



BEEN THERE! DONE IT! JUST NOT QUITE SURE IF I'VE EARNED THE T SHIRT

ETHICAL FASHION | PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT | WORK-STUDY
SWEATSHOP LABOUR | FASHION PEDAGOGY



ABSTRACT

ETHICAL FASHION IS NOW PART OF THE MAINSTREAM OF FASHION COURSES BUT NOT ALL STUDENTS NECESSARILY EMBRACE ITS MESSAGE NOR DO EXISTING PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES ACHIEVE THEIR OBJECTIVES. THIS PAPER EXAMINES THE PROCESS OF SIMULATING A FACTORY MANUFACTURING EXPERIENCE WITH FIRST YEAR FASHION DESIGN, FASHION MARKETING AND FASHION COMMUNICATION STUDENTS.

The project raised considerable problems in planning and delivery both from a practical and ethical viewpoint. Transferring working practices from developing countries to an educational environment were thoroughly considered by the tutors, technicians and Ethics Committee. Health and Safety guidelines were strictly applied whilst trying to mimic 'real life' factory conditions. The planning and final delivery of the project was successful and as a consequence an operational blueprint now exists.

The paper will critically reflect on the limits and possibilities of factory simulation as an experiential learning tool for addressing a range of issues from sewing skills; sweatshop labour; production management and even performance art.

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BACKGROUND: THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT IN TEACHING FASHION IN HE

In April 2008 the University of Northumbria appointed its first Professor in Ethical Fashion. This was the University's first externally funded Chair and support for the post has come from two organizations – the Spanish multinational Inditex SA which owns the 'Zara' brand, and the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation, the Brussels based Global Union representing workers in over 230 trade unions in 110 countries in the world.

The idea for the post emerged from the relationship between the two parties which had been cemented in a so-called international framework agreement on worker's rights concluded in October 2007. International framework agreements are a new phenomenon in industrial relations that have moved social dialogue from a national to a global level.

The origins of the relationship between Inditex and the ITGLWF goes back to April 2005 when Javier Chercolés, the head of Corporate Social Responsibility of Inditex was woken early on the morning of the 13th April by an irate Neil Kearney, General Secretary of the ITGLWF denouncing him as 'a merchant of death'. Inditex had been sourcing from Spectrum Sweaters Ltd, a factory in Bangladesh which had collapsed like a pack of cards early in the morning of the 11th April killing 64 workers and injuring, in some cases seriously,

a further 84. The owner had extended the building to 8 stories without first acquiring planning permission. The joint quest to provide a pension and rehabilitation for the families of the dead and the injured became the first practical outcome of this relationship between the two parties.

Following the signature of the agreement it was agreed, as part of a joint work agenda, to create an academic post in ethical fashion as a strategic intervention to address the curriculum in buyer training.

As is common in the emergence of new areas of study there is often imprecision in the use of terminology and definition. For a number of educationalists and actors in the industry 'Ethical fashion' has come to refer to the worker rights agenda. The Ethical Trading Initiative is, for example, primarily concerned with encouraging 'retailers, brands and their suppliers to take responsibility for improving the working conditions of the people who make the products they sell,'¹ and the Labour Behind the Label/DFID initiative Fashioning an Ethical Industry aims to give a:

'global overview of the garment industry, raise awareness of current company practices and of initiatives to improve conditions, and inspire students – as the next generation of industry players – to raise standards for workers in the fashion industry of the future.'

For many garment workers, poor working conditions and the abuse

of human rights are an everyday experience. These are in the main caused by the particular configuration of the global apparel value chain in which the brand owners and retailers wield considerable 'buyer driven' commercial power (Gereffi 1994). For the past decade, ex factory prices have been falling against rising production volumes with consequent impacts on workers both in terms of pay and work intensification. (Miller & Williams 2009) Whilst there is undoubtedly an increasing awareness of the ethical awareness agenda amongst both fashion staff and students (Garforth and Usher 2008:8-9), the fundamental drivers of unethical practice have, until recently, remained largely untouched.

Developing an awareness of the impact of purchasing practices (Hurley & Naushad 2005; Impact/Traidcraft 2008) is a crucial way of preparing future fashion buyers and since fashion buying appears to be the second major destination of graduates (Goworek 2001), educational work in this area is arguably of critical importance. Fashion students with an understanding of these initiatives will be in a much better position to build upon the work that is being done when they enter the industry.

Although ethical fashion is now part of the mainstream of fashion courses, not all students or staff necessarily embrace its message nor do existing pedagogical approaches achieve their objectives in this area. As Mo Tomaney has argued:

'Asking creative fashion students to consider human rights and ethics in the supply chain within a typical set design project defies the accepted boundaries that govern a creative fashion course'. (2009:31).

One major way in which such issues can be broached is via a discussion of the product life cycle in whole or in part but in seeking to develop students' understanding of the realities of working life for workers in garment manufacturing countries, there is a need to move beyond the abstract and theoretical in the dissection of the product life cycle, as Thomas has argued, through an empathetic approach; 'Developing an emotional response for another living thing experiencing inequality' (2009:19) generally points us in the direction of experiential learning. However, other than ad hoc encounters with visiting speakers (clothing workers) from key fashion sourcing countries, opportunities for empathetic work can appear limited.

This paper examines the process of creating a factory simulation in the sewing workshops of the Design School at the University of Northumbria as an empathetic tool in ethical fashion pedagogy. Students were given the opportunity to assemble T-shirts cut from their own patterns under factory conditions and rules for an 8-hour shift, and took time out to reflect on the process. We critically reflect on the issue of authenticity in simulated learning situations and address the limits and possibilities of factory

simulation as an experiential learning tool for addressing elements of an ethical fashion curriculum. A number of additional learning outcomes and possibilities are also considered.

This experiential phase was the second part of a brief which was set for the entire first year fashion degree cohort (embracing the three degree programmes of Design, Marketing and Communication). Students formed cross-disciplinary teams to develop a design, marketing and launch concept for an ethical T-shirt. These were presented in power-point format at the end of the semester (Miller 2009a). The second, voluntary stage of this exercise involving an actual T-shirt in a factory simulation, is considered in some detail below.

A SWEATSHOP EXPERIENCE?

In delivering such an aim there is, of course, no substitute for first-hand experience but for those colleges with sizable sewing workshop capacity we would argue that there is the available potential for introducing authentic experiential learning opportunities in a workshop/small factory context. From a practical and ethical viewpoint, the simulation raised considerable problems in planning and delivery. Transferring working practices and working conditions in developing countries to an educational environment were thoroughly considered by the tutors, technicians and the School Ethics Committee. The project was planned to take place over the course of one working day and

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the original intention was to emulate as near as possible experience of a sewing machinist working in a production environment.

It cannot be assumed that students will want to involve themselves in such an exercise with great alacrity. It is an opportunity to develop sewing skills but conversely those students who are more favourably disposed to conceptual work may not be drawn to this. Pressures on the sewing room in the Design school meant that this could only be run optionally in the first instance although two assembly lines could have operated on the day. There is an argument for making such an activity a 'core' element of delivery for certain programmes.

Inevitably, there was a strong pull to re-create a 'sweatshop' experience, with 'aggressive' line management and quality control, an intense work pace, and participants being required to stay late until the quota was complete. Approaches were initially made to the School of Performing Arts to establish whether any students would be interested in playing the role of the 'bastard supervisor' for a day. The absence of a positive response was fortuitous, since this had become a matter for deliberation at the School Ethics Committee, some concerns having been raised that striving for an

element of authenticity might infringe the institution's own codes of practice. An additional ethical question posed, related to possible discomfort caused to students who in the course of repetitive work over a prolonged period might sustain some injury.

Since the students would only be timed carrying out their assembly operations during the actual day, it was not possible to fix an actual target for the simulation, although actual performance in export factories from worker's stories and case study material was referred to in preparatory and de-briefing sessions. The actual output achieved during a 7-hour shift was 95 pieces of acceptable quality, about 1/10th of the performance of a similar workforce in an export factory.

A learning point for the staff was that the pull to label such an exercise a 'sweatshop experience' not only has to be resisted but also countered since it would be pretentious and unrealistic to imagine that students engaging for 7-8 hours with assistance from design technicians to meet quality targets can be remotely connected with the daily experience of garment workers in the export sectors of major supplier countries of the UK. This is, of course, a key discussion point which has to be drawn out.

THE CENTRAL IMPORTANCE OF DESIGN TECHNICIAN INVOLVEMENT

The preparation and execution of the exercise had to be carefully planned and relied heavily on technicians to assist in the production. As former workers in garment manufacture, the design technicians were therefore critical to the success of the simulation. Their knowledge was essential for fabric procurement, configuration of the sewing room, line balancing, and quality control. Moreover, in the preparatory session with the students in which students were introduced to the 'factory system', it was possible to defer to the technicians for their own first hand experience of supervision, pace of work and the working day.

IMPACT ON THE LEARNER

Involvement in the factory simulation was entirely voluntary. Preparatory sessions involving the design technicians acquainted the students with factory systems, assembly line layout, supervisory regimes and unit labour cost (Miller 2009b). A de-briefing session allowed the students to reflect on and evaluate their own experience of the day. It is too early to present any authoritative findings in relation to student response from such an exercise. However, a preliminary assessment by the students of this exercise was that in general they were exhausted and shocked at the demanding factory regime given that the collective output constituted about 1/10th of a comparable assembly line in an export factory. It is planned to repeat the project in subsequent years using filmed extracts with feedback and involvement from each year's cohort.

Factory simulations have the potential of providing fashion students with a first hand insight into a key element in a product life cycle and more specifically into the human impact of repetitive operations in garment assembly. A greater understanding and appreciation of the 'relative' values and contributions which workers at different stages of the cycle make, will hopefully equip our graduates to address the wholesale inequalities which exist along the supply chains of our global fashion industry in the future.

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A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT BY THE STUDENTS OF THIS EXERCISE WAS THAT IN GENERAL THEY WERE EXHAUSTED AND SHOCKED AT THE DEMANDING FACTORY REGIME.