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## **Encouraging a Considerate Approach to Design within Textiles and Fashion**

### **Abstract**

*This paper presents the second part of a case study into the use of a live project brief with a fair-trade importer as a means of integrating ethical issues into the curriculum of a BA Fashion Fabrics and Accessories course. Through documenting and analysing student responses to the project the paper demonstrates that such an approach provides a unique, and in many ways successful, means of integrating ethical issues into HE level curriculums and does encourage students to become more considerate as designers.*

### **1. Introduction**

This paper presents the second part of a case study into the use of a live project brief with a fair-trade importer called Just Trade (JT) as a means of integrating ethical issues into the curriculum of the BA Fashion Fabrics and Accessories (FFA) course at De Montfort University. The first part of the study provided evidence to suggest that such collaborations are highly appropriate (Horton and Kane 2008). The aim of the project was to provide

students with an in depth understanding of fair-trade and the product development process within this context through the design and production of a range of accessories. It was hoped that students would be encouraged to develop an approach to design in which the well-being of workers within the design and production process is considered. This paper documents the outworking of the project. From a research perspective it explores the relevance and success of this approach to integrating ethics into fashion and textile courses.

Within the paper the connection between fair-trade and well being will be clarified, the methodology used will be outlined and the results discussed under three key headings: live projects in art and design; empathy and narrative; and communication. Interim student work will be presented and conclusions drawn.

## **2. Background: Fair-Trade and Well Being**

Fair-trade is one of a number of movements that have emerged over recent years in response to the negative affects of globalisation (Raynolds et al. 2007, p. 4). Well-being is central to the fair-trade philosophy. One of the movements core objectives is 'to improve the livelihood and well-being of producers by improving market access, strengthening producer organizations, paying a better price, and providing continuity in the trading relationship' (Raynolds et al. 2007, p.5).

Rutt Veenhoven, explains that there are many words used to indicate how well we are doing including; 'quality of life', 'well-being', 'health', 'happiness' and 'welfare' (2000. p.1). Such terms, he warns, can be problematic in that they sometimes 'do not have an unequivocal meaning' and are sometimes used as an umbrella for all that is good, but on other occasions they denote specific merit' (ibid). Although dubious about the holistic assumption of such terms, he notes that the term 'well-being' has been used to denote quality of life as a whole relating to life aspects such as dwelling conditions or employment chances. In relation to fair-trade, the term can be connected to employment opportunities and stability (Raynolds et al. , 2007, p. 5).

### **3. Methodology**

The methodological approach taken within the project has been consistent with the qualitative approach used within the first part of the case study. The methods used to document and evaluate the project to draw research conclusions have included; reviewing relevant theory; documentation of student work and teaching materials, semi-structured interviews, and qualitative analysis.

#### **3.1 Methods**

Student work including journals, sketchbooks and prototypes was reviewed and photographed throughout the project. Teaching materials including project briefs, briefing notes and Just Trade tutorial notes were obtained and

reviewed as an integral part of the analysis process. Semi-structured interviews were conducted part way through the project with the seven students undertaking the project. A number of themes and questions, informed by the reviewed literature, were developed in order to explore the students' response to the project and to evaluate its success. The interviews were transposed and analysed by grouping comments around the developed themes. The approach to analysis was rooted in qualitative methodology and has evolved around a concurrent process of data reduction, data display and data analysis (Miles and Hubberman, 1994). The students involved consented to the anonymous use of their comments and imagery. It was felt that a reassurance of anonymity would enable the students to talk more openly.

#### **4. Live Projects in Art and Design**

As outlined, our approach to encouraging a considerate approach to design on the FFA course was to integrate a live project with a local fair-trade importer into a Level 2 module. Research conducted by Viljoen and Hoskyns proposes that the integration of 'live' projects into art and design curriculums at HE level enables students to acquire 'real world' skills and 'may provide a balance between academic rigour and learning through work' (2007, p. 4). Their work also suggests that live projects provide an opportunity to establish direct contact with political and social situations (ibid p. 15). Through using a live project as a method of introducing ethical issues into the FFA curriculum

we hoped that the students would encounter the 'real world', including current negative social situations connected to the fashion industry.

Workshops conducted by Viljoen and Hoskyns that gained student perspectives on live projects suggests that students value the 'people based nature' of such projects and agree that live projects prepare them for life outside university (2007, p.12). Further, to this, and perhaps most important to our use of a live project, the workshops suggested that 'live projects can change the way students practice their discipline and how they plan to pursue their future work' (ibid). This is essential when taking into account the desire to impact students' consideration of ethical issues beyond their university course and moving into industry.

#### **4.1 Project Development**

The development of the project was facilitated by good working relationships between FFA and JT staff. The project was established through research and discussion with JT which began a year in advance of the actual project. A collaborative approach was central to the development of the project brief and delivery. This is consistent with Sara's (2004 in Viljoen and Hoskyns, 2007, p.5) view of live projects, which suggests that 'the remit of the (live) project is typically worked out in collaboration with the external collaborators, rather than being imposed by the design studio tutor. As a result, the process is more dialogic and inclusive than traditional studio projects. The external focus introduces a contingency to the projects, which makes live project work stand

apart from the necessarily more abstract projects of the traditional design studio'. Table 1 shows the key learning and teaching activities which were used within the delivery of the project and the involvement of FFA and JT staff. In terms of course learning outcomes, prior experience of live project briefs has shown that if the project brief is set through collaboration and expectations are discussed prior to delivery, the outputs can be mapped across to the learning outcomes effectively, as shown in Table 2.

<b>Learning and Teaching Activity</b>	<b>FFA and JT Staff Involvement</b>
<i>Introductory Lecture to deliver brief.</i>	Laura Frith director of Just Trade FFA Module Leader
<i>Taught workshops to deliver new information and then students re-produce these activities to ensure understanding and learning has taken place.</i>	FFA Staff, relating to accessory design Louise Davis of Just Trade – project specific weave techniques and costing
<i>Tutorials to facilitate the personal development of all areas throughout the project brief.</i>	FFA Staff
<i>Seminars to assist the practice of presenting project work confidently in a verbal and visual manner to professional audience.</i>	FFA Staff
<i>A professional and personal presentation will be delivered by students to Just Trade.</i>	FFA Staff Laura Frith and Louise Davis (JT)
<i>Peer tutoring and self assessment will be an important part of identifying and understanding successful working methods and outcomes.</i>	Facilitated by FFA Staff
<i>Self-directed learning exercises and activities in addition to taught and tutor supported activities.</i>	Facilitated by FFA Staff
<i>Experiential learning to increase the ability to problem solve.</i>	Facilitated by FFA Staff
<i>Reflective thinking through production of a concise written report on their working methods and module outcomes at the conclusion of the module.</i>	Facilitated by FFA staff through the introduction of Project Journaling

Table 1 Learning and teaching activities and involvement of FFA and JT staff.

<b>Course/Module Learning Outcomes</b>	<b>Live Project Requirements to meet Course/Module Learning Outcomes</b>
<i>1. Demonstrate the ability to identify and research design concepts for fashion accessories and successfully interpret them into new, personal design ideas.</i>	<i>Sketchbook, visual research, concept and theme underpinning project.</i>
<i>2. Demonstrate the ability to identify market levels and undertake the design development process for this market. Enhancement of idea generation through appropriate 2D-design development and the exploration of 3D ideas into possible creative design applications.</i>	<i>Design development and presentation board styling, toiles and maquette Photo-journaling of process and problem solving. Designing through making. Understanding of fair trade and Just Trade</i>
<i>3. To demonstrate developed written and illustrative techniques.</i>	<i>Journaling and visualisations. Making notes for production.</i>
<i>4. To develop visual / verbal and written communication skills for presentation purposes.</i>	<i>Critical evaluation and verbal and visual presentation to Just Trade design team.</i>
<i>5. To produce suitable prototypes.</i>	<i>Range of accessories.</i>

Table 2 Module learning outcomes mapped against project requirements.

## **4.2 Project Findings**

Feedback gained through the interview process suggested that students had responded to the project in a different way to their 'usual' project briefs. It provided contact with a very specific 'social situation' and feedback suggested that the students felt the project had provided preparation for the 'real world'.

An important element of this was the students' recognition that they were

dealing with the 'whole (product) process'. Alongside this a number of students' projections of their future approach to practice was impacted in terms of ethical practice.

The 'live' nature of the project brief resulted in a markedly different student approach. There was a greater sense of excitement about the project which seemed to be motivated by the potential to have designs commercially produced. One student explained how her understanding of the project as a professional piece of work had impacted on her actual working practices;

*"I have tried to think of it as a job...it's a bit daunting but I am enjoying doing it...I think it has made me a bit more organised and I have noticed that I am working a lot quicker, but I'm not rushing it but it's got a deadline...it's...sort of a step up to what it is actually going to be like when I finish uni".*

Key to the feedback given by a number of students was their enjoyment of working with the 'whole' product process from ideas development to considering materials sourcing and production techniques and capabilities, to commercial production and product importation;

*"I like working with the fair-trade project because it really makes you think about what you are using and how the cost is affected by the materials and who's producing it. So you have to think of the thing as a whole which I don't*



*know, if I hadn't have had a fair-trade project I might not have thought about all that stuff..."*

As suggested by this student, the 'micro' nature of JT and the fair-trade approach to design and manufacture enabled the students to get a snapshot of the whole product design and development process. We feel that this is unique to working with this type of company and approach to trade and provides students with invaluable insights into a broad range of ethical issues.

As noted, live projects can change the way students practice their discipline in the future. Impacting on the students approach to accessory design, in particular their consideration of ethical issues, was the central concern in this project. When asked did they think that the project would affect the way they would approach future projects, a number of the students implied that it would;

*"...I'm always going to be thinking about it (fair-trade) now"*

*"...I think my understanding has changed in a positive way because now I will be thinking about what I am using and wanting to use more things for fair-trade, definitely".*

## **5. Empathy and Narrative**

Sue Thomas has explored the idea that empathy is a key driver in engaging designers in ethical design and questions whether or not it can be acquired (2007). In exploring the meaning of empathy she cites Thompsons suggestion that empathy involves "...identifying oneself mentally with (and so fully comprehending) a person or object of contemplation" (Thompson, 1995 in Thomas, 2007). Thomas identifies 'social imagination' - the ability to value the life and life experience of others, in other words putting yourself in the place of others - as key to developing empathy (2007). She suggests that potential drivers for empathy may include 'a keen appreciation of the inequality, and possibly injustice, in provision of products and services to community members or environments' (ibid). Thomas' discussion centres on empathy relating to the designer/consumer relationship. The work presented in this paper suggests that it is equally relevant to the designer/producer relationship, particularly within the context of fair-trade.

In terms of generating empathy within the design process, Thomas quotes Fulton Suri to identify ways in which practicing designers can develop a greater sense of empathy (Thomas, 2007). These methods include; gathering information, experiencing directly, prototyping experience, role playing, improvising and body-storming, story telling and scenario building. Within the live project discussed here, a number of these methods naturally became part of the teaching process as a result of the fair-trade context and approach to design and production taken by JT. We found that the idea of narrative was of particular significance.

Chapman suggests that narrative relates to our well-being, quoting the Schumacher Society's claim that quality of life 'is dependant on the number of stories we know about the items that we use in our everyday life' (2005, p120). The products produced by Just Trade have a natural and genuine narrative that is rooted in and established through the personal relationships on which the product development and trade approach are based. As well as narrative being embodied in the products themselves, the work presented here supports the idea that personal storytelling inspires students to engage in ethical issues.

### **5.1 Project Development**

Integrating the notion of narrative into the project teaching happened naturally through the initial briefing sessions with JT. Laura Frith, the founder and designer at Just –trade, delivered the brief. Laura's approach to the business has been to develop highly personal long term relationships with the women who produce the products. It is often the relationships that prompt the product development, for example a product might be developed around the skills and interests of a specific person. The depth and warmth of these personal relationships with individuals and the wider community of the township in which she has worked was communicated to the students through a series of stories, illustrated with photographs, about the lives of individuals and their interaction with Laura.

## **5.2 Project Findings**

The impact of these stories and their link with the development of empathy within the students was clear on talking to them. The stories also impacted on the ways in which the students chose to develop their design both in terms of process and materials. Talking to students suggested that they had varying levels of understanding of ethical issues prior to the project. However they all agreed that ethical considerations were important. Empathy levels are complex to measure and analyse and whilst this is beyond the scope of this project, key phrases within the interviews which could be seen as indicators of empathy have been identified. Such phrases suggested that the students showed different levels of empathy toward fair-trade prior to the project but also that these empathy levels were affected through the project. This related to their understanding of Peruvian culture and individual workers' lives.

When the students were asked what they 'took' from the project briefing, the stories that Laura told were repeatedly referred to. The stories that were memorable to the students ranged from those about the workers' life styles, humorous stories and those relating to materials and process. The students commented on stories relating to both positive and negative aspects of the workers' lives. For example issues that relate to health and hours of work but also to the positive sense of community and enjoyment that they perceived about those working with the JT projects. For example one student explained;

*“...she told us that she got a group of ladies in just from the community and she got together and taught them things... and I just think it’s lovely to have that community”.*

Such comments were linked to what could be perceived as empathetic responses including expressions of care and concern. These included comments which suggested that the student had imagined themselves in the place of the people in the stories or had made a comparison with their own lives demonstrating their use of social imagination. For example;

*“...when she told me about the women...one woman had two jobs and the only time she could sleep was on the bus between the jobs...it’s made me think how lucky I am”.*

Humorous, personal and idiosyncratic aspects of individual workers’ personalities and others in the community that were perceived by the students seemed to aid a sense of connection between the students and the workers. This sense of connection was demonstrated through the students’ comments on their approach to the project. For example the students connected the availability of shoes laces for use in their project to ‘the lace man’ and the ability to use wood to the presence of a ‘wood man’ and carpenter within the community;

*“...she said there was a lace man and he just sells shoe laces and she showed us pictures and he just had them around his neck and over his arms...so I thought I could use laces instead of ribbon (in my work)”.*

This sense of connection was also demonstrated through the students' desire to be connected to the workers throughout the design process through putting up photographs of Mama Ursula in their studio space, as shown in Figure 1, and the desire to include others in the community in the production of their products.



**Figure 1** Mama Ursula in the FFA studio, the Lace man and Mama Ursula's pets.

## **6. Communication**

A key part of the project was that JT would choose a student design to be developed for commercial production in Peru by Mama Ursula and other relevant workers. This meant that students were limited to materials that could be sourced locally in Peru and had to bear in mind the current skills and

techniques used by Mama Ursula. They also had to develop an understanding of how specific process and techniques would be communicated.

Reviewing this aspect of the project highlighted the value of 'craft knowledge' within this context. As discussed in the first part of the case study, craft knowledge can be described as 'practical knowledge or know how' and can enable the maker to predict how an object will respond to manipulation even in situations outside the immediate working context (Yair 2001, p.62-61).

In terms of communicating the making process, the students had to consider the value of various forms of communicating product information within a cross cultural context. The processes used by the Peruvian makers are in essence low- tech, hand based techniques. The way in which they work is rooted in what we would call 'craft', in which the development of a product happens through reproduction - product to product. The making information is embedded within the product itself rather than in drawings. However, a previous study relating to cross cultural communication suggests that drawings are also an important part of the communication of practical processes. For example a research project into the improvement of sanitation in the developing world suggested that black and white line drawings are of particular importance (Shaw, 2005, p.11). They are described as an approachable and accessible means of communicating both technical and contextual information. In comparison to photography they are not usually country or culturally specific and they can withstand multi generational

copying (ibid). This enables the information contained to be retained and passed on within the community (ibid).

### **6.1 Project development**

To enable the students to develop producible concepts, they were given detailed information about the workers' methods of making. This included information relating to their limited use of measurements and numbers within diagrams and their preference for working from an actual product. This information was explored in relation to the students' own ideas through tutorials with JT part way through the project. The students were also asked to record the techniques they had used through drawing and photography as a further means of communicating ideas to workers.

### **6.2 Project Findings**

When talking with the students, it became clear that their 'craft knowledge' had aided their development of new techniques appropriate for the Peruvian workers. It was evident that the students preferred photography as a means of recording techniques but also that they took a 'craft approach' to this aspect of the project. Further to this, the notion of a particular individual



having to learn to make their project increased their sense of empathy and connection with the workers.

Evidencing the use of craft knowledge, one student used the information about Mama Ursula's weave techniques to develop new processes that she was confident Mama Ursula would be able to reproduce due to her understanding of weave. On discussing this, the student describes that;

*"I have started to develop a different (technique)...its not really weaving but generally threading and looping threads together, it's a similar technique but it's not quite weave....it's a pretty simple technique".*

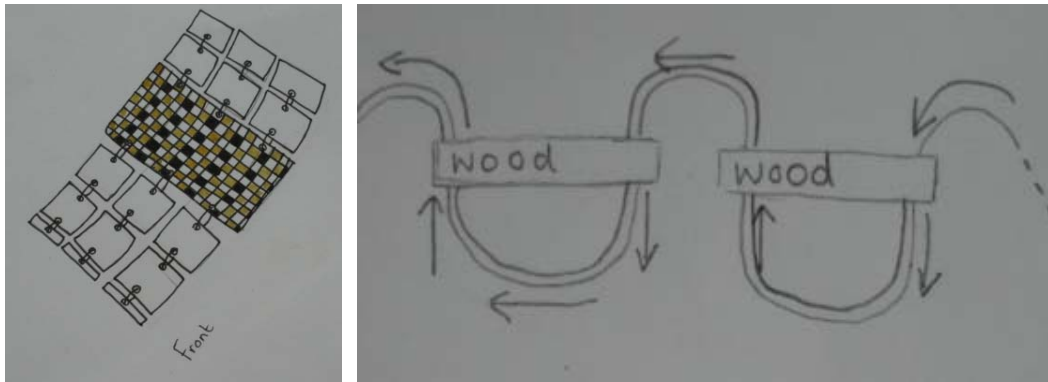
Although the students tended towards photography to record their ideas, they were encouraged produce diagrammatic representations of their processes as shown in Figure 2. They also took on board the need to communicate product details through prototypes rather than providing numeric measurements. One student explained a way she could communicate belt sizes;

*"For the measurements I'm thinking I might give her, if they could take it out, an old belt of mine, she might understand that better because I am thinking of tying it so that it can be any size".*

Through engaging with the idea that their processes and techniques would need to be communicated to Peruvian workers the students displayed further

evidence of their use of social imagination and a sense of connection with the workers;

*“As I am dyslexic, note form isn’t good enough for me, I have to have pictures...I was thinking how would I feel if it was given to me?... I have to see people do stuff, so (I am thinking of) getting someone to actually do the hand movements and take pictures of it”.*



**Figure 2** Drawn recordings of process (Stephanie McDonald Wlaker)

## **7. Project Outcomes**

Table 3 and Figure 3 show the students’ work part way through the project and outlines the product concept; materials and processes used; and interim feedback from JT on the viability of the concept for production. At the time of writing this paper the final selection of a product to take forward for production by JT had not taken place. However, this is scheduled to happen at the end of 2008 with the product design being taken over to Peru for development in January 2009. Images and further information on the success of the product development will be included in the conference presentation.



**Figure 3** Interim product development (Katie Wakefield, Stephanie McDonald Walker, Lucy Foster)

<b>Product Concept</b>	Peg bag with scrap fabric lining and bird pin	Linked wood jewellery	Threaded yarn disc bag
<b>Process</b>	Main fabric woven in plain weave Wooden or wire bird shape wrapped in thread and stitched to bag, shoe lace tie up	Wooden components engraved and cut into uniform squares which are linked with metal wire	Drilled wooden discs, 'threaded' and connected together and lined with scrap fabrics, seed pod handle
<b>Materials</b>	Organic cotton yarn Wood/wire Scrap fabric Shoe laces	Wood Metal wire	Wooden discs Organic cotton yarn Scrap fabric Seed pod 'beads'
<b>JT Interim feedback on Viability</b>	No foreseen problems with material sourcing or production	No foreseen problems with production but suggest that wood is linked using salvaged wire from old cables	No foreseen problems with material sourcing or production

**Table 3** Interim product development and feedback

## **8. Conclusions**

This paper has demonstrated that the use of a live project brief in collaboration with a fair-trade importer provides a unique, and in many ways successful, means of integrating ethical issues into a fashion and textile HE level curriculum to encourage students to become considerate designers. It has analysed student responses to such a project and in doing so has explored three significant areas in relation to working within this context. The use of live project briefs to incorporate ethics into teaching has been evidenced as a viable means of engaging students in real life scenarios in which they have to connect personally with another's social situation and of providing an experience that has potential to impact upon their future design practice. The importance of empathy has been highlighted and in particular its relevance and centrality to fair-trade. Whilst it has not been studied here scientifically, the findings do show that personal narratives supported with images has been a significant means of drawing out empathy in relation to the designer(student)/producer relationship. Alongside this, the project has brought attention to the need for designers to understand how design ideas are communicated cross culturally and has underlined the significance of craft knowledge and drawing within the fair-trade production context.

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