Article

"THE RABBIT HOLE" – NEW FRAMEWORKS OF AWARENESS FOR FASHION PEDAGOGY

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> I wonder if I've been changed … Let me think. Was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different.
>
> Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses case studies based on craft cluster modules undertaken by students at the National Institute of Fashion Technology, India (NIFT) – a new pedagogical method developed to raise social awareness within fashion students. I demonstrate how these modules affect students' understanding by engaging them in new ways of working and thinking. Through these modules, students learn to see new relationships between ideas and people, and to ask questions of deeper relevance related to their understanding of craft practice, makers and the craft-making environment. By learning to trace the feelings that allow them to express themselves, students come to understand new sustainable models.

As fashion education shifts focus from traditional 'colour theory' to new 'care theory' models, skills and practices of awareness framed in the curricula by way of direct social engagement energise creative pursuits and consciousness towards collaboration. This change in fashion pedagogy may result in students experiencing a similar transformation to that which Alice experienced in the rabbit hole – a shift in awareness towards a new dimension that is inclusive and dynamic in nature.

Keywords: non-objectivist, dynamic frameworks, expanded vision, navigability between frames, engaging with the experiential, intuitive cognition.

INTRODUCTION

Universal yet personal, grounded yet opening up new vistas for the future, a new awareness of the fashion system has brought in its wake a conscious, renewable and sustainable core that demands courage to reform the processes as much as its outcomes. The frameworks of learning these concepts entail must come from a consciousness of the dynamic environments we live in, and a mind that operates free from objectivist paradigms or prejudices. Earlier processes, devoid of nuances and concerns other than monetary gain and the commercial success of a brand, must now incorporate ideas of collective social growth. It is not just about undertaking practical steps and sustainable measures, curbing consumption, and a commitment to recycle or reuse.

Though effective, these measures do not touch the core of the issue. The problem lies in how we regard and treat the world. With this new awareness, the designer has a key role to play: the role of an intelligent 'game changer.' Fashion schools may be grounded in design, but must also work to develop their levels of awareness and

responses, choices and preferences. Fashion educators must infuse their students with a love for different people and environments, and guide them in exploring opportunities for service and co-existence. In short, it is imperative for the contemporary fashion designer to 'have a heart,' 'emote' and finally 'engage' in the need to achieve human excellence. This involves developing a new fashion pedagogical framework that:

- broadens students' often narrow and limited vision into one encompassing communities and environments
- navigates between frames of reference and develops a collective approach that generates new ideas and problem-solving abilities
- engages with experiential narratives and life stories – exploring the consequences of choices made, through discussion and analysis.

NON-OBJECTIVISM

> "… there is seeing, and seeing that the spiritual eyes have to work in constant and vivid alliance with the bodily eyes, otherwise one is faced with the danger of seeing and yet of seeing nothing."[1]

The main objective of design education in the current context of sustainability must be to expand the vision of a student, to value more than profit, while being professional and humane at the same time. Two strategies drawn from the Ted (Textile Environment Design) Project's ten sustainable design strategies that reflect these values include:

1. Design for Ethical Production. Design that utilises and invests in traditional craft skills, both locally and globally. It includes designers acting as facilitators for sustainable and social enterprises in traditional craft communities.
2. Design Activism. To encourage designers to leave behind the focus on 'the product' and work creatively with society at large. In doing so, designers become 'social innovators,' using their design skills to meet social needs. Such an objective calls for a shift in our frameworks of teaching and learning mechanisms.

The pedagogy for such a learning process must include non-objectivist goals that emphasise personal work satisfaction and social responsibility. The development of a 'product' must be secondary to the 'processes.' A shift in objectives starts firstly by treating a student as an active and living entity by creating opportunities to demonstrate the 'aliveness' of different environments and people. An integrated learning model promotes studying the impact of design, not only on urban consumer groups but also on rural and semi-urban cultures and environments. A program called the "craft cluster module," that has been successfully integrated into the fashion design curriculum at the National Institute of Fashion Technology, India (NIFT), involves setting up student engagement with rural artisanal communities. These modules draw on the rich and diverse cultural settings of the country and reflect the diverse craft practices, languages, food, dress and beliefs in every province. This direct engagement for 3-4 weeks enables a student to become sensitised to their new environment, playing an insider by stepping in and out of various roles, becoming a part of the problems faced by the host community and seeing it from an outsider's perspective, and intervening and measuring the impact of the designs they create. The environment is structured to encourage conversation, interaction and non-linear discussions, and to help students to experience situations that promote meaningful engagement with the reality of craft practice.

The learning derived from this activity is measured by questionnaires and a review of the project. In this engagement, the primary analytical tool is the quality of feedback and questions from the participants. The data is presented by the students in the form of design propositions, problem identification and insights gathered, which are interspersed in the resulting narrative. Learning outcomes are gauged through presentations, and the whole exercise is designed to show the development of 'insight' in the students at the end of the program. In the words of one student, Ms.

Monami Roy: "I understood that the smallest, simplest act such as selection of material, method or technique can have a large, sweeping impact on the environment and [on] life, and that everything is an opportunity to be inclusive and collaborative."

This craft cluster module enables a student to go through three successive stages of craft design in process:

- observation and perception at the emotional level
- conscious exploration
- conscious manipulation

A sense of conscious awareness is developed at every step in this process as opportunities to engage are provided in a live arena bustling with situations and scenarios. This experience shapes the methods and advantages, challenges and limitations of direct engagement with artisanal communities as a tool for learning design in the current context of global consciousness and sustainability.

EXPANDED VISION

While the challenges and crisises we face are often global in scope – human rights, international conflict, environmental issues, and cultural identity, for example – solutions may often emerge from local situations. What is required is the development of concepts and theories derived from experiential narratives that can be projected onto a larger vision. The craft cluster module is designed to develop in a student the ability to:

- Tell a story – creating bridges between social concerns and urban markets through the design process. This is achieved by actively scouting for opportunities for social or socio-cultural engagement by working towards upgrading skills, improving training and design-marketing, and planning technological strategies for the communities involved in the sense of preparing them for a competitive market-readiness.
- Create multidimensional stimulation – shift beyond product into appreciating the people, resources and heritage of a community. To protect, conserve and further the art, culture and craft traditions of a region. Students are encouraged to share experiences that are authentic and uplifting. In the words of one student, Ms Tulasi Elangovan: "I personally do not have a great sense of connecting design to surface intricacies by way of patiently developing … it has added to my skill and understanding."
- Engage in cross-cultural design – understand the need to integrate the concept of 'we,' not 'I,' to form a collective sense of design. Students are asked to lead from across cultures – for example, the adaptation of *biscornu* (a tiny eight-sided embroidered French pillow that can be used as a pincushion) in Lambani embroidery.[2] Using design ideas from across the world, we organised workshops involving Lambani artisans and students from the Swiss Textile College, who were on an exchange program with NIFT. We developed "Lambani biscornu," a French pincushion design adapted to create embroidered hangings and throw cushions.
- Build on reason and value as a way of being 'responsible.' The aim is to create fashion products that are not 'in' or 'out' of trend, but have 'continuity,' enabling design to become a vehicle for social, cultural and environmental issues and give customers sufficient reason for buying products – such as poverty alleviation, revival of culture and promotion of the arts.

Figures 1a and 1b. *Biscornu*-inspired cushion and hanging.
Photograph: Prof. Kavita Saluja.

THE CRAFT CLUSTER MODULE METHOD

As we facilitate experiential learning, the pedagogy involves setting up situations and designing the experiential exercises that promote a meaningful continuum of experiences, philosophy, interactions and ethical considerations. The aim is to shape designers who are integrators, capable of expressing their cultural backgrounds to create cross-cultural design ideas.

In this case, the students are immersed in the cluster environment – the habitat, flora and fauna, and lifestyles – where they live in close association with local artisanal communities that express themselves in authentic ways. In short, the stage is set for the learning process to become active. Participant sensitisation workshops precede the craft cluster program itself, with participants interacting with specialists who have previously engaged with rural artisan communities through providing design intervention, technological upgrades or simply social engagement. Students also visit local government agencies to get an updated record of the demography of the area, along with information on the artisanal skills and techniques available in the cluster. This stage is called Diagnostic Study and helps prepare the students to visit craft clusters; it involves acquainting them with the dress, language, food and faith of the artisanal communities in order to create a smooth transition and flow of events.

The student–artisan workshops that follow up this intial study are a two-way learning process – the students learn about indigenous craft resources, and the artisans learn about urban taste and market requirements. They are preparing themselves to develop products through:

- Using both a contemporary Indian and an international design vocabulary
- Diversifying product categories and range to create a wider customer base
- Developing better finishing techniques for a high-value, well-crafted look
- Using raw materials available in nearby clusters and creating design synergy
- Planning technological strategies. (For example, Lambani embroiderers were given training in tailoring to enable them to develop marketable products based on student surveys; as a result, 14 sewing machines were procured under a government scheme (SGSY) and installed. Tailoring programs were conducted to teach these artisans to stitch soft furnishings, accessories and garments.)

During this process, not only do the students acquire techniques and skills from the artisans which improves their work, but the exchange also allows them to accumulate experiences which expand their mental horizons. The ability to correlate materials, environments, people and cultures further refines their outlook and expands their vision as they see a larger realm of possibilities for design at the social level. As lecturers, we have also noticed significant connections being formed between the students and artisans, enduring for days, months and sometimes years after being involved in the program. Sometimes, a student's graduation project may involve the craft community they have been immersed in. In a few cases, enterprises and brands have been established by the students in close collaboration with the host craft community.

In the craft cluster environment, design becomes the result of a dynamic relationship between the designer and the environment they experience – something that not only follows preexisting technical and artistic models, but also includes sociological elements and the local economy. This in turn heightens students' sense of social responsibility and they become mindful of their own cultural mindsets and interpretive errors. In her feedback, fashion design student Ms Pragati Hegde wrote that "it was an eye opener how craft communities work; it brings a sense of respect for them and the products they make. It was interesting to be a part of the challenges they face and realize that the incentives that drive them to do this kind of hard work are more than money – no wonder these products are highly priced in the market." Thus design learning is approached as a practice and not as an outcome.

Figure 2. NIFT students with Lambani women. Photograph: Prof. Kavita Saluja.

NAVIGABILITY BETWEEN FRAMES – CREATIVE FLEXIBILITY

Donald Treffinger has proposed a model of creative learning comprising three levels: complex thinking, feeling processes and involvement in real challenges.[3] A creative act involving connecting elements that do not obviously relate to each other takes place during engagement in experiential settings. The shift from urban settings to semi-urban or rural environments, navigating unexpected extremes and oppositions, itself offers a means of solving problems and often brings about an inner transformation in the students. To enable "navigability" in such situations, pedagogical methods that are process-driven and prioritise a sense of responsibility are practiced. In the craft cluster module, students are asked to gather pertinent information about the possibilities or potential of craft development given the resources available, and to define the function of 'design' with reference not just to the materials and processes involved, but also to its impact on the environment and the local people. Design is here seen as a dynamic socio-psychological tool. The designer is made to commit to a sociocultural environment through practice. The quality of the learning outcomes hence depends on building social consciousness in students.

ENHANCING INTUITION

Creative flexibility is encouraged in the participants by their exposure to artisanal communities and the local environment; these elements prompt them to approach problem-solving in unusual ways, leading to a creative surge and flexibility of thought. This reflects the notion that intuition encourages full utilisation of the cognitive resources of the human brain.[4] Students' intuitive sense is sharpened in the process of experiential engagement with the craft cluster. This enables them to connect the unconnected, find new pathways and patterns to help them solve

problems, and to view design in terms of its impact on people and its links with human emotions. One example was a student's development of a Lambani 'insignia' doll, aimed at creating an identity for Lambani tribal women.

Seymour Epstein suggests that intuition involves the processing of information based on experience – but through the emotions rather than through rational thought processes.[5] Intuition comprises the elements of immediacy, sensing relationships and reasoning – the kind of reasoning that enables the instant comprehension of a situation.[6] The development of intuition is almost impossible in a clinical studio environment devoid of real-world challenges and situations. In the words of one student, Mr Omendu Prakash: "I realized that craft-based products are cherished for a longer time because of something intrinsically human and emotional in them."

Figure 3. Lambadi 'insignia' doll. Photograph: Prof. Kavita Saluja.

Figure 4. Bag with Lambadi embroidery. Photograph: Prof. Kavita Saluja.

CONCLUSION

This paper supports the role of fashion design education beyond the limits of the classroom or studio – moving out into experiential settings where people, environments and cultures are able to supplement students' cognitive abilities. Such experiences, in turn, create an expanded vision and the ability to see in the web of relationships that connects everything. The spirit of experiential learning is well described in words of student participant Ms Suman Marathe:

> This program enabled me to see how the work happens, alongside life … as the Lambani women would share the happenings of the day with others in the group, their needles swiftly flying between warp and weft of the cloth, a joke here and there, and then impromptu, for no reason at all, they would all get up and break into song and dance. In a circle, eight or ten of them with their costumes glittering to their joy, we joined in … Happiness at work, I thought.

The pedagogy of the craft cluster module outlined in this paper emphasises the shift from adhering to well-defined academic curricula to developing dynamic settings that emphasise interaction and sensitisation. These frameworks can then be adjusted, based on participants' responses and insights. As a result, fashion design pedagogy is being seen in a new light – as actively humanistic and inclusively sustainable.

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1 Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, *La Métamorphose des Plantes* (Paris: Triades, 1975), 171. (author's translation)

2 The Lambani or Lambadi people are a nomadic community originally from the northwestern belt of the Indian subcontinent and now settled in southern India.

3 Donald J Treffinger, *Encouraging Creative Learning for the Gifted and Talented: A Handbook of Methods and Techniques*, National/State Leadership Training Institute on the Gifted and the Talented (Ventura, CA: Ventura County Superintendent of Schools Office, 1980).

4 Amy L Baylor, "A Three-Component Conception of Intuition: Immediacy, Sensing Relationships, and Reason," *New Ideas in Psychology*, 15:2 (1997), 185-94.

5 Seymour Epstein, "Integration of the Cognitive and the Psychodynamic Unconscious," *American Psychologist*, 49:8 (1994), 709-24.

6 Nel Noddings and Paul J Shore, *Awakening the Inner Eye: Intuition in Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1984).