

Fashion Design Education as Leadership Development

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Abstract

This paper explores design education as leadership development, specifically in the teaching of sustainability to fashion design students. Leadership development refers to the generation and fostering of leadership capacity in others, in this case in fashion design students by their instructors. Fletcher & Grose (2012) outline a vision of new roles for the fashion designer, including designer as educator-communicator, designer as facilitator, and designer as activist. This paper connects these ideas to leadership development and explores overlaps between ideas of ‘citizenship’ and leadership. Issues of sustainability are too complex for any individual person or company/organization to solve alone; solutions require leadership across the hierarchies of different organizations in the global fashion system. Following Kotter (2013), the paper makes a distinction between leadership and management. Management is a set of tasks such as staffing, budgeting, and planning, while leadership is about vision, behaviour and bringing about useful change not limited to a particular part of an organizational hierarchy. Farr (2010) approaches teaching as leadership in secondary education, and the ideas translate to tertiary education relatively easily. This paper responds to the questions: Can design educators be creators of leaders of change? What successful strategies exist for such an approach? The paper sets a research agenda, in part arising from examples of leadership demonstrated by alumni.

Keywords: design education, leadership development, sustainability, pedagogy

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Introduction

In this paper I explore design teaching as leadership development, more specifically in the context of teaching fashion design at university level. The paper sets a research agenda with an aim to be relevant for most design educators across design disciplines. The year 2017 marked fifteen years for me as a fashion educator in Australia and the United States, nine of those in a full-time capacity. My research has focused on various facets of fashion and sustainability for almost as long, and that research drives my teaching. I strive to educate my students to be designers capable of addressing various issues of unsustainability in the fashion system, and to design and create systems that create sustainability. In response to currently undertaking a post-graduate certificate in leadership and change I see that there are overlaps between what I call ‘citizenship’ with my students, and leadership. There is an opportunity to be more rigorous in terminology, as well as investigate leadership development among fashion design students and graduates. This paper outlines a research proposal for this investigation.

Context

As an example of the unsustainability in the fashion system, we are now manufacturing approximately 150 billion garments each year (Kirchain, et al, 2015). Fashion consumption is uneven in its distribution: Cline (2012) states an average US citizen to buy 68 garments and 7 pairs of shoes each year. Matthews (2016) reports on a study that claims that of all clothing produced, a third is sold at full retail price, a third is sold at a discount, and a third is not sold at all – it is landfilled or incinerated instead. Finally, the fashion system does not spare people in its wastefulness: since 2012, more than 1,500 garment workers have died in factory accidents in Bangladesh, Pakistan and China (Rissanen, 2017).

Fletcher & Grose (2012) outline a range of new roles for the fashion designer in the frame of sustainability in fashion. These include designer as educator-communicator, designer as facilitator, and designer as activist. In this paper I connect some of these ideas to leadership development; these new roles provide an opportunity to reframe fashion design education. Farr (2010) approaches teaching as leadership at the grade, middle and high school levels. I expand from Farr’s ideas of teaching as leadership to teaching as leadership development at the university level. I will draw the overall context from a recent paper, presented as a manifesto (Rissanen 2017), in which I framed design education as a future-making activity. In this paper I aim to respond to the questions: Can design educators be creators of leaders of change? What might be successful strategies for such an approach?

Terminology: Design Leadership and Leadership Creativity

An initial review reveals that literature tends to collapse design leadership within design management, making little distinction between the two. Outside of design discourse, Kotter (2013) makes a clear and useful distinction between leadership and management. Management is a set of well known tasks such as staffing, budgeting, and planning, while leadership is about vision, about behavior and about bringing useful change, not limited to a particular part of an organization hierarchy. Kotter in fact says: “leadership is increasingly needed from more and more people, no matter where they are in a hierarchy”. This is certainly true when it comes to issues of sustainability in the fashion system: it will require leadership at the individual level across the hierarchies of different organizations in the global fashion system. Through the new roles for the fashion designer, there is an opportunity to rethink the term design leadership unburdened by ideas of extant hierarchies, particularly in connection with management.

Ruppert-Stroesku & Hawley (2014) provide a useful framework for creativity in fashion design education: “Leadership Creativity overrules current archetypes and shifts the sector in a new direction while Adaptive Creativity integrates existing paradigms into a direction the sector is already trending.” Imagining bold solutions to complex systemic problems of unsustainability in fashion calls for Leadership Creativity. For example, issues of wastefulness in fashion are inseparable from the dominant economic paradigm: in my teaching I frame the global economic systems as a design problem to fashion design students, using the visual tools provided by Raworth (2017). In this respect, the scope of Ruppert-Stroesku & Hawley’s study is limited: it is focused on the design of fashion products and does not extend to the design of fashion systems. Sustainability in fashion systems requires both: as well as designing products, that is clothing, we also need to design the systems in which those products are created, purchased, used and returned back into the system as a resource. Leadership Creativity is a key attribute to be developed and fostered in fashion design education to create systemic change for fashion sustainability. While at Parsons we are relatively comfortable now about framing classroom activities in systemic contexts, I see an opportunity for us to share about that work more widely at conferences and through scholarly publications, to prototype curriculum and pedagogy and provide critical feedback within and between institutions.

Leadership as co-operation

Issues of sustainability are too complex for any individual and even an individual brand to solve alone. In 2010 a large number of global fashion and apparel brands, many of them direct competitors, came

together to form the Sustainable Apparel Coalition to solve issues of unsustainability in their operations. I use the Coalition as an example of co-operation by competitors, because historically the BFA Fashion Design program has been set up to be highly competitive. Students are pitted against each other, and I see this at times becoming a hindrance to leadership development. Leadership development is more effective in a collaborative setting. In 2012 a student of mine had some of her thesis collection garments stolen while in transit from a photo shoot, less than a week before the final deadline. The program director allowed the student a short extension. The other students finished and submitted their garments by the deadline and came in for two days over a weekend to help the student recreate the stolen, labor-intensive garments. She would not have been able to recreate them by herself. This may sound trivial but in the context of a highly competitive program this was almost unheard of. I see it as leadership in the form of collaboration. Johnson (2017: 293) discusses leadership in cooperative groups: no-one succeeds unless the whole group does. Throughout the students' senior year I had emphasized the necessity of co-operation in solving problems of unsustainability in fashion. Although the problem that arose was not focused on unsustainability, the lesson seemed to have been grasped: by the Monday this student was able to submit her thesis work, and the entire class was complete for their presentations. It was clear from the class responses that this was an all-round rewarding experience. It is a story I still share with students six years later to make a point about the importance of collaboration. There are tensions between collaboration and competition in fashion and sustainability that further research ought to explore.

New Roles – and Leadership Qualities – for the Fashion Designer

Fletcher and Grose (2012) outline a range of new roles for the fashion designer, among them designer-as-facilitator (of new relationships between previously unconnected stakeholders, for example) and designer-as-educator (of consumers or of an industry partner), and designer-as-activist (for example, Safia Minney's anti-slavery work). For the most part unconstrained by commercial constraints, fashion design education is well placed to generate what may currently seem like utopian notions of fashion design in the reality of a studio classroom. The authors focus more on the tasks, less on the qualities, that these roles might entail or require. A key leadership quality according to Johnson (2017: 78) is integrity, which he defines as wholeness or completeness. Wholeness is honoring one's word. I bring this to my teaching: how are we going to change the lives of garment workers in Bangladesh if we are lying to ourselves or each other? I strive to keep any conversation about morality away from conversations of integrity: wholeness simply is honoring one's word, or not. Integrity in turn is connected with authenticity, another leadership quality. There is an opportunity to expand upon

Fletcher & Grose's proposal, to give shape to these new roles in terms of qualities that those roles require as well as the tasks within them. Further research will investigate recent graduates' views on these ideas.

Growth Mindset: Looking Forward

Farr (2010: 176) discusses teachers who view themselves as works in progress, as having a growth mindset. For such teachers mistakes become catalysts and opportunities for learning and further development. Throughout my 15 years of teaching I have had little formal training in teaching. In recent years I have become more strategic about my own professional growth and development, and I have taken advantage of workshops at The New School to expand my teaching skillset. Mostly however I have been self-taught as a teacher. In the early years the self-teaching was a survival response. I would have a challenging time in the classroom and ask colleagues for advice on how to manage certain situations. More recently it has been more strategic in the way that examples that Farr (2010: 175-182) describes: scheduling time for review and reflection of my own teaching effectiveness. Writing this short paper I see that in order to develop leadership in my students, I need to teach them to schedule time to review and reflect on their effectiveness and learning, and development as near-future leaders. (I have reservations about the term "future leader". I see no reason why my students cannot be leaders right now, and many in fact are, among their different communities.) This is something I will be taking forward to future semesters, as I do see all of my students as leaders. We maybe in one of the most privileged institutions in one of the most privileged nations - acknowledging that privilege in the United States is very unevenly spread across different segments of the population - and with that privilege comes a great opportunity. Our international student body upon graduation has a potentially global impact if we are to train our students as leaders as well as designers. I do firmly believe we can do both. A former student, Carmen Gama, is now leading a completely new, sustainability-focused design program at Eileen Fisher and is invited to speak nationally about the initiative. Another former student, Lucy Jones, is a global leader in designing fashion for people in wheelchairs, and speaks globally on the issues on a regular basis. In 2017 her work was featured in three major museum exhibitions, including the recently concluded 'Items' at the MoMA. Gayatri Jolly, a Parsons graduate from 2014, returned to her native India and set up an educational program, Master G, that trains underprivileged women in both garment making and business skills, such that the women are capable of advocating for themselves in an often precarious manufacturing industry. In short, the evidence is all around me, alive in alumni, that fashion designers can practice leadership in their work in myriad ways. In turn, I have the capacity to strategically and

actively build leadership training into my teaching practice each semester, no matter the course I teach. There is an opportunity to document the curricular and pedagogical approaches and the results, and begin sharing these with my colleagues. There is also an opportunity to invite colleagues to share their experiences in this: while many of my colleagues may not regard what they do as leadership development, I know from the results (Jones and Jolly were not students in my courses) that it is an inherent part of many colleagues' teaching practice. Bowman (2004: 188) states: "...school leaders must teach not only students but also each other". Both The New School Provost's Office as well as my department, the School of Fashion at Parsons, host faculty development workshops where colleagues share their expertise with one another. Bowman also calls for mentorship, which I see as essential and complimentary to the faculty development workshops; formal and informal mentoring structures could be built into various existing structures of faculty interaction, to foster a culture of leadership development among educators.

In teaching fashion and textiles sustainability, often the scope is limited to technical aspects of the designed products, for example, the environmental impacts of farming a particular fiber or the toxicity of a dye chemical. These are vital, and we must teach such issues, however factual information alone does not empower design graduates sufficiently as change makers when they enter an industry that is paradoxically fixated on continuous change and concurrently resistant to any systemic change within it. (The current 'retail apocalypse' as the trade press has dubbed it, is evidence enough of the latter point.) I scan the somewhat limited (and thus manageable) scope of scholarly journals on design education regularly and doing the review for this paper revealed that there is a limited amount published on leadership development in design education. There is an opportunity and a need for fashion design educators to more intentionally research leadership development within their pedagogy, and how leadership 'lives on' post-graduation. Systemic change in fashion requires leadership across and irrespective of organizational hierarchies, and leadership development ought to be a priority for fashion design education.

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