

CHAPTER ELEVEN: If Ideas were Fashion

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If Ideas WERE Fashion

DAVID WONG AND DANAH HENRIKSEN

INTRODUCTION

Standing in a Paris Metro subway, somewhere between Les Champs d'Elysees and L'Arc de Triomphe, I gaze at the glossy placards above the seated passengers. Givenchy, Piaget, Lancome ... a variety of alluring, attractive images. I think about the thousands of Metro riders who also gaze at these evocative images and, perhaps, are inspired to imagine a different world, a different way of living. As I scan the stretch of images along the line of the windows, my gaze suddenly stops. It's a simple, but engaging graphic of the earth and a single star. To one side, it says (in French), "When you look at Alpha Centauri—the closest star to Earth—you are watching something that happened over four years ago." Like the images for perfume and furs on either side, here is an advertisement, except it's for a science idea. Here in Paris, where the distinction between style and living is beautifully blurred, I am inspired to wonder, "What if ideas were fashion?"

WHY CONSIDER IDEAS AS FASHION?

We are fascinated with fashion. In its presence we look or turn away, imitate or reject, admire or dismiss. We spend an extraordinary amount of time, energy, and money to fashion ourselves and the world around us. Middle and high school students are especially fashion conscious. Most students would agree that their lives are made more interesting, meaningful, and beautiful by fashion.

We as educators should be envious of the intensity of observation and imagination associated with students' fascination with fashion. If only our own teaching could be as engaging. We may also wish that our teaching transformed the students' world as much as the experience of fashion seems to. Thus, we propose

that provocative implications emerge from the question, “What if ideas—substance of school—were fashion?” We discuss how the phenomenon of fashion can be a framework for thinking about teaching and learning.

To propose that subject-matter ideas could be fashion is to imply similarities between the *New York Times* Style section and the *Educational Researcher* Featured Article section, between FCUK and F=MA, between students in school halls and students in shopping malls. Within the circles of “serious-minded” scholarship, our proposal runs the risk of crossing the fine line between the cutting edge and over the edge of scholarship. Here are a few reasons why we think it is a risk worth taking.

Fashion is a deeply engaging experience. Fashion fascinates middle and high school students. One only needs to note the amount of time, energy, and resources they expend on fashion to be convinced. Furthermore, fashion engages not just young people but adults as well, not just in this culture but across cultures, and not just today but throughout the ages. We call fashion a “deep inclination” because the attraction to fashion has been evident in a wide variety of people over long periods of time. Because fashion is a deep inclination, we propose that it has the potential to be the basis for creating powerful educational experiences.

We note here that the primary goal of our work is to identify new ways in which school can become more compelling to students. We begin by first looking at the kinds of situations in which students seem to be naturally deeply engaged. The casual observer may note that this is already the cornerstone for pedagogical strategies such as student-centered instruction. In these approaches, the basic task is to describe how the subject matter of school can be connected to topics that interest students. In our approach, we are less concerned with topical similarities between the students’ lives in and out of the classroom and more concerned with finding similar experiential qualities between life in and out of school. For example, in fashion experiences students are compelled by the imaginative consideration of possibilities and by visual or tactile forms of expression. They may be fleetingly transformed or revived in the experience of fashion. If this is so, we recommend that educators strive to create instructional experiences that similarly enliven students.

Thus, our intention is not simply to suggest that teaching should be more engaging by making connections to things that are currently hip or “in fashion” among students (although this is not a bad idea and is the main thrust of most approaches that take students’ interests seriously). Instead, we recommend that educators become more attuned to the psychological qualities that make the experience of fashion so absorbing. With this knowledge teachers may begin to create experiences with similar qualities in the classroom.

How can the substance of school be similar to objects of fashion? To equate ideas with iPods may seem a contrived metaphor with little redeeming value.

Yet we would ask scholars to hold off this reflexive reaction, and engage in some “methodological belief” and willingly “try on” an unconventional perspective (Elbow, 1986). In moments of playful open-mindedness, we might consider how the underlying psychological, social, and cultural dynamics in the rise of a new fashion item—say an iPod—are similar to the dynamics of being absorbed by a new idea in class. Both involve the awakening of perception, the engagement of thinking and feeling, and the interchange of viewpoints and experiences with others. Without making any claims about the relative worth of iPod and school ideas, we can agree that the experiences share educationally relevant qualities.

We push the comparison further and point to one notable difference: students rarely find the experience of school as engaging as fashion. By “engaging,” we refer to more than the engagement of the emotion, but also to the intellect—the very part of the student that schools seek to stimulate and develop. Anyone who doubts that fashion engages the intellect need only look at teenagers playing popular video games. Notice the detail in their observations, the depth of their knowledge, and the richness of their discussion and analysis. Similarly, in the realm of fashion experience we can find the same sharpness of perception and the same sensitivity to detail and nuance. If only students could distinguish the differences between plant and animal cells as easily and eagerly as some can distinguish real from knockoff Louis Vuitton handbags!

To fashion is to imagine, create, and express. It should be clear by this point that we are primarily concerned with the experience of fashion and not with the objects of fashion. Of particular importance in the experience of fashion are the involvement of the imagination and the consideration of the possible. Whether trying on a new outfit or designing a science project, the fashion experience evokes anticipating, hoping, dreaming, wishing, desiring, and becoming. The energy, drama, and meaning of the experience are in exploring the imaginative bridge between the actual and an allusive possibility. At its best, education can and should do the same. Within the framework of Dewey’s aesthetics, the meaning of intense, transformative experiences emerges from exploring the imaginative bridge between the actual and the possible (Dewey, 1934; Jackson, 1998).

Although we have pointed out the ways that fashion fascinates people and is an integral part of what it means to be human, we also recognize that there may be a strong negative reaction to our suggestion that ideas could be fashion. There is no shortage of aphorisms expressing this sentiment:

“Fashion is something that goes in one year and out the other.”
Denise Klahn, writer.

“Fashion, n. A despot whom the wise ridicule and obey.” *The Devil’s Dictionary*, 1911.
Ambrose Bierce, writer.

“We forfeit three-fourths of ourselves to be like other people.”
Arthur Schopenhauer, philosopher.

“I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year’s fashions.” In a letter to
Committee on Un-American Activities of the House of Representatives, 1952.
Lillian Hellman, playwright.

We acknowledge that the lens of fashion has pitfalls as well as potential. Ironically, many authors and readers of this volume may be among the most severe critics of the fashion idea. Those who are familiar with societal inequities and cultural means by which these inequities are sustained are likely to be especially wary of the realm of fashion. Furthermore, although the fashion metaphor emphasizes inspired imagination and original expression, it can also connote frivolous action and slavish conformity.

But, what provocative metaphor of learning has ever been immune to unflattering interpretation? Associationist models of learning were seen as simplistic and mechanical, the computer metaphor was devoid of emotion, the expert/novice paradigm smacked of authoritarianism, and the various forms of postmodern perspectives have been dismissed as hopelessly relativistic. We think of it this way: A metaphor or perspective is a suggestion to be explored rather than an assertion to be proven as true or false, or good or bad. The role of the metaphor is to express a new idea in a comprehensible way or an existing idea with renewed clarity and power. In their role as professionals, teachers explore these possibilities and determine for themselves the meaning and value of any new idea. We hope the fashion metaphor is unusual and provocative and, thus, has potential to lead the open-minded educator to explore new possibilities for engaging their students.

To ensure that the metaphor is understood, we define key terms clearly and specify what is and is not part of association between fashion and learning. First, we define the educative fashion experience as one that is mindful, rather than mindless. Sure there are both kinds ... the key is to understand the difference. By “mindful” we are not suggesting that the experience should be a dry intellectual activity but rather one of vital and lively perception.

Second, we see value in emphasizing the creative aspect of fashion. Life is made more interesting, meaningful, artful and beautiful in fashion. In fact, when “fashion” is considered as an active verb—meaning “to form”—an undeniably creative and existential flavor emerges. In an existentialist’s worldview the meaning of life is created primarily through individual choices and actions. Thus, the relationship between fashion and life takes on even greater significance. We might see that all our conscious acts, even the act of not acting, are existential choices, or “fashion statements.” To fashion something, be it an idea or an artifact, is to give meaning to one’s existence (Dewey, 1958; Nietzsche, 1978; Sartre, 1943). In this

light, the intense curiosity that students have for fashion is more than interest in mere accoutrements but in a deeper, more significant desire to become a certain kind of person (Back, 1985; Brubach, 1999; Davis, 1992; Steele, 1985).

Further consideration of the meaning of fashion as an act of creating highlights its close relationship with “style.” Interestingly, common perceptions seem to be much more positive about style than fashion. Perhaps the term “style” better conveys individuality and expression of self, whereas “fashion” connotes conformity and suppression of self.

“The style is the man himself.”

Greek proverb

“Proper words in proper places make the true definition of style.”

Jonathan Swift, writer.

“The most original thing a writer can do is to write like himself. It is also his most difficult task.”

Robertson Davies, writer.

Thus, if we consider that fashion can mean to style or to create, then the purpose of education is to help students “to fashion” a worthwhile existence, rather than “to be in fashion.” Indeed, the elements of style—originality, flair, and confidence—seem to describe equally well the goals of both fashion and education.

How to find a good idea: Taking a fresh perspective on enduring educational issues. Although scholarship in education values originality, it is, in fact, an inherently conservative endeavor. The value of any new piece of work is largely associated with the degree to which it is grounded in and gives credit to the work that preceded it. The explicit and implicit conventions of scholarship demand that new ideas be firmly grounded in an existing conceptual framework or legitimately born from one of the “parent” disciplines such as psychology, philosophy, anthropology, and sociology (Shulman, 1986).

In this spirit, we wish to acknowledge the “family resemblance” of our work to other scholarship in education. The metaphor of learning as the fashion of ideas actually shares much in common with mainstream metaphors such as learning as identity formation, learning as participation in meaningful shared activity, and learning as language appropriation (e.g., Gergen, 1994; Lave and Wenger, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). Connections to other scholarship facilitate the comprehension and assimilation of new ideas and lessen the possibility that new ideas might be summarily rejected because they seem too incomprehensible or unconventional.

Sometimes, new ideas emerge from within an existing paradigm—a conceptual system that provides a perspective for seeing, describing, and understanding

educational phenomena such as highly motivated behavior. At other times, as with our work, new ideas are conceived outside the parent disciplines. Instead of returning to academic disciplines for inspiration, we looked at culture, broadly speaking, for ideas about highly motivated behavior. We looked at both pop culture and art culture; we looked at contemporary culture as well as culture through history. We asked, “What kinds of phenomena do people seem to be deeply engaged by across time and across age groups?” One enduring phenomena of fascination was fashion: people of all ages, across time, are drawn to fashion. (Examples of other “deep inclinations” include an almost innate fascination with sublime experiences, the idea of redemption, sex and violence, heroes, and tales of love overcoming great odds.)

(Note: Our break from the parent disciplines may remind some readers of action research (e.g., Carr and Kemmis, 1986) and grounded theory (e.g., Glaser, 1992). However, there are significant differences in how we identify phenomena of interest and develop central constructs.)

One final thought on this matter: given the relatively minimal impact of educational scholarship on educational practice in the past century, we feel safe in pointing to a need—perhaps a dire need—for educational scholarship that reaches beyond our “parent disciplines” in search of new ideas. There is no shortage of intelligent people in the areas of fashion, advertising, and marketing. Professionals in these domains regularly affect the lives of many people. We have much to learn from them.

THROUGH THE LENS OF FASHION: WHAT WE MIGHT SEE IF WE CONSIDERED IDEAS AS FASHION

Once we identified fashion as a “deep inclination,” we took a closer look at its expression in classic and contemporary art, literature, and scholarship. In this process, we gained a deeper appreciation for the phenomenon and a firmer basis for generating implications for education. We searched for fashion phenomena in which people—especially young people—were deeply engaged. In this section, we discuss two examples—the Apple iPod and the television show *What Not to Wear* (*WNTW*). These examples are contemporary and popular—hardly the kind of citations one finds in the literature reviews of most serious scholarship. However, there is no denying the audience’s intensity of attention, imagination, and eagerness associated with these particular phenomena. Because this kind of intense engagement is a central aim of educators, we believe there are lessons to be learned from a closer examination of these fashion phenomena.

THE APPLE IPOD: FASHION, ADVERTISING, IDEAS, TEACHING

The Apple iPod is a portable digital music player that comes in a variety of colors, sizes, and storage capacities. First introduced in 2002, the iPod has since become a massive commercial success. Although many other portable digital music players are available, the iPod has become the must-have item and in 2005 dominated the competition with an astounding 87 percent share of the market (actually down from a high of 92 percent). What accounts for the iPod's success? Granted, iPods are a well-designed piece of technology, but we might also say this of a kitchen spatula. With apologies to architect Michael Graves and his line of high-fashion kitchen utensils available at your local Target store, the iPod is more likely to be at the top of many gift wish lists. Among the many brands of portable, digital music players on the market, the iPod is the most coveted. Something has elevated the iPod beyond pleasant functionalism into the realm of fashion. Ask for an explanation from young iPod owners and you are likely to hear that iPods are, in a word, cool. Why is the iPod such a fashion phenomenon and what can we educators learn from it?

Silhouettes: Ads and the Inspiration of Imagination

It may be important to observe that not only is the iPod itself considered cool, but the advertisements for the iPod are also the objects of intense observation and discussion. The "Silhouettes" ads are probably the best known in the iPod advertising campaign. These ads have appeared in print, television, and Internet media and consist of dancing silhouettes against a solid neon background. The Silhouette ad campaign was created by the TBWA\Chiat\Day advertising firm and won the Grand EFFIE Award (the preeminent award in the world of advertising/marketing that recognizes "creative achievement in meeting and exceeding advertising objectives"). The awards are based two-thirds on results achieved and one-third on creativity. Seth Stevenson (2004), a reporter for Slate and National Public Radio, described the iPod ads in this way:

let's talk about what the ads get right. For one, the songs (from groups like Jet and Black Eyed Peas) are extremely well-chosen. Just indie enough so that not everybody knows them; just mainstream enough so that almost everybody likes them. But as good as the music is, the visual concept is even better. It's incredibly simple: never more than three distinct colors on the screen at any one time, and black and white are two of them. What makes it so bold are those vast swaths of neon monochrome. This simplicity highlights the dance moves, but also—and more importantly—it highlights the iPod. The key to it all is the silhouettes. What a brilliant way to showcase

a product. Almost everything that might distract us—not just background scenery, but even the actors' faces and clothes—has been eliminated. All we're left to focus on is that iconic gizmo. What's more, the dark black silhouettes of the dancers perfectly offset the iPod's gleaming white cord, earbuds, and body.

"Silhouettes" is, indeed, a powerful ad. The music and images converge to create a compelling sense of style and cool. The ad seizes the viewer's attention and attunes them to the concept of the iPod.

Of course, not every ad is as compelling as "Silhouettes," nor is every viewer moved by these ads, nor is every person crazy about iPods. Thus, in order to understand how the ad works its magic we start with the assumption that there is nothing inherently compelling about the ad itself, nor about the iPod. The experience of any ad, product, or idea becomes compelling when there is a certain quality to the interaction between it and the audience. What are these qualities? In our opinion, the magic of fashion is that it inspires the imagination. iPods and Silhouettes are cool for this very reason. Specifically, there is a consideration of possibilities, of a world that could be. The realm of imaginative possibility can include personal and interpersonal qualities, physical, intellectual, and emotional capacities, or the nature of the world around us. In the experience of fashion, as we move back and forth between what is and what could be, we feel movement, growth, and a greater sense of vitality.

How do the iPod Silhouettes ads inspire the imagination? Here are a few possibilities:

- The dancers are vibrant and expressive: those who respond to "Silhouettes" are likely to also wish they could be so able to be so beautifully moved by music.
- The music, image of the person, and the movement are ultrahip. The more you aspire to be part of the culture suggested in the ad, the more compelling it will be.
- The design of the ad focuses our attention on certain things and not on others. Like good teaching, the art of the ad is to draw attention to what is important. In the case of Silhouettes, it is music, movement, freedom, fun, and, of course, the iPod itself.
- Silhouettes both seizes and holds our attention. The sound, contrast, movement, colors are "catchy" and grab our attention right away. However, like all good advertising, art, and, teaching, the beholder is rewarded for spending time and looking closer (see Dewey's 1913, *Interest and Effort in Education* for a discussion of catching and holding attention.) For example, the silhouettes turn out not to be quite completely monochromatic black. In the nuances of shading, the careful observer begins to see

facial features, clothing, and accessories (other than the iPod). Also, after repeated viewing, one cannot help wonder “how did they do that?” The amount of discussion on the Internet on this topic attests to Silhouettes power to catch and hold viewers’ interest.

To wish, to aspire, to hope, and to wonder involve the imaginative consideration of possibilities. The possibility of being alive with greater skill or intensity is compelling.

The experience continues beyond the advertisement to the product itself. The power of the ads is related to the degree that the imaginative bridge spans reality and a conceivable possibility. It is difficult to feel compelled by that which is completely beyond the realm of the possible. “Silhouettes” and other effective fashion experiences create fantasies that lie beyond what exists but not so far beyond that they seem impossible or unattainable. To the degree that “to exist” means to live, the stretching of existence from what is to what could be is, literally, to expand what it is to be alive.

Beyond the Ad: From Imagined Possibility to Fashioned Reality

So far in this discussion of iPod ads, the focus has been on the experience of the advertisement. Granted the experience of the ad may be compelling, but what else is? What happens when the commercial is over? When the page is turned? Is the experience of fashion only in the moment? First, the value of experiences that are “only in the moment” should not be diminished for one simple reason: life is “only” a series of moments. Furthermore, a deeply felt moment leaves an impression that, in turn, shapes future moments. As Einstein famously noted, “A mind that has been stretched will never return to its original dimension.”

Thus, the real issue of concern to educators is how the “momentary” experience of the advertisement influences subsequent moments of experience. The belief that present experiences either enhance or diminish possibilities for subsequent experiences was fundamental to Dewey’s (1938) philosophy and views of education (he called it the “principle of continuity of experience”). Furthermore, the imaginative consideration of possibilities was an integral element of learning. In educative experiences, possibilities are not only conceived but explored. From this exploration come new perceptions, relations with the world, and understanding and sensitivity.

The goal of all advertising and marketing is to get people to invest in a product. What happens to the experience over once a person has purchased an iPod? For some, nothing: the ad is observed, perhaps with “interest,” but nothing subsequent is affected. Others may be compelled by the ad to purchase an iPod. As

a fashion phenomenon, individuals may “try on” some of the imagined possibilities to see how they “fit” with who they are or would like to become. Perhaps, in their lives with an iPod, they will listen more intently to music or dance with new enthusiasm. Perhaps, they will see themselves or others will see them as more sophisticated or cool. Perhaps, the iPod will open up new opportunities for interacting with others by sharing music or the details of each other’s iPod experiences. In these ways, fashion and ideas live on beyond the immediate experience of advertisements.

Silhouette’s Implications for Education: Image and Imagination

The power of images. In the iPod’s Silhouette ads, the look, the sound, and the movements all cohere to give the ad a distinct feel of style and fun. For other ads, the feel can be completely different. For example, Nike’s famous “Freestyle” shoe commercials exude grace, athleticism and confidence. Old Kodak film commercials were well known for their dripping sentimentalism. The *feel* or *sense* is the heart of the aesthetic experience—it is what strikes us first, moves us through the experience, and lingers with us afterward. To create images that evoke a distinctive and powerful feel is central to the art of fashion and advertising. It is also central to the art of teaching.

Images and descriptions abound in school textbooks, posters, and lectures. Why is it that these images usually fail to seize the students’ imagination? Perhaps, these images are typically not artistic—that is, they were not created to evoke an aesthetic experience. Instead, many images are intended to be descriptive or illustrative and represent ideas in a straightforward manner. However, in artistic images, ideas are evoked rather than represented. The images are more implicit than explicit, more connotative than denotative. Imaginative thought and feeling are stirred in situations that are suggestive, alluring, and intriguing.

Let us reconsider the images we might use in schools. What if teachers and students in art, creative writing, or multimedia courses were given the charge to create images that stirred the hearts and minds of students? The intent of these “image makeovers” would be for these visual, aural, and textual pieces to become more artistic in their design and more aesthetic in their experience.

The all important “buzz” When it comes to subject matter ideas, how often do students excitedly ask their friends “have you heard...?” or “did you see...?” Any marketer will tell you that the buzz—the spontaneous sharing of information—is a crucial to the success of any product. The buzz can emerge in a variety of ways. For example, what exactly made Juicy Couture the uniform of choice for the high school crowd? Perhaps, in a saturated market, the faint buzz that resonates below the radar might have had a larger impact than the ubiquitous campaigns.

The fact that Juicy's fame developed through word of mouth steeped the company in cultish cool from the onset. Also, the genius of Juicy's often explicitly monikered clothing is the inherent self-promotional factor. Whether adorning the likes of a Hollywood hipster or teenage trendsetter, there is never a question as to who created the ounce of cotton proudly proclaiming "Juicy Debutante" or "Old School Juicy." Much of Juicy Couture's perceived legitimacy among teenagers is rooted in the joint adoration of peers and idols, rather than in a manufactured image hyped by a corporate entity. Students have literally given the company its advertising legs, strutting their logo-emblazoned drawstring pants throughout the corridors of high schools across America.

Although the way that the buzz comes about may vary from one fashion phenomenon to another, the bottom line is that people are spontaneously talking about IT. The energy of the buzz is evident in the telltale phrases "Have you seen ..." or "Have you heard ..." If subject-matter ideas are to be fashion, then educators need to become more savvy about the nature of "the buzz" and how to create it.

The model image. When we consider the images of fashion, we may be inclined to think of the celebrities. We may be tempted to think that star power is a driving force in any fashion happening. For example, Nike ads are famous for featuring well-known athletes at the height of their careers. Nike maintains an absurdly deep stable of superstar athletes—Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan, Mia Hamm, and Lance Armstrong—to name only a few. However, it would be shortsighted to conclude that we are compelled by fashion only because of the celebrity image. Successful advertising campaigns have been created both with and without recognizable celebrities (T-Mobile's Catherine Zeta-Jones and Verizon's "Can you hear me now?" guy or U2 singing and anonymous silhouettes dancing on iPod commercials).

If successful ads do not necessarily involve celebrities, we might think that these ads are successful because the people are attractive. The people in the iPod ads may not be celebrities, but their silhouettes make it clear that they are attractive and talented. Or, make a quick flip through any magazine and you are likely to encounter images of people who may not be celebrities but are still more attractive, much more attractive, than ordinary folks. The world of fashion and advertising seems to be the exclusive domain of attractive people. Is this true, and is it a problem?

Certainly, celebrity and attractive people help to draw attention to a product. There's no point in trying to debate or over-theorize this simple observation. It is not our task in this chapter to conjecture about whether this inclination is cultural, biological, learned or otherwise. It is also not our intent to go on at length about the social and moral implications of this inclination. Suffice to say, our fascination with certain kinds of people is a powerful inclination. This inclination has the

potential for both positive and negative consequences. Our primary task in this chapter is to appreciate the positive potential and to consider ways this potential can be developed for educational purposes. We take our inclination to notice attractive people as a matter of fact and a starting point for other considerations. Questions such as “What makes someone attractive in addition to celebrity status and physical beauty?” emerge as more interesting to us than whether this inclination is good or bad.

We suspect that the people in successful ads, whether they are well-known or not, represent ideas in ways that evoke feelings of connection and possibility. Thus, a picture of Einstein standing at a chalkboard may not actually be the best advertising image for the laws of gravitation. Do kids really relate to him as a person, or is it just that crazy hair? Also, the iconic image of Einstein with his tongue out does not really give the feel of what it would be like to really be moved by a physics idea. The iPod Silhouette ad, by contrast, directly expresses the experience of being with the iPod. You want to get an iPod because you want to be part of that experience. Thus, if the science teacher’s goal is to sell a science idea, perhaps a more compelling image would show an anonymous high school student in the grip of a powerful idea. For example, the ad might express her dawning realization that both she and the moon in the night sky are held captive by the gravitational attraction with the Earth.

WHAT NOT TO WEAR: FASHION, TEACHING, AND LEARNING

In this section, we focus more directly on the issue of practice and address the question, “If ideas were fashion, how might we teach?” To begin, we emphasize that there is no one right way to teach ideas as fashion. We endorse any instructional approach that inspires students to imagine possibilities, helps them create an existence that is more worthwhile and beautiful, and, in general, provides opportunities for them to experience how “cool” ideas can be.

It may be coincidence, but there has been a recent convergence of fashion and instruction in popular culture. The “expert re-fashioning” genre seems to be more popular than ever on television. In one week of cable television program viewing, one can observe experts helping novices refashion their clothes, hair, face, and body. And, the inclination to make over does not stop at personal appearance. Other targets of expert-assisted renovation include one’s house, car, family, and lifestyle.

We emphasize again that we make no claims about the value of any of these programs or any fashion phenomenon in general. Our point is that the popularity of these programs is evidence for a strong interest in being helped at fashioning. These shows tap into something and we aim to understand this source of potential energy.

There are many examples in this expert re-fashioning genre. We focus on one of the most popular, longest running shows. *What Not to Wear (WNTW)* is a hugely popular show on Discovery's The Learning Channel with a relatively simple premise: two style experts, Stacey London and Clinton Kelly, help re-create the fashion sensibilities of a person who has been deemed to need a "fashion intervention." Within the larger framework of the ideas-as-fashion metaphor, the format of this show may be woven into an educational representation, considering subject-matter ideas and learning in the same light as new clothes and fashion sensibility.

Each episode begins with a different candidate, nominated by friends and family members to receive style expertise and advice, as well as a budget for a new wardrobe. The process begins by breaking down the participant's fashion missteps and misguided ideas with a brutally honest evaluation from resident experts Stacey and Clinton. Acceptance of the benefits of a fashion budget, advice and stylized look is contingent upon the participant's willingness to try new things, be open to a new personal fashion sensibility and recognize its effect upon both their intrinsic life and their experience of the world. They must allow the experts to honestly critique and in many cases throw away (or donate) their existing wardrobe in favor of a fresh set of ideas.

These new fashion ideas are important in that they are tailored to the personality and individualism of each participant. There is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to putting everyone in a universal trendy look, but fashion is viewed as a means to visually express something about oneself and to experiment with a personal aesthetic. The primary rule for learning about fashion here is that "*you've got to try it on*" in order to fully experience the possibilities of a concept. Though participants may initially doubt the hosts' advice, they must try their suggestions and consider them fully before deciding to accept or reject them. The result is that individuals often come to appreciate items that they never would have considered and develop a more educated sense of what works and does not work.

Since its inception several years ago, the show has styled many participants, each with a distinctive flavor and unique vibe to their new look. There are of course, some general rules for good all around fashion sense (i.e., kick those socks and sandals to the curb), but for the most part each person is treated as a distinct individual in the experience.

The final stage is the reveal when the individual presents their new look and discusses the ways in which their outlook on fashion and on themselves has evolved. Final comments and reactions have been marked almost overwhelmingly by a positive shift in self-image and associations with fashion, which begs the question of why does fashion and style create such a distinct and positive feeling of excitement for the participants and the audience?

We hang art on our walls and decorate our homes to complement and express ourselves in our surroundings. Why do we find fashion, and the feeling that it creates, so compelling? Ultimately there are two questions that can be anticipated within the fashion/learning associations that we draw. Although we find *WNTW* to be a persuasive format, the first question to ask is, “What difference does it make, what you wear?” This question begs the same answer as its education-centered counterpart, “Why should it intrinsically matter to the student what they think or what they learn?” The answer to both questions may be that these things, ideas, and fashions create a reflection from within. We take cues and images of the self through the ways in which the world sees us. Identity is, to some degree, always a reflection of the world around us. In the *WNTW* ideal, this is referred to as “style from the inside out.” Fashion and appearances are explicit ways to affect these cues—but what students may come to realize is that ideas and knowledge have value for this same reason.

WNTW and Implications for Learning

The expert/novice paradigm revised. With its clear emphasis on the right and wrong way to do things and the passing on of wisdom from teacher to student, the model of instruction in *WNTW* may seem glaringly old “fashioned” and outdated. Progressive educators would question how learners could possibly voice their own ideas or take charge of their own learning given Stacy and Clinton’s teacher-centered didactics. Similarly, scholars of the postmodernist cloth would surely object to the experts’ privileged access to the truth about what not to wear. Oh, the hegemony!

It may seem strange to note that Stacy and Clinton are hardly alone in being out of step with the current educational mindset. Numerous other television programs follow a similar expert-centered approach to dispensing advice. One need only glance at the program schedule for The Learning Channel or Home and Garden Television to witness our collective eagerness to sit at the feet of experts.

Similarly, one would be hard pressed to find shows that feature the egalitarian learning community favored by many progressive and postmodern educators. Why can’t Stacy and Clinton be “guides on the side” rather than “sages on the stage” and encourage their students to explore their own fashion ideas? Even the Socratic Method—a perfect blend of progressive student centeredness and *WNTW*’s confrontational dramatics (at least, when Socrates was the teacher)—has not been picked up by any of the popular instructional television shows. Why is this so?

The easy explanation would be that the instructional methods of *WNTW* serve the primary goal of catching and holding the interest of the television audience.

This is popular television after all and, therefore, strives to entertain rather than educate. However, only the most puritanically serious-minded critic would insist on such a stern separation between entertainment and education. To think that a good educational experience does not entertain and that good entertainment does not educate is just plain wrong. In fact, we suggest that *WNTW*'s appeal has a lot to do with its educative qualities. Stacy and Clinton are engaging not only as actors but also as educators. We enjoy watching their dramatic methods precisely because they are so self-assured, strong, and direct. Furthermore, their teaching engages not only because of its dramatic methods, but because of its dramatic effects. Most of the "learners" on the show begin with skepticism or flat-out resistance but end up expressing sincere gratitude for the way the experience changed them. Thus, it would be simplistic and arrogant to dismiss the pedagogy of *WNTW* as having "only" entertainment value.

If we took the popularity of *WNTW* and its relatives seriously, here's what we might see. First, we would quickly realize that professionals working in the fields of art, fashion, entertainment, and education share the same goal of creating compelling experiences for their audiences. In considering ideas as fashion, we might see learning new ideas as an aesthetic phenomenon and that educators have much to learn from those who have a highly sophisticated appreciation for the aesthetic qualities of powerful experiences.

Second, *WNTW* illustrates how professionals in arts and entertainment are adept at finding and evoking dramatic tension. The creators of *WNTW* understand how to artfully work the tension between good and poor ideas, teacher and student, and what is and what could be.

Third, even though *WNTW* resembles the traditional expert-novice paradigm of teaching, its basic epistemology has been significantly "updated" (to use a term borrowed from home design shows). In the typical expert-novice study, the expert and novice define the beginning and end of a continuum of learning. Instruction relies on the force of logical reasoning to move novices closer to the experts' way of seeing. *WNTW*, along with the metaphor of ideas-as-fashion, highlights how learning is motivated not just by the power of abstract reason but also by the real, practical consequences of the idea. In this updated version of the expert-novice approach, "teachers propose and learners dispose." That is, the expert gives reasons why the suggestion is a good one and really "works" for the person. In the end, however, it always comes down to the individual's own lived experience with the idea/fashion. Thus, unlike the classic expert/novice model, it is not a foregone conclusion that learners will move closer to the expert's point of view. However, because ideas are fashion, they will have tried on the idea, experienced its effect, and, as a result, have a greater appreciation for it.

Educational scholars will remind us that Dewey offered this same perspective on learning long ago. In fact, basing meaning in the practical consequences of an idea is a central feature of pragmatism as expressed by philosophers such as Charles Peirce, William James, and Richard Rorty, as well as John Dewey. We are not so ahistorical and besotted by *WNTW* as to proclaim Stacy and Clinton as visionaries of a new philosophy of meaning. Instead, we suggest that *WNTW* provides a compelling, contemporary illustration of pragmatism's central argument. *WNTW* reminds us that ideas, like fashion, must be lived in and experienced in order to understand, appreciate, and judge their meaning and significance.

IF IDEAS WERE FASHION: A FEW OTHER PROVOCATIVE IMPLICATIONS

Our goal here is to enliven the perception of our readers. In case the metaphor of ideas as fashion and the examples from popular culture have failed to be sufficiently provocative, we offer two final implications.

Style is substance. For many, this idea strikes a jarring and dissonant note. The distinction between the realm of style and the more substantial matters seems natural and intuitive. Indeed, it is a contrast that runs deep in our society. In schools, we want our students to learn substance: that which is deep, meaningful, and enduring. In contrast, we are inclined to think of style as that which is superficial and ephemeral. In art, style may be the form or technique of a painting but not its meaning. In language, style is the manner of expression but not the content. Yet so much of the weight of an artist's message is inextricable to its form. Similarly, the meaning of language is not just in the words, but how the words are expressed. (See Postrel's *Substance of Style* [2003] and Sontag's "On Style," in her book *Against Interpretation* [1966] for two different takes on why the separation of style from substance is not particularly worthwhile.) Finally, consider the classic "big question": where is the meaning and significance of one's life? Is it somewhere within us—bestowed upon us by another or inherited from others? Or, perhaps, it exists in living—created and re-created in our interactions and experiences. Life's meaning and value—its most important quality—is on the surface and ever changing. Thus, life's meaning, its very substance, is fashioned.

Teaching as advertising, learning as shopping. When exploring the realm of ideas as fashion, one soon encounters the association between fashion and consumer culture. This is a complicated issue, and once again, charges of superficiality and insubstantiality must be addressed. Granted, the consumer culture of fashion is a veritable breeding ground for vanity, greed, thoughtlessness, and other moral infirmities. "To consume" can mean to eat or drink in large amounts or

to destroy something completely by fire or disease. A “consumable” is something that is impermanent, used up, or discarded after use. However, “to consume” also means to fill somebody’s mind or attention fully (e.g., to be consumed in compelling or passionate experiences). All educators surely aspire to this intensity of engagement for their students. To be consumed in the experience of fashion can no doubt be perilous. This is true of all intense experiences. The lesson here is not to avoid intensity but to be aware of it, to modulate it, and, in the case of the novice, to trust in the wisdom and care of others.

If we can hold in abeyance the reflexive disdain we may have for consumer culture, other interesting implications may emerge. If ideas are fashion, then learning is the art of shopping. As good shoppers, students know how to be open to inspiration, “try on” many different things, and enjoy the experience. Ideas are to be tested in the same way as hats, scents, shoes, or music. We imagine, experience, and evaluate how a particular idea enriches our world. In this view, the task of the teacher is to educate the students’ “shopper” sensibility and to help them have more intense and fulfilling shopping and fashion experiences. Experts in advertising and marketing make it their business to be attuned to the experience of the shopper and may be a source of helpful insights for educators (e.g., Rogers, 1983; Solomon, 1985; Underhill, 2000).

Similarly, if learning is shopping, then teaching is advertising. Teachers offer a well-chosen line of products—subject-matter ideas—and are skillful at promoting them. They realize that a fine balance exists between classic and trendy style. They are exquisitely sensitive to what moves their customers and skillful at creating needs where no need existed before. They are versed in the aesthetic and appreciate that new ideas must be felt—not just comprehended—before students can be moved. Finally, as merchandisers, teachers fully realize that the customer has every right to not like or “buy” what they are selling. Teachers cannot force their students to make their “product” part of their lives. The best educators can only hope—and this is no small hope—that students will fully experience and appreciate worthwhile subject-matter ideas. In both education and fashion, whether or not an idea finds a place in a student’s way of life is a matter of “informed taste.” In our opinion, this is a worthwhile goal of education.

No doubt, many people will find it crass to think of education in these terms. Unfortunately, this reaction does a double disservice. First, it turns a blind eye to the fact that schools have always been connected to the marketplace idea (Powell, Farrar, and Cohen, 1985), and considering questions of value and utility is essential to any thoughtful plan of education. Second, a quick dismissal idea of learner as shopper undervalues the experience of the shopper. The appeal of shopping spans all ages, all cultures, and all periods of history. Like fashion, the allure of shopping seems to be an example of what we have called a “deep

inclination.” Perhaps we overlook the value of the shopping experience because of the association between women and shopping. We should be especially cautious of this prejudice. This warning applies to men for obvious reasons, as well as women, for less obvious reasons. In an article appearing in *Vogue*, feminist scholar, Elaine Showalter (1997) boldly asserted, “But for those of us sisters hiding ‘Welcome to Your Facelift’ inside ‘The Second Sex,’ a passion for fashion can sometimes seem a shameful secret life. . . . I think it’s time I came out of the closet.” Later, she added wryly, “For years . . . I’ve been trying to make the life of the mind coexist with the day at the mall.”

At times, the experience of shopping can be characterized by excessiveness that can easily spill over to gluttony. And, yes, shopping can be mind numbingly dull and can resemble a trancelike state of mind. However, in the moments when shopping becomes an act of fashioning it is an intensely human and vital experience filled with imagination, anticipation, inquiry, and reflection. As educators, we aspire to give our students this kind of experience.

CONCLUSION

The main task of our work is to find ways to make school experiences more engaging and meaningful to middle and high school students. To find provocative and worthwhile ways of conceptualizing this task, we looked not only to the field of education and its parent disciplines but also to the popular culture of the students’ world and the kinds of experiences they find compelling. In this way, the “ideas-as-fashion” metaphor emerged.

Where do we go from here? Our plan is to seek the assistance of both educators and professionals from the world of marketing and advertising. As a team, we would develop an “ad campaign” to inspire students to find a few well-chosen school subject-matter ideas fashionable to think and talk about. Isn’t it cool to consider that popular movies and classic literature draw on a small handful of powerful themes? Or doesn’t it inspire the imagination to realize that plants are the only living things on Earth capable of converting the sun’s energy into a form that can be used by animals? Granted these ideas have been around for a while and have yet to catch on. Despite this fact, we are not yet ready to give up. We should resist the urge to “blame” students for their lack of interest in these ideas. Perhaps, educators themselves must first believe that these ideas are genuinely cool. Perhaps we need to recruit the help of professionals who make it their business to make things fashionable. Some skeptics may still have difficulty imagining how these ideas could be fashionable in any way. However, this vision becomes more viable when one considers how “incredulous” it is that oversized jeans, the Backstreet Boys, or the

mullet hairstyle could have ever become wildly popular. Our “advertising campaign” for creating a fashion of ideas will have three elements: evocative print ads for the ideas, a strategy for creating a “buzz” among students about the ideas, and suggestions for developing a classroom culture that supports the fashion of ideas.

Some “serious-minded” educators may quickly judge our fascination with style and fashion as superficial and frivolous. They will question the appropriateness of finding scholarly inspiration in popular culture phenomena. We quietly suspect, though, that a significant portion of the educational community will be open to the suggestion that important contributions can come from places and people outside traditional academic circles. Yes, this work is “popular” in that ideas and examples are drawn from a pop-culture that is contemporary, public, and easily accessed, rather than an academic culture that is abstract, difficult to access, and arcane. However, because fashion is a deep human inclination, it is the kind of experience that can be found and appreciated across time periods, age groups, and culture. We believe the “ideas as fashion” metaphor may resonate deeply with three important audiences: scholars, practitioners, and students. If this were true, then these ideas are “popular” in every positive sense of the word.

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