

CO-WORKING, EXPLORING THE WAYS TEACHER-PRACTITIONERS SHAPE STUDENTS' LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN FASHION AND TEXTILES HIGHER EDUCATION.

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INTRODUCTION

In this study teacher-practitioners are professional practitioners working in fashion and textiles businesses and teaching within fashion and textiles subjects in higher education (HE). S/he contributes to teaching within an institutional setting and may also support the student experience in other contexts, for example, as a host in a workplace-learning environment.

The Co-working project explores the experiences of fashion and textile teacher-practitioners in HE, and observes how they facilitate student learning and enhance student employability in the fashion and textiles industry. The research was undertaken in late 2009 and early 2010. The report aims to inform HE's understanding of the role of teacher-practitioners and focuses on:

- What motivates fashion and textiles industry professionals to teach?
- What are the teacher-practitioners' perceptions of their roles in shaping graduate learning outcomes and attributes?
- How do teacher-practitioners perceive the benefits to and limitations on their practice?
- How do students view the benefits and limitations of the teacher-practitioners?
- How are professionals supported in their roles as teacher-practitioners?

BACKGROUND

This research is timely as it addresses government and industry concerns about whether HE is delivering the appropriate skills to ensure students are employable post-graduation. And, how they will contribute to the continued growth of UK creative industries. As Andy Burnham, the former Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport stated, on the global impact of the creative industries:

“If they (Creative Industries) are to continue to grow in size and significance, we must work hard to maintain the most favourable conditions to stimulate British innovation and dynamism. And we must

ensure there are people with the right skills to meet the needs of that expanded creative sector”

(Andy Burnham, 2008).

There has been a long-standing relationship between governments, industry and education in working to ensure the UK workforce is rich in manufacturing skills and creative innovation. Art-based design education has contributed to these objectives.

“This culture of learning through practice has persisted and teacher-practitioners today represent a significant number of those delivering and developing the undergraduate curriculum” (Clews and Mallinder, 2010).

Historically, fashion and textiles HE has sought to engage with professional designers to offer students the experience of industry within a vocational programme and to enable them to operate successfully in industry after graduation. This has evolved into industrial placement programmes at undergraduate and post-graduate levels and the common practice of placing teacher-practitioners at the heart of fashion and textiles HE. This mode of practice has been adopted in institutions across the UK for over 50 years.

Many art and design schools established in the 1840's & 1850's were directly linked to industry. Throughout the 20th Century these schools evolved in

various guises and are now part of the new universities of today.

The Faculty of Arts at the University of Brighton, formerly known as the Brighton School of Art and founded in 1859, is typical of schools born out of the necessity to produce designers for the manufacturing industry in the United Kingdom. At this time teacher-craftsmen were engaged in education to encourage development of industry relevant skills. This was intended to produce individuals able to work in industry as designers. Industry professionals were instrumental in building design practice and manufacture in the UK, to compete with its European counterparts. The undergraduate courses in Fashion and Textiles at the University of Brighton have pioneered the concept of a work experience as part of its Fashion and Textiles BA(Hons) and MDes courses, featuring a year, or part of a year in industry.

The Royal College of Art (RCA), formerly known as the Government School of Design, began offering art-based applied and decorative art programmes during the last decade of the 1800's. After the Second World War the college concentrated on delivering a new provision of specialised courses including fashion design. The Fashion and Textiles Department

at the RCA considered it appropriate that all staff were engaged in industry practice as well as fulfilling their teaching roles. The RCA actively encourages its students to seek placement opportunities during the summer months of vacation from the institution and the delivery of 'live' projects with industry is a key characteristic of the course.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DEVELOPMENT

The following methods were used to generate data that would feed the research and inform this report:

1. A targeted questionnaire was devised for student focus groups, spanning undergraduate courses at the University of Brighton and postgraduate courses at the RCA. This anonymous, quantitative feedback enabled us to compare data and identify emerging themes and trends from staff and students. 10 students from each institution and from the various levels of undergraduate and post-graduate study participated in the focus groups. Teacher-practitioners also completed a questionnaire based on the one used in the parallel, national Looking Out project (Clews and Mallinder, 2010). The questionnaires focused on generating the following:
 - a) A good cross section of data enabling the

assessment of the proportion of teacher-practitioners contributing to teaching.

- b) Data expressing the categories of teacher-practitioners.
- c) What business activities teacher-practitioners engaged in and, for how long?

2. The interview process generated narrative accounts offering another dimension to the report. It was important that there was representation from a wide range of practitioners from the fashion and textiles departments of both participating higher education institutions (HEIs). Individual interviews were carried out with ten teacher-practitioners from both institutions. The researchers concentrated on understanding the professionals' experience of HE and how it impacts on their practice both as teachers and in their professional practice. The researchers also set out to record and examine students' expectations, perceptions and experiences of learning with teacher-practitioners.

The student questionnaires were distributed to students on undergraduate and postgraduate courses (Level 3 to Level 8, QAA, 2010). All the students completing

¹ The MDes in Fashion and Textiles is a four-year undergraduate programme. The programme includes a mandatory period of industrial placement normally undertaken during the third year.

the survey were studying full-time and all of those responding from the University of Brighton were on the final year of the MDes undergraduate programmes¹.

Questionnaire completed by RCA students showed that 25% of postgraduate students were first year students and 75% were final year students.

FINDINGS

The majority of teacher-practitioners interviewed and those who completed the questionnaire had experience in the fashion and textiles industry and education spanning ten to twenty years. There were some teacher-practitioners with less than ten years experience and a few with over 30 years experience.

Of those teacher-practitioners who completed the questionnaire 83% said that initially the motivation for working in HE was additional income. 66% said the consistency of income was a deciding factor. 80% were keen to give something back to education and 33% of the teacher-practitioners participating in the questionnaire considered it important to learn from students.

“There was a general acceptance that universities and industry were perfectly suited partners in the innovation process, but that dynamic innovation business models and knowledge platforms reflecting

the aspirations and strategic objectives of each partner (HEIs, their students, the design industry and SMEs) were required for such partnerships to work” (Murphy, Dersken, Horn, 2010).

When questioned about what they thought students gained from their contact with industry professionals, teacher-practitioners said that students attained a realistic view of how industry works and an awareness of how industry is changing. It was also acknowledged that it would be difficult to teach if you didn't have a working knowledge of the fashion and textiles industry. It is important that students have knowledge and experience of the industry, but educators need to be mindful of the balance necessary to enable creativity to flourish while at the same time acknowledging that industry operates differently to education. The students are given the opportunity to explore this dynamic through teacher-practitioner contact.

“It is a role [for teacher-practitioners] that needs appropriate balance” (teacher-practitioner, 2009).

“The strength of teacher-practitioners is they allow the student to experiment, test ideas in the luxury of the educational environment and at the same time make the student aware of the limitations of this practice if it were carried out in industry. But the role

would also to be to encourage risk-taking for industry, to be sure to keep the industry at the forefront of their game” (teacher-practitioner, 2009).

Teacher-practitioners were asked whether or not they had been taught by teacher-practitioners during their own design education. Participants who had been in education for over 30 years had quite vivid memories of the teacher-practitioners they engaged with as students in the late 60s and early 70s.

“I was at Birmingham College of Art. My Head of Department, Donald Tomlinson, had been very involved with Tootles Manchester, and all of my tutors had been in industry or continued to have freelance connections with industry... and we had industrial design projects, we did some work with Royal Cavendish Textiles and Kidderminster Carpets...” (teacher-practitioner, 2009).

“I was taught by practicing designers, no one was full-time then. We were approached by the industry to deliver projects” (teacher-practitioner, 2009).

Since the late 60’s there have been strong vocational links with industry, and our interviews revealed that all teachers had been practicing designers before going into teaching. One interviewee commented:

“It is dangerous if you leave college and go straight

into teaching without knowledge of anything of industry” (teacher-practitioner, 2010).

Interviewees thought it was impossible to run a good course in fashion or textiles without the participation of teacher–practitioners, as they form the connection with the professional world of fashion and textiles. Teacher-practitioners support and teach the key skills required for practicing in industry. They are aware of current practices of communication, presentation and working to deadlines etc. Teacher-practitioners recalled that placement hosts had strong links to colleges from the beginning of the 1980’s. When manufacturing was based in the UK the host would engage students in the whole supply chain. Manufacturing industry has subsequently dwindled in the UK relocating to emerging economies and this has changed the way and what students learn on placement. Today, there is more focus on design, marketing, and less attention to production.

The data indicates that teacher-practitioners’ industry experience helps to inform teaching, however it does not necessarily drive the curriculum. It is considered important to keep things broad and “resist directing students into a specifically commercial direction”. Reinforcing this statement and referring to studio-based teaching of teacher-practitioners:

“As a teacher you separate yourself from your own practice and respond to the needs of the student and the background experience and practice [of the teacher-practitioner] sits as a framework, which may or may not contribute to the student needs” (teacher-practitioner, 2009).

In an article examining the roles and identities of teacher-practitioners Alison Shreeve observes:

“As practitioners who teach (practitioner tutors) move between their practice and their teaching, the two different cultural contexts require them to work in different ways” (Shreeve, 2009).

All the students surveyed had at some stage of their education, been taught by part-time teachers who were industry practitioners. At the RCA 92% of student respondents had experience of being taught by teacher-practitioners at undergraduate and postgraduate level, with approximately a third being taught by teacher-practitioners at foundation level. At the University of Brighton all students were taught by teacher-practitioners at undergraduate level and just less than two-thirds had experience of teacher-practitioners on their foundation courses². Only half the student respondents at the RCA and the University of Brighton believed that they were seeing more teacher-

practitioners now than when they began their studies in further or higher education.

The questionnaire probed what might be the tangible benefits of being taught by teacher-practitioners. Students indicated that teacher-practitioners understood the balance between creative thinking and viable design solutions for industry. They were able to guide students towards realistic and commercial solutions to design problems. The questionnaire showed that students consider teacher-practitioners to have a good understanding of industry best practice, as designers and as communicators and reinforced this perception by indicating that teacher-practitioners become a conduit between education and industry. Other observations show that the close proximity and first-hand experience of industry brought to the learning environment by teacher-practitioners is both exciting and relevant to students. They are also aware of innovative design methodologies, which they pass on to the students.

When students were asked about their own professional development and what they understood by this, they believed there was a necessity to develop the following essential qualities:

- Employability.

² Most students entering art and design HE course complete some form of HE level, foundation education between leaving school and starting their degree. Foundation courses are usually general art and design courses lasting one academic year and are diagnostic, intended to assist student in identifying their strengths and therefore their choice of subject. In practice students enter degree courses with a range of pre-degree experience including industry experience, BTEC and HNDs, related degree experience and foundation studies.

- Ability to interact in the business/industry world, demonstrating standards of good practice.
- Adaptability and flexibility to engage in new and unknown design practices.

Students further believed that some conditions are essential for the development of these qualities:

- Access to industry mentors facilitating the process of knowledge acquisition and understanding its application.
- Transition from graduate to practitioner and the further development of skills after graduation.
- Professional recognition; acknowledgment of peer professionals through commercial outlets and public exhibition.

Students consider knowledge of current professional experience to be an important component in HE. 75% of the RCA students believed the professional knowledge of teacher-practitioners to be very important and 60% of University of Brighton students considered it very important to their education.

Students believe the professional skills that would be of particular benefit to them at the point of graduation are business acumen and the application of that

knowledge to launch and run their own sole-trader/SME practice. Further, they believe this knowledge had greater currency when delivered by teacher-practitioners. Additional elements of the curriculum that students considered important were, industry knowledge, knowledge of supply chains, design-work costs, public relations, finance, marketing and company law, especially aspects of intellectual property.

The student questionnaires showed that the simple presence of the teacher-practitioner presents students with an alternative perspective on their work. This is particularly relevant to the development of ideas and production knowledge. Fashion and textile design is a fast moving discipline and teacher-practitioners have a good knowledge and direct experience of current trends in design, business practices and branding successes. What students value is teacher-practitioners' understanding of the positioning of emerging designers, their launch into the world of work in the creative industries and their proposed career path.

Our research reveals that teacher-practitioners understand the necessity for integration of industry requirements to the fashion and textiles curriculum. It was evident through the teacher-practitioner questionnaire that they demonstrate an ability to

recognise the translation of design ideas into a marketable product supported by retail and market trend awareness. Students communicated that the active role of teacher-practitioners in industry brings freshness to the learning setting and a dynamic approach to teaching.

Responses to the questionnaire demonstrate that a balance of teacher-practitioners and academics is appropriate to fashion and textiles education. It was clear that students understood the difference between the teaching approaches of teacher-practitioners compared to more academic-based educators who are not engaged in industry. The questionnaires suggest that teacher-practitioners have a particular approach in teaching, passing on knowledge and expertise without deliberately implementing specific teaching and learning methods. One might question whether this is sufficient for all students. Some may find this beneficial, others not. How can HEIs harness and nurture the strengths of teacher-practitioners to enhance graduates' attributes?

The questionnaire also suggested that there were strengths and weaknesses in the roles of the teacher-practitioners. The main strengths are the challenging and questioning of student work and judging whether

project outcomes are viable in commercial settings. This encourages students to reflect on their work in a broader, industry context. This helps students gain a better understanding of the commercial application of creative and innovative ideas. However some students indicated that there was an inconsistency with contact and communication with teacher-practitioners and this had a negative impact on design development.

Interviews and questionnaires showed that new projects and alternative initiatives, for example, a two-day Fashion Business seminar with practitioners from industry at the RCA, provided a positive injection of contemporary industry practice by encouraging the involvement of industry practitioners in education, the delivery of fresh current approaches to fashion business practice enhances academic programmes.

“If the practitioner is involved in ongoing development at their practice then this energy is then passed on to us the students” (student questionnaire, 2009).

TYPES OF LEARNING

The conventional view is that education largely takes place in the institution in lectures and through other activities which support intellectual debate and

embrace more than just vocational learning. There is opportunity for 'blue-sky' thinking and the time to reflect on design practice in a way that industry is unable to afford.

In industry, vocational training is based on the specific needs of the host company. HE (and FE) allows students to operate at their own pace. This is often considered a weakness in an industry focused on working to deadlines. The strength however, is that in the institution students are allowed to develop their skills in a controlled, holistic setting.

The interviews revealed that in one-to-one teaching, there is a danger that students gain only a limited perspective, that of the teacher they are working with. However students are able to gain a broader perspective from a range of lecturers, and the industry practitioner is an example of this provision, with particular knowledge and expertise in contemporary industry thinking and practice. The variety of teaching helps students formulate their own position in terms of design ideas and production. Other areas which teacher-practitioners cite as a strength are, teaching students how to judge the market, gain a better understanding of working in a team, working to a brief and understanding how to connect the different

components of procuring work, design, delivery to market, etc.

Businesses hosting placement students do not always have the time or consider it relevant for students to have a broader understanding of what is happening within the company, especially in those aspects that do not directly impact on the students' agreed placement activity. However if the student is observant they are able to assimilate a greater knowledge of how the company operates in all its facets from the marketing and design through to production, financial management and customer awareness.

There are variations of the practices of placement hosts within the fashion and textiles sector and, therefore variations in the experiences of students on placements. If fashion and textiles businesses depend on student placement to support and sustain day-to-day operations, then surely this creates a false economy and questions the success of the business model. This may also impact on the student perception of best company practice in the fashion and textiles sector.

There was a range of views about whether placements offer a valid learning experience. In particular, the appropriate duration for a meaningful professional experience facilitating the developmental

skills of the student. The majority of teacher-practitioners considered that 6 months of professional experience was the optimum period that would be of benefit to the student and anything less than 3 months is insufficient. Typical duration of a fashion and textiles placement (on these courses) is at least 3 months. However there were exceptions, one particular interview raised the combination of a bright learner and willing host that could prove an exception.

“One student went to Diane Von Furstenberg and a good experience as she grew up... 6 weeks placement and she benefitted greatly” (teacher-practitioner, 2009).

When reflecting on teaching practice and the preparation of students for industry the research showed that there are three key skills considered to be vital to the success of students once in industry:

1. Communication Skills.
2. Presentation.
3. Attitude, business acumen, talent.

Employability skills were considered to be very important qualities necessary for a career in the fashion and textiles industry. Business acumen was considered to be something that could be acquired

whilst working. What was particularly surprising was that design ability and talent were not the first consideration. One interviewee stated:

“But 90% attitude to 10% talent... a professional attitude and able to work with people.. communication is really, really important. Knowledge of technical skills helps you to design” (teacher-practitioner, 2009).

The research showed that teacher-practitioners believed there is a need for HEIs to keep abreast of fast-paced technological developments in the industry. Teacher-practitioners believe they bring current knowledge of the fashion and textile industry, its needs and new developments, to education. Teacher-practitioners also believe they understand the application of technology to the creative industry sector. Through their teaching, students are exposed to a working knowledge of equipment and processes as well as new creative thinking and its applications. This in turn contributes to the building of the students' entrepreneurial skills set.

There are a range of initiatives, which have evolved from the fashion and textiles curricula that demonstrate closer working relationships between industry and education. It is clear that more links with industry are developed through postgraduate projects than in the

final year of the undergraduate programme. Experience on working with live projects is important although not all students joining the RCA postgraduate programme have benefited from learning through industry-based projects. One interviewee highlighted the benefits of undertaking live or industry-based projects:

“The product from the textiles winner led to a range of household products being produced with three windows in Oxford Street, and later the student being employed by them [John Lewis]” (teacher-practitioner, 2009).

Discussions revealed that the ideas of student designers are seen as fresher and show a willingness to take risks but are less tested. This is considered an attractive quality for industry as it pushes and shapes new directions for those companies who set live projects with design courses. Student participation in these projects often leads to employment.

Projects set by academics have been adapted to create greater cross-disciplinary activity, working across the disciplines of fashion, textiles, product design and materials within institutions. There are currently large multi-disciplinary design studios emerging from the fashion and textiles industry working in a wider context across design.

One interviewee explained:

“Umbro.. a company that want blue-sky thinking.. and not just all about making.. encouraged students to think beyond what we’ve got now... maybe the research approach encouraging new thinking” (teacher-practitioner, 2009).

CONCLUSION

This report shows that teacher-practitioners have an invaluable role in shaping students’ learning experiences in fashion and textiles higher education. Their participation in education tests the success of balancing creative freedoms, leading to experimentation, and ultimately to innovation, which the HE seeks to encourage. It also questions the belief that thinking is given commercial validity only when exposed to industry. It shows that industry, through placement schemes and employing new graduates, have access to new ideas through the proposal of design solutions, unaffected by the constraints of commerce. The student and industry practitioner meet, exchange ideas and then part, and in both are changed by the experience.

The Leitch Review (2006) stated “that the UK must commit itself to a world class skills base in order

to secure prosperity and fairness in the new global economy. The Review recommended moving the UK into the “top eight in the world at each skill level by 2020” Both the report and commentators have pointed out that unless the overall skills level and the proportion of the workforce with higher-level skills is raised “Britain risks losing out to better educated more dynamic workforces elsewhere in the world.” (Boone, 2007).

This research found that teacher-practitioners contribute in a range of ways to HE. They bring a new, dynamic perspective to the educational environment through the process and development of ideas and production knowledge.

“It is important that those who teach have been or still are practitioners” (teacher-practitioner, 2010).

Broadly speaking the teacher-practitioner brings enthusiasm, inspiration, motivation, critical judgement and specific industry guidance to the student experience. In fashion design, knowledge of current trends and branding is essential and this is knowledge that teacher-practitioners provide. Teacher-practitioners also have an understanding of the positioning of emerging designers and their launch into the world of work. Students often see the

teacher-practitioner as a ‘critical friend’. They are seen as independent and advise students from the standpoint of a current design professional/consultant, as they are generally less integrated in the daily course responsibilities.

“When sucked into teaching too much one can lose practice and this is a danger” (teacher-practitioner, 2009).

Although teacher-practitioners are highly valued, there is also evidence that it is their industry experience that shapes their communication with students. There may be teaching and learning practices, which would enhance teacher-practitioners’ delivery of knowledge to students. Specialist practices that are derived from teacher-practitioners may also enhance programme delivery and complement the expertise of academic staff. It may be appropriate to fine-tune when and how to involve teacher-practitioners to ensure they contribute more effectively to shaping the curriculum.

Interestingly, teacher-practitioners do not place design ability at the top of the list of skills students need to acquire. Rather, attributes associated with the workplace and industry, communication, attitude in the workplace and team working ability are considered most important. If HE is to deliver what is expected

3 Non-contracted staff are employed extensively to delivery specialised skills and courses in business, law and specialist technical, occupational skills. They also deliver guest lectures and are central to industry-based extra-curricula programmes.

of students to succeed in employment, as expressed through these findings, it would appear to confirm the contribution of teacher-practitioners as a necessary part of the learning experience.

Industry-based learning opportunities may become increasingly threatened in the recession. In the face of reduced funding to HE the role of the teacher-practitioner may be vulnerable and placements may be more difficult to sustain. There may be fewer resources available for visiting teachers from industry. The impact of increased student fees may trigger a fall in applications and enrolments, which could in turn adversely impact on the health of courses.

Full and part-time teachers, including teacher-practitioners in HE already work under considerable pressure including the need to undertake scholarly work which sustains and enhances their teaching practice and subject knowledge. The findings suggest that there are additional pressures to engage in research that brings funding (and prestige) to institutions, teaching responsibilities that involve planning, preparation and assessment, and numerous administrative tasks. Any increase in these pressures could adversely impact on the special roles of teacher-practitioners.

As budgets are reduced the role of non-contracted teacher-practitioners is vulnerable³. Therefore, it is more important that contracted staff are given the opportunity to actively engage with industry on a regular basis. In addition, it may be possible for institutions to become more entrepreneurial in their engagement with industry professionals for example, through knowledge transfer partnerships, competition launches, sponsorships and so on. A commitment to continued engagement with teacher-practitioners within courses is key to preparing students for work in the global markets of the creative industries in the 21st century. Acting on this commitment will help ensure that the balance between education and industry experience remains a key feature of graduates' experience as they enter a vulnerable market.

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