Extreme education: new approaches to skills and work-based learning

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Abstract

This paper will question how far we need to go from conventional fashion/textile education methods in order to meet the needs of the industry in a world where change is constant. What are the skill sets required for the fashion professionals of the future? How far does our current curriculum meet the needs of the industry and what pedagogical processes should we be using to make ensure that our approaches to teaching and learning are dynamic and fit for purpose? UK government strategies for vocational education will be examined and consideration will be given as to how these strategies may impact upon the curriculum for fashion/textiles education. The UK government wants to see more engagement from employers in vocational education and is involving them in the development of the new 14-19 specialised diplomas, foundation degrees and in the broader skills agenda by developing skills academies across a range of sectors including fashion retail. Fundamental to the government's approach is a curriculum that utilises academic and work based learning but how do we ensure that work based learning is effective and appropriate? Innovations in education are also being driven by technology. The paper also considers how we can utilise technology to promote widening participation, independent, flexible and reflective learning and help our students to develop the skills sets that employers require. The paper will be illustrated with examples of approaches to work based learning and technological solutions that are available.

The Changing Face of the Fashion Industry

The fashion industry has seen extraordinary changes in recent years driven by global economics and technological innovation. This has led to a revolution in the way we consume fashion and the way in which

fashion is produced. There are no longer distinct seasons on the High St and consumers have become difficult to categorise with celebrities shopping in discount stores and mixing bargains with designer pieces.

Continental retailers such as H&M and Zara have led this revolution followed closely by UK retailers such as Topshop and Primark. The impact has also been felt in the United States where retailers like H&M have broken into the market with 91 stores across the states and another 150 planned. (Fooroohar, 2006). This is extreme fashion it is fast and disposable. In a recent BBC article Hilary Alexander states that:

> "It's just got faster and faster, spinning out of control but certainly spinning at a rate that can make you dizzy. If you want to be in fashion, you've got to stay in the race."
> (BBC, 2006)

The way that consumers are shopping is also changing; shoppers are increasingly prepared to experiment with new sources of fashion from supermarkets to online retailers.

Supermarkets are having an impact on clothing sales in the UK with the number of shoppers prepared to buy clothing from a supermarket leaping from 60% to 73% in a year (Poulter, 2005). Tesco has become the UK's third largest clothing retailer in terms of the number of garments sold (Tesco Annual Review, 2006).

Retailers are also waking up to the concerns of the consumer about ethical and environmental issues. The Fairtrade foundation (2007) says that UK sales of Fairtrade products are running at £300m per year. In the UK retailers such as Tesco and Marks and Spencer are responding by launching ethical ranges such as Marks and Spencer's Fairtrade and organic cotton clothing.

Online retailing

According to the Office of National Statistics (ONS, 2006) the value of Internet sales to households rose to £21.4 billion in 2005 from £16.5 billion in 2004, a rise of 29.7 per cent and the number of UK adults using the internet for ordering goods, tickets and services is continuing to rise from 39% in July 2001 to 55 percent in July 2005 (Wallis, 2006). A number of fashion retailers already have transactional sites are more are planning to develop them. Britons spent more than £1 billion buying clothes online last year and it is predicted that the market could grow by a further 138 per cent in five years. (Hardie, 2007).

A global supply chain

The fashion industry supply chain has become increasingly international components; textiles and manufacture of products are sourced from around the globe. The supply chain has become much more complex and increasingly apparel companies are operating in an international environment where "labor and transportation costs often determine where production takes place and outsourcing of all or part of production is common." (fibre2fashion, 2006). Complex supply chains and an increasing demand to bring the product to market in a shorter lead-time characterize the fashion industry in the 21st century. Information technology and effective communication systems are critical to the co-ordination of the supply chain (Jin, 2006) and technology plays in an increasingly important role in the manufacture and distribution of goods.

So what impact is this having on the fashion curriculum? Is it moving fast enough to stay in the race? Is this global dimension reflected in our curriculum? Are we addressing the ethical and moral issues that are challenging the industry? Are we teaching our students the skills required to compete in a market where change is constant?

Employability and the skills debate

Ensuring that students have the skills that employers are demanding is a major driver in UK government policy in both further and higher education (Cox & King, 2006, DFES 2003). As students are now paying for their education their expectations are higher and they are taking more account of published information on student destinations thereby putting employability and the related skills high on the agenda for universities (Cox & King, 2006).

The Learning and Skills Council (LSC, 2005) National Employer Skills Survey identified the following as major skills gaps in applicants where skill shortage vacancies exist:

- Technical and practical skills, lacking in around half of all instances
- Communication skills (lacking in 40 per cent of cases)
- Customer handling (36 per cent)
- Team working (32 per cent)
- Problem solving skills (29 per cent)

Employers also identified a relatively large increase in the incidence of literacy and numeracy skills.

A survey by the Association of Graduate Recruiters published in January 2007 identifies that students are lacking in leadership, teamwork and communication skills. In an interview with *The Guardian* newspaper Carl Gilleard Chief Executive of the AGR states that:

> "The world of work is very much based on relationships and we al have to deal with other people working in teams. That means they have to be able to communicate in different ways. You have to he able to negotiate and be able to interpret and listen, some people working in teams will have to take leadership roles. Expectations among employers have grown." (Ford, 2007)

Many courses are also failing to provide students with a clear understanding of the international nature of the industry that they are preparing to enter. In their research into the fashion textiles curriculum in the USA Yu & Jin (2005 p. 234) found that "international perspectives in clothing and textiles education have not been systematically discussed." Their analysis of responses from US apparel manufacturers found that they considered "understanding international markets as the most important area in which to educate college students, followed by global product development process, global supply chain management, understanding other cultures, and global sourcing" (Yu & Jin 2005, p. 240). They propose that every fashion textile programme should include an international module.

Wright et al (2002 p. 122) identified a significant gap between the attributes that university lecturers and industry leaders felt were important for fashion textile students. They found that the industry believed strongly that affective skills were the most important whilst "almost half of the educators chose cognitive attributes as most important to students' success." They also discovered a lack of information about apparel design curriculum development.

The changing nature of the industry and the increase in the use of technology and Internet retailing have also had an impact upon the kind of skills that students will need to develop. Skillsmart Retail (the UK sector skills council for the retail industry) have identified a whole range of implications for skills development driven by online retailing they have identified that there will be an increased need for IT

specialists but there will also be an impact on the roles of distribution managers, delivery drivers and warehouse operatives and that there will be a considerable challenge in providing high quality customer services when the public are interfacing with a delivery driver rather than a sales assistant. They also identify creative challenges, for example, how visual merchandising is conducted on the Internet with "the visual merchandiser's 'space' being the computer screen rather than the store." (Skillsmart, 2005, p4).

There will always be a need for a healthy debate around the different aims and values that should influence the curriculum and to what extent employers should be guiding this however it is clear that some governments are putting employers in a more powerful position when it comes to the development of vocational education.

The UK Government's strategy

Two key documents produced by the UK government, The Future of Higher Education (DFES, 2003) and Prosperity for all in the Global Economy-World Class Skills (Leitch, 2006) outline their strategy for the future of education in the UK. Skills development and employer engagement are at the core of their vision for the future of vocational education. They identify the need for a new range of vocational qualifications that will be developed and delivered in collaboration with employers. These qualifications include specialist diplomas developed as an alternative to A levels for 14-19 year olds, further development of foundation degrees and programmes that integrate work based and academic learning. They are developing a range of skills academies across various sectors where there are identified skills shortages. These include areas such as finance, construction and retail.

The Fashion Retail Academy was the first skills academy in the UK developed as a private public partnership. Funded jointly by the Learning Skills Council and major UK retailers including the Arcadia Group, Marks and Spencer, Next, GUS and Tesco, the Academy opened its doors in September 2006. The Academy had a remit to be innovative in its delivery of the curriculum and use of learning technologies. Students spend 27 weeks in the Academy and 10 weeks engaged in work based learning in stores, head offices and undertaking visits to distribution centres and suppliers.

These skills academies offer students a fast track route into employment and are seen by many learners as an alternative to a degree and the associated financial burdens. Traditional providers of education may soon feel the impact of these alternatives as more students are put off higher education by the prospect of large debts.

So, can we conclude that we need to sharpen our act and offer a different experience, more flexibility in delivery and a wider range of skills?

How this affects the fashion curriculum?

Employers want graduates who have subject specific and soft skills, an understanding of international commerce good leadership and team working skills and preferably some work experience. Students want courses that will enable them to get employment in an increasingly competitive environment. They are progressively more interested in and concerned about ethical issues. The challenge for fashion education is to deliver these skills and cover an increasing number of topics in an environment where resources are increasingly stretched.

This paper is intended to inspire debate about whether the fashion curriculum has changed sufficiently to keep pace with the industry? Have our teaching and learning strategies developed to deal with the demand for employability skills from both industry and students?

As practitioners in fashion and textiles education how far have we moved in the last ten years? Are we still using talk and chalk or have we moved to an interactive form of lecturing?

Have we considered how we can incorporate work-based learning or problem based learning in our programmes? Have we included an international module? Have we moved to flexible modes of delivery, part-time, online and distance or blended learning? If the answer to most of these is no then it may be time to re-think our programmes and engage in some educational extreme sports.

Work–based learning

Many fashion and textile courses already pride themselves upon close links with industry but others struggle to find support from and industry that is increasingly under pressures of time and resources.

Support from industry has often come in the form of money, competitions or sponsorship through the provision of materials. The

experiences of the author in delivering work-based learning at LCF and the Fashion Retail Academy indicate that the best type of support from the industry comes in the form of time and access to people and resources. Having a class or lecture delivered by and industry leader such as the CEO of Marks and Spencer or the design director of Topshop is beyond monetary value. Enabling students to visit a distribution centre or participate in the planning of a PR event adds realism to the educational experience that is not possible within the confines of the classroom.

In order to be successful work-based learning should be an integral part of the academic process, it should be assessed and valued. One of the successful strategies employed at the Fashion Retail Academy was to ensure that placement providers bought into the process by attending a briefing session. During these sessions the curriculum and assessment process were explained, mentors were briefed on some of the issues that can arise during a placement and effective strategies for dealing with them. The most successful placements were those where students were given a detailed induction, a structured timetable and had a supportive and accessible mentor. Students carried out assessed tasks in the workplace that related directly to the units being studied in the Academy and received feedback on their performance from their mentors. Often the mentors and placement providers would become very interested in the programme and offer to get involved in delivering some of the curriculum or they would be so impressed with the students that they would offer them paid part-time employment or full time employment when they had completed the course.

Angie Lench, Curriculum Manager at the Fashion Retail Academy, says that the success of the Academy's approach "is about putting theory into context and being able to see how it really works in the proper context. Without that it is impossible to judge why we do things in retail and how they all tie together...until you have worked in that environment it is difficult to appreciate how close the interdepartmental relationships are."

In order to engage in work based learning students do not always have to go out to industry, industry can come to them and deliver master classes, engage in live projects or mentoring. Lench says "master classes and lectures by people from the industry make it real and bring a real currency to the course"

Work based learning has been an integral part of the FdA Fashion Design and Technology at the London College of Fashion (LCF). They have used both simulated in-house work based learning and Industry mentors to enable students to gain a realistic view of the industry they are entering. Working with a mentor for their final major projects enabled the students to feel as if they were really engaging in the industry and brought a sense of realism. Polly Kenny, Academic Co-ordinator for the Technology Centre at LCF says "with all the collaborations they met with a key person within the company two or three times and gained direct feedback. That was the added value of the project."

Technological solutions to work-based learning

A third way of engaging students in work based learning and the development of soft skills utilises technological solutions. Simulated work based learning through eLearning simulations is gaining in popularity and are being used by companies to train employees. These immersive simulations enable the learner to gain experience in dealing with complex or difficult situations without risk to the company. Perhaps the best-known examples are the use of simulators for airline pilots who can practice how to deal with situations that they hope will never happen. They are widely used in medical training where it is preferable to make mistakes with a simulation rather than a real patient. These are often complex and expensive simulations but there are many simpler and cheaper examples or work based simulations in areas such as management skills, supply chain management and customer service. One such example is Virtual Leader by SimuLearn, which enables participants to practice and explore management skills in a virtual role-play simulation (http://www.simulearn.net).

Many Universities are investing the use of massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) environments such as Secondlife (www.secondlife.com) to enable students to engage in simulated work based learning. These environments allow students to test out ebusiness concepts, build environments, engage in and stage virtual fashion shows, photo shoots and to create virtual magazines and create and sell virtual collections. They also offer the potential for online interviews with key industry figures.

Using simulations enables students to develop team-working, communication and management skills. The skills that the industry says

they need and they are able to do so whilst engaged in subject based authentic activities. They also encourage collaboration enabling students to develop skills in communicating at a distance and across cultures.

The skills that our students bring with them are also changing Aldrich (2005,p, xxix) states "they are problem solvers. Often they are averse to reading. They want more material in less time. And, hardly worth mentioning anymore, they are very computer-savvy." These characteristics can be utilised by engaging students in online activities and by bringing web2 technologies such as blogs and wikis into the curriculum. These activities are powerful tools for developing the affective skills that employers identify as essential as well as the cognitive and domain specific skills that educators identify as important (Wright et al, 2002).

Developing effective work based learning experiences either within the college, the work place or in virtual space is time consuming and demands a lot of commitment from the employer as well as the education provider.

In order to ensure this integration continues we will need to convince employers across all sectors of the fashion and textile industry that their time is well invested, that they are making an investment in their own future by ensuring that they get appropriately skilled employees who have a realistic view of the industry they are entering.

New ways of delivering the curriculum

There is much that can be done by educators within the core curriculum to help students to develop a wider range of skills. By considering the way in which we are delivering the curriculum and the teaching and learning strategies we are using we can help students to develop problem solving, team working and negotiation skills.

The constraints of budgets and the increase in student numbers may mean that educators are forced to fall back upon transmission based models of education such as lectures, however even these can be interactive. Students can be invited to prepare and give part of a lecture? Interactive voting systems can be used to test their understanding? The Internet can be used during lectures to find the latest thoughts or information on a topic and generate a discussion. Interactive whiteboards can be used to actively engage students in the session.

Problem-based learning

Problem based learning is one approach that can utilise real world problems within the classroom and enable students to find their own solutions, these can then be compared with the approaches taken by industry. All kinds of challenges can be used for problem based learning the key is that they should be relevant to real life. Barrett (2005, p. 16) states "Problems are not always about difficulties that need to be sorted out. Challenges, dilemmas, and triggers are problems. Understanding a puzzling phenomenon or a difficult concept can be a problem. How to find a better, more ethical or cheaper way of doing something is a problem. How to design or create something is a problem." You can find some examples and further explanation of the technique at http://www.studygs.net/pbl.htm.

Virtual learning environments

Most universities now have a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) but these are often used as little more than online notice boards and repositories for handouts and course documents. Most VLEs now have a range of tools to enable collaborative and interactive learning these include wikis (web pages that allow users to edit and author them), discussion forums, pod casts (lessons or programmes that can be downloaded and listened to on an ipod or MP3 player), eportfolios, online survey and assessment tools.

Examples of activities that can be facilitated through a VLE are web quests, virtual seminars and blogs (online journal or diary) they can be used to collaborate with learners at other institutions. The VLE can also be used as a means to extend the lecture with related activities, discussion boards or exhibitions of work. All of these are simple activities that require very little technical knowledge but can engage students in active learning and can be used to support work-based learning activities.

As McMullin (2006) states these technologies can "offer a powerful set of tools for social reflection, collaboration, and construction" skills that employers are looking for, and it can be done within the context of delivering the core curriculum.

Conclusion

This paper has illustrated that meeting the changing needs of the fashion textile industry and the requirements of employers can be done within the context of the fashion textiles curriculum by adjusting the way in which we are delivering the curriculum and utilising the full range of traditional and technological tools available to us as educators. Utilising approaches such as problem-based learning and work-based learning within or outside the classroom or in virtual space can enrich the learning experience for our students and us as educators. Technological tools can assist us in this process and provide a stimulating experience for students and educators.

Engaging employers in the process of education can be challenging but once they are engaged they find it extremely rewarding and they can see the benefits for their own businesses. Using their enthusiasm to enrich the curriculum brings its own rewards.

The fashion industry is changing at a phenomenal rate and we cannot afford to be left behind if we want to ensure that we continue to attract and retain students and ensure that they have the right skills sets when they leave.

To do this we need to be open to new ideas and new ways of thinking about how we deliver the curriculum. We need to engage in a little bit of educational "bungee jumping", leaping into the unknown but ensuring we have the right pedagogical "rope" to stop us from crash landing.

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