



## Centering social justice pedagogy in fashion education

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### Introduction

This paper argues for fashion education that considers diversity, inclusion, and equity integral in the curriculum. Current fashion education tends to be neoliberal in its approach and favors “colorblindness” over the reality of injustices within society and the industry. Besides the mainstream, heteronormative, White majority, diverse groups have contributed significantly to the fashion industry. Despite this, teaching and learning in the fashion discipline rarely delve into these groups’ historical, sociocultural, and political contexts or highlights their contributions in U.S. educational institutions. The current neoliberal approach to teaching fashion, which prepares students for an industry that prioritizes profit over people as its business model, does not create enough space to include diverse experiences and perspectives. In the U.S., the discipline of fashion, apparel, and textiles evolved out of home economics with a focus on textile production. As a result, most colleges that teach fashion in the U.S. are not located in major metropolitan centers but agricultural areas. This means that the average student’s exposure to diverse populations is often limited, which may necessitate launching courses on diversity and fashion in these contexts even more.

### Literature Review

**Pedagogical and methodological considerations.** We posit that the experiences of both cohorts must be highlighted in the classroom. We consider social justice pedagogy and action research the best approach to tackle diversity issues in the classroom. The use of these approaches guarantees a democratic and effective classroom practice.

**Social justice pedagogy.** Social justice pedagogy reflects a political investment in the hopes that instructors and students will use their knowledge to alter current inequalities in society (Ayers et al., 2009). It also requires that instructors serve as agents of social change and employ teaching methods to lead to social justice actions. A social justice classroom should use a curriculum and classroom practice grounded in students' lives (Ayers et al., 2009). A significant portion of teaching focuses on how topics introduced in the classroom might move us closer to social justice (Mora, 2016). Using social justice pedagogy in a fashion course engages students politically and socially through the medium of fashion.

**Action research.** Action research is an appropriate method to investigate how interlocking systems of power silence the perspectives and voices of the most marginalized (Heron & Reason, 2001). The primary purpose of action research is to generate knowledge while making change. Action research is a reflexive practice for the instructor. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the “actor” in improving or refining actions or teaching processes (Sagor, 2005). Engaging in action research ensures that the course is tailored to both student and instructor needs and the needs of the discipline and fashion industry.

### **Implementation**

The course, Diversity in Fashion, has three learning objectives: 1) Students will distinguish the relationships between diversity, inequality, and social, economic, and political power globally. 2) Students will identify individuals’ contributions from diverse and underrepresented groups to local, national, and global communities. 3) Students will critically examine their attitudes about diverse or underrepresented groups and develop a practice of considering diverse groups’ perspectives to inform their decision-making.

Though the Diversity in Fashion course has not launched yet, it was informed by social justice pedagogy and action research. By including social justice pedagogy and action research in two existing courses, student interest and engagement increased around social justice issues. In 2020, several undergraduate students expressed interest and assisted with planning a Diversity in Fashion programming series for the department. Despite the difficulties of the COVID-19 pandemic, students remained interested, and over 50 participants signed up for diversity in fashion workshops during the 2020-2021 academic year.

### **Conclusion**

The benefits of diversity and inclusion can be significant to fashion students, who are increasingly expected to keep cultural appropriation at bay in runway shows, clothing designs, and editorial photo shoots. Recognizing and valuing differences in gender, appearance, sexual orientation, ability, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and age, to mention a few, are starting points for instructors to compel their students to think about diversity and representation critically to shape a diverse and inclusive future. Fashion educators are responsible for educating themselves on the different angles of an issue to successfully navigate complex and often controversial discussions on diversity with their students. Once these conversations are modeled in the classroom, students will avail themselves of the skills needed to continue these conversations with their families, friends, strangers, and colleagues at their workplace. The

course will help students think through the potential situation by introducing them to diverse forms of fashion expression for analysis. After the course, we hope that students will make educated decisions, seek global solutions, and refrain from signing off on offensive products or marketing as fashion professionals.

### References

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