Taylor & Francis Group

The Design Journal

An International Journal for All Aspects of Design

Wearable Words: A case study applying Jewellery theory and practice to the education of Fine Art, Textiles Innovation and Design, Graphic Communication and Illustration students

Roberta Bernabei

Published online: 06 Sep 2017.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

View related articles ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

Wearable Words: A case study applying Jewellery theory and practice to the education of Fine Art, Textiles Innovation and Design, Graphic Communication and Illustration students.

Roberta Bernabei

Loughborough University, United Kingdom

Abstract: *Wearable Words* is a cross-disciplinary and multidisciplinary education adventure that investigates the human body through 'wearable objects'. It transfers the teaching of jewellery studies to a group of learners from different disciplines including: Fine Art, Textiles and Graphic Communication and Illustration. It aims to determine whether the theoretical issues of jewellery and jewellery technologies can bring an innovative research method and new practical tools to students who are not familiar with the jewellery arena. In so doing, *Wearable Words* symbolises the non – verbal communications of body related objects.

The paper examines the preliminary challenges, weaknesses and successes of the project, which was delivered to 19 second year BA students between February and June 2016 at Loughborough University. It analyses the extent to which a shift to the theoretical and practical approaches of jewellery design education enabled students of different disciplines to develop their research methodologies, design capabilities and making skills. The results are analysed through observational methods, open ended questions, and visual analysis.

Keywords: Visual - digital research, Jewellery studies

1. Aims

The research aims to determine whether the practice and theoretical study of jewellery can foster multi-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary learning & teaching applicable to other creative arts subjects.

2. Objectives

The research investigates the extent to which studying jewellery's interdependent relationship with the human body and its geometry, movement, social and cultural contexts might broaden generic creative skills. This entails assessing the results of guiding students unfamiliar with the jewellery

discipline, through a taught module based on jewellery techniques, research methods and practical investigations.

3. Introduction

Cross-disciplinary approaches in the creative arts have become increasingly prevalent in the last decade as artists, craftspeople and designers have sought inspiration and innovation through collaboration with scientific and technological disciplines (Niedderer, 2011). This subject synthesis has been witnessed in postgraduate art education with the temporary establishment of Department 21 at the RCA London between 2010 and 2011; a student led cross-departmental studio space designed to solicit interdisciplinary thinking and working (Williamson, 2013, p.371-372). Other examples include Aalto University, which has "established an experimental platform for multidisciplinary education and innovation, the Design Factory" (Design Council, 2010, p.10). Correspondingly, some single honour undergraduate arts disciplines have been amalgamated into more generic courses. At Loughborough University for example, distinct jewellery, furniture and ceramic bachelor courses were combined into a mixed-media programme, *3D Design New Practice*. Whereas Animation, Graphic Design and Illustration were united into *Graphic Communication and Illustration*. Whilst this process of disciplinary unification can agglomerate the academic costs of specialist workshops, technical support, teaching and admin, subject specificity may be diluted. Conversely, one might argue that teaching related subjects together can educate students how to operate more flexibly across disciplines by applying universal skills such as design problem solving and the honing of personal aesthetics. The question therefore arises as to how one might expand possibilities for arts students to be equipped with transferable creative skills in addition to those of their own disciplines. This may be desirable for future employability according to the 2010 Design Council Report on design education in the UK, which argues that "there is no one particular mix of skills that can guarantee good innovation performance in all circumstances, broadening the mix of skills with teams and individuals from other fields is one way to help innovation to happen" (Multidisciplinary Design Education in the UK , 2016, p.12).

In order to explore possibilities for the transference of creative skills, a single discipline was required that would have some underlying characteristic in common with a multitude of other disciplines. The human body is often the 'site/recipient/user' around which many creative disciplines operate in terms of wearing, using, decorating, educating, housing, interacting with, managing, protecting, stimulating and so forth. The three main undergraduate BA (hons) courses in the School of the Arts at Loughborough University overlap because they all deal with 'objects/products' related to human beings and in many respects, to the human body. It was therefore decided to investigate a body dependent subject as the conduit for cross disciplinary teaching. In some subjects the connection is more immediate than others, as in the case of Textiles being used in the clothing trade. Yet, graphic designers can create fonts for T-Shirts or design signage that moderates human movement in the built environment. Jewellery was selected as a catalyst for knowledge transfer because of its design and production in relation to various body parts, alongside its role in decorating, memorialising and representing the human being and multiple human experiences, ceremonies or rites of passage. The research therefore tests whether studying the nuances of jewellery, including its documenting of memory and experience, and its impact when worn, can enrich the knowledge and skills of non-jewellery students.

The paper examines the preliminary challenges, weaknesses and successes of a pilot module: *Wearable Words*, which was delivered to 19 second year undergraduate students between February and June 2016 at Loughborough University. It analyses the extent to which a shift to the theoretical and practical approaches of jewellery design education enabled students of different disciplines to broaden their research methodologies, skills and knowledge. Accordingly, *Wearable Words* is a cross-disciplinary and multidisciplinary project that investigates the human body through 'wearable objects'. It transfers the teaching of jewellery studies to a group of learners from three different disciplines: Fine Art, Textiles Innovation and Design and Graphic Communication & Illustration.

Jewellery has the further advantage of most students having limited experience of its theories and techniques; making it an unfamiliar environment where they would collectively commence with a similarly everyday understanding. Furthermore, the lack of subject familiarity might help overcome preconceived and habitual decisions; challenging the student cohort to question new situations and encourage approaches different to the norm.

In developing the module, attempts were made to benchmark students' initial knowledge of jewellery and their general approach to creativity, prior to instigating a series of lectures, seminars and tasks that would encourage them to consider new ways of designing, conceiving and making in relation to the human body. Assessment tasks required a degree of self-analytical thinking and these reflections form the basis of this paper's results. The following section explores the parameters of the module and the research method in greater depth.

4. Methods

The establishment of the module *Wearable Words* was the device through which jewellery teaching and learning as a means of transferring creative skills could be evaluated. To test the full spectrum of teaching methods in Jewellery, the module contained both theoretical and practical aspects. The former includes the requirement to study the changing relationship of jewellery to the body through historical, traditional and contemporary jewellery, encompassing temporary and permanent vehicles of communication, as well as 2D design methods. The practice based element necessitated the students to apply some traditional goldsmith techniques such as wax working, alongside hi-tech solutions such as CAD/CAM to aid the production of wearable objects in which body related objects and their communication played a central role. The depiction of written language was included to give a second commonality to the module alongside the body; in that students will already either use language directly in practicing their discipline or as a tool for analysis and learning.

Submission requirements for assessment were twofold: firstly, students were required to create an object in relation to the body and to then create a video or photo essay that demonstrated and analysed potential interactions between their object and the human body. Students were encouraged to explore body related issues from their own discipline through some aspect of the jewellery world. Consideration was to be given to notions of social issues, identity, aesthetics, geometry and the movement of the object. The second task was more theoretical and based on developing an appropriate set of research questions with which to tackle an argument investigating commonalities between jewellery and their subject matter. An argument had to be built based on analysis of case studies including artefacts/objects from jewellery and their respective disciplines. The assessed work provided the data that determines the initial findings of what extent the practice and theoretical study of jewellery can foster cross-disciplinary learning & teaching applicable to other creative arts subjects.

In planning the module, it was necessary to introduce students to the world of jewellery through the delivery of lectures and seminars. These provided an opportunity to familiarise students with the visible and hidden communicative values of wearable objects. Case studies were employed to demonstrate and illustrate associated issues, an approach supported by Seymond Roworth-Stokes and Tim Ball, who argue it is an increasingly used method in innovative Design pedagogy (Tovey, 2015, p.180). The selection of case studies focused on jewellery, but because the cohort was heterogeneous references were made to other disciplines where students could recognise some familiarity: namely Graphics, Illustration, Textiles Innovation and Design and Fine Art.

In order to foster cross-disciplinary thinking, discussion of visual case studies of artefacts designed for the body sought commonalities with multiple disciplines. The aim was to share understanding and knowledge of the communicative roles of wearable artefacts and the relationships they can have with the human body. This process was enriched by the provision of written texts that challenged students' perceptions of clear confinements between disciplines. Exploration of the case studies sought to explore anthropological notions of family values, status symbols, memory encapsulation, belonging to a social group or ideology. References to value / message / signifier were analysed by using semiotics, phenomenology, historical analysis, reflective design and theories of looking such as those based on perception and colour. Selected theories were imbedded in lectures and seminars, summarised in PowerPoint presentations and hand-outs, to give students some tools to create their own methodology. The latter was one of the requisite elements in the written assignment, where students had to establish how they would undertake analysis.

To determine the strengths and weaknesses of the module, and therefore the hypothesis underlying the aims, it was necessary to assess students' ability to make cogent analyses cross-disciplinarily and to extrapolate jewellery specific skills and to apply them analytically to other disciplines. This was inculcated into the submission requirements which, as discussed, included producing a body related object, analysing it, alongside a written essay that required students to establish societal, physical, contextual and meaningful links between jewellery and their discipline. Determinants for success were the extent to which students had understood the need to integrate the function, aesthetic and materiality of their objects with the body. Another factor of importance was the extent to which dealing with the body had refreshed their thinking in relation to their original disciplines and how they might then return to it with new means for extending their personal artistic languages.

5. Results

Students completing the *Wearable Words* module submitted two pieces of coursework for assessment. These were intended to demonstrate their refinement of analytical skills and the extent to which they had identified new skills that they might apply within their primary discipline. A broad overview of submissions revealed that students from different originating disciplines generally faced their own specific group of problems when addressing the body as substrate.

Graphic Communication and Illustration students faced challenges in looking beyond two dimensional preconceptions of imaging words to more three dimensional renderings upon a physically tangible body. Responses could be categorised according to their proximity to the skin in terms of direct contact, secondary contact and relational contact. The first group directly applied 2D imagery to the body with tattoo or paint, the second applied words to clothing to make an intermediate worn second skin. Whereas a final group conceived of a dialogue between an

autonomous object and the body; testing potential relationships by positioning the jewel upon or in relation to different body parts. None of the Fine Art Students adopted direct or immediate contact with the body, preferring instead to make three dimensional objects in relation to the body. Or, to operate physically removed, but temporally connected, via film and performance. An example of the latter included a video with a provocative performance to paint the face of the model with temporary make up. The Textiles students in the initial cohort tended to operate through direct contact with the body and this may have been an extension of their 'normal' thinking in relation to the production of fabrics for clothing.

Whilst the use of jewellery with non-jewellery students did not always prompt developments in thinking, design and creativity, on multiple occasions it did. Making the object was not so much the catalyst for change, but rather the subsequent management of its relationship with the body. Some students drew upon their previous experience and knowledge and merged different techniques. For example, a Graphic Communication student made a piece of jewellery with paper, folded like a concertina. Whilst the origami aspect could be deemed somewhat familiar, the challenge to them was witnessing the object positioned on the body and understanding and mediating the dialogue created by the paper touching the body and the shape-shifting in response to its movement. In so doing, the student was pushed beyond the norms of their expertise to reinvigorate an established working method in their vocabulary; to realise the kinetic potential of pattern forming and origami in movement.

There was some evidence that by encouraging students to step beyond their own disciplines, the module appeared to permit students to gain a better understanding of future directions in their main subject. For example, one Textiles student interrogated technological interventions within the body as their case studies for analysis. Namely, embroidered surgical implants by Julian Ellis and Veronica Ranner's Biophilia: Organic Crafting – a speculative project creating artificial silk hearts for medical implant purposes. These two artists were of interest because they explore the cultural and personal emotional significance of bioengineered, anatomical 'wearables'. Examining these innovations in textiles prompted a crocheted collar, whereby threads reproduce the body's lymphatic system. This use of individual threads as the means of construction, rather than in the weft and weave of fabric, has led to a desire in the student to further this bio-medical physiological language through constructed textiles in future modules.

A related example includes a student who explored wearable sculptures by Ernesto Neto and Franz West to unify their interest in Fine Art that is effectively made for the body; made to be worn or physically experienced somehow. Responding to these arguments practically led to the creation of small amulet sculptures that could also be worn as earpieces of dynamic and unusual geometry. The student entitled them *Ear Maracas*, because they rattle when the wearer moves. According to the student in question, the work is "intended to be worn in a gallery setting as a participatory art-piece exploring the impact of the senses when viewing work in a gallery."[1] Bringing sculpture to jewellery led to the student sowing seeds of originality in the field of jewellery, but also helped enhance their understanding of scale in sculpture vis-à-vis the dimensional polarities of amulet versus monument, as well as identifying the body as a potential location for the site-specific, whereby the motion of a decorated body becomes essential to an artwork's functionality and 'conceptual' completion.
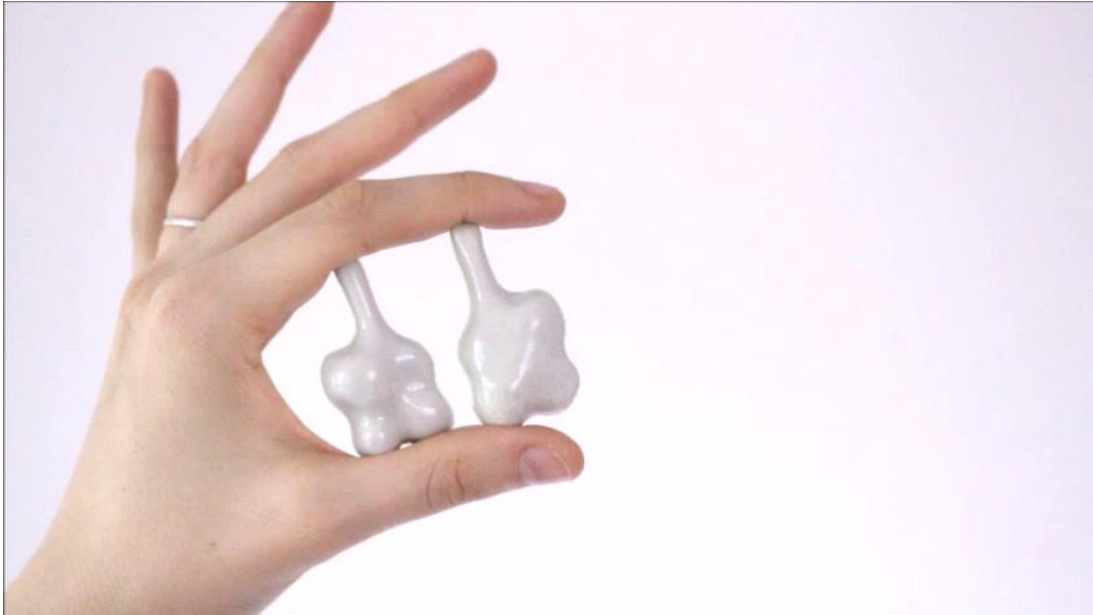
Figure 1.
Ear Maracas, porcelain (Fine Art Student)

Exploring some of the more sentimental aspects to jewellery prompted some students to articulate a change in their thinking in relation to the end users of their designs, illustrations, textiles or artworks. To think less of their disciplines' outcomes as being abstract from the world, but more in relation to people as individuals or members of a group with their respective lives and emotional complexities. One such student explored the historical role of jewellery in asserting ownership and power, both physically and symbolically. This was accompanied by them creating a large transparent circular pendent in which the words "I'm Married" are spelt out didactically in bold black type. The font appears to exaggerate the shift from the symbolic nature of a wedding ring to a much more literal rendering of relationship status because its truncation by the pendant's curvature made it seem like it had been enlarged by a magnifying glass.

The necklace was designed to be "uncomfortable to remove. Made out of Perspex plastic, the ends are sharp and painful, when wearing normally it is of no inconvenience to the wearer but when attempted to take off can scratch the neck of the women and leave a mark that shows it's been removed."2 As already intimated, their exploration of jewellery prompted them to return to their own discipline with an expanded vision of parameters for consideration when creating something for an end user.

Figure 2.
I'm Married, Necklace, Perspex (Textiles Student)

6. Conclusions

The research sought to establish whether the practice and theoretical study of jewellery can foster cross-disciplinary learning & teaching applicable to other creative arts subjects. The findings presented in this case study result from the initial running of the module during one academic year and are therefore to be interpreted accordingly. The long-term intention is to develop the research over several years with multiple student year groups completing the module; thereby augmenting the sample group and its validity. Nonetheless, some indicative conclusions may be drawn from this first cohort and these include that studying a discipline through the conduit of jewellery and its relationships with the body can, for some students, act as a catalyst for re-evaluating the techniques and modalities of their originating subject. In this sense, it may broaden perceptions of the boundaries of a discipline in a student's mind, as well as expanding conceptions of the end user's potential needs and how anticipating those can beneficially influence the design and making process in many fields.

It also appears to have prompted the acquisition of some transferable skills, particularly in relation to enhancing abilities to shift between two and three-dimensional design, as well as creating form in relation to a body in motion and the cultural, social and political notions of the body. Student feedback also suggests that having to analyse the canons and tenants of a new subject (jewellery) may have honed the analytical skills required to complete the subsequent third year dissertation. That said, further iterations of the module will be required to fully determine the long-term impact of Wearable Worlds and how studying jewellery can benefit students from other arts disciplines. The second iteration of the module has commenced with an increased uptake amongst Graphic Communication students; with the participating cohort keen to augment activity beyond the 2D bias of their originating course to explore three-dimensionally. Completion of a second running of the

module will allow for greater sampling to discern how and where the educational framework can be improved and refined.

References

De Luca, M. & Meurer, S. (2015) The Memory of Beauty, Exhibit your Culture, (accessed 10 July 2015) https://www.ces.uc.pt/myces/UserFiles/livros/1097_2014-%20CETAID_project.pdf

Design Council (2010) *Multi-disciplinary Design Education in the UK.* (Report and recommendations from the Multi-Disciplinary Design Network) http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/asset/document/multi-disciplinary-design-education.pdf last accessed 19.12.2016

Dormer, P. (1997) *The Culture of Craft*. Manchester, Manchester University Press.

Jones, C. (2009) "Interdisciplinary Approach - Advantages, Disadvantages, and the Future Benefits of Interdisciplinary Studies," *ESSAI*: Vol. 7, Article 26. http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol7/iss1/26   last accessed 22.12.2016

Muratovski, G. (2016) *Research for Designers: A Guide to Methods and Practice*. London, Sage Publishing.

Newell, W. H. (2013) The State of the Field: Interdisciplinary Theory. *Issues in Interdisciplinary Studies*, n31 p22-43 http://eric.ed.gov/?q=Interdisciplinary+studies+&id=EJ1101054 last accessed 21.12.2016

Niedderer, K., Imani, Y. & Overton, M. G. (2011) Craft as a Tool for Multidisciplinary Collaboration and Design Practice. *1st Cambridge Academic Design Management Conference*. http://niedderer.org/CADMC_2011_63%20Niedderer.pdf last accessed 20.12.2016

Rose, G. (2012). *Visual methodologies: an introduction to researching with visual materials*, London, SAGE Publications Ltd.

Tovey, M. (Ed.). (2015) *Design Pedagogy: Developments in Art and Design Education*. London, Routledge.

Williamson, B. (2013) Recent Developments in British Art Education: 'Nothing Changes from Generation to Generation except the Thing Seen', *Visual Culture in Britain*, 14:3, 356-378.