

Textiles: Art and Technology A report of a TVEI Textiles Project

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Some ten years ago, Jill Fitzgerald O'Connor, an independent designer, took part in a TVEI Pilot Project in Textiles in Northumberland; these are her reflections and suggestions on avoiding some of the pitfalls.

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When I was studying to be a designer, at the start of the sixties, I was expected to be able to 'realise' a design, that is, to see it through from sketch to pattern to finished garment. This concept was reinforced by the example of my first boss, who could roll up his sleeves and sit down at a machine to show the sample-machinist exactly how he wanted the garment made up. In due course, when I started up my own business, not only did I have the necessary skills to produce my own sample range, but when I needed employees, I was able to train them in-house. Above all, what I have always found so satisfying about my work is the balance of *creativity* and *practical skills*.

British clothing manufacturing is heavily concentrated in what is known as CMT (Cut, Make, and Trim) for chain-stores such as Marks and Spencer, where there are plenty of opportunities for production technicians but very few for designers. Whilst our designers are internationally acclaimed for their innovation and creativity, there are not enough designer jobs for the thousands of talented young graduates. Yet the industry could improve and be more competitive, if not on price, then on design, if only these college-leavers were more acceptable to the industry. When manufacturers are asked what they are looking for, it is always the same: *the technical skills to realise the designs*.

■ The TVEI (Textiles) Pilot Project

In 1985, the Government set up a new vocational initiative for secondary schools, funded by MSC (Manpower Services Commission). I was approached by the LEA for the part-time, peripatetic, post of teacher-adviser in fashion/ textiles, to develop a course linking education, training, and employment. My role was to:

- demonstrate skills and techniques to teachers and pupils
- support and assist the teacher in the classroom, as required
- link industry and education
- exemplify and encourage enterprise

and all on the pay-scale of an unqualified teacher!

The two Newcastle city schools assigned to me had very different approaches:

- In the first school, the work was focused on *fashion*, and art and design orientated, with the art and needlework teachers working as a team, preparing the pupils for HE. This course was confidently planned: each pupil was to produce (including artwork and practical) six garments to reflect the different areas of study.
- In the other school, the emphasis was on *textiles* and the school had actually been



equipped with industrial machines as it was envisaged that girls would go straight into machinist jobs. The course was planned to be flexible, according to the needs of individual pupils.

As teacher-adviser, my role at both schools was to be as a facilitator.

■ Introduction of the teacher-adviser

A non-teaching adult, in an authoritative technical position, poses a threat to the regular teacher unless the roles are clearly defined. In the same way, when I was put in front of a class, I found the experience intimidating because I had not been trained in class-control techniques. There was also a danger that, unless I had the opportunity to train the teachers beforehand, their inexperience in the new methods would undermine their confidence.

Group size in education is larger than for training in industry, so I was frequently used as an auxiliary, which defeated the object of the project. The best method of working was leading by example: working on new styles and cutting patterns; what really impressed the youngsters was the *speed* at which garments could be created from the resources now available to them, compared with the 'needlework' with which they were familiar.

■ Creating resources

It soon became clear that what was needed was learning materials that could be quickly applied to the teacher's requirements, and which the pupils would immediately recognise as simple to use, thus disguising the teacher's unfamiliarity in working with them. It was also clear that they wanted to make simple garments for themselves, similar to those they could buy in the shops — casual tops and skirts, in sweatshirting, denim etc.

■ The fashion blocks

I drafted card templates, from standard bodice blocks, in three styles (see Figure 1). The shapes were so similar to the styles the pupils were wearing, that they had no hesitation in selecting the design they wanted to make. They drew round the template onto plain 'kitchen paper', then compared measurements with their own garments, and extended the block to make their individual pattern. I demonstrated how to use professional equipment

(pattern-grader's set-squares, spiked tracing-wheels, and pattern-notchers), first bringing in my own, so that the teachers could evaluate whether it would be advisable to purchase some for the school.

The methods I used were:

- calico 'toiles' (mock-ups for fit and style)
- open-width laying-up for economical usage
- making-up on the flat
- holding work (unpinned) for seaming and easing
- machine-finishing (buttons etc.).

These methods were essential for use with industrial five-thread overlockers and the professional results — declared to be 'as good as from shops' — encouraged the pupils, who wore their finished garments to school.

■ Design or skill — chicken or egg?

The whole concept of TVEI was *problem-solving*, and the fact that pupils had to think through for themselves the best order of working showed how effective this was. No sooner had they finished one garment, they would want to make another, but this one would be much better, it would be *different*. They quite naturally found that they were beginning to design. By week six I recorded that 'the variety of work, including techniques not deemed within the grasp of this ability level, continues to surprise'.

At the 'fashion' school, there was a group of 'non-drawers' who had looked forward to being able to make garments, but were becoming demoralised through the emphasis on drawing and designing. When finished work was exhibited, there was plenty of lively artwork, but the standard of garment-making failed to reflect this.

Ten years ago, CAD was a novelty; the Technology Bus visited both schools and pupils had the opportunity of hands-on experience, supervised by technicians. The artistic pupils at the 'fashion' school were not impressed, but those who had difficulty with drawing were delighted with the fashion package, which enabled them to design different garments for ready-drawn 'models'.

I demonstrated how technology could be used to do the 'difficult' techniques such as

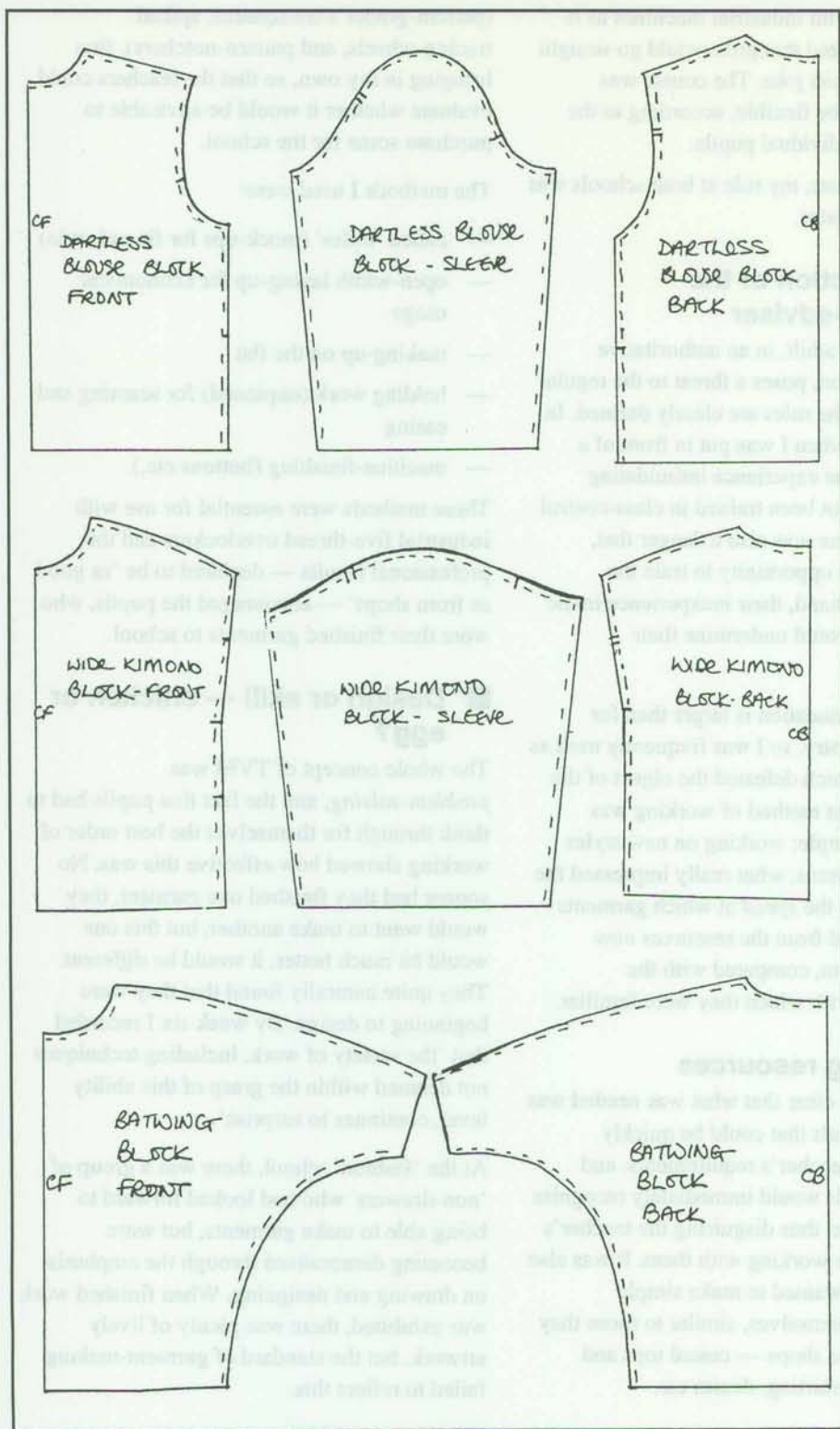


Fig. 1: The Fashion Blocks

lettering, by enlisting the help of a technician to produce a print-out of a selected fontstyle that could be cut to make paper stencils for screen-printing; the end result was a two-colour print for sportswear (see Figure 2).

■ Enterprise — and competition

In the 'fashion' school, the local Youth Enterprise Centre introduced the concept of enterprise via business plans and organisation structures. Unfortunately, this resulted in serious disagreements between the pupils: one group drifted away from the subsequent 'boardroom' power struggles — they were 'just the sewers'. However, this group turned out to be the power-house of a highly successful and profitable range of separates manufactured by the fashion mini-enterprise, and at one point in the hectic Enterprise Week, actually locked the management out of the Needlework Room, to stop them interfering with production!

Competition of a different sort also took place. One of the local M & S suppliers, with a proactive personnel officer, set up a fashion competition for schools in the region, the brief being to create a leisure outfit from jersey fabric supplied by the firm. This was won by a pupil from the 'textiles' school largely because of her understanding of production criteria: a garment must be economic in fabric usage, as uncomplicated as possible in construction yet with attractive features, and above all, it must appeal to the target customer. The pupil not only won a cash prize, but was taken to the factory, where she saw her pattern being computer-graded, and put into production in the training-section.

■ Links with industry

Apart from begging materials from local factories, we made a number of educational visits. I also made contacts through my status as a designer, with trade papers and textile companies. The climax of this was participation as delegates to the prestigious World of Fashion Conference in 1987, where the teachers were welcomed as pioneering valuable grounding for further training in industry.

This was definitely an objective achieved, largely through the confidence expressed by

the pupils when they were taken on factory visits. Their familiarity with the machines and techniques also gave them positive attitudes when applying for vacancies, and their 'make-through' skills enabled them to get the more interesting, and better paid, sample machinists' jobs, as well as improving their team-working skills. After our first batch of leavers found jobs, the schools found they were being approached by employers for more of these capable recruits.

Fig. 2: Computer Aided Design. Sweatshirt and running-vest with 2-colour screen-printed logo.

■ **Lessons to be learned**

What did I learn from this project? As a new initiative, it contained both successful

achievements and some serious difficulties. Many of both were dependent on the specific situations which existed in this area and in the two schools where I was based, but some general observations also came out of the project. Three in particular are worth recording for any school-industry link of this nature:

- The basis for successful designing is the practical craft skill
- It is unreasonable to expect teachers to become experts overnight
- A better dialogue is required between industry and education.

■ **Ten years on**

In recent articles, I have read of the concern that trainee-teachers are so lacking in practical skills that there is a risk of them being unable to deliver the National Curriculum.¹ I have conducted a brief survey among fashion/textile students now at colleges into their experience of Art/Design/CAD/Textiles teaching at secondary schools. On the whole, they thought their teachers were skilled and confident, and encouraged them to go into higher education. What was surprising were the numbers of students who studied art to GCSE and A level who would have liked to do more *drawing*. Headteachers were felt to be neutral in supporting art & design subjects, with the occasional attitude that they are more suited to non-academic pupils. Parents were seen as being overwhelmingly supportive, but less than delighted at the prospect of their offspring ending up as machinists, technicians or pattern-cutters.

I am keen to establish what teachers themselves think, and whether they would welcome INSET along the lines of the TVEI pilot. I was recently invited to run a weekend workshop for art and needlework teachers at an enterprising school in another region, and was asked back to see their fashion show. Now, with the popularity of *The Clothes Show* on television, the whole image of the clothing industry has been revitalised, and schools throughout the country put on their own fashion shows, so why this continuing lack of skills?

■ **Reference**

1. See, for example, Tim Lewis's article in *Design & Technology Teaching*, Vol. 27 No. 2.

