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THE INFLUENCE OF REFLECTION
IN MY JOURNEY AS A FASHION PRACTITIONER

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Angela Newson

If I'd been asked 22 years ago when I graduated from university with my Diploma in Fashion Design and Technology where I saw myself in 20 years, I'm not sure I could have given a definite answer. It has taken travelling my expedition to figure out which stops I relished the most and therefore wanted to stay longer at.

After two decades working within the fast-paced, ever-evolving New Zealand fashion industry, predominately in technical manufacturing roles, I made the shift into a lecturing role where I can help prepare New Zealand's future generation of fashion practitioners. With this shift in career path, I decided the time was right to advance my qualifications while refining my practice. While researching options available to me to complete such study I came across Capable NZ, who offer an Independent Learning Pathway (ILP) which supports individuals like myself with strong professional backgrounds to prepare and present a portfolio that is submitted as evidence of successfully meeting the graduate profile for their chosen qualification.

This article is a record of the reflective journey I took while working towards my Bachelor of Design (Fashion) with Capable NZ and Te Pūkenga / Otago Polytechnic. Undertaking this study presented me with the chance to critically explore my life encounters and consider deeply how they have influenced my professional practice. It wasn't until commencing my ILP journey that I began to recognise and appreciate the magnitude of all my life experiences in connecting me with my place in the world today.

MY JOURNEY ITINERARY

The goals and plans I had set for myself when graduating from Massey University with my Diploma in Fashion Design and Technology in 2000 mimic the mood boards and illustrations of a new design. The career paths and directions I have traversed are akin to the sampling stage, with continual analysing, accessing and redirecting of a prototype until the desired outcome is realised. My journey as a fashion practitioner has not been a linear one, rather – much like the fashion design process – I have travelled a path full of twists and turns, with intersections requiring decisions on direction. Regardless of which way I went on this voyage, each leg of my journey has provided me with distinct and valuable experiences, all contributing to steering me to where and who I am as a fashion practitioner today.

As a professional, I have always focused on the journey rather than the destination – discovering through experience that what can seem like the most direct route may in fact not provide the experiences necessary to provide maximum learning. I am a strong believer in the ideology that 'everything happens for a reason' and, whether we know or understand it at the time, each experience in life is set to guide us in a particular way. For this reason, I have never been someone to say 'no' to opportunities presented. Throughout my professional practice I have ensured that I choose paths which not only orientate me towards my career goals, but also offer me scope for discovery and growth.

THE INITIAL LEG

It is not only the routes I have taken and the subsequent experiences I've acquired since gaining my Diploma in Fashion Design and Technology that have contributed to who I am today as a fashion practitioner. Many of the values and beliefs I live my life by were instilled in me from childhood, where the combination of a peaceful rural upbringing and my parents' positive examples helped shape my perceptions of the world and influence my character; becoming the roots that ground me both personally and professionally. Without the foundation of the safe, secure and nurturing environment I was raised in I wouldn't have the resilience, poise, curiosity, determination, integrity, adaptability and discipline I possess today as an adult. Each of these values have intertwined throughout my life experiences to contribute to my success as a fashion practitioner.

Growing up a part of rural New Zealand in the small central North Island township of Taihape – about as far from the fashion scenes of the time as one could get – it is sometimes a wonder to me how I chose the path I did. However, if I consider the isolation of a provincial upbringing I can appreciate how, as a young child, I learnt to use my imagination and ingenuity to entertain myself, nurturing my creative tendencies from my earliest days.



Figure 1. From rural Taihape to Fashion Design.

THE CONNECTING LEG

I was fortunate to embark on my career in fashion at a time when momentum was building in re-establishing a thriving local fashion industry after the challenges it had faced in response to the economic reforms of 1992, which saw import licenses removed and trade tariffs lowered, ultimately resulting in the dramatic downsizing of the local industry. Riding the wave of international recognition earned from the New Zealand Four's (NOM*d, World, Zambesi and Karen Walker) show at London Fashion week in 1999 (<https://teara.govt.nz/en/video/44308/london-fashion-week>), Kiwi designers were commencing a cultural revolution inspired by the increased level of international curiosity about New Zealand fashion.

I took on my first role in the industry in 2001, working as a junior patternmaker and production assistant for a small womenswear label, producing a range of effortless, classic pieces offered across a 8–24 size range and sold from our retail space on the Terrace in Wellington, alongside wholesale accounts. This role allowed me to hone the skills I had learnt at university while fully immersing myself in the fashion trade. I was privileged to experience the optimistic attitudes and relationships that marked the local industry. Designers were working together for the greater good, from collaborating in joint efforts to host the annual Wellington Fashion Festival to sharing sample machinists and CMT (cut, make trim) services. Designers understood the rewards to be gained for all when performing in unison.

Working within this tightknit fashion community meant that I was introduced to experts from many fields and able to receive valuable mentorship from those more practised than myself. I recall one instance feeling particularly privileged to receive one-on-one fitting instruction from the 1972 Benson and Hedges supreme award winner, Roland Wimmers – something I would never have benefited from if industry professionals at the time hadn't believed in the principle that collaboration maximises mastery. The learning I gained and the enhancement of my competencies in this role, both directly and indirectly, was extensive and enriched my future career greatly.

My next job was a natural advancement from the first – I secured a position as a senior patternmaker and production manager for a newly launched label producing a womenswear range of bold, whimsical, decorative designs inspired by the owner/designer's native Peru. This appointment provided me the opportunity to build on my technical strengths – maintaining a position specialising in patternmaking – while increasing my professional prowess by taking on the added responsibility of managing the day-to-day operations of a workroom. I was soon to realise that this role would challenge me in additional ways – unfortunately, the working environment proved to be strenuous, stemming from an owner who lacked trust and confidence in her team. The effect of this on the morale and efficiency of the workroom was immense and meant that I spent much of my time advocating for staff and resolving conflicts as they arose. However, beyond the negatives I encountered in this role, I still credit it with maturing my interpersonal skills and teaching me how to adopt an empathetic yet rational approach in my professional practice. The barriers I faced taught me how to take a conscious look at my emotions and respond positively for the sake of my own well-being. I learnt the power of resilience, while gaining a sincere appreciation for work environments where a positive and caring culture is exercised.

During my time in this role, I continued to engage with many of the industry contacts I had built up previously. Whether via brief catch-ups at suppliers or shared attendance at trade workshops, the conversations I had with numerous designers led me to detect what I believed was a real need in the industry. Various designers spoke about not being in a position to employ a patternmaker full-time and how great it would be if they could just contract patternmaking skills as and when they needed.

It was these conversations that encouraged me to take a leap of faith and establish myself as a freelance patternmaker, where I could utilise my abilities and expertise to benefit many while satisfying my desire for more control over my working life. My intuition paid off and, within the space of a year, through commitment, hard work and pure conviction, I had built up a client list of more than 15 Wellington labels, ranging from longstanding brands like Robyn Mathieson to some up-and-coming names of the time, twentysevennames, Kowtow and Alexandra Owen. In addition to the larger labels, I also provided my services to smaller start-up brands launching ranges in niche markets including babywear, yoga wear and uniforms, allowing myself to gain experience across a diverse array of markets.

Furthermore, self-employment gave me the freedom to sample additional sectors of the industry. In 2007 I was lucky enough to complete a three-month contract working with the Gibson Group on the television series *Timetrackers* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1425398/>), which gave me an appreciation of managing the tight turnarounds and long hours common in costume work. The catering offered was an extra privilege I hadn't experienced previously and one I could happily become accustomed to. It was also during my freelancing days that I first dipped my toes in the discipline of teaching – following my principle of never passing up opportunities, I accepted part-time tutoring roles at both Massey University and NZ Fashion Tech.

Freelancing did have its downsides, however, and along the way I fell prey to some of the traps. It took me a long time to learn how to say 'no' and to realise that clients would still provide me with work even if I couldn't fit it in immediately. I was at times so concerned with people-pleasing that I sacrificed my own down time and worked all hours to deliver everybody's work when they wanted it. Similarly, every few years I felt uncomfortable when I informed my clients that I would be increasing my hourly rate. While I recognised the value of my services and knew it was only fair that my income increased regularly, I always struggled with doing this. When learning how to become brave in business, I remembered observing in childhood all the hard work and determination that my parents put into running their own company. I had witnessed the importance of trust and mutual respect in their approach to business, and knew that I needed to implement these values to govern my own professional interactions. Over time, I gained an enhanced level of self-confidence and grasped the significance of my own inner strength and tenacity.

So greatly did I cherish my freelancing days that I continued contracting my services for over ten years, eventually winding down when starting a family. In 2015, after taking time to enjoy the treasured younger years at home with my daughters, I aspired to get back into the throes of the fashion industry. I began by taking up a role as patternmaker for a Sally Eagle Bridal, a designer producing bespoke wedding gowns both off-the-rack and made-to-measure. I cherished using my expertise to help create such intricate pieces, symbolising so much to the client.

After nearly four years in this role, I moved on to work a spell as the made-to-measure co-ordinator for local menswear brand Rembrandt. Working for a company with such a lengthy history as Rembrandt (established in 1946) gave me insight into what it takes to survive and thrive through the many challenges faced across the lifetime of a business. My role as made-to-measure co-ordinator allowed me to immerse myself in quality tailored pieces, many made from fine Italian fabrics, while exploring an area of the industry I was unfamiliar with. Gaining experience in offshore production opened my eyes to a whole new world of manufacturing considerations, such as time-zone differences, language barriers and international shipping. However, finding myself stuck behind a computer full-time failed to make my heart sing, and the thought of this becoming my long-term future quickly became a bleak prospect; I realised that I required a balance of creativity and structure to prosper in my professional practice.

REFLECTION ON MY TRAVELS

Working as a fashion practitioner in the various roles I have had throughout my career has meant operating within the intricacies of the fashion design process. Regardless of the specifics of the role I held at any one time, the process of taking a design from concept to production always involved me in a circular process of research, ideation, development and revision.

The more collections I was involved in creating, the greater I understood the necessity for this circular design process in accessing and responding to a garment's ability to be desirable to customers, viable for business and feasible in manufacturing. The problems I sometimes faced to ensure this outcome were many. Whether I was trying to figure out how to make a yield-heavy design fit a narrow fabric for Robyn Mathieson; how I could produce a quality finished garment without the use of any manmade notions for Kowtow; or how to replicate the aesthetic of a non-supporting backless wedding gown for a larger-busted bride at Sally Eagle, the solutions adopted required me to push beyond conventional thinking and adapt my practice to suit the complexity of the challenge.

To do these things successfully as a fashion practitioner takes confidence – a conviction I adopted over time through observation and reflection on my own work. By regularly reviewing the hurdles I met, I was able to be pro-active in my practice and use my past experiences to inform new solutions. I learnt through insight to carry a positive mindset and approach obstacles as opportunities for growth, a means of indulging my technical creativity and experimental instincts. As my experiences in the industry have grown, so has my practice-led expertise, resulting in an expanded inner catalogue of resolutions. As Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984) (McLeod, 2017) suggests, the development of new concepts is encouraged by new experiences.

Over time I learnt to approach new designs by developing fresh perspectives, to push beyond conventional thinking and reasoning. Without rejecting the rules and testing the practical boundaries, I, along with my new designs, may not reach full potential. As a natural stickler for structure and routine, I have had to train myself to be less stringent and more willing to deviate from the norm. It didn't take me too long to discover that when I pushed myself out of my comfort zone and used more flexible tactics, embracing innovation, I bolstered not only the success of the design, but my own critical thinking skills.

From the early days of my career, I have appreciated the benefits that can come from collaboration within professional practice. Through each stage of the design process, I consult with others. Whether interpreting illustrations with a designer or nutting out the best construction methods with a sample machinist, I have always enjoyed my problem-solving-in-action 'pow wows.' I have learnt that supporting this bringing together and sharing of the diverse knowledge on offer in a workshop lends diverse viewpoints and brings an objective vision to my own perspectives, ultimately enriching my own expertise.



Figure 2. Knowledge made physical.

MY CURRENT DESTINATION

In 2019, after many years immersed in the fashion industry, the time was right for a new challenge and a change of direction in my career path. As an alternative route presented itself to move into teaching full time, I decided – despite some concerns – this was a path I would take. I felt a sense of inner turmoil asking questions such as: Was I going to be any good at this? Would the students like and respect me? Would I have the confidence needed to facilitate learning? After channelling my energy into positive thoughts, I reflected on the many times I had had to promote myself to new clients in my freelancing work and acknowledged that I was simply beginning another chapter of my professional career. Once again, I had an opportunity to revise and reshape my previous practice to new circumstances.

From my first days teaching, I saw it as my central duty to endorse learning which galvanised the industry-based expertise required of graduates entering the fashion industry. My strong industry background meant that I knew firsthand what skills and knowledge were desired by the industry. The breadth of my credentials placed me in the perfect position to share from my own industry experience in order to create genuine and relevant 'real world' learning.

In my teaching practice I use pedagogic approaches which highlight collaborative, inquiry-based, reflective learning. I aim to foster innovation by supporting a process of self-discovery through the removal of preconceived assumptions or expectations. As Mezirow's Transformative Learning theory (1978) (Mezirow, 1997) suggests, it is essential for learners to become critically reflective about their underlying assumptions and intentions. When practiced in class, this approach encourages my learners to look at things from a unique perspective.

Through my own life experiences and observations as a facilitator, I have become an advocate for the view that 'we learn best from our mistakes.' My desire is for students to understand that making mistakes is itself a design process, and not to be looked upon negatively. I want them to feel secure in experimenting during design and not intimidated by potential obstacles, or even failure. As a fashion practitioner, I learnt through my own process of trial and error that it was only through acknowledging problems that I could then begin playing with various responses. As Edward Thorndike's theory (1928) (Thorndike, 1932) proposes, "Things freely learned are best learned" and "The greater the freedom enjoyed by students ... the greater the intellectual and moral advancement enjoyed by them."



Figure 3. Tuakana-teina, learning then teaching.

My admiration for learners investing in their futures within an industry they love generates nostalgic memories of my own encounters as a fashion student. These positive recollections motivate me to ensure that I deliver learning to my students which enhances their journey and empowers them to reach their potential. As I reflect on the wisdom imparted to me through the connections I have made throughout my own study and career, I feel a sense of duty to give back and share what I have been so fortunate to receive. One of the most successful ways in which I do this in my teaching practice is through the practice of tuakana-teina (Tangaere, 1997), which refers to the learning relationship between a tuakana (older person) and a teina (younger person). By fostering tuakana-teina relationships among my learners and endorsing group activities or peer-review exercises, I seek to reinforce a mentoring approach between learners which allows for the sharing of knowledge, aids in building a supportive class whanau and becomes mana-enhancing for my students.

Today we are living in an age where we are witness to the increasing effects of global warming and have slowly come to recognise the importance of creating positive change to ensure the success of future generations. It is common knowledge these days that the negative impacts created by clothing production on the planet and its people are immense. In the last 15 years alone global consumption of clothing has doubled, with an average of 150 billion items produced per year, of which only 80 billion are sold on. In most developed countries clothing sales have doubled over this time, while the average number of wears per garment has decreased by 36 per cent (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, n.d.). The damage being caused to our environment through high carbon emissions, excessive water usage and pollution, along with extensive land use and hazardous chemicals in the daily production of the clothes we wear, is cause for serious concern.

Working as a lecturer in fashion education, I understand the platform that my position provides me to encourage forward thinking and help drive widespread change. As knowledge and actions are passed down through the generations, I recognise my responsibility as an educator in an evolving industry to bring the narrative for a brighter future to the forefront of my practice. The future of Aotearoa's fashion industry depends on the actions taken now. The industry must have a constructive purpose in all it does, stand tall and be strong as a collective working towards a common goal.

FUTURE TRAVEL PLANS

Despite now being stationed at a destination I take pleasure in (fashion education), I remain committed to life-long learning and the continuous pursuit of higher-order thinking and self-discovery. I recognise the value in ensuring that I continue with reflective practice and stay true to myself while allowing for personal reinvention, self-improvement and life-enhancement. As John Dewey put it (1933), "We do not learn from experience, we learn from reflecting on experience."

It was my aspiration for personal growth that led me to enroll in my Bachelor of Design (Fashion) study with Capable NZ and Te Pūkenga / Otago Polytechnic in 2021. While compiling my portfolio for this study, I realised that it could have benefited from more visual documentation of my career. While I have the odd scrapbook and a collage of magazine features from garments I crafted on my workroom wall, it is the behind-the-scenes images I wish I had more of. Pictures depicting myself in the depths of the design process



Figure 4. Reflective journaling.



Figure 5. Workroom collage.

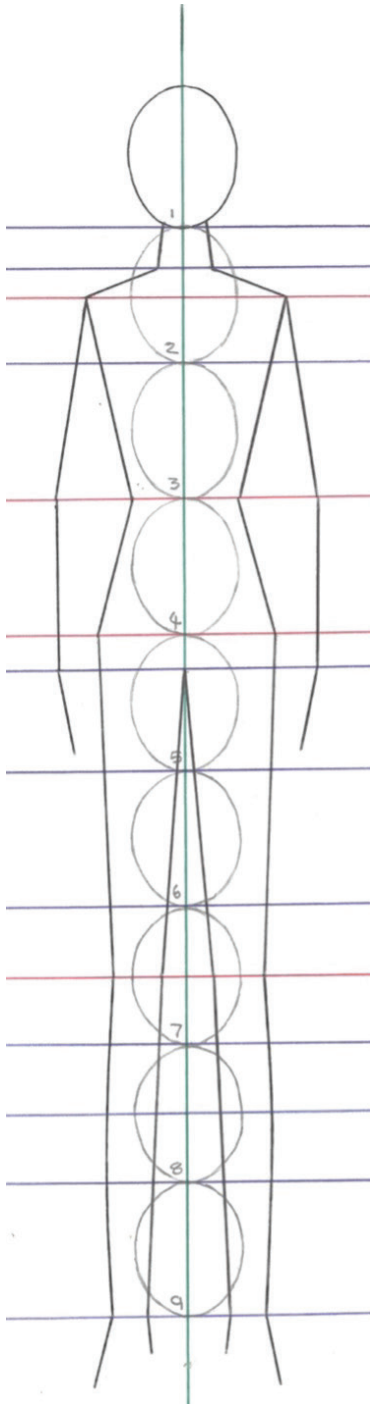


Figure 6. Fashioning my future.

would have been amazing. Today we live and work in the digital age with cameras at the ready, so our ability to visually document our journeys has become much easier; it is now just a question of recognising the importance of collecting such evidence. Working as a lecturer in fashion, I regularly find myself discussing my own experiences during a lecture and doing my best to describe (for example) the layout of the 'design / sampling wall' in a previous workplace. At the time, this wall was simply a wall full of sketches, swatches and post-it notes; but, reflecting on it now, it demonstrated so much more than that – it illustrated an efficient method of design process management accessible to all in the workroom. As I try to 'paint a picture' of this wall in the minds of my learners and explain its simplicity yet effectiveness, I wish I had a photo of it.

At the conclusion of my Bachelor of Design (Fashion) studies earlier this year, I was required to sum it all up and produce a framework of my professional practice. As a fashion specialist, I wanted to do this in a creative way and chose to relate my framework to the development of the 9-head croqui used in fashion illustration. I recognised the similarities between the two and was able to relate the 9-heads' main vertical balance line to my own centre of gravity; the stacking of the heads to build height to my continuous growth and ever-evolving self; and the plotting of body proportions to mark the general outline of the croqui to the ways in which all the genuine and meaningful connections I have made throughout my life have benefited my overall well-being. Continuing the comparison to the second stage of croqui development – which introduces movement through tilting directions while retaining balance and proportion – I was able to suggest how being flexible and resilient in my practice has allowed me to travel varied paths while maintaining the same overall direction towards a flourishing career.

I can truly appreciate the transformative journey I have been on throughout my lifetime and how while my previous steps don't define me, they have certainly all influenced my professional practice. It is my passage through life, enriched by the encounters and experiences I have devoured, that has had an incalculable bearing on shaping the design ideologies and teaching philosophy I use as a fashion practitioner today.

Regardless of exactly where life leads me in the future, I know one thing for sure – that fashion will always remain a part of me. At the risk of sounding clichéd, fashion is in my blood, it consumes my thoughts daily and underpins everything I do – which I have no doubt it will continue to do as I move forward in my future endeavours. I believe my pursuit of fashion can only have a positive effect on me, as with passion comes spirit and prosperity. I am excited for the future and for where the road ahead will lead me.

As a fashion practitioner, **Angela Newson's** leading area of interest is the technical elements of the design process, exploring the transformation in design from two-dimensional to three-dimensional pieces. Angela works as a lecturer at Whitecliffe School of Fashion + Sustainability in Wellington.

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