

COLLABORATIVE PEDAGOGIES FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE: INSIGHTS FROM THE 'FASHION PRACTICES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE' UNIT

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INTRODUCTION

The fashion industry sits at the intersection of global crises relating to climate, racial, and social injustices¹. Preparing students to navigate – and critically tackle – these challenges is increasingly important². Despite the emergence of pedagogical methods foregrounding collaboration, interdisciplinarity, and engagement with real-world contexts, relatively limited research has examined how students experience these approaches in creative higher education.

This paper presents insights from the *Fashion Practices for Social Change* unit at London College of Fashion, UAL. The unit brings together students from diverse master's courses and aims to cultivate the skills and mindsets needed to imagine and enact fashion practices for social change. It asks students to work in multidisciplinary teams and respond to live briefs co-developed with external industry and community partners. A qualitative evaluation of the unit draws on in-depth interviews with students, project partners and the Unit Leader, and a participatory process in which student researchers contributed to the data analysis.

Fashion Practices for Social Change

Fashion Practices for Social Change (FPfSC) is an elective unit delivered across thirteen master's courses at London College of Fashion (LCF), UAL. It is derived from thinking and research conducted by Dr Francesco Mazzarella and his colleagues at Centre for Sustainable Fashion (CSF), UAL. It draws from the CSF framework of fashion design for sustainability³ which supports working within the context of human equity and planetary boundaries, tackling some of the symptoms of unsustainability (including wellbeing compromised, modern day slavery, climate change, consumption and waste), and cultivating mindsets (*e.g.* resilience, equity, activism, collaboration) (Figure 1). This unit focuses mostly on the social agenda, promoting education, activism, collaboration, and decoloniality in fashion⁴.

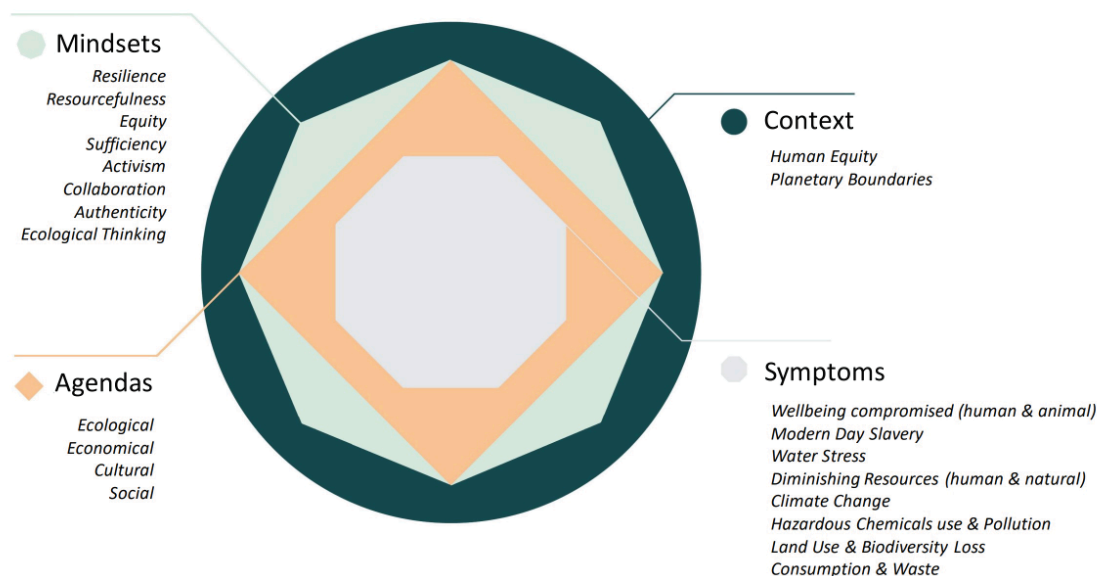


Figure 1: CSF Framework.

In this eight-week unit (twenty credits in the UK), students are introduced to a range of academic content that supports them to think about how they could use their own creative practices to foster positive social change. Through a combination of lectures, seminars and team project work, students are encouraged to think about issues such as the impacts of fashion on societies, in the context of a just transition. They are introduced to fashion-led practices, actions and strategies to challenge the *status quo* (e.g., decolonising fashion, slow fashion, alternative business models, activism, etc.) and given opportunities to consider the barriers to enabling positive social change, through fashion. Students work in collaborative multi-disciplinary teams to develop their own projects in response to briefs set by external partners who work in value-aligned parts of the fashion system, such as social enterprises or creative projects with local marginalised communities.

UAL Principles for Climate, Racial and Social Justice

The *Climate, Racial and Social and Racial Justice* (CRSJ) principles⁵ were co-developed by UAL staff and students to provide an ethical framework to guide learners' creative practice and professional development (Figure 2). Through the design of FPfSC, Dr Mazarella sought to actively embed these principles, scaffolded by relevant theories, frameworks and tools that expanded on CRSJ and provided students with opportunities to explore them in practice through class-based activities, collaborative project work, self-directed study, and the learning outcomes set for this unit.



Figure 2. UAL Climate, Racial and Social Justice principles.

The FPfSC unit most closely aligns with Principle 4: *Design for human equity, social and racial justice* (i.e., by mobilising critical thinking, humbly questioning the norms, practices and biases embedded in our societies and cultures) and 5: *Accelerate activism and advocacy* (i.e., by participating in co-creation and actions that realise change in solidarity with those within and outside of our community).

Student Knowledge Exchange

A core element of the FPfSC unit delivery is the opportunity for students to work with external partners on live briefs. Within the academic literature, the understanding of how embedding Knowledge Exchange (KE) activities in teaching and learning is poorly represented^{6,7} and frequently focuses on partnerships with industry. Less research is available around what is involved in adopting Student Knowledge Exchange (SKE) as a methodology for learners to participate in projects that lead to positive social change through creative practice. Through evaluative work, this paper contributes to this understanding.

Partners

In the 2024-2025 academic cycle, there were three community partners who set briefs for the students:

- Victoria Ho, Creative Director and Co-Founder of Fashion 4 Freedom (F4F). This brief invited students to propose product innovations and develop a storytelling campaign to support cultural sustainability and market engagement with a fashion brand committed to preserving and promoting the heritage craftsmanship of the Vietnamese Ta Oi Indigenous community.
- Krirsten Caron, Strategic Consultant and Researcher, who conceived Future Artisan Cooperative. Through this brief, students were asked to explore an emerging support system for design-attuned women-led artisan enterprises in low-to-middle income countries (LMICs). In response to this brief, students developed campaigns and a communication plan encouraging young people to learn craft skills and engage in cultural heritage preservation.
- Laura Nyahuye, Multi-disciplinary Artist, designer of 'I Migrated'. The key objective of this brief was for students to build on the practice of artist Laura Nyahuye and amplify the voices, personal identities, diverse cultural heritages, and lived experiences of refugee women in order to shift negative perceptions around migration, via film, performance, stage design, a communication campaign, textile/fashion artefacts, and/or a project plan.

METHODOLOGY

This section presents the methodology adopted for the evaluation of the unit discussed in this paper. Student voice was consciously embedded in the unit design and delivery, and in the approach to evaluation. This was done at three key points in the unit's design and ongoing development:

1. Design

While designing the curriculum for this unit, Dr Mazzarella corresponded with several recent LCF graduates, consulting with them on the plans for the unit and talking through his ideas for appropriate content. These graduates were positive about the proposed unit.

"It sounds fantastic and covers content that I find to be very important. I especially love that you have decided to include co-creation, impact assessment and communicating social change. I believe these are very practical and valuable things to learn that will benefit the students in the future."

(Graduate 1)

2. Data Collection

As described in the methodology section below, the evaluation focused on understanding the student experience of participating in the unit through conducting in-depth qualitative interviews with students in its first year of running.

3. Analysis

We included the voice of students in the analysis of data through employing three students or recent graduates to participate in a series of thematic analysis workshops⁸.

Evaluation Design

This evaluation, drawing on an embedded evaluation approach⁹, involved a collaborative partnership between Dr Rose Thompson (RT), a research and evaluation professional, and the Unit Leader for *Fashion Practices for Social Change*, Dr Francesco Mazzarella (FM). The aim was to explore with

students, project partners, and the teaching team – through qualitative interviews – the experience of the unit. The proposal for this evaluation was approved by UAL (application ref: 026-25-01 'Evaluation of Student Experiences of the Climate, Social and Racial Justice Framework').

Data Collection

All students taking the FPfSC unit in the a.y. 2024-2025 were invited to participate in a one-to-one interview with RT in the last 4 weeks of the unit. Ten students were interviewed, and were offered a £10 voucher as a thankyou payment for participating. Student interviewees were asked questions about their experiences in the unit, including their feedback on taught content, working with external partners, and producing their collaborative projects. Two external partners and the Unit Leader also participated in semi-structured interviews about their experiences of being involved in the delivery of the unit.

Data Analysis

The student interviews were recorded and transcribed through the Microsoft Teams application. RT anonymised all transcripts and checked them against the audio recordings of the interviews for accuracy, correcting errors in transcription where they were found. RT employed three students or recent graduates to participate in a group thematic analysis process, drawing on principles¹⁰ described by Braun and Clarke (2020). Figure 2 shows the process through which this analysis was conducted.

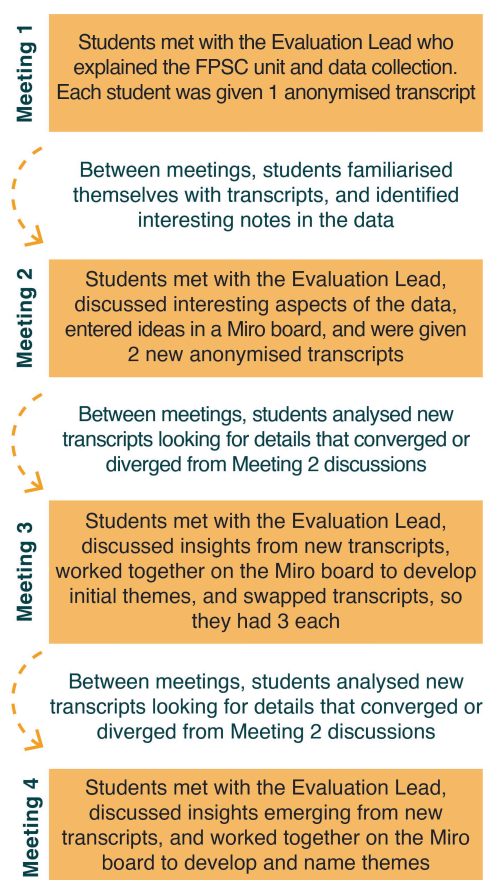


Figure 2: Collaborative analysis process⁸.

Through this process, RT and the student researchers initially identified eight potential key themes (Figure 3) which were narrowed down to four through further discussions with FM.



Figure 3: Miro board produced through a collaborative evaluation process.

FINDINGS

The following sections present a summary of the key findings.

Working with External Partners

Overall, collaboration with industry partners was viewed very positively by students. They highlighted that being asked to respond to ‘real’ briefs set by external partners made the work feel motivating and relevant.

“Having an outside brief also makes it more realistic and more lively. And you want to invest yourself in it more. [...] Because you feel like they could benefit from this as well, so I don't just want to make something halfarsed, I want to take good photos, so that if Victoria [external partner] wants to use them, I want to make her proud as well. So, that gives external value to it and motivates you to continue.”

(Student 6)

Additional benefits were found in bringing the students face-to-face with the ‘dark side’ of fashion waste through the partnership with North London Hospice.

“The thing I did is to collect clothes from their [North London Hospice] warehouse, and when I went inside the warehouse, it was the same image that I had before, so basically there was a kind of garbage mountain. [...] I was really happy to experience that kind of thing directly.”

(Student 5)

This student went on to develop a self-generated partnership with the organisation outside of the unit through a pop-up shop for second-hand clothes within the college.

Some students reported experiences that could be described as ‘transformational’¹¹ through the partnership, in that they described being motivated to change the direction that their future careers might take.

“We had an important shift, and for me personally, she [external partner] changed my mind about how this social enterprise works, and made me become determined to pursue something like that when I graduate. I also want to pursue something more meaningful, with social value and that echoes my own values.”

(Student 8)

Partners also reported positive benefits from the collaboration.

“For me what was great is that I had some instincts about ideas. I’m a lot older, and it was really lovely to hear the younger generation come up with their ideas. Some things were kind of fresh to me. [...] I sometimes think these young adults are more advanced than sometimes the teaching teams. One of the groups was amazing. The work was like MBA standard. This is without a doubt, and I was like this could be launched into an amazing business proposition, and I loved it.”

(Victoria Ho, external partner)

Cross-disciplinary Collaborations

Students’ experiences of cross-disciplinary collaborations were more mixed. Where collaborations within cross-disciplinary groups worked well, they reported a number of benefits, including building connections across different courses, creating outputs for their portfolios that differed from the kind of outputs they could have created alone, and working in conditions that may replicate the kind of partnerships necessary in the industry. For an example of an output of these collaborations, see Figure 4.

“[The project outputs] are different from what I would typically do for assessments and assignments. Fashion Marketing is very much [about] written work, long case studies. [...] But when I can show the pictures we’ve done, the process to produce these pictures, the research, it’s a bit more engaging. So, I think that was a really big success.”

(Student 6)



Figure 4: A photographic output from one of the student collaborations. Photo by Tingyuan Xu.

However, where students struggled with their teamwork, this was reported as having significant negative impacts on their experiences of the unit. They reported having to put in additional labour in their attempts to make the teamwork function and being disappointed with the outputs they were able to produce when the missing members were from the creative disciplines.

“A lot of the times when the groups produced a very good output, that was when they all worked together and brought their skillsets together. [...] I'm not an expert in photography or any digital assets by any means. So, it was really hard for me to produce the majority of the work when I didn't have the sort of skillset that was required to do something really cool.”

(Student 7)

In a minority of circumstances failed teamwork resulted in students being unable to complete their project work.

Grappling with the Complexity of Social Justice

Overall, students had a positive response to the incorporation of themes relating to climate, racial, and social justice into the unit. For some students who had prior experience in the fashion sector, encountering these themes within an academic context was valuable in validating ideas about some of the issues they saw within the industry and the things they wished to improve.

“It's important, 100% important and I think this has to be embedded into our course, [...] into everything that we do, whether it's creative management, it doesn't matter. This is so important because we are humans in the end, and you're dealing with other humans in a working environment. If you don't consider social, racial, environmental situations, then what are we working for?”

(Student 9)

For other students, this unit provided them with the first opportunity to discuss in depth and with others some social justice issues.

“This unit was also the first time for me to discuss those topics in a group of people. [...] I learned some use cases. [...] It was a really good start for me to know more deeply. That was really helpful.”

(Student 5)

As would be expected from an elective unit, there were some students who were passionate supporters of the inclusion of themes relating to climate, racial and social justice in the unit, and more broadly in their course and experience at UAL. This was amplified through meaningful briefs set by values-aligned partners.

“I felt a real sense of pride and, like I was contributing to something. Our work is going to the Fashion District festival this week, it's being displayed there. Laura [external partner] is trying to see if it can go to Refugee Week and then Francesco [Unit Leader] has asked us to lead a workshop on how we created the film. And I felt that there was a real value in that kind of follow up from Francesco. [...] That has been a real bonus to this module.”

(Student 3)

However, there were some tensions within the unit where students reported being in groups who had different levels of care about the subject. This echoes tensions we have uncovered in student experience of other units that consciously embed principles for climate, racial, and social justice¹².

“I have conversations within the team where I was saying [...] ‘We need to really do this well’. And there were some people saying, ‘Oh, but we just need to pass this unit’. And I was like, ‘No, that's not the point, it's not about passing or failing the unit. It's about really putting our heart’.”

(Student 9)

Positionality

Some students described having opportunities within this unit to understand the lived experiences of migrants and refugees in the UK. Through these conversations, students were prompted to consider their own positionality, surfacing their own assumptions about what a displaced person would be like.

“I had biases myself or preconceived notions of what a migrant or refugee should be like, or what their circumstances should be. [...] I was trying to connect with them the best I could and it actually surprised me how much we had in common, so I was constantly checking myself

when I was hearing their stories, because one of them was highly educated, and that really surprised me.”

(Student 9)

For some students, this reflection was prompted by their interactions with migrant women through their relationship with the external partners, but for others this reflection was prompted through interactions with fellow students from different nationalities and cultures.

“We were reflecting on our migrant heritage and how that helped us understand social activism and stuff that was talked about in the class, and the liminality feeling. There was someone who is mixed race, [who] was saying she doesn't feel enough, but feels enough of each. [...] So, I think there are open discussions, even though they can be heavy.” (Student 6).

In making space for diverse modes of reflection, the unit was able to enable a range of students to consider how they related to the fashion system and people who may be working within it.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we presented findings from the evaluation of the *Fashion Practices for Social Change* unit at London College of Fashion, UAL, discussing how it provided students with opportunities to consider complex climate, racial and social justice issues through their interactions with values-aligned external partners. Students worked in multi-disciplinary groups to complete their project, and where teamwork was successful, they were able to consider their own positionality and reassess their future potential career paths. This finding contributes to the literature on Student KE, in which our understanding of how working with external partners for the purpose of exploring routes to positive social change are limited^{6,7}.

However, the evaluation process also revealed that where teamwork was difficult, students found the unit challenging and were able to consider these complex ideas only at a more surface level. Some students indicating that the work they put into trying to make their teams function was disproportionate, crowding out their ability to reflect and develop more creative responses to the briefs. We suggest that academics designing units that use live projects as a pedagogic approach to exploring issues of climate, racial and social justice pay close attention to how positive group dynamics and a commitment to teamwork can be established and nurtured.

NOTES

¹ Kate Fletcher and Lynda Grose. *Fashion and Sustainability: Design for Change*. (London: Laurence King, 2012).

² UNESCO. *Education for Sustainable Development: A Roadmap*. (Paris: UNESCO, 2020).

³ Dilys Williams. “Fashion Design for Sustainability: A Framework for Participatory Practice.” (paper presented at the LeNS Conference, Milan, Italy, April 3–5, 2018).

⁴ Francesco Mazzarella and Dilys Williams. *Fashion Values Nature: A Landscape Review*. (London: University of the Arts London, 2022).

⁵ Laura Knight. *Embedding Climate, Racial and Social Justice*. (London: University of the Arts London, 2024).

⁶ Chiara Marzocchi, Fumi Kitagawa, Federica Rossi, and Elvira Uyerra. “Reconceptualising Knowledge Exchange and Higher Education Institutions: Broadening Our Understanding of Motivations, Channels, and Stakeholders.” *Studies in Higher Education* 48, no 5 (2023): 673.

⁷ Harriet Dismore, Veronica Campbell-Barr, Ruth Manning, and Peter Warwick. “A Relational Approach to Knowledge Exchange in Higher Education.” *Studies in Higher Education* 49, no 12 (2024): 2534.

- ⁸ Rose Thompson and Francesco Mazzarella. "Piloting Collaborative Evaluation Approaches in Creative Education: Making Space for Staff and Student Voice in Evaluation Processes for Curriculum Development." Paper presented at the UK Evaluation Society Annual Conference 2026, Sheffield, (UK, May 18–21, 2026). <https://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/id/eprint/27079/>
- ⁹ Vicky Ward, Tineke Tooman, Bridie Reid, Huw Davies, Bridget O'Brien, Louise Mear, and Martin Marshall. "A Framework to Support the Design and Cultivation of Embedded Research Initiatives." *Evidence & Policy* 17, no 4 (2021): 755. <https://doi.org/10.1332/174426420X16068399428158>.
- ¹⁰ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. "One Size Fits All? What Counts as Quality Practice in (Reflexive) Thematic Analysis?" *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 18, no 3 (2020): 328. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>.
- ¹¹ Jack Mezirow. *Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice*. In: Cranton, P. *Transformative Learning in Action: Insights from Practice*. (Wiley, 1997).
- ¹² Rose Thompson and Rachel Clarke. An evaluation of the Responsible design unit: Embedding of responsible design principles in BA DAD-Y1(LCC). (London: University of the Arts London, 2026). <https://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/id/eprint/26015/>

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