

FUTURESCAN 4: VALUING PRACTICE

Re-wiring Practice: A Conscious Pedagogy

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Abstract

This short paper considers ways in which three esteemed and globally renowned fashion educators': Lidewij (Li) Edelkoort, Kate Fletcher and Timo Rissanen, have influenced the holistic advancement of a UK undergraduate fashion design curriculum, a course that places sustainable practice as integral to its core ethos. The paper will identify how the tacit and explicit nature of 'conscious' and 'pre-conscious' learning, more specifically, the concept of 'habitus', exists in fashion design students' sustainable practice, typically through the journey of their graduate collections.

Keywords: sustainability; fashion design; fashion thinking; pedagogy; conscious practice

Introduction

'Fashion with a big F is no longer there. And maybe it's not a problem; maybe actually it's a good moment to rethink' (Edelkoort 2015: no pagination).

This paper considers the viewpoint of prominent fashion educators, who also express the need for a shared responsibility to ensure effective, longer term, change. Pertinently, to inspire these changes and stimulate positive action, not only by the industry, but through fashion design education, and by our, predominantly, Generation Z/Post-Millennial or, less commonly termed, Generation iY/Late-Millennial, student demographic (Mohr and Mohr 2017).

Discourse on the twenty-first century issue of sustainability in fashion is nothing new, and has been written about extensively for over a decade (Fletcher 2016; Gwilt 2014; Siegle 2008). The phenomenon that is Fast Fashion, the 'Evil machine that is exploiting everyone and everything' (Firth 2015: no pagination), has escalated its impact on, not only the environment and the consumer, but humanity itself, thus persisting at the forefront of discussion - throughout the media, the industry, and education. As the problem has gained momentum, the spotlight has been firmly fixed on industry practices. Consequently, brands and retailers are, albeit to varying degrees, playing their part in reducing environmental impact and addressing ethical issues, in the production of textiles and garments. Nonetheless, the blame cannot lay solely on the relentless cycle of over-production and over-consumption; we must also question how we, as educators, play our part in shifting the future drivers of the industry and our fashion students' design thinking.

The research takes an auto-ethnographical approach, drawing on qualitative enquiry, through extensive experience of leading and teaching undergraduate fashion design curricula. Analyzing the advancement of a BA (Hons) Fashion Design course, from the development of its infrastructure, to its delivery. The subject explores tacit and explicit learning, identifying and evaluating *conscious* and *pre-*

conscious or habitual, sustainable methodologies utilized by fashion design students, typically through the journey of their graduate collections.

The three fashion educators referred to in the paper are described here:

Lidewij Edelkoort - One of the world's most famous trend forecasters, and heralded by *Time Magazine* as one of the twenty-five most influential fashion experts of our day. Edelkoort was one of the founders of the School of Form, Poznan, Poland, in 2011. The School of Form 'aims at educating designers who understand people needs', through the notion that 'good design cannot exist without humanities' (2018). In her 2015 'Anti_Fashion: A Manifesto for the Next Decade', Edelkoort stated that we are witnessing 'the end of fashion as we know it' (Edelkoort 2015: no pagination), referring to the impact of 'Fast Fashion' on the future drivers of the fashion eco-system, today's 'Generation Y' fashion design students. The term Generation Y or Gen Y and, more commonly, although arguably not completely overlapping, the Millennial generation, is based on Generation X, the preceding generation. Generation Y is the term given to the generation born in the 1980s and 1990s, to define them as a collective cultural group who are generally liberal, tech savvy, and open to new ideas and methods.

Kate Fletcher - Within a year of the publication of Edelkoort's manifesto, Kate Fletcher's, *Craft of Use* (2016) project paid homage to the tending and wearing of garments as much as their creation, revealing the expression of fashion '...in a world not dependent on continuous consumption...', where garments, whilst '...sold as a product, are lived as a process'. Fletcher (2018a: no pagination)) is a researcher, author, consultant and design activist, with over fifty scholarly and popular publications in the field of sustainable fashion and textiles. She is Professor of Sustainability, Design and Fashion at the Centre for Sustainable Fashion, University of the Arts London (UAL), UK.

Timo Rissanen - holds a practice-based PhD on zero waste fashion design. He has co-curated and co-published a number of books on fashion and sustainability with Alison Gwilt and Holly McQuillan, and is currently the Assistant Professor of Fashion Design and Sustainability at Parsons School of Design, New York, United States of America (USA).

The Problem with Fashion Education

In an interview with *Dezeen* (Fairs 2015), upon the release of her publication 'Anti_Fashion: A Manifesto for the Next Decade', Li Edelkoort (2015) declared '...the end of fashion as we know it...'. The manifesto outlines ten reasons why the fashion system is obsolete; most pertinently, the chapter on education states that with time being short, and the design process consequently compressed, today's fashion students '...no longer have the time to consider a conceptual approach which might transform the silhouette, nor the time to transcend dominant trends' (Edelkoort 2015: 1).

Consequently, alongside designing collections, sourcing materials, and manufacturing garments, today's fashion design students are expected to create accessories, brochures, arrange shows, photography and communications – within only three years of study. The impact of this is a diluting of the essence, and purpose of twenty-first century, sustainable, fashion thinking, resulting in a superfluity of graduate collections that have no purpose, other than to further choke an industry that is already gasping for breath.

A further salient point, arises from industry feedback, which frequently declares the detrimental impact of reduced emphasis on technical skills in fashion design education. In an attempt to reduce pressure

on final year, undergraduate fashion students, technicians are significantly involved in the making of graduate collections, or students are encouraged to outsource. This results in a stream of fashion design graduates who are entering the industry with distinct limitations in their technical understanding and ability.

The Pedagogical Objective

The crux is in the balance. Alongside equipping our fashion design graduates with the technical skillset required by the industry, we, as educators, must future-proof students by instilling, at the very least, an awareness of sustainable fashion design practice, to ensure their contribution in progressing the sustainability agenda, as they enter the industry. Our role, and indeed duty, is to re-connect our students with their practice, re-wiring their thinking and understanding of ways in which small shifts, through a more conscious approach, can alter the perspective of what a garment or collection can be, its purpose, and its end use.

Taking that 'Moment to re-think' (Edelkoort 2015: no pagination) the framework of an undergraduate fashion design curriculum that has an ambition to explicitly integrate sustainable practice, we must lead with a conscious, holistic methodology that connects the student with the 'craft' of their practice. This will define the practice itself, where clothing transcends the concept of 'fashion'. The nucleus of such an infrastructure affords time and space to inspire, and cultivate a connected relationship between the student and their practice, from the start of their three-year journey. The notion of sustainable *fashion thinking*, within a purposeful space that synthesizes theory and practice, establishes a broader contextual understanding, critical and purposeful design thinking, and positioning of the student's overall design philosophy. This is essential in setting the graduate apart from their contemporaries. It will help to ensure that, by the time a student enters their final year of study, sustainable design thinking is innate to their practice. This can be identified through the adoption of concepts such as repurposing, traceability, reduced carbon footprint, sourcing of deadstock materials, organic fabric, Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) cotton and fabrics made from post-consumer waste (PCW), zero waste pattern cutting techniques, non-binary design concepts, and less definitive sizing boundaries.

Figures 1 and 2 show work by Lottie Edgar, a BA (Hons) Fashion graduate, from her undergraduate collection that integrated zero-waste design and pattern cutting, non-binary design, re-purposing and which had no size restrictions.



Figure 1: Look One of Lottie Edgar's six-look look collection that was designed and made applying holistic and sustainable methods. Lottie's collection was showcased on the Graduate Fashion Week 2018 (GFW18) runway, as finalist of the GFW18 Considered Design Award, which was sponsored by Johnstons of Elgin. Credit: Lottie Edgar, 2018.



Figure 2: Look Two of Lottie Edgar's six-look look collection that was designed and made applying holistic and sustainable methods. Lottie's collection was showcased on the Graduate Fashion Week 2018 (GFW18) runway, as finalist of the GFW18 Considered Design Award, which was sponsored by Johnstons of Elgin. Credit: Lottie Edgar, 2018.

Conscious Practice and Habitus

This section will discuss observations of fashion design students' awareness of ways in which they apply knowledge of sustainable practice, considering how specific skills and techniques manifest themselves. It becomes evident that some techniques are consciously applied; *consciously*, meaning deliberate and intentional awareness, and application of, the student's decisions relating to sustainable fashion design practice. Conversely, there exists a pre-conscious mind-set or more aptly, *habitus*; 'principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them (Bourdieu 1990: 53). In the context of fashion design practice, meaning prior learning of sustainable practice, whose subsequent application might be said to go without saying. These behavioural observations prompt questions, primarily around students' awareness of tacit versus explicit learning and consequently, the pedagogy of making the implicit explicit.

Zero waste pattern cutting is an example of conscious practice. This is a technique that addresses inefficiencies in the cutting of fabric, to ensure that no wastage occurs. Creatively speaking, zero waste pattern cutting opens up fashion design thinking through the exploration of ways in which the whole piece of cloth can be used. Zero waste pattern cutting can be a complex undertaking for an undergraduate fashion student, as through the method of draping to initiate zero waste concepts, preliminary outcomes are often chance-based, dependent upon how the fabric drapes on the body, once cut, with each garment transforming as it rotates 360 degrees around the body. Equally, frustration can mount during the initial exploratory stage, whereby design choices may appear restrictive when fully utilising the entire piece of cloth. The intuitive approach associated with commencing the design process with a simple piece of cloth and a mannequin, coupled with the problem-solving required to address issues of balance, style, function and finishing, are fundamental challenges faced by the zero waste pattern cutter. As the silhouette takes form, alternative methods to incorporate functionality and finishing need to be worked through, and the translation of the three-dimensional (3D) concept into flat pattern to ensure technically viable production. Thus, the degree of trial and error and problem solving involved in zero waste pattern cutting requires commitment, tenacity and dedication. Only a few students see it through, albeit often with highly considered results.

Conversely, there is a magic in this technique; the very nature of it lends itself to mindfulness and connected practice, non-traditional approaches and highly individual outputs. The processes involved in the translation of 3D concepts to two-dimensional (2D) flat patterns, and back into a 3D final outcome, subverts and reverses the traditional and perhaps, more ordered, sequence of a finalised 2D design, pattern drafted from a block, toiled and finally constructed as a sample garment. Through zero waste pattern cutting, the student begins to realise that a symbiotic relationship exists between fashion design, pattern cutting and working with material and form; often with pattern cutting and garment construction informing the design process, as part of the design process, rather than one of simply refining the design. Pattern cutting becomes a fashion design tool; '...what defines zero waste fashion design from conventional fashion design is that pattern cutting must be integral to the design process; pattern cutting is fashion design.' (Rissanen and McQuillan 2015: 88). Figures 3, 4 and 5 show work from Lottie Edgar, demonstrating her process of zero waste design and pattern cutting.

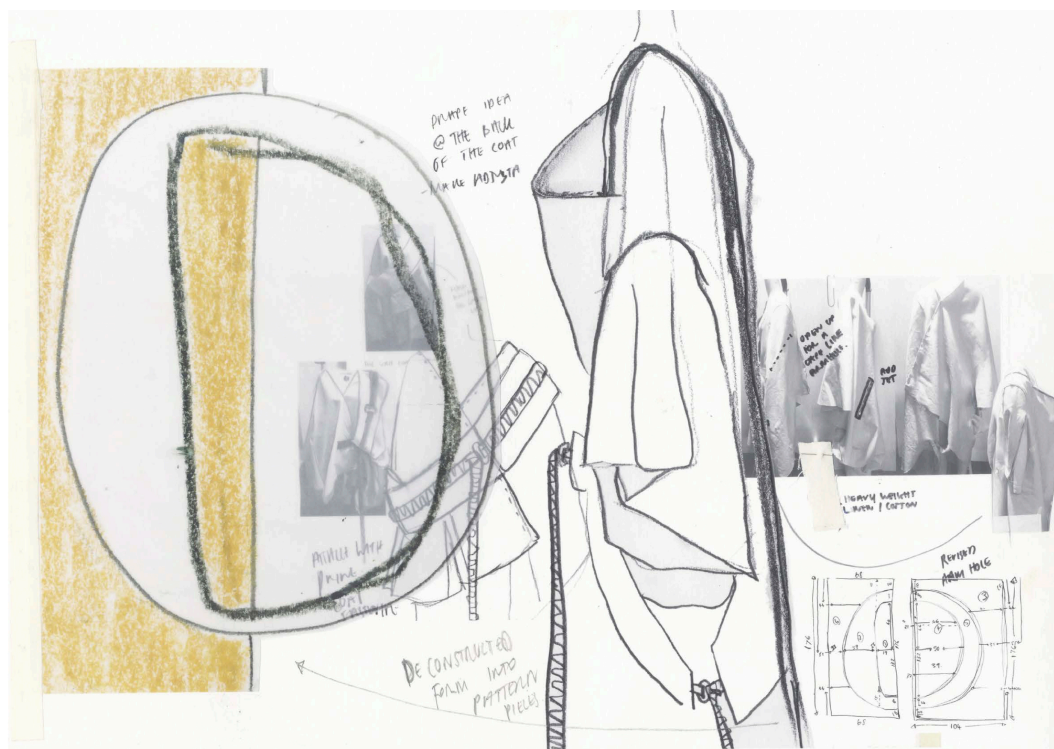




Figure 5: Zero waste fashion design method leading with reverse pattern cutting - 3D:2D:3D.
Credit: Lottie Edgar, 2018

From an educator's perspective, observing a student, who is fully immersed in this process, is a highly rewarding experience. Noticing the mindful approach in becoming more connected to the haptic nature of their practice and the confidence that this instils. This is a space where true learning evolves, and one where the designer and garment co-exist. A space where practice becomes praxis.

When considering *habitus*, it is commonplace that students apply practices such as sourcing of deadstock materials, non-binary design decisions, trans-seasonal pieces, less definitive sizing boundaries and reduced carbon footprint sourcing, unaware that, albeit simplistic, these '...tiny lessons of change...' (Fletcher 2016: 23) are also core to sustainability. Additionally, the sustainable design process does not start solely with material and end with the garment; organic threads for garment construction and closures, either reclaimed, or buttons made from recycled polyester and zips made from plant-based material, all lend themselves to sustainable practice. Some students are unaware that components, such as buttons, are often made from recycled material and garment hangers are often made from recycled and recyclable plastic. The process does not end in the finishing of the garment. The student, as a conscious designer, must think beyond the garment, into its own lived environment, prior to the wearer taking ownership. The reduction, if not elimination of plastic packaging, replaced by recyclable packaging and promotional and point of sale (PoS) material using, not merely Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) card, but recycled FSC card, become part of the solution to the wider issue.

Bethany Williams is a fashion designer who produces collections from recycled and organic materials. She has recently been awarded the Queen Elizabeth II Award for British Design, an honour that

recognises talent, community values and sustainability practices. Williams is also one of many sustainable fashion designers whose sourcing of 'deadstock' materials is integral to their design ethos. During a recent presentation to students, in March 2019, Williams stated that 'We can all do our bit' (Williams 2019); hence, even from a rudimentary perspective, by developing studio culture with a conscience, where students share housekeeping responsibilities, such as switching off power, and taking care over their use of consumables, such as pattern paper and unnecessary printing, everyone can contribute to the wider agenda within a design and making room; socially, as a community and environmentally.

Conclusion - From Designer to Wearer: The Exchange

Irrespective of design intention, a garment can sometimes meet many needs functioning in ways that are unplanned and idiosyncratic. Such a piece calls into being a way of thinking that is primed for finding more diverse potential in fashion garments and opens a door to increased possibilities of use. (Fletcher 2016: 80)

Through non-binary aesthetic decisions, adaptable sizing and fit, and trans-seasonal pieces, conformity of use are challenged, somewhat by the designer, but ultimately, the wearer who controls the use of the garment. Either way, all of the above offer solutions to wider social, economic and consumptive issues; space-saving in smaller living environments through sharing of wardrobes, reviving the familial *hand-me-down* culture, and sharing or swapping clothing with friends and co-workers, to reduce consumption. These are positive and more relevantly, relational examples of ways that we can *all do our bit*.

Discourse on sustainability between educators and industry continues to query the relevance and scale of seasonal or more frequent collections. Increasingly, emergent brands are focussing on the *investment piece*, often with sustainable design central to its brand identity, through either considered *nano-collections* or the single product model, as a way to fundamentally hone their brand and decelerate the fast fashion cycle. Pedagogically, this research will extend into sustainable practice, in the context of circularity, within a postgraduate curriculum that integrates a business model for a micro fashion brand. The line of enquiry will question whether holistic, conscious practice could be developed into a commercially viable, wholly sustainable product line.

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