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Shared Talent

An exploration of the potential of the 'Shared Talent' collaborative and hands-on educational experience for enhancing learning around sustainability in fashion practice

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Shared Talent is a people-centred learning process, inspired by sustainability thinking and values and applied to fashion design and development. The focus is placed on how the students learn and how they consider the impacts of their work as part of the development into what they produce. As the principle investigator in this work, I offer experience drawn from over twenty years designing high profile womenswear collections, in many different locations. This is complimented by having worked with students inside and outside of sustainable fashion education. What I have been a part of with *Shared Talent* is a gently evolving gathering of experiences, relying on the receptivity of the participants and its observations are non-generalisable, so it does not seek absolutes on ways to teach and learn. It does however offer an alternative to most current fashion based course programmes that take the hierarchical approach usually associated with fashion production into heterarchical experiences that emphasise the value of each person's contribution by giving it more prominence in the work.

Introduction

It has so far brought together students and practising designers from different colleges, universities and cities across the world and from diverse areas within the fashion cycle including, design, pattern construction, garment production and management, craft, photography and journalism. To date, *Shared Talent* has seen three manifestations,¹ all developed with the purpose of allowing participants to interact in a way not previously experienced either in the classroom or workplace and to support a specific community or craft threatened by the current fashion model. Through its three manifestations to date, we are evolving a practical educational model that is sustainability in action.

This paper describes and reflects upon the work-in-progress that is the *Shared Talent* learning process; where individual players learn what they do better by seeing what other connected players are doing. It explores an understanding of each player's role in a broader context than just 'me.' It converts the 'me' to 'us' without becoming homogenous, by having distinct and related parts. It sits within the traditional format of what fashion design and development recognises as the skills and processes involved in the manipulation in 3D form of materials, to create pieces that relate to the body in ergonomic, aesthetic, functional, relevance and desirability terms. But it changes the organisational arrangements and power hierarchy, considering each component part of the process in a networked whole.

The fashion context has proven a useful one to a people-centred process like *Shared Talent*. The hands and minds prevalent across the creating of fashion, a process still dominated by human activity even at the most mass produced scale, lends itself readily to the exploration of sustainability values to promote ways of working that can foster an understanding of mutuality as a driver for creativity, fulfil-

¹ *Shared Talent* South Africa 2007, *Shared Talent* Tabeisa 2008, *Shared Talent* India 2009

ment and prosperity. It is envisaged however, that the evolving process of *Shared Talent* has application far beyond this sector, as the fashion sector is, like many others, dominated by a one-way flow of information and decisions, with hierarchies that can stifle creativity. The understanding of ways to nurture mutuality within the fashion process could offer insights to a wider understanding of our interdependence in the world.

This paper presents emerging themes from *Shared Talent* projects to date, to assess the ways in which a networked heterarchy can influence new ways of working congruent with sustainability values, offering creative opportunities to reinforce the sustainability agenda.

Each project has been explored through the narratives of the participants, before, during and on reflection beyond the timeframe of the project itself. An analysis has then been made to see what, if any, lasting impressions the project made on how the participants work and what they do.

These insights show the vitality of ideas that are generated through the process of physical, materials problem solving and how that can be translated into both a written and visual language. As fashion is both experienced and practiced, through this emerges a new form of literacy. The process allows reflection and learning about oneself through looking at the role of others. This has the overwhelming effect of increased confidence in the whole through increased confidence in self and in others.

Shared Talent 1

The first *Shared Talent* educational experience took place in South Africa in July 2007. It involved a group of fashion students from LCF,² a Johannesburg-based college³ and a South African women's co-operative⁴ and took place over a three-week period.

It was originally designed to bring together students from across diverse disciplines relating to areas within the fashion industry in order to give them direct experience of small scale manufacture of fashion products; to broaden their understanding about the sorts of things that can be made; and to connect them with producer communities – in this case a women's co-operative. Further aims included the transfer of knowledge from designers to producer communities regarding the preferences and interests of export markets (particularly in the rich North) with a view to future product development and export sales.⁵

The practicalities included the coming together of participants, spending time with each other in workshop facilities to exchange experiences and ideas. It included the unprecedented move to transfer the 'work in progress' onto a stand at South Africa Fashion Week, where the work and the participants were broadcast to the world through the exhibition and its coverage on national television.

Shared Talent 1 was predominantly an informal, intuitive evolution of ideas, not formally recorded.

Shared Talent 2

The second *Shared Talent* evolved from its predecessor, drawing directly on the experience of *Shared Talent 1* through collaboration with Tabeisa.⁶ It took place in South Africa and Ghana in August 2008, involving students and graduates from London College of Fashion and a number of women's co-operatives based in locations across South Africa and Ghana over a four week period.

² LCF London College of Fashion, part of University of the Arts London

³ LISOF is a college in Johannesburg offering design and construction courses in fashion. This is a relatively new area for higher education within SA as part of a growing creative industry. The college is relatively small and its ability to engage in this project was enabled and led by the principal's drive and ambition.

⁴ Buotemelo is a women's co-operative in Hillsborough Johannesburg supporting women who are challenged by poverty, ill health, domestic difficulties, with the majority of the participants suffering from different stages of HIV/AIDS. These women develop and share hand based skills across a number of different locally sourced materials, making for the local market in Johannesburg.

⁵ Shared Talent 1 was initiated through the Fashion Business Resource Studio and LISOF principal.

⁶ Tabeisa supports organisations varying in size from sole traders producing accessories and gifts using recycled materials and local crafts, to small clothing manufacturing units supporting up to 25 members of the local community. Each business was selected based on the growth potential of the highly skilled workbase and the need for design innovation to offer new products for new markets and competitive advantage within a very tired tourist focused market.

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It was designed with the aim of bringing usually de-coupled skills across the supply chain together through UK team members working directly with the members of the co-operatives to develop 'production ready' prototypes that could be offered for sale through Tabeisa's retail channel Exclusive Roots. These prototypes needed to be viable for continued production and further development beyond the timescale of the project.

The practicalities included preparation time prior to the concentrated period together at the co-operatives and a 'checking in point' part way through the time, when all participants travelled to one location to discuss the work in progress. The selection of workable styles was refined and finalised so that the submission to Exclusive Roots could be completed.

Shared Talent 2 was also predominantly an informal, intuitive evolution of ideas, not formally recorded.⁷

Shared Talent 3

The third *Shared Talent* educational experience took place in Delhi, India, in July 2009 over a twelve-day period. It involved a group of fashion students from the UK, a group of practicing designers from the UK, a group of fashion students from the Netherlands, a group of fashion students from India and a group of practicing designers from India.⁸ Other participants included textile makers, skilled artisans and organisations representing hand-skills, NGOs working with local skills and women's organisations and an experienced UK buyer working with high volume fashion in the UK. *Shared Talent 3* evolved as part of a project carried out by CSF under Defra's SCAP initiative.⁹ Preliminary research identified materials sourced in India for their more positive ecological, social and cultural impacts and their potential for application in fashion.¹⁰

The project was designed to facilitate understanding between designers; between designers, makers and buyers; between people in different geographical locations and different cultural contexts. Specific requirements of the project funders were discussed alongside the aspirations of the participants. It also drew on the experience of the first two projects to discover more about the process and what it can offer to teaching and learning through a sustainability lens.

The practicalities included significant preparation in bringing together the participants firstly through an online video exchange, dialogue through social media networks and semi-structured workshops in both India and the UK. Once in India, participants from the UK and India engaged in an immersive experience, living and working at a venue specifically designed for artists to work.¹¹ The visiting participants included the textile makers, technicians, NGOs and other organisations that spent a shorter amount of time with the group. The samples produced were presented to a major UK retail company at the end of the project for their feedback. Selected pieces were then showcased at London Fashion Week on their stand.¹² Throughout the project, filmmaker participants recorded the experiences through filming of locations, activities and interviews. The LFW showcase, five-minute film and styled look book form a lasting visual narrative of the project. The project contents have been collated and focused into an online resource for others to view and offer their own contributions.

⁷ Shared Talent 2 was facilitated through the Centre for Sustainable Fashion.

⁸ Participants were selected from practicing designers based in the UK and Delhi and students from LCF, Pearl Academy of Fashion Delhi and Amsterdam Fashion Institute.

⁹ The UK-India Sustainable Textiles Dialogue was a project carried out by CSF funded by Defra and the India Ministry of Textiles. For more details see www.sustainable-fashion.com

¹⁰ For detailed findings of the research see www.sustainable-fashion.com

¹¹ The Global Arts Village, just outside Delhi

¹² Monsoon offered feedback from their design and buying teams and the opportunity to showcase work at LFW on the Monsoon stand.

Methodology

London College of Fashion courses span the processes involved in the current fashion supply chain, from the manipulation of materials into 3D garments and a narrative and explanation of these pieces through visual and written communication and styling. They also cover the practical implications of development into commercially viable collections for identified potential customers. Currently each of these specialisations are taught as discreet disciplines across three schools and, although encouraged to create dialogues across courses, students predominantly experience this through individual initiative or, at best, through a shared industry-led brief. Curriculum does not include an experiential element where students work *together* on a project in a 'real life' situation.

From the outset, it was hoped that any activity, however discreet and specific, would allow ideas to permeate across the student and staff communities and into the courses via the individuals involved. It was equally important to seek endorsement and support from the Head of College and subject leaders.

In each case, expectations were discussed and agreed by participants prior to project activity. Interest and commitment from participants was secured through a process of call out, interviews and offers to those able to meet the practical obligations of time and eligibility.

Before each of the project's activities started, a programme of preparatory exploratory work was designed and delivered. This needed to be balanced with the desire to work collaboratively between all participants working together rather than taking the usual approach of 'remote design – pre-conceived realisation.'

In each case, initial dialogue was set up between the participant organisations through appropriate and viable means including written introductions, video discussions and the exchange of written, visual and 3D representations of each other's work through *Facebook* and the exchange of ideas online.¹³

Each project's activity included a concentrated time where everyone was together. Initially an exchange of verbal and visual descriptions of each other's lives took place and then a programme of activity was devised to include development workshops, visits to culturally significant places, invitations to each other's neighbourhoods and times to enjoy eating and relaxing together.

In *Shared Talent 2*, due to the geographic location of the businesses, many participants were required to work independently whilst others were working in pairs or living together in small groups and were able to interact on a daily basis. All participants and businesses were brought together in Durban, South Africa, for a five-day workshop halfway through the one month programme.

The methodology of *Shared Talent 3* changed to a semi-formal structure in order to capture data about designers' knowledge and awareness of sustainability and their ways of working using three different methodologies. Two of these methodologies used longitudinal data gathering approaches. The first explored the participants' understanding of sustainability before and at the end of the project. The second was to investigate the individuals' ways of working both before the project commenced and after it had finished. The third method involved gathering detailed qualitative data about the participants' thoughts, attitudes and ideas to key themes in advance of the time they spent together in India.

The process and findings of this study form the main basis for this reflection.

What sustainability means to me

As part of the selection process, with the aim that all applicants could experience some part of the project, each person (in both the UK and India) was asked to bring along an object, image or story that epitomised sustainability to them. This was explained to two other members of the group. These sustainability ideas were drawn into themes as they emerged.

This question was revisited during and at the end of the project through individual interviews and group discussion to see if sustainability ideas had changed (or not) and in what way (or not).

¹³ Through these discussions, a mutually developed design brief was formed; ambitions around the viability of the collaboration beyond the project timeline were discussed as well as 'ownership' of final products.

How do I work?

At the start of the project, each individual was asked semi-structured questions about the ways in which they work as part of their current practice.

Six months after the conclusion of the project, interviews were held with a number of participants, asking the same questions about ways of working in order to better understand the changes (if any) that had taken place.

Chain letter conversations

In order to gain rich data about the participants' approaches to design and knowledge of sustainability four email 'chain letter' conversations were circulated among the group. This took place initially through *Facebook* and then by posting up the questions inside the studio to invite comments during the 10-day workshop process. This was to garner information about the participants' approach to the *Shared Talent* process.¹⁴

Outcomes

In *Shared Talent 1* the visible manifestation of the project communicated the story of the project and documented the physical pieces produced through the time spent together. The securing of a stand at South Africa Fashion Week, allowed a focus and platform for the project, but also a very restrictive timescale for experimentation. The solution was to transfer the development workshops and to spend the week with everyone on the stand continuing the experimentation as a 'work in progress'. This offered a way to place the work within a fashion context whilst offering a new experience to the women from Buotemelo who had never been into this event, or even this part of town. Thus broadening scope and expanding horizons in small but distinctive ways.

The finished pieces were brought to London to exhibit to the public and to potential buyers and press. In consequence to the London exhibition, Buotemelo received their first export.

The outcomes for the student participants included the subsequent setting up of a fair trade accessories business, embarking on MA Fashion and the Environment and developing a collection later exhibited in Estethica.¹⁵

Further recognition was given to the project and its work through The Green Gown Awards¹⁶ where the project won the award for Social Responsibility 2008.

In *Shared Talent 2*, each co-operative was able to develop products that were ready to sell through Exclusive Roots¹⁷ thus fulfilling the ambition to support the financial stability and continuing benefit of the project. The skills exchange that took place between the students and graduates and the women in the co-operatives offered new insights into where each participant's own work was positioned. The prototypes were developed into production and many are ongoing sales lines at Exclusive Roots, through which each co-operative continues to sell their work.

Other outcomes include the subsequent development of a fashion business, focusing on sustainability thinking, showcased at Estethica at LFW.¹⁸

In *Shared Talent 3* a collection of pieces stemming directly from the project was presented at Estethica at LFW, in Delhi at India Fashion Week and through a British Council event in Delhi. These visual artefacts were also captured through photography in a magazine format¹⁹ directed to a fashion-savvy audience and a five minute film was made as a visual précis of the experience.²⁰

Additional outcomes offer a more interactive way for audiences to connect to the project through an online resource connecting designers to producers in the context of sourcing in India.

¹⁴ Chain letter conversation details were recorded during the workshops

¹⁵ Estethica is a section of London Fashion Week focusing on design with ethical and ecological criteria

¹⁶ The Green Gown Awards are annual awards given to UK universities for their contribution to sustainable development and are organised by EAUC The Environmental Association for Schools and Colleges

¹⁷ Pieces were photographed and offered for sale internationally through Exclusive Roots website www.exclusiveroots.com

¹⁸ Estethica is the section of London Fashion Week where designers are selected against 'sustainability and aesthetic criteria.'

¹⁹ Shared Talent www.sharedtalent.com

²⁰ Shared Talent film shown at LFW, Defra website, BBC news on line

Various participants developed important contacts and links including additional showcasing of the work and returning to India to work with one of the producers.

Data gathered in accordance with methodology included written reflections, filmed interviews and self-reflective video diaries, group discussion documentation, observation and mapping. This rich data has been collated into the following emerging themes.

Participants' Responses

The *Shared Talent* process provided an opportunity to explore the practice of teaching and learning fashion design in a way where sustainability values like co-operation, participation and resourcefulness were strongly expressed. As part of this process, we explored the response of participants to *Shared Talent*, recording this in a range of ways before, during and after the formal project activities. The participants' responses were often intuitive and emotional rather than analytical. They were also wide-ranging yet, within this diversity, distinct themes began to emerge. These themes are discussed below.

Greater reflexivity

For many of the participants, *Shared Talent* offered perhaps the first opportunity since graduating from college to deeply question their own motivations and identities as designers and to explore the values of their own design practice. For some participants, this reflexivity also appeared to trigger a deeper questioning of other aspects of fashion collection design and development. For example, processes that had previously been taken for granted as 'common practice' were scrutinised and participants began to discuss their experience of such processes and possible alternatives. This was recognised as surprising as fashion design is notoriously secretive. As one designer put it, "sharing felt like something radical to fashion."²¹

The reflexivity triggered by the *Shared Talent* process appeared to offer a new angle on fashion where sharing can be seen as an avant guard practice, a new type of aspirational behaviour that could perhaps offer an alternative ethic or code of practice for fashion. By offering a way of working that encourages exchange as a part of development, it is possible to encourage a shift from the current fiercely protective system where secrecy and hierarchy are seen as a means to creative and financial advantage, to one where competitive advantage is seen through the sharing of knowledge, inspiring individually distinctive application.

Shared Talent participants – like most other learners – had a tremendous thirst for knowledge at the outset. Calls for a 'how to' manual were slowly but surely retracted as participants explored the reality that there is no template for new ideas generation and that 'preparation and permission' is offered ultimately from authentic dialogue with others and ownership of your own actions.

In some cases this enhanced reflection led to exhilaration and excitement in the participants at new-found knowledge and strength gained from each other's support. In other cases, increased thoughtfulness generated inertia caused by the overwhelming complexity of the issues. A little like lifting the lid on Pandora's box; and then feeling crushed by a flood of information, choices and consequences that sometimes plunged the participants into a flood of emotional responses that were difficult for them to manage.

To a certain extent the project framework, which required participants to produce tangible outcomes, helped mitigate some of the feelings of being overwhelmed for it made those involved respond to this new information by making; by fashioning garments from fabric and working through the issues in physical forms.

The self-questioning elicited by the *Shared Talent* project of the participants reflected a number of key social, cultural and developmental perspectives. There was a clear delineation in focus between those living in India and those from either the UK or the Netherlands. For the Indian participants, sustainability was thought of first and foremost in terms of human wellbeing. For the others, ecological integrity was foremost in their minds. These different perspectives inevitably offer an opportunity to learn more about both the issues and other cultures. In the case of *Shared Talent 3* this learning was expressed by those participants from industrialized countries looking to less-industrialized ones for examples of good practice.

²¹ Follow up interview March 2010

Thinking and learning through making

Shared Talent was a practice-based project and the intense pleasure associated with ‘making’ was expressed by many of the participants. More than that, it was even seen as a ‘need’. The act of making was recognised by the participants to heighten the vitality of the conversations; it gives material, tangible, texture to the dialogue. It linked the active experimentation of practice with values. It is the ‘result’ of hard work and energy put in. Part of this is expressed through the fact that through sustainability when in object form can be, ‘experienced, held, touched, and responded to emotionally’. What are more vital and original sustainability ideas can be generated through material experimentation, actual problem manipulation and resolution.

“We discussed what sustainability means to us collectively and individually every night and worked on our ideas during the day in the workshop.”²²

“I had heard about sustainability before, but now I have experienced working towards sustainability, which inspires me much more.”²³

“I finally feel as though I know what I am doing, now that I am actually ‘doing’ something, making garments.”²⁴

Seeing time pressures differently

Shared Talent was an immersive experience that required participants to agree to commit their time to do this. Indeed time pressures dominate most fashion professional’s day-to-day work. Participants spoke of the ‘indulgence’ of taking time out of their normal practice to be involved with *Shared Talent*, but recognised that once relationships, honesty and trust had been established, working together enabled them to ‘do more, do better, do faster,’ and to enjoy the process as well as the outcomes. There was frequent reference to the feeling of ‘being honoured to have been a part of something so meaningful.’ This fulfilled one of the key aspirations for participants at the outset, the achievement of ‘meaningful design work.’²⁵

“The whole space was full of positive energy. It had a feeling of something meaningful that all of us had indulged in. the exchange of ideas, approach and culture was helpful in the realisation that design is the language which helps us to connect and contribute to each others and our own work.”²⁶

Most fashion, from luxe through to supermarket fashion, works on a short or very short-term development cycle. Vision, reference points, production, showcasing, acceptance and success are all realised within a very restrictive time and reference frame, whilst operating within a fashion system that operates in a fixed way that has not changed in our lifetimes. *Shared Talent*, whilst also taking place in a limited time frame, creates a bridge to the longer-term through alternative values and experiences.

“I want to find a way of working that is informed by all that I have seen and heard and to show something by the end of our time in Delhi, but I don’t want to panic and create shortcuts and a return to ‘normal’ ways of working.”²⁷

“In a different place, you have to adapt to different times. Nobody here can just do things the way that they do them usually. This is a different set up.”²⁸

Participation feels good

While the initial motivations of the participants varied from the more selfish to more altruistic, without exception all those involved described the positive effects of participation in *Shared Talent*. An incredible energy was evoked both through the creative and professional engagement of the participants which led to a feeling of renewal of their ideas, skills and practice inspired by the broader context of sustainability.

“Through the overall experience, I feel enriched and come away feeling inspired and my design practice reinvigorated. Things weren’t perfect but for a project with a brand new format, I felt confident in my own and other’s abilities.”²⁹

²² Participant reflective diary (UK participant)

²³ Participant reflective diary (Indian participant)

²⁴ Participant reflective diary (Netherlands participant)

²⁵ Hopes, fears and expectations were collected at the outset of the project

²⁶ Evaluation form *Shared Talent* workshop in Delhi

²⁷ Participant comment during workshop in Delhi

²⁸ Participant reflective diary (Indian participant)

²⁹ Participant feedback evaluation form workshop Delhi

While participation in *Shared Talent* felt good, particularly during the immersive workshop, it was also tinged by the financial and market power imbalance between buyer and producer countries. For the Indian participants, involvement was motivated not only by self-development, but by the capacity to make contacts, endorsements or introductions to new ‘markets’ in the West; the reality of the economic dimensions of such work for participants from emerging economies.

Courageous thoughts and actions

Prior to the *Shared Talent* experience, a significant number of participants struggled to feel confident in the sustainability aspects of their own work or in what they had to offer others. Post *Shared Talent*, by contrast, participants described their enhanced practical capabilities in three areas:

Increased confidence to do more for and by themselves after seeing their own contribution to the group.

“Now I know how it can apply to me (sustainability) and what I can offer. I am sure that I will always keep sustainability in my head”³⁰

Increased confidence to work collectively, without being literal or constrained by the traditional hierarchical roles within the design and development process.

“Working collaboratively on an actual design can be frustrating and indecisive. Offering advice about each person’s own part is a much better way forward for me.”³¹

Increased confidence to imagine new working structures and relationships.

“Conserve works in such a unique way, taking a problem (street refuse) and turning it into a never ending source of usable materials, (plasticized sheeting) using what the rubbish-pickers choose as the starting-point for design.”³²

This improvement in capabilities offered dynamic ways in which to work that gave confidence, increased a sense of community, equality and fairness amongst participants and hence became an example of ‘culture change in action.’

“New knowledge helps me to make new decisions.”³³

In conclusion

The hope is that the data and observations gathered through this work will aid the understanding of how to embody sustainability content and ways of thinking in fashion practices. The descriptions and reflections articulated here are modest and participant reliant viewpoints that offer an alternative to mainstream ways to educate that could provide further potential benefits. We need to prepare students to be relevant because of their point of view, not because of a specific product that they have made, but we see that both the process of making and attributes held by ‘things’ are of great significance in our lives and in the lives of others.

We aim to integrate the principles of sustainable design into a framework around which designers can share new methodologies, thus creating an exchange whilst retaining the individuality of the designer. This requires a collective building of knowledge, skills and values and channels for exchange in order to empower designers to individually engage with a collectively agreed set of criteria and to overcome barriers. This is a very new approach for fashion design – a discipline characterised by its elusive nature, its secrecy and its fierce protection of ideas and rights to ownership. We need to change direction from the

³⁰ Participant reflective diary (Netherlands participant)

³¹ Participant reflective diary (Netherlands participant)

³² For details on Conserve see www.Conserve joined the project to talk about their work.

³³ Participant reflective diary (Netherlands participant)

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traditional model of competition, to encourage sharing of expertise, thus opening up the potential for innovation and surprise. This new 'sustainability in action' framework re-positions designers as communicators across the product development process, empowering them to contribute to real change in the way that fashion is perceived, created and consumed.

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Kate Fletcher is a sustainable designer, consultant, writer and key opinion leader in fashion, textiles and sustainability. Her work has been at the forefront of sustainable design in fashion and textiles for the last fifteen years. Kate helped to develop the concept of 'slow fashion', championing innovative approaches to developing sustainable products and services. Kate holds a PhD from Chelsea College of Art and Design. She is the author of 'Sustainable Fashion and Textiles: Design Journeys'.