Discourse: Debating the Future of Fashion as Design

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Figure 1: *Discourse,* stainless steel cards by Chelsea Franklin, 2019

Abstract

The conference track theme in relation to this paper is Disruption & Innovation - Academia & Industry. In facilitating discussion on the disrupting factors facing the fashion industry, we aim to show how we are identifying opportunities to ease and expedite a transition from the now to the new in an understanding of fashion design education and practice. Exploring how an active integration of academia and industry

at masters level can provide an alternative to an otherwise one-sided offering which only looks to support design talent to become sole practitioners.

This research paper provides an analysis of a workshop developed by the authoring researchers Chelsea Franklin, Susan Postlethwaite and Kat Thiel, alongside their contextual findings. The workshop uses a tool for debate, *Discourse,* designed by Chelsea Franklin while she was an MA fashion student at the Royal College of Art. The tool was developed as a response to, and recognition of, the struggle of working as a siloed, sole-practitioner/ designer within education whilst understanding that the industry is built of complex supply chains and networks of individuals.

The work has emerged from a new fashion pedagogic model that aims to produce a multidisciplinary fashion student/ researcher/ designer. We will share the first results of this on going research which is currently being developed in tandem with the RCA MA Fashion course, encouraging students' to engage intellectually with their discipline and to question and hold to account new industrial models.

This research is part of a larger body of work currently being developed through *Future Fashion Factory: Digitally Enabled Design & Manufacture of Designer Products for Circular Economies AHRC funded research*. Through this work RCA Fashion researchers propose to define a new methodological approach, Fashion Thinking that has three distinct strands - Fashion Thinking for Social Change, Fashion Thinking for Applied Speculation and Fashion Thinking through Advanced Manufacturing. *Discourse* engages with all three of these areas.

Fashion Education: Old & New Models of Pedagogy

Traditionally focused on training students in conceptualising, designing and making of their own collections, undergraduate and postgraduate fashion courses in the UK have not significantly evolved over the past 25 years. They are increasingly unsuccessful in training students to enter a world of advanced manufacturing, working with digital tools, advanced technologies or new models of entrepreneurship that now make up the fashion industry landscape. Nor are they equipping students to address societal and environmental concerns in the rigorously informed way demanded by both industry and consumers. Add to this a new understanding of the marketization of fashion as art and the landscape has clearly shifted considerably. Rogers and Bremner (2019) suggest that any repositioning of design education 'must first acknowledge that it has been complicit in creating a world that nobody wants any more'.

Reports from Business of Fashion (2016) showed that students entering the jobs market were lacking knowledge specific to new technologies resulting in impaired ability to challenge current practice or develop new design-led roles. Research into new teaching models in other design disciplines shows that UK fashion education is

ripe for a much needed overhaul if it wishes to stay relevant. Much can be learned from initiatives in other international universities and institutions. The future of the UK Design School may depend on these new insights. Multi disciplinary universities have already understood *design thinking, speculative design, and critical design methods (Rogers and Bremner 2019)* as useful approaches to innovation and are leading the way in research for new economic models of values led entrepreneurialism and the design of 'volume to value' business models that are profitable without growth. As Rogers and Bremner (2019) suggest tomorrow's designers may well emerge from businesses such as health care, education and computing.

They recognise a shift in Design School approaches from an emphasis on design to a desire to 'gain academic legitimacy' establishing dialogues with history and scientific and philosophical theory, then a 'search for legitimacy through design science' and finally a push towards interdisciplinarity 'in an allegiance with technology' which we can all now recognise as the norm within Design Schools.

Alongside more traditional research activities, Aalto University in Finland have introduced platforms to galvanise researcher's contributions in Aalto's focus areas - digitalisation, energy, entrepreneurship, experience, health, living, materials, and sustainability. These loose groups show exciting potential to investigate cross-disciplinary research in these subject areas. By partnering with industry, their work is providing a more pluralistic, real-life picture of the studied areas.

In her publication, *Recrafting Craft - An Exploration of Speculative Scenarios for Tomorrow's Fashion Education* Mascha van Zijverden (2018), based at Willem de Kooning Academie in Rotterdam, presents speculations on possible pathways for future fashion education. She explores six different readings of the fashion system: engineering, bio-design, curation, sustainability, modes of production and no fashion school at all. These experiments question the systems at work that shape education, industry and the supply chain.

In a similar line of questioning to van Zijverden, at the Sandberg Instituut, a progressive Postgraduate programme of the Gerrit Rietveld Academie Amsterdam, a temporary programme structure has been introduced that reacts to urgent matters - be they ecological, societal or political. These courses have a predetermined lifespan and are designed as a reaction to imminent demand in a particular field. Once less urgent, the course is closed and replaced. This flexibility is unprecedented and shows high adaptability to keep the university offering current and relevant courses to its students. Beyond the expanded curriculum and new ways of teaching, the Sandberg Instituut is testing new external funding models for art and design education.

But Fashion education is no longer exclusively offered by schools and universities. The online fashion platform Business of Fashion for example offers time-effective courses with industry experts, that are aimed at Gen Z, who are statistically less

likely to invest in university education but instead are assembling their education to their exact needs via various short courses and offerings relevant to their interests. For £216 a year, subscribers to the BoF site gain access to all online courses and page content.

The meta narrative coming from government encourages the STEAM agenda that has now been adopted in many Design Schools. The Design Council report *Designing a Future Economy- Developing Skills for Productivity and Innovation 2018* suggests that design skills are the fusion of creativity with technical ability and interpersonal competencies. They highlight moving from STEM to STEAM+D - that is, Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Maths, to include D, the Design element, to ensure a resilient economy in the longer term. The report encourages policy makers and education providers to consider how they will develop the complex problem solving, critical and creative thinking abilities that are essential to innovation (Design Council 2018).

In their *Leading Business By Design: High Value Manufacturing* report the Design Council 2015 policy recommendation is that young people at all stages of education require exposure to the multidisciplinary mix of science, technology, arts, humanities and enterprise that should underpin both creative and manufacturing success in the UK. They go on to say that government should provide incentives to universities to deliver an increased range of multidisciplinary design courses in partnership with expert bodies to enable engagement with *the fourth industrial revolution*.

Rogers and Bremner citing Flusser (2019) claim that Design has always been viewed as a bridge between art, science and other subjects. They suggest that 'Design praxis now commonly involves the use of techniques from other areas like film making, anthropology, storytelling, the social sciences and so on, claiming this new approach as 'undisciplined ' and 'irresponsible' praxis. This they propose as an alternative disciplinarity (alterplinarity) 'where the creative practitioner is viewed as a prototype of a contemporary traveller whose passage through signs and formats refers to a modern day experience of mobility, travel and transpassing where the aim is on materialising trajectories rather than destinations'.

A New Model

A series of 'platforms' designed to encourage engagement with new perspectives have been introduced in the Fashion Programme at the Royal College of Art. The original platforms were Bio Design, Sports, Digital and Future Systems, they have now been reduced to 3 - Bio Design, Digital and Advanced Manufacturing Systems. These groups are taught in parallel with an understanding that there are shared rationales, areas of interest and synergies, and that collaborations across these areas should happen and is encouraged.

The pedagogic models that supports this new positioning are Lauren Vaughn's idea that the issues and connections between design, practice and research are as relevant to master's degrees as they are to doctoral research (Vaughan 2017); new models as proposed in Rogers and Bremner's irresponsible design (2019); feminist pedagogic models (Trogal 2017); design anthropology methods (Gunn, Otto and Smith 2013, Gunn and Donovan 2012); Transition theory and new economic models (Stahel 2017, Mazzocato 2019); and practice based and practice led research methods (Vaughan 2017).

Vaughan (2017) claims that underpinning practitioner research is the understanding that the practitioner–researcher has the skills and expertise in the actions of the field to be able to undertake research within it. Citing Schon, Vaughan points to the transition from designer-practitioner to designer-practitioner–researcher in the course of academic study, as a shift from being able to understand and articulate the value or challenges of technical acts, to being able to place these in broader socio-cultural, technical and economic contexts.

RCA Fashion researchers propose three new directions: - Fashion Thinking for Social Change, Fashion Thinking for Applied Speculation and Fashion Thinking through Advanced Manufacturing that can be viewed as distinct, but also linked and coupled, to co generate knowledge and form new propositions for designer led research and practice. Fashion Practice Journal Special issue on Fashion Thinking (2016) recognised the definition as 'not yet stable'. Beyond Skov and Melchior's (2010) identification of an object based /culture based /practice based and production based approach this research positions Fashion Thinking for Social Change as following a Humanities trajectory, holistically looking at systems for sustainability and bio design applications as well as user experiences informed by psychology and new economic models; Fashion Thinking for Applied Speculation critically assesses movements within the industry and speculatively positions work to test fields of application within the context of new technologies, aesthetics, philosophy and sciences; Fashion Thinking for Advanced Manufacturing encourages work that radically reimagines making processes, machines and systems from a designer led perspective and sits within the context of Industry 4.0 and circular economic models.

Fashion Thinking through Advanced Manufacturing is being further developed by Postlethwaite in the context of the Future Fashion Factory AHRC funded Creative Clusters research investigating the potential for reshoring UK manufacturing in Industry 4.0. There are huge challenges that need to be overcome so that micro and SME businesses can purposefully and successfully use tools that will help them develop more sustainable practices. Students become micros become SME's – this is largely the training they receive in UK Design Schools. The focus of UK Government research funding is targeting small-scale enterprises through research in UK universities and the linking of small designer business to offshored volume producers is developing at speed internationally. The UK industry lags behind world

leaders in manufacturing but this opportunity to focus on developing designer led tools has the potential to make UK fashion production world leading.

Challenging Nixon and Blakely's notion of fashion thinking as "adding meaning and value to the functional and experiential spheres of products and services," (Nixon and Blakely 2012) but building on their idea of fashion thinking as a "paradigm of critical thought and creative agency" Postlethwaite believes that rather than proposing fashion thinking as a methodology to be incorporated by organizations beyond fashion, its first function is to serve a new generation of thought leaders *within* the fashion industry for a shift in the way fashion is taught, made and sold.

Given the new landscape in both education and industry she claims it is imperative to equip masters' students, and potentially undergraduate students too, with research skills in order for them to explore and critically examine Industry 4.0. She proposes they will need both hard and soft skills. Skills that include an understanding of technologies, digital tools and engineering, married to critical thinking, collaboration and interdisciplinary working.

In co constructing new meanings in fashion pedagogy the kinds of questions students and research staff are jointly investigating are: - What the implications for fashion design might be if new forms of scaled, dispersed, technology driven, local manufacture emerge and how might UK and international fashion manufacturing practices drive development? How can a *transdisciplinary studio* research, propose and develop new approaches to garment/apparel manufacture that also address societal issues of sustainability, the future of work and the regeneration of towns and urban areas? What (and how) can fashion pedagogy learn from a closer understanding of engineering, economics and ethical issues in manufacture that can inform developments in delivery of C21st fashion design education? What are the models that can allow this to be delivered in partnership with industry? What models like these currently exist and where? What kind of robotics or machinery might you design for a more sustainable manufacturing process?

The impact of this new approach is a newly informed fashion student whose practice is then impacted by the research taking place with the Fashion Programme and reciprocally whose work is also able to inform and influence it.

Students who took part in the Future Systems platform explained

> **As a platform, Future Systems challenged us to demand context and contemporary relevance from our work. We were asked to explore and understand the complex landscape of industry that's in front of us, and offer positive alternatives, solutions, and new definitions for fashion practice. This critical discourse and collaborative engagement supported us in developing valuable skills that have carried into our current practices.**

> *"The Future Systems platform reinforced my very pragmatic approach to fashion, but also, I'm finding that the theoretical aspect of my thinking has enhanced and added depth to my work"*

> *"The Future Systems platform allowed me to engage in a critical and design thought process which illuminated aspects of my work that I had I never previously considered.*

> *The platform is performed as a collaborative effort, which allowed me to work and think alongside my peers- this helped me realize the importance of shared skills and collaboration.*

> *"This shift in practice was kick-started by the Future Systems platform. The group discussions, presentations and sharing of texts and ideas effectively challenged me to think about industry beyond its current praxis, and my position within it."*

Discourse: A Tool to Debate the Future of Fashion as Design

Franklin claims the type of engagement you see in other design disciplines has not yet been represented in fashion education. Examples being research around problem spaces, commercial opportunity, in-depth understanding of material choices, global context, competition, and collaboration. This level of investigation is not equally represented in fashion education as it is in other design disciplines - thus the title *Discourse: A Tool to Debate the Future of Fashion AS Design.*

The trigger for the work was an exercise RCA MA Fashion students were given titled, "Mirror, Mirror". Students were tasked with designing a moment to summarise their "essence" as designers, creating an emotional connection between their work and the audience. Franklin created *Discourse* in response to the brief. The design process included research into design tools and games such as those produced by Ideo, which prompted her to map considerations around the audience and intention. The design demanded careful consideration around language and basic semantics; how not to be condescending or pretentious, to not dumb down the output, yet design something friendly and inclusive. The initial prototype was produced for "Mirror, Mirror" where Franklin acknowledged her place/intention amongst the cohort as someone creating opportunities for discourse.

Franklin suggests *Discourse* was about the disconnect between the value systems within fashion education and industry, and that without realigning them to mirror the "contemporary landscape", young designers would continue to struggle to understand their value. Franklin claims that we don't have to abandon our material culture and discipline, we just have to evolve it, asking "What can fashion become?"

In its current state, Franklin proposes that the fashion system struggles to produce value. Responsible for both fueling and exploiting a growing consumer demand for a faster and cheaper product, she believes the industry has educated consumers to understand that fashion has very little value. This suggests that we must work to redefine our value systems away from the burgeoning rate of consumption, and into solutions-oriented products and systems. Otherwise, we risk defaulting to an inherently broken process: operating at a high environmental and human cost.

Discourse is, therefore, a tool for debate on the fashion system, where audience members are invited to join the dialogue. Franklin proposes that "we must work together to reclaim fashion as design and respond to the contemporary landscape and industry in which we, as designers, are operating."

Mechanics

Instructions

To begin,
the dealer turns up a
question, and the player
to their left answers it
aloud.

The players take turns
debating the answer
around the table,
using the response
cards to prompt their
supporting or
counter-argument.

The player who
answered the question
can close the argument
once it has made its way
around the table, and
turn up a question for
the player to their left to
answer.

The game continues
until all players have
opened and closed a
debate.

Figure 2, Instructions to *Discourse,* 2019

The tool was originally designed as two decks of playing cards: one deck of question about the fashion system, and the second deck of prompts to initiate a dialogue about the questions.

Examples of Questions:

> **Do consumers want control over the design process?**
> **Can luxury be inclusive?**
> **Is design a talent?**
> **What's the design language of automation?**
> **How much is a machine's time worth?**
> **Can we quantify material value?**
> **Can you design a physical product with virtual materials?**
> **Can a process be as aspirational as a product?**
> **Where does the responsibility of a designer start and end within a product's lifecycle?**
> **Examples of Responses:**
>
> **Substantiate +**
> **Verify +**
> **Disrupt -**
> **Negate -**
> **Reverse +/-**

Discourse evolved through a series of iterations into a workshop, which demanded the design of eight "decks" (four of questions, and four of responses) separated thematically: Experience/Affect, Material/Machine, Method/Design and Production/System. Each theme can be played by five participants at a time, enabling twenty individuals to participate in the workshop simultaneously.

The mechanics of the cards created equal opportunity for participants to deliberate and discuss their position on specific topics. As a tool for supporting dialogue, *Discourse* was successful in that it provided statements which participants could use to share knowledge and opinions.

> **"It was a way to give my opinion and be respected at the same level as the others."**

"I think the real strength is that it offers everyone an equal chance to speak and get their point across. It is democratic and supports engagement with different communities."

"It has made me think about how to create discussions that are more inclusive, and involve everyone having an equal voice. It has also made me reconsider the language that I use."

Student Feedback, RCA MA Fashion Workshop, October 2019

Execution & Findings

The workshop developed by the authoring researchers Chelsea Franklin, Susan Postlethwaite and Kat Thiel, put *Discourse* to use in two key settings. The first of which was an international academic conference attended by design researchers from a multitude of disciplines. This workshop was premised on the idea that other design disciplines have much to teach fashion through open dialogue around shared problem spaces.

The second was at the Royal College of Art, with first and second year Fashion MA students in attendance. Though the aim was to encourage debate, analysis from data collected (sound recordings and survey-based feedback) revealed that debate was often not possible within this context due to lack of knowledge of specific terms, conscious feelings of courteousness with peers and self-reported concern about intellectual capacity.

Examples of Semantic Challenges:

Question card reads: Design for disassembly or design for reutilisation?
What? Ok. Design for disassembly or design for reutilisation? I don't even know what that means exactly.

Question card reads: Is non homogeneity a bug or a feature?
I mean I have an idea of what this means but can I get help? Is non homogeneity like not everything is the same?

Question card reads: Can you mass produce craft?
I don't really understand this question.

Question card reads: Is mass customisation the mass democratisation of the role of a designer?
So I think this means about how, almost like a designer becomes a brand?

**Yes. So I have to think about the question. It is so confusing…
It has taken me awhile to understand it, to be honest. Mass
customisation, is that when the like when people can choose on the
website, the colour and what it looks like?**

Response card reads: Attest -
I need help- what is attest?

Response card reads: Reverse +/-
Reverse means I don't know right?

Response card reads: Negate -
I want to ask what negate means? We disagree?

Discourse Recordings, RCA MA Fashion Workshop, October 2019

The above findings provide clear evidence for the pressing need for students to undertake thorough real-world research, with the intention of gaining hard and soft skills needed to formally articulate the relevance of their practice. Contrary to the above mentioned challenges however, students have reported that engaging with *Discourse* on multiple occasions eased their initial anxiety around sharing knowledge and debating topics that they felt lay outside their immediate remit:

**"I was so scared. It just took me so much time to sort of process the
question. And it was like there's other people as well as like what am I
saying? Trying to make it sounds like I'm not stupid. Like with other
people as well who were like tutors and PhD."**

**"I feel like it would benefit from having questions a bit simpler -more
easily like articulated."**

"Yes, I think there's like a pressure to be like intellectual."

**"This really freed my thinking of my own practice and it's output in the
future."**

**"Maybe in another context, you are not brave enough to talk about what
you think"**

Student Feedback, RCA MA Fashion Workshop, October 2019

In summary, though *Discourse* was designed to enable dialogue, interacting with it in a range of controlled settings revealed wider challenges fashion students face in articulating and responding to the themes set by Franklin. As a tool for supporting dialogue, the *Discourse* cards were successful in providing statements which

participants could use to exchange knowledge and opinion. The formal mechanics of the cards gave participants equal opportunity to deliberate and discuss their position. The themes enabled the settings to be intimate and focused. In the context of a conversation, waiting your turn within meant participants commonly 'missed their chance' to contribute. Though the aim was to generate discourse, analysis revealed that debate was sometimes not possible due to a lack of knowledge of specific terms, conscious feelings of courteousness with peers and self-reported concern about intellectual capacity.

Conclusion

Testing Discourse with varying audiences revealed the complexity of the fashion industry and how it is perceived by students, researchers and designers from varying backgrounds. 3 sets of value are being discussed through Discourse. Students' value to industry, industry's value systems and consumers' understanding of the value of fashion. This suggests the potential difficulty in the design of Discourse. Many questions posed by Discourse are deliberately industry specific, prompting participants to evaluate a wide range of topics, from new technologies to economic models and the future of manufacturing and distribution. In order to fully engage with these ideas and to foster meaningful discourse the research shows that students feel ill equipped to tackle these complexities. The absence of industry from education is not providing sufficient industry specific insight of the field graduates are about to enter. While the research shows that engaging with Discourse on more than one occasion strengthens students' ability and willingness to engage and share opinions, the knowledge sharing aspect remains based on assumptions rather than first hand insight of the industry which is then shared amongst peers to help inform their practice. Feedback given on the legacy of Discourse provides little evidence that these discussions alone had great effect on any project development. This might be due to the relative broadness of the topics discussed or point to the fact that they are not specific enough to generate sufficient insight needed to influence the development of projects. Understanding all aspects of the fashion system, from both an industry and academic perspective, in order to understand your place within it and how you might promote change looks like a Sisiphean task. It therefore behoves UK academia and industry to engage more completely, and internationally, through industry facing projects, placements, industry facing PhD and MA sponsorship and the sponsorship of research and R&D labs, both within academia and commercially, to foster radical change.

We acknowledge that there are significant changes to be made for Discourse to become a useful tool or catalyst for change within fashion education. A glossary of terms and more specific, debatable topics aligned to the 3 stands of Fashion Thinking have been proposed to specifically improve the learning and exchange aspect of the tool. It is further suggested to engage industry participants alongside students as a step towards implementing STEAM+D thinking into education to give masters students a critical advantage and insight during their shift towards becoming a designer-practitioner-researcher. The STEAM agenda originally emerged from Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) where Franklin studied her

undergraduate degree. Researched over the course of 4 years from 2011, the proposal was driven by an understanding that design education fosters critical thinking and comfort with risk taking that is necessary for success in the workforce. RISD's ambition was "to reach consensus among disciplines on the requirements of the 21st Century workforce" (Allina 2019). In the United States the understanding of the value of design to advanced manufacture is well established, where Allina considers design to be a literacy, a capability and a specialism.

Evidently we see the thorough implementation of Fashion Thinking as laid out above as an imperative step to steer fashion education into a self critical and future driven design category that is able to produce industry informing projects and proposals.

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