. If awareness about the whole lifecycle of the garment - including both business and ethics - can become the norm in discussions of design and product development, students may begin to consider the life chain of the products they create as a matter of course. This would inevitably bring them greater empowerment when they enter the industry. Graduates

would be better equipped to promote change and enable positive sustainable solutions within their organisations, with the by-product that a young designer could confidently contribute to the broader business debates within those organisations.

It is natural that consumer confusion around fashion ethics impacts on the student cohort as much as on any other enthusiastic consumer of fashion and media. It is challenging for an educator to illustrate these complex and often contradictory debates, or to offer solutions when the industry itself has not yet been able to decipher clear routes to change but, rather, has initiated processes to enable change (a concept which in itself can cause confusion in its dissemination to students). How can we support students to visualize how she or he may either use design itself to bring about change or see how they may effect change as designers rather than as consumers? The latter may seem more attainable. Fashion students are opinion leading consumers of fashion, so they are in a position to influence other consumers both directly and indirectly, just as they do in terms of fashion itself. The question is, how does the undoubted current buzz around sustainability and ethics transfer itself - as a trend - down the consumer chain? Can it be transformed into an underlying trend, one that will effect lasting change? Is this a mobile phone trend, or a Tamagochi trend, a little black dress or a puffball?

When they take up posts as designers in industry, fashion school graduates may frequently find the path to change seems to be outside their field of influence; but within fashion schools, placed in imaginary professional situations, students have a real opportunity to come up with visionary solutions outside commercial constraints, with more open-ended and holistic sustainability projects that engage them with the less "sexy" side of the discussion alongside the "sexy".

Students and staff can begin to see the product and its relationship to sustainability in a more integral light, to embed issues of sustainability directly into creative processing rather than always treating them as distinct subjects. For example, why do we always ask students to produce a collection? The removal of that framework invites new creative solutions to the understanding of what a "collection" might be, new possibilities for the presentation, consumption and marketing of fashion.



Perhaps the collection is a stale way of looking at the marketing of fashion that restricts the creative response to sustainability.

Students at Central St. Martin's (CSM), London, were recently given a cross-disciplinary project in which they were asked to consider sustainability across the life of a garment. Working in groups of five or six students, several of the groups grasped the chance to work with incredible fabrics and cuts, seeing sustainable solutions for the consumption of fashion in ideas related to slow, such as a dress hire collection, a collection of garments that can be endlessly adapted for future wearers, or a vehicle for the dissemination of issues. The fashion student is not necessarily the opinion leader in the political aspects of ethical or green issues, but as a creative thinker, she is able to make a real contribution to the broader debates within the industry through visionary solutions. Creative students are in a good place to be able to offer creative pointers to change before they get bogged down in the industry, corporate loyalties, and subordination of design departments to branding and sourcing, as is often seen in the industry. As students, they may be allowed to be thrilled by fashion, to consider fashion consumption without the hindrance of business planning and spreadsheets (so often the *bête noir* of young design school graduates), to harness their passion for the subject into real and innovative sustainable solutions for business and design, and really show a pathway to the industry. We know that, if it can be done in a way that is creatively exciting, makes business sense and grabs consumer interest, the industry is likely to sit up and listen.



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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