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The Connect Project

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Abstract

Conducted in March 2015, the Connect Project provided a collaborative educational experience focused on the challenges of environmental impacts, over-consumption and ethics in the global apparel industry. Motivated by internationalization, four leading institutions – Buffalo State College (USA), Manchester Metropolitan University (UK), Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology China (CH) and RMIT University Australia (AUS) – collaborated on a transnational project. The project brought together instructor/student teams, one from each institution, to travel around the world in eighteen days to learn and disseminate information about sustainability in the apparel industry.

In order to engage students at each home institution, a website was built around the project which was pre-loaded with videos and articles pertaining to sustainability in each country visited. While the team was active in each country, students would blog about their experience and share images through the website. Social media was also employed as a means to reach out to students at each institutions home base. They were encouraged to ask questions and read the daily blogs. The student audience was encouraged to participate through adding their knowledge of sustainability to the content of the blog, ask questions and participate through classroom/campus activities.

The response from the students at each institutions was constant. Over 500 students logged in at least once to follow the group and read the articles. The social media feeds brought in almost 600 followers including leading members of the international fashion industry who added in their thoughts to the issue of sustainability.

Keywords: participatory learning, fashion sustainability, internationalization strategy, online learning

The Connect Project

The *Connect* project was a collaborative educational project whose main objective was to help students better understand the scope and scale of the problems and challenges that face the apparel industry in creating a global sustainable future. Bringing together four universities, one each from the United States, United Kingdom, China and Australia, each with one team consisting of an instructor and a student traveled the world in eighteen days in order to inform themselves and the students from each of their institutions on the current state of sustainability in the global fashion industry. A Connect specific web page was developed in order to disseminate information from each participating country/institution/student and was ideated as a depository to capture information.

The Connect project enabled participants to learn about the multifaceted apparel system first hand and report information and experiences to their peers through multimedia channels. Thus, it is connecting experiences and the opportunity for knowledge exchange by reflecting on lessons learned and sharing experiences collectively that becomes important to broadening students' understanding of the fashion industry's "big picture".

Connect provided a collaborative educational experience that debated the challenges of environmental impacts, over-consumption and ethics in the global apparel industry. It had the following objectives:

1. To generate interest and enquiry surrounding the issues which affect the global apparel industry, the environment in which we live and our future.
2. To better understand the scope and scale of the problems and challenges that face the apparel industry in creating a global sustainable future.
3. To encourage students to become active in the campaign for a sustainable future.

The Connect project's design offered the opportunity to practice problem-based learning (PBL), creating a focused learning experience grounded in exploring sustainable innovation in the context of the apparel industry. Through visits to each of the participating universities, constructive investigations were formed toward structuring the students learning within each socio-cultural and market context (Sroufe & Ramos, 2015). This offered the environment in which the students learned about sustainable innovation by recording their experiences, developing understanding and reflecting on what they had learned by posting on the projects blog.

Literature Review

The topic of sustainability in the apparel industry provided common ground for all students studying fashion in the participating institutions and important opportunities for research, across both business and design disciplines. The partners shared common goals to engage academics, students and professionals from around the world in participatory learning towards the importance of sustainable innovation and to educate future leaders of industry, who might instigate change

Globalization

Globalization is defined as the increasing phenomenon of international interdependence and interconnectivity, which brings together economic, cultural and social change (OECD, 2009). Marginson and Van der Wende (2009), stated that "Higher education is implicated in all the changes related to globalization. Education and research are key elements in the formation of the global environment, being foundational to knowledge, the take-up of technologies, cross-border association and sustaining complex communities" (p. 18). Globalization has stimulated an unprecedented flow of information worldwide and has changed the transmission of knowledge. It

is therefore incumbent on universities to internationalize curricula to improve their student's prospects in globalized sectors of the labor market (OECD, 2009).

Apparel industry

According to Kunz and Garner (2011), textile and apparel related businesses provide employment for more people than any other business segment and these positions can be found in every country of the world. The global apparel industry has long been aware of the environmental and ethical issues along its supply chain – unsafe factory conditions, workers' rights violations, and the use of harsh chemicals are but a few of the issues. Jones, Blackey, Fitzgibbon and Chew (2010) found that students enjoy the use of technology and online activities and appreciate the opportunity to communicate through social media platforms.

The concept of communicating experiences and knowledge transfer through shared learning is what inspired the Connect project (Chhabra & Sharma, 2011). Each institution was also keen to engage in internationalization in response to the continued globalization of the apparel industry. In order to tackle the issues of sustainability in a global field such as the fashion industry, it was felt that we needed to take a global perspective. This collaboration took the issue of sustainability and combined it with social platforms to engage and inform students about the state of the industry in four diverse countries.

Methodology

Each institution had the freedom to implement this project on campus in their own way. For example, at RMIT the school year was launched with industry panel discussions and presentations. This, combined with access to the Connect digital intelligence, provided a foundation for all our students to literally 'connect'. By framing the commencement of the academic year around global issues and sustainability it provided knowledge to all students in

our cohort to be considerate of this in their work, whether developing design ideas, considering business models or challenging the system in which they will be employed. Students were encouraged to base decisions on the underlying premise of social responsibility as well as benefitting the global community and to develop a personal definition of sustainable fashion based on their perspective, research, and creativity. As a consequence, a project that could have benefited a few but actually informed many and has had significant breadth of impact on teaching methodologies and heightened student experience.

Key to dissemination of the research and findings from each institution in the Connect project was the technology strategy the project employed to communicate the projects learning objectives as well as engage and expand the projects followers to create a fashion community discourse around the key issues and debate sustainable fashion. In the first instance, a website was built around the project where the students were required to take notes during each professional visit or event and blog their own reflections and learning on the experience. Prior to traveling, each instructor/student team uploaded videos and articles pertaining to sustainability in their city/country that could be released during planned activities to provide research contexts and further information. While the team was active in each country, they explored local small and medium-sized companies which practiced sustainability in some manner and presented at events conducted in the home institutions, putting forward what they had learned; debating ideas and perspectives as part of the learning objectives. The experiences each team had in each country provided rich information to help the students following the project become engaged in knowledge sharing and reflect on their own actions as consumers and future fashion industry professionals (Hmelo-Silver, 2004).

Social media was also employed as a means to reach out to students at each institutions' home base. The use of social media allowed individuals to engage in a global network of others interested in similar topics. The students were encouraged to ask questions and read the daily blogs. While the team was traveling in the air, the pre-loaded videos and articles would automatically go live in order to keep the audience engaged and informed.

Twitter is a social media site which broadcasts short messages to followers. Twitter was used to update the students back at the home school to what we were seeing, learning and doing. Twitter limits the size of the posts to 140 characters [this has recently increased to 280] which encourages students to summarize key ideas from the information they are taking in. Twitter also offers an enhanced way of connecting with the professional fashion community and this is how the projects debates came to the attention of key fashion commentators such as Lucy Siegle.

As such, the Connect project directly engaged students aligned to the project and provided a specific and enhanced benefit to the students who were the University representatives. The broader benefits however indicate that the Connect project democratically enhanced the student experience across a broad cohort (Hmelo-Silver & Barrows, 2006). See Figure 1.

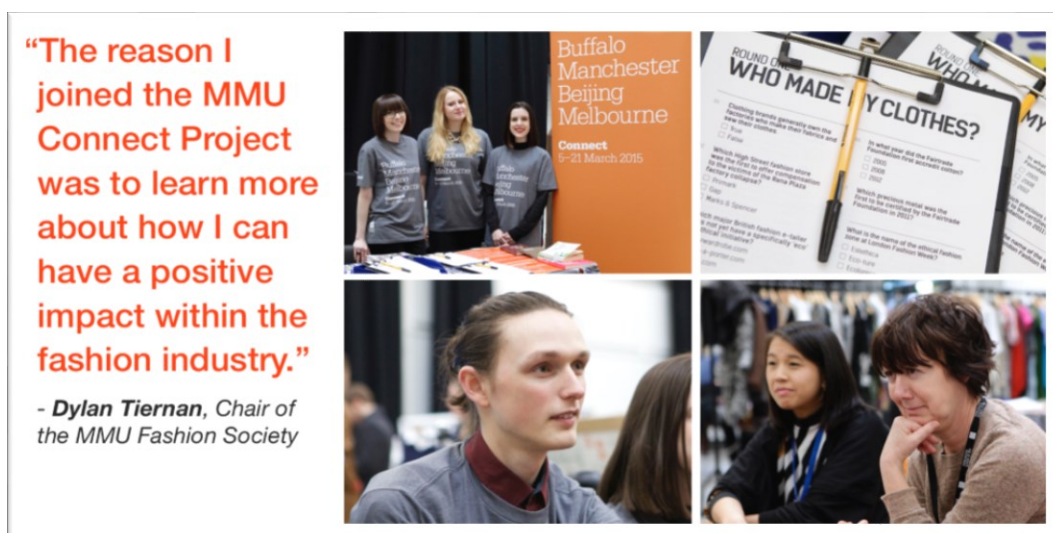


Figure 1: Students 'connect' with the peers to discuss sustainable fashion futures

The student representatives directly communicated with student cohorts at their home institution via a range of social media platforms including individual blogs of daily experiences, podcasts of seminars and conferences and visual presentations via Instagram.

As the travelling participants originated from a diverse range of cultural and international backgrounds, students at their home campuses were able to compare different perspectives of activities that the travelling teams were experiences. The diversity of the travelling party provided a forum for home students to engage with all students of the travelling party. As a result, digital discussions became much broader and deeper and were not limited to single country perspectives.

The interest generated by students at the home institutions was very strong. This was demonstrated and measured by individual hits, comments and questions raised. The response from the students at each institution were constant. Over 500 students logged in at least once to follow the group and read the articles. The social media feeds brought in hundreds of followers including leading members of the international fashion industry who added in their thoughts to the issue of sustainability.

The Connect project enabled participants to learn about the multifaceted apparel system first hand and report information and experiences to their peers through multimedia channels. The Connect webpage (Figure 2) is currently a rich learning resources which holds a variety of examples and perspectives on sustainable innovation. It is used as a learning resource for all the universities and this has allowed an even larger audience to continue the discussion and add to the resources. Participation in unique learning experiences, such as Connect, help students acquire new knowledge and skills in an engaging manner and help them to be better prepared to enter the global apparel industry.

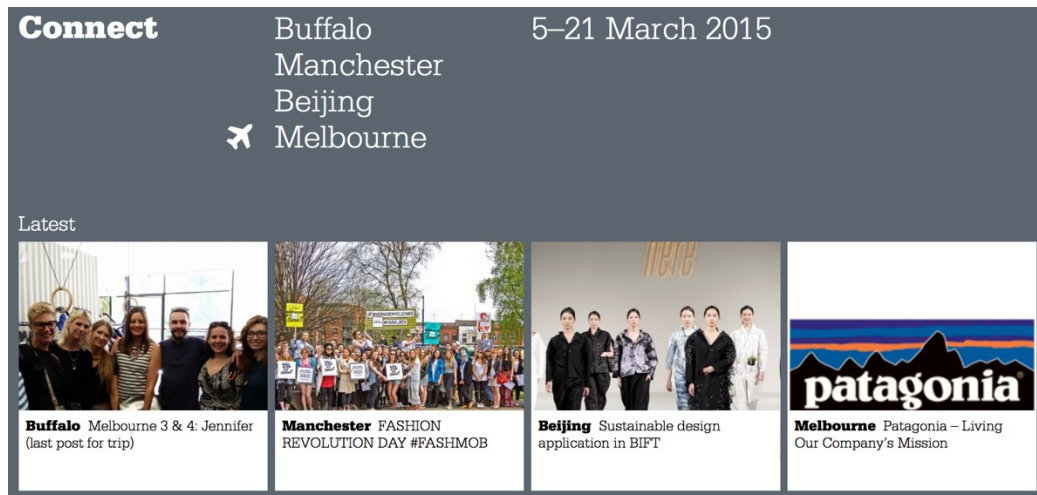


Figure 2: Connect live blog screen capture

Discussion

Long Term Impact

According to the Institute for International Education (IIE) (2018), 325,339 U.S. Students studied abroad for academic credit in 2015/2016 which was an increase of 3.8% over the previous year and 63.1% of the study abroad experiences were considered short term (eight weeks or less). While there has been a marked increase in the numbers of students studying abroad, the expense of doing so is usually a major reason why more students do not participate in this type of experience. A short term study abroad program can help reduce the expenses Chieffo and Griffiths (2004) noted that student who spent even one month abroad “were more confident in their levels of intercultural awareness and functional knowledge than their peers who remained on campus”.

In order to determine how this experience affected the students, they were asked to complete a reflective learning exercise. According to Boyd and Fales (1983), reflective learning is "the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which results in a changed

conceptual perspective” (p. 100). At the end of the 18 day trip, students went home and were given three weeks to reflect on their experience. At that time, students showed an increased awareness and understanding of the global scope of the issues of sustainability in the fashion industry and indicated that they wanted to carry this knowledge into their lives and workplace in the future.

In order to determine if there was a long term effect on this experience, questions were mailed to the participating students one year after the experience and they were asked to once again reflect on their experience. The objective of this exercise was to determine how the students perceived the effects of this experience on their subsequent choices in academia or their career. The student responses showed that the students reached the point in which they are re-evaluating their behaviors and altering them to embrace a lifestyle that considers the environment (Boorady, et. al., 2016). They most notably also stated that this experience had given them a more overall positive outlook on the fashion industry and gave them insight on how they want to define their role in the industry.

...this project has made me acutely aware of the extent of the issues and the importance of engaging in discussion about what can be done; to be a part of developing solutions to problems is much more important than profiteering from fantasy that drives consumer tastes. I have noticed a change in mind-set within myself since returning...As a result...I have gained...life changing knowledge regarding the importance of sustainability that...I will be able to use to inform any future job search and occupation.
– UK student

Social Media

Once the project was completed, data was collected on the social media response. We had over 400 followers on our Instagram account “@mmu_connect” and Lucy Siegle, an early pioneer of environmentalism who is currently focusing on the fashion industry, called out our

project to her over 16.3K follower with “UBER DISRUPTORS!!” and included links to our project (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Lucy Siegle names Connect project in UBER DISRUPTORS! post

The Connect project launched in March of 2015 and 51.6K tweets happened in the one month, followed by 35.9K in April (the month of the Fashion Revolution campaign), see Figure 4. In all, we had 123.2K tweet impressions in total. We also had major influencers such as Sass Brown, Orsola de Castro, Lily Cole and ASOS Green Room tweet positive reviews about our project and the student’s presentations.

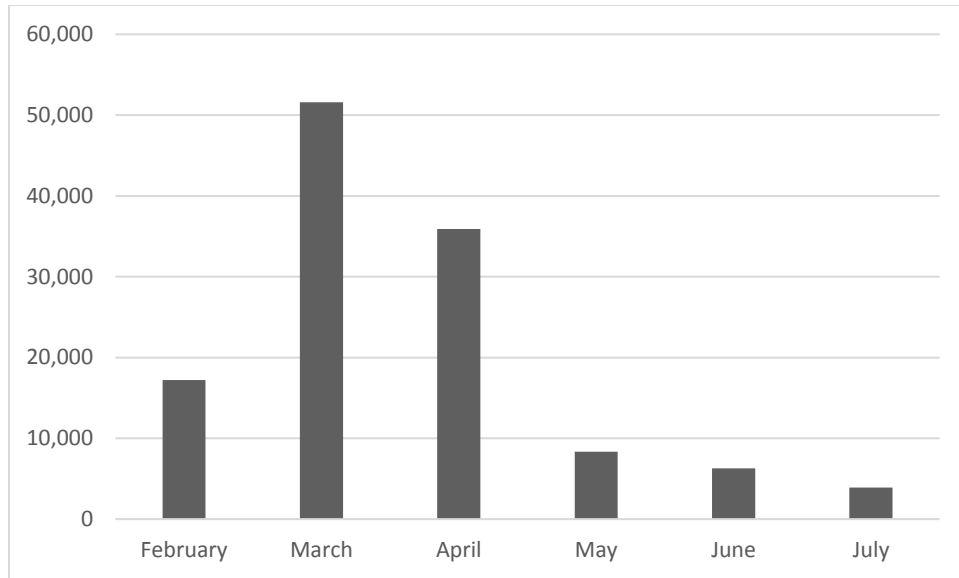


Figure 4: Twitter Impressions. Twitter statistics for Connect during project activity phase.

Recommendations

The structure of this project allowed the students to accumulate a wide range of knowledge about sustainable fashion innovations in a wide range of areas. The students took opportunities to interact with their peers and engage them in the learning process. The combination of peer-to-peer learning, connecting with industry professionals and the formation of a real-world and online community created a network of learning resources which was used in real-time and has created an archive for future use.

To further engage students, using technology to its fullest potential is highly recommended. Since the completion of this project, social media sites have embraced the use of live video streaming to enhance their use, such as Facebook Live©. This feature would allow the person, for example, visit a factory to live stream what they are seeing and hearing while also allowing the viewers to ask questions and interact. The video would then remain posted for others to watch at their convenience.

It would also be good practice to encourage the students at each institution to interact more. A possibility would be to pose a question and give students a time limit to post their responses, perhaps in video format. This would allow deeper learning to take place, actively engage the followers and increase their involvement in the project.

Limitations

The small size of the participants in this study is the major limitation and further studies should be conducted to assess the impact of short term study abroad.

Conclusions and Future Study

The main objective of this project was to help students better understand the scope and scale of the problems and challenges that face the apparel industry in creating a global sustainable future. The modality of this project was considered very successful as determined by the reach of the online accounts. The responses from the students who participated in this global project show that there was a positive long term impact. Future short term study abroad experiences and a virtual experience between campuses is currently under discussion.

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