



Diversity in Body Shape and Size: Teaching Design and Communications

Bernie Murray, Ryerson University, Canada

Ben Barry, Ryerson University, Canada

Keywords: diversity, education, size, body

Teaching students to create products targeting niche markets and specialty sizes is challenging in fashion education. Students often begin their schooling with steadfast ideas about what body type and shape is desirable in fashion. These ideas are learned, promoted and reinforced by students' role models and inspirational references in the fashion industry. However, it is crucial that fashion educators teach students to embrace size diversity because the greatest opportunity in the fashion industry exists in the plus-size sector; while sales of women's apparel are relatively stable, sales of women's plus size apparel is growing (Fortune 2013). Moreover, teaching students to design and communicate to curvy consumers provides them with an opportunity to understand the experiences of consumers who are currently marginalized in the fashion industry. Research suggests that students who learn to understand marginalized perspectives are able to confront systems of domination and injustice in their lives, workplaces and society-at-large (Collins, 1991). Unfortunately current fashion education rarely provides students with opportunities to celebrate and embrace diverse body types. This paper provides an overview of two current teaching practices that are used to offer students the opportunity to explore design and communication using the lens of size diversity.

We introduce a case study of a daylong conference that was coordinated for all the first-year fashion design and communications students. The students attended a lecture by a former fashion editor Caryn Franklin in which they explored changes in the representation of women and men in fashion; the negative consequences of such changes; and the current efforts of fashion industry leaders to celebrate size diversity. Students were then given a creative assignment in which they had two hours to create a proposal for a garment or media project, such as a film, blog or editorial, that promoted positive messages about the body and beauty. The students then had to deliver a 5-minute presentation on their idea in small discussion groups moderated by graduate fashion students. The aim was to encourage students to develop a critical lens to question, challenge and re-envision issues around diversity from the onset of their fashion education that could be employed and expanded in subsequent courses and years of study. Following the event, a survey was distributed to the students to evaluate the experience and impact. Results reveal that the majority of students developed a framework to challenge exclusion and also intend to champion diversity in their academic and professional careers.

The second case study that we share is Ladieswear Block Development. DeLong (1998) claims that the basic shape of the apparel-body-construct is the silhouette that provides a frame of reference for our perception of all its other shapes. Teaching *Ladieswear Block Development* provides opportunities for design students to develop basic blocks using personal body

measurements. Learning outcomes for students who successfully complete this course include: (1) An understanding of theory and principles for the development of blocks for ladies apparel; (2) Practical skills and knowledge to develop blocks for size 10 and for individual body measurements; (3) Knowledge for apparel fit, figure types, and garment ease; (4) Skills and knowledge adapting woven blocks creating blocks for elastomeric fabrics; and (5) Critical thinking skills developed in chart analysis and garment fit. Issues around the development of apparel for various body types and fit are addressed. Apparel blocks are developed, muslin prototypes are constructed, and garments are fit with each student. Providing opportunities for fashion design students to explore the development of blocks for personal fit specific to niche markets such as plus size, maternity, tall, petite, and the mature women broaden the perspectives and design philosophies of future industry professionals.

As a result of attending this session, delegates will uncover insights on approaches, activities and challenges when teaching about diversity. The presentation will include handling difficult questions, incorporating the perspectives of marginalized groups, and utilizing the diversity of students in the classroom. Delegates will garner key strategies and tools required to help develop students' understandings of hegemonic systems and become fashion diversity leaders.

References

- DeLong, M. R. (1998). *The way we look: Dress and aesthetics*. New York: Fairchild Publications.
- Fortune, C. (2013). *The bigger picture*. The Grid. Retrieved from <http://www.thegridto.com>.
- Collins, P. H. (1991), "On Our Own Terms: Self-Defined Standpoints and Curriculum Transformation," *NWSA Journal*, 3 (3): 367-381.