Sustainable teaching:
Case studies at RMIT University
October 2010

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I am a Textile Designer and teach the courses Textile Design and Textile Industry and Technology in the Bachelor of Arts (Textile Design) program. Before joining RMIT as an academic I worked in the textile industry as a knitwear designer.

I see sustainable development as a complex balancing act between consideration of environmental, ethical and economic factors to ensure the needs of the present can be met without compromising future needs. Working more sustainably requires creative thinking and a willingness to explore new ideas and approaches. There is no definitive answer or one grand solution, but rather lots of multi dimensional possibilities.

In relation to my teaching, I am interested in helping my students see the relevance of sustainability to their futures. How does a discipline such as textile design engage in and contribute meaningfully to a more sustainable future? Sustainability seems so global and abstract, how does a student relate to it on a personal level? And how will they learn about the impacts of their personal and professional decisions without becoming overwhelmed?

I want students to develop, hopefully, a sense of empowerment that they can make a positive difference. That through students’ own critical thinking and informed choices of design, manufacture and retirement of textiles meaningful solutions are possible.

My teaching approach reflects sustainability’s multi-dimensionality. I do not hide from the fact that sustainability is complex and challenging – it is okay to be messy. I want students to see the complexity, understand it and ultimately work with it. In doing so, there needs to be some optimism that the problems are not insurmountable. Act local think global. If it is too negative students will switch off, “It’s too hard”. There is a need to quickly focus on how to develop strategies to work with the complexity and to develop practical design solutions.

I want to hear from students about what they think and work with them from there. It is great when they start critiquing from the beginning and questioning, even what I say, if they have the evidence. I try to get them to think about and weigh up issues relevant to them as textile designers; to make it personal to them and to get them actively involved by sharing and relating what they already know and think.

I try to set up learning opportunities where students can take ownership towards developing how they can make a difference to sustainability through their professional practice. I want to support them in developing and applying their knowledge, to feel comfortable to share their ideas, listen to the views of others, problematise, look for solutions and continually reflect on their findings and experiences. For textile design this means focusing on the life cycle of textile products and its impacts, in order to be able to develop solutions, strategies and or systems to ameliorate these impacts.
There is something exciting about this generation of students and their receptiveness to this learning/teaching approach – which encourages them to critique and question. All students are interested in the topic. They are beginning to make links between their own world and their concerns, that the textile industry can have the solutions, and that they can be part of the solution. It helps to reinforce all of the other skills students are learning throughout the program. It increases the relevance of what they are learning, by contributing to their abilities to be good designers and to make informed choices.