

Problem-based learning as ethical enquiry in fashion branding and communication education

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Abstract

Contemporary art and design education institutions in the UK face multiple challenges pulling their curricula in opposing directions. As an example, students are framed as ‘customers’, with policymaking that tries to satisfy their demands (McVitty, 2011) in ways which contrast the value of risk historically associated with the art and design school (Gale, 2020).

However, fashion branding and communication education is well-versed at inhabiting conflict points like these, as the discipline requires educators to balance seemingly competing priorities: apparent binaries like ‘marketing vs ethics’ or ‘environment vs fashion’ aim to be discussed, unpacked and held in creative tension.

Over the last two years these globally-relevant issues have become even more pressing. Environmental degradation caused by overconsumption (WRAP, 2017), systemic racism (Legesse, 2020) and unjust and unhealthy labour (Loscialpo and Mongelli, 2021) are perpetuated and expressed in fashion branding and communication industries. Meanwhile, higher education itself has been called to reckon with its history of colonialism (Hack, 2020).

As students become increasingly aware of and embedded in these global issues, their narratives reflect the lived experience of navigating these contradictions while training for professional settings. As one of our

students lamented, battling with the ubiquitous image-making she perceived as crucial to industry success: 'Another fashion photo of a white girl in a puffy dress in a river - what story are you even trying to tell?'

For Global Fashion Conference 2021, we ask: with these macro and micro experiences at the heart of our pedagogy, how will we continue to teach and promote our discipline? How will we - or can we - handle these frictions and conceptual strain? We propose a problem-based learning workshop to explore answers to this question and begin to develop a global professional learning community around teaching for and in times of systemic change.

At the workshop, participants will be presented with a purposefully ambiguous scenario grounded in this dissonance; an irregular problem which does not offer a single trajectory or rationalised answers (Simone, 2014; Grigg and Lewis, 2017) but rather will encourage participants to consider alternatives from their own experience or from radical re-imaginings of their profession.

The workshop will use digital technologies to bring the problem to life, and accessible, appropriate tools so participants can easily record and later share their thoughts.

The expected results at the conference are 1) documentation of ideas from international participants on moving forward with fashion marketing education in a time of significant systemic upheaval; 2) to trigger the reframing of teaching practice paradigms in participants' minds; and 3) the beginnings of a professional learning community.

This workshop and results are relevant for fashion theory and practice as it will support the advancement of understanding of these global multi-faceted issues and the impact they have in educational and professional settings. Embracing their importance and embedding them in teaching paradigms, even as they are inescapable, unsolvable and irrational, will contribute to stepping away from perceptions of dichotomies and taking a more contemporary, holistic approach. The ultimate goal is thus to better prepare our students for the reality of professional practice in the fashion branding and communication industry, and as a global citizen.

Keywords: fashion education, education for sustainable development, problem-based learning, fashion branding and communication

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