

Teaching for sustainable development: Designing a responsible business elective

Natascha Radclyffe-Thomas

London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London, United Kingdom

n.radclyffethomas@fashion.arts.ac.uk

Abstract

This short paper describes the motivations, intentions, experience and results of designing and delivering a responsible business elective. In so doing, this paper explicitly addresses two of the conference themes: Power and Society; more specifically the subthemes of Fashion education for equality and Fashion entrepreneurship and sustainable prosperity.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the numbers of social enterprises in fashion, where businesses whose founders are balancing profits with their ethical and charitable practices. Social enterprise is operating at all levels of the market and at differing size operations. With fashion businesses increasingly focusing on their environmental and social responsibilities, and students vocalizing their desire to work for responsible companies (UN PRME News, 2016), business schools are challenged to reconsider their curriculum and integrate sustainability into teaching and learning experiences (Chitrakorn, 2016).

A key distinction of effective education for sustainability is to embody cooperative practices within the classroom, to avoid mere transmission of facts and opinions, and instead to foster sustainability literacy (Stibbe & Luna, 2009) whereby students are empowered to recognize and develop the 'skills, attitudes, competencies, dispositions and values' required to address global challenges.

The author developed a week-long elective *The Purpose Economy: Doing Business for Good* designed to give students a critical understanding of the complexities and opportunities for sustainable fashion businesses. Using a case teaching approach students were introduced to models of social enterprise across market levels, and operating internationally and participated in creative problem solving facilitated through role plays, debate and simulations that addressed product development, marketing and management functions. Working in teams, students were tasked with proposing their own social enterprise start-up that would address both local and global sustainability challenges. At the close of the elective students were asked to reflect on their personal learnings with many reporting personal and professional transformations: 'My vision of working in a company has changed. I would like to work in a company that does not only aim for profit, but that has another purpose from behind: to think about the environment and to make sure that nobody does a terrible job for this company.'

‘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 for society, yet it’s more like an obligation for business to conserve what nature had given us and preserve it in a sustainable way.’

The paper will outline how social enterprise fashion businesses are providing new models and fashion futures for our graduates and how a focus on sustainability that encourages dialogue and debate we can facilitate transformative learning experiences.

Keywords: Teaching, sustainability, responsible business, social enterprise

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