Fashion variations: student approaches to learning in fashion design

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Abstract

This paper investigates the qualitatively different ways that students approach their learning in the context of first- and second-year fashion design courses.

The central aim of the study is to explore the variation in fashion design students' approaches to learning. The focus on variation suggests that these approaches are best explored with a phenomenographic study. Fashion design students in four fashion design departments in UK universities were chosen as the subjects of the study. The phenomenographic method used commenced with semi-structured interviews focusing on student approaches to learning in the context of a fashion design project in the first or second year of study. The sample of 21 was deliberately selected to maximise the variation. The focus of analysis is to define the qualitatively different ways (but not the similar ways) in which fashion design students approach their learning.

The context explored in this study focuses on one fashion design project. The second-order nature of the research approach is

concerned with talking to students about how they experience their learning (that is, to describe the experience of their interviewees, rather than to describe their own experience, which is a first-order approach). This paper also focuses on variation or on experiences that are different, in learning fashion design. The variations in approaches to learning in fashion design are constituted as a series of qualitatively different categories of approaches. These approaches move from strategies that focus on the product, through a focus on the process of design to a focus on concepts. The students' intentions in deploying these strategies vary from developing a technical competence, through the development of the design process to development of their own conceptions. These categories are described in terms of those structural and referential aspects of the strategies and intentions. This is demonstrated in the outcome space, which describes the internal relations in structural and referential terms, this enabled the construction of the hierarchy of the structural component of the study.

Introduction

Although the body of research building on Marton and Säljo's seminal study (1976) into student approaches to learning now ranges across a number of subjects and disciplines, only one such study has been conducted in art and design. A case study on the encouragement of independent and reflective learning on a graphic design course (Gibbs, 1992; Davies, 1994) touched upon student approaches but did not set out specifically to identify the range of different approaches taken, nor to define the features of the differences. This being so, teachers in the discipline have had little empirical research to inform debates on student learning. Nevertheless, the discourse that has developed around student learning has come to embrace the terms 'deep' and 'surface' without specific information about how such characteristics might manifest themselves in art and design.

It is only recently that a larger proportion of teachers in the discipline has started to recognise the role educational research can

play in the development of thinking concerning pedagogical issues. This growing awareness and our own everyday observations indicate that it is very likely that students are adopting deep and surface approaches. But if they are, how do we know, and what more can we say about these approaches in the context of art and design? More specifically, what do our students on fashion design courses do when presented with the project briefs, which constitute the practical learning environments of design projects?

Biggs (1999, p. 18) and Prosser & Trigwell (1999, p. 12) have produced models of the factors that impact on learning outcomes and the relations between them. These suggest that we might develop teaching and assessment practices that encourage the achievement of higher quality outcomes if we are able to understand the learning processes students adopt in a given context and why. Knowing more about the range of variation in approach, and how the different approaches are characterised in art and design, would provide opportunities for students and teachers to reflect on how learning intentions, focus and motivation are related to the learning that has taken place. At the same time, we might develop better methods for facilitating learning if we understand more about how students variously perceive the objects of their learning.

Approaches to learning

The literature on approaches to learning encompasses what have come to be regarded as seminal studies. The first of these, conducted by Marton & Säljö (1976) was concerned with what were then termed 'levels of processing'. They found the key difference between the ways educational psychology students had read a given text rested on whether they focused on what the text was about (deep processing), or on the text itself (surface processing). Svensson (1977) also working on how students read texts found similar results in what he termed students' 'approaches', but he referred to the two approaches as 'atomistic' and 'holistic', the former describing a focus on parts of the text, and the latter a focus on the meaning of the text. Over time,

elements of the terminologies adopted in these two early studies appear to have merged to give us the 'deep/surface approaches'. Research undertaken by Laurillard (1979) confirmed that the two different approaches were adopted by students working on problem-solving tasks on a combined science course, and also identified that students would change approach according to the learning context. Thereby it was established that an approach is not a fixed characteristic of the student, although there may be a preferred approach. Studies conducted by Entwistle and Ramsden (1983) again supported the early findings but identified that students could also take a 'strategic' approach. This resonated with the 'cue-consciousness' first observed by Miller & Parlett (1974), and accorded with Ramsden's (1979) earlier investigation into the effect that the learning context, for example heavy workloads, could have on approach.

Deep approach	**Surface approach**	**Strategic approach**
Intention to understand	Intention to complete task requirements	Intention to obtain highest possible grades
Vigorous interaction with content	Memorise information needed for assessments	Organise time and distribute effort to greatest effect
Relate new ideas to previous knowledge	Failure to distinguish principles from examples	Ensure conditions and materials for studying are appropriate
Relate concepts to everyday practice	Treat task as an external imposition	Use previous exam papers to predict questions
Relate evidence to conclusions	Focus on discrete elements without integration	Be alert to cues about marking schemes
Examine the logic of the argument	Unreflective about purpose or strategies	

Table 1 Features of student approaches to learning (Source: Entwistle, 1987)

Features of approaches are summarised in Table 1. Many of the features describe or relate to learning, teaching and assessment practices that are not part of the learning environment common to most art and design institutions i.e. project based, problem based or experiential and independent learning. The majority of learning time is spent through practice of the design processes and would include a number of stages of the process which are perhaps not readily identified in the descriptions elicited here.

The re-contextualising of such research into a language familiar to art and design practices is perhaps undertaken on an intuitive basis by teachers, the terminology certainly having resonance to our experiences as teachers. Further illumination may be provided by references to the aspects or dimensions, rather than the features, of deep and surface approaches and these are outlined in Table 2. Drawn from Marton and Booth's (1997) detailed analysis of the experience of learning and from the later interpretation by Dall'Alba (2000), both take a phenomenographic perspective. All three dimensions appear to have a more universal application to analysing approaches to learning than the previous example.

Methodology

The study was modelled on a brief that focused on finding out about approaches to learning, conceptions of learning, and contextual factors that had influenced approaches. From this brief a framework was constructed relating to the conduct of the interviews and on how to present the data (Drew, Bailey & Shreeve, 2001).

> The phenomenon used as a focus for eliciting the students' experiences of learning for this study was the taught design project, which equates with the assignment or essay used to facilitate learning in text-based disciplines. First-year students and students in the first term of the second year were the focus for the study. These students are past their introductory studies and into their first design projects, but not at a stage of concentrated specialisation. This context was a constant

for all the interviews. Additionally, as 2000) assessment is a key factor that affects approach, students were asked to describe a project that had been completed and assessed. The students were selected so as to maximise the variation; in other words, students with different approaches to the fashion design project were sought.

Aspect	**Deep approach**	**Surface approach**
Direct object of learning (Marton & Booth) *or* Student's focus of learning (Dall'Alba)	On underlying purpose and meaning of task or learning material	On the task or learning material itself
Indirect object of learning (Marton & Booth) or Student's intention (Dall'Alba)	To understand	To reproduce
Act of learning (Marton & Booth) or Way in which the student engages in learning (Dall'Alba)	Organising and integrating	Memorising the content of what is being learned

Table 2 Aspects of approaches to learning (Sources: Marton and Booth, 1997; Dall'Alba)

The defining features of approaches to learning, the terms deep and surface approach to learning (Marton and Säljo, 1976), and the description of those defining features (further elaborated and summarised by Entwistle, 1997) were understood by the researchers not to fit neatly with their experience of design education. With this as the main underpinning feature of the aim of the enquiry, to redefine the features of approaches to learning in the context of design, the research question can be framed as:

What is the qualitative variation in approaches to learning adopted by design students, and how does that range of approaches relate to research results in other disciplines?

And further defined as:

> What is the qualitative variation in approaches to learning adopted by fashion design students within the framework of the design project?

This study embarked on in this paper contributes toward the further articulation of approaches to learning in design by testing the research questions within the context of first- and second-year fashion design.

> Phenomenography is the empirical study of the limited number of qualitatively different ways in which we experience, conceptualise, understand, etc, various phenomena in and aspects of the world around us. These differing experiences, understandings etc are characterised in terms of categories of description, logically related to each other, and forming hierarchies in relation to given criteria. Such an ordered set of categories of description is called the outcome space of the phenomenon in question. Participants in the study are encouraged to reflect on previously unthematised aspects of the phenomenon in question. The analysis is carried out in an iterative manner on those reflections. Distinctly different ways of experiencing the phenomenon discussed by participants are the units of analysis and not the single individuals. The categories of description corresponding to those differing understandings and the logical relations that can be established between them constitute the main results of a phenomenographic study.
> Marton (1992)

This research approach has been articulated more fully by Marton and Booth (1997).

One example of a set of results (outcome space) from the study on learning instrumental music (Reid, 1997) contains three ways of conceiving of the music object (an outcome of the learning of a musical instrument). The three ways are qualitatively different in meaning, with the focus being on the instrument, on the music, or on the musician:

> [Music] as technique relates to the physical aspects of playing the instrument as well as notational elements such as phrasing, accents or articulation.
>
> [Music as] sound and communication [is] related to the belief that each piece of music has an inherent meaning that is constituted by such things as style, period, harmony and composers' intent. It is the [inherent meaning of the music] that is communicated to an audience.
>
> Music as personal meaning ... involve[s] aspects of [technique and sound and communication], but these aspects were reinterpreted by the participants through the notion that music is a way of expressing personal meaning and understanding of the world through music performance. It is the musician's ideas that are expressed through the music's inherent meaning.
>
> Reid (1997, p. 204, in Trigwell, 2000)

There is, however, also a structural differentiation present here in the form of logically related hierarchies. (An outcome space is far more than a 'list'.) The playing of music as a way of expressing personal meaning (a focus on the musician) is still seen to be achieved through the development of technique and the communication of sound. And communicating the meaning of the music (a focus on the music) is still accomplished through the playing technique and an awareness of phrasing, accents and articulation. The category that focuses on the musician is structurally related to the other two and would therefore appear to be the most inclusive and complete. In other words, there are internal relations in the outcome space (Trigwell, 2000).

Findings

In this study of 21 university students of fashion design we have identified four different approaches to learning. These approaches are constituted in terms of the students' strategies and intentions in the context of one of their first- or second-year fashion design projects.

The approaches are briefly described below.

Approach A

In this approach students adopt a product-focused strategy with the intention to demonstrate technical competence.

Students focus on making a technically competent artefact (garment, drawing, pattern etc.) Information is collected with the intention to reproduce elements in the making of the artefact. The visual aspects of the design process focus solely on remembering procedures and techniques.

Approach B

In this approach students adopt a product-focused strategy with the intention to develop the design process.

As with approach A, students adopting this approach also have the intention to develop technical competence, but they aim to do so through strategies focused on experimenting with design processes. Part of their development occurs in interaction with a tutor, technician or peers. Students collect and review information in order to develop the process of design in the making of an artefact. Practice and repetition of design and making skills are an important part of the learning process.

Approach C

In this approach students adopt a process-focused strategy with the intention to develop the design process.

Students focus on the process of visualisation through experimental design and making. Students make connections and relate ideas in the process of visual research. The design process is interactive with tutor, technician or peers in order to further develop ideas. Experimentation in this approach is a strategy used for discovery and development of design processes rather than a means to making an artefact more competently.

Approach D

In this approach students adopt a concept-focused strategy with the intention to develop own conceptions.

Students focus on the process of visualisation of concepts through experimental design processes and making. Visual concepts are developed through relating ideas in the research process. The development of visual concepts is considered to be fundamental in this approach and therefore is more important than the final execution of the product. The design process is interactive with tutor, technician or peers in order to develop critical abilities and conceptual thinking skills.

The strategy and intention dimensions of the student approaches as described in the categories above are summarised in Table 3.

Strategy	**Intention**		
Focus of the learning	Developing technical competence	Develop design process	Develop own oconceptions
Making an artefact (product focus)	A	B	
Experimenting with process (process focus)		C	
Visualising of concepts (concept focus)			D

Table 3 The structural and referential aspects of the categories of approaches

Discussion

The interview data collected was framed within the context of particular projects that had been assessed and thus formulated a past experience which students recounted to the interviewer. The analysis and findings must be interpreted in the context of this situated learning experience and do not necessarily represent a fixed approach to learning in each of the students responding. All the accounts reflected a similar pattern of experience, the framework of

project or problem-based learning, which most art and design programmes undertake.

The outcome space represents the hierarchical relationship of approaches. Each approach encapsulates those below it. For example, a student who demonstrates a concept focus may also demonstrate strategies that concentrate on processes and experimentation. This can be illustrated further by reference to particular approaches.

Approach A

For students adopting a product focus with the intention to demonstrate technical competence, the key traits are their desires to 'get it right', to reproduce a product or technique and to do as they are instructed. The tendency in their accounts is to expect the tutor or the technician to show them or tell them how to do something and then to reproduce this with a professional finish.

> Student (S): It's scary at first because you're thinking 'I don't want to get it wrong.' 'Don't do this wrong'. The amount of time you've got you need to get this done by. You're kind of scared but then you kind of go into a rush - 'I have to get it done, I have to get it done.' You just don't think about anything else but getting that shirt done.

> S: You always learn, you know, you always learn something, so it's never a waste of time. S: You always learn, I mean I learnt, you know, having to do the fabrics in big sections made you learn a lot about how to make a fabric professionally and you know how to finish something off professionally because you can't have bad, botched-up fabric in a full garment, you know. So I suppose it did help to learn and focus that these are real garments and they should be finished to a professional standard and so yes I suppose you did.

Students adopting this approach perceive the process of designing, visualising and making to be one of memorising and applying techniques and procedures, as illustrated overleaf:

S: Firstly you have to get a book which has patterns and that and you read it and they give you examples and you actually are able to try them out. So that's how I learnt by reading and learning every day. It's easier for me that way. Sort of learning and doing something, for me memory wise it's easier for me to learn every day so I can remember it. I can visualise it in my head – 'I remember doing it this way' so that helps. That's how I learn anyway through doing that.

Students gather information with the intention of identifying within it elements that can be copied and reproduced:

Interviewer (I): When you say 'thinking about' what does that involve, 'thinking about pockets'?

S: Just drawing a few different examples of pockets and maybe having a look at some real trousers and having a look at real pockets, then going back to sort of the paper and just drawing out some ideas of different pocket shapes and things like that.

Interaction with tutors or technicians is for the purposes of being instructed or shown techniques and procedures:

S: I just went down into the knit room and I spoke to one of the technicians, told them that was what I wanted to do - and they just showed me how to do it and I just went ahead and did it, so - I mean I had done a workshop in the first year but that was using the small, sort of hand machines, these were the bigger machines - so, you know, it was just sort of show - this is how you do it and then you try it yourself.

Approach B

As with approach A, the intention of approach B is on the production of the artefact, on developing technical competence, but the student adopts strategies of experimenting with the design process.

S: Started off in the library with visual research, lots of sketchbook work. Photographs and general playing around with denim as well, making little samples, ways of making it stiff. Thinking about exaggerated body

form and how I was going to make something that had to be wearable, only in terms of going down the catwalk. Whilst we were doing our visual research we had pattern cutting tuition for I think three mornings. Had various little projects to do for that as well. Then just making the garment.

S: On one hand [the sketchbook] is there to sort of store the information that you have collected, but also it is there to use the information you have collected and play with it before you have the final idea.

I: So is play important in your learning?

S: Yes I think so.

I: You think so?

S: It is. A lot of the stuff, in relation to this project, a lot of the bits that I did earlier on, I didn't really know what I was doing but I was just playing around, experimenting really and finding out was doesn't go right, which is more important, and what does go right. Making mistakes and finding out how to go about trying to change them or leaving them as they are. Experimenting.

The acts of rehearsing and evidencing design and technical procedures are important aspects in these approaches.

S: … thinking about it is more unrealistic than actually doing it. I think when you think about ideas they can often be - once you put them into practice you can push those areas more but I definitely used that in the past two projects, I have been a bit more active in things rather than just talking about how things are going to look. I just do them. Especially when you are talking to a tutor there is not point in saying what you are going to do. They can't tell you that is great when they haven't actually seen it. I think it is the evidence of how you are working that is important.

Approach C

Students who adopt approach C focus on the processes, include experimentation, trial and error, but use these strategies to develop the design process, rather than concentrating on producing the artefact more competently. They see interaction with others as opening up opportunities for further development of ways of seeing things differently.

> S: And then just went on to selecting items, garments and stuff.
>
> I: And when you're doing that what do you do?
>
> S: Lay everything out and go through it, sort of see what jumps out at me. Usually the tutor sort of will maybe, you know, say something to … and usually I think it already. A lot of the time I ask my flatmates or friends. More than - em, flatmates because they're all design students too, so.
>
> I: How have you found out about doing that?
>
> S: Trial and error, I think, mostly. And, obviously tutors and uni mates a lot of the time. Definitely helps.
>
> I: They're helping you to learn how to do things?
>
> S: Yeah. Yeah just - the procedure you go through. And then trial and error because it doesn't always work. It's different for everybody.

Discussions with peers, tutors and technicians are seen as opportunities to identify and develop new ways of manipulating ideas, materials and techniques:

> S: Yes, I did but I also kept my mind open. I mean if my teachers were to suggest something, then I would definitely do it and I would definitely try it out. Or even if my peers suggested something then I would definitely try it out.

Approach D

Student adopting approach D will also use experimental approaches. Visual concepts are developed through relating and developing ideas through research. The focus of their intention however, is on the concept of their work and not the process, finish or the perfection of technique. This student describes her attempts to express an abstract concept:

> I: What did you find most difficult?
>
> S: Matching the reality of the garment with what was in my head and in my design. Not the cut part but the concept – does it convey the idea - what I wanted it to be? … People look at a garment and think about whether they or anyone would wear it. It's not the point. I want people to think about the idea, not whether it's a 'nice' frock or if anyone would walk down the street in it.

Students adopting this approach use research to make connections and to develop concepts to a wider world view.

> S: So, I spread out what I had and what I'd found out – information and stuff I'd got from the library and the net. I liked the idea of the stuff I'd picked up from the street, the non-fashion materials that she'd mentioned in the brief. They were dirty and raw, about time and decay and experience – do you know what I mean? They'd kind of lived and died. Christmas was in the middle of the brief and my brother was talking about violence and fights near the university where he is, and in the town. I realised I wanted to do something that kind of linked the nearness of violence and chaos and fear in cities now with ideas around apocalypse – you know that we do have apocalypse now, all the war – that stuff in Yugoslavia, that was apocalypse for the victims, wasn't it, I mean. And fires, tornadoes, floods – I mean the chaos everywhere….

Interaction with tutors and peers is to develop critical and conceptual thinking skills:

> S: I like feeling that a tutor is there when I need help to get me through to the next stage, not to tell me – that's so much better here, where I was before she used to make too many suggestions and it was like to follow them was 'to do it right'. Here, she gets me to think and to answer my own questions.

With all these different approaches to learning occurring within a first year cohort of students one needs to understand that learning is not simply a straightforward activity in which all parties undertake a programme of work and arrive with the same outcomes. There are implications for structuring and clarifying exactly what the focus of assessment is, when students have been through the project process. Where students do not see learning as a relating to an abstract concept, for example, but tutors do, they will not succeed and will probably find it difficult to understand why they do not achieve high marks. There is a challenge for tutors to devise ways to enable students to adopt approaches which relate to the development of concepts in a relational way, if indeed this is what the aim of the curriculum is to be.

Conclusion

There are similarities between the original approaches to learning studies outlined earlier, but in attempting to redefine the features of approaches to learning in the context of design, the differences between the original research results and the new context must be evaluated. In examining these earlier, seminal studies, the focus is on learning using a text (even though the term 'text' can take on a metaphorical meaning), or of learning in text-based study. At the extremes of deep and surface approaches to learning, this study illustrates a resonance between the intention to reproduce, memorise facts and procedures, and at the opposite extreme, the intention to relate ideas to previous knowledge and experience. These two approaches in this study appear to parallel the deep and surface approaches in some elements. Text and design can be freely interchanged with these descriptions of the features of approaches to

learning. The findings expressed in the outcome space developed for this study indicate a greater area of variation between these two extremes. It is within the development of the design process that the difference appears. The approaches reflect neither a strategy for reproduction, nor one of making connections and relations in the learning, but one of experimenting with designing, making and material processes in order to engage with the learning of design.

The implications for learning, teaching and curriculum design are situated in the recognition that for different students, and quite possibly, for different teachers (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999), the focus of learning can be at odds with curriculum, assessment criteria and stated outcomes.

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