Introducing Participatory Action Research to Vocational Fashion Education: Theories, Practices, and Implications

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Abstract

This paper revisits the philosophical trajectory and practices in fashion education. It examines to what extent participatory action research (PAR) can contribute to the advancement of vocational education by emancipating practice-based skills and knowledge co-created by students, faculty members, and market practitioners. While the fashion market is dynamically reshaping today's fashion pedagogy by imparting new skills and abilities to students, this investigation aims to highlight the limitations of the Bauhaus tradition as a top down approach aimed at continually producing work-ready graduates for junior positions. Drawing upon the findings yielded by our experimental project *fashionthnography.com*, the analyses presented in this paper elucidate to what extent PAR can meet the intended goal of equipping the students with a higher level of working capabilities and creativity, as well as greater cultural appreciation. This study contributes to the expansion of vocational education and training, as its findings indicate that we need to embrace practice-based knowledge co-creation for long-term success in both industry and academia.

Keywords:
Participatory action research, fashion education, co-created learning experiences, qualitative research, design education

Introduction

Traditional vocational education and training (VET) is dominated by a supply driven apprenticeship philosophy focusing on skill development and assessment. This narrow scope, however, has rendered it less responsive to the changing needs of both enterprises and individuals (Seezink, Poell, and Kirschner 2009; Tukundane and Zeelen 2015). Nearly eight decades ago, education philosopher, John Dewey, highlighted the importance of democratising and liberating education and encouraged the active involvement of stakeholders in curriculum planning and experiential learning (Dewey 1944). According to Dewey, students should actively interact with the environment in order to adapt and learn. Consequently, researchers who follow Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism have called for inclusion of a participatory component in competence-based vocational education to encourage reflexive curriculum development practices (Seezink, Poell, and Kirschner 2009; Hillier and Morris 2010; De Wet 2017; Morgan, Yazdanparast, and Rawski 2018; Alexander and Hjortsø 2019; Lang and Liu 2019). Even though this stream of research has prompted VET to embrace a demand-driven, marketised formulation, such market-inclined pedagogical reform may challenge the identity and roles of VET educators, as they are increasingly required to balance stakeholders' expectations with educational goals (Locke and Maton 2019). To elucidate whether and how participatory action research (PAR) can contribute to the advancement of vocational education, in the present study, the philosophical trajectory and practices in fashion education are revisited, as this field is still dominated by research on vocational curricula focusing on practical development of fashionable clothing (De Wet 2017). The ultimate aim of this analysis is delineating how emancipatory forces promoted by PAR would advance vocational education by co-creating new skills and knowledge for future success.

The 21st century is widely described as the era of design that embraces individuality and diversity (Lee 2006). While many fields have been adversely affected by the increasingly uncertain global economy, the fashion industry has been undergoing rapid and mostly positive changes at an unprecedented rate and has reshaped itself by capitalising on new business models and technologies to satisfy the increasingly fastidious customers (Cholachatpinyo et al. 2002). This change in practice has, in turn, prompted fashion institutes to revise their curricula, making them more relevant. Indeed, today's graduates must possess the job skills and knowledge relevant to this highly dynamic global environment (Hodges and Karpova 2009; Kozar and Connell 2013; Romeo and Lee 2013). In response to the industry's accelerated pace and the highly unpredictable professional landscape, Farem (2012, 278) argued that fashion academia should 'focus on developing students' conceptual skills and design processes within curricula that provide greater interdisciplinary opportunities.' In a similar vein, in 2015, *Business of Fashion* (BoF Education) surveyed 4,032 fashion students and found that many of the prestigious fashion schools favour a highly-technical curriculum focusing on garment construction and pattern-making. However, such strong emphasis on creativity has resulted in lack of business-related training that would prepare students for the commercial world. In recognition of this gap, some fashion institutes have already begun to search for the equilibrium between teaching business skills and nurturing creativity (Banks et al. 2019a, 2019b). For example, Parsons School of Design has redesigned its undergraduate curriculum to better align creative teaching with business education. Polimoda reassesses its teaching every few months to ensure that its programme is keeping pace with the changing fashion landscape. Other institutions offer internship opportunities that allow students to experience and learn business skills within a workplace context. It is evident that the changing job market demands a multidisciplinary approach to education, as this is the only means by which students can be equipped not only with the skills needed to produce quality designs with integrity, but can also

acquire short-term operational efficiency and adaptability, preparing them for different roles and departments in the fashion world. This ambitious objective, however, leaves little room for design students to reflect on the rationales behind fashion practices. To further explore the integration of education, research, and practice in vocational fashion education (VFE), in this work, the participatory action research approach is adopted to identify possible mechanisms to synthesise various components of fashion pedagogy and research strategies. To highlight the limitations of the Bauhaus tradition, which follows a top-down approach (whereby knowledge is imparted to students by lecturers/practitioners), an illustrative case study of an experimental project, namely *fashionthnography.com*, is presented to examine to what extent PAR can contribute to the emancipation of practice-based skills and knowledge co-created by students, faculty members, and market practitioners. The ultimate goal of this investigation is to establish *how participatory action research contributes to the vocational fashion education (VFE).* Hence, the following research questions are addressed:

1) What are the possible pedagogical means to facilitate knowledge cocreation in vocational fashion education?
2) How does PAR change the perceived roles and engagement in teaching and learning among students, faculty members, and market practitioners?
3) How do participants evaluate the practical, intellectual, and socio-cultural value brought by the process of PAR in fashion studies?
4) What are the challenges and implications of applying PAR in vocational fashion education?

Following Dewey's philosophy and emphasis on experiential learning, the present study is guided by the premise that PAR not only addresses both intellectual and market circumstances, but also advances VET and equips students with higher-level working capabilities and creativity required to address socio-cultural concerns.

The historical development of vocational fashion education: from *vorkurs* style to democratised education

The philosophical backbone of fashion pedagogy – The Bauhaus

In unveiling the pedagogical paradigm behind fashion design education, the Bauhaus (1919 − 1933) strove to promote 'the integration of artistic and practical pedagogy. Artists and designers are trained as creative individuals to equip with both aesthetics sense and applied skills for the professional working world' (Wax 2010, 23).

The philosophy behind Bauhaus pedagogy encourages students to learn various art and design principles and fundamentals through intensive practice and training before choosing a design specialisation of interest. Hence, the faculty members, most of whom are practicing artists and designers, are responsible for imparting their design expertise and guiding the students' design choices, aligning them with the contemporary practices (Wax 2010). The contemporary form of Bauhaus pedagogy, as embedded in a four-year degree program, usually incorporates a vocational or trade orientation. During the first year of study, students gain fundamental skills and learn the core principles of general art and design. The subsequent three years are designated for dedicated design studies. Thus, the curriculum places emphasis on developing design skills associated with specific practices (e.g., garment construction, sewing techniques, form development, or pattern making). The advanced level of teaching during the final year of study aims to encourage students to refine the design process as well as their aesthetic sense by working on theory-based and skill-based assignments (e.g., capstone project that involves developing a graduate portfolio and a fashion collection, both of which showcase

students' abilities before launching them into the industry). With a strong focus on studio/workshop-based fashion design modules, this highly technical curriculum requires the addition of liberal studies and discipline-related subjects (e.g., digital design, textiles, business, knitwear, and other courses) to support students' individual goals and provide them with a well-rounded education. The ultimate goal of the contemporary Bauhaus training is to prepare work-ready graduates who can secure junior positions, such as the assistant designer.

The paradigm shift in fashion pedagogy – the multidisciplinary studies

Given that we are currently living in an ultra-connected, fast-moving technological age, Wax (2010) called for the re-evaluation of the role played by the future fashion designers, and questioned to what extent the Bauhaus tradition can truly prepare our students for the modern fashion industry that demands a new set of skills and a more diverse knowledge. The rapidly changing fashion landscape mandates that design education shift from an emphasis on equipping students with fundamentals skills in specific design areas towards other core qualities inherent in the design process. These include (1) ability to collaborate and communicate, (2) capacity for empathy, (3) ability to articulate design insights to those in other fields, and (4) capability to act strategically (Wolff and Rhee 2009). Professor Frances Corner, Head of London College of Fashion, acknowledged that, to remain relevant, fashion institutes should equip students with many new forms of analytical skills, along with emotional intelligence, creativity, innovation, and capacity to appreciate and adapt to the changing consumer purchasing attitudes (Business of Fashion 2015). Such an interaction-based learning approach echoed Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory developed in the mid-1980 s, postulating that learning involves the acquisition of abstract concepts that can be applied flexibility in a range of situations. For Kolb, the impetus for the development of new concepts is provided by new experiences.

Similarly, Palomo-Lovinski and Faerm (2009) opined that the higher-education curricula of fashion studies should focus on creative student development by offering course modules that enable design cross-fertilisation in the areas such as science, education, or business. In the last few decades, new learning theories and approaches, such as social learning (Dewey 1944; Flinders and Thornton 2013; Williams 2017), experiential learning (Kolb 1984), and situated learning (Lave and Wenger 1991) were introduced to the field. More than eight decades ago, Dewey (1938) already argued that progressive education should include socially engaging learning experiences. However, crossing the boundary of traditional vocational education is a significant paradigm shift that necessitates greater emphasis on generic skills required for creating innovative products our society demands. Upon entering the workplace, design students are now expected to address a wider scope of interests, including those of different sub-cultures, media, and technology, while also being mindful of the current state of the economy and available resources, as well as an increasing societal environmental awareness. For instance, London College of Fashion and Central Saint Martin embeds its strong research tradition in humanities, cultural awareness, and historical contexts, whereby fashion is considered as a cultural phenomenon in a social and historical context (Skjold 2008).

In an attempt to shift from a vocational, trade-oriented curriculum, many American design schools are starting to offer multi- and inter-disciplinary, or even transdisciplinary, studies (e.g., Parsons The New School for Design). According to Palomo-Lovinski and Faerm (2009), early involvement in research and development engages students in analytical thinking, allowing them to learn about specialized areas, such as sustainability, social innovation and design, and technological-aid design, while enriching students' learning experience and improving graduates' work performance (Romeo and Lee 2013). These pedagogical practices include the emphasis on creativity training (Banks et al. 2019a, 2019b), adoption of multi- or

cross-disciplinary approach in design education (Newsletter and McCracken 2000; Morris, Childs, and Hamilton 2007), use of advanced computer technology in fashion and design training (Romeo and Lee 2013; Elfeky and Elbyaly 2018), overseas experiential learning programmes (Ha-Brookshire 2008), on-job supervision through internship programs (Stanforth 2009), and close monitoring of the differences between academic content and the design industry requirements (Chida and Brown 2011; Kozar and Connell 2013).

Border-crossing − reflection and the limitations of fashion pedagogy

By departing from an exclusively skill-oriented curriculum (e.g., the Bauhaus tradition) to embrace a multidisciplinary model of teaching, Farem (2012) argued that the paradigm shift in fashion pedagogy gives precedence to 'thinking' over 'making.' The new pedagogical trajectory implies that educational success is achieved by designing and implementing an effective curriculum that includes a well-organised internship program to close the gap between graduates' skillset and industry expectations. However, some scholars criticised this approach, claiming that it was unlikely to prepare students for addressing the problems they would encounter in the future because it simply replicated existing industry practices in the curriculum without an intention to encourage new knowledge and skill development that meets industry's upcoming challenges (Kinsler 2010).

In reviewing the existing university education system, Kinsler (2010) also criticized the pedagogy adopted, describing it as 'academic commodity production,' in which 'methodological individualism' is praised. The pedagogical measures discussed above have enshrouded the nature of fashion education of our time as a one-way knowledge transference process (whereby teachers/professionals impart information to students as passive recipients). As a result of this top-down approach, students are expected to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to cope with the requirements pre-set by the industry and academia. Moreover, as graduates enter the fashion industry as passive recipients of instruction, rather than autonomous learners, they are unable to experience the emancipatory power of creativity and originality, as their capacity for generating creative and sustainable ideas or business models that can be adopted in tackling the future challenges in the fashion industry has never been fully developed. In sum, Kinsler's assertion implies that academia and market practitioners may require an emancipatory consciousness towards the critical assessment of the extent to which the social milieu impedes the fostering of the good. It also suggests that top-down teaching with a focus on the outcomes, rather than the learning process, should be abolished (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009).

Thus, this work focuses on participatory action research that recognizes teachers, students, and professionals from the fashion industry as knowledge co-creators who jointly partake in the learning process with the ultimate goal of building student self-efficacy essential for long-term success. The analyses presented in the sections that follow focus on the research findings and experiences stemming from the fashionthnography.com project, since it serves as a platform to reflect on today's fashion education. It also allows exploration of the inexhaustible potential of the close collaboration among academics, students, and fashion industry professionals.

Methodology: participatory action research

Participatory action research (PAR) is a democratic process aimed at the development of practical skills and knowledge in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes (Reason and Bradbury 2001). This approach seeks to bring together action and reflection, as well as theory and practice, as collaboration with others is encouraged in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to humanity, leading to the flourishing of individuals and their

communities (Reason and Bradbury 2001). Kemmis (2006) argued that action research can be broadly classified as either technical, practical, or emancipatory. Yet, regardless of its type, the entire project should follow an emancipatory trajectory that focuses on the improvement of outcomes and greater self-understanding among research practitioners. Each participant's background (in particular, that of the students) and his/her experiences are honoured and respected. Students are encouraged to critique and respond to the resources they are given. Drawing on 'indigenous knowledge' the students possess, PAR requires those who have the power to claim authority (e.g., academic scholars, market practitioners, and researchers) to reflect on their positions and knowledge dissemination practices during the research process (Greenwood and Levin 2003; Kemmis and McTaggart 2008). In that sense, PAR is reflexive, as it motivates all participants to critically examine their respective roles in the research process.

In vocational fashion education, it is crucial to recognise the collective action and interactions among educators, industry practitioners, and students. PAR provides useful methodological tools that can guide researchers and educators when reviewing existing challenges and opportunities by engaging different stakeholders in a deliberate learning and collaboration process. In the following section, the PAR project *fashionthnography.com* is briefly described, before outlining the challenges encountered during the research process in exploring the potential of rethinking fashion pedagogy of our era.

An illustrative case study on *fashionthnography.com*

fashionthnography.com is an experimental project grounded in the PAR methodology. Its aim is to document and explore the collaborative research process undertaken by a group of fashion students, academics, and industry professionals, who share the same passion for fashion and regard each other as sources of inspiration and creativity aimed at enhancing the fashion education and training. The project was motivated by the fact that many local fashion employers have been disappointed with the work performance and attitudes of fashion graduates in recent years. This has led some of the market practitioners to question to what extent the theory-focused curriculum can truly equip the students with the knowledge and skills necessary for meeting the current job requirements and industry expectations. In response, some members of academia have attempted to resolve the conflicts And misunderstandings between students and practitioners, theories and practices, and ultimately teaching and research. As a result of this synergy, what commenced as a website project has evolved into an experimental research project aimed at finding practical solutions to fashion learning and training issues by drawing upon the participants' experiences in resolving the problems facing the fashion industry (Miskovic and Hoop 2006; McHugh and Kowalski 2011).

Following the PAR paradigm, in this work, naturalistic, qualitative research techniques are adopted not only for data collection and analysis (Reason and Torbert 2001) but also to ensure that the research process is dynamic, as its ultimate aim is search for alternate means of delivering fashion education and training. The data examined in the sections that follow pertains to two mini projects in which the research participants engaged between 2013 and 2014, namely: (1) a street style photo-taking study documenting how fashion evolves in different cities (e.g., SAT project), and (2) interviews with fashion elites and experts from the disciplines of design, branding, retail, and management. A purposive sampling method was adopted to engage 20 fashion students from local universities and colleges in Hong Kong who volunteered to partake in the research project (see Table 1). The project team also invited several market practitioners and members of academia to join this collaborative initiative, aiming to open a dialogue among all three parties. In the spirit of PAR, the relationships among the research participants (students, academics, and market practitioners) were not hierarchical,

as the aim was to facilitate open and unrestricted exchange of experiences and perspectives, thus promoting the development of new insights and ideas while eliminating the practitioners' negative attitudes towards the next generation. To provide an 'etic perspective in action,' all participant observations were conducted in the most natural settings available, whereby academic participants were directly involved in the preparation, execution, and review sessions of the two mini-projects with the students and market practitioners (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). More importantly, the student participants were invited to discuss with the academics and industry representatives their findings, reflections, and innovative ideas aimed at promoting different fashion practices (Agar 1996). These included, but are not limited to, marketing research, concept and style development, design and patternmaking, as well as merchandising and branding strategies. As student participants were encouraged to challenge and critique the pedagogical rationales behind each activity originally proposed by academic members, this prompted the academic participants and market practitioners to review their existing practices, or even innovate industry practices as inspired by the students. The resulting feedback and new insights into fashion pedagogy were audio-recorded, as well as documented in the form of field notes and research logs for subsequent analysis and reflection. This versatile dataset provides a useful repository of possible suggestions for fashion education, as well as for revising the structure of the action research project.

The research team also conducted in-depth phenomenological interviews with student participants and market practitioners to elicit their feelings and reflections on research project participation. For emancipatory purposes, when examining these experiences, focus was given to the change of value-set in the collaborative research project for fashion education (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). The analysis and interpretation of interviews are based on the triangulation of findings yielded by different data sources, as identified by the research participants. Iterative methods were also employed when analysing documentary sources to identify emergent themes and grasp their meanings, as reflected in the participants' lived experiences during the action research process.

Discussion: pragmatic learning and participatory action research in vocational fashion education

The experimentation of *fashionthnography.com* illustrates the possibility of integrating social learning and participatory action research into vocational fashion education. In the spirit of PAR, since its inception, the project has evolved via an emerging and dynamic process, with the active engagement of all participants (e.g., students, faculty members, and industry professionals) in different mini-projects. The resulting findings are presented below under the following broad themes: (1) the reflections and insights into practical solutions to fashion learning and training based upon the participants' experiences in two of the mini-projects (McHugh and Kowalski 2011); (2) the changing roles and values of fashion pedagogy as perceived by the research participants; and (3) the reflections on the challenges and limitations of PAR when applied to fashion pedagogy. In presenting these findings, the aim is to promote university−community partnerships (Innes et al. 2016; Bess et al. 2016).

Reflection 1: a shared consciousness of pedagogical needs

The main objective of the case study was to gain insight into the possibilities of adopting an emancipatory curriculum design that would facilitate co-creation of learning experiences among students, academics, and industry professionals. Thus, the project team attempted to initiate a new fashion pedagogy that encouraged the self-transformation of participants through collective knowledge development and skill co-creation. With this goal in mind, when designing the mini-projects, care was taken not to replicate any existing fashion practices or

set predetermined learning objectives. Instead, the project team followed de Brentani's (2001) three-process business operation training (ideation, negotiation, and implementation) approach to stimulate research participants to 'brainstorm' new pedagogical solutions and to reflect on the teaching/learning process. In the ideation stage, students and industry participants were first invited to share and discuss their views on the existing fashion education and the challenges they encountered in fashion practices. They were then asked to set the learning objectives and propose ideas for mini-projects, along with specific design and methods that would be involved in each project. During the negotiation stage, they were encouraged to share their perspectives and negotiate with other team members to resolve any concerns or disagreements. Lastly, the research participants were asked to review and execute their plan together.

Taking the SAT project as an example, the mini-project was initiated by one of the faculty members, who felt that the existing fashion curriculum over emphasised the glamour of high-end fashion, due to which the essence of fashion as a sociocultural phenomenon related to how people dress in their everyday life was overlooked. To address this imbalance, a fashion street-style photo-taking activity was proposed to help the participating students identify the impact of street fashion and consumer lifestyle on the mainstream fashion trends. The proposal was discussed amongst all project participants and was strongly endorsed by a few industry practitioners who had difficulties in training junior fashion designers on how to conduct research on street fashion. In their experience, many junior designers seemed disinterested in consumers' everyday clothing, and rather drew their inspiration from high-street fashion shows and the latest collections from luxury designer labels. This, however, often resulted in 'immature' designs that were very difficult to commercialise in the mass market. The street-fashion photo-taking exercise was thus deemed a valuable opportunity for students to gain a better understanding of consumer behaviours in mix-and-matching everyday fashion styles. The fashion students also welcomed the idea since they found that learning fashion in lectures and studio-based tutorials was overly abstract and such theoretical knowledge could not prepare them for the working reality. Some were also concerned that the knowledge and skills gained at university would not be adequate to fulfil the expectations from the fashion industry. Hence, students were passionate to learn, and formulated their academic goals by participating in the mini-projects for personal development (Yick et al. 2019).

The street-fashion photo-taking activities comprising the SAT project were performed every Saturday afternoon in two of the shopping districts in Hong Kong. The objective of this mini-project was to capture the changing street fashion styles and subsequently analyse the images taken from the perspective of theoretical and managerial implications for fashion retailing and branding purposes. The comprehensive set of data collected by the student participants was also useful to the members of academia and market practitioners. This beneficial experience prompted the research team to regularly organise face-to-face meetings to articulate a co-operative inquiry for all involved parties to function as co-researchers and co-subjects. These meetings were highly interactive and helped in jointly generating ideas, designing the project, and drawing conclusions (Reason and Torbert 2001). These meetings also allowed the participants to share their experiences and learn from each other, and co-create new knowledge about fashion trends and consumer behaviours. For example, students identified a specific group of consumers wearing exclusively black garments, but sophisticatedly playing with other design elements, such as materials, brands, and proportions. This inspired faculty members and market professionals to rethink the existing market segmentation strategies, which has been largely focused on consumer demography and psychography dimensions.

Apart from deepening fashion knowledge through a research-based pedagogical approach, students were also encouraged to modify the format of the activity if they found it easier to achieve the previously agreed-upon fashion learning outcomes. In this particular case,

students were initially instructed to merely take photos of random pedestrians. However, they suggested stopping the pedestrians to take styling photos, so that they can conduct a short interview and gain more information that would be beneficial for brand analysis and understanding consumer preferences in a mix-and-match style. The fact that their proposal was accepted motivated the students to be more actively engaged in the project, which was highly beneficial for their learning.

Reflection 2: learning as a creative dialogue for knowledge creation

One of the key outcomes of applying PAR for co-creating fashion knowledge among students, academia, and industry practitioners was the realisation that education can no longer be viewed as a one-way knowledge transference process. Instead, fashion learning should be an interactive and creative process, aimed at engaging all participants in a dialogue for knowledge cocreation. According to Bill (2012), 'learning to become creative involves intense hermeneutical processing of the self, through a variety of techniques all designed to encourage representations of the student's own thought about anything and everything' (59). The academics and industry practitioners that took part in the project thus considered adopting a constructionist approach, which places students at the centre of their own learning, with an emphasis on 'the ability to reflect on the experience' (Southworth 2015, 252). More importantly, the goal of this approach is to engage learners in a conversation in a social learning setting, in which the educators provide guidelines to students in identifying and resolving the problems independently. Since students that took part in this initiative were encouraged to the initiative in identifying problems and finding solutions, this helped them gain confidence in their abilities, which they could transfer to new situations.

As noted previously, in the SAT project, this approach manifested in giving the students autonomy to negotiate and change the learning mode by researching the clothing styles in the street. More importantly, the regular project team meetings facilitated discussions and sharing of different perspectives towards fashion knowledge. Owing to these positive experiences in the SAT project, the faculty members and industry practitioners subsequently approved the students' request for private interview sessions with fashion experts (the second mini-project). While the faculty and industry members utilised their social networks to invite industry elites to the interviews, the students were ultimately in charge of the interview content and protocol, and had to ensure that the fashion elites were engaged in a dialogue, rather than having a questions-and-answers session. The objective of the interviews was to allow the students to learn from the success stories in the fashion industry from which they could draw upon for career development. Each interview lasted about 1.5 hours, and the interview agenda (set by the students) was sent to the interviewees in advance. The fashion students were highly creative, and decided to engage the interviewees by asking them to draw pictures and talk about their vision for business and career development. Since the students researched the informants' profiles before the interviews, they would usually slightly adjust the content of this drawing exercise to allow each interviewee to narrate his/her story. The student participants found this exercise setting highly beneficial, as they expanded their understanding of the fashion industry and practices. The faculty and practitioners were also impressed by the students' performance on this mini-project, as their highly creative mode of learning allowed all involved to co-create new knowledge in fashion practices and pedagogy.

Reflection 3: the changing roles and values perceived by research participants

Rissanen (2017) stated that 'education is a future-making activity' (533) and vocational education should prepare its students to successfully contribute to their chosen field. In this project, adoption of PAR encouraged the students, faculty members, and market practitioners to constantly reflect on their roles in the teaching and learning activities, as well as the practical,

intellectual, and socio-cultural values that these activities brought to fashion education. All involved felt that their active participation in the mini-projects and the subsequent discussions had led to critical self-reflection on some previously unquestioned perspectives and assumptions regarding fashion as a profession and as an academic discipline. They all agreed that their engagement in the mini-projects was a transformative experience through which they acquired new knowledge about fashion and education by experiencing, reflecting, and thinking, and by adopting new roles in the projects (Kolb and Kolb 2005; Southworth 2015).

During individual interviews, many student participants admitted that they learned more when they took an active role in the mini-projects. The students found that they enjoyed creating their own learning opportunities, since they were allowed to explore creative ways to understand the fashion market as well as to build their own self-efficacy for personal development (Bradford 2005). The PAR mini-projects deconstructed the unbalanced power relationship between students and the faculty members/market professionals, since students were allowed to critique the learning methods and negotiated alternative learning solutions that fit their learning style. As students were engaged in all project stages – from ideation, through negotiation and implementation, to reflection – many felt that this interactive learning process prompted them to reflect on their existing knowledge. The new perspectives and ideas that emerged from these reflections were explored further in the course of the mini-projects (Southworth 2015). Landgren and Pasricha (2011) argued that such an active learning approach provided students with the ownership of their learning, as they discover, process, and apply their learning to shape their values and attitudes. Some of the students claimed that they gained self-confidence through close collaboration with faculty members and industry practitioners, as the project was conceived as a partnership of equals, all of whom could gain valuable experience and learn from one another.

While the fashion students benefited from acquiring new fashion knowledge as well as building self-efficacy for personal development, faculty members and market professional likewise admitted that their engagement in the mini-projects changed their perspectives, as it prompted them to re-evaluate their expectations and even their role as project supervisors. Some market professionals shifted their position from that of an industry advisor to a 'fashion learner.' They were impressed by the discussions related to the SAT project, as they gained new insights into fashion branding and product development. The market professionals found regular meetings with faculty members and students inspiring, as this offered them new socio-cultural and intellectual perspectives. During the interviews, some market professionals also admitted that the mini-projects had changed their original impression of the younger generations, as they appreciated students' learning attitudes and working capability. One of the market practitioners shared that, through working closely with the students and observing their interpersonal skills such as communication and project execution, she better appreciated the potential of the younger generations (Bill 2012). The collaboration among the fashion educators, fashion students, and practitioners in these mini-projects also addressed challenges of 'employability' (Blackmore et al. 2016; Fung 2017) where the interacting stakeholders co-define learning objectives and curricula to ensure that the learners would have the opportunities to acquire the knowledge, skills, and experience needed for developing their career in the fashion industry.

Implications and conclusion: limitations and future research directions

According to the old adage, 'it is easier said than done,' even though the research team holds a strong vision in exhausting the pedagogical possibilities in fashion education collaboratively, many fundamental challenges arose during the exploration of new knowledge in fashion training and its implications for our capacity to overcome the obstacles in the continually

shifting fashion landscape. The first problem encountered during the research process pertains to the politics of power (Ozanne and Saatcioglu 2008). The experience gained through fashionthnography.com has shown that participation of parties with different backgrounds can never be politically neutral, especially when the project is initiated by a group of 'experienced' academic researchers and market practitioners. Some students indeed found it difficult to ask questions about the project, which made proposing new ideas or analysing tasks they were assigned to do particularly challenging. It was also not uncommon for the academics and industry practitioners to dominate the discussions during the meetings. Consequently, the emancipatory nature of the project was not fully realised. Communication issues also emerged during the research process, as the three parties came from completely different backgrounds. This resulted in discrepancies in the language/jargon used and the knowledge and experiences in the field, as well as different ways of thinking, which made it very challenging to forge meaningful connections among the marketers, academia, and students. It was also very difficult to balance local and theoretical knowledge, as the members of academia may hold pre-set theoretical assumptions that would influence their view of a particular fashion phenomenon, while market practitioners and students may rely on their lived experiences in understanding different fashion discourses.

While educators and researchers use participatory action research to challenge the dominant approach still prevalent in the educational system in many aspects (e.g., policy-related issues, stereotyping, and oppressive practices within the school setting), this research approach successfully encourages members of academia to reflect on their authoritarian positions, as well as the educational content, in order to foster a truly collaborative, empowering, and multi-cultural educational environment that reflects the reality of the changing global context (Miskovic and Hoop 2006; Kinsler 2010). It is believed that PAR can contribute to the initiatives aimed at extending existing VET by deconstructing the one-way skill-based training and assessment pedagogy. This can only be achieved by opening a new dialogue on knowledge co-creation that better prepares students for the upcoming challenges in the industry. Given that, as a part of this project, students were actively encouraged to discuss and negotiate their experimental ideas and practices, this also benefitted the members of academia and industry practitioners, as it prompted them to review their existing practices and the assumptions behind those practices. Even thoughmany challenges and problems still need to be overcome, as this project has shown, application of PAR in practice can be highly beneficial, as it provides an alternative way of reflecting on the existing pedagogical assumptions and methods used in fashion training. More importantly, engaging students, academics, and market practitioners in collaborative action research projects opens the possibilities of gaining new insights into future fashion training. It also prompts exploration of the potential creative design practices and business operations in ameaningful and sustainableway. The quote from Ozanne and Saatcioglu (2008, 436) best illustrates the stance of the research team, highlighting the benefits of applying PAR for those who have a vision in making a change for our future:

> *For those of us who are fortunate enough to possess these considerable resources, it is time to move away from the comfort of the sidelines, step into the field, and charge into the important work of solving our pressing social problems.*

In conclusion, we value the contribution of participatory action research in vocational fashion education. We strongly believe that it is crucial to democratize research and education, and to forge closer bonds between vocational training and education. Hence, educators, students, and community stakeholders should recognise the importance of collaboration and co-creation. Authors of future studies could explore the customisability and scalability of participatory

action research, as well as the possibility of engaging practitioners, researchers, and students from multiple academic disciplines in similar PAR projects (Barnes et al. 2016). We would like to end this article with John Dewey's memorable quote:

> *If we teach today's students as we taught yesterday's we rob them of tomorrow (Dewey 1944, 167).*

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Appendix: Table 1. The historical development of vocational fashion education

Tradition	Key Pedagogical Foundation
German Bauhaus School of Art and Design (1919-1933)	Standardization of foundations courses tend to treat lessons as means to an end, and knowledge as taxonomic (Dockery and Quinn, 2007).
New Bauhaus in Chicago (1937-1946) by László Moholy-Nagy	Including a preliminary course called "foundations" – a rhetorical device to suggest that at a basic level, art, like science and industry, must comply with standards (Tavin, Kushins, and Elniski 2007).
Pragmatism and Social Learning (Dewey 1944)	Students should interact with the environment in order to adapt and learn. School should be representative of a social environment and that students learn best when in natural social settings (Flinders and Thornton 2013; Williams 2017).
Development of Creative Personality – Itten (1964)	Students learned by doing, experimentation for its own sake was encouraged and "play" was considered key in imparting important theoretical discoveries (Lerner 2005).
Experiential Learning – Kolb (1984)	Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (Kolb 1984, 38).
Situated Learning – Lave and Wenger (1991)	Motivation to learn stems from participation in culturally valued collaborative practices (Lave and Wenger 1991).
Postmodern Principles – Gude (2004)	Programs should develop and nurture critical creative intelligence. Gude (2004) identified 15 categories or principles that guide contemporary art and design practices (e.g., appropriation, juxtaposition, recontextualization, hybridity) (p. 8-12)