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## *Queering Fashion as a sticky course*



This case study interview is part of the QAA collaborative enhancement project on the 'Sticky Course', which is exploring ways that Higher Education courses embed approaches to transition, assessment and enquiry-based learning that support students to 'stick' to and with their course, and improve experience and engagement. Here, Siobhan Clay, Head of Academic Enhancement at UAL talks to Fenella Hitchcock, Senior Lecturer in Cultural and Historical Studies at London College of Fashion about the Queering Fashion Unit she leads on her course.

***“as a trans person, this unit means a lot to me and it will always be a thing that I mentioned in that journey and to have the theory behind things given to me in a way that I can understand to be able to see myself kind of reflected in these”***

(anonymous student feedback)

### Siobhan Clay

Hi Fenella, thanks so much for agreeing to talk about the Queering Fashion unit that you've developed at London College of Fashion. Can you start by describing the rationale and context for developing the unit?

### Fenella Hitchcock

One of my long term aims was to change how we talk about queer fashion as a practice, which is deeply informed by my students work as much as practice that I see out in the world, out in cultural and creative industries and not just in fashion. I am also personally invested in trans rights and thinking about the position of trans studies in relation to fashion studies, so trans inclusion within the curriculum, and how the broader political landscape might be impacting on our students and how they feel when they come to us to study. I also wanted to think about what trans inclusion looks like for us in Cultural and Historical studies. So the project is the result of a range of personal and political investments as much as a response to things I see in my everyday working contexts.

***“having it taught like a conversation, you know, it was a very open dialogue between us and Fenella and you could ask her to reframe the same concept five times. And she would do it with a smile.”*** (anonymous student feedback)

### Siobhan Clay

Fenella, can you tell us more about Cultural and Historical Studies?

### Fenella Hitchcock

So we're a cross-college provision responsible for working with students to develop their research skills and ability to theoretically and historically locate their work and make sense of the industry they are going to enter. The way we work can present some challenges as you're not guaranteed to work with the same group of students from years one through to three. There's a possibility you'll be aligned to, say, a specific programme or course, but there's also a strong possibility you'll only encounter particular students or groups once in their entire degree. We teach one unit at each level of most of the undergraduate degrees at LCF. So the questions you're asking in this project are very interesting for someone like me, who is mostly engaging with students in quite intermittent or short-term ways. We have to make sure that students understand that we aren't separate from the rest of their course and think about the ways we embed ourselves into all of the different spaces that we contribute to through the CHS provision.

## Siobhan Clay

Could you describe a little bit about the unit itself, and the outcomes of the activity and what changed, which students benefited? And if there were any unexpected challenges that you faced?

## Fenella Hitchcock

So Critical Issues in Fashion Research is the overarching unit. It's taught in the second year and students elect for a project they feel is relevant to them or something they want to explore in depth. It is often a choice based on something they've looked at in the first year, but where they want to go deeper or explore something that feels urgent in relation to the kind of work they make or within their field of practice. Queering Fashion is one of the projects we offer to students in the School of Design and Technology. It's critically exploring the assumption that fashion (and fashion education) is automatically attuned to the needs and experiences of LGBTQ+ people. If you think about particular collections or if you think about fashion editorials, we see expansive notions of gender, we see instances of trans inclusion, we see masculinity being redefined. Fashion has been so important in queer history, and queer people have been so important in the formation of fashion and innovation, and still are. But at the same time, you come up against all of these binary structures within actually how fashion is organized and contradictions in how it is spoken about.

I am trying to give students a space to think about these tensions but also to think about queer fashion beyond just the idea of expressing our identity. What does queer fashion do? What does it give us? So it's not the sort of traditional 'a queer history of fashion' approach' - we do some of that, but it's more about critical fashion practice and forms of worldmaking.

We consider ideas around how fashion and queerness have specific temporal connections, as well as fashion's role in the production of structures of feeling, as well as affective engagements with dress on more personal level. This week we were looking at ideas from posthumanism and new materialism to think about urgent issues around our relations to nature and technology and non-human others. We also look at queer spaces and economies, and how they circulate fashionable goods and knowledge.

I am trying to get students think about the impact they can make and things they can get involved in and be a part of. I'm really keen to build a sense of community in and beyond each cohort and to help them understand that they are part of a community of practice. They have access to so many amazing people and places at London College of Fashion and through their courses, but also just around them in an everyday sense. And through each other! I want to encourage them to go out in the world and meet people but also situate what we learn in these spaces.

I have to say that I am quite critical of the term community and how it can be used. But if you're presenting this framework of stickiness, then I would say I am trying to think about how many different ways we can produce this in class and beyond. Even when students have finished the unit I'm still in touch

with lots of them and trying to connect them to each other.

### **Siobhan Clay**

I like the idea about an expansive curriculum that takes you outside of the classroom, maybe in ways that other units might not. So the idea of the broader community, and that being really central to how the unit is delivered or conceived or thought about and connected sounds really interesting.

### **Fenella Hitchcock**

I try and get them out to see something if I can. But I'm also thinking about the cost of study and also budget constraints. So often it involves pulling on my network or seeing what's available that is discounted or free or pay what you can. But another thing I have been quite insistent on was that I needed practitioners in the room with me and organising that can be challenging on a practical level. I try to have a practitioner with us for each seminar and each time I am trying to connect the ideas I present to their work. So creating 'stickiness' to a practitioner and through practice which expands us further. It's also useful, I think, in building students confidence and competence in speaking about their work and in professional ways, and about building your network beyond the usual people you might encounter, who you meet on a regular basis.

***“But it was just so amazing to feel represented, you know, and represented authentically and not in a way that was then made, you know, palatable or understandable to people outside of that community.”*** (anonymous student feedback)

### **Siobhan Clay**

That sounds really exciting and like it would be a good hook for lots of students.

### **Fenella Hitchcock**

Yes, definitely. That's something they've always responded really positively to. Some of them have said, oh, I've got to meet this person who actually I know already I've really admired or I didn't know this person was making this work, and it's really inspired me.... I think very carefully about how to select people. I can only work with practitioners who understand how to talk to my students with care. I need to think about what experiences and perspectives are they bringing that I don't possess, what it is important for my students to see. I also think about how they might potentially see themselves reflected in these people or how they model the different routes that you have beyond university. I think so many students think the only way to do this is this hyper competitive system of the 'star designer' and by adhering to very specific channels. Sometimes I bring them people who align with that but it's important that they are also exposed to people who are experienced but still figuring things out

and facing the sort of challenges that you know are ahead of you. I'm never trying to definitively say 'this is how you make queer work'. I constantly tell students none of us have absolute answers but that it's my job to offer possibilities. Part of that is giving them the opportunity to meet someone who is doing things a little differently and to ask 'how did you do that'?

### Siobhan Clay

I think that that level of care and attention about who you bring in and how they interact with and approach students in really inspiring. I think, is really it's essential maybe to this unit, but it's a really nice one to think about because I think that range gives students probably a lot more agency and that they can see themselves in, you know, in the future.

### Fenella Hitchcock

Yes, I hope so. I mean, I've definitely seen it go the other way before in my own education and that of my peers. I'm very protective of my students and I do kind of vet people. They're often from my network. They're people I trust, they're people who know how to speak to students at the right level and understand they're still learning, and to remain sympathetic to the broader challenges that students face. You know, things like needing to work across their studies. There are a lot of factors to manage in this space so you can provide this 'protected' area where all they have to do is learn. That sounds very simple but it hard to create.

***“Everything was taught academically and then explained further if it needed to be, and this kind of like not assumption that we understood, but this kind of assumption that we'd be able to kind of apply these topics from the get go and working backwards. (anonymous student feedback)***

### Siobhan Clay

This is the impact on students ... what do your students tell you about their experience on the unit? What things improved?

### Fenella Hitchcock

I have 30 students every year. That's the smallest cohort size we teach and in some ways working with such a small group makes this work possible. It can be obviously harder to scale up if you have, say, 90 students. Practically you just have to organize things differently. So it is quite bijoux and that means that as the project leader I tend to know everyone. I know if they are not there and have the opportunity to build close working relationships quite quickly. I can see the impact in lots of different spaces, I'll try and approach it logically. So the first one is in the classroom itself and in feedback. Either

students telling you about their experience unprompted or just seeing how their interactions change. There have been times when it's taken a while for the right energy to build. They are from different courses and might be the only person from their course or not know anyone else. I'm constantly getting them to mix and share because that's the dynamic I need to teach my content but also to support them in connecting with each other. I was initially worried that some of the tasks I ask them to do might be perceived as infantilizing but actually they love them the most. My students love an excuse to be a bit free and have fun, especially in CHS which can sometimes feel 'serious' or 'heavy' or activate negative feelings for learners who didn't have the best experience in school. I am very responsive and student-led and try to find ways where they can both explicitly and implicitly tell me if things are working without having to take full responsibility to articulate a need. I try and intuit from what they are doing or not doing and ask directly if I need to. I also do a standard formative feedback Padlet at the midway point to check they're taking away what I need them to or if anything is missing. That's always really good. I make it anonymous and students are really, really honest. They tend to highlight similar things – they always want more one-to-one time but they also really like group work. They say they feel respected and comfortable to be themselves and that I meet them where they are rather than somewhere I expect and assume them to be. I think that is evidence of significant impact.

I see the impact in their work, particularly in reflective moments where they talk about how their kind of perspective or learning has changed. I saw it in an action research project I did about Queering Fashion, where I conducted focus groups and interviews. That was really helpful in understanding the benefits and areas to develop. You know, students saying to me... I understand myself now as an archivist and the project has legitimised things that I do that I thought were silly and just for me and didn't mean anything. These are really meaningful and important, I feel confident to claim the word archivist for myself.

I've also had students who approached industry practitioners for their placements and have gone to work with them. Attainment is also a key indicator and I saw a significant increase this last year, I think over 10% though I'd need to check the figures. I was particularly proud of that because one of the areas I really wanted to look at were international students who were opting for the project and students who were wanting to see those intersections of race and gender and sexuality put to the fore. I really wanted to make sure that those tensions were addressed every week very, very clearly for them. And I love to see students who have said they really want to focus on, for example, a Chinese context in their work feeling empowered to do it. It's not my area of expertise but I've been able to push myself to be able to adequately support them and expand my knowledge. I see the impact in what they've written about and how they're progressing these ideas in the final year.

I won an ArtsSU award so I think that shows impact too. And I was really proud that that was for contributions to the student experience and the student who nominated me explicitly said how important Queering Fashion

was for them as a trans student. How it gave them confidence in a part of their transition where they were feeling quite scared, quite worried to step into their masculinity.

And I see the impact when I bump into students in and around campus as well. They often want to talk to me they want to tell me what they're doing now. My students e-mail me and show me a project that they've done elsewhere that relates to what we covered. That's what pushes me to keep at it and see how I can scale these small interventions up another level.

### Siobhan Clay

Fantastic. Yeah, those small moments are very significant, aren't they? That level of trust and confidence that you've helped nurture in the unit that they can go forward and do that sounds brilliant. I can't remember how long you've run the unit, but has attendance or engagement as you've built it has changed, or if working on different units with others if you have seen a difference?

### Fenella Hitchcock

Attendance is a funny one. I would say my attendance patterns are pretty much in line with the other projects in the School of Design and Technology. Obviously with a small group of 30 you really notice if people aren't there, but that's actually quite good, because it means that I'm able to send an e-mail and say I've noticed you've not been here for a couple of weeks. Is everything OK and is there extra stuff that you need support with that I can direct you and signpost? I think students attend when they feel they can. If there's a deadline or crit on there's fewer bodies in the room, but I don't have many students who I never ever see.

***“Being so grateful that no one felt like they were giving wrong answers. No one in that class felt like they didn't understand and couldn't ask about it. We had almost every person showing up for almost every single class, which is, you know, good for a university. I think it says a lot for the kind of engagement.”*** (anonymous student feedback)

### Siobhan Clay

And then the last question is really about next steps? You talked a little bit about scaling up. So yeah, what are your ambitions or how are you sharing the success of the unit with others colleagues?

### Fenella Hitchcock

I am sharing it in the most immediate ways among my department and making sure that my programme director is aware of what's going on. I do

also feel strongly that Queering Fashion shouldn't be the only space in which this content needs to exist. Part of me that thinks that one day I would like for Queering Fashion not to need to exist, that it would be embedded within everything and that you didn't have to have this sort of space that's just for a particular approach or particular group of students. I do have students who don't identify as LGBTQ+ and who say that it isn't their experience but they chose the project because of someone they love or want to support or as a means to go beyond what they know or practice allyship. So there are routes of possibility there to expand the reach beyond a specific audience. This also connects to ideas I have about how to make some of what we do accessible to students who don't bid for this project, perhaps working with cultural programming or developing something that would also engage the public. I'm hoping to develop an exhibition and so it would be ideal to have past and present students contribute in some way.

I want to disseminate the findings of the project in an academic journal and I'm really keen that that's for a fashion studies audience. My head of college sits on our LGBTQ+ Champions Forum and has been very supportive. I want to take more of what I am learning to those sorts of spaces and see how I can make positive changes to policy. I only really know about my own efforts and if there are other or bigger things happening, I would want to find a way to contribute and learn from others. I'd also like to connect more with course teams and support my colleagues who less confident in this area to address that and think through trans and non-binary inclusion in their context.

I'd also like to keep growing the project so it becomes a proper network. I have a mailing list which students can join if they want to keep in touch and where I share opportunities or they can send call outs for collaborators. If that kept building, then at a point where the unit might not exist any more, the project still has a life and keeps doing that work. That's the ultimate goal, beyond you need to do this so you are equipped to produce an essay in final year.

### **Siobhan Clay**

Amazing. On that essay question is it always an essay? Does it have to be a written piece?

### **Fenella Hitchcock**

At the moment, yes, and unfortunately don't have any control over that. But I am very much in favour of offering different modes of assessment and have quite a lot of experience of this, so I'm happy to work with students to 'bend' the essay form as much as they want to. I'm always asking about their practice because I want to know how they can apply those creative skills in things like their research methods or to engage critically with some of their research materials.

A lot of my work seems to be about addressing the wounds from prior educational contexts which were very rigid in their expectations or where students were made to feel like they weren't good at academic writing. I try to focus on their strengths and where they feel good. So always thinking, OK,

we need you to produce 3,000 words for this submission but you are great at visual research. How can that drive the narrative and structuring of this work? Could you record yourself talking through that and then write it up? So yeah, I'd love to be able to experiment with more diverse outcomes. I think the project would lend itself well to that and it would really benefit the students.

***it's given me reassurance that I can have creativity in my approach, not just in what I'm presenting. And "I think that gives me a lot of confidence that I can create a piece of work that I'm proud of that didn't feel like pulling teeth to write and that felt like I was actually getting what I thought across in the in the right way"*** (anonymous student feedback)

### **Siobhan Clay**

Sounds fantastic. Well, thank you so much for reflecting, thinking about it and answering the questions. Is there anything you think we haven't covered that you want to say about the project and thinking about that stickiness?

### **Fenella Hitchcock**

I think having this opportunity to reflect has really made me conscious of all the different places where 'stickiness' exists for me. I often feel like I inhabit quite an unusual position and one that's quite challenging, but actually that's helped me to grow and there's a lot of value in that. I would definitely like to know more about impact in terms of retention. As I said, I know these students very well and tend to notice if they've not continued with their studies but I don't always know much about the why behind that. I have had instances where students have told me they considered dropping out of university but stayed in part because of Queering Fashion, which is very meaningful. We're in a moment where there are a lot of issues that need to be addressed but it's not always easy or comfortable for us to do so. We are operating in a quite intense point regarding discussions around freedom of speech. But I also think that we as academics need to do more to understand our students and where they're coming from. I sometimes end up working with students who are rightfully quite angry about all sorts of things and this always reminds me to focus on building empathy and understanding with my students, to keep listening to them so I can meet their needs and help them achieve as best they can. As I said, I think fashion education assumes it already knows what LGBTQ+ students need, particularly trans and non-binary students. I'm not saying we are bad at this but I am saying we can do better. Thinking intersectionally, finding spaces to talk about social class, race, gender and sexuality, disability and so on together is important. We do this in class but I don't always see it happening outside of that. All of this comes into play as we try to encourage 'stickiness' and yet we are still having largely separate

conversations. So maybe that's one for my list of things to do, to build the opportunities and start those conversations.

### Siobhan Clay

Yes, those intersections are really vital, aren't they? And this space looks like the place to have those really good, honest conversations.

***I really want to emphasise that that like this has been a huge thing for me in my life, like a real a real milestone, a real turning point. And I see the connections that I made in that class continuing to help when we finish the course.***

(anonymous student feedback)

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This case study is an output from a [Collaborative Enhancement Project](#) supported and funded by QAA Membership. The project is led by De Montfort University in partnership with Glasgow Caledonian University, University of Brighton, and University of the Arts London. Find out more about Collaborative Enhancement Projects on the [QAA website](#).

#### Biographies:

Fenella Hitchcock is Senior Lecturer in Cultural and Historical Studies at London College of Fashion, UAL. Her teaching and research is largely focused on the varied relationships between sexuality, style and performance. She also conducts pedagogic research into the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in UK Higher Education.

Siobhan Clay is Head of Academic Enhancement within the Teaching, Learning and Employability Exchange at University of the Arts London (UAL). Siobhan has worked in HE for the last 16 years in roles focused on student experience and awarding gap agendas, working with academics to support successful student transitions, inclusive teaching and learning and curriculum development.



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