

Fashion Students Engaging in Iconic Designs in a Business World

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Introduction

The significance of fashion as part of modern popular culture is well acknowledged through the media. In turn, its growing sense of respectability has been taken up by academia through studies, which have examined fashion in terms of its social, cultural, political and economic history. In addition, universities have acknowledged its importance in the global economy and as a consequence the number of fashion business courses has increased over the past decade in order to meet both the demands of industry and also students looking to study this subject in higher education. The challenge for those delivering such courses is to ensure that the needs of industry are met and, in doing so, ensure that students understand that the subject, which is informed by aesthetics, anthropology, psychology, linguistics, sociology, cultural as well as business studies, is given the gravitas that it deserves as oppose to something that is merely frivolous and fun wherein enthusiasts are only informed about fashion through the pages of Vogue, Elle and other glossies. In all, the subject is understood to be academic and one that draws upon multiple disciplines.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe and evaluate a study that employed web based technologies blended with both classroom activities and a field visit to the Victoria and Albert (V&A) museum as part of teaching and learning the subject of fashion. Particular focus of the study was on the field visit. More specifically, the study drew upon first year undergraduate students, who typically, as they make the transition from school or college to university, are faced with problems including the move from small class sizes in school to very large class sizes in university, from structured study plans to independent learning. Such problems can be compounded by a potential misinterpretation of the subject area, which in the case of fashion can easily arise in that, for the reasons outlined above, students may perceive the subject to be something quite different to what

both academia and industry understand it to be. In all, the purpose of the study was to encourage students to engage with the subject matter in a scholarly manner, using the stimulus of a coursework assessment, which revolved around the field visit to the V&A. Together with increasing the students' understanding of the concept of fashion, the educational visit also aimed encourage students to work together in small teams, and thus 'make friends' to develop a sense of belonging; provide a forum for students to engage with their subject matter more and; to develop their academic skills through writing a carefully scaffolded set of 'patchwork texts 'stitched' together by a reflective commentary of their learning during the module.

In all, the chapter reports findings arising from an evaluation of teaching and learning implemented during this study. In doing so, this chapter draws upon field notes made by the lecturing staff accompanying students on their visit, and of the assessment (a presentation) where students presented their 'product' in small groups. Issues raised by the literature review, as well as the site visit, were incorporated into a pilot questionnaire, which was completed by approximately two thirds of the students. This pilot study was subsequently followed up by two subsequent data collections, one pre the visit to the V&A and one post visit. Selected extracts from this data, consisting of students' reflective commentaries, are included in the chapter to illustrate perceptions on their learning experiences.

Encouraging Engagement with the Subject

The purpose of museums is to facilitate access to knowledge that the museums themselves hold (Mencarelli et al., 2010). In recent years, it has become the norm that museums accept the constructivist view to learning, that is, focus is on what the museum contributes to the visitor's existing knowledge. Taken to the extreme, Fritsch (2007) identifies that there is:

'no museum knowledge except for that which the visitor constructs in his or her head.' (Fritsch, 2007, p.2)

Hence the role of the curator is not about producing instructional materials about an object, but rather to facilitate the learner in exploring and discovering. In all, museums are acknowledged

as places for learning however it is the learner who constructs their own learning. This view is summed up by Bayne et al. (2009) who state:

‘the phenomenal presence and status of the collected artefact remains important, but less so than the ability of the individual museum user-learner to access and make meaning from it.’ (Bayne et al., 2009, p.112)

It can be determined therefore that museums encourage visitors to engage with the artefacts through inspiring the visitor to explore them within the context of their own personal histories, that is, their experiences and previous knowledge.

Encouragement Engagement with Peers

Traditional education understands learning to be a largely secluded relationship between the learner and the material to be learnt. The only other being in this relationship is the teacher who is in control whilst the learner is both compliant and passive. Constructivism rejects this view and holds that learning is a social activity. Hein (1991), writing on museums, supports this notion. Indeed, in acknowledging this, museums strive hard in being identified as social environments wherein experiences may be shared, for example through the provision of restaurants, shops and cafes. Albeit, these facilities contribute to the overall profits of the organisation, nevertheless they are designed to extend the experience of the museum visit and facilitate social interaction and are now commonplace in both small and large museums alike (Mencarelli et al., 2010).

Closely linked to social activity, is the concept of entertainment in museums that further extends the opportunity for engagement and which Stephen (2002) identifies, along with education is also an objective of museums. Evidence of educational objectives are presented in the Victoria and Albert museum’s ‘*Ten Commandments for Learning at the V&A*’, for example:

‘Our belief is that learning at the V&A can develop talent and creativity in our visitors, through looking, thinking and making.’ (V&A, 2009, p.1)

Whereas, in addition, the V&A’s mission states:

'To be the world's leading museum of art and design; enriching people's lives by promoting knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of the designed world' (Frampton & Davies, 2011, p.1)

Museums give rise to the notion of edutainment, wherein initiatives have been undertaken in order to blur educational and enjoyment and social interaction. Examples of such initiatives include: the V&A's Summer Camp in 2010, which was a two day celebration of design with the purpose of sharing design and knowledge skills. It included live entertainment, creative workshops and a communal campfire tent. Alternatively, in 2006 the Tate Modern, erected 'Test Site' by the artist Carsten Holler, which was composed of five giant slides, the object of the art being a "playground for the body and the brain". Whilst such initiatives have met with criticism, for example, the 'spectacularisation' of art (Barnes, 2011), nevertheless, such creative and inventive events provide productive environment for sharing ideas, discussion, learning and reflection.

The Study

The Module

The module through in which this assessment was delivered – Studying Marketing and Operations, is a higher orientation module in that it provides an introduction to the learning strategies, which students need to successfully study in Higher Education. Further to this, it introduces students to researching subject material from a wide variety of sources and; provides them with a framework for the development of a range of skills contributing to a reflective portfolio of personal development. The objectives of the module are identified in the learning outcomes,:

On successful completion of this module students will be able to:

- (1) Understand how to build upon their previous learning and develop strategies for individual success at Certificate, Intermediate and Honours level study;
- (2) Demonstrate their ability to work in a group with other students, using written, oral and interpersonal skills;
- (3) Use evidence from a range of sources and critically use information gathered to reflect and solve problems creatively within an appropriate ethical framework

Fashion students need to be equipped with knowledge of key people in the profession, together with these key peoples' values and judgments, in order to understand how these particular individuals' work has been promoted over that of others. In order to facilitate this understanding, the students were set a project focused on a field visit to the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A). The V&A has an international reputation as a museum showcasing art and design. Students were tasked to devise a new product inspired by the V&A collection and present ideas for merchandising it. To scaffold student learning, the students had access to a bespoke interactive website (Figure 1) that introduced the task, and guided the students through a set of practical and reflective exercises designed to support their final portfolio. Specific areas covered were the theory behind teamwork with a self test task to profile the students preferred role in a team setting; sections guiding research; presentation skills as well as a final gallery where their final products could be showcased, the 'style gallery'. The range of tasks housed within the website drew upon a multimedia suite of products, in order to digitize some of the key Fashion artifacts housed at the V&A, and thus offer the students a customised resource they could relate to their chosen discipline.

Congratulations, you have been appointed as new managers of the Merchandise Enterprise and Design team for the Victoria and Albert museum! Your team is responsible for developing innovative and creative merchandise products that will help visitors appreciate and enjoy the museum's exhibitions.

The Board of Directors of the Victoria and Albert Museum have said:
 "We want you to come up with a new, different and exciting product based on one of our works of art. You have no limits! We really want to inspire people to visit our gallery. Come back to us with a proposal."

During the course, your team will make a short presentation about your ideas for merchandising the fashion piece.

NEXT

This project is designed to enable students to make an immediate start on a piece of assessed work.

Figure 1.0 Introductory image for the website, which hosts the learning activities
<http://learning.londonmet.ac.uk/LMBS/fashion>

In addition, the free wetpaint wiki (www.wetpaint.com) was used to encourage students to develop their thoughts and written progress through their first semester at university. The commercial aspect of this website (wetpaint is free to use but is funded by commercial advertising) was seen as a beneficial aspect, relevant to students studying fashion marketing in that wetpaint wiki provides a learning opportunity with regards to public relations, advertising and communications. Using this website exposed students to targeted media and, indeed, this was part of the 'in class' discussions.

An analysis of the student wiki sites showed that those who chose to engage with this technology moved away from pure description, into analysis.

"A clever stunt by Chanel, that got their show heavily reported by international media, was the performance of Lily Allen half way through proceedings. Wearing Chanel spring/summer 2010, she appeared with a band in a hut that rose from the floor, and sang her single 'Not Fair'. It could be argued that, however original and spectacular, this act took all attention away from the rest of the clothes."

Extract from Holley & Oliver (2011)

In the subject specific module, also studied by this student cohort, 196 of 198 students opted to join the Fashion Marketing' lecturers' facebook group, where he posted a regular blog links and information about contemporary fashion and design. Thus the students were introduced to the different business models offered by the advances in the web 2.0 world.

The Assessment

The assessment strategy for the module was informed by the learning outcomes. Stimulated by the thought of exploiting the potential learning benefits that the V&A museum has to offer, that is, having an international reputation as a museum show casing art and design and in particular, it's collection of fashion and accessories from 17th century to the present day. This furnished students, via a V&A artefact, for example a Katharine Hamnett 1980's slogan T-shirt,

with the opportunity to demonstrate innovation and business flair by devising a new product that would be appropriate to sell in the museum shop. An example of this is the design of earrings and other accessories such as handbags that would complement the concept of the original slogan T-shirt. In this way, the curriculum design is matching up student's creativity with the sharp business acumen demanded by employers in the competitive fashion industry. In addition, to the production of a new product, students were also asked to undertake small group presentations, the aim of this being, to enable students to experience team working in a supported environment.

Guidelines for the Group Presentation

"Your team should brainstorm ideas for an innovative product based on your piece of artwork; In order to do this, you should sift through the various ideas and relate these to three interesting facts that you have found out about your selected artefact, for example a pair of gloves from 1660-1680: - you will have discovered that gloves at that time played an important role in communicating the wealth and status of the wearer, often through the use of silk ribbons. In turn, for your product, you may decide to incorporate ribbons, as in the late 17th century, to symbolise wealth, but now in the 21st century e.g. pimp a nike trainer?"

You should find out about the customer profile of visitors to the V&A as this will influence your choice of product; You should consider product function e.g. does the product exhibit some kind of status (e.g gloves in the mid 17th century); political ideals (e.g. Katherine Hamnett 1980's T-shirt); protection; shock or denote belonging to a particular subculture or tribe; You should draw on marketing theory to support your rationale for your choice of product, price, promotion and place. (This will require you to carry out research about your product category)."

Iconic design

The students needed to incorporate both business acumen and design skill to successfully market their product during the assessed team presentations. To familiarise the students with iconic design, a set of activities were scheduled the week prior to the visit to the museum, where students were shown an image of *Marilyn*, by Andy Warhol, and asked to work in pairs to define exactly why *Marilyn* has iconic status. This original Warhol a silk screen on canvas piece that originates from a multi image diptych (pair) format produced in 1962. The painting is based on a photograph of actress Marilyn Monroe taken by Gene Korman in 1953 for *Niagara* (1953) the film that propelled Monroe to star status

(www.webexhibits.org 2010). This particular double artefact, *Marilyn Diptych*, is housed at the Tate Modern; London.

After the discussion, students were able to access a two page document from the Virtual Learning Environment, prepared by an expert tutor, which set to deconstruct the types of writing about art and design that students, many from a widening participation background, had not previously accessed.

“This paper will discuss the iconography of both the artwork and the actress, highlighting the concept of celebrity. Additionally, the influence of the artefact will be analysed in order to provide an insight into popular culture whilst an evaluation will be made to illustrate the ubiquity, longevity and the overall impact of the piece” (Wallace 2009).

Process of the Data Collection

Data was collected, in the first instance in December 2009 in the form of a pilot questionnaire and distributed to all first year Fashion Marketing students who took the Studying Marketing and Operations module. The timing of this data collection occurred after the V&A visit and after students had completed their presentation. The purpose of the pilot study was to elicit initial impressions of the learning experience and the assessment students were asked to undertake. The design of the questionnaire consisted of predominantly closed questions, with three opportunities to add free text. A total of 47 responses were elicited, approximately two thirds of the module cohort.

Subsequent data collections took place, both with the aim of collecting open and reflective statements from students. The first data collection took place in September 2010 at course induction i.e. at the very start of students embarking upon a university education. Students were asked to identify whether they visited museums and what was good and what was bad about them.

All Fashion Marketing students who attended the induction produced reflective statements. This totalled 56 students. These students were a different cohort than those who completed the pilot questionnaire. The second data collection took place in March 2011 on the same students who had attended induction. This totalled 21 students. All reflective statements were anonymous. In terms of limitations of the study, final reflections from students were collected at the end of the taught module, approximately 12 weeks after the module had been taught. However, as indicated below, transformative learning may not occur to the student until later. Therefore it would be beneficial to follow up this study further, perhaps at the end of the students' course.

Student Reflections

Engagement with museums

The students surveyed were all Fashion Marketing students, the subject they had chosen to take at university. Given the creative nature of the course, as might be expected, many of the students, at induction, stated in their reflections that they visited art galleries and museums. For example, many mentioned that they had visited the V&A. However their interests were broad, that is, beyond matters of art. This is evident in the reflections presented below, which are representative of the numerous comments made by individual students. It is clear there is an engagement and interest in museums.

'My favourite museum to visit in London is the Science Museum as I find it the easiest to interact with and the most interesting'. ... 'Favourite museums - Science Museum, Moma, Tate Modern and V&A' ... 'The best thing about museums are that you can concentrate on anything you like.'

Whilst a number of students stated that they had visited museums as part of school trips, that is, not on their own initiative, others made reference to museums they had visited independently whilst travelling to countries such as Singapore and India. In addition, some mentioned specific museums e.g. 'FOAM' photography museum in Amsterdam; the Shoe Collection in Northampton; Leopold museum in Austria. Further to this, some students reflected on

specific exhibitions, for example, 'Grace Kelly' and also the 'Golden Age of Couture', both of which were at the V&A. These students had visited these exhibitions prior to coming to university.

Purpose of a museum

Students comments reflect the museum literature, discussed above, that is, the purpose of a museum is about both education and enjoyment (Stephen, 2002):

'If people want to learn new things, for most, it is easier when looking at paintings or 3D objects rather than reading books, so it is a practical way of learning.'... 'Museums show you past and present pieces of art, help you gain inspiration or are just a fun day out.'... 'first hand experience of learning something.'... 'learning and understanding other cultures.'... 'makes you think imaginatively.'... 'Benefits of museums is that they educate inspire and fascinate me.'

A minority of students had never visited a museum and some had only visited whilst on school trips. Nevertheless, for a number of these students reflections expressed positive anticipation to museum visits:

'I would like to visit the V&A now that I live in London.'

In all, the majority of students were fully engaged with museums as places of education and enjoyment. It was only the very minority who had no interest.

Engagement with the subject

Limited reflections focussed on how or to what extent the assessment helped the students to better engage with their subject. However, what limited offerings there were, were positive. The reflections below are representation of statements made:

'fun to come up with product ideas and pitch it' ..'broaden my knowledge... interesting way of learning.'... 'fun way of learning.'..'it was extremely inspiring and evoked excitement.'

What the subject of fashion is about

'I have learned numerous things... firstly, fashion marketing isn't about drawing pictures and designing.'

Engagement with peers

It is evident from the large number of reflections made on working in groups that this aspect of the assessment was of much interest to many students. The comments indicate that there is some anxiety associated with working in this way. A number of negative comments were evident. However, despite negativity, some also offered reflections relating to learning that had taken place despite of a adverse group experience such as poor communications within a group. In all, some students were able to rise from the experience. Common amongst the reflections on group work was the acknowledgement that attaining a successful working group is very important. A number of students reflected the interpersonal skills required to do this as important in terms of employability.

'My previous groupwork experiences have not been very satisfactory as I had uncommitted members in the group before and was very anxious as to whether it would occur again. However I had formed a group with two very trustworthy and hard working people. We were determined to be successful in our presentation and get excellent grades.'

'I think groupwork is a very important skill to be able to perform ... it is needed throughout the whole of life, whether in work or social activities.'

'I learned that working within a team is not a simple task as it requires a balanced input from each member of the team in order to succeed. For the next time, I will try to engage and motivate the people in my group to achieve our common goal.'

'I unfortunately had to perform the group presentation on my own due to lack of communication with other group members.'

'good to do in a group as we all have different opinions and ideas.'

'I gained knowledge about forming relationships and choosing groups effectively.'

'I gained a strong sense of camaraderie.'

Whilst the idea of students sharing their learning and working together in groups is often understood to be something of value, it is evident from the above reflections that a number of issues can arise thereby making the student experience, both positive and negative. Gunn (2007) identifies some negative issues, for example, one being freeloading whereby students may interpret other students who seemingly are not contributing being rewarded marks whilst their hard working peers do all the work. Secondly, other issues identified include vocal dominance by a minority or just one person. Dealing with these kinds of issues demand well developed interpersonal skills. Exposing students to group work from the start of their university life helps to better equip them in these skills.

Interestingly, the results of pilot questionnaire indicated that none of the students visiting the V&A used the café or other social areas such as the shop. A reason maybe the prohibitive prices for food and drink in the café.

Skills Development

Initially, most students found the idea of having to create a product from an existing fashion artefact very daunting. Overall skills called upon to undertake the assessment were varied, many of which were commented upon in the reflections.

Specific skills:

'creating a questionnaire.'

With regards to presentation skills:

‘I got information on how to do a really good presentation. For example, I learned that such a simple thing like eye contact, smiling ... could make your presentation much better’.

‘The presentation was extremely beneficial in improving my presentation skills. .. It helped me with my timing.’

‘improving oral communication skills through group working and the presentation.’
... built more on my communication skills.’

Employability

‘I knew this [team work] was a must and I wouldn’t get far in my career without this skill.’

‘Negotiating, dealing with conflict, motivation strategies are all very important and I had opportunities to apply them.’

With regards to time management:

‘There was a positive aspect to my early start. Me and my workshop group went to the V&A. I took my camera with me to take pictures of the artefacts. The photographs helped a lot later on in the assessment.’

Learning environment

‘I enjoyed visiting the V&A as it was interesting to use resources other than the internet and the library.’

Overall

‘In general, this module has helped me by giving me the opportunity to develop my writing, observational skills as well as working in a group, presenting in a group and working with new people. I have also been able to fit this module well in with my other fashion marketing modules and feel they complemented each other nicely.’

Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter we have sought to capture student reflections on their learning experiences of a first year assessment, which specifically aimed at orientating students into higher education.

The assessment, which required students to work as a group, put students at the centre of their learning. In essence students took on the role of ethnographers through developing products, which were of interest to them as a group. It was not the artefact that was at the centre of the learning, for example, acquiring an understanding of the relationship between politics and fashion in the 1980's. Rather, it was the student and their learning and development, putting them in the position of acquiring and developing skills through undertaking the project.

Skills reflected upon by the students included for example: working in groups; undertaking oral presentations and time management. In particular, it was working in groups, which students choose to focus their reflection upon. Group work provided the opportunity for the lecturer to increase the complexity of the assessment. In turn, whilst there was some negativity evident in the statements, overall students reflected that they understood the benefits of group work for future employability.

Reflecting on the learning process, Falk and Dierking (2011) point out that learning is transformative, that is, it involves learning to reflect on the past and occurs over the long term. Therefore, in order for deep learning to occur, visitors of museums need reinforcing experiences long after the museum visit has taken place. Discussions taking place in the classroom, post the museum visit, allow for the opportunity for this to occur. In addition, student presentations, further allowed deep learning to occur. The museum's web site can also promote transformative learning. However none of the students referred to the V&A website as a place that they went to in order to further learned about the artefact that they had chosen. Indeed one student identified that visiting the museum itself was an attractive alternative to learning in the library or learning online. A number of previous studies (e.g. Tyler, 2010) have explored museum pedagogy. However these studies have predominantly focused on school children. From this, it might be assumed that museum's role does not encompass university level learners. Our study challenges this.

To conclude, the instance of this study, the findings indicate that adopting an innovative and creative approach to learning can encourage students to engage with **both business acumen and broader skills development.**

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