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An investigation into creative design methodologies for textiles and fashion

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Abstract. Understanding market intelligence, trends, influences and personal approaches are essential tools for design students to develop their ideas in textiles and fashion. Identifying different personal approaches including, visual, process-led or concept by employing creative methodologies are key to developing a brief. A series of ideas or themes start to emerge and through the design process serve to underpin and inform an entire collection. These investigations ensure that the design collections are able to produce a diverse range of outcomes. Following key structures and coherent stages in the design process creates authentic collections in textiles and fashion. A range of undergraduate students presented their design portfolios (180) and the methodologies employed were mapped against success at module level, industry response and graduate employment.

1. Introduction

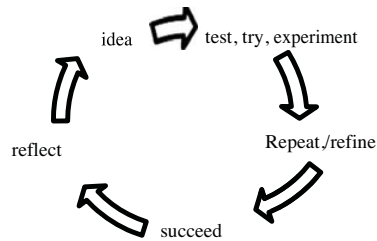
The focus of this paper is to consider the importance of authentic concepts and ideas in textile and fashion design education. The Textile Art, Design and Fashion course at Belfast School of Art encompasses embroidery, knit, print, weave and pattern construction with outcomes for fashion, interiors, product or artwork. Comprehending key trends and market intelligence, while important, can result in pastiche outcomes, while a unique design collection is often the catalyst for finding graduate employment. Therefore understanding how students engage with design development through visual investigation, process-led and conceptual starting points is essential for student success. Muratovski states that 'design studies can provide us with a fundamental understanding of design by answering such questions as: Who are we? What is it that we do? Where do we come from? And more importantly where are we going from here?' [1]

2. Methodology

The research methodology employed was reflective, qualitative and quantitative in enquiry. Qualitative method included student, external examiner and industry feedback following 3-year interventions on the Textile Art Design and Fashion Course. Quantitative research focused on the marks profile, graduate destinations and employability statistics over 3 years. Categorizing students as either visual investigators, with observational drawing, conceptually led where the pursuit of an idea is the main consideration or process-led where sampling and making is the key driver for inspiration. In this context process-led includes embroidery, print, knit, weave, and pattern cutting/draping. Mbono suggests that understanding Kolb's learning cycle [3] and the principles of divergent and convergent gathering and editing of the information is also part of the liminal experience for the design student. [4] Students need to develop their own work that might begin with a drawing or an idea, alternatively it could be testing and experimentation, as identified in figure 1.

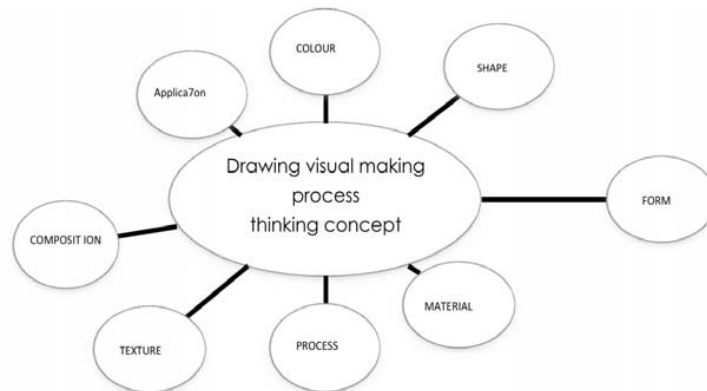


Figure 1. Ideas development
Learning cycle



It has been suggested by Clarke that, “Design is an evolutionary process that involves the generation of ideas that lead to the creation of a product.” While it has been seen over the generations “it was only during the eighteenth century, in Europe, that this was acknowledged to be a profession.” During the industrial Revolution it became increasingly accepted that a product’s functional and aesthetic qualities could be ‘commercially advantageous’. The Creation of these qualities remains a key function of design. Clarke also identifies that “Today, the importance of design is recognised globally because of the economic benefits it brings. But this does not overshadow the primary concern of the designer: to produce a product that has functional and aesthetic appeal at the right price for the consumer. Research and development are core activities in the design process, and vary in emphasis and definition depending on context.” [5] This can be seen in figure 2.

Figure 2. Approaches to design – visual – conceptual – process



The Textile Art, Design and Fashion Course has 2 visits a year by an external examiner, this is to ensure the parity of standards across the UK. It is necessary for the external examiner to highlight areas of good practice and areas that need to be addressed. The external examiner’s report forms part of the qualitative feedback in this paper and the comments will be discussed in the results. Industry feedback from placement providers will also be discussed in the results.

3. Materials

A variety of materials were used, for the design and drawing stage, and included pencils, ink, watercolour and acrylic paints. The design stage included photography, video, paper, collage, sketchbooks and research journals. Design development additionally used technology such as Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator. Sampling and fabricating involved various outlined processes relevant to each of the workshop areas.

Processes including - Embroidery, Hand, machine (domestic); multi-needle (industrial); quilting and felting. Knit -Hand, Machine (domestic) Machine (industrial) power machine (Industrial) linkers and over lockers. Print - Screen-printing, digital printing, dyeing of yarns and fabric, laser cutting, devoré, flocking. Weave - Handlooms, Jacquard looms. Construction - Pattern drafting/cutting–hand/computer, industrial sewing machines, industrial over lockers. If we look at one of the processes (knit) it is clear that the application and interpretation can be diverse and this is relevant of all the described processes, “knitting has seen a resurgence in popularity with many different approaches emerging from creative international catwalk fashions through to... lightshades, cushions, floor coverings, chairs and blinds... Conceptual artists, too, have exploited the traditional craft of knitting to create installations of all dimensions, from large- scale public sculptures to miniatures and wearable art. [6]

4. Results

An increase in confidence was reflected in the student surveys and understanding of appropriate approaches and processes over the 3 years is evident in the improved marks profile and the final classifications. The information maps progress and the improvements in the 2:1 and 1st category award.

Table 1. Mapping marks in final year modules

Year	2:1/1 st category
2014	65%
2015	60%
2016	68%
2017	73%

The following employability information was included in the 2016/17 Key Information Sets (KIS) data and improvement in the graduate destination has resulted in this years results showing that graduates are 2% above the National Average.

Figure 3. Unistats KIS Data Employment in TADF

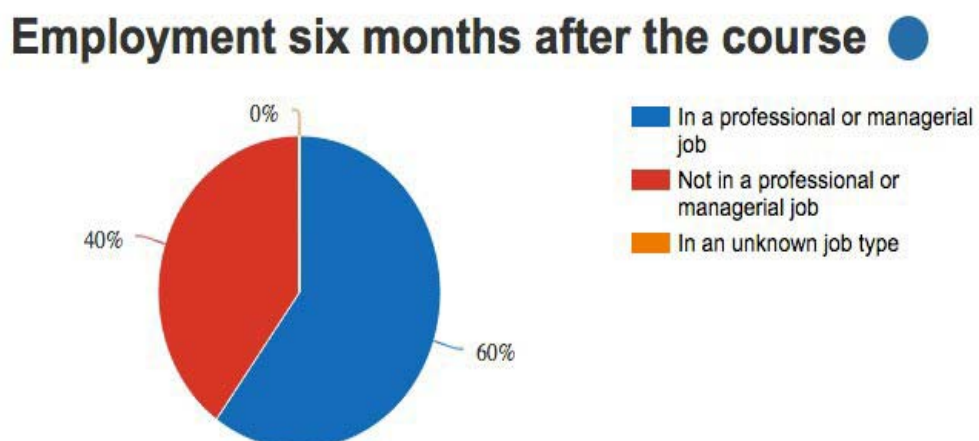


Figure 4: Unistats KIS Data TADF destinations

4.1 Industry Feedback

In 2015 the Textile Art, Design and Fashion Course showcased at New Designers. This National exhibition has been described as, “New Designers presents an unmissable opportunity to buy new products for your store or home, get inspired by fresh ideas and discover new design talent to commission or recruit. Every year over 3,000 of the most promising graduates from Britain’s leading design courses exhibit. The show features everything from illustration to animation, furniture to fashion...and takes place at the spectacular Business Design Centre in London, the world’s capital of design. It provokes fresh thinking and kick-starts careers, providing a pipeline of young talent into one of the UK’s fastest growing creative industries.” [7] This was an important event for the TADF course and the students, and one of the students was awarded Runner Up for overall best design. Industry Response has been very positive, the key stakeholders who have been involved in providing placement, graduate internships and employment have responded with their own definition of successful design graduates as follows, “ I think the graduate skills that are valued by commercial business are: Design ability; innovative ideas to create the next ‘big seller’, CAD technical ability; to illustrate designs efficiently, Commercial awareness of who the target market is, in order to build a commercially successful collection, Trend prediction and trend analysis, general IT and communication skills, and finally knowledge of the procurement process within the fashion industry.” (Walter Reid, Manager, Douglas and Grahame Ltd) The design team at Dunnes Stores recommends that graduates are “able to create patterns, draw garment shapes, have advanced editing skills for photographs and the ability to create electronic mood/ trend boards. Increasingly useful are knowledge of other IT packages, graphic design that includes packaging and typography and web page design. Students must have excellent professional presentation skills.”

The feedback from many industry collaborations has enabled the course to adapt and create modules that respond to this while ensuring creativity and innovation is the foremost consideration and that commercialisation can always be exploited through a diffusion line more ripe for the market. “The students are skilled and understand how to make textiles alongside digital technologies and we as a company have benefitted with placement students and graduates joining our team and working with us over several years.” Tarlach de Blacam Inis Meain Knitting Company.

4.1.1 External Examiner's Feedback. The 2016, External Examiners report highlighted innovation and good practice and this endeavour to produce work that reflected the personal approaches, "Best features of the course include the diversity of student outcomes. This clearly indicates how the change to course structure now allows students to take an individual approach to their study programme and approach to contextual outcomes. This celebrates the diverse nature of the course itself and also accommodates for the diverse range of students coming on to the course. Programme curriculum incorporates an approach to pedagogy that is both agile and flexible to meet with the challenge of delivering a programme that includes textiles and fashion from both an art and a design perspective. Strengths also include the provision of a new flexibility in the pace, place and mode of course delivery. Workshop provision should also be seen as strength of the course. As previously discussed the market report option illustrates best practice particularly regarding students market/contextual awareness and in the development of student's employability and communication skills. Academic staff members approach to research and its dissemination clearly informs content design and delivery, which illustrates effective communication and organisation amongst members of the academic team. Both the academic and technical teams are clearly dedicated to the continual development of the programme". (Julie Haslam, External Examiners Report 2016)

5. Discussion

The breadth and diversity of graduate destinations have increased with a greater number of students in employment within 6 months of graduating as seen in the KIS data. The diversity of work and flexibility of graduate skills, experience, work-based learning and placement opportunities have also facilitated this increase. The burgeoning film industry in Northern Ireland has also been pivotal in providing employment over the past 5 years, and this is clearly a growth area for the textile and fashion industry with *Game of Thrones*, *Dracula* and the *Frankenstein Chronicles* to name a few productions, and the course has made provision for this expansion through incremental change and revalidation. The approaches, skills and flexibility have enabled students, using any process for any application including, product, interior, fashion or artwork to be employed in costume design area, alongside the more traditional routes of fashion designer textile designer or textile artist. Employer responses to the course have been very positive with industry stakeholders seeing the benefits of tripartite relationships through Knowledge Transfer Partnerships and *IntertradeIreland* Fusion Projects.

This would not be realised unless the initial starting points were authentic as Patrick Gottelier states, "Good design does not come from rootless creative flights of fantasy with the designer sitting with sketchpad and pencil in hand. Designers need to be obsessive about research in all its forms, to know what has gone before and what is happening now, and then to be able to take a leap into the future and imagine what should be coming next. Any successful design process, whether in a classroom or a professional design practice, always has research as its starting point. Good research makes connections that are both obvious and oblique: it tells us something new about ideas or styles we thought we knew all about. Good designers, through the process of undertaking extensive and exhaustive research, are able to analyse, re-appropriate or sometimes even outright steal ideas from the past, and through the use of juxtaposition caricature or exaggeration tell us something vital about our future. [8]

6. Conclusion

Therefore through the diverse approaches supporting individual learning styles the outcomes can be original and rich. The resultant work has rigor in its development and creates confident graduates who can identify and discuss the uniqueness of their own work and its relevance to the identified client or market. The marks profile improved as the work is contemporary, and the rigor and authenticity of the journey is as important as the final outcome. External feedback is the real test, and through responses offered by external stakeholders such as the external examiner, industry, and national competitions. National Competitions include *New Designers*, *Irish Fashion Innovation Awards* and *Design Ireland Awards*, the results show that original work needs to have both good research at the inception stage combined with an awareness of approach and trend analysis. Students raise the reputation of the course through ambition and success at national and international level. Furthermore student successful accomplishment of the design process produces an increase in graduate employability and opportunities for entrepreneurship.

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