 

**Been there! Done it! Just not quite sure if I’ve earned the T-shirt.**

**The limits and possibilities of factory simulation in fashion pedagogy.**

**Key words**

Ethical fashion, production management, work-study, sweatshop labour, fashion pedagogy.

**Abstract**

Ethical fashion is now part of the mainstream of fashion courses but not all students necessarily embrace its message nor do existing pedagogical approaches achieve their objectives. This paper examines the process of simulating a factory manufacturing experience with level 4 Fashion Marketing and Design students.

The project raised considerable problems in planning and delivery both from a practical and ethical viewpoint. Transferring working practices from developing countries to an educational environment were thoroughly considered by the tutors, technicians and Ethics Committee. Health and safety guidelines were strictly applied whilst trying to mimic ‘real life’ factory conditions. The planning and final delivery of the project was successful so an operational blueprint now exists.

The paper will critically reflect on the limits and possibilities of factory simulation as an experiential learning tool for addressing a range of issues from sewing skills to sweatshop labour to production management and even performance art.

**Background: the importance of context in teaching fashion in HE**

In April 2008 the University of Northumbria appointed its first Professor in Ethical Fashion. This was the University’s first externally funded Chair and support for the post has come from two organizations - the Spanish multinational Inditex SA which owns the Zara brand, and the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers’ Federation, the Brussels based Global Union representing workers in over 230 trade unions in110 countries in the world.

The idea for the post emerged from the relationship between the two parties which had been cemented in a so-called international framework agreement on worker’s rights concluded in October 2007. International framework agreements are a new phenomenon in industrial relations which have moved social dialogue from a national to a global level.

The origins of the relationship between Inditex and the ITGLWF goes back to April 2005 when Javier Chercolés, the head of Corporate Social Responsibility of Inditex was woken early on the morning of the 13th April by an irate Neil Kearney, General Secretary of the ITGWF denouncing his company as ‘a merchant of death’. Inditex had been sourcing from Spectrum Sweaters Ltd, a factory in Bangladesh which had collapsed like a pack of cards early in the morning of the 11th April killing 64 workers and injuring, in some cases seriously, a further 84.The owner had extended the building to 8 floors without first acquiring planning permission. The joint quest to provide a pension scheme and rehabilitation for the families of the dead and the injured was the first practical outcome of this relationship between the two parties.

Following the signature of the agreement it was agreed, as part of a joint work agenda, to create a post in ethical fashion as a strategic intervention to address the curriculum in buyer training.

As is common in the emergence of new areas of study there is often imprecision in the use of terminology and definition. For a number of educationalists and actors in the industry ‘*Ethical* fashion’ has come to refer to the worker rights agenda. The Ethical Trading Initiative is, for example, primarily concerned with encouraging ‘retailers, brands and their suppliers to take responsibility for improving the working conditions of the people who make the products they sell,[[1]](#endnote-1) and the Labour Behind the Label/DFID initiative Fashioning an Ethical Industry aims to give a ‘[global overview](file:///M%3A%5Ccontext%5Caglobalindustry%5C) of the garment industry, raise awareness of [current company practices](file:///M%3A%5Cresources%5Creports%5Ccleanupfashion%5C) and of [[initiatives to improve conditions,](/resources/factsheets/%22%20%5Cl%20%22)](file://localhost/resources/factsheets) [and inspire students - as the next generation of industry players - to raise standards for workers in the fashion industry of the future’. For others, notably the Ethical Fashion Forum, the ethical agenda is much wider and concerns the promotion of sustainable practices to reduce poverty, environmental damage, and raise standards in the fashion industry[[2]](#endnote-2) In the USA, the Educators for a Socially Responsible Apparel Business have widened the scope to include issues of animal welfare, body image and consumer behaviour (Dickson & Eckmann 2006). It is not in the scope of this paper to engage in terminological debate. Suffice to say, although the exercise analysed here seeks to apply experiential learning in the area of working conditions, the activity has the potential for developing other elements in the ethical/sustainable fashion curriculum.](/resources/factsheets/%22%20%5Cl%20%22)

For many garment workers, poor working conditions and the abuse of human rights are an everyday experience. These are in the main caused by the particular configuration of the global apparel value chain in which the brand owners and retailers wield considerable ‘buyer driven’ commercial power (Gereffi 1994). For the past decade, ex factory prices have been falling against rising production volumes with consequent impacts on workers both in terms of pay and work intensification. (Miller & Williams 2009) Whilst there is undoubtedly an increasing awareness of an ethical agenda amongst both fashion staff and students (Garforth and Usher 2008:8-9), the fundamental drivers of unethical practice have, until recently, remained largely unaddressed.

Since buying and related activities appears to be the second major destination of fashion graduates (Goworek 2001), developing an awareness of the impact of purchasing practices (Hurley & Naushad 2005; Impactt/Traidcraft 2008)) would appear to be a key learning objective in the development of an ethical fashion curriculum. This assumes that such a curriculum is now part of the mainstream of fashion courses, and that all students and staff fully embrace its message. Existing pedagogical approaches may be challenged in this area. As Mo Tomaney has argued:

*‘Asking creative fashion students to consider human rights and ethics in the supply chain within a typical set design project defies the accepted boundaries that govern a creative fashion course’ (2009:31)*

One major way in which such issues can be broached is via a discussion of the product life cycle in whole or in part but in seeking to develop students’ understanding of the realities of working life for workers in garment manufacturing countries, there is a need to move beyond the abstract and theoretical in the dissection of the product life cycle through, as Thomas has argued, an empathetic approach. ‘Developing an emotional response for another living thing experiencing inequality’ (2009:19) generally points us in the direction of experiential learning. However, other than ad hoc encounters with visiting speakers (clothing workers) from key fashion sourcing countries, opportunities for empathetic work can appear limited.

This paper examines the process of creating a factory simulation in the sewing room of the Design School at the University of Northumbria as an empathetic tool in ethical fashion pedagogy. Students were given the opportunity to assemble T-shirts cut from their own patterns under factory conditions and rules for an 8-hour shift and took time out to reflect on the process. We critically reflect on the issue of authenticity in simulated learning situations and address the limits and possibilities of factory simulation as an experiential learning tool for addressing elements of an ethical fashion curriculum. A number of additional learning outcomes and possibilities are also considered.

This experiential phase was the second part of a brief to design an ‘ethical’ T- shirt which was set for the entire first year fashion degree cohort (embracing the three degree programmes of Design, Marketing and Communication). Students, formed cross-disciplinary teams to develop a design, marketing and launch concept for their shirt. These were presented in powerpoint format at the end of the semester. (Miller 2009a) The second, voluntary stage of this exercise involving the assembly of the actual T-shirt in a factory simulation, is considered in some detail below.

**The factory simulation**

There is, of course, no substitute for first-hand experience but for those colleges with sizable sewing room capacity we would argue that there is the available potential for introducing ‘authentic’ experiential learning opportunities in a workshop/small factory context. From a practical and ethical viewpoint, such simulation exercises can, however, raise considerable problems in planning and delivery.[[3]](#endnote-3) Transferring working practices and working conditions in developing counties to an educational environment were thoroughly considered by the tutors, technicians and the School ethics committee. There was an inevitable pull to describe the exercise as a ‘sweatshop experience’, but the ‘authentic’ simulation of a harmful working environment involving intensified work pace, physical and verbal abuse from supervisors (approaches were initially made to the School of Performing Arts to establish whether any students would be interested in playing the role of the ’bastard supervisor’ for a day), cramped conditions, and an extended working day until completion of the production target, inevitably raised some ‘ethical’ concerns of our own which were aired at the School Ethics committee. Some concerns were raised that striving for an element of authenticity might infringe the institution’s own codes of practice, and an additional ethical question related to possible discomfort caused to students who in the course of repetitive work over a prolonged period might sustain some injury. Consequently the project was clearly identified as a factory simulation and planned to take place over the course of one 8-hour working day with the main aim of emulating as near as possible the experience of a sewing machinist working in a production environment.

It cannot be assumed that students will want to involve themselves in such an exercise with great alacrity. It is an opportunity to develop sewing skills but conversely those students who are more favourably disposed to conceptual work may not be drawn to this. Pressures on the sewing room in the Design school meant that this could only be run optionally in the first instance although two assembly lines could have operated on the day. There is an argument for making such an activity a ‘core’ element of delivery for certain programmes.

Since the students would only be timed carrying out their assembly operations during the actual day, it was not possible to fix an actual target for the simulation, although actual performance in export factories from worker’s stories and case study material was referred to in preparatory and de-briefing sessions. The actual output achieved during a 7-hour shift was 95 pieces of acceptable quality, about one tenth of the performance of a similar workforce in an export factory.

**The central importance of design technician involvement**

The preparation and execution of the exercise had to be carefully planned and relied heavily on technicians to assist in the production. As former workers in garment manufacture, the design technicians were therefore critical to the success of the simulation. Their knowledge was essential for fabric procurement, configuration of the sewing room, line balancing, and quality control. Moreover, in the preparatory session with the students in which students were introduced to the ‘factory system’, it was possible to defer to the technicians for their first hand experience of supervision, pace of work and the working day.

**Impact on the learner**

Involvement in the factory simulation was entirely voluntary. Preparatory sessions involving the design technicians acquainted the students with factory systems, assembly line layout, supervisory regimes and unit labour cost (Miller 2009b). A de-briefing session allowed the students to reflect on and evaluate their own experience of the day[[4]](#endnote-4). It is too early to present any authoritative findings in relation to student response from such an exercise. However, a preliminary assessment by the students of this exercise was that in general they were exhausted and shocked at the demanding factory regime given that the collective output constituted about one tenth of a comparable assembly line in an export factory. Some of the individual responses can be seen in a short film[[5]](#endnote-5) of the simulation. It is planned to repeat the project in subsequent years using filmed extracts with feedback and involvement from each year’s cohort.

**Conclusions and recommendations**

A number of issues were raised in the evaluation of this project with a view to re-creating the experience for future students. When the project was initially suggested it was perceived as an interesting idea, but its relevance to the design realisation elements of the curriculum was questioned - the central aim being different from the practical design based projects that students usually undertake. On reflection the teaching teams consensus was that the experiential element of this project was extremely powerful, the project strength being that the hypothetical experience emulated is that of the producer/manufacturer rather than the designer. This initiative challenged accepted practice and has raised the opportunity of developing ‘live projects’ into experiences.

The project was difficult to organize and deliver but was successful in challenging accepted practice, delivering a strong ethical message and a memorable event for those involved. The cohort of students who took part in this project are now on Industrial Placement for a year, this activity will hopefully raise student awareness of responsible design and manufacturing practice and enable reflection on their own participation in the fashion industry.

Overall we would argue that such a factory simulation has the potential of providing fashion students with a first hand insight into a key element in a product life cycle and more specifically into the human impact of repetitive operations in garment assembly. A greater understanding and appreciation of the ‘relative’ values and contributions of workers at different parts of a garment value chain will hopefully equip graduates to address some of the wholesale inequalities which exist along the supply chains of our global fashion industry in the future. However, the pull to label such an exercise a ‘sweatshop experience’ not only has to be resisted, but also critically addressed, since it would be pretentious and unrealistic to imagine that students engaging for 7-8 hours with assistance from design technicians to meet quality targets can be remotely connected to the daily experience of garment workers in the supplier countries of some of our major fashion retailers in the UK.

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1. <http://www.ethicaltrade.org/about-eti> last accessed 09.09.09 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.ethicalfashionforum.com> last accessed 09.09.09 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. A detailed technical note on how the exercise was run can be made available [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. A number of the t shirts were printed with the winning logo from the first phase of the student project. Members of the winning group were presented with a printed shirt and all students who took part in the simulation were given a T shirt as a memento. The rest will be sold to raise funds for the next exercise. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The film can be viewed at www. INSERT URL HERE [↑](#endnote-ref-5)