

## Designing a sustainable future through fashion education

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## **Designing a Sustainable Future through Fashion Education**

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### **Keywords**

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### **Abstract**

With production moving offshore in the race to the bottom necessary to satisfy increased demand for more garments and faster trends delivered at lower prices, fashion in the developed world has become not just fast, but disposable fashion. One of the 'successes' of the twentieth century fashion industry was to democratise fashion; by adopting mass production techniques and sourcing from low-wage economies, fashion retailers were able to produce runway looks at more affordable prices. Concurrently, developments in fashion media sped up the communication of fashion and we have seen an exponential proliferation of enticing creative imagery circulating from brands, models, online influencers and passionate amateurs. Consequently, rates of fashion consumption have risen, unacceptable working conditions continue for many, and the fashion industry is facing complex and demanding challenges including resources, climate change, waste, labour conditions and income inequality. Much as we now understand how garment design has an exponential impact on a garment's sustainability, and recognise that incorporating sustainable design principles is paramount, so those of us in fashion education should prioritise sustainability in our curriculum design and increasingly, I have felt a responsibility to bring these issues into the classroom, to design a fashion education that acknowledges and addresses ethical and sustainable aspects of fashion.

Those campaigning for better processes and working conditions have been successful in highlighting their activism across social media channels. The environmental impact of industrial-scale fashion is making headlines and prompting questions about the sustainability of the business model on which modern fashion is based, and by which it has become a trillion-dollar global business. Surveys show that more people than ever are interested in how their clothes are made, by whom, and under what conditions. Diverse strands of communications have combined resulting in demands for ethically made, sustainable fashion. Customers are increasingly interested in the provenance of their clothing. Luxury brands' marketing strategies have incorporated brand storytelling and in seeking to establish a prestige marque, luxury brands have opened the doors of their ateliers to the public. A focus on high quality materials, the value of handcraft skills, and

local expertise recognised by the UN's Intangible Cultural Heritage has created a market for slow fashion that can be evidenced across market levels. Many mainstream fashion brands have followed the lead of luxury brands who frequently feature their use of quality materials and artisanal techniques as key to their identity and value. The fashion industry is moving towards a new era, with many companies aspiring to come out of the shadows of sweat shops and excess and facing up to their responsibilities to planet and people. This emerging era of radical transparency is highlighting that people want to buy from ethical brands and want to work for ethical companies.

I have spent my life *in fashion*, as a teenager creating a look to suit my tastes, mood, music affiliations and friendship groups, later as a designer-maker with a small fashion label and now as an educator. It is a huge privilege to work in fashion education, and I've been lucky enough to have taught for over twenty years, in the UK, in Asia and the US. I have taught fashion history, design, making, branding and communications and fashion business. Listing these fashion curriculum areas reveals both the universality of fashion as a discipline, one that is studied and practised globally, but also emphasises the many facets of this multi trillion-dollar business. Living in Hong Kong and travelling in China I saw firsthand both the social and environmental impact of mass production and fast fashion. Mass migration to the factories of Southern China has exploited workers and disrupted family relationships for those working away from home and those left behind. The impact of textile and garment production is visible in poor water and air quality as well as overflowing landfill. Local, small-scale fashion brands and skilled workers (e.g. tailors) cannot compete with low wages and industrial scale production and so the market becomes homogenised and quality often suffers. Similarly, visiting manufacturers in New York's garment district I saw how the decrease in domestic production means that hand-skills and heritage makers are being lost at an alarming rate.

The role of education to help transform practices across the fashion industry is key. As educators, we have a responsibility to shape curriculum and students' learning. When I started out in fashion education, whether in design or business curricula, the focus was on introducing knowledge, techniques, skills that would enable students to curate design research, cut patterns, construct garments, produce fashion communications, or balance the books. The fashion supply chain was conceived as a linear one and most fashion education did not question the established fashion system or consider the impact of fashion production or the afterlife of fashion products.

It's important to consider how best to engage students with these issues, how to design classes and curriculum that is more than a transmission of facts, figures and opinions regarding fashion and textiles' impact or a litany of bad behaviours to avoid. How can we involve students and foster the curiosity and creativity that will seek out innovative solutions to fashion's complex challenges? Stibbe and Luna's (2009) pedagogical approach to develop 'sustainability literacy', and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and Principles for Responsible Management Education frameworks can be applied to inform curriculum design that facilitates impactful experiential learning. Fundamentally, this approach encourages students to ask why, and what if? And by asking students to apply the lens of sustainability to fashion design, marketing and business we engage them in decision-making and knowledge-seeking.

At the London College of Fashion's Fashion Business School we take a systems approach and look at sustainability and business ethics as sources of value for fashion businesses and individuals and have developed sustainability-focused projects that encourage students to analyse sustainability issues from both the business and consumer side. We ask students to evaluate business practices along the supply chain as well as rationalise the motivations behind the increased interest in ethical consumption. We have an extremely international student body and so it is natural for students to research how sustainability impacts their home markets. Through these projects, we are encouraging students to reimagine what the fashion industry could be.

One of the barriers to developing sustainability-related curriculum is often a lack of confidence in our own knowledge, we fear not having all the answers. I have found sustainability education to be most successful when it is a collaborative venture, and have sought out organisations and individuals across design and business to share their sustainability journeys as masterclasses, guest speakers or on panels. I have benefitted immensely from finding a supportive network of sustainable fashion educators; being part of the By The Fire network (<https://www.by-the-fire.co.uk>) has provided a space to seek out and share good practice in sustainability pedagogy across fashion design and fashion business. Another collaborator has been Redress (<https://www.redress.com.hk>), the Hong Kong-based textile-waste environmental NGO whose work focuses on the principles of sustainable design and who produce engaging educator resources including the documentary *Frontline Fashion* that showcases their annual sustainable design competition. The Ethical Fashion Forum (<http://www.ethicalfashionforum.com>) has hosted student field trips that introduced methods and measures of sustainable design. Panel guests from social entrepreneurs, sustainable fashion designers, retailers, and researchers have generously shared their opinions and advice. The topics of sustainability and ethics are complicated and do not offer easy solutions, and this can sometimes be overwhelming for students, however, hearing contradictory opinions and personal sustainability journeys has been empowering for students and has had a huge impact on their academic and personal development.

It is an important part of a sustainable fashion education to showcase alternative modes and methods for design and business and we encourage our students to address these through consumer behaviour reports, business strategy projects, dissertations and social enterprise business plans. It has been rewarding to see a significant rise in interest in sustainable fashion and ethical business amongst our students, and as part of a pedagogic research project into the impact of our sustainability teaching we asked students to self-report the impact on them, responses included:

*'I used to think sustainable fashion was a marketing tool for business [...] Now I think it is really something some brands are pursuing to help the people, the environment and the world'.*

*'I used to think brands mainly greenwash and use ethics to appeal to consumers. Now I think it can be a valued and authentic part of a brand'.* (Radclyffe-Thomas, Varley & Roncha, 2018).

Although planning and implementing a sustainable fashion curriculum can appear daunting, sometimes the simple lessons turn out to be the most powerful. Recently I was invited to run a week-long course on responsible business at Toulouse Business School. Introducing the topic of sustainability to non-fashion students I asked the class to look at their care labels and find out where an item of their clothing was made, and then to find out what the monthly wage for a textile worker in that country is. The class were astonished to discover that the price they paid for a hoodie was the same as the monthly wage of the worker who made it. In the same class I described how a lot of clothing gets returned or discarded for the simple reason that many people do not know how to sew on a button. I followed this up by asking the class of 24 how many of them could, and joked that part of the class assessment should be to sew on a button. Discovering that only 3 of the 24 could sew on a button I brought buttons, felt, needles and thread to the final session and before the end of class everyone had in fact sewn on a button! And I'd like to think they learnt a valuable lesson. I often use reflective writing for students to consider such topics and after this course one of the participants wrote:

*'It now sticks in my mind that whatever humans do in a business activity, there will be impacts resulting from it, socially and environmentally. Therefore, it's businesses' obligation to oversee the sustainability impact resulting from their business activity to the society, and do accordingly to fix any errors they contribute to society. This class made me have a new view and definition of social entrepreneurship. Thus, it's not necessarily a 'plus point' anymore, from my perspective, for a company to do business that cares of the society, yet it's more like an obligation for business to conserve what nature had given us and preserve it in a sustainable way.'*

I'd like to close by saying that fashion means different things to different people. For some it is aspirational, an enticing, fantastical world offering daydreams and glamour, providing avenues for self-expression, and opportunities to project our innermost feelings and identity through our clothing choices. For others, it is a trivial matter, not of any personal interest and rarely given serious consideration. But with an industry that has been estimated as generating 2% of global GDP, fashion is neither an opt-in or an opt-out, fashion is a business. And if we want it to be a sustainable one we each need to question our influence on it at both a personal and professional level.

Dr Natascha Radclyffe-Thomas is a Higher Education Academy National Teaching Fellow and Academic Lead for the Principles of Responsible Management Education at the Fashion Business School, London College of Fashion. Natascha has twice been a finalist in the Green Gown Awards for innovation in Sustainability Education.

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