



association of fashion and textiles courses

FUTURESCAN 4: VALUING PRACTICE

Creating a skills-based curriculum culturally relevant to a diverse student cohort

Buddy Penfold, De Montfort University, bpenfold@dmu.ac.uk

Nicola Taylor, De Montfort University, nicola.taylor2@dmu.ac.uk

Pinky Bazaz, Nottingham Trent University, pinky.bazaz@ntu.ac.uk

Shipra Roy, National Institute of Fashion Technology (Bangalore), nodalofficer.dmu@nift.ac.in

Abstract

Prompted by The Freedom to Achieve project, the BA (Hons) Textile Design team at De Montfort University (DMU) sought to create a curriculum that was culturally relevant for their diverse cohort, particularly Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students. Through a series of student led co-creation events, the feedback was a desire to be aware of textile practices beyond Europe, and acknowledge the heritage links of Leicester and India. The Textiles Design BA students were from mixed media, constructed textiles and print pathways. Discussions centred on two main areas:

- Wanting to learn traditional Indian craft hand techniques not taught on the DMU textiles course;
- An understanding of how hand-crafted designs would translate into mass manufactured fabrics;
- Visiting the textile manufacturing industry.

The #DMU Global trip to India was created for September 2018 with partnership institute National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT). NIFT 'encourage our remarkably creative student body to draw inspiration from India's textiles and crafts while focusing on emerging global trends relevant to the industries we serve'. (NIFT 2019)

The DMU students voted on which handcraft skills they wanted to learn and a week-long programme was designed to include traditional hand embroidery and woodblock print techniques.

It is hoped that the outcomes will include a sense of community and joint heritage between DMU and NIFT students by sharing hand skills. Visits to traditional and industrial manufacturing factories will give an insight into global sourcing and subsequently enhance employment skills and build confidence through international experience. Industry visits would give a sense of a world working environment. The trip provides a more inclusive learning environment, with active learning of India's inspirational design heritage and handcrafts. By encouraging the students to be involved in designing the programme, they have taken ownership and engaged at a high level. The students on the trip have presented to the next year group, ensuring the learning experience is sustained in future years.

Keywords: artisan skills; diversity; community; collaborating; pedagogy

Introduction

De Montfort University (DMU) recognises the sector attainment gap of 15% between Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and their fellow students in achieving a first class or upper second class honours degree and has introduced a University wide initiative, 'Freedom to Achieve' to reduce this gap. This paper presents a case study from the Textiles BA course that responds to this initiative, where colleagues co-created with students a textiles trip to Bangalore, India, to encourage students to use their heritage to enhance creativity and create a diverse curriculum.

DMU is situated on a campus very close to Leicester City Centre, United Kingdom (UK). Leicester is one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse cities in the UK, with residents from 50 countries from across the globe and 34% of city residents born outside of the UK (Hardman 2012). DMU has a long-standing commitment to equality, diversity and inclusivity, which has been recognised nationally and internationally. The institution has been awarded the 2018 Sunday Times inaugural award 'University of the Year for Social Inclusion'.

Freedom to Achieve

DMU launched 'Freedom to Achieve' in 2017, with DMU, one of a group of UK universities awarded the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) Catalyst fund. The funding was for a project, led by Kingston University, to help identify why fewer BAME students achieve first class or upper second-class degrees compared with their fellow white students; a discrepancy known nationally as the BAME attainment gap. The initiative aims to ensure that every student at DMU can achieve their potential and can see themselves and people like them reflected in the course(s) they study. DMU has actively engaged the BAME cohort through a series of initiatives starting with a co-creation event where students and staff discussed ways to tackle the attainment gap. The four targeted areas the BA (Hons) Textile Design pilot project focussed on were adapted from 'DMUfreedom' Equality and Diversity Charter 2016-2020. These are based around the curriculum to be aspirational and culturally aware; the environment providing learning, living and social spaces; personal and academic development and creating a community where a DMU student can feel they belong. But what does this mean to the academics teaching and how does this apply to a skills-based curriculum?

DMU Textile Design

BA (Hons) Textile Design was chosen as a pilot programme for the 'Freedom to Achieve' initiative. The course achieved a 100% NSS score in 2018 and has a high success record of placements and employability - achievements which the academic team are proud of. Therefore, when the 'Freedom to Achieve' feedback highlighted an attainment gap between different groups of the student population, it prompted the question: were all our students represented in the curriculum?

The textile design academic team wants all students to achieve their full potential and wants to create an inclusive community. The academics analysed the curriculum considering:

- Did our curriculum reflect the global world of design?
- Were both design and skills taught based on western design?

The academics considered the tools to develop the curriculum. Alongside the 'Freedom to Achieve' initiative was #DMUglobal. #DMUglobal is an international experience programme for De Montfort University students, which aims to enrich studies and broaden cultural horizons through travel. Textile students were offered access to #DMUglobal academic trips to Paris trade fairs and trips to Hong Kong, New York and Berlin. But the academics questioned whether these trips reflected the diversity

of the students studying textiles. The curriculum was considered. Could a unique selling point (USP) for the course be created through a more global offering? Could the students visit somewhere that as textile artists or once employed, they would travel to and source textiles from?

De Montfort University Strategy

The textile design academic staff, reviewed the university strategy which promotes an 'ethos' of active learning. Key phrases from the university strategic framework triggered ideas:

- Deliver an individual student experience;
- An inclusive and stimulating learning environment that recognises the value of co-creation;
- Increase the cultural competence of our students;
- Multi-strand relationships with global organisations whose values closely align with our own.

The team of academic staff recognised that students do not ever ask for '...multi-strand relationships with global organisations whose values closely align with our own'. (DMU Strategic Framework p17) Therefore, the academic team needed to ask the students what they wanted.

Curriculum Co-creation

A meeting with the BA (Hons) Textile Design students was held to ask the students what they wanted to achieve from a visit to Bangalore. Approximately 25 students attended and the students had clear aims:

- Factory visits - to understand the production side of textiles;
- Cultural Heritage - to learn Indian traditional designs and techniques;
- History of Indian textiles – to gain primary information in India for their final projects.

The Textile Design Programme Leader, the Associate Professor International and Arts, Design and Humanities Fair Outcomes Champion created a DMUglobal textiles trip working with Shipra Roy, Nodal officer for DMU at NIFT. When asked for Roy's views on creating the program and its pedagogic benefits to students, she said:

The program was kept completely hinged on the hands-on learning pedagogy. Craft skills look very simple, as a complex product [it] is divided into simple steps; so that each and every person who is involved in the product making specializes in their own domain specific task. The students were shown the process in the area of weaving of silk sarees, which started from the growing of silkworm from egg stage to the final weaving of sarees. The experiential learning is the best form of learning; the participants of the program got to see the whole process and understand the nuances involved in detail and this gave them the opportunity to imbibe the learning, instead of keeping it at the theoretical level. (Roy 2019)

NIFT taught processes that were traditional to India and not part of the current DMU textile curriculum. The ethos of NIFT was that of social responsibility to keep the traditional craft heritage alive and that social responsibility fitted well with the ethos of DMU. The DMU students voted on which hand craft skills they wanted to learn and a week-long programme was designed to include traditional weaving, hand embroidery and woodblock print techniques.

As practitioners, the academic team was excited by the contrast between hand skills and the state-of-the-art manufacturing industry in India design. The result of this visit had a positive effect on the Textile Design curriculum. The aim of the project was also to create a legacy. By taking a technical instructor

on the visit to learn the skills alongside the students, it ensured that the skills will be taught to students not on the trip and also to future year groups. The links between the DMU and NIFT academics provided an opportunity to swap references and reading lists, alongside current information on up and coming designers. This has enhanced and enriched the teaching curriculum.

Conclusion

This case study shows that small actions can create change within the aims of 'Freedom to Achieve' to reflect the multi-cultural heritage in the BA (Hons) Textile Design student cohort through:

- Curriculum: through learning materials;
- Environment: Visual surroundings of project work;
- Development-travelling together
- Community and belonging; co-creating together staff and students.

An opportunity was created that gave all our students an understanding of the global nature of textiles, through changes to the curriculum, as the nature of the apparel industry develops internationally. The Business of Fashion and McKinsey & Company report 'The State of Fashion 2018' report states: 'We believe that 2018 will be a watershed year in fashion. For the first time, more than half of apparel and footwear sales will originate outside of Europe and North America.' (The Business of Fashion and McKinsey & Company 2017: 7)

The real benefit of reviewing diversity within the curriculum and working with the students to co-create the textiles visit to Bangalore is seen through this quote from one of the students on the trip who is a British Indian Muslim:

The trip to Bangalore heavily influenced my third year of study at De Montfort University. As a weaver, I was inspired by the 'weave clusters' and saree shops we visited. During pre-collection, I taught myself the saree techniques and will be using them in my final collection. Bangalore has also inspired me to consider pursuing further study in doing a Master's degree, where I hope to revisit India to learn the ancient techniques and document them, in order to come up with innovative designs and combinations of techniques for modern textiles. (Khadija Dookanwala April 2019)

The overarching 'Freedom to Achieve' project for the BAME attainment gap is showing positive effects with the attainment gap reducing over the last 5 years (2012/13 – 2017/18) by almost 5%. Although, the gap is now 8.9% and so there is still more work to be done. The emphasis on diversity has been really positive for the student experience and to increase staff awareness, which has prompted further initiatives to be started.

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