

Making Reading Visible in The School of Fashion and Textiles

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Context for the Project

Data collected from the DMU SAE (Self-assessment exercise) shows that only 29% of new (L4) students mark themselves as confident in relation to academic reading. This contrasts with higher levels of confidence in areas like 'computer skills' (68%) and digital literacy (59%) and, interestingly, levels of confidence in relation to academic writing were also higher, standing at 40%.

Reflecting on this data and looking for related literature on academic reading, led us to see the 'invisibility' or 'mystery' that seemed to lie around academic reading. What are the expectations of academic reading? Do we articulate and scaffold these for our students? We often focus on teaching or structuring academic writing but not reading (out of 105 Learning Services workshops offered at DMU this year, 32 had writing in the title, including a whole week of workshops entitled 'Successful Writing Week', and only 4 had reading in their title.)

The literature demonstrates the same focus on academic writing. There is a much clearer idea of what constitutes writing in Higher Education than what constitutes reading. There is a significant 'silence' in the literature as to what 'counts' as reading

Academic Literacies Critique

The university participates in an "institutional practice of mystery" (Lillis, 2001, p. 58) Implicit and unspoken academic conventions intimidate and create confusion and disadvantage for non-traditional students. University conventions can be difficult to articulate and name for those immersed in them, and extremely difficult to discern and understand for newcomers to the university. **Unless academic conventions and skills are explicitly taught, the university will continue to exclude and undermine the participation of non-traditional students.**

It is important for lecturers to make efforts to de-mystify academic conventions for students, including commonly unnamed and untaught academic and disciplinary skills. **Students benefit from explicit instruction and support, rather than being left to "read between the lines" or independently discover the "secrets" to succeeding at university through osmosis (Elton, 2010; Lillis, 2001).**

Reading in fashion-based subjects and project aims

Through the work of CLaSS that involves working alongside students from disciplines across all four faculties, it is apparent that the approaches, expectations and requirements around academic reading differ.

In the School of Fashion and Textiles, many of our students struggle with the critical and contextual components of their degree programmes. There is often a conflict between immersive studio practice and classroom-based thinking, reading and writing activities where written outputs are considered separate to visual work (Fitzwater, 2018).

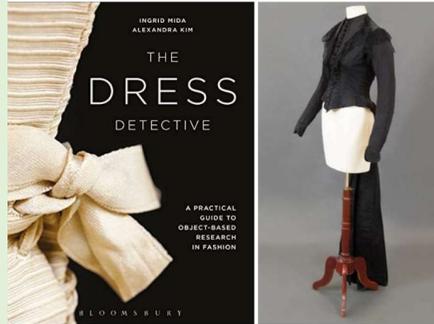
Fitzwater also goes on to say that Art and Design-based education often sees high levels of engagement from neurodiverse as opposed to neurotypical students. At times, this presents as students' difficulty in finding information and the inability to narrow down a search for a text, while at others it presents as apathy towards reading with students finding it hard to see the benefits of the process when they can simply "search for a quote" to demonstrate their understanding. We are interested in how Francis (2009) suggests that reading must be 'active' and students must work on 'specific points of the writing' that leads to 'excitement and confidence with the text.'

- **The aim of this project was to engage design-based students in the process of reading in such a way that instilled greater levels of confidence in the process. In order to achieve this, we wanted to make writing a visible and visually attractive experience for students.**

Our Reading intentions:

- Each week, we expect our students to do a small amount of reading. We are interested in them being able to make meaning from the text rather than simply to read a set number of pages. We want our students to read meaningfully and mindfully. In the example on the right, we pre-selected text that was pertinent to the theme of that week's workshop which was based on writing a garment analysis.
- We took a small section (no more than two paragraphs) of text and pasted it into the Microsoft Sway document.
- We wanted students to appreciate the beauty of the book as an object and to see the relevance between academic texts and the design world. Our example here was accompanied by the front cover and other images from the text.

Read the following extract of a garment analysis of a Man's Evening Suit/Tailcoat. This illustrates the writing style required for a good analysis.



Dating this evening suit to about 1912–1922 places it at a dynamic intersection of tradition and change, both in terms of the production of men's clothing, and the increasing relaxation of sartorial codes for formal continued to play an important role in menswear well into the twentieth century, the role of ready-to-wear men's clothing was well established by the 1910s, with mail-order catalogues offering stock evening suits from the turn of the century (1999: 28). Nonetheless, wealthier customers might still choose to visit a tailor for a bespoke or made-to-measure suit, in order to secure a custom fit, and better quality fabrics offered by a tailor. The quality of fabric used for this evening suit—a finely woven wool with an understated stripe, which has worn well—suggests that it was a bespoke suit. This is supported by another, almost imperceptible detail.

Questions on the text:

1. What impact does class play on how menswear was purchased in the early 20th century?
2. What signs should we look for in a made-to-measure suit?
3. What can clothing tell us about the body that has inhabited it?



Further Reading

- **Mida, Ingrid E. and Alexandra Kim. (2015) *The Dress Detective: A Practical Guide to Object-Based Research in Fashion*, Bloomsbury Publishing. You can read the [full text online](#). This is the set text we are using on the course and gives a really comprehensive guide to doing object-based research**

Microsoft Sway:

The images to the left show how the Microsoft Sway Programme was used as it has a visually appealing choice of templates with plenty of space to include images, video recordings, hyperlinks and text. The colour range and font choice has a contemporary feel. Students have commented positively on the 'look' of the platform.

Copyright regulations still apply in the same way as they would for photocopying. Rohit Tailor's support was invaluable here (Content Delivery, Kimberlin Library).

Sway can be viewed horizontally or vertically. We chose a vertical layout so as to emulate the experience of scrolling.

MS Sway allowed us to paste text and questions together therefore, enabling a UDL approach where instructions are made clear. The scrolling mechanism allows students to move seamlessly between the two.

MS Sway allowed us to hyperlink to texts on the library Website. This allows keen students to read further without having to create and open new tabs. The Sway format allows students to seamlessly engage in question, text and further reading.

To view our example of Sway, click here:



Student Feedback

- *The composition, presentation and delivery of the reading was all extremely informative and aided in my understanding of the content.*
- *I liked it as there was key visuals to go with some descriptions and we learnt methods and writing techniques looking at past work and examples with images too. The layout was good to understand and was helpful to practice in the lesson.*
- *Yes, it was very neat and organised with everything coming together on one screen.*
- *Yes loved it presented in bite sizes pieces and not too overwhelming.*
- *The way that reading was presented in pre lecture materials and in seminars was great. Very accessible and great reading suggestions. Something I found a bit challenging is reading some of the library books online as the pdf format they appear in on screen was quite difficult to read. Where I could, I would go into the library and get a physical copy.*
- *It was very easy to find material for the essay thanks to the way that the reading was presented. Everything very relevant and noticeable clear connection to the possible essay topics.*

All students that participated in the post-course questionnaire, noticed that their confidence in academic reading had improved by the end of the course.

Developing a Reading Culture - Top Tips

1. **Make books visible in the learning space:** draw readers in by placing interesting books, articles and newspapers on desks as students enter the room. Allow students to browse them informally (without any instruction, prompts or objectives) as you set up your lesson.
2. **Talk to students about the books you are reading:** tempt students with fictional texts as well as non-fiction books. This will enable them to understand that you too are a reader and make time to read. (Check out our 'What I'm Reading' poster!)
3. **Create a culture of reading in your department, school or faculty:** establish book groups, and allow students to actively see reading adopted by all.
4. **Bring fiction into the classroom:** Are there examples from literary texts that you can use to demonstrate a point on sustainability, textiles and the body, or the designed world?
5. **Consider visually appealing digital tools:** Try using MS Sway to entice students to read in much the same way as they would on their phones. The act of scrolling to read the text is similar to browsing on social media platforms and can reduce those feelings of disengagement and otherness.
6. **Keep reading lists small but perfectly formed:** a smaller reading list encourages students to make meaningful choices about their reading rather than feeling overwhelmed. In the School of Fashion and Textiles, we choose one key text per module and another complementary text for keen readers.

Further Reading

- Bharuthram, S. and Clarence, S. (2015) 'Teaching academic reading as a disciplinary practice in higher education', *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 29 (2), 42-55.
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- Maguire et al. (2020) 'Reading to Be: The role of academic reading in emergent academic and professional student identities', *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 17(2).
- Milner, K. and Merdian, H. (2020) "'It's not a waste of time'" Academics' views on the role and function of academic reading: A thematic analysis', *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 17(2).
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