

Cross-Cultural Collaboration as a Pedagogical Approach in Fashion Design: Insights from an Industry-Academia Partnership

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Abstract

In today's fast-changing world, academic institutions are gearing toward incorporating diverse teaching methods and sustainability principles to engage Gen Z students and enhance their learning experiences. Through a practice-led exploratory case study, this research investigates the effectiveness of cross-cultural collaboration as a pedagogical tool in fashion design. The study focuses on a unique collaboration that involved multiple stakeholders, including a UK retail brand, an Indian fashion institute, a local artisan community, and a production partner who co-developed a limited-edition clothing collection.

This research examines the learning experience that resulted from this collaboration, demonstrating how cross-cultural, industry-academia partnerships can substantially enhance fashion design education. The study offers valuable insights for developing globally focused curricula that incorporate real-world collaboration, cultural exchange, and sustainability. Engaging students in collaborative projects that involve practical application and exposure to diverse perspectives can enhance the relevance and impact of fashion education, especially for Gen Z, who are increasingly prioritizing careers driven by purpose. The research highlights how collaboration and co-creation among various stakeholders enrich experiential and contextual learning in fashion education. This method fosters creativity and innovation while enhancing students' understanding of global fashion systems, traditional craftsmanship, and sustainable production techniques. These activities not only improve design capabilities but also align with the evolving objectives of the fashion industry, such as promoting sustainability and cultural awareness. Additionally, the partnerships encourage critical thinking, ethical decision-making, and adaptability—skills essential for future designers in an ever-changing, globalized market.

Incorporating cross-cultural partnerships into fashion design education presents a progressive strategy for equipping students to address the challenges and opportunities in an evolving industry. By immersing students in meaningful, globally relevant projects, fashion education can better prepare the next generation of designers to contribute to a more sustainable and culturally sensitive fashion landscape. This approach aligns educational practices and the learning experience with the industry needs and the socially conscious values of Gen Z.

Keywords: Co-creation, collaboration, fashion design, craft, fashion pedagogy

Introduction

The interplay between sustainability and fashion represents a complex and vital relationship. The fashion industry, one of the world's largest, exerts a significant influence on the global workforce, the environment, and the economy (Cline, 2019). Over the 20th century, clothing evolved from durable items to disposable commodities, with the fashion industry undergoing extensive globalization. The rise of "fast fashion" in the last 15 years has doubled production, making fashion more accessible (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). The environmental impact of fashion, including water pollution, waste, and greenhouse gas emissions (Fletcher, 2014), and its effects on worker rights, social justice, and economic sustainability are well documented. Given their vast impact and concealed production methods, greater transparency in the transition from resources to products is imperative.

Fashion is prominent in the global creative industry. The creative economy encompasses economic sectors that generate and harness creativity and knowledge. This involves adding economic value to products and services through creative content (Howkins, 2013). In this era, a product's worth is no longer tied to raw materials or production methods but is determined by creativity and innovation (Howkins, 2013). Strategies, such as co-creation and collaboration, are actively employed to enhance a company's value (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Co-creation, a novel approach to innovation, advocates the creation of products and experiences through collaboration within an innovation network that involves companies, consumers, suppliers, and channel partners. This approach can be pivotal in promoting sustainability in the fashion industry through three strategies. First, it minimizes waste and overproduction by tailoring production to customer preferences and optimizing resource utilization. Second, it enhances product durability through customer-specific design and provides repair and maintenance services. Lastly, co-creation nurtures a sense of ownership and community,

adding emotional and social value to fashion products and fostering sustainability and longevity through attachment and shared identity.

Given the burgeoning challenges faced by the industry in addressing environmental issues, integrating sustainability into fashion education is crucial. The academic community and industry are increasingly recognizing the importance of pedagogical approaches that promote cross-cultural collaboration, co-creation, and experiential learning for their potential to address these challenges. This study investigates such an approach through a qualitative case study of a collaborative project involving a global retail brand, academic partner, craft community, and production partner. This research aims to characterize the learning experiences within this cross-cultural collaboration and explore how these insights can enrich fashion design pedagogy.

Literature Review

As a significant contributor to social and environmental issues, the fashion industry is under increasing scrutiny (Kozlowski, Bardecki and Searcy, 2012). It is a \$3 trillion worldwide giant, accounting for 2 percent of the global GDP (GlobalData, 2021), with 60–75 million people employed globally in the textile, apparel, and footwear industries. This places the fashion business as the third largest industry worldwide (cleanclothes.org, 2023). The integration of sustainability into new product development is still largely unexplored, despite the rising pressure on businesses to include environmental and social obligations in their business plans (Dangelico and Pujari, 2010).

Over the past two decades, sustainable clothing and textiles have gained attention in numerous academic fields, including consumer behavior (Niinimäki and Koskinen, 2011; Niinimäki, 2011; Klepp and Bjerck, 2014; Laitala and Klepp, 2011; Klepp, 2008), design thinking (Fletcher and Grose, 2012), and practical applications (Gwilt and Rissanen, 2011). The fashion industry must change its relationship with consumers to address finite resources, which requires significant adjustments in apparel design, production, usage, and fashion design education (Riisberg, et al., 2014).

Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) suggests that, as people meet their basic material requirements, they shift their focus toward non-material goals. Understanding this shift is crucial for the fashion industry to adapt to changing consumer demands and to shift their offerings to enrich the experience of value-driven customers (Pink, 2006). Brands and designers are increasingly adopting collaboration and co-creation as design practices in response to changing demands to generate novelty deeply rooted in values and emotions. The future fashion designer's role extends beyond being an "aesthetic

provider” to that of a practitioner who engages in the design process with heightened empathy and a broader perspective (Faerm, 2015). Designers are increasingly working internationally owing to globalization and advances in communication and collaboration technology (Ye, McKelvey and Jefferies, 2011). Collaborative experiences nurture substantial strides in thought and innovation (Pink, 2006).

According to Frascara (2007), design students require increased exposure to emerging fields and practices in the design profession. Engaging in complex projects, especially those that immerse them in a global context, fosters enhanced growth and profound learning experiences. These initiatives should push beyond familiar territories, prioritizing communal, collaborative, and community-driven thinking and pedagogical methods. The fashion design pedagogy landscape has evolved significantly, transitioning from traditional approaches to incorporating emerging methodologies.

Traditional fashion design education emphasizes hands-on learning, craftsmanship, and technical skills, such as pattern making, sewing, and textile knowledge (Kawamura, 2011). This method often involves studio-based learning, in which students work closely with experienced instructors, fostering strong mentor-student relationships and peer learning (Aspers, 2010). The curriculum deeply integrates historical and cultural contexts, equipping students with a comprehensive understanding of fashion’s evolution and societal implications (Craik, 2009). In contrast, emerging fashion design pedagogy integrates digital tools and technologies, such as CAD software, 3D printing, and virtual reality, transforming the design and prototyping processes (Gaimster, 2011). The 21st-century design education in fashion, with its heightened emphasis on sustainability and ethics, is integrating value-driven strategies in its curricula by including modules on sustainable materials, ethical production methods, and the environmental impact of fashion (Black, 2012). Additionally, modern programs adopt interdisciplinary approaches, merging fashion with business, technology, and social sciences, to prepare students for diverse career paths within the industry (Kunz and Garner, 2011). Collaborative learning and global perspectives are also central to emerging pedagogy, with students engaging in group projects, industry partnerships, and international studies (Gwilt, 2014). Moreover, there is a strong focus on entrepreneurship and innovation, encouraging students to develop their brands and explore new business strategies (Rosenau and Wilson, 2014).

A significant component of the emerging fashion pedagogy is the emphasis on cross-cultural collaboration and co-creation. These approaches are becoming increasingly prevalent in fashion education, with institutions fostering international partnerships

and exchange programs that enable students to work with peers from different cultural backgrounds. Such collaborations enhance students' cultural awareness, global perspectives, and essential skills in today's interconnected fashion industry (Stevenson, 2019). For example, initiatives such as the Global Fashion Exchange and collaborative projects between Western fashion schools and those in Asia or Africa have led to innovative design solutions that merge diverse cultural aesthetics and techniques (Smith, 2018). These experiences not only enrich the educational process but also prepare students for the global marketplace by fostering an understanding of diverse consumer bases and cultural nuances (Martínez, et al. 2010).

Contemporary design education increasingly emphasizes the integration of theory and practice to cultivate critical thinking, creativity, and practical skills for optimizing design learning (Lawson, 2005; Oxman, 2004). This highlights the evolving trends in design education and the critical role of practice-based learning in fostering essential skills, which brings collaboration and co-creation in the process. Literature reflects that these strategies bring two crucial learning conceptual models—situated learning and experiential learning. Situated learning, from Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory, emphasizes learning in real-world contexts, where students engage in authentic tasks, collaborate with industry partners, and tackle culturally relevant projects. This approach promotes socially and culturally aware design skills. Experiential learning, based on Kolb's (1984) model, focuses on learning through experience, reflection, and application. It encourages iterative problem-solving and direct engagement with materials and processes. Both approaches bridge academic knowledge with professional practice, helping students address design challenges with creativity and social responsibility.

Collaboration and co-creation are crucial for integrating situated and experiential learning in fashion pedagogy. These practices immerse students in real-world industry environments, bridging theory and practice while fostering creativity, problem-solving, and sustainability awareness. By working with industry professionals and artisans, students develop critical skills and gain a deeper understanding of global fashion systems and cultural diversity. Ultimately, collaboration and co-creation enhance students' ability to navigate the complexities of the fashion industry, preparing them to be adaptive and socially responsible designers.

Methodology

The study adopts a case study approach to uncover the learning experience of fashion design students engaged in a unique cross-cultural collaboration. The research revolves

around a partnership between Monsoon, a UK-based high-street fashion retailer, and the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) in New Delhi, India. This collaboration aimed to co-create a limited-edition women's clothing range, celebrating Monsoon's 50th anniversary and highlighting Indian cultural craftsmanship. The study involved various participants, including shortlisted fashion design students from NIFT New Delhi, design and sourcing team members from Monsoon, artisans of the Kutch craft community, faculty members from NIFT, and representatives from Mpack Sourcing Pvt. Ltd., India. The study aimed to answer the overarching question, "How does cross-cultural collaboration within fashion design education influence students' learning experience by way of cultural immersion, collaborative design process, co-creation, and reflective practices?"

The project's conceptual model is based on the interrelationship of four fundamental components:

- Cultural Immersion: Engaging with the Kutch craft community and the rich tapestry of Indian cultural craftsmanship to deepen students' comprehension of diverse cultural contexts in fashion design.
- Collaborative Design Process: The partnership between Monsoon, UK and the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) facilitates collaborative efforts among students, industry professionals, and artisans, highlighting the significance of collective creativity, and innovation.
- Co-Creation Process: The active involvement of students, artisans, and industry representatives in the design and production phases fosters a shared creative environment that enhances the outcomes and strengthens community ties.
- Reflective Practices: Implementing journaling, interviews, and observational techniques to enable students to critically reflect on their experiences, challenges, and learning outcomes throughout the collaborative project.

The research elucidates how these components interact to shape students' learning experiences, culminating in enhanced critical thinking, creativity, and practical skills in fashion design. Data was collected using multiple methods to comprehensively understand the learning experiences. The students documented their experiences, reflections, and design processes in journals during the project, which served as primary data sources. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students, academic mentors, and industry partners to gather insights into the experiences, challenges, and perceived benefits of the collaboration. Additionally, the researcher observed

collaborative design and production processes, noting interactions, decision-making, and the integration of cultural elements. Design sketches, prototypes, and final products were collected to analyze the tangible outcomes of the collaboration.

Data was examined using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns in the learning experiences. The data from different sources (journals, interviews, observations, and artifacts) was triangulated to substantiate insights within the thematic areas of the study, ensuring the validity and reliability of the findings. The findings were presented in accordance with the theoretical models of situated and experiential learning. The initial coding of journals, interview transcripts, and observation notes helped identify significant statements and insights. These codes were then grouped into broader themes, encapsulating core aspects of learning such as social participation, contextual learning, collaboration, reflective practices, learning as a process, and experience as the source of learning.

The study adhered to ethical guidelines to protect the participants' rights and well-being. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and right to withdraw at any time without penalty. The final report kept personal information and data confidential and anonymized. The findings were shared with the participants for feedback and validation to ensure the accuracy and representation of their experiences.

MONSOON X NIFT New Delhi: The Cross-Cultural Collaboration and Co-Creation

To commence the collaborative endeavor, Monsoon, a UK-based company, in conjunction with its Indian sourcing partner Mfact Sourcing Pvt. Ltd., took the proactive step of approaching the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) in New Delhi. The primary objective was to explore the potential for creative collaboration that would involve the enthusiastic participation of design students from the Fashion Design Department at NIFT and the skilled artisan community hailing from Kutch, India, specializing in textile crafts. The ultimate goal was to conceive and create an exclusive line of women's clothing. Under the Craft Cluster Initiative program (NIFT, n.d.), NIFT engages with several handloom and handicraft clusters across India to uplift them, incorporating craft studies as an integral part of its curriculum. The initiative has completed several projects with support from the Ministry of Textiles (MoT), Office of Development Commissioner (Handlooms), and Office of Development Commissioner (Handicrafts) in India. This advantage prompted Monsoon to decide on NIFT as their academic partner in India.

To ascertain the feasibility of this proposal, establish a shared foundation of understanding among the various stakeholders involved, and gain a deep appreciation of the rich craft culture of Kutch, a dedicated “inspiration trip” was meticulously planned and executed. This weeklong expedition served as a vital prelude to the collaborative project, allowing all parties to immerse themselves in the artistic and cultural milieu of Kutch, India. The team visited craft clusters for embroidery, weaving, printing, and dyeing in villages such as Anjar, Awadh Nagar, Sumrasar, Zura, Nirona, Kukma, and Ajrakhpur in Bhuj, Kutch (Figure 1).



Figure 1: ‘Inspiration Trip’—a cultural immersion visit of delegates from the Monsoon women’s wear department, Mpact Sourcing Pvt. Ltd., and fashion design faculty from NIFT New Delhi to various craft clusters in Kutch, Gujarat.

During this cultural journey, the team gathered visual and tactile samples that served as the foundation for the design direction of the clothing collection. These samples were chosen to resonate with urban customers while conveying the narratives of the Kutch community. Traditional handcrafted techniques, which are indicative of a deliberate and sustainable production process, were considered suitable for large-scale production. These materials were presented to the student participants to help them

grasp the essence of the design brief and the client's requirements. The goal was to inspire students and guide their choice of color palette and value-adding techniques in their design process (Figure 2). Additionally, the team connected with officials from the local government handloom and handicraft office in Bhuj, mapped out the artisans, and established relationships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in the area.

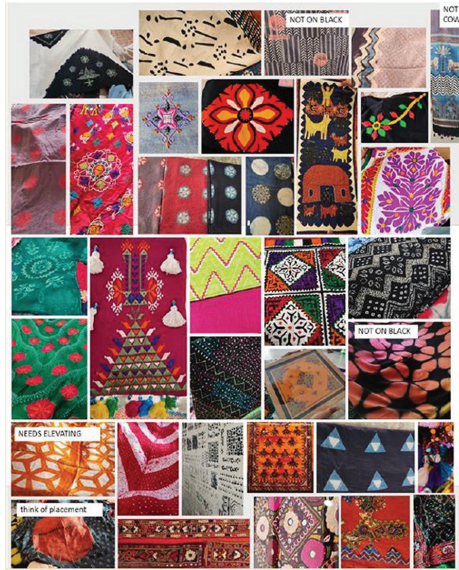


Figure 2: A visual board featuring tactile references created by Monsoon UK's design team. The board showcases various handcrafted textile techniques, such as *bandhej* (resist tie-dye), *rabari* embroidery, *ajrakh* (resist printing and dyeing), narrative textiles through applique work, and the contemporary fusion of clamp dyeing with *bandhej* and *ajrakh*.

Following their return from the craft cluster, a project briefing session was conducted at NIFT to introduce the collaboration with Monsoon, UK. During this session, students received a comprehensive presentation that included visual and tactile samples, as well as an inspiration guide. The primary purpose of this presentation was to engender thoughtful contemplation among the students. The presentation also aimed to familiarize the students with the design process typically employed by the Monsoon design team. Furthermore, it underscored the significance of a co-creative approach involving students. The overarching objective of this collaboration was to engage in a dynamic and immersive process that harmonized diverse aspects of design and craft studies. This synergistic endeavor is envisioned to culminate in the creation of novel outcomes (Figure 3).

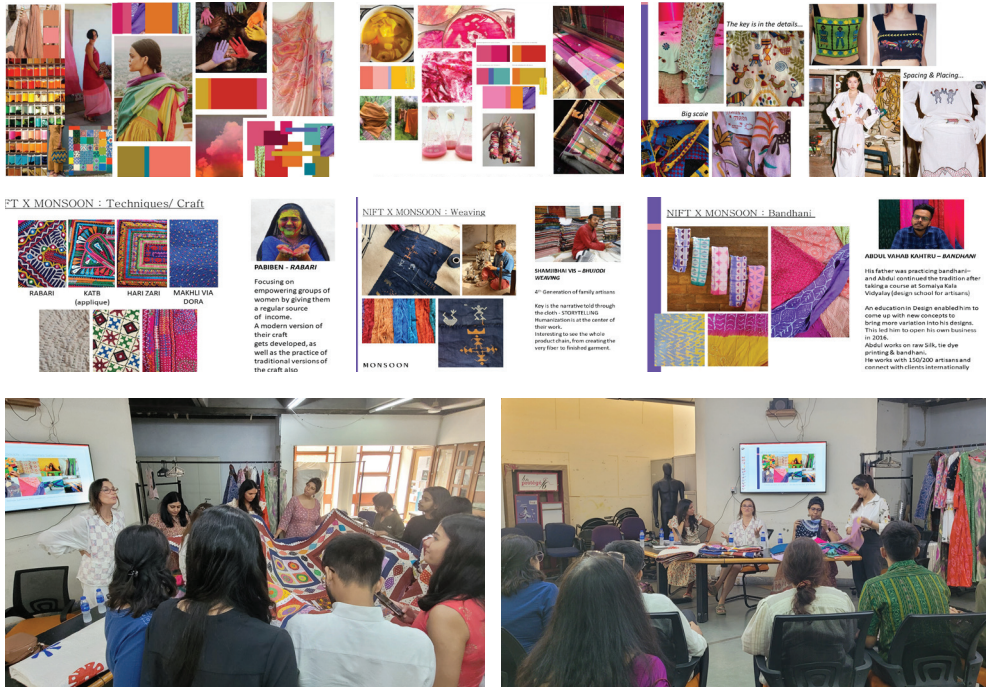


Figure 3: Snippets of the design brief created after the cultural immersion ‘inspiration trip’ that was presented by Ms. Caroline Jackson, Design Director, Monsoon Accessorize; Ms. Laura Liistro, Senior Fashion Designer, Monsoon Accessorize, UK; and Ms. Archita Singh, Founder, Mpcat Sourcing Pvt Ltd, India, to the participating students to explain the cross-cultural collaboration project.

After the presentation, a selection process was conducted to identify two students from the Fashion Design (Semester VI) program. The selection followed a two-phase approach. Student participation in this study was voluntary. In phase one, the students were required to present prior design projects that showcased their design philosophy, leveraging their unique perspectives as Indian fashion design students and highlighting their aesthetics (Figure 4). Phase two was a design competition in which students had to work on a common design brief provided by the Monsoon Design Team under academic mentorship. The brief focused on the summer dress category, and students were required to generate design inspiration, apply specific techniques, and develop three paper design renderings. Their designs were expected to align with the brand’s aesthetics, consider UK customer preferences and lifestyles, and introduce innovative elements (Figure 5).



Figure 4: (Left to right) Mr. Satyam Dey, Ms. Saumya Sharma, and Mr. Prashant Rathi, students of NIFT, FD Sem. VI, among other participating students, presenting their design projects to the Monsoon UK Design Team as part of phase one of the shortlisting process.



Figure 5: Snippets of design work done by students as part of phase two, demonstrating their understanding of the design brief provided by the Monsoon design team.

After the completion of phase one and phase two of the shortlisting process, two fashion design, semester VI students, Mr. Satyam Dey and Mr. Prashant Rathi, were selected for further participation in a six-week-long intensive internship project. This was thoughtfully crafted to align with the distinctive nature of cross-cultural collaboration and academic delivery.

Subsequently, the chosen students embarked on an “inspiration trip” to Bhuj, Kutch, aimed at immersing them in different cultures and enabling interactions with various craft communities. This journey was a vital component of the cultural immersion exercise, as per established practices. The students were instructed to document their travel and maintain journals to record their experiences, which served as a foundational element of the design process. The connections established with artisans and local government officials responsible for handlooms and handicrafts proved to be highly beneficial, enhancing the efficiency and inspiration derived from the cultural immersion visit (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Mr. Satyam Dey and Mr. Prashant Rathi, fashion design students on a cultural immersion visit to Bhuj, Kutch, seeking an understanding of craft communities, observing crafts, and developing ties for artisanal collaboration for the project.

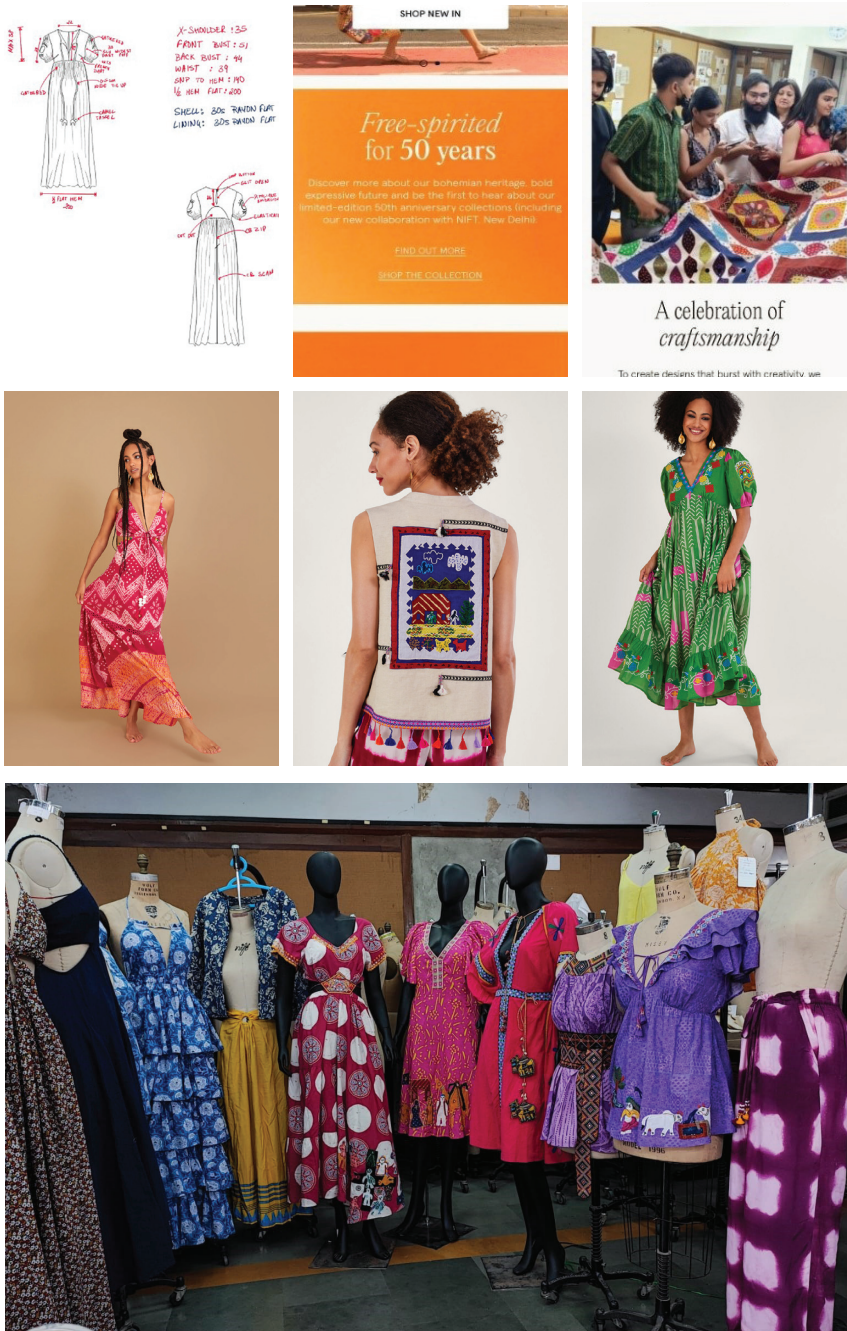


Figure 7: Snippets of the design development process of cross-cultural collaboration and the launch of the collection on Monsoon's official website and social media handles.

Source: Monsoon, UK

Upon their return to NIFT Delhi, the students began crafting designs and consulting with their academic mentor and the Monsoon UK team. This collaborative effort spanned concept development, ideation, design iterations, selection, and range development. To incorporate handcrafted details, they partnered with garment production factories and the Kutch artisans. The final collection, launched in April 2023, paid tribute to artisans and crafts and celebrated Monsoon UK's 50th anniversary (Figure 7). The collection can be accessed on the website of Monsoon, UK (Monsoon, 2023).

Findings

The observations recorded in student learning, which emerged from their field journals, discussions with academic and industry mentors, visual ethnography, and the design and sampling processes, along with the researcher's own experiences during the real-time learning process, provided a foundational basis for validating the theoretical models of situated and experiential learning. For ease of understanding, stakeholder A represents personnel from Monsoon, and stakeholder B represents personnel from Mpac Sourcing in the descriptive data presented.

Situated learning

Situated Learning Theory (SLT), originally formulated by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in 1991, delineates the process and progression of learning when individuals are allowed to engage within a community of practice. Within such a community, novice learners evolve into experts through repeated practice within the context of their learning. This learning is inherently unintentional, a characteristic that is referred to as 'legitimate peripheral participation' (LPP) (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In the framework of LPP, the learner transitions from the periphery of the community to its core as they acquire expertise, actively engaging and participating in the socio-cultural customs and practices of the community (Figure 8).

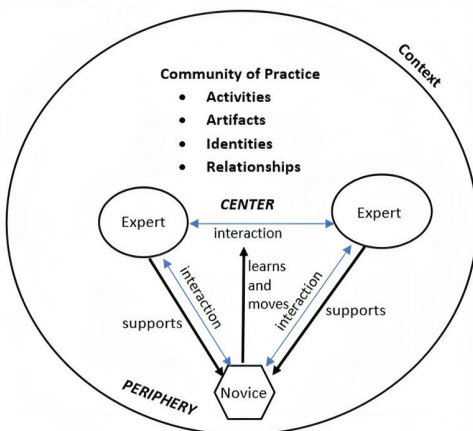


Figure 8: Situated learning theory model
Source: Lave and Wenger, 1991

In an innovative industry-craft-academia partnership, the learning environment seamlessly integrates the local city, craft clusters, *karkhanas* (artisans' workshops), and production facilities (Figure 9). This unique dynamic allowed student designers to navigate these interconnected elements fluidly, adapting to each other as their needs evolved. Through this immersive experience, students gained hands-on exposure to the diverse aspects of design and production, fostering a holistic and dynamic learning journey.



Figure 9: Student designers during their cultural immersion visit to the craft cluster of Kutch gaining situated knowledge from artisans, reflected in the implementation of their design process.

Source: Travelogue and design journals of student designers, Mr. Prashant Rathi and Mr. Satyam Dey

Following a thematic analysis of the qualitative data, the key concepts of situated learning theory that emerged and surfaced predominantly are presented below.

Learning as social participation

Learning occurs through engagement in a community of practice, where individuals participate in authentic activities and social interactions.

Student A: “Before leaving for the inspiration trip, I conducted secondary research by reading books, articles, online resources, and documentaries, which was good, but somewhere I craved for the tactile experience.”

Student B: “When I was informed about the inspiration trip, I was both excited and nervous. Excited, because I will get to see the craft up close being done in front of me, and maybe I get a chance to do it myself. Nervous, because I was apprehensive whether artisans would entertain me or not, as I am different from them.”

Stakeholder A: “The inspirational trip to Kutch helped us connect to the ethos of our brand and communicate our objective behind this collection to the students. We wanted students to experience the same; therefore, it was pertinent to move beyond PowerPoints and let them have a live experience.”

Stakeholder B: “Though it added to the logistics, the student designs after the inspiration trip were more connected, unique, and practical...”

Legitimate peripheral participation (LPP)

Novice learners start at the community’s periphery and gradually move toward full participation as they develop skills and knowledge.

Student A: “We went as strangers and had our apprehensions. But kaka and kaki accepted us with open hearts. They knew we lacked tactile knowledge and skills, so they started teaching us simple techniques before moving on to the next. By the end of the inspiration trip, I was lending my hand in their work.”

Student A: “Post visit, I had the phone numbers of artisans, and I connected with them via WhatsApp. They became friends and family to me, and therefore I felt a greater sense of responsibility towards their community while designing.”

Student B: “I thoroughly enjoyed the process of learning skills and techniques from master artisans. Where else would I have received such an opportunity? Their patience and handholding were commendable. They were like our professors on the field (chuckles)! Even today, if I need to understand what is possible in the technique, they are a call away.”

Contextual learning and authentic activities

Knowledge is constructed in specific contexts, making real-world experiences vital for effective learning. Engaging in real-world tasks enhances learning by connecting theoretical knowledge to practical applications.

Student A: “I think the primary reason for us being motivated throughout the visit was that we were there...right there...in a rural environment. I understood the concept of cradle-to-cradle there, as nothing was wasted. There was so much to observe. Be it dressing, food, folk music they sang, their stories, their art, their craft... there was never a dull moment. They love talking, by the way.”

Student B: “I was so mesmerized with how they decorate their homes with the most mundane things like utensils, which we hardly ever consider an object of admiration. Their craft has only those natural forms like flowers, birds, patterns, colors, and materials that exist in their ecosystem—nothing alien. It felt like I was in a different timeline altogether.”

Stakeholder A: “We have been designing keeping in mind the Indian craft and culture for so many years; it has always been close to Peter (founder). For me, it was my first time visiting a Gujarat cluster, and I now understand why India is so close to his heart.”

Collaboration

Learning is inherently collaborative, with students gaining insights through discussions and teamwork.

Student A: “When we started designing new ideas keeping in mind the traditional techniques and how we can develop products in alignment with brand ethos, there was so much brainstorming. This process was different as the decision-making had to account for artisans’ skill and knowledge, our unicorn ideas, most of which had to be re-iterated due to limitations of the craft techniques, and what the Monsoon design team appreciated.”

Student B: “I would say it was initially a messy process to visualize and design. But with each insight and with each intervention, the path ahead got clearer and clearer.”

Student B: “I think the unique part of such live projects is that it’s real and so are the challenges. It is different from how we learn in a studio setting working on hypothetical projects.”

Reflective practice

Critical reflection on experiences is essential for deep learning and understanding.

Student A: “As part of our briefing, we were supposed to document each day’s experiences and highlights through photographs, videos, and reflections in our journals, which we

shared with the Monsoon team. This exercise helped us to observe more closely, listen deeply, and internalize the experience. When explaining a specific motif that I found interesting to the team, I was speaking the language of the artisan—describing what the motif symbolized and how it was connected to their culture, mythology, and ecosystem.”

Student B: “What stood out to me personally when reflecting on our conversations about their communal past was the hardship they faced during their migration to India. Despite being uprooted from everything familiar, they rebuilt their lives without abandoning their craft, culture, or traditions. They remain happy and content, even with less, and that sense of happiness and satisfaction is beautifully reflected in their craft and practice.”

Experiential learning

Experiential learning for fashion design students provides an immersive, hands-on approach that bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical applications. By engaging directly with real-world scenarios, such as craft clusters, studios, and production facilities, students develop a deep understanding of the multifaceted nature of the fashion industry. This method encourages creative problem-solving, collaboration, and the ability to adapt to ever-changing environments. It also allows students to experiment with materials, techniques, and processes tangibly, fostering innovation and craftsmanship. Through these experiences, fashion design students become better prepared for professional challenges, with a richer, more nuanced perspective.

Figure 10 illustrates David Kolb’s (1984) four-stage experiential learning model, which states that learning begins with the “concrete experience,” where the learner encounters a tangible and often novel experience that may be entirely new or involve a re-evaluation of existing experiences in light of new concepts. Subsequently, the learner engages in “reflective observation” of the new experience, contemplating the recent experience in the context of their existing knowledge, with a focus on discrepancies between experience and understanding. This, in turn, leads to “abstract conceptualization,” where reflection generates a novel idea or a modification of an existing abstract concept, signifying the individual’s learning from their experience. Finally, the learner engages in “active experimentation,” during which the newly formed or modified concepts are put into practice. The learner applies these ideas to their surroundings to observe the outcomes and consequences.

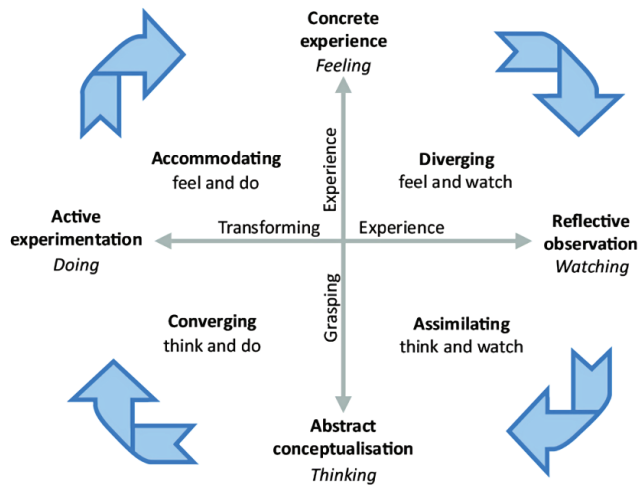


Figure 10: Kolb's learning model

Source: Kolb, 1984

Based on the thematic analysis of the qualitative data, the key concepts of the experiential learning model that came into sight are elucidated below.

Learning as a process and learning cycle

Learning is seen as a continuous process where knowledge is created through the transformation of experiences. It is not a static outcome but a dynamic process of adapting and evolving understanding.

- Concrete Experience: In the context of the collaborative project, the student designers actively indulged in concrete field experience and reflective observation, assimilating the craft knowledge through one-on-one interaction with artisans, documenting the steps through field notes, videography, and photography, and practicing the craft through hands-on experience.
- Reflective Observation: The second stage involved returning from the 'inspiration trip' and undertaking an internship to execute the collaborative project as per industry standards. This process involved developing individual design inspiration, concepts, and initial paper designs that led to abstract conceptualization (Figure 11).

- Abstract Conceptualization: This stage witnessed the convergence of design ideas through weekly review meetings with academic mentors and industry stakeholders. The discussions helped to align the designs with Monsoon's identity and values for the international audience. It was also pertinent to design handcrafted products that could meet production demand, as the collection was intended for retailing and the volumes were high.



Figure 11: Initial Inspiration and design explorations by student designers, Mr. Prashant Rathi and Mr. Satyam Dey.

Source: Students' internship documents

- Active Experimentation: The final stage entailed prototyping and sampling, a conventional process of developing apparel products. The students engaged with the factory as well as the craft community to execute the selected styles and ensure the feasibility and viability of craft techniques in context to the lead time of the product development process. The stage of prototyping and sampling (Figure 12) gave them the necessary insight into flexibility to accommodate iteration according to the different variables, which are crucial in the production process.



Figure 12: Prototyping and sampling before production to check the viability of design, technique, fit and drape.

Experience as the source of learning

Direct involvement in experiences is crucial to learning. Learners must actively engage in experiences to acquire knowledge and skills. Examining the interaction between the artisans, students, stakeholders, and educators during the ‘inspiration trip’ and thereafter during the design development and sampling process proved helpful in enriching the learning.

Student A: “This live project has been a bridge between designers and artisans, which, so far, we have not experienced in our studies. They (artisans) hand-held us throughout the process like our professors do.”

Student B: “Artisans treated us like family, and they shared not just about the craft but their culture as well. Their hospitality, mostly lunches they offered, is something I will always remember.”

Stakeholder A: “Their craft goes beyond just personal expression. Their designs interpret the spirit of the community, including the animals, houses, hardships they went through, and hope. Translating something folkloric to a commercial product without compromising the narrative was the biggest challenge for all of us.”

Stakeholder B: “The highlight was the musical evening they arranged as a surprise for us, inviting folk artists to welcome us. They opened their homes. They have large hearts and a clear consciousness. Peter’s vision of Monsoon is exactly about this. The wearer cherishes the pieces. That certainly was a challenge for the student designer to capture in their designs.”

The learning environment and context in which experiences occur significantly impact the efficacy of learning. Real-world applications make learning more relevant and meaningful.

Student A: “The co-creation exercise made us think critically, as we were the common connection between artisans and the monsoon design team. We juggled between preserving the traditionality of the craft and the ethos and making it modern and contemporary for a western wearer.”

Student B: “In the studio, we mostly work on hypothetical briefs that limit the process of iteration. In this project, I do not recall the number of amendments I had to make my design production-friendly while doing justice for craft integration. The artisans worked similarly when they developed products for commercial purposes. The commerce aspect of any design is equally crucial.”

Conclusion

The cross-cultural collaboration project between the renowned global high-street fashion retailer Monsoon, UK, and NIFT New Delhi ushered in an innovative fashion design pedagogy that transcended the conventional confines of studio-based fashion design instruction. Students’ engagement in a live project with authentic stakeholders, including an international brand, a garment manufacturer, and artisanal communities in India exposed them to an immersive learning environment. This unique educational experience allowed them to interact with craft communities, providing insights into the grassroots realities of India’s textile clusters. The collaboration with an international brand introduced students to global design aesthetics and trends, building their understanding about diverse consumer preferences and their sensitivity to different cultures and regional needs. The project gave an opportunity to integrate local cultural elements with international trends. Furthermore, the students were exposed to sustainable indigenous techniques in textile production, the intricacies of artisanal and industrial production processes, and the decision-making involved. It also encouraged the creation of artifacts that carried a narrative reflective of the involved communities. Drawing from the students’ shared experiences, it becomes evident that cultural immersion and live projects foster opportunities for cross-cultural collaboration and promote personal growth.

This study demonstrates the potential of cross-cultural collaboration and co-creation as a pedagogical approach in fashion design education. By engaging in collaborative projects that involve multiple stakeholders, students gain valuable experiential learning opportunities that prepare them for the complexities of the global fashion industry. It also allows learning to diffuse beyond the traditional studio silos, decentralizing the role of the educator by involving other experts. The findings underscore the importance of integrating such collaborative projects into fashion design curricula to foster a more holistic and sustainable educational experience.

Future research should explore similar collaborative initiatives across different cultural contexts and industries to further validate and expand the insights gained from this study. Enhancing the rigor of data collection and analysis methods will also contribute to a deeper understanding of the pedagogical benefits of cross-cultural collaboration in fashion design.

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