Creating Professionals to meet the challenges of Knitwear Industry: The Role of Fashion Education by means of Industry Relevant Learning

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Abstract

In the current scenario of global fashion industry, where the dynamics of business are changing rapidly, there lies a tremendous challenge for fashion education institutions to meet the demand of trained professionals, especially with a view to provide professionals who can meet the new challenges of continuous innovation and disruption.

This is becoming more and more evident as the industry is craving for appropriately trained professionals for the new roles, mainly in the areas of fashion design, management and technology. More specific areas have come up recently, especially in the field of fashion knitwear, whereby not only the knowledge of design and technology but also that of management becomes crucial. However, the industry often talks about the lack of trained professionals who are geared to take up these challenging roles.

There is an ever growing need that needs to be seen, so as to make fashion education more relevant and make an impact in the current scenario of disruptive technologies and markets. The objective of this paper is to focus on such issues, with a view to explore the role of fashion education in creating professionals who can meet these disruptive challenges in the fashion industry. This should lead to a synchronised and continuous association between the academia and the industry for a better and promising future for all the stakeholders.

This paper deals with the importance of improving the teaching methods, based on industry relevant learning, specifically with reference to the knitwear industry. The objective of this endeavour is to enhance the impact of fashion education, thereby making it more efficient and meaningful. It mainly focuses on how teaching inputs can be improved to create fashion professionals who can contribute positively for a better shared future.

Keywords:

Fashion,Knitwear,Education, Industry, Professionals, Relevant

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1. INTRODUCTION :

In the current scenario of global fashion industry, the dynamics of business are changing rapidly. This paper deals with the importance and significance of fashion education with reference to the changing demands of the fashion industry, specifically the knitwear industry. It mainly focuses on how teaching inputs can be improved to create fashion professionals who can contribute positively for better and sustainable knitwear industry.

As stated by Dickerson (1999), global supply network consists of diverse entities including retailers, designers and merchandisers, garment manufacturing plants, as well as distributors, logistics and warehousing companies. Irrespective of the category, garment products can take complex route from fabric production and distribution, and finally to an individual retail customer. Fashion markets are subject to rapid change and, as a result, commercial success or failure in those markets mainly depends on the organisation's flexibility and responsiveness to these changes. The ability to scale up or down quickly and the inclusion of ever changing consumer preferences into the design process will decide the responsiveness and readiness to gear up for the challenges, as highlighted by Christopher, Lawson and Peck (2004).

And for this to happen, one of the major steps is to prepare fashion professionals who can be the key drivers in the apparel industry. This paper primarily explores the issue of better teaching methods by means of industry relevant learning, so as to create professionals who are better equipped for meeting the challenges of knitwear industry.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW :

Inculcating more specialized Knitwear content and further enhancing the same , has been the focus of various studies in the past. Ingwersen (2012) says that Australia must strive for a skilled Fashion Knitwear workforce that understands the technical skills, but more importantly has a design-driven focus. With the realisation of the emerging knitwear sector, more and more academic institutions have been involved in the process of not only incorporating knitwear but also reviewing existing knitwear courses to make it more effective in terms of creating well equipped professionals in a holistic manner.

Talking about the globally renowned Fashion Knitwear programme of Nottingham Trent University, UK , it's stated that Students at this level understand the capabilities of the knitwear machines, but not necessarily all operations, hence they have access to technicians who work alongside them. Communication is seen as a vital aspect of the program as students need to know how to communicate effectively to ensure they obtain the correct outcome (Ingwersen ,2012) . This is one interesting observation , which talks about the focus and hence leads to more insight into the teaching aspect. For this very purpose, there is also an increasing need to improvise the teaching methods , whereby the focus can be refined further while also making the delivery more interesting and industry relevant.

As followed by many of America's leading fashion design programs, Bauhaus students were encouraged to learn design principles "by doing and making," and studied

various art and design fundamentals before progressing to their chosen design specialisation such as fashion design, architecture, or graphic design (Marshall, 2009). Hence, fashion education and more so a discipline like knitwear design, which is based on a technique that has evolved through ages, needs to be learned more by doing rather than just reading or listening to lectures. Hence, the focus in teaching knitwear is more on the practical sessions with the knitting machines , as well as hand knitting, which is more of a skill based practice and the very root of knitwear. Hence, the inclusion of hand knitting in the knitwear design curriculum of NIFT has been a valuable step in this direction.

The role of the future fashion designer, then, is not merely one of "aesthetic provider" but as a practitioner who approaches the design process with deeper levels of empathy, sociological pattern-recognition, innovation, and big-picture capabilities (Faerm , 2015). Design education now fosters design thinkers as well as makers –those who know when and how to acquire the knowledge they will need to confront increasingly complex conditions. (Wolff & Rhee, 2009, p. 10) . This statement highlights the need of holistic teaching that incorporates relevant social qualities and additional capabilities along with the conventional course content.

Abundance has made businesses realise that "the only way to differentiate their goods and services In today's over-stocked marketplace is to make their offerings physically beautiful and emotionally compelling (Pink, 2005, p. 55) This study is primarily based on experience and practice based on such factors , which can not only add value to the content delivery but also make it more grasping and applicable , thus making the teaching process more of industry relevant learning, rather than just conventional delivery of topics to be covered.

Faerm (2015) states that the ability to engage with multiple disciplines, and in design teams containing participants with highly diverse expertise, will provide fashion designers with a broader spectrum for creative opportunities. The collective and collaborative variety of experience and background will foster the ability to make big leaps of thought and innovation. (Pink, 2005) NIFT has recently joined the movement towards developing programs that promote interdisciplinary engagement , and it's indeed a very significant step towards creating better professionals for the industry. This form of teaching and learning strengthens students 'ability to "integrate ideas and collaborate with people, resourcefulness, lateral thinking" (Wolff & Rhee, 2009, p. 13).

Designer Clement Mok states the need of this academic shift by stating: The next 10 years will require people to think and work across boundaries into new zones that are totally different from their areas of expertise. They will not only have to cross those boundaries, but they will also have to identify opportunities and make connections between them". (Pink, 2005,p. 135) Hence, this can play a key role in this scenario of inter disciplinary approach, whereby complex multi- disciplinary content can be simplified by means of a relevant process involving real life industry situations and issues.

Inspite of the increased focus on historical, cultural, and contextual studies that are included in the fashion design curricula , fashion design education is relatively under-theorised when compared to other art and design disciplines such as architecture, fine arts, and industrial design (Skjold, 2008, p. 12). This presents a great scope for the fashion educators to develop a framework that enriches students 'learning, and prepares the graduates for a better future. To accomplish this, a system based on industry relevant

learning can be of much value as it can be used to not only inculcate values and soft skills, but also deliver the concepts and industry practices more actively , without being monotonous. Hence, it can effectively lead to a holistic understanding and problem solving skills, and in fact, create more motivated and passionate professionals. Hence, this study primarily talks about such factors and how they can be incorporated by means of industry relevant learning, and thereby , further improvising the teaching methods based on one's industry as well as teaching experience.

3. THE CURRENT SCENARIO :

In the current scenario, students need more than just conventional theoretical knowledge to learn the subjects related to the knitwear industry, where need of the hour is to impart industry based inputs which can be based on the actual industry situations . There is a need for industrially relevant learning methods not only to make it more useful but also to make it more lively and interesting. As discussed by Prince (2004), these methods primarily refer to teaching that involves the students in various activities that relate with the industry based practices. For example, this can be some real case studies, industry projects, simulated activities, industrial role plays etc. This can help in better understanding and creating analytical bent of mind that can lead to development of innovative knitwear products and solutions to various industry specific issues. Hence, this paper is based on this need to discuss and develop such practical methods that can be used to teach knitwear design and related subjects (Choi ,2012).

The teaching of knitwear based subjects primarily consists of topics like flat knitting, hand knitting, circular knitting, knitwear production and planning, advanced knitting technologies, design process, knitwear product development etc. Conventionally, teaching such topics involves a lot of emphasis on theoretical aspects and at times, tends to be quiet monotonous. In such a scenario, teaching is limited to theoretical perceptions only and there is no understanding of applications of the same in real life scenario. Hence, by incorporating industrial learning, fashion education can play a significant role to create the desired level of professionals. This is more true mostly in case of undergraduates who don't have any industry know how and it becomes very difficult for them to understand the concepts in a realistic way. Even in case of post-graduate students, who might have some industry experience, it is seen that the understanding narrows down according to their experience domain, rather than a holistic knowledge of the concepts. This can result in lot of misconceptions in learning, which I have often seen while teaching knitting subjects.

4. METHODS, VIEWS AND SUGGESTIONS :

As I have seen while teaching, it is difficult for fashion students to understand the concepts relating to the different parts of the knitwear apparel chain, as it consists of numerous stages right from yarn manufacturing, followed by fabric production, design and development , manufacturing in factories, followed by further movement through distributors, wholesalers and finally the retailers. Hence, to address this scenario, there is a need to adopt a better teaching approach that is based on practise based learning of the various parts in the knitwear supply chain, whereby, fashion students can relate to the concepts and applications in a better way.

Hence, to provide the required professionals, there is a need to address the issue of better teaching methods so as to prepare knitwear professionals, who are capable of viewing holistically the various aspects and parts of the knitwear industry, thereby leading to professionals who are not merely designers but more of design managers. Fashion education has a significant role in this challenging scenario of knitwear industry across the globe.

Based on the above mentioned reviews, and my academic experience of more than ten years in the knitwear design department , whereby I have taught knitwear subjects and practised some of these ideas , I have compiled a list of such steps that can be used to equip the students with more confidence and help them become more industry oriented professionals. Hereby, some of the ideas and suggestions to teach knitwear and related subjects, based on practice based learning are discussed as follows :-

- ❖ **Increasing the level of student involvement in the teaching process** : Students tend to get weary and forget things in the usual method of presentation and discussion, especially in case of knitting theory subjects like flat knitting and circular knitting. It is always good to include some projects and case studies that can be given to students in groups and asked to present to the class. At the same time, all students in the audience can be asked to record their inputs, learning and feedbacks and make a short report on it. Thereafter, these reports can be compiled together and shared by all students so that they come to know about others' views on their presentation and thus feel more involved in the process.

- ❖ **Some good case studies can be given** that will pose an exciting challenge for the students to prove their understanding, analytical abilities and presentation skills among their peer group. Another very successful technique that I used was that of making teams and asking them to present their findings on latest news from knitwear industry and share it in class. They get points based on the feedback given by their senior batches. The same teams are also tested on a knitwear industry based quiz. The overall winners are appreciated and their names are displayed on the department boards. This not only instills a spirit of healthy rivalry but also increases their practical knowledge base as well as the latest happenings in the industry.

  This can also result not only in better understanding of the subject concepts but also increase the levels of motivation and involvement among the students. This will help to build a foundation that will lead to well equipped and motivated fashion professionals who can make their mark in the industry by meeting up the challenges being posed by the knitwear industry. Such professionals would be able to play a crucial role in the global knitwear industry by solving the issues related with knitwear production management, lead time, quality, visibility, collaboration, design, technology and coordination.

- ❖ **Introducing objects, pictures, videos, stories etc in between the classes** : Students tend to get bored of theory concepts associated with the knitwear subjects. It also becomes difficult for them to concentrate on the subject as it can be monotonous after going through different lectures. Hence, it is a good idea to make the classes interesting by introducing some object, story, image, video etc related

with the concepts. This can be something like a video showing how a knitwear brand like Missoni, UCB etc achieved fame and success by the use of right market strategies, creative design matched with appropriate planning , sourcing, manufacturing and retail practices. This will not only make it more exciting but also help in better understanding through industry relevant learning. It will also motivate the students and develop their innovative and analytical thought to view the industry in a holistic manner and address various issues involved with the knitwear industry. Also, as knitwear is known for its rich and exciting fabric design and texture possibilities, hence showing visuals of the knitwear products , and thereby focusing the various interesting possibilities of knitted fabric design can be of much value in this regard. Hence, displaying visuals of knitted fabric structures with reference to the knitting basics was found to be very useful.

- ❖ **Using real life scenarios to create activities like role play and group discussions** : Students need to understand the concepts and issues in a real life scenario that will expose them to the industry based scanarios, as stated by Landgren and Pasricha (2011) in 'Transforming the fashion and apparel curriculum to incorporate sustainability'. To achieve this, they can be given role play exercises based on some real and relevant issue faced by the knitwear industry. Also, while talking to some of my colleagues who teach subjects based on knitwear industry to fashion students, I found that they have found role plays to be of good use.

- ❖ **These role plays can be designed around the various components of the knitwear industry.** For example, students can pose as buyers and exporters to negotiate a knitwear order. These role playing exercises can be further enhanced by following them with some group discussions based on the role play activity, whereby teams of students can discuss to give their response upon the situation that arose out of a role play. This will be interesting as well as an engaging activity that will stimulate the minds of the students and give them a better understanding of how the concepts are applied in the industry. This activity can also be a platform for generating new ideas as well as making the process of learning an enjoyable one.

5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE SCOPE :

Hence, these industry relevant learning techniques can be used in fashion education to nurture the professionals who are geared up to be the crucial link in the knitwear industry. It will add value to fashion education that will lead to creating manpower that can effectively deal with various issues of the knitwear industry. The industry relevant teaching approach can be seen as a promising way ahead for fashion education to cater to the changing demands of the knitwear fashion industry. It opens avenues for learning and problem solving by practical means that can lead to fruitful brainstorming sessions giving birth to innovative ideas. By adopting such means, fashion education can play a significant role in facing the challenges of the knitwear industry.

This paper discussed how industry relevant fashion education can be of value in for

the knitwear industry so as to create professionals who can take the industry to the next level. The views and ideas expressed are primarily based on my knowledge and experience of teaching fashion knitwear related subjects and some secondary resources as well. There lies a good scope for further research areas whereby specific models may be created to teach fashion subjects that can be more relevant and fruitful in terms of the specific knitwear industry issues. One area of concern can be that of the class strength in numbers, whereby it needs to be seen whether such means would be of value with the increase in number of students. In this regard, a research work by Power (2010) can be of good reference.

Also, the fashion students mostly don't have a sound background of applied mathematics to understand the analytical concepts and related topics. Hence, research can be done to find out how such analytical concepts can be included in the teaching process to improve the learning outcome. This can also lead to some new models for fashion education that use innovative ways like games , as discussed in works by Robb and Johnson (2010) to teach subjects like knitwear production and planning to the students of fashion courses. Such efforts towards industry relevant learning can eventually lead to a better shared future for all the industry stakeholders.
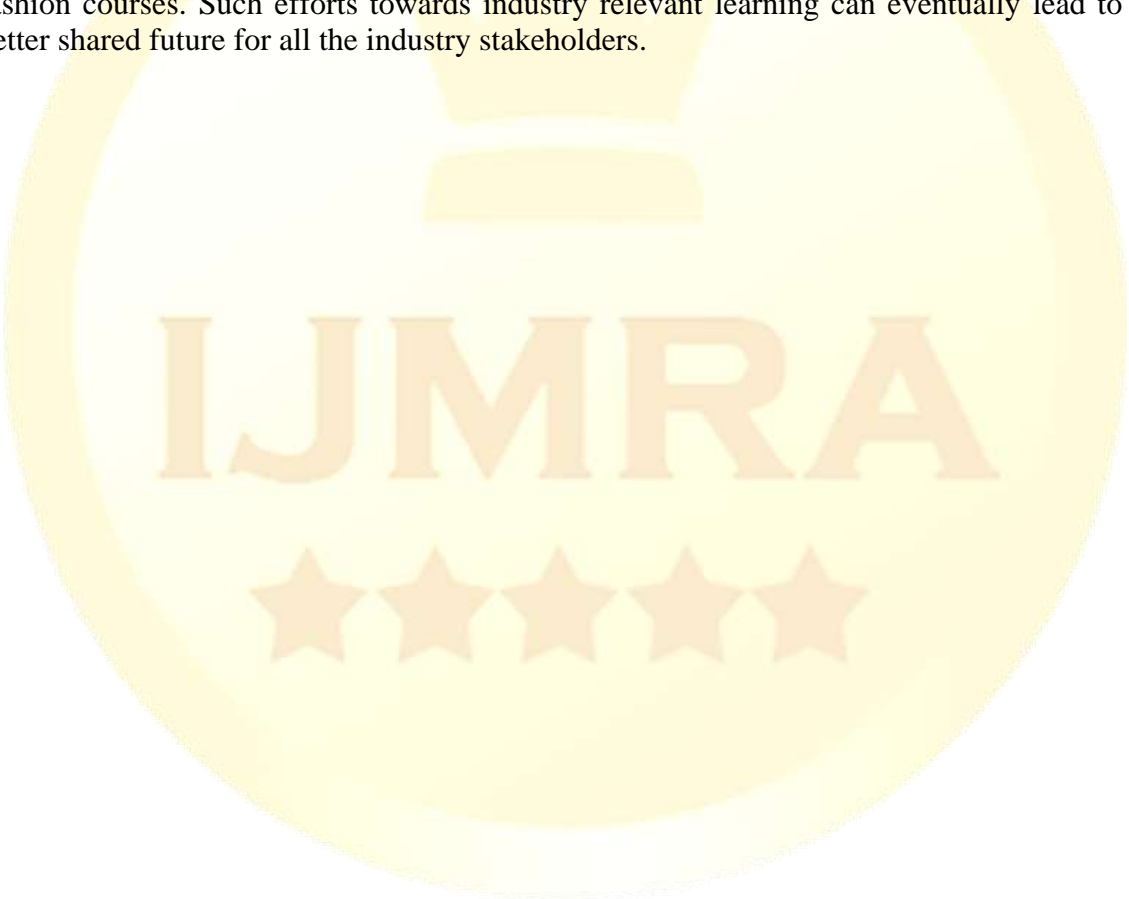
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