Article

DRAPING AS A DESIGNING AND MAKING PROCESS, WITH POTENTIAL FOR THE UNEXPECTED

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This article reflects on our experiences of team teaching in the Fashion Design 2 (FD2) course as part of the Bachelor of Design (Fashion) programme. This was the beginning of a new project called "drape." Rekha Rana, one of the course lecturers, was working with drape in her own practice while completing her Masters study in Fine Arts. We had identified a need to introduce alternative approaches to the designing process that differed from Year 1, where students approach design with the target market as the focus – a ready-to-wear (RTW) product-focused approach directed at a specific fashion audience. Students were not free to experiment beyond the restrictions imposed by conventional garments in the commercial fashion system.

The drape project allowed them to work with a product or garment, but one which was not pre-defined. Indeed, students were encouraged to unlearn the conventions relating to Western garments and investigate the ethnographic clothing traditions of other cultures. Students undertook a process-driven method aimed at exploring interactions between body, form, materials and space. The results demonstrated to them the potential in hidden, liminal spaces and allowed them to create new and unconventional designs which were dificult to conceive through traditional processes such as drawing. This exercise required students to design by making. It involved the exploration of geometric shapes in the creation of three-dimensional forms on mannequins. These explorations led to the completion of a designed garment.

This process has affinities with learning approaches within fashion design discussed by Drew, Bailey and Shreeve.[1] These authors outline four approaches to learning, including focusing on developing technical competence and developing students' concepts. However, we identified in particular with two approaches that are intended to develop the design process, adopting product-focused and process-focused strategies respectively. Both employ experimentation in the process of making as a key strategy in design development.[2] It is hoped that this article will contribute to an ongoing discussion of the role of draping as a fashion design tool.

The existing literature shows that there are many approaches to the design process. We as educators are in the process of testing and developing these approaches. There seems to be a dominant process – one that is favoured in the literature – that is targeted towards fashion students and educators. This approach privileges a research platform that is utilised to inform conceptual development, which in turn underpins the design process. Leach epitomises this approach when he suggests that "increasingly, these days, designers are looking for new and personal research bases, as research has come to involve much more than just a theme, and thoughts and ideas have become more conceptual and abstract."[3] Evidence for the dominance of this approach is seen in several other recently published examples.[4]

As well as focusing on conceptual development, these writers also share a focus on drawing/sketching as the normative way of developing designs in response to their research. According to Seivewright, "drawing is a fundamental process and skill that you must explore and perfect."[5] While a range of design attributes such as colour, texture and proportion are discussed in these texts, the designs themselves are predominantly understood through fashion sketching as part of workbook practice. These processes embody the conventions of fashion education and reflect the structural framework of design practice as suggested by Williams.[6]

Many of these texts and the processes they discuss are directed towards commercial outcomes that are user-focused and compatible with the ready-to-wear system of fashion. Central to all these discussions is the sequential progression followed by the design process towards a commercial outcome. These features are representative of the formal elements and design conventions that contribute to Williams's structural framework. Atkinson, for example, lists five specific target markets which fashion students should aspire to pitch to: haute couture, pret-a-porter, designer wear, intermediate and high street.[7]

As part of developing a contemporary fashion programme, the present authors sought to introduce new design processes that can supplement existing methods as well as foster new design knowledge. In this way, the authors identify with Williams's postmodern framework which stresses the questioning of conventional ideas, the search for new directions and the use of non-traditional materials and techniques.[8]

However, a number of obstacles lay in our path from the outset. As Griffiths has pointed out, very little has been written about fashion by designer practitioners.[9] One notable exception is Timo Rissanen, who has become well known for embracing sustainability in his practice through unusual design processes. Interestingly, Rissanen is one of very few practicing designers who contextualise their work through academic enquiry. He outlines eight design methodologies which can be broadly subdivided into three categories.[10] First comes the sketching, draping and patternmaking of an original idea. Second is the replication of existing designs through sketching or patternmaking. Rissanen's third approach is more conceptual, perhaps involving visual cues or using paper to drape the dress form. He suggests this last technique be used to integrate the print into the design.

Rissanen's own practice is defined by the conceptual process whereby he draws exclusive inspiration from the interaction of body and cloth.[11] His approach allows him to develop new forms that sit outside the traditions represented by Western fashion garments. His design process exemplifies a practice-based approach as outlined by Gray and Malins.[12] These authors define practice as a research methodology involving action and reflection that provides a means of "discovering new practices or methods/processes/techniques and materials by experimentation; re-discovering/revitalising/revising traditional practices in new/contemporary contexts; reconstructing artwork/artefacts to bring about new understanding/insight through the experience of making/re-making."[13]

These definitions of practice correspond to the critical making methodology with which Rissanen identifies in his own practice. Rissanen is part of The Cutting Circle, a patterncutting collective that seeks "new ways [of] thinking about making, uncovered through the act of making,"[14] an approach suggested by Matt Ratto's framework of critical making. For Ratto, critical making is "a mode of materially productive engagement that is intended to bridge the gap between creative, physical and conceptual exploration. Although they share much in common with forms of design and art practice, the goal of these events is primarily focused on using material production – making things – as part of an explicit practice of concept elaboration."[15] Commensurate with the postmodern framework of Williams and the practice-based methodology of Gray and Malins, critical making embodies a process that explores "the various configurations and alternative possibilities, and using them to express, critique, and extend relevant concepts, theories, and models."[16]

In this article, the authors seek to discover how an exploration of a making process involving the FD2 drape exercise reflects the processes identified in recently published commentary and research. This approach presents students with an opportunity to develop their existing skills as well as to question preconceived notions of Western fashion and the very conception of the garment. Making produces results that cannot be achieved through the conventional structuralist approach of workbook practice. We seek to identify this new approach through the contemporary design practices of designers such as Timo Rissanen and Julian Robert, and avant-garde designers like Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto. This discussion will be supplemented by reflection on student work that embodies unconventional practices of making to realise garment designs.

INTRODUCING THE DRAPE COMPONENT

In 2010, all courses within the Bachelor of Design were restructured to create a new 15-credit model. These changes proved significant and prompted a major content review. Fashion Design was introduced as a dedicated course for both first and second year students: Fashion Design 1 and Fashion Design 2. A new teaching team was put in place to deliver these courses, which continue to evolve. One of the lecturers, Simon Swale, drew on content from previous courses while the second team member, Rekha Rana, brought additional concepts and knowledge, drawing on a diverse cultural background and experiences gained through studying for her Masters in Fine Arts.

Various factors came together to create the first drape exercise. Firstly, drape was largely missing from the fashion programme, being offered only to third-year students at an introductory level. A need was identified to introduce drape as a technique from both a technical and design perspective throughout the programme. Secondly, Rekha Rana was already exploring alternative drape methods through her study of ethnographic clothing. This body of work was now ready to be introduced into the teaching program as a new design process. The third factor was our recognition that some students face difficulties utilising drawing as a design tool.

The introduction of the drape exercise in 2010 was largely formulated on the basis of previous design exercises – for example, the requirement for students to design a five-piece collection which was assessed as a major component of the course. Although the designs produced were expected to be developed from the physical process of draping, the expectation of drawing such designs continued from past practice. The preliminary exercise was specifically focused on ethnographic garments which were composed of simple geometric shapes. This was introduced to demonstrate an alternative aesthetics to what students were accustomed, and was also an attempt to bring Eastern and Western approaches together as exemplified by designer Sherin Guild, whose practice was reflected on by the students. Over time, and with continuing assessment of student engagement and outcomes, the drape exercise changed focus to encourage greater levels of experimentation and exploration. Students were now being asked to question their understanding of what a garment is.

In 2013, reflecting these enhanced expectations, the brief for the drape component was expanded. It now included the following questions and directives:

> EXPERIMENTATIONS:
>
> Students will embark on the experimentation work to trigger design possibilities. For this process please consider these 3 aspects to develop and extend upon.
>
> 1- Fabric: explore the potential for your designs in various fabrics: cotton, knit, vinyl, voile … combine fabric types to explore the different ways your designs behave.
>
> 2- Shapes: potential for rectangles and circles. Transform these and combine. A rectangle becomes trapezium, a circle becomes an oval. What happens when the body must pass through these shapes?
>
> 3- Garments: contest preconceived notions of dress; what is a skirt, a top, a bodice? What happens when you displace opening for head, arm, leg? Why must we distinguish between front–back? Why do we distinguish between body and sleeve?

This exercise took place over a four-week period and students' progress was monitored through informal discussions in the studio on a weekly basis. The making process occurred within the timetabled studio sessions as well as during self-directed time. Distinct from a design process in which drawing is the dominant tool (and with which students often struggle), this exercise facilitates learning that grows out of a practice-based methodology. This approach is consistent with that outlined by Shreeve, Wareing and Drew for education in the creative arts. These authors discuss traditions within visual arts education such as studio-based practice and the giving of formative feedback through

informal 'crit' sessions on work-in-progress – approaches that encourage "open-ended solutions and many possible ways of undertaking practice."[17] As noted above, this approach differs from that taken in many recent publications targeted at fashion students which privilege the development of a thematic framework. In a studio-making setting, design concepts are developed organically through the interaction of cloth, hand and dress form.

In addition to recognising the need to introduce alternative design methodologies to enrich students' experience of learning, a second and equally important concern was for students to 'unlearn' previously acquired knowledge. As mentioned above, previous design exercises had focused exclusively on the development of ideas within a commercial context, and reflected Western technical processes such as patternmaking and construction. In effect, such knowledge serves to re-inscribe students' conceptions of what a garment can be: a trouser, a jacket, a skirt, etc. Once introduced to ethnographic clothing traditions, however, students began to question this knowledge, and when draping was introduced these boundaries could be fully tested, as they were permitted to use only simple geometric shapes and their derivatives: circle (or oval), square and rectangle (or other trapezium) and triangles. These are shapes that bear little resemblance to Western-derived fashion patterns.

In Figure 1, the student has collaged geometric shapes with obvious reference to ethnographic garments. Note the absence of traditional armholes as well as the flat, unfitted sleeve silhouette.

In 2014, the first class included a demonstration of how these shapes could be moved around the body (Fig. 2a-d). In

Figure 1. Laura Sanders, drape exercise explorations (2014).

previous years, it had become apparent just how difficult some students found 'forgetting' the principles of Western clothing, especially fitting garments to the body through the use of darts, pleats, etc. This demonstration helped them visualise alternative silhouettes than those to which they were accustomed. These forms were unlikely to occur to students through a process of drawing alone.

Following this demonstration, each student was allocated a mannequin (half size) and two pieces of fabric with different properties: one soft and 'fluid' knit, another more rigid and structural. Students were encouraged to cut simple geometric shapes in multiple, moving them around the body and cutting openings for the head or arms to pass through. This immersive process was at once both design and making (both patternmaking and construction), combining workstations that are usually separated in the chain of fashion practice. Here is an iterative and reflective process that creates a holistic work environment and design model.

Figure 2a-d. Simon Swale, demonstration of draping different geometric shapes around the body (2014).

In combining design development with making, this exploratory drape exercise provides much deeper experiential learning than merely sitting and drawing. The practice-based studio model allows students to engage in a process of action research where design problems and solutions are directly presented to them and their peers. Unlike drawing – which exposes the many insecurities students face about their capabilities – this drape exercise privileges an exploratory and experimental approach where there are no wrong answers. "*Why should I bother with back and front, with symmetry? What happens if I sew a square shape to a circle shape with the same perimeter? What happens*

to its form when I cut two holes for the body to pass through?' These are the kinds of questions students are faced with and, as the answers are not self-evident, they become genuinely curious, much less inhibited and protective of their work, and are more engaged with what their peers are creating.

In the design shown in figure 3, the student has displaced the usual neck opening towards the hems of the garment. She is also playing with the idea of multiple neck openings as we can clearly identify two options for the head to pass through. This creates an unusual silhouette, resulting in a garment which can be transformed and worn in multiple ways.

Figure 3. Sharlee Ghent, final design for drape exercise (2014).

Unlike traditional patternmaking, the focus on unconventional shapes and silhouettes means it is often difficult to tell how exactly something has been produced. This prompts dialogue, a dialectical examination of shape, form and space. These 'live' explorations create the opportunity for dialogue between student and lecturer. As with drawing, some students also struggle with conventional concepts of patternmaking and construction. However, in undertaking a drape methodology, students are involved in a hermeneutic circle where making informs the design, which in turn informs the understanding of patternmaking and construction in new ways. Along with the process of making goes new knowledge creation, as well as the reinforcement of prior knowledge. The studio setting has now become a hotbed of innovation and excitement! Draping returns the concept of a garment to its fundamental truth – that it is simply a covering for the body (or parts of it) – and students feel liberated in the knowledge that, with each exploration, their designs become unique.

While making is part of design development and learning, it is also part of larger learning strategies including being able to produce a resolved garment. This became the second part of the drape design exercise once significant exploration of a range of geometric shapes, in combination and in a range of fabrics, had been undertaken. To create a 'resolved' garment, students had to refine their design and make it up as a completed toile. In fashion parlance, a toile is a marquette or sample – in this case, one that demonstrates the final finishings and closure details. How will the seams and edges be finished? Does the design require a collar, or pockets? Many of these questions are being asked, and answered, in the developmental stages, where it is always about making and any problem confronts one immediately. Unlike drawing – where aspects such as fastenings are frequently left out, un-thought of or forgotten, and details such as pockets are represented

disproportionately – using drape, students can see and must immediately address any shortcomings they perceive. There can be no simple turning of the page.

In Figure 4, while the outcome appears conventional, the student's workbook demonstrates an unorthodox process of using multiple triangular patterns which only become apparent on closer inspection of the garment. (Figs.4, 5). The geometric aspect of design has been considered, with connections made to broader design fields.

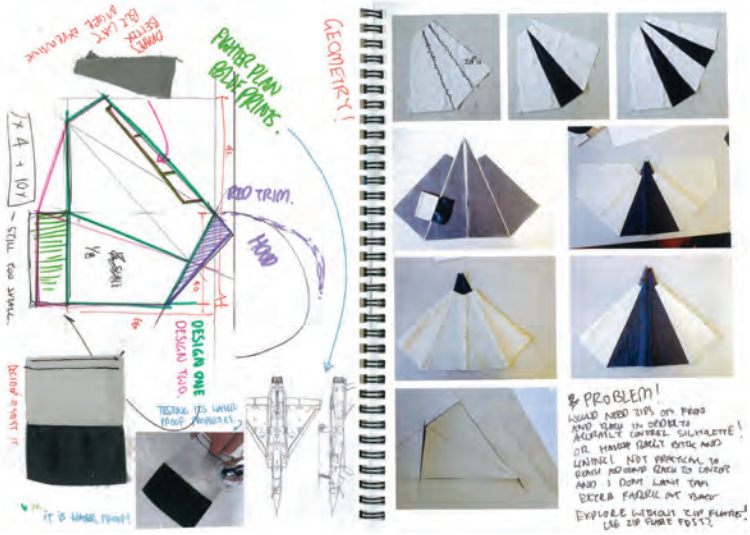

Figure 4. Joseph Hollebon, page from student workbook for drape exercise (2014).

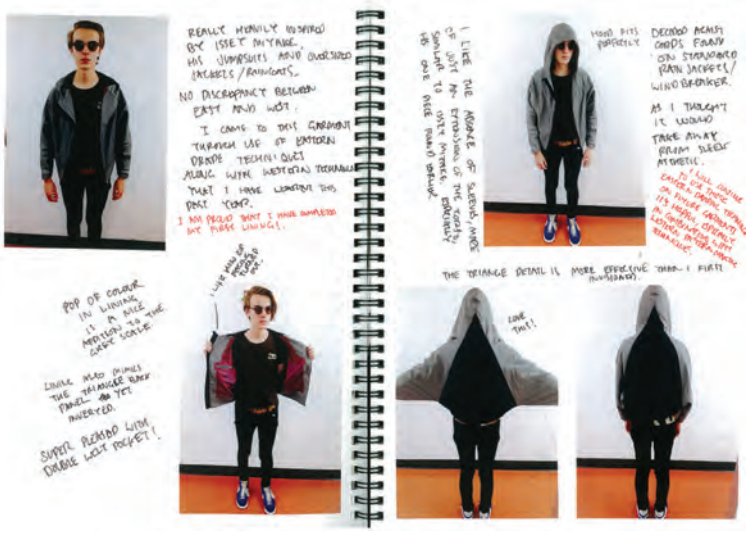

Figure 5. Joseph Hollebon, student wearing final design for drape exercise (2014).

Having conducted this drape exercise over the past five years (2010-14), we are now in a position to evaluate its effects on the students' subsequent design practice. It must be said that not all students have responded favourably to this exploration of the new and unfamiliar, or the plain 'weird.' Some students' preconceptions of fashion run deep, and it has proven difficult for some to forgo their love of 'pretty' dresses and a predilection for the femininity of the fashion stereotypes of the 1950s. For these students the impact of the drape exercise remains marginal.

For others however, the exploratory and experimental approach to fashion design offers a way of disrupting or contesting traditional fashion codes of masculinity and femininity in a Western sense. Some third-year students find themselves developing an aesthetic influenced by the East and by the ethnographic garments they had considered merely as part of their drape exercise in year two. The most talented among them fuse the two into new hybrid forms that reflect the continuing collapse of cultural distinctions. Other students have used the process of transforming geometric shapes to consider more abstract forms reflecting architectural influences.

The first example in Figure 6 demonstrates student Emily Scott's newfound passion for ethnographic garments and Eastern culture which led her to travel to India after graduation to experience the Holi festival. This collection is immersed in the vibrant colours of the festival which she had researched as part of her study journey and which was to turn into real travel. This collection won acclaim among her peers as well as the top prize at the inaugural Australian Graduates Fashion Week in Sydney.

Figure 6. Emily Scott, Bachelor of Design (Fashion) final year collection (2012).

The second example (Figure 7) highlights the student's engagement with the project and ability to develop unconventional materials and silhouettes in a Western fashion context. Sam Ralph has cleverly drawn on a range of alternative processes in the creation of a collection that is a cultural hybrid of East and West, masculinity and femininity. This collection resulted in him being selected for the prestigious Mittelmoda graduate fashion competition in Europe.

Figure 7. Sam Ralph, Bachelor of Design (Fashion) final year collection (2012).

Our final example illustrates the extent to which students learn to contest the practicality and function of traditional dress and what constitutes a garment. Here the structures of origami have been used to suggest the spatial qualities of architecture and explore the relationship between body and space. Although the connections are not obvious, the process evident here would not have been possible without the experience gained during the FD2 drape exercise.

Figure 8. Carolyn Taylor, Bachelor of Design (Fashion) final year collection (2012).

After five years in operation, this is an opportune moment to reflect on both how the Fashion Design 2 course has developed in response to its initial objectives, and on the subsequent careers of students who have benefitted from it. From the outset, the drape exercise filled a gap in the fashion program; as a practice, drape has a long history within the Western fashion system but has been largely absent from the classroom. Besides offering an alternative way of working, what has developed through this exercise is that drape can be understood as an alternative way of *thinking*, both about design and making and as a way of exploring the boundaries of the fashion garment. These advances in understanding have been largely the result of Rekha Rana bringing her experiences of art practice, rather than design, into the teaching environment.

As time has gone on, the authors have recognised the importance of this exercise as a tool to push students to move beyond their own fashion preconceptions into more sculptural and abstract forms. The overwhelmingly favourable response from students – especially those who are uncomfortable with other design processes, such as

drawing – led the authors to recognise that drape should be introduced much earlier in the fashion program. As a result, they now also teach drape as a module to year one students, albeit within the traditions of Western fashion.

However, what has been most rewarding for us are the phenomenal accolades many of our students have received and the clear connections between much of their work and the FD2 drape exercise. What we are witnessing is the reality that our graduates are capable of producing work at the cutting edge of international design, footing it with the very best fashion students from around the world.

Rekha Rana Shailaj graduated with a Diploma in Design (Fashion) from Otago Polytechnic in 1997. Her two main areas of interest – designing fashion and teaching – landed her an educator's job at Otago Polytechnic. For the past 12 years she has worked as a lecturer in fashion design, digital patternmaking and textiles. She completed a Master of Fine Arts (Design) with distinction in 2011 from the Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic. As a conceptual designer, Rekha practices design in a multicultural environment, working with subjectivities and identities created through different fashion systems. She pursues new methods of working with creative processes, drawing on both Eastern and Western sensibilities. Ethnographic clothing is a special interest, especially from India where she was born and raised. The similarities shown in the simple shapes of these garments from various cultures have focused her attention on the kimono from Japan and the kurta from India.

Simon Swale is a fashion lecturer in the School of Design at Otago Polytechnic. He studied fashion at Otago Polytechnic before working extensively within the Dunedin fashion industry. Simon now enjoys researching and writing on various aspects of fashion, often through the lens of media studies and popular culture.

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4 Simon Seivewright, *Research and Design* (Lausanne: AVA Publishing, 2007); E Renfrew and C Renfrew, *Developing a Collection* (Lausanne: AVA Publishing, 2009); S Faerm, *Fashion Design Course: Principles, Practice, and Techniques: The Practical Guide for Aspiring Fashion Designers* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2010); Julia Gaimster, *Visual Research Methods in Fashion* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2011); Mark Atkinson, *How to Create your Final Collection* (London: Lawrence King Publishing, 2012).

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7 Atkinson, *How to Create*, 2012.

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13 Ibid., 105.

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