



The Future of Fashion Education: An Opinion

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The Subject

It is fairly typical to hear from an ex student of fashion design that they were not really aware of the constraints of commercial design. Also that they feel their education should have reflected these business needs. It is as if they were the first to discover that work is 'ordinary' and unremarkable and that they are slightly shocked that the tastes of the average shopper are no different from those of their friends and family. This alumni view has also often been voiced by designers, buyers and company owners. It is an old story – design for business versus design as art. There are arguments for and against, we can see that when the art is really missing then youth and the street reclaim fashion and businesses start to suffer; trends are not entirely owned by the industry. Also no student or start up business should be dissuaded from initially having the highest of creative ambitions, but they should, at least, learn and fully understand the fine art of compromise. Ultimately it is a fair point that fashion is a business and for most students it is their hoped for destination, but education is not just about training for business. For each side it seems, whether business or art, there is a case

to be made. In a way, these concerns about the nature of fashion education reflect the evolution of fashion education, from the earliest forms of apprenticeship to modern notions of educational systems producing 'professionals'. Once upon a time the majority of designers initially learnt their trade within industry but, as with many modern vocations, education now provides mass training according to consensual norms. The dilemmas arise as a result of the space between education and industry and the difference in their objectives. You could say that the objectives of fashion education should match the objectives of the employer but that would be to overlook the deeper social motivations and justifications for having an educational system. In the end education is about the student, so industry and education do indeed need to practice that fine art of compromise.

The theme of professionalization as an educational offer is an interesting one and easy to understand when it relates to restrictive codes of practice, for example the education of lawyers or architects, it is a little harder to understand in relation to subjects like fashion but it seems that all the arts and crafts have been steadily

professionalised for at least 150 years, in fact since the higher education system has looked around for things to do and teach. Within fashion education we can see that over the last 30 to 40 years there has been a steady professionalization of fashion manifested as new courses and subjects. Almost without fail the development of fashion education mirrors the economic development of a country and the stages of its industrial evolution - textile design, then fashion design, then a blossoming of all the disciplines that relate to advanced industrialisation or post-industrial society, from fashion photography to fashion retail management. This relationship, between the social and economic development of a country and its educational offer, or requirement, reflects how the local fashion sector evolves. Fashion shopping becomes entertainment, not just necessity, there also arise media and museum manifestations of fashion as mainstream culture; it leads to the academic development model of 'fashion + x', for example fashion + management, fashion + PR, fashion + journalism and the more problematic worlds of the less definable freelancers – fashion + styling. We now see these all over the world as diplomas and degrees and each, it seems, moves toward an idea of curriculum fixity and appropriateness validated by the imprimatur of a national or international system of quality assurance.

In addition to the vocational, professional and industrial stimuli of fashion as a subject we also see another phenomenon – fashion as an object of study. The various visitors to the table (perhaps for longer than we think) have included history, sociology, psychology and anthropology. Their collective, powerful, intellectual heritage, has often reduced the native theorisation of fashion to a poor academic second and established

an academic canon that serves their own subjects sometimes more than fashion itself, resulting in fashion failing to find its own academic and philosophical framework. However academic discourse is an evolutionary process, these disciplines have established a system of interrogation and review that stimulate and enhance our understanding of the social importance of fashion and the engine of consumerism. The subject of fashion today, with its industrial, cultural and academic character, is consequently very broad, involving practical, professional and intellectual dimensions with a growing repertoire of qualifications that reflect the different communities that have a stake in its future. The question remaining of course is what is its future?

Curriculum

It is a fact, that although fashion design is often the start point of fashion education, design is only a small part of the wider fashion industry. Ultimately the fashion industry must benefit from the increasing professionalization of the sector and the tailoring of the academic offer to meet niche and hybridised education. In principal an MBA in Fashion Management should be an advance on a general MBA. However there is an issue – although the increasing diversity of fashion awards address job specific practices – it is a little harder to see and predict what should become part of the core discourse for all students of fashion. Assuming, of course, that there is a generic and universal core at the heart of fashion education. Fashion is not a classical academic subject, it is a pluralistic mish-mash of convergent and overlapping subjects and practices (Welters and Lillethun, 2007) . As a result it would be easy to suggest that future curriculum development is relative to need and local circumstances and

that the idea of core curriculum is only relevant across cognate awards, for example all those of management. However there are challenges facing the whole of the fashion industry and modern society that, even if they are not core curriculum, should represent an agenda that a rounded fashion education needs to consider. Two worth consideration are the method of manufacture and globalisation.

It is perhaps time that it was acknowledged that the legacy of stitching and pattern pieces as the foundation of garment manufacture is problematic. It has engendered two problems – the sweatshop and a failure to fully or significantly automate garment production. While we can acknowledge that there are both innovations and alternatives ways to manufacture, we must also recognise that without the solution of this problem, throughout the 21st Century, hundreds of thousands if not millions of people will be subject to uncomfortable working conditions and possible exploitation. Another aspect of this problem concerns the future of what clothing can be, how we would approach its design and perhaps too how we would also plan for the end or re-use of a garment. The 20th Century tested the opinion, voiced by some 19th Century critics, that the aesthetic outcome of handcraft was superior to factory manufacture. Modern industrial design has proved to have an expressive repertoire equal to that of the pre-industrial age even if the factory system itself remains problematic. So too new technology, systems of manufacture, and the incumbent new methodologies of design, suggest a problem for fashion design education. Fashion designers may increasingly have to work like industrial or product designers if they are to take advantage of the advances in fabric technology and performance. Over the years textile

science and textile manufacturing seem to have made advances in a way that fashion has not, whether this is to do with research and development or industrial infrastructure is not entirely clear, but fashion now faces a challenge of industrial evolution. It seems right that the industry should consciously address these issues and with some purpose.

Globalisation is a hot topic and has been for some time. It seems to involve just about everything and therefore has a rambling and epic aspect as a subject of academic study (Eriksen, 2007). Potentially central to any global industry, the problem is how can students understand it and more significantly have experience of it? Awareness and knowledge of the supply chain and the overall structure of the fashion industry provides students a holistic view that allows them to contextualise their own knowledge, plan a career, anticipate change in the sector and to foresee new market opportunities. Difficult to deliver from a fixed location, the experience of globalisation is best achieved through international collaboration; student and staff exchanges, international internships, multi-site education and the pooling of knowledge.

Certain themes relevant to fashion seem to arise out of the combined effects of globalisation and industrialisation. One such is when industrialisation and modernisation (often in conjunction with political change) sweep away past cultural forms and replace them with international styles, leaving an aesthetic and spiritual discontinuity that disrupts feelings of legacy, heritage and identity. This becomes problematic for designers who seek to call on the collective past as a source of design inspiration and hence market advantage. This phenomenon is particularly true in much of East and South East Asia

(Bellah, 1999). Other interesting themes arise from the responses to globalisation, including external and 'occupant' considerations of the local and how local conditions suggest and permit different models of business or product. This latter does not only apply to developing nations, for example these days there is a capacity for craft practice in both wealthy and poor nations to feed into the worldwide market for luxury goods.

The Business of Education

The increasing diversity within fashion education simply reflects a steady growth in the mirroring of the wider fashion industry itself; sometimes one course for one role, sometimes one for many. So too we can expect to see the global nature of the industry, from the manufacture of garments to their consumption and disposal, reflected in curriculum development, student experience and institutional collaboration. Traditionally the educational system has played a key role in societal and technological advance, and the need to broadly develop the research culture within fashion education is self-evident because there are clear challenges for the 21st Century. There remains only one other significant factor likely to influence the future of fashion education which is the future of education itself.

Around the world there are many models of the higher education system and also many models of where and how fashion education takes place. From the private to the public, different institutions will have different remits, but for all of them fashion education is potentially a lucrative source of income. There is evidence of the increasing internationalisation of the education business and it is obvious that ultimately we face a period of growing competition that will impact on issues such as quality,

student numbers and the nature of the educational offer (Universities UK, 2010). In one way fashion education is vulnerable, its purpose and value may be undermined and discredited by inflated student numbers or poor experience. On the other hand the fact that studying fashion is for many a lifestyle choice, means that recruitment is secure and we have seen very large fashion institutions develop. There are also national economic policies that drive the growth of fashion education. We can see too that in developing economies design education is key in the local development of value-added, luxury or advanced goods for export. Furthermore a thriving consumer landscape (in which fashion is central) is key to the urban experience, which in turn provides the economic wellbeing of a nation (Worldwatch Institute, 2011). For all these reasons fashion education is likely to grow and there will be an increasing pressure to add value to the student experience.

In conclusion what we can say about the future of fashion education is that it will definitely increase, everywhere. Also that if, over and above the vocationally obvious, educational institutions are to retain their academic credibility there are some tough issues surrounding the development of fashion curricula appropriate to the 21st Century, including new skills and training. We can observe that the creeping professionalization of fashion acts as a stimulus to the entire fashion education system, and that collaboration, internationalisation and fashion discourse are necessary to produce the right kind of graduate for the future. Finally there will always be a temptation for irresponsible expansionism within fashion education as it mirrors the growth and status of fashion as a part of popular culture, we should guard against this. The antidote to it,

as in most things, will be to maintain a sense of good will, perspective and social responsibility but perhaps more than these - a continuing love of fashion.

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