

Teaching by Example: Integrating Sustainable Practices into the Traditional Fashion Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Integrating sustainability into fashion education is increasingly essential. *Teaching by Example: Integrating Sustainable Practices into the Traditional Fashion Classroom* examines how sustainability principles can be embedded into skill-based courses like pattern cutting and garment construction while preserving traditional craftsmanship. The paper explores strategies to inspire students to adopt sustainability as a core design principle.

Craftsmanship is presented as integral to fostering sustainability, emphasizing how an appreciation for quality and care leads to more mindful design practices. By valuing traditional techniques, students counter the disposable mindset of fast fashion, understanding the effort behind garment-making.

The study details projects like upcycling, zero-waste pattern cutting, and sourcing sustainable materials, which teach technical skills while integrating ecological thinking. These projects demonstrate sustainability as a fundamental aspect of fashion education, not an isolated topic.

The paper underscores the importance of teaching with passion and leading by example. By fostering enthusiasm for both craftsmanship and sustainability, educators can instill values of care and responsibility in students, preparing them to address the industry's environmental challenges. This comprehensive approach equips students with the technical and ethical skills needed to shape a sustainable future for fashion.

Keywords: Sustainability in Fashion Education, Craftsmanship, Skill-Based Learning, Pattern Cutting and Garment Construction, Upcycling, Sustainable Design Practices, Forming Futures, Zero-Waste Design

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Sir David Attenborough, the renowned natural historian, described climate change as "the biggest threat to security that modern humans have ever faced," emphasizing its

existential nature and the urgent need for action (Attenborough, 2021). As a fashion professional with 25 years of experience—and as both a passionate craftsman and an environmentalist—I often find myself asking, *‘Why am I part of this destructive machine that goes against everything I believe in?’*

Through teaching, I discovered the answer: I have the opportunity to share and teach the craft I love while inspiring and educating students about sustainable practices and design.

Leading by example is a cornerstone of education. Inspirational teachers profoundly shape a student’s thinking, steering them toward positive actions. Research confirms that educators who model behaviours like patience, respect, and curiosity foster growth mindsets in their students, encouraging not only academic achievement but also personal development (García-Crespo et al., 2021). As an educator, I see it as my duty to raise awareness of sustainability while equipping students with the skills to act on it. Climate change will inevitably affect their futures, and my role is to help them face it with knowledge and resilience.

For the past decade, I have been developing a Menswear Pattern Cutting and Garment Construction course at Shih Chien University in Taiwan. This course guides students through the intricacies of developing blocks, mastering pattern-cutting techniques, and working with various sewing machinery. Over time, I began integrating sustainability into the program, reworking projects to include eco-friendly principles. These changes have evolved into meaningful elements that significantly enrich the learning experience. The course now embodies core sustainable values and serves as a living example of how traditional skills align with contemporary challenges.

Purpose

Design education has been described as "an essential tool for creating an ethical fashion system and to generate social change" (Onur, cited in Murzyn-Kupisz and Hołuj, 2021, p.3). Sustainable design is now a prominent topic in fashion education, often centred on individual projects that encourage students to think critically about environmental issues. However, sustainability must extend beyond isolated design exercises to encompass all aspects of fashion education—especially in skill-based classes like pattern cutting and garment construction, where students learn how garments are physically made.

This paper explores how sustainability can be seamlessly integrated into traditional fashion skill classes. By aligning with the 2025 IFFTI theme of “Forming Futures,” it highlights how educators can shape a sustainable future by embedding ecological thinking into foundational practices. The investigation is structured around four key approaches:

1. **Embedding Sustainable Thinking in the Classroom Environment:** Creating an atmosphere where sustainability is part of daily practice, from material usage to classroom behaviour.
2. **Sustainable Manufacturing and Production Education:** Teaching students how to apply sustainable practices without compromising the core goal of mastering essential skills.
3. **Fostering Passionate Craftsmanship:** Encouraging care, precision, and pride in garment creation to inspire long-term appreciation for quality and durability.
4. **Engaging and Accessible Learning:** Designing courses that are educational, interactive, and impactful, while steering clear of overly rigid or lecture-heavy methods.

Through these strategies, this paper aims to demonstrate how sustainability can become an integral part of traditional skill-based classes, bridging the gap between design and production to prepare students for the challenges of the future.

BACKGROUND

Historical Context

Traditionally, fashion education has centred around three core subjects: design and concept development, pattern cutting, and garment construction. These foundational skills have remained largely unchanged for decades. While modern tools like CLO 3D offer significant sustainability benefits, such as enabling virtual sampling and fitting, they have not been investigated in this paper because the class focuses specifically on hands-on traditional methods. These methods are better suited for establishing a foundational understanding of the skills necessary for garment construction. Although digital tools like CLO 3D are invaluable and are taught as a separate class, the tactile, hands-on approach provides an irreplaceable depth of understanding that underpins all further exploration of fashion techniques.

Historically, when localised production was common, there was greater emphasis on honing these practical skills, and craftsmanship held significant value. As mass production expanded, the need for a deep understanding of these skills diminished, leading to a decline in craftsmanship over recent decades. This shift has contributed to the modern attitude of treating clothing as disposable rather than as something special to be cherished and cared for. A well-made garment, once considered a treasured item, is now often replaced by cheaper, mass-produced alternatives, reflecting a broader cultural shift toward convenience and materialism.

Sustainability in Fashion Education

Since the early 2000s, sustainability has become a prominent topic in design schools, with significant progress in creating awareness around this issue. Many institutions now incorporate sustainability-focused projects into their curriculums or offer

dedicated programs that explore this path in greater depth. These initiatives have undoubtedly improved awareness and inspired some students to focus on sustainable practices.

However, when sustainability is treated as a minor side project or when participation in sustainability programs is optional, it creates the illusion that addressing this crisis is itself optional. This is misleading, as sustainability is not a choice—it is a necessity that will impact everyone.

This realisation drove the development of this project. Why should sustainability be confined to a single design project rather than applied across the entire fashion education process? Specifically, I wanted to explore how sustainable thinking could be integrated into the subjects I am most passionate about: pattern cutting and garment construction.

Sustainability, I believe, is as much a mindset as it is a practice. It encompasses the desire to conserve and care for resources, to create with passion and love, and to prioritise longevity and thoughtful design. Educating students in these areas fosters a deeper understanding of the impact of every design choice, both during the production process and throughout the lifecycle of the garment. By embedding this mindset throughout the curriculum, students are more likely to feel empowered and inspired to drive change in the world.

METHODOLOGY

Purpose and Design of the Survey

The survey was designed to evaluate the impact of my class on students' attitudes toward sustainability and craftsmanship. By gathering opinions from participants spanning over nine years, the goal was to explore how the integration of sustainability influenced their thinking and professional practices. This data serves to validate the arguments presented in this paper and provide real-world evidence of how sustainability can be integrated into skill-based fashion education.

The survey consisted of eight closed-ended questions to collect quantitative data on trends and behaviours, followed by two open-ended questions to capture personal experiences and insights. Administered via Google Forms, it provided a straightforward and accessible way for students to share their thoughts.

Participant Details

The survey targeted approximately 350 students who completed my class between 2015 and 2024. At the time of publication, the response rate was 15% (53 students). While this may seem low, response rates for surveys involving past students over a broad time range are typically challenging. Despite this, the data provides valuable

insights, as the participants span diverse career stages and offer unique perspectives on the long-term impact of the class.

The respondents were predominantly female, with a small number of male participants, and primarily Taiwanese, with a few East Asian respondents. The age range of participants was approximately 20 to 30 years, offering a broad spectrum of perspectives. This demographic diversity enriched the findings, highlighting the class's long-term and short-term impacts across different stages of professional and personal development.

Data Collection and Analysis

Quantitative Findings

The survey highlighted 4 key quantitative results that demonstrate the class's impact on sustainability and craftsmanship:

1. **Improved Understanding of Sustainability:** 90.6% of students reported an increased understanding of sustainability after completing the class, showcasing its effectiveness in deepening knowledge.
2. **Recognition of Sustainability in the Classroom:** 96.2% of students acknowledged sustainability as a prominent and integral part of class discussions.
3. **Impact on Professional Work:** 88.7% indicated that lessons on sustainability influenced their personal and professional design practices.
4. **Enhanced Appreciation for Craftsmanship:** 100% of students stated that the hands-on projects and demonstrations in class changed their perception of quality and craftsmanship in garment production.

Additional findings showed that students unanimously agreed the hands-on projects changed their perception of garment quality and that the teacher's passion for craftsmanship was a standout element of the class.

Qualitative Insights

Qualitative responses were grouped into three main themes:

1. **Inspirational Impact:** Many students highlighted how the teacher's passion and practical demonstrations inspired them to rethink sustainability in fashion. *"Ra doesn't just talk about sustainability but puts a lot of effort into practicing it. He really shows that sustainable garments can be beautifully crafted,"* noted one survey respondent.
2. **Practical Implementation:** Several responses focused on how the class encouraged resourcefulness and practical applications of sustainability. *"During the Jeans Project, I truly came into contact with and understood the issue of sustainability for the first time, and it was also the first time using recycled denim fabric for my work. I am very grateful to teacher Ra for guiding us through such a*

meaningful class, integrating the concept of sustainability into our lives, making the samples not only aesthetically pleasing but also more meaningful and valuable!" shared another student in the survey.

3. **Shifts in Perception:** Students often mentioned how the class transformed their understanding of fast fashion and quality craftsmanship. *"Before this class, I didn't realise how harmful fast fashion is. This class taught me how to create high-quality garments that can last for decades, helping to reduce waste,"* reflected a survey participant.

Summary of Key Themes

The survey results demonstrate the value of integrating sustainability into skill-based fashion classes. Students not only gained a deeper understanding of sustainability but also developed an appreciation for craftsmanship and quality. The findings underscore the importance of leading by example and show how hands-on projects can effectively transform student perspectives and practices.

FOSTERING A LOVE FOR CRAFTSMANSHIP & INSPIRING SUSTAINABILITY

The Disconnect with Craftsmanship

Spencer W. Kimball once stated, "Real craftsmanship, regardless of the skill involved, reflects real caring, and real caring reflects our attitude about ourselves, about our fellow men, and about life" (Kimball, 1978). Kimball's words suggest that the act of craftsmanship embodies broader societal values, such as respect, patience, and responsibility. Yet, as society increasingly neglects these values, it risks fostering a culture of detachment—not only from the objects we use but also from the deeper principles they represent.

Not long ago, crafts like sewing were commonplace in households, with many mothers designing or repairing clothes at home. Vivienne Westwood reflects on this cultural shift: "When I was a little girl you used to learn to sew all the holes in things, darning socks, but nobody mends things anymore" (Westwood, n.d.). This domestic engagement fostered an appreciation for the effort involved in clothing production and encouraged a sense of care for garments. While I do not advocate for a return to traditional domestic roles, there is undoubtedly a connection between the decline of these skills and today's disposable attitude toward clothing.

The rise of fast fashion further compounded this shift. Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reveals that apparel prices peaked in the mid-1990s and then dropped significantly, reducing the perceived value of clothing (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). In the 1990s, saving for a \$50 Stussy T-shirt (equivalent to \$100 today, calculated using the U.S. Inflation Calculator) required effort, leading to a stronger attachment to the garment. Now, the same T-shirt can be purchased for \$14. This

dramatic price shift encourages overconsumption and devalues clothing, making it easier for consumers to discard garments without a second thought.

This devaluation has also influenced how students approach fashion education. When clothing was more expensive, aspiring designers often entered the industry with hands-on experience and a maker's mindset. Today, many students are drawn by the fantasy of being a designer, with less appreciation for craftsmanship and the skills required to create quality garments. Josh Williams of Parsons School of Design observed that students increasingly view entrepreneurship as a means of creative control, often prioritising autonomy over skill-building (Williams, 2021). This perspective can detract from the care and responsibility essential to sustainable fashion practices.

Another contributing factor is the decline of domestic industries in the 1980s and 1990s, as production moved to countries with cheaper labor. This shift not only reduced local manufacturing jobs but also diminished the perceived value of learning traditional craftsmanship skills.

Classroom Strategies

In response to these challenges, I have implemented several strategies to rekindle an appreciation for craftsmanship and foster an understanding of sustainability. These strategies encompass classroom practices, project design, and my teaching methods.

1. Sustainably Aware Classroom Environment

To instil sustainability at a foundational level, I created a classroom environment that promotes sustainable practices:

- Recycling bins are designated for paper, fabric, and recyclable materials.
- Notices and signs remind students to recycle, reuse pattern card, turn off irons and lights, and close doors to conserve air conditioning.
- A cleaning roster assigns two students per session to maintain the classroom and manage waste responsibly.

Student Quote:

"The moment I started looking at all the trash cans at school filled with waste and realising the reality of the industry I'm in, it gave me a much clearer vision of everything."

2. Leading by Example

As a kinaesthetic learner, my teaching focuses on hands-on demonstrations. I work alongside students, creating my own garment while teaching each step of the process, from pattern cutting to construction. By incorporating design details and personal touches into my samples, I demonstrate the value of care and creativity.

Wearing these finished garments to class reinforces the connection between effort, quality, and sustainability.

Student Quote: "Teacher Ra influenced me so much. The concept he taught us in class will stay with me for life and be integrated into my works."

3. Engaging Projects with Personal Value

Projects are designed around classic menswear pieces, such as T-shirts, jeans, and jackets, that students are excited to create and wear. Allowing students to customise fit and style encourages personal connection and pride in their work, reinforcing an appreciation for craftsmanship.

Student Quote: "In Ra's class, while learning techniques, we also produced works that are practical. For example, the jeans and suit pants we made are still pieces I frequently wear in my wardrobe."

4. Upcycling Student Waste

One of the most impactful strategies involves side projects where I collect and repurpose classroom fabric scraps into new designs. This hands-on demonstration of sustainability encourages students to view waste as a valuable resource.

Student Quote: "I remember during the jeans course, the teacher had a box to collect leftover denim scraps. When I saw Ra transform those scraps into a perfectly pieced denim jacket, I truly understood the meaning behind that box."

5. Appreciation for Tools

I emphasise the importance of quality tools and their role in sustainable practices. By sharing stories about my own tools, providing guidance on selecting durable options and even providing students with specific items, I encourage students to value their tools as much as their craft.

Student Quote: "The most impressive memory was about the teacher's fabric scissors. You emphasised that they were a family heirloom and precious, which made me realise even tools should be treasured."

6. Passion and Responsibility in Design

I firmly believe that when a garment is made with care and passion, the love of the maker becomes entwined in its fabric. This passion inspires respect and care from the wearer, fostering a lasting connection with the garment. Teaching with this mindset means encouraging students to put their heart into every piece they make, showing them the value of creating garments that are both desirable and durable. By focusing on proper techniques, attention to detail, and high-quality finishing, students are equipped to reverse the fast fashion mindset and embrace sustainable

practices. This approach instils a love for the craft, which naturally aligns with sustainability. When students take pride in their work, they begin to value clothing as something to be cherished rather than disposable.

Student Quote:

“Learning with Teacher Ra truly taught me what it means to create with care. It’s not just about the garment; it’s about putting your heart into it so others value it just as much.”

Outcomes

Although this project is still in its early stages, the results are promising. Many students have carried the principles learned in my class into their subsequent undergraduate and graduate collections, demonstrating a growing commitment to sustainability and craftsmanship.

Student Quote:

“This course enabled me to critically reflect upon taken-for-granted approaches and challenge them with a sustainable perspective. It also encouraged me to consider the many opportunities for sustainability in my future educational and professional path.”

SUSTAINABILITY-ORIENTED PROJECT DESIGN

Range of Sustainable Projects

I addressed the curriculum by incorporating a distinct sustainability focus into each existing project:

- **Upcycled T-Shirt Project:** Students repurpose old damaged, discarded and unwanted T-shirts into new designs, learning how to extend the lifecycle of garments through creativity and resourcefulness, whilst still learning the core pattern and t-shirt construction techniques.
- **Zero-Waste Shirt Project:** This project introduces students to zero-waste pattern-cutting techniques, emphasising the importance of efficient fabric usage to reduce waste whilst still learning the core pattern and construction techniques of a shirt.
- **Sustainably Sourced Jeans Project:** Students focus on sourcing habits, learning to identify and choose sustainable materials to replace traditional options.
- **Sustainable Casual Jacket Project:** Students are tasked with independently identifying and applying a sustainable aspect to their design.

While these projects retain the core focus on pattern cutting and sewing techniques, the added sustainability component encourages students to think beyond traditional garment construction. Each project is designed to produce finished garments that

students can wear and value, avoiding wasteful calico samples. To support this, I ensure access to quality materials and trims, enabling students to create polished pieces with proper finishing, such as bartacks, buttonholes, buttons, and rivets.

Educational Goals for Each Project

Each project has specific goals based on its sustainability focus, but the overarching objectives remain consistent:

1. **Skill Development:** Teach foundational fashion skills, including pattern cutting, sewing, and garment finishing.
2. **Sustainability Awareness:** Introduce sustainable practices tailored to the specific project, such as upcycling, zero-waste techniques, and sustainable sourcing.
3. **Craftsmanship Appreciation:** Foster an understanding of the time, effort, and skill required to create well-made garments.
4. **Real-World Application:** Enable students to create wearable pieces that reflect both technical skills and sustainability principles.

By combining technical education with sustainable thinking, these projects aim to prepare students for the future of fashion, where sustainability is no longer optional but essential.

Future Impact

These projects have inspired many students to continue exploring sustainability in their subsequent work. Several students have incorporated the principles learned in class into their undergraduate collections, while others have cited the projects as a foundation for their professional practices. As one former student expressed:

“This hands-on practice not only allowed me to deeply appreciate the charm of upcycling waste materials, but it also inspired me to explore innovative possibilities in sustainable design for my graduate collection and thesis development, I was even selected as a finalist in the Re:Dress sustainable fashion competition thanks to the ideas spawned in this class”.

Closing Paragraph

The sustainability-oriented projects are designed to be both educational and inspiring, helping students understand the intersection of skill development, creativity, and environmental responsibility. By integrating sustainability into foundational skills, these projects not only prepare students for the demands of the modern fashion industry but also empower them to become agents of change, capable of driving the industry toward a more sustainable future.

CHALLENGES AND REFLECTIONS

Student Resistance and Practical Challenges

One of the primary challenges I have encountered is finding a balance between the foundational skills the university requires me to teach and the sustainable practices I aim to incorporate. Sometimes this has been addressed by creating both traditional and sustainable versions of a project—for example, producing a sample using conventional methods and a finished garment with sustainable techniques.

Another challenge is the additional planning and sourcing time required on my part to provide students with specific materials, such as recycled zippers from YKK or sustainable fabrics, as these resources are not readily available in the market. This effort is necessary to ensure students have the tools to experiment with sustainability effectively.

Sustainability-focused projects can also introduce complexities to otherwise straightforward assignments. For instance, the T-shirt Project, once a simple cut-and-sew exercise, now involves upcycling old T-shirts. This requires students to inspect and deconstruct old garments, cut out usable sections, and piece them together before sewing the final product. While this adds time and effort, it also enhances craftsmanship and gives students the opportunity to personalise their work, which many find rewarding.

Though I have not encountered direct resistance from students regarding the sustainability focus of the course, I have observed that some struggle with my emphasis on delicate hand-sewing skills and craftsmanship. These tasks demand time, care, and patience—qualities essential to sustainability. Many students, however, later reflect on these challenges positively, recognising the value of taking time and caring for their work.

Student Quote: "You need to focus on the details and take time to finish the project. Not making trash ;) in terms of this viewpoint, it's protecting our environment."

Challenges in Integrating Sustainability

Two significant challenges in integrating sustainability into the fashion curriculum are the lack of accessible sustainable resources and the current emphasis on aesthetics over functionality in modern design.

- **Limited Sustainable Resources:** Most fabric markets and suppliers offer few eco-friendly options, making it difficult for students to source materials for their designs.
- **Superficial Design Priorities:** The modern design approach often prioritises surface-level appeal and cost, which can make sustainable designs appear less innovative or compelling.

These challenges present exciting opportunities for innovation. Design, at its core, is about problem-solving, and sustainability offers the ultimate design challenge. By embracing these obstacles, students rediscover the roots of fashion in thoughtful material selection, careful pattern cutting, and high-quality construction. This approach addresses challenges while revolutionising the industry.

Students have already used these challenges as a springboard for creativity. For example, one student incorporated deadstock fabrics into her designs, creating an entire senior collection that combined sustainability with avant-garde aesthetics. Another used zero-waste techniques to design functional, modular garments that could be adjusted and adapted over time, reducing waste and increasing longevity.

By returning to the fundamentals, students cultivate a meaningful relationship with fashion, inspiring designs that are both practical and groundbreaking.

Reflections on Teaching Sustainability

The menswear program I've developed over the past 10 years is a project I'm truly proud of. While my passion for teaching craftsmanship, love, and care has always been central to the course, the sustainability focus has been a more recent addition, emerging over the past 4–5 years as the foundational elements matured.

Student responses to the course have been overwhelmingly positive. It's heartening to see them embrace the craftsmanship, skill, and sustainability concepts I've shared and to witness their growth as designers. Several students have carried these principles into their final collections, incorporating sustainable techniques and materials they were introduced to in class. One graduate reflected, *“What the teacher brought us was the enjoyment of details and craftsmanship, but also the understanding of how challenging it is to be a true craftsperson.”*

That said, I see immense potential for further growth. Each year, I revise and refine the curriculum, incorporating new ideas and methods. There are still projects I have yet to transform into sustainability-focused exercises, but this remains a key goal for the future.

Menswear has proven an excellent platform for these sustainable ideas. It offers classic foundational pieces—such as T-shirts, shirts, jeans, and casual jackets—that students can make for themselves while learning essential skills. These garments are highly wearable and versatile, even for female students, who often enjoy oversized fits. Seeing an end goal they can personally benefit from helps students stay motivated and passionate about their projects, reinforcing their connection to the craft.

Closing Reflection

Teaching sustainability in fashion education is not without its challenges, but these obstacles have only deepened my commitment to this mission. The journey has shown me that with careful planning, creativity, passion, and a dedication to craftsmanship, it is possible to inspire the next generation of designers to embrace sustainability as an integral part of their practice. By fostering a love for both skill and care in garment-making, we help students understand that sustainability and craftsmanship are intrinsically linked. Each class, project, and reflection brings us closer to forming a future-oriented approach to fashion education—one where sustainability and craftsmanship are woven into the fabric of every design decision.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Key Points

This paper demonstrates that sustainability and craftsmanship are not mutually exclusive but deeply interconnected. By integrating sustainable practices into traditional skill-based courses like pattern cutting and garment construction, it is possible to nurture students' technical abilities while fostering an appreciation for environmental responsibility. Key strategies such as leading by example, embedding sustainability into project design, and cultivating a passion for quality and care have proven effective in inspiring students to rethink their approach to fashion. Through hands-on projects and real-world applications, students not only gain technical expertise but also adopt a sustainability mindset that influences their professional and personal practices.

Long-Term Vision

The ultimate vision for this initiative is to create a fashion education system where sustainability is not treated as an optional topic but as a core principle embedded in every aspect of the curriculum. As this program evolves, the goal is to expand its reach, incorporating sustainability into even more projects and ensuring that every student is equipped to design and produce garments with ecological and ethical awareness. By continuing to refine the curriculum, embrace innovative techniques, and adapt to emerging challenges, we can prepare students to lead the industry toward a more sustainable and thoughtful future.

Implications for Broader Education and Industry

The insights and outcomes from this program have implications far beyond the classroom. For educators, this approach serves as a model for integrating sustainability into skill-based courses, demonstrating that foundational techniques and ecological responsibility can coexist seamlessly. For the fashion industry, the shift toward sustainability represents both a challenge and an opportunity. By prioritising craftsmanship, durability, and thoughtful design, fashion professionals can redefine

consumer expectations and move away from the disposable culture perpetuated by fast fashion.

Final Thoughts

Aligned with the 2025 IFFTI theme, “Forming Futures,” this paper underscores the critical role of education in shaping a sustainable future for fashion. By equipping students with the tools, knowledge, and mindset to embrace sustainability, educators have the power to drive transformative change. As the next generation of designers emerges, they bring with them the potential to redefine the industry, weaving sustainability into the very fabric of fashion's future.

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