

32 Reflection on an experiential learning platform: concept to retail at Praxes studio

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Keywords

Education community, brand identity, experiential teaching, incubator, fashion process

Abstract

This study evaluates the efficiency of using Praxes, an actual operating fashion brand incubated by the department, as an experiential learning platform for Master's degree students. Does identifying with the school's brand and doing practical research and work aimed at the current market improve on the stagnant teaching methods of our elders?

Instructors work along with the students in the Praxes design studio to create fashion merchandise, from concept to retail, that conform to the brand identity. Students are challenged not only to expand their range and depth of knowledge, but also to harness their courage in order to successfully participate, thus cultivating innovative and entrepreneurial fashion activists. Using surveys completed by the students, and interviews with the teachers, we refine the teaching system in pursuit of successfully preparing our students for the industry whilst actually running a successful fashion brand.

Education is transformed from an academic tower to a communication platform that enters the industry by exploring real world problems and proposing workable solutions to put into practice. Traveling to China to source fabrics, or to a trade show in the US to market products is all part of the process, and managed by students with the respective backgrounds. They are enabled to move parallel towards the workplace and look into the future.

This research is based on qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys. We explored the teacher and student opinions and attitudes towards the Praxes experiential learning platform, as well as the overall performance of the brand and then looked at the effect of this method on the overall academic development of the department. We see how creating a fashion brand with its own unique identity creates a sense of community amongst our students, transforms the way the students approach their education, and brings our department closer to the needs of the industry.

Introduction

Shih Chien University Fashion Design Department has been enjoying a prominent position in Taiwan and our alumni have made inroads internationally. However, in our industry things go out of fashion quickly, and along with technological advancement, new trends and production methods are the order of the day. Students in a traditional classroom setting who learn passively from a teacher need to transform into self-motivated creators with their own individual vision in order to be successful designers. There is also no longer a static body of knowledge the teacher can transfer to the students. New data emerges constantly and only students who can navigate this ocean of opportunities will succeed. Moving from a more positivist epistemology to a constructivist approach requires the teachers to step down from the stage and not see themselves as emitters of knowledge. (B.R Sockman, P. Sharma, 2008) As Patricia H. Hinchey puts it, 'Instead, the task of the constructivist teacher is to design experiences that will give students an opportunity to develop their own understanding of the data at hand.' (Hinchey, 2010: 42)

Thus we launched the MA Praxes Program in 2013. Students form a team to run the fashion brand and learn practical skills that actually bridge the gap between education and industry. Teachers facilitate and guide from the side. 'In situated contexts learning occurs naturally as a consequence of the learner recognising knowledge's practical utility as well as the need to use it in an attempt to interpret, analyse, and solve real-world problems.' (Hannifin, Land, 2000) Or as explained by the theory of Understanding by Design, '... gains are more likely when teachers teach for understanding of transferable concepts and processes while giving learners multiple opportunities to apply their learning in meaningful (i.e., authentic) contexts.' (Wiggins, McTighe, 2011)

Constructivist theory sounds promising, but how effective is the program really? How can it be adjusted to be more effective? Also, what shortcomings does this real world exposure highlight in our BA program? Researching what is partially our own teaching practice technically qualifies as action research. 'Put more formally, the fundamental purpose of pedagogical action research is to systematically investigate one's own teaching/learning facilitation practice with the dual aim of modifying practice and contributing to theoretical knowledge.' (Norton, 2009: xvi) Embarking on this research we aim to apply the results to fine tune our program and share the insights with the wider educational community.

Methods

To evaluate the Praxes program we collected data from four sources. Firstly we looked at the Master's Degree Graduate Student Survey all 26 MA Praxes graduate students completed. All students are routinely surveyed, so a sample selection process was unnecessary. The questions are general enough to cover all aspects of the course, and Likert's attitude scale makes it easy to analyze the data. (Norton, 2009)

Secondly we looked at interviews conducted with faculty members who were involved in the Praxes program. With a smaller number of instructors involved, and them being eager to help with the research project, email interviews were conducted with open ended questions so they were free to bring up themes and issues as their experience dictated.

Third, we surveyed graduate students about their current occupations and combined the results in a chart. This is hard data, but it should be kept in mind that any number of factors may have influenced the recorded outcomes.

Finally we looked at how the budget is spent and reduced the numbers to diagrams in order easily evaluate whether funds are most effectively allocated.

1. Master's Degree Graduate Student Survey

Section 1 of this document states the threefold education goal for this program.

- To cultivate a sense for culture, the humanities, art, and aesthetics
- To cultivate fashion design research and creative abilities
- To cultivate fashion industry planning and execution skills

This is followed by the following questions:

Q1: I understand the department education goal.

Q2: I agree the department education goal is appropriate.

Q3: I agree the department education goal is suited for my learning needs.

Q4: I agree the department education goal is useful for my future professional needs.

Q5: I agree the course curriculum is matched with department education goal.

Q6: I agree the teacher's professional ability is matched with department education goal.

Table 1 Education Goal Survey

	Totally Agree		Mostly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Completely Disagree	
	Students	%	Students	%	Students	%	Students	%	Students	%
Q1	15	57.69 %	7	26.92 %	4	15.38 %	0	0.00 %	0	0.00 %
Q2	13	50.00 %	7	26.92 %	6	23.08 %	0	0.00 %	0	0.00 %
Q3	10	38.46 %	9	34.62 %	7	26.92 %	0	0.00 %	0	0.00 %
Q4	9	34.62 %	10	38.46 %	7	26.92 %	0	0.00 %	0	0.00 %
Q5	9	34.62 %	8	30.77 %	9	34.62 %	0	0.00 %	0	0.00 %
Q6	13	50.00 %	7	26.92 %	6	23.08 %	0	0.00 %	0	0.00 %

In Section 2, the survey looks at core competencies. The students are asked to rate the importance of the following core competencies the department aims to teach.

Q1: Practical fashion design skills

Q2: Design thinking ability

Q3: To have humanistic, art, and aesthetic sense

Q4: The ability to do design research and planning

Q5: The ability to organise a show and do marketing

Table 2 Core Competency Importance Survey

	Extremely Important		Very Important		Important		Not Important		Pointless	
	Students	%	Students	%	Students	%	Students	%	Students	%
Q1	13	50.00%	7	26.92%	6	23.08%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Q2	15	57.69%	4	15.38%	7	26.92%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Q3	18	69.23%	4	15.38%	4	15.38%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Q4	14	53.85%	7	26.92%	5	19.23%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Q5	11	42.31%	9	34.62%	6	23.08%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%

In Section 3, the students are asked to what degree they consider themselves to have mastered the core competencies stated in Section 2.

Table 3 Core Competency Mastery Survey

	Completely Mastered		Mostly Mastered		Partly Mastered		Mostly Not Mastered		Not Mastered at All	
	Students	%	Students	%	Students	%	Students	%	Students	%
Q1	11	42.31%	6	23.08%	9	34.62%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Q2	14	53.85%	6	23.08%	6	23.08%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Q3	15	57.69%	6	23.08%	5	19.23%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Q4	11	42.31%	7	26.92%	8	30.77%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Q5	11	42.31%	6	23.08%	9	34.62%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%

2. Interviews with Praxes Faculty Members

Interviews were conducted with faculty members who were or still are involved with Praxes. A set of questions was asked of each instructor to enable a clearer understanding of how Praxes has been operating. The questions are as follows:

1. How is working with the Praxes program different from conventional teaching?
2. How did you experience this year's collaborative teaching?
3. Is there anything else you would like to say about Praxes?

The data from the interviews was collected and organized and relevant parts referenced in the Discussion section. Information about the faculty members who were interviewed is documented in Appendix I.

3. Graduates' Current Occupations

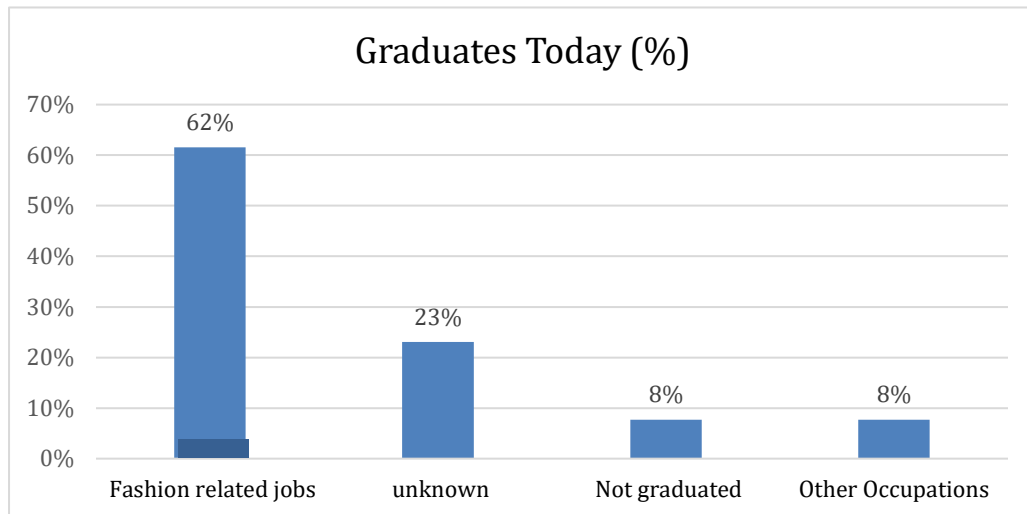


Fig. 1 Graduates today

Among the sixteen students who work in fashion related fields two are actually running their own fashion brands. Surprisingly though, eight of them came to the MA program with degrees that are not fashion related, for example philosophy, visual communication, children's English education, Japanese, architecture, business, cosmetics, and shipping and transportation management.

4. Budget Allocation

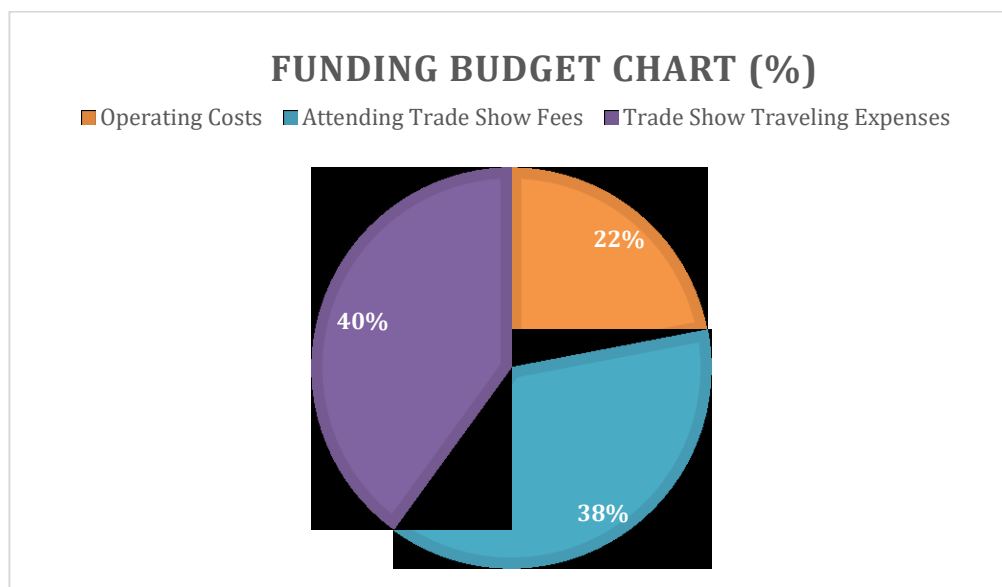


Fig. 2 Funding budget chart

Praxes is funded by a government grant. From Fig. 2 it is clear that trade show fees as well as related transportation and accommodation are the largest expenses. The

operating costs include the buying of fabrics, making samples, and creating the look book.

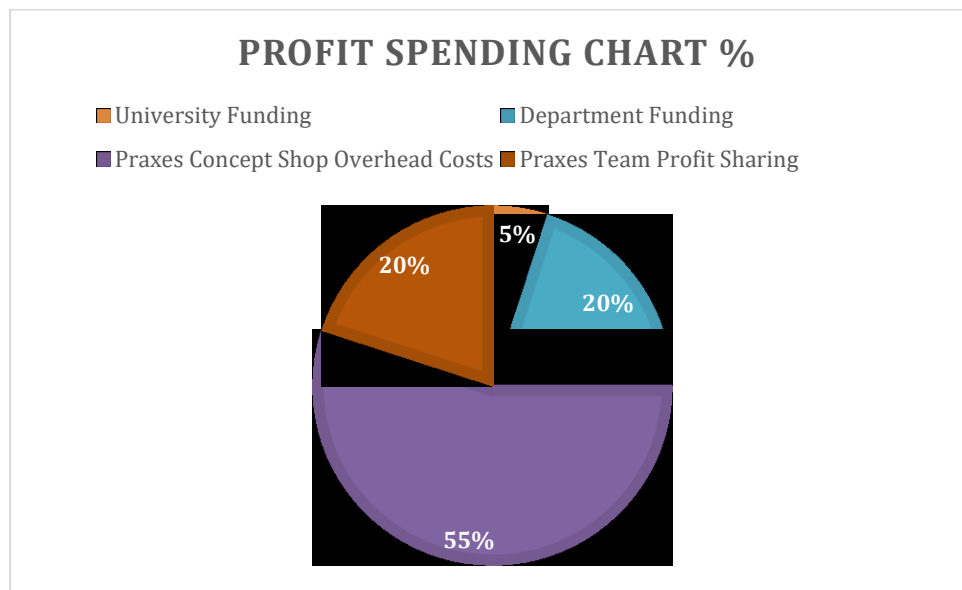


Fig. 3 Profit spending chart

The amount of profit the brand makes every year varies, and so does the number of students. The money is allocated as above and the Praxes team could each receive a tiny or substantial sum, depending on the brand performance.

Discussion

A quick look at Table 1 reveals that the students perceive two weaknesses related to the education goals for this program. They are not that sure that the goal is suited to their future employment needs or that the curriculum matches the goal (Table 1 Q4 and Q5). However, Fig. 1 shows that 62% of the students do find employment in fashion related fields and half of them were not even in fashion related fields before. It does give some indication that the program is effective, at least for some students. What difficulty do the others experience?

Professor Feng-Yu Hsu sheds some light on this in her interview, 'In our BA program we have always been teaching the students that they can go from zero to their own collection, all by themselves, which is great.' But when working on the Praxes team this causes some difficulty, 'It is difficult for them to follow the brand image and identity instead of their personal vision.' Surprisingly, this is more difficult for students who have been studying fashion design before, for example, 'We operate like a real brand and suggested designs will often be subject to changes. This is often not easy for the students to accept.' Kevin Wang commented on this aspect in his interview, 'Most important is to identify the problems and then solve them while considering the brand your own brand.'

This turned out not only to be a lesson for the students, but also for the department, as Professor Feng-Yu Hsu explains, 'For the department this was also a learning curve.'

For the first five years we had designers leading the students to run the brand. Finally we realized that it is not the best way. Designers from outside the faculty still have their own identity they cannot help but impose on Praxes. Also, when a designer leaves, the continuity of the brand identity is interrupted along with the operating procedure and we almost have to start over again.' So currently faculty members join the team and bring their respective skills to the table to assist the students. Till Fang pointed out, 'When I teach I am more subjective to guide them, but the collaborative teaching this year benefits the students because they are exposed to more diverse opinions, so they can find their own voice.'

This is also valuable to the faculty members as it brings them closer to the real world problems faced in the industry. Professor Grace Hsieh commented, 'Teamwork, and thus communication, is key. I have to stay in touch with the design team to effectively plan colors and order the right fabrics to print. I have learned to support the design team instead of following my own opinions.' Kevin Wang also observed another advantage, 'It's great to have more instructors from different fields instead of just one leader so everyone can share expertise and learn together.' This was corroborated by Professor Tseng Tzu-Hui, 'This year, with this collective teaching platform there is a larger team, so during the fashion process there is more time to talk about the prototype and sample making, and teach in more detail so the students can learn how to solve the problems.' Kevin Wang brings up an important point, 'I used to be a student working for Praxes so I don't teach the students but face the problems together with them and learn and gain experience in the process.' Professor Feng-Yu Hsu mentioned an added advantage; 'Working for the Praxes platform is also a valuable opportunity not only to develop your social skills but also to make invaluable connections with your other team members.'

The faculty and students 'face the problems together'. This is a recurrent theme manifesting in words like 'teamwork', 'communication', 'collaboration', 'collective', 'share expertise', and 'learn together'. But what is the cement that can hold the team together? Professor Grace Hsieh said:

Identifying with the group, the common identity and goal, brings the diverse team members together to work on a communal project. We are proud to be from Shih Chien Fashion Design Department and to be Taiwanese and that is an important part of our brand identity. Taiwan represents youthfulness, freedom, open mindedness, respect for others, and creativity unfettered by dogma or political baggage. Praxes aims to equip our students to take this heritage into the world by letting them experience the realities of turning their fashion vision into a profitable venture.

By working on team building around the brand identity, Praxes could help students navigate the difficult transition between being self-sufficient and true only to their own vision, to becoming design professionals who can also apply their skills and talent to benefit communal projects.

Looking at Table 2 and Table 3 it is clear that practical fashion design skills are not rated as 'very important' by the students, and that they feel they have not sufficiently mastered these skills. Also, design thinking ability, which the department regards as crucial, is not rated very highly by the students. Professor Feng-Yu Hsu said, 'Students

coming from traditional classrooms experience several difficulties when they start at Praxes. The running of a brand requires a lot of attention to technical detail involved with production and marketing. Most students would like to focus on design only.' Professor Tseng Tzu-Hui explains, 'Under the time constraints of running a real brand the students need to learn the professional business requirements so they need more help with the connection between materials, the making process, the prototypes and the sizes.' Kevin Wang elaborates, 'When teaching design, the idea is everything, but when working for an actual brand, the design is under budget control. Based on market and budget considerations we need to understand the whole market direction and mass production possibilities.' Till Fang also mentioned this issue, 'Normal teaching is just to help students develop their design aesthetic and inspire them. Praxes leads the students to actually run a company, so they do not design only but also manage the production and do the marketing. It is a broader experience that also goes into more detail.' Finally, Jerry Wang underlined the difference between the BA program and Praxes, 'Conventional learning uses scaffolding and case studies to gradually build skills but Praxes puts you directly on board, and behind the wheel.' As Fig. 3 indicates, the students actually stand to earn money from participating in this program. However, even with this motivation, students are often at a loss when facing these challenges.

The faculty members had several ideas how to smooth over these difficulties. Professor Tseng Tzu-Hui pointed out that when you start working for a clothing brand you receive in-house training. At Praxes students join the program for two years. During the first year they learn from their seniors, and during the second year they take the lead and train their juniors. How can this system run more smoothly? Kevin Wang shared from his extensive experience both as student and teacher at Praxes, 'For brand consistency all information and documents should be saved more systematically so new students and teachers can follow the same standard operating procedure. The logic of organization and calculating the budget are the real skills involved in running a brand.' Till Fang had a similar idea, 'Praxes members stay for only two years so the brand needs a clear design style and target market in order to create continuity. All documents need to be archived and organized. Increased continuity can lead to more efficient use of time.' From a more technical perspective Professor Tseng Tzu-Hui adds, 'We need to build a pattern making system for Praxes to make pattern making easier for future students who come from different backgrounds with different skillsets.' Regarding the difficulty with more practical design related skills that are crucial to make designs viable and require design thinking within the limitations of the budget and the market, the consensus is to develop standard operating procedures which should permanently remain in place, sustaining the identity and continuity of the brand while the students come and go.

Tables 2 and 3 also indicate that the marketing section scores low in importance and mastery, notwithstanding that a large part of the budget is spent on visiting trade shows, as Fig. 2 indicates. Grace Hsieh remarked, 'Even though visiting international trade shows is an invaluable experience, we also need to look at other opportunities for the students to sharpen their marketing skills. Recently we explored more local and regional marketing opportunities, for example 'Under the Radar' in Korea, and 'AXES' in Taiwan. We also opened our own concept shop in 2017.' Kevin Wang pointed out, 'The skill to communicate with your client also becomes important. So we learn to understand the client or market to adjust the whole collection direction.' He suggested, 'It would be great to have more business experts as instructors because our design

skills are good but we could improve our business skills.'

From the perspective of Praxes the department can better evaluate the BA Fashion Design program. From the above it is already clear that many BA students have difficulty adjusting to collaborative environments, and that it is a challenge for them to master the technical skills related to budget, production, and marketing. These are expansive fields and will not easily be encompassed by a BA course. Teamwork and collaboration skills are more easily within reach, and Professor Grace Hsieh remarked:

This collaborative platform allows us to boldly create while at the same time understanding what our role is and learning to effectively communicate with other team members. In our BA program the students work mostly individually and it completes their education if they have this experience. Opening up internship positions at Praxes would also be of benefit to our BA students because they can get practical experience here.

Conclusion

Taking the time to research this program has renewed the staff's inspiration and once again reminded those involved of the potential it has. For students who want to seek employment in the fashion design field it is beneficial. For students who plan to start their own fashion brand it is invaluable. This research has given some perspective on how to make it more effective.

The first and most important lesson is that the brand needs to be developed, and brand means identity. It is common knowledge that brand identity is an important marketing tool, but it is manifest that brand identity is also a way to get the students to collaborate to achieve the Praxes signature style. In the fashion industry you get paid a salary to follow instructions, but for many students it is a new experience to put their personal style on the backburner and apply their creativity to a communal venture.

Secondly, it is clear that there is still a gap between BA Fashion Design education and the industry. It is the aim of every institution to close this gap, but there are many technical skills required to get a good design from paper into a showroom, and they are not easily covered within the scope of a BA degree. The Praxes platform is a good opportunity to get introduced to these aspects of the industry. Training can be streamlined and more continuity can be ensured by archiving and organising documents and developing standard operating procedures in order to facilitate this. Teachers adept in all aspects from design planning to marketing need to be on board to guide the students.

Thirdly, in the process of researching this study, the necessity of efficient ongoing data collection with the aim to keep streamlining the program, became apparent. Accurate data is essential in order to apply Lin Norton's ITDEM method (Norton 2009), where first the issues are identified, then how to address the issues is worked out, then the process is carried out, next the results are evaluated, and finally future practice is modified. Action research for a long-term collaborative teaching program requires the whole team to be aware of the students' and other instructors' experiences.

The primary lesson we learnt was that one needs to keep learning and keep adjusting to stay in fashion!

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Appendix I

Praxes Faculty Members Interviewed

1. Assistant Professor Jerry Wang is a fashion designer running his own brand. He worked at Praxes for over two years from 2015-2017 as the creative director leading the team.
2. Assistant Professor Tseng Tzu-Hui is teaching pattern making and draping. She has been at Praxes since 2013, managing the process from design to producing samples, and the adjustment of samples.
3. Kevin Wang lectures in pattern making and traditional Chinese costumes. He has been teaching at Praxes for almost three years, advising on budget control, communicating with the production team about making the garments, teaching the students how to make production sheets, making sure the pattern is tightly fitted on the fabric so the right quantity of fabric is purchased, and calculating the cost of fasteners and trimmings.
4. Associate Professor Grace Hsieh teaches design fundamentals, printed textiles, dyes and textiles testing. She started working with Praxes in 2017, assisting with printed textiles.
5. Till Fang lectures in men's wear and women's wear design and brand visual image planning. He started at Praxes in 2018, first as consultant, and later as creative director in charge of the collection, trade show design, and look book design.
6. Associate Professor, Feng-Yu Hsu is the Head of the Fashion Design Department at Shih Chien University, Taiwan. She is also the CEO of PRAXES. She teaches master's programs in Fashion Design, International Fashion Marketing and Practice (Praxes). She initially applied for a grant to launch and fund Praxes.