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Design educators reflecting on the call for the decolonisation of education

Role with the Students: A Social Constructivist Decolonising Teaching Strategy for Visual Literacy in Fashion Design Programs

AJC (Lee) de Wet

University of Johannesburg

Abstract

Visual literacy is a core competency required to express and reinforce cultural identity through clothing in the realm of fashion, and is therefore important within the context of decolonising fashion design education. Traditionally, curricula focused on the Euro-centric concept of fashion and accordingly, teaching methods and design products expected from students were mostly applicable within this context. Nevertheless, in South Africa, due to political and educational reform, the demographics of students in fashion design programs in Universities have changed radically over the past two decades to include diverse African and South African cultures. This changed situation increasingly challenged the relevance of conventional teacher-centered visual literacy teaching applied in the past. In this regard, the author of this paper supports the global argument that it is imperative for educators in their fields to transform teaching approaches fundamentally in order to be more inclusive and relevant to a diverse student body, as a critical aspect of decolonising of knowledge in tertiary education. This paper represents a starting point of a process to address the decolonisation of fashion design teaching approaches, by proposing a conceptual framework for a teaching strategy that aims to facilitate principles that enable students to construct visual literacy competencies that are rooted in the cultural and personal perspective of an individual. Viewing the proposed teaching strategy through the lens of social constructivism acknowledges the context of students, which in this paper relates to respect for the roots for others. To inform the teaching strategy, the discussion reviews pertinent literature that explores the dimensions of a decolonising visual literacy teaching strategy. Guiding principles from a social constructivist teaching perspective, relates to the learning environment that includes the roles of the instructor and students, and assessment of contextual authenticity of students' visual literacy in their design work. Implementing the proposed teaching strategy is an attempt to work towards an enhanced student-designer with visual literacy knowledge and skills that are rooted in the personal and cultural perspectives of the individual.

Keywords:

Fashion design education, decolonisation, conceptual framework, visual literacy teaching strategy, social constructivist teaching approach.

Introduction

Clothing in the realm of fashion is a powerful means to express and reinforce cultural identity (Rovine 2009), and is therefore important within the context of decolonising fashion design educational approaches. In this regard, visual literacy abilities to use, understand and create visual information to express personal and cultural perspectives are core competencies to consider in student training programs. Traditionally, fashion design education in South Africa at undergraduate level focused on the Euro-centric concept of fashion that places emphasis on knowledge and skills development according to the European haute couture model (Lavelle 2013; Smal & Lavelle 2011). Accordingly, teacher-centered educational approaches and methods, and design products expected from students were mostly applicable within this context. Nevertheless, in South Africa, due to political and educational reform, the demographics of students in fashion design programs in Universities have changed radically over the past two decades to include diverse African and South African cultures (De Wet 2017). This changed situation increasingly challenged the relevance of conventional teacher-centered visual literacy teaching practices applied in the past (De Wet 2016), to adopt an approach that accommodates a diverse body of students. Teaching visual literacy within varied cultural contexts, though, presents several unique challenges for facilitators in the field to address that concern the roles of students and the instructor in the learning environment and the assessment of contextual visual literacy knowledge and skills in students' design work. Although there is an indication of awareness regarding the need to change educational fashion design approaches within a South African context, there is extremely limited available literature in this regard (De Wet 2017; De Wet 2016). To this end, the author of this paper supports the global argument to transform teaching approaches, fundamentally, in order to become more inclusive and relevant to a diverse student body, as a critical aspect of decolonising of knowledge in University tertiary education (Keet 2014; Sefa Dei 2016; Todorova 2016).

As a starting point to address decolonising fashion design teaching approaches, this paper proposes a conceptual framework for a teaching strategy that aims to facilitate principles that can enable students to construct visual literacy competencies that are rooted in the cultural and personal context of an individual. In this regard, the strategy employs a social constructivist approach that encourages, respects and rewards the uniqueness (roots) of a student. The underlying assumption in this paper is therefore that all students comprise a valuable set of existing visual knowledge that can develop and enhance their design abilities. Acknowledging the contextual authenticity of students relates to respect for others and the context of the student, which in the context of this paper represents a decolonising approach. Implementing the proposed teaching strategy is an attempt to work towards an enhanced student-designer with visual literacy knowledge and skills that are rooted in the personal and cultural perspectives of the individual.

To inform the proposed visual literacy teaching strategy, the discussion in this paper reviews pertinent literature. By means of introduction, the concept of a decolonising visual literacy teaching strategy initiates the discussion. Following this, social constructivism is presented as the underlying approach of the strategy. Thereafter, the dimensions of the approach are deliberated in terms of, the learning environment, roles of the student and the instructor, and assessment of the contextual authenticity of students' visual literacy. The conceptual framework diagram presented as figure 1 then consolidates the information as a means to illustrate how the aspects within the teaching strategy relate. Lastly, final thoughts and recommendations are made that may be valuable to others in the field of fashion design education with similar challenges to address decolonisation in the learning environment.

The following section explains the proposed teaching strategy that can be implemented in a tertiary education context, as a starting point to address the decolonisation of visual literacy teaching in the field of fashion design.

Decolonising visual literacy teaching strategy

The full extent of the concept of decolonisation is extremely complex and not within the scope of this discussion. In an attempt to address and contribute to the decolonisation of fashion design education at tertiary level, the proposed teaching strategy implements the belief that a student best constructs visual literacy knowledge, based on personal and cultural contexts, in a process facilitated by an instructor (Wright & Grenier 2003). Visual literacy for fashion design students includes a set of competencies to develop in order to understand, interpret and produce visual messages through design work that originates from the context of an individual. In this regard, Bleed (2005) confirms that students who are visually literate: 1) understand basic design principles, techniques and media, 2) are aware of emotional, psychological and cognitive influences in perceptions of visual information, 3) understand the representational and symbolic power of visuals, 4) are informed critics and viewers of visuals, 5) are knowledgeable producers of visuals, and 6) are innovative visual thinkers and problem solvers. The teaching strategy aims to develop these abilities through a decolonising approach that appreciates the aesthetics of diverse cultures that contain deep meanings, representing group and personal identities of a student. Embedding existing visual-related knowledge of students as an integral aspect of the strategy can foster a collaborative learning situation that according to Pear, Darlene and Crone-Todd (2002) enriches the instructor and student, and so could bridge possible cultural and social differences between the two parties. The question is what would be an appropriate teaching approach to facilitate a decolonising process that can enable students to become active creators of their own visual knowledge and skills?

Social constructivist teaching approach

Social constructivism as a decolonising paradigm for the proposed strategy not only acknowledges the cultural uniqueness and complexity of a person, but also encourages students to form their own version of knowledge actively, by building on personal background and embedded culture and worldview (Demir, Bay, Bagceci, Vural & Avci 2015). Demir et al. (2015) further explain that the student as a member of a particular culture inherits historical symbol systems, in this case, visual information that encompass specific meaning upon which to build visual competencies. In this paper, 'social' constructivism also points towards the interaction with peers in order to learn about and from the constructed knowledge of others (Boud, Cohen & Sampson 2014). Sharing individual perspectives can result in students creating understanding collaboratively that may not be possible alone (Stevens & Van Meter 2000). This teaching approach therefore encourages students in deriving their own solutions to problems, interactively with others in the learning environment, rather than accepting information as a passive participant (Demir et al. 2015; Pear et al. 2002). Therefore, in this paper, decolonisation, applied from the perspective of self-ownership relates to a social constructivist approach. Nevertheless, in order to enable students to become social constructivist learners, it is important to consider the broader learning environment.

Learning environment

The complete learning environment for students that optimises the ability to learn and create knowledge include several aspects to consider in a teaching strategy (Demir, et al. 2015; Stevens & Van Meter 2000). Bates (2015, p. 445) states that these matters generally relate to physical locations, contexts and the ethos in which students learn. This paper focuses on the ethos aspect, which in this case, is based on respect for cultural diversity and

the uniqueness of an individual. The ethos of respect for diversity, in this discussion, points towards two specific dimensions. The first is collaboration, to encourage tolerance for the differences of others, amongst students and between students and the instructor. Furthermore, meaningful interactions between the parties can create a learning environment where the instructor and students learn from each other (Wright et al. 2003). According to Vygotsky's (cited in Stevens & Van Meter 2011) socio-cultural teaching perspective, a student first build knowledge in a social context, then internalise and appropriate the information individually. The second dimension relates to a democratic environment, which here, implies that students are regularly involved in interactive problem solving discussions and shared decision-making, where individual opinions are valued and so increasing the possibility for self-determination within a community of equals (Demir, et al. 2015). The ethos of the learning environment manifests in three scenarios of the teaching strategy, namely, the role of the instructor, role of the students, and assessment methods of contextual authenticity of students' visual literacy.

Role of the instructor in the learning environment that optimises students' ability to construct visual literacy knowledge

The primary role of the instructor in a social constructivist setting is that of a facilitator of the learning process who guides and supports students in constructing their own knowledge, as opposed to a process where students merely memorise and reproduce provided information (Demir, et al. 2015; Wright & Grenier 2003). Wright and Grenier (2003, p. 255) describe the instructor/student interaction in this context as "guided participation" that helps to bridge the gap for students between familiar existing knowledge and skills and those required to solve new problems and learn new information. Within the role as a facilitator in a decolonised classroom, in this paper, the interaction builds on respect, equality, and choice of options and opinions in order to accommodate diversity. From a teaching perspective, students are provided with fundamental visual literacy principles that then need to be applied through experimentation and solving design problems relating to actual end-users. Exploration and engaging with real-world design issues are means to help students shift from passive to active learners and participants in order for them to make sense of the learning experience (Demir, et al. 2015). Throughout this process, the instructor guides the learning activities through discussion and inquiry to understand students' preexisting conceptions, and support problem solving and reflection on the process and design work. According to Wright and Grenier (2003, p. 263), knowledge constructed in this way can encourage teaching and learning that are "dynamic, interactive, and expanding rather than static and prescribed". Since decolonising appropriate fashion design skills can be acquired during a collaborative process, students play a major role in the visual literacy teaching process.

Role of the students in the process of constructing visual literacy skills

While the instructor facilitates the process of learning, students have the primary responsibility of building on personal perspectives and pre-existing visual knowledge through a process of sense-making (Demir, et al. 2015). Guided by Klein, Moon and Hoffman (2006), sense making in the context of this paper relates to the ability or attempt by which students draw on their existing visual knowledge to give meaning to new instructional information, by making cognitive connections that lead to the recreation of a new enhanced network of visual literacy. In the process of seeking meaning to form new knowledge, students need to purposefully reflect upon and evaluate provided instructional principles, concepts and facts from their own perspectives and interpret the information in a way that seems appropriate to the individual (Demir, et al. 2015; Stevens & Van Meter 2011). The argument can therefore be made that through the sense-making process, the authenticity of students' visual literacy can be enriched, as it now consists of personal perspectives integrated with new information that results in reformulated principles. A challenging question to address in view of the

above, is how to assess the contextual authenticity of a students' visual literacy in a responsibly way that aligns to a social constructivist approach?

Assessment of contextual authenticity of students' visual literacy

In order to reflect the democratic and collaborative ethos of the learning environment, an alternative approach to assessment is required to shift the power and control, often associated with conventional evaluation, from the instructor, to a shared responsibility between instructor and student (Demir, et al. 2015; Pear et al. 2002; Stevens & Van Meter 2011). In terms of decolonisation, the indicators of respect and the roots of the students relate strongly to the shift of control in assessment, by considering a person's background and way of making sense to construct knowledge. This discussion focuses on the assessment of students' process and progress made to construct visual knowledge that encapsulates the contextual authenticity of an individual, not the achieved level of learning in the end design product. Possible questions to ask in this regard relate to whether a student was able to reflect and derive an opinion, did they actually make sense and construct the knowledge, was the student able to cope with peer criticism, could the student work with what was facilitated, how did they make it their own? In this regard, students' ability to reflect upon and respond to these issues are the indicators of achievement. However, to enable a collaborative evaluation process that represents a social constructivist intention, implementing the appropriate assessment principles are essential.

Holt and Willard-Holt (2000) emphasise the importance of dynamic assessment principles that involves assessing progress continuously throughout the learning process to assist students in constructing their own knowledge. The author of this paper further applies the view that assessment involves an interactive process of dialogue between lecturer and students in order to mediate an individual's level of understanding and achievement on any task, rather than it being an activity carried out by the instructor only (Sardareh & Mohd Saad 2012; Stevens & Van Meter 2011). The role of the instructor in assessment is essentially to share expert feedback as triggers for further development (Holt et al. 2000), as well as identify and share students' insights with peers. Pear et al. (2002) emphasise the importance for an instructor to reject the absolutes that are common in conventional assessment and to recognise that often there is no single correct result to demonstrate constructed knowledge. Since assessment is part of the learning process, students play a key role of taking responsibility to monitor their level of progress to make sense and reformulate individual visual literacy principles. As recommended by Sardareh and Mohd Saad (2012), learning and assessment are here viewed as inextricably integrated, rather than separate processes. This implies that students need to apply the same active engagement and participation by constantly assessing their own understanding of the learning process and knowledge created when interacting with others (for example peers). Nonetheless, a collaborative approach that is essentially student-centered requires specific supportive assessment methods.

To reflect a social constructivist view of assessment, self and peer assessment methods are means for students to formulate and test ideas, draw conclusions and implications and examine knowledge collaboratively and individually in a student-oriented environment. These assessment methods are also tools for the instructor to take into account at the stages of evaluation, in order to acquire deeper insight from the students' perspectives and so increase the relevance of feedback (Chang, Tseng & Lou 2012). Peer assessment as a process whereby students rate each other's design work, based on project criteria, can be a way to enhance students' understanding of the learning process by "learning with and from each other" (Boud et al. 2014, p. 4), and in doing so, encourages a sharing culture between students. Self-assessment of knowledge, on the other hand, occurs when a student self, evaluates the level of his/her current knowledge against parameters (Sitzmann, Ely, Brown & Bauer 2010; USW Australia 2014). Rust, O'Donovan and Price (2010) emphasize though, that for students to understand and participate actively in the assessment process, explicit knowledge of project outcomes, criteria and the standard to apply is critical. Implementing

peer and self-assessment as a strategy for students to take ownership of their own learning process, reflects a social constructivist-learning environment, which represents the decolonising intention of the visual literacy teaching strategy.

Figure 1 below demonstrates the above-discussed decolonising teaching strategy that facilitates principles to enable students to construct visual literacy competencies that are rooted in the cultural and personal context of an individual.

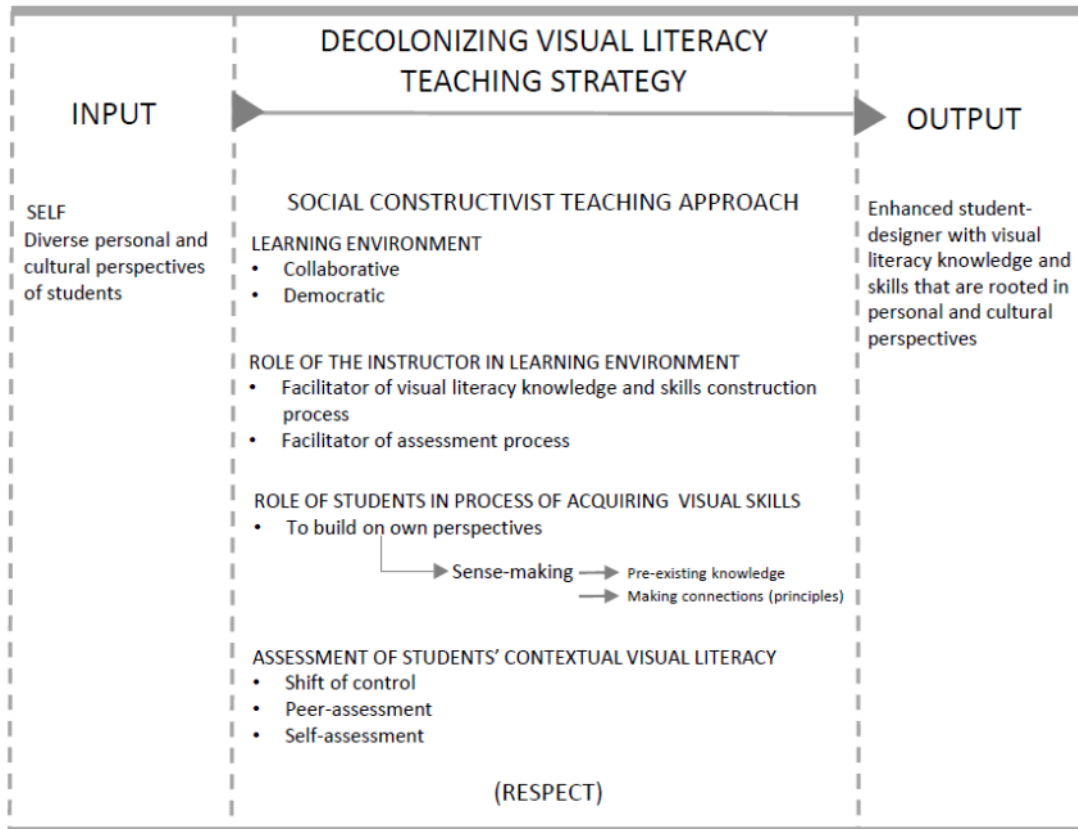


Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of the proposed decolonising visual literacy teaching strategy (self-constructed)

The proposed strategy presents opportunities and challenges for educators in the field to consider in the process of decolonisation. Clearly, a strength is the social constructivist teaching approach that places students in control of their own learning process and allows alternative teaching and assessment methods, to accommodate a diverse body of students. Possible challenges are that this approach requires agile instructors who are able to constantly think on their feet, are able to operate organically, and most importantly, have empathy to accommodate diverse ideas of students. An opportunity for students are that the learning experience and assessment of design work concerns their process and progress, rather than focusing on the end-product only. For the facilitator, the shifting of traditional teacher/student roles presents an opportunity to learn about, with and from the students, and he/she can therefore assist students more effectively to construct own knowledge from personal perspectives. The changing roles, though, can pose a threat to instructors concerning the loss of control in the classroom.

Conclusion

As demonstrated in this paper, the need to decolonise knowledge in South African University structures, increasingly challenges the relevance of conventional teacher-centered instructional approaches in fashion design education. This discussion addressed this issue, by proposing a conceptual framework for a teaching strategy to facilitate students with principles to construct visual literacy knowledge and skills from personal and cultural perspectives. Viewing the proposed strategy through the lens of social constructivism, the crux of this paper suggests that there needs to be a shift of control in the learning environment, particularly, in the assessment process of students' contextual visual literacy, from teacher-centered, to shared responsibilities between instructor and a student. The changing roles, raising concerns of who is actually in control in the classroom, is a matter that needs to be addressed.

This paper presents a viable starting point for further investigation and development, and an opportunity for fashion design educators to pursue and adapt to their situations. In terms of decolonisation, it is important to emphasise that teaching and learning methods that facilitate this transition, need to be built into the entire curriculum and adopted by all educators within a department on an ongoing basis. If this is not considered as a strategic objective, isolated pockets of application could cause uncertainty and even confusion. One can therefore argue that decolonising teaching principles, such as these presented in this paper, have to become the core of curricula of a department, not simply be an extension or component of existing curricula. Furthermore, implementing the proposed teaching strategy addresses University requirements regarding how to transition into decolonisation of knowledge and, more specifically in this case, is a starting point of the process of transformation towards decolonising the way in which fashion design is taught. In conclusion, the control of conventional teacher-orientated teaching approaches needs to be reconsidered in favour of elevating the 'role' of students so that they have a voice in their own learning experience and knowledge construction.

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