Keeping it real: Using client-based real-world projects in a fashion programme of study

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Introduction

Authentic, real-world projects are commonly used in fashion education as learning and assessment tools. Students from fashion schools around the world design collections, develop patterns, produce garments and enter runway shows and competitions as a standard part of their learning process. Students need activities such as these to gain the skill and knowledge requirements of the discipline. A not-so-common practice is the use of a real client for these "design and make" projects, which is understandable considering the extra challenges a real client poses for both students and tutors in the learning environment. But do the benefits outweigh the pitfalls of projects such as these? The fashion department at Southern Institute of Technology put this question to the test by introducing client-based, real-world projects into their assessment practices. Action research was implemented as a tool for initiating improvements to the assessment practice by gathering data from the students and tutors involved, and making changes to improve the learning experience for the students.

Background

When given the option, most fashion students will choose to design and make garments or collections that fit with their own target market, aesthetic or taste. Even if the target market outlined in the assessment brief is someone in a completely different demographic than their own, they still manage to make something they would be happy to wear themselves. This is understandable and expected as it is less challenging for a student to design and produce garments that are true to their own aesthetic. Once in industry only a few of the fashion graduates will find a career that enables them to design their own look. Most will work for other designers, or companies, and these roles require them to think outside their area of 'taste' and think about what the client wants. By giving students the extra challenge of working with a real client, they have to step out of their comfort zone and stretch themselves to satisfy the wants and needs of another person. Producing garments for a real client also challenges the students in regards to pattern making as they develop their patterns and construct the garments to fit a real person's physique rather than to a standard-sized mannequin.

An authentic assessment should replicate real-world challenges to see if students are capable of achieving the task as it would be done in industry. Much of what is done in industry requires a sound knowledge base of the subject. Exhibitions, cases, portfolios and problem-based inquiries most often require theory-based research and a component of written work. Much of this preparatory work will need to be taught in a classroom, or virtual environment, before the student is placed in a real-world situation. With this in mind, programme planning should include a mix of the two to best meet the students' needs (Mueller, 2011). Every assessment we give our students takes with it a message that sounds something like 'this is what you need to know and this is how you should go about it' (Boud, 1995). By ensuring those messages are related to real-world experiences, from the underpinning theory upwards, it is expected that students will enter the workforce better prepared for employment. Authentic assessment practices underpin the following three learning theories: experiential learning, project-based learning and real-world projects.

Students benefit in a variety of ways from real-world projects. Chapman, McPhee and Proudman (1995) stress the importance of learners being challenged outside their perceived physical and social comfort zones, and state that this challenge will enable them to develop from the new experiences. This includes being accountable for their actions and owning the consequences. They also discuss the series of meaningful relationships that help the students see how they fit into the bigger picture and fully embrace their learning. These relationships include the learner to self, learner to teacher, and learner to learning environment. Client-focused real-world projects also offer students the novelty of a student to client relationship. Aldoory and Wrigley (2000) evaluated the experience of real-world projects by assessing the student, teacher and client feedback. They found that all three parties benefited from the experience. The students were able to place classroom material into a meaningful context, the client

found value from the creative input, and the teachers stressed that even though there was extra work and negotiation required, the enhanced learning was worth it. Positive outcomes were also reported when Daugherty (2003) examined the opinions of students and their community partners in real-world projects.

The process

Three groups of students undertook client-based, real-world projects, with the first two working on them at the same time (Phase One) and the third group of students during the following year (Phase Two). At the end of Phase One, data was collected from the students and tutors to see what impact these projects had on the students' learning. After analysis of the data from Phase One, changes were made and put into practice during Phase Two. Data was then collected from the students in Phase Two and more recommendations have been developed ready to be implemented during the next phase.

It is expected that this action-research cycle will continue until both students and tutors are satisfied that we have a robust package in place for future years.

Phase One

Students in Phase One included four from year one (level 5) and five from year two (level 6) from an undergraduate fashion programme. There was a wide variation in the experience of the students when they started the project, as outlined below:

- Designing garments: from 0–25 years
- Drafting patterns: from 0–7 years
- Sewing garments: from 0–36 years
- Designing garments: for clients 0–4 garments
- 3 students had designed for clients and 6 had not
- Producing garments for clients: 0–15 mostly, with one student having made 450 items
- 6 students had produced garments for clients and 3 had not
- 4 of the above 6 students produced garments from their own designs
- 3 students had been previously employed in the fashion industry varying from 1–13 years, mostly sewing.

The students from Phase One chose a client they could meet with regularly for both feedback during the design development process and fittings during the production process. The students chose a client who was outside the institution to make the project more authentic. The students then undertook design-related research and utilised the design-development process to create one total look for their client. The client met regularly with the student during this stage to offer feedback and help with decision making as would happen in the industry. Once the final design was developed the student then produced the total look in the production class. They developed patterns by both drape and flat pattern development techniques and constructed the garments under the supervision of a tutor. Once the projects were complete, the students were interviewed to see if there was any change in their

confidence to work with clients, topic-specific confidence and motivation to complete their assessments. Although those were the focus questions for the interview, some students also mentioned an improvement in their motivation for a higher-quality finish of the garments, and therefore this factor has also been documented. The general findings from these interviews are outlined in Table 1. Following is a brief outline of the areas of interest:

- *Confidence to work with clients* is the individual student's confidence in their ability to communicate with clients and their ability to design and make garments for a specific physique.
- *Topic-specific confidence* is the individual student's confidence in their ability to understand the fashion design process, complete a design project, develop patterns, and construct garments for a specific client.
- *Motivation to complete assessments* is the individual student's motivation to work on the design project, complete the design portfolio, work on the pattern development and construction process, and complete the garments for a specific client.
- *Motivation for a higher-quality finish* is the professional quality of the finish of both the design portfolio and the finished garments and patterns.

Table 1: Phase One summary of changes

	Confidence to work with clients	**Topic-specific confidence**	**Motivation to complete assessments**	**Motivation for higher-quality finish**
Student 1	Improvement	Improvement	Improvement	Improvement
Student 2	Improvement	Improvement	Improvement	
Student 3	No change	No change	No change	No change
Student 4	Improvement	Improvement	No change	Improvement
Student 5	Improvement	Improvement	Improvement	Improvement
Student 6	Improvement	Improvement	No change	
Student 7	Decrease	Improvement	No change	Improvement
Student 8	Improvement	Improvement	Improvement	
Student 9	Improvement	Improvement	Improvement (design)	

Data gathered from students in Phase One, as summarised in Table 1, shows that eight of the nine students experienced improvement in three or more areas. Only one student did not find any changes to her motivation or confidence by the end of the project. The reason for this student's results differing from the other students is understood to be because she started the project with a lot more experience in producing garments for real-world clients than any of the other students. This student had previously made 450 garments where the other students' experience ranged between 0 to 15 garments. Even though many of the participants found the project to be challenging, hard work and a 'reality check', requiring more skill and understanding than designing and making garments for simulated assessment briefs, they all considered it to be a beneficial and valuable learning experience.

To reduce the potential pitfalls and improve the experience for students and tutors involved in future projects such as these, recommendations were developed after Phase One and implemented during Phase Two. The first recommendation (from both students and tutors) was to discuss the potential challenges of such projects with the students both prior to and during the project, with the aim of reducing the 'unexpected' element. This recommendation came about because many of the students didn't realise the challenges involved and became overwhelmed once the project was under way. In response to this recommendation, during Phase Two both the design and production tutors ensured the students were aware of the potential issues at each stage of the project. These students also had the opportunity to discuss the potential challenges with the Phase One students, getting first-hand peer advice.

The second recommendation was related to the less experienced students needing more garment-fitting appointments with their clients. It was therefore decided that the year one students should choose a client more familiar and available to them until they have gained the basic made-to-measure skills and are ready to work with a client less familiar and available to them. This was a recommendation from the tutor who found that the less experienced students struggled with limited access to their client during the production process. Because the Phase Two students were all from year one, they were able to choose a student from their class as their client to see if this option alleviates the pressure created by client unavailability. Admittedly, this option took away some of the real-world aspect of the project and, as with the action-research cycle, it was expected that data collected at the end of Phase Two would either support or oppose this change.

The third recommendation (from both students and tutors) was that tutors facilitating the projects should ensure that students choose a project at a complexity level to suit the individual student's knowledge and skill level, enabling the more experienced students to be challenged and reducing the risk of the less experienced students becoming overwhelmed. This was recommended because some of the students underestimated the extra time that goes into the 'made-to-measure' element of the project and chose to make garments at a complexity level they could have managed had they been for a standard size. When implementing this recommendation the tutor still allowed the students, alongside their clients, to decide on the garments to be made but guided them towards the more appropriate complexity level.

> **Tutor comments after Phase One of the project:**
> *Real-world projects benefit not only the students' mental and physical skills, but also the community, if carried out in a responsible and realistic manner. Having real clients adds a real-life dimension to the design process and really makes the students think and act more responsibly, testing their life-skills in communication as well as their technical knowledge in their field of study.*

Phase Two

Students in Phase Two included seven year one (level 5) students from the same undergraduate fashion programme. Overall these students had less experience than those from Phase One, as outlined below:

- Designing garments: from 0–5 years
- Drafting patterns: from 0–2 years
- Sewing garments: from 0–8 years
- No students had any experience in designing garments for clients
- One of the seven students had produced a garment for a client
- None of the seven students had produced garments for clients from their own designs
- None of the seven students had ever been employed in the fashion industry.

Table 2: Phase Two summary of changes

	Confidence to work with clients	Topic-specific confidence	Motivation to complete assessments	Motivation for higher-quality finish
Student 10	No change	Improvement	Improvement	Improvement
Student 11	Improvement	Improvement	Decrease (design)	Improvement
Student 12	Improvement	Improvement	Improvement	Improvement
Student 13	No change	Improvement	Improvement	Improvement
Student 14	No change	Improvement	Improvement	Improvement
Student 15	Improvement	Improvement	Improvement	Improvement
Student 16	Improvement	Improvement	Improvement	Improvement

Data gathered from the Phase Two students shows that they all improved in at least three of the areas. One student found a decrease in his motivation to complete the design assessment stating, "I was less motivated because it was challenging and not as straightforward as I thought it would have been. When I am designing for myself I can change things anytime without having to wait days to see the client." Even though this student found the design project challenging, when asked if he thought undertaking this project was beneficial his response was: "Yes, definitely! It made me step out of my comfort zone and consider the wants and needs of someone else. It's like stepping into another world. It showed me what I can do for someone else and I learned a lot from it".

Two of the students who found no change in their confidence to work with clients were very good friends who chose each other as clients. They both stated that it may have been too easy with a friend and having chosen someone else in the class may have offered them that extra, needed challenge. These comments influenced a recommendation to randomly assign clients within the classroom to ensure all students have the opportunity to extend themselves during future projects. All of the other students from Phase Two agreed that it was a good idea to choose a client from their class for a first time project such as this.

Tutor comments after Phase Two of the project:
I think it's appropriate for the first-year students to choose a client from within, rather than outside, the classroom. This project has definitely given them a real idea of what's involved, what sorts of questions they need to ask, and how organised they need to be in their fittings and their re-fittings, and their design and fabric choices. That was so problematic last year when they couldn't get hold of their client to ask them these questions and make the changes. Now that they have done this first client-based project, it would be a really good idea for the students to design and make for a client from outside the classroom during year two or three of their studies. That would again take them to the next step of professional etiquette in fitting and organisation.

Recommendations

Being a case study, it is not intended that the findings be generalised but rather give an insight into the implementation of using client-based, real-world projects into a fashion programme of study. Both students and tutors involved in the project believe it to be a valuable practice enhanced by the following recommendations:

- Discussion of the potential challenges of such projects with the students both prior to and during the project, with the aim of reducing the 'unexpected' element
- Enabling the less experienced students to choose a client more familiar and available to them until they have gained the basic made-to-measure skills and are ready to work with a client less familiar and available to them
- Tutors facilitating the projects should ensure the students choose a project at a complexity level suited to the individual student's knowledge and skill level, enabling the more experienced students to be challenged and reducing the risk of the less experienced students becoming overwhelmed.

The findings support theories outlined in a wide range of literature that authentic assessment practices in the form of client-based, real-world projects are beneficial to student learning. Data gathered from the students and tutor involved provides evidence that, along with being challenging, this assessment practice is a valuable and worthwhile initiative. By designing and producing for a real client, the students have been challenged to become more client-focused during the design process and the projects have also developed their pattern-making and garment-construction skills as they custom make these garments for the very real human figure.

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