SEEING THINGS: OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENT-FOCUSSED CURRICULUM AMIDST PANDEMIC CHALLENGES

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Abstract

The 25th of March, 2020, saw the beginning of one of the most unsettling periods of recent history in Aotearoa; 50 new Covid-19 cases were announced that day, a state of emergency was declared and the first of a series of lockdowns began at midnight. As a nation trying to make sense of this unique situation and the impacts on our personal lives, many were also tasked with adjusting to disrupted work environments. This paper reflects on the challenges faced in practice-based tertiary education, and looks specifically at the design of a studio project for second-year fashion students at Auckland University of Technology (AUT) School of Art and Design.

The *Seeing Things* project was not planned prior to lockdown; it was a reaction to circumstances. Lecturers recognised the need to develop curriculum that embraced change while stimulating curiosity and creativity. Consideration was given to possible learning outcomes as balanced against available technology, but most importantly, an empathic design approach (Steen, 2011) was employed. In this context, it required placing students' circumstances, including access to or lack of equipment, possible financial constraints, and their emotional state and level of motivation, at the centre of the curriculum design.

Seeing Things was launched as a series of weekly video prompts for targeted research, actively encouraging students to see, sense and make sense of things around them from a new perspective, using their "bubble" locations and resources as stimuli for a variety of creative responses. Online meetings with small groups of students were held in successive weeks. These were used to review the experimental work created in response to each prompt, and to discuss how these could be further developed for use in fashion contexts.

The project saw both students and lecturers employing processes of design and reflection. For staff, using a reflective practitioner approach (Visser, 2010) enabled the ongoing development of the project throughout its first iteration in 2020. Key to this was the sharing of experiences and knowledge that occurred during the weekly sessions; this followed the Māori principle of ako, a reciprocal approach that sees the teacher as learner, and the learner as teacher, and affirms group learning (altLAB, 2022).

The student outcomes were rich and diverse, and although no quantifiable research has been undertaken to determine the success of the project, positive feedback from both students and faculty have led to its integration within the course in 2021 and 2022, and in the ongoing curriculum development for the AUT Bachelor of Fashion Design programme.

Introduction

Seeing Things was a project developed in 2020 for second-year undergraduate fashion students following the sudden public-health measures imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the strict lockdown meant that fashion students would have to conduct their studio practice at home, with just one scheduled group session with their designated studio lecturer per week. Lecturers used empathic design to develop a project that recognised limitations to the type of work students would be able to produce. Two key considerations were that lecturers and technicians would be unable to provide physical demonstrations to support the making process, and that studio-related equity issues between individual students needed to be recognised. The result was a project based solely on the concept development phase of the fashion design process.

The pandemic environment heightened the need for lecturers to respond holistically to student needs—this was done through embedding "ako" and reflective practice techniques into the learning and teaching space. Significant consideration was given to the student experience, with lecturers anticipating and responding to pandemic stressors as well as individual student concerns. Over the course of the project, subsequent global events also shaped assignment content. Although cognisant that students were already dealing with uncertain times, lecturers felt that interrogating new events was a responsible reaction, and was done with goals of cultivating informed, aspirational and globally-aware future citizens. This paper provides a narrative description of how the course unfolded in 2020, and changes made for subsequent delivery in 2021 and 2022.

The research undertaken for this paper was reflective in nature with no formal quantifiable research undertaken. Understandings have been drawn from verbal student feedback throughout the course, and lecturers were also able to review written reflections of the project in 50 student blogs. Feedback has continued to be highly positive throughout the three iterations of the project, leading to the integration of aspects of the project within the new AUT Bachelor of Fashion Design curriculum, currently under development.

Taking the Fashion Studio Online

The lockdown imposed on 25 March, 2020 saw classes at Auckland University of Technology (AUT) suspended for five weeks while the faculty devised new remote teaching strategies. A primary consideration was to ensure that digital equity was achieved for all students. This involved the supply of devices to those students needing them, but it also required consideration

of internet connectivity and students' ability to adapt to using new online platforms. The US Department of Education similarly describes this as the three pillars of digital equity—accessibility, affordability and adoption (US Department of Education, 2022). An overarching decision was made to implement a hybrid model comprising both synchronous and asynchronous delivery, and lecturers were tasked with developing content to fit the model.

At AUT, undergraduate Fashion Design Studio courses are largely practice-based, with research and subsequent designs brought to fruition through in-studio making practices including draping, flat-pattern work, garment construction and fittings. All aspects of the making process are supported in-person by design lecturers and technical staff under a constructivism pedagogy, whereby knowledge and understanding is constructed through experiential learning and social interaction (Narayan *et al.*, 2013; Sawyer, 2017). Thus, lockdown presented fashion design students with additional equity issues—some had the means to make garments at home, having space, sewing machines, tailor's forms, pattern-making equipment and blocks, industrial shears and fabric; while others lived in more crowded accommodation or did not have making equipment or materials available at the sudden onset of lockdown. While some lecturers in the department decided to persevere with making (albeit with markedly altered expectations), as discussed in this paper, others determined that the current limitations provided a fresh opportunity to explore contemporary fashion design practices in more depth.

Fashion Design Practices and Opportunities for New Models

In higher education, fashion design studies often require students to develop concepts that underpin 2-D and 3-D design explorations (Cassidy, 2008; Garner and McDonagh-Philp, 2002; Shreeve, Bailey and Drew, 2004). This forms part of the research and critical analysis process required at degree level study. At AUT, the fashion design process often begins with students responding to a contextual positioning framework, exploring linkages with contemporary design in other disciplines (for example, architecture, product design, sculpture, painting); historical contexts (for example, a specific place and time, cultural movements, sub-cultures, occupations, uniforms and so on); visual qualities such as silhouette, colour, textile choice, print; and fashion contexts including designer alignment, retail alignment and market sector. Research leads to certain areas of the framework becoming more dominant depending on both the specificities of the assignment brief and the students' individual leanings. The research is conveyed through a visual story board or mood board, which serves to convey the direction of the design work to follow. This is important both as a communication tool (between student and lecturer) and also to keep the student work on track, being used to inform decisions throughout the design development and prototyping phases. While the framework served to support some in-depth research and innovative design concepts from students, it was also identified that the formula often led students to using historical contexts, or responding to a specific designer collection, as their fall-back position.

Fashion design has a rich, albeit dubious, history of appropriation as evidenced by such practices as the outright copying of fashion product (Hilton, Choi and Chen, 2004; Raustiala

and Sprigman, 2006), the appropriation of cultural emblems (Lee, 2019; Shand, 2002), and the deriving of concept themes from other fashion producers (Weller, 2006). In New Zealand, much of this stems from a time when our geographic isolation had many consumers keen to follow the fashion trends of Europe and North America. Initially, this saw fashion houses such as *El Jay* reproducing foreign designs under license (Jenkins, 2010, p. 86), and in later years, top firms sending design teams overseas on regular inspiration-gathering expeditions involving the purchasing of sample garments to inform the next season's designs.

[1] In addition, fashion forecasters have built an entire industry on predicting or defining future fashion trends, leading many designers in predetermined directions with the latest colour-ways created for the textile industry and accompanying design trends provided to garment manufacturers (Gaimster, 2012; Garcia, 2021). Concern about the prevalence of this culture in the existing industry, and recognition of the aforementioned student fall-back positions, presented an opportunity for lecturers to consider ways in which students could explore their own individual experiences, histories and values to inform their fashion design concepts. Lockdown provided optimal conditions for this exploration to occur, because of the longer time allowable for design concept development, and enforced isolation providing opportunity for deeper individual exploration.

In 2017, British menswear designer Paul Smith featured in a short video in which he credits a large part of his success to creating unique products and textiles inspired by his surroundings. The video sees Smith narrating his observations as he walks through a London Street, observing the textures of cobblestones and painted doors, and colours of the buildings as contrasting against grey skies (The Gentleman's Journal, 2017, 00:01:28). This was shared with second year AUT Bachelor of Fashion Design students as the overarching theme for their first lockdown project in 2020. *Seeing Things* was launched as a series of weekly video prompts for targeted research, actively encouraging students to see, sense and make sense of things around them from a new perspective, using their "bubble"[2] locations and resources as stimuli for a variety of creative responses. In the first iteration of the project design, students were asked to see their bubble as *Informative*, *Inspiring*, *Nostalgic* and *Sensory*.

Two Observation-based Design Prompts: "Informative" and "Inspiring"

The first two prompts, *Informative* and *Inspiring,* asked students to hone their observational skills to look intently at a chosen garment from within their bubble, and to undertake deep,

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[1] The author has had career experience in the New Zealand fashion industry spanning several decades, and has witnessed this practice first-hand.

[2] The New Zealand Government used the term "bubble" to describe physical locations and in-person social interactions permissible under lockdown regulations. At Level 4, a person's bubble was strictly limited to those people who shared their dwelling from the onset of lockdown. People were locked into these living arrangements and excursions beyond the physical dwelling were strictly limited. These limitations were slowly eased during successive lockdown phases.

reflective observations of their surroundings. While fashion students are likely to be visually inclined, Coppi, Oertel and Cattaneo (2021) identify that significant training is required to develop the required visual competencies to work in the profession, in particular, visual expertise in relation to garment details, defects and fit. Caruso *et al.* describe this as "professional vision" (2017, p. 47) involving an interplay of cognitive and perceptual skills (2017, p. 50). Students undertaking the first *Informative* prompt were guided to closely inspect, sketch and create a specification sheet for their chosen garment. This was not substantially different to tasks set in previous years, however the second *Inspiring* prompt was a significant departure, being intrinsically linked to pandemic conditions, requiring students to deeply embrace and reflect on their bubble surroundings. Students first viewed a video recording in which the lecturer shared her own explorations for the initial tasks for that week, beginning with observing then photographing her surroundings, analysing the images and then grouping them into themes such as temporality and decay, light and shade, man-made versus natural textures, and natural hues versus artificial colours and artefacts.

The exercise required students to undertake highly focussed observations. Williams discusses observation as involving "being physically, mentally, emotionally, and sensorily present; being led by curiosity; and capturing what one sees, smells, touches, hears and tastes via photography, notebooks, video, and sketching" (2018, p. 81). Students were asked to observe and photograph intently, looking for interesting interplays of light, colour, form, texture and detail, and identifying attributes such as contrast, repetition, and thematic correlation. In response to their work, students then undertook a series of 2D and 3D creative experimentations. Cognisant that some students may not have access to standard art materials, lecturers encouraged innovative experimentation, for example, replacing dip pens and ink with sticks and black coffee; utilising felt-tip pens to create watercolours; creating assemblage boxes from bubble objects; and natural dyeing using available food and plant material. The final stage for this prompt was to find fashion references that shared some of the characteristics of their photography and creative responses. The completion of first two prompts provided a timely opportunity for lecturers to reflect on student engagement and experience of the project.

Consideration of the Student Experience: Empathic Design and Reflective Practice

Except in rare cases where students were in a shared bubble (for example, as housemates in rental accommodation) the work was conducted individually, but was shared during subsequent online meetings in groups of four to six students with their designated lecturer. Prior to the declaration of a state of national emergency, the student cohort involved in the project had been working on a group assignment, and had self-selected their group members (based mostly on previous studio groupings or existing friendships). The teaching team elected to retain existing groups for the online meetings as a deliberate measure to ensure some degree of continuity and familiarity given the overwhelming changes already being faced through enforced pandemic measures. Within the first two weeks of the *Seeing Things* project, it became evident that students were responding and achieving at markedly different levels. In some instances, this could be attributed to a lack of understanding of that week's requirements, and this highlighted

the role that peer to peer, constructivist learning plays in developmental work for studio projects. The sharing of outcomes amongst friend groups appeared to provide a safe environment for students to display their progress and to articulate any challenges they were facing.

By employing reflective practitioner and empathic design approaches, lecturers were able to both respond to revelations in real time, and to adjust upcoming tasks to best meet student needs. Leonard and Rayport (cited in Steen 2011, pp. 52-53) discuss designers utilising empathic design techniques, including observation, reflection and analysis, to capture the latent needs of users and to address these through brainstorming and prototyping. The four prompts for the *Seeing Things* project had been decided at the outset, and allocated so that each staff member would each develop online video content and outcome guidelines for two prompts. Weekly content was developed progressively throughout the duration of the project with lecturers meeting online to adjust and finalise the proposed content, taking into consideration needs that were becoming apparent through weekly interactions with students. Students who were less engaged in the creative experimentation phase of the *Inspiring* prompt were reminded that the brief did not require specific outcomes, rather it asked them to see their bubble as being rich in undiscovered and/or underutilised sources of inspiration, and to simply try to respond creatively. Some students found the fine-art aspect and broad scope of the task intimidating— these students were gently reminded that while the brief encouraged creative experimentation, it also allowed for the embracing of "epic fails," which Tawfik, Rong and Choi (2015) discuss as also providing opportunities for learning.

Other students were indicating more personal struggles, such as anxiety, depression and feeling isolated from family members in other cities. This became particularly apparent midway through the project, by which time New Zealanders were approaching their tenth week of COVID-19 public health measures, having only recently emerged from seven weeks of living within restricted household bubbles.[3] This amplified the pastoral care aspect of the teaching staff's role. Philosopher and educator, Schön (cited in Visser, 2010), describes that reflective practice is something that good educators often display as a matter of course, with many competent practitioners carrying unstated tacit knowledge. Lecturers considered the student revelations as reflected against their own experiences of lockdown, of their own early adulthood including their own higher education experience, and of having parented young adults. Without taking on a parent or counsellor role, lecturers sought to cushion affected students through the provision of caring learning space. Seary and Willans describes this as one in which the learner feels safe and comfortable on an holistic level, stating that they "must feel cared for, that they matter" (2020, p. 15). Similarly, Schön discusses that practitioners "often reveal a capacity for reflection on their intuitive knowing in the midst of action and

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[3] Level 4 lockdown ran for four and a half weeks, followed by a further two and a half weeks of Level 3 lockdown. Both were highly restricted, requiring all but essential workplace and educational activities to be conducted at home. https://covid19.govt.nz/about-our-covid-19-response/history-of-the-covid-19-alert-system/

sometimes use this capacity to cope with the unique, uncertain, and conflicted situations of practice (Schon, 1983; cited in Visser, 2010, p. 23).

Ako and an Emotional Response to Prompt Three: "Nostalgic"

A good example of this type of reflective practice occurred during the *Nostalgic* prompt. After revisiting childhood photographs and memories, a student revealed that her bi-racial ethnicity made her feel disconnected from both sides of her racial heritage, or rather, that she felt that she had never been fully accepted by her peers on either side. This had elicited a sense of sadness, which was shared during a small-group online discussion. Her peers and lecturer offered supportive feedback, honouring her emotional vulnerability and decision to share. In her writing, the student elaborated, saying that family photographs tend to capture only happy moments, distorting the way we remember the past. She stated a desire to acknowledge the overwhelming sense of grief that punctuated her happy memories, and that she wanted to explore this to make her creative response to the *Nostalgic* prompt more authentic. Her lecturer supported this cathartic approach, and the result was a highly effective abstract artwork reflecting her conflicted feelings.

In the *Nostalgic* video prompt, the lecturer had focussed entirely on the positive connotations of nostalgia, including notions of warm childhood memories and the sentimental yearnings for bygone eras. While most researchers support this positive viewpoint (Vess *et al.*, 2012; Zhou *et al.*, 2021), others also consider the historical connotations of nostalgia as a melancholic and maladaptive psychological disorder (Batcho, 2013; Stephan *et al.*, 2014; Yang *et al.*, 2022). Hoffer (cited in Batcho, 2013, p. 166) refers to the etymological origins of the term, from the Greek *Nostos* meaning a return or homecoming, and *Algos* signifying pain or suffering. Returning to present day interpretations, Wildschut *et al.* (cited in Sedikides *et al.*, 2008, p. 305) discuss a study of British and American undergraduates that identified a range of emotional responses to both ordinary and nostalgic memories. Although both categories typically elicited a positive response, drawing on nostalgic memories also saw some respondents expressing a simultaneous combination of both happiness and sadness. The grief expressed by the student in our project gave her lecturer pause to reflect on the feel-good assumptions made by the prompt, and recognise that if the prompt was to be used again in the future, it would have to be done so with consideration and care.

This situation highlighted the way in which the principle of "ako" underpinned tutor-student interactions throughout the project. Ako is a Māori concept that can be used to describe the pedagogical approach[4] that sees the learning and teaching relationship as reciprocal and non-hierarchical, honouring the knowledge, culture and experience of both the student and teacher (altLAB, 2022; McDonald, 2011). Marshall (2014) explains that in Māori culture, knowledge and experience are held in high regard, so the teacher and student are not necessarily seen as equivalent, but that the exchange of knowledge under ako respects each other's strengths and

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[4] Mead (cited in Marshall 2014) distinguishes between the notion of ako as used in contemporary educational settings and the exchange of sacred knowledge in pre-colonial Māori contexts.

needs. In this way it departs from the Eurocentric expert or transmission model of teaching (Bishop, Berryman, & Richardson, 2002, p. 56; McDonald, 2011). Ako also sees the participants in a holistic light—not simply as their role in the learning environment, but as a whole person situated within a whanau (family), culture and unique value system (altLAB, 2022; Ferguson, 2010).

An holistic response required staff to simultaneously provide care for students' vulnerability while also directly addressing the real-world topics of concern. Students reported various concerns relating to the pandemic including anxieties around online learning, separation, succumbing to illness, and increasing anti-Asian discrimination. In an article discussing higher education in the context of external crises, Carriger (2020) argues that real life is intrinsically unpredictable and often fraught. She posits that without normalising duress, we can use these situations to develop courses that are invested in external realities, with goals of cultivating students who are not only ready for contemporary society but are also invested in changing it for the better.

Responding to Global Events with Prompt Four: 'Political'

The fourth prompt, inviting students to explore *Sensory* inspiration from their bubble was scheduled to be delivered to students on 3 June, 2020. At this stage New Zealand was in the de-escalated COVID-19 Alert Level 2, signified by a low risk of community transmission, but still retaining limitations on social gatherings (New Zealand Government, 2023). Similar restrictions were in place in other nations, but the killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer on 25 May rapidly overshadowed pandemic concerns (Allam et al., 2021). A week after Floyd's death, an unprecedented level of anti-racism protests were seen around the world, including in several New Zealand cities (Allam et al., 2021; Barrie, 2020). New Zealanders who attended the rallies were acting in breach of mandated COVID social-distancing measures (McCullough, 2020; Strang, 2020), however, many considered the weight of this breach (and implications for the national COVID response) against an overwhelming frustration at decades of racial inequity, and grievous impacts on communities of colour (Kampmark, 2020; McCullough, 2020). The author was responsible for developing the final prompt for the *Seeing Things* project, which would have seen students exploring sensory aspects of their bubble, however, in reflecting on the highly publicised and emotionally charged nature of the protests, the decision was made to invite students to explore the ways in which their world was *Political.*

The close proximity of the Auckland march to university student accommodation meant it was likely that some students would have witnessed, if not participated, in the event. The lecturer also reflected that her own undergraduate years had seen involvement in the 1981 Springbok Tour protest movement,[5] and that the current student cohort were potentially developing their

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[5] The Springbok Tour protest movement took place in Aotearoa 1981 in response to the touring South African rugby team. At that time, South Africa was operating under the racially segregated apartheid system, and an international agreement to disallow sports fixtures between signatories (including New Zealand) and South

own political awareness. Buzzetto-Hollywood, Hill and Banks (2021) discuss Generation Z as being the first real digital natives. Their study of students from four diverse colleges in the mid-Atlantic United States found that the majority of participants identified as being informed about current events, with 78 per cent having discussed socio-political concerns with friends and relatives (page 3). Although this study examined the behaviours and attitudes of American students, the respondents' method of consuming information (social media) transcends national boundaries, as does the content being consumed (Mutch & Estellés, 2021; Nielsen, 2016). The afore-mentioned study of Buzzetto-Hollywood, Hill and Banks lists race-based violence, climate change, LGBTQ+ rights, sexual assault, human trafficking and women's rights as areas of concern for the American students (2021, p. 3). Identical topics also appeared in the New Zealand students' response to the 2020 *Political* prompt.[6]

The decision to substitute the *Sensory* theme with the *Political* was based on the dominance of Black Lives Matter discourse in news and social media (Deflem, 2022; Perez, 2020). Under the principles of ako, the lecturer had also gleaned important insights from her student during the *Nostalgic* prompt, that it was possible to explore solemn or contemplative topics, to experience 'negative' emotions, and to use creativity as a means of catharsis. For the *Political* prompt, students were asked to explore a political topic of significance to them; to provide evidence of research (visual, written and/or videographic); an explanation of their personal perspective on the issue; and their creative expression provoked by it. These could include, but were not limited to, sketches, poetry, craft, assemblage, and textile manipulations. Finally they were asked to explore the ways in which fashion could be used as a vehicle for political commentary.

Taking the Project Forward

A full qualitative study of all the student experience of *Seeing Things* project was not undertaken, but the reflective practice of lecturers provided insights that informed subsequent curriculum development. Insights came from discussions with students throughout the project (weekly meetings) and from informal analysis of reflective statements made by students in their final blog submissions. In 2020, a significant majority of students gave positive responses about the project in their reflections, with comments including that the project was enjoyable, insightful and provided an opportunity for new skill acquisition. As well as feedback, lecturers assessed the quality of the outcomes and found that for many of the submissions, both the creative work and the written insights in response to the prompts were extremely strong.

African sports teams, had been breached by allowing the 1981 tour. The tour and subsequent protest movement divided the nation.

[6] The topics from each country also included some that were not replicated in the other country. Students in Aotearoa New Zealand also focussed on disability rights, and freedom of speech and feminism in China; while the American cohort identified gun violence and immigration reform as issues of concern (Buzzetto-Hollywood et al., 2021).

This was particularly so for responses to the *Political* and *Nostalgic* themes. Thus, lecturers deemed the project to have been largely successful.

In 2021, with the country still facing rolling lockdowns, faculty were tasked with creating a flexible curriculum with projects that could be moved online at short notice. The success of *Seeing Things* in 2020, in terms of ease of online delivery, strong student engagement and positive learning outcomes, led to the decision to deliver a version of the project in 2021, and again in 2022. A further deciding factor was the recognition that the project saw students engaging in both outward and introspective thinking, that we believed would support their development as design practitioners. Huutoniemi and Willamo describe outward thinking, or "outward-oriented thinking" (2014, p. 24), as a cognitive process in which issues are understood by looking at the systems surrounding them, serving to reframe the problem as being a part of a larger whole, thereby creating new understanding of the issue and its complexities. An example from fashion discourse might be that of fast fashion—while this phenomenon has caused significant environmental impact and is responsible for the exploitation of workers in the globalised garment industry, students might explore these concerns alongside considerations around the democratisation of clothing for the working class in developed nations, and the need for paid work in developing countries. This is not to deny the initial concerns, but rather to understand the complexities at hand. Buchanan (1992, p. 10) describes these as "wicked problems"—not because they are morally reprehensible, rather, that their complexities make them difficult to solve. Introspective thinking occurred throughout the *Seeing Things* project as students analysed their personal response to each prompt, for example, exploring their personal values in relation to socio-political concerns; analysing why they were drawn to certain features in their physical environment; and the feelings evoked from nostalgic memories.

Seeing Things was delivered in 2021 and 2022 in an adapted format allowing for the development of physical outcomes—either full garments or fashion accessories. This was made possible by the partial and then full return to in-person studio classes (in 2020 and 2021 respectively). To allow students sufficient time to design and construct garments required a reduction in the number of prompts from four to two. The *Informative* prompt from 2020 was somewhat disparate from the three subsequent prompts—although there was an artistic element in the observational drawing of their chosen garment, the main task was largely geared towards vocational outcomes. This diverged from the creative expression and critical thinking that the three subsequent prompts invited, so it was removed from the project. The *Inspiring* prompt was retained. It appealed to those visually-inclined students who had been drawn to fashion design for its inherent attention to aesthetics. The prompt called for highly-focussed first-hand observations that steered students away from predictable internet searches as a source for their inspiration. This enhanced their visual literacy, enabling them to craft more individual storytelling while also strengthening their observational and editing skills.

The *Nostalgic* prompt had delivered a range of responses, from whimsical to poignant, with critical thinking more evident in the latter. In these instances, the introspection often led to outward-oriented thinking, situating the memories in a broader socio-political context.

The bi-racial student whose nostalgic memories rekindled the sense of exclusion she had experienced in childhood went on to explore institutionalised racism in Aotearoa. For her, the nostalgic thinking had informed her response the *Political* prompt. Based on this, and needing to condense the project down to two prompts, the best aspects of the *Nostalgic* theme were merged into the *Political* prompt. This was done by incorporating the catch-phrase of second-wave 1970s feminist movement: "the personal is political" (Hanisch, 2000). Hanisch first used this slogan in a feminist opinion piece written in 1969 to describe the way in which personal problems being experienced by women often had their roots in a patriarchal system of female oppression (Hanisch 1969/2006, p. 3–5). In this context, politics refers to power relationships rather than electoral systems (Hanisch 1969/2006, p. 1). Rogan and Budgeon (2018) explore Hanisch's theory and conclude that even informed, digitally-connected young women today are at risk of experiencing oppression. In our project, we use the "personal is political" construct to allow students to explore their own lived experience and life goals in the context of systemic stagnation shifts and stagnation.

Student Reflections to the "Seeing Things" Project

Over the three iterations of the *Seeing Things* project (2020 to 2022), of the students whose work was reviewed for this paper, a significant majority indicated a positive learning experience. The review was done by way of an informal analysis of the outcomes and reflections contained within student blogs that remained accessible at the time of writing. Although this did not represent all of the submissions, the sample size (50 students), along with reflections from the lecturers who had participated in teaching on the project, was deemed sufficient to establish meaningful perspectives on the outcomes of the project.

Aspects of the project elicited mixed responses from students. For example, the fine art-aspect of prompt explorations was challenging for some (albeit exciting for others), and the relevance to fashion contexts for these students was unclear. Also, the time to respond to each prompt (one week) felt too hurried for some students (although invigorating for others). Finally, references to previous lockdowns in the 2021 and 2022 iterations of the project were notably unwelcome by some students, suggesting fatigue and frustration with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Overall, however, it was apparent that the many of students welcomed the acquisition of new a concept design methodology that they planned to utilise in the future. Most had found the new prompts stimulating, although many expressed a preference towards either the visually-oriented *Inspiring* prompt or the more nuanced *Nostalgic/Political* prompts. Similarly, whilst some students produced highly creative explorations and outcomes; others conducted excellent written research, sharing perceptive and insightful responses to the prompts. In 2020, students found the project to be a welcome distraction to the monotony of the first lockdown, but some also missed being able to make garments. Thus, after lockdown students were generally pleased to be able to return to studio and get access to technical facilities for making clothes. Face-to-face engagement with peers and lecturers also supported learning and enjoyment.

Although the original project needed to be adapted to account for the return to a physical studio, the conceptual side of the project (design prompt explorations) remained valid alongside garment development, given that higher education already requires significant self-directed study.

Discussion and Conclusion

Seeing Things was developed in the context of responding swiftly to the challenge of delivering a feasible, engaging and relevant assignment for undergraduate fashion students living in lockdown at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Observation-based assignment prompts were designed to strengthen students' visual literacy skills, while more nuanced prompts were developed to encourage both introspective and outward thinking. The latter unwittingly fed into student sensitivities, however this resulted in powerful student outcomes, characterised by insightfulness and authenticity. Lecturers were able to support students through these cathartic experiences by employing the principles of ako in their teaching, characterised by reciprocity and mutual respect.

When the project was reworked for 2021 and 2022, both the *Inspiring* and the *Political* prompts were retained, providing scope for both aesthetic and intellectual explorations, each with opportunity for highly creative outcomes. In particular, the *Political* prompt activated a greater level of critical thinking amongst students. Critical thinking is the characteristic that separates higher education from vocational training. Reflecting on the student feedback, it has been decided that any future iterations of *Seeing Things* will retain the hybrid model of concepts developed from the targeted prompts, together with the subsequent phase of interpreting one of these concepts into a final garment or fashion accessory. The nature of the prompts can remain broadly the same, as lecturer delivery of, and student responses to, the prompts will change each year, particularly in the political prompt which will reflect the shifts in the national and global socio-political landscape. This might see, for example, feminist students moving away from topics such as *Roe v Wade*, to explore political representation and/or misogyny in electoral spheres. Topics such as climate change will likely remain present as a matter of ongoing urgency, as will interrogation of global fashion systems.

Fashion lecturers at AUT are acutely aware of the issues surrounding the global fashion industry, and one of the underlying principles of this project has been to support the development of a new generation of fashion practitioners ready to participate in the shaping a new fashion system not beleaguered by exploitative and dangerous working conditions, adverse environmental impacts and unchecked consumerism. Ultimately, *Seeing Things* aimed to deliver a rewarding and innovative online fashion studio experience for students in the midst of challenging circumstances; it also sought to inspire students to become global citizens, accountable for their future roles and the required shifts within the global fashion industry. The reflections contained in this paper have provided an illustration of these efforts and may serve as inspiration for future endeavours to innovate fashion design education situated within pressing concerns.

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