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Teaching the tangible, remotely: Fashion as Material Culture

Clare Lomas, Head of Curriculum Development and Assessment and Maria Costantino, Lecturer in Cultural and Historical Studies, London College of Fashion

Abstract

This article, based on observation and reflection, considers the pragmatics of teaching the usually tangible aspects of material culture transposed to online delivery due to Covid-19. Challenging aspects included translating object-based learning (OBL) to a digital space in which common/shared objects for analysis/examination were absent; balancing object-based and object-driven approaches; understanding student engagement and interaction in a digital environment, and creating a valuable, inclusive teaching and learning experience. We argue that there is potential for object-based learning activities to be delivered online and to work well, with the haptic engagement managed remotely.

Keywords

material culture; object-based learning (OBL); blended delivery; student engagement; remote learning

Introduction

This article considers the challenges and experiences of teaching the *Fashion as Material Culture* (FaMC) project situated in *Critical Issues in Fashion Research*, a 20-credit unit in Cultural and Historical Studies (CHS) at the London College of Fashion (LCF).

In the global Covid-19 pandemic, the British Government imposed a number of social restrictions and a series of lockdowns across the United Kingdom from March 2020 until March 2022. As a result, CHS teaching, previously delivered in person as lectures, seminars and workshops at LCF, was primarily delivered online during this two-year period, with limited face-to-face teaching sessions reintroduced from autumn 2021.

The experience of translating teaching content from face-to-face delivery, to wholly online remote teaching, and then adopting a blended approach during two academic year cycles has facilitated discussions around the value of a digitally enhanced approach to learning and teaching across a wide range of disciplines throughout the educational sector globally. However, there is a difference between remote 'emergency' teaching online as undertaken during the initial stages of the pandemic in the UK (March – July 2020) and subsequent government-imposed lockdowns and social distancing (July 2020 – March 2022), and the provision of quality online learning or a 'blended by design' (UAL Educational Principles, 2020/21) approach to the curriculum. This article reflects on the successes and challenges, and considers how the teaching and learning experiences can be taken forward to inform future iterations of the *Fashion as Material Culture* (FaMC) project.

Background: Fashion as Material Culture in Cultural and Historical Studies at London College of Fashion

Cultural and Historical Studies (CHS) units have been part of the undergraduate credit framework at LCF since 2001 allowing honours degree "students to step outside their core subject as a way of enriching understanding of their discipline" (UAL Undergraduate Common Credit Framework, updated 2019). CHS units across three years of honours degree courses in the School of Design Technology and the School of Media and Communication at LCF are composed of *Fashion Cultures and Histories*

(a 20-credit unit in year 1/level 4); *Critical Issues in Fashion Research* (a 20-credit unit in year 2/level 5), where students elect from a choice of research projects (including the *Fashion as Material Culture* project); and *Contextualising Your Practice* (CYP) an extended essay (a 20-credit unit in year 3/level 6 for students on courses in the School of Design and Technology); and *Dissertation* (a 40-credit unit in year 3/level 6 for students on courses in the School of Media and Communication).

CHS taught delivery seeks to scaffold students through their learning from level 4 *Fashion Cultures and Histories*, where students are introduced to a wide range of themes and key ideas through consideration of fashion and its relationship with identity and representation, to level 5, *Critical Issues in Fashion Research*, where students are introduced to a range of research methods and approaches within their choice of a specific project. In the third year (level 6) students choose the topic and research question(s) they wish to examine for their CYP Extended Essay or Dissertation and are assigned an individual CHS supervisor.

Online challenges: a brief overview

The *Fashion as Material Culture* (FaMC) project seeks to introduce students to some of the theories and issues of material culture and design history by using objects as a starting point for the study of fashion. The emphasis is on handling objects and seeks to explore the ways in which objects of fashion acquire meaning in specific historical and cultural contexts. It considers how the act of consumption is only the start of an object's 'life' and how objects are transformed and invested with new meanings closely linked with identity. It examines how the status of an object changes when it is considered worthy of collecting, passed on from one generation to another, or housed in part of an archive or museum. FaMC has always promoted specific approaches, such as object-based learning (OBL), which is popular and successful with a diverse student cohort. An object-based approach is defined as "an approach to the study of material culture that starts with close description of the object and works outwards" (Open Learn, 2016). The pedagogical value of OBL has been discussed in this journal previously (Barton and Willcocks, 2017; Lelkes, 2019) as well as specifically in relation to students studying fashion, dress and textiles (most notably Steele 1999; Taylor, 2002; Kawamura, 2011; Mida and Kim, 2015; Nicklas and Pollen, 2015).

As noted in the special edition of *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education* (March 2021) we were aware of a number of challenges for all those involved in teaching and learning in the initial period of the first government-mandated lockdown. These included staff and students using a wide spectrum of electronic devices; learning to engage with and use new and emerging digital platforms; realising the optimum length of synchronous teaching sessions to best support student engagement and learning; optimum time scheduling to deliver teaching online (synchronous delivery) when students were located across the globe in different time zones and experiencing different 'waves' of the pandemic; revising and optimising the available electronic resources to support the validated curriculum; students in some countries unable to access digital content due to firewalls; uses of VPN; and unreliable or intermittent WIFI signals. In short, finding the best ways to support students and teaching teams in a digital environment during what was termed "unprecedented times" (Eubanks, 2020).

Alongside logistical concerns, there were both sector wide and discipline-based concerns regarding the teaching of art and design subjects online, where in analogue situations, studio practice, use of specialist equipment or fittings to the body and performers, or translation of 2D design to 3D outcomes are expected. Additionally, there were subject and unit specific challenges concerned with remotely teaching in a digital space (especially for students who had joined their course expecting face-to-face delivery). This was also the case in the field of material culture, since the content is concerned with tangible objects, sensory awareness and the lived experiences of "style-fashion-dress" (Tulloch, 2010) as an embodied practice.

A further challenge was teaching a mixed cohort of students who were largely 'unknown' to the unit tutors: students who elect the *Fashion as Material Culture* (FaMC) project are drawn from across all the different honours degree courses of year 2/level 5 students in the School of Design and Technology at LCF.

The CHS teaching staff on the FaMC project wanted to make the taught synchronous sessions interactive to mirror some of the teaching activities normally undertaken in face-to-face delivery of the project (which had been developed at LCF since the introduction of the honours credit framework). The CHS department at LCF had already developed collective skills in blended delivery: recording a series of podcasts to support the delivery of initially, *Introduction to Cultural and Historical Studies*, then renamed, *Fashion Cultures and Histories* (20-credit level 4 unit from 2016/17 onwards); piloting the recording of lecture presentations and making the content available afterwards with auto-captioning (2019/20); developing a series of *Research Methods eResource 'toolkits'* (2019/20); developing a digital version of the *Key Texts Reader* (reviewed and updated annually from 2003/4 onwards); as well as using online discussion fora via UAL *Virtual Learning Environments* (VLEs) to include online archival storage of oral history resources (2004-2010) and extend teaching beyond the physical classroom.

In the academic year 2020/21, the project tutors on the FaMC project wanted to elicit stories and experiences from students and find a way of enabling the cohort to creatively collaborate by doing activities 'together' but remotely, online. This was successfully achieved during the first synchronous workshop session when all participants undertook an object analysis of a now, very familiar object: the face mask.

One of many challenges for CHS staff over the years has been to develop ways of engaging a diverse student cohort of learners and foster interest and engagement in enquiry. The CHS staff with their extensive teaching experience recognises that it is not *theory* itself, but rather it is the *language of theory* that perplexes many students. The FaMC project thus aimed to encourage students to collaborate and share their knowledge of a common language of theory for material culture in the same way that students develop and share a common technical language in their subject practice (whether Pattern Cutting, Bespoke Tailoring, Womenswear, Menswear, Jewellery, Sportswear, Contour, Fashion Design, Fashion Textiles or Footwear and Accessories).

Key aims of the FaMC project were for students to relate material culture theory to their subject-practice (thereby understanding the role of fashion as a discourse and enriching their practice through different forms of research) and, by drawing on students own lived experience of fashion as an embodied practice, to diversify and decolonise the canon. The historically westernised/Eurocentric discourse of fashion is problematic and raises a number of issues especially for a diverse student cohort. Examining, discussing and critiquing this discourse can be challenging, more so perhaps on digital third-party platforms when, as a tutor, you cannot see students' facial expressions or body language to gauge the way the cohort or individuals are responding to content that might be triggering or in asynchronous learning materials, where content could be taken out of context.

The FaMC project discusses object analogies, how objects are used as a point of comparison, or to make connections, but also promotes the understanding that objects are analogies for 'lives lived' (Appadurai, 1986; Attfeld, 2000; Gerritsen and Riello, 2015; Turkle, 2011). The tutors also wanted to encourage the students to use objects (and images) that were at hand, in order to conduct research (such as object and visual analysis) from wherever they were, which resulted in a broad spectrum of fashion objects drawn from diverse environments, cultures, histories and lived experiences.

Online teaching: delivery, materials and resources

In academic year 2020/21, the FaMC project had 93 students registered, with scheduled learning and teaching hours for project content sessions of 3 hours, to be delivered on alternative weeks during the autumn term (15 hours in total). The students were brought together as a group for the first part of each 3-hour session, followed by three smaller break-out groups of 31 students for further workshop discussion.

In addition to project content, there were a number of pre-recorded lectures on Research Ethics, Methods and Approaches, written and recorded by CHS colleagues as a shared resource for the *Critical Issues in Fashion Research* unit (approximately 10 hours of delivery); webinars for the project essay briefing and support in essay writing with online 'office hours' were also offered (5 hours). A weekly scheme of learning included signposting to the pre-recorded lecture content, essential readings and resources (podcasts, YouTube videos, websites, key text extracts, eBooks and eJournals) and independent learning activities was shared with students and briefed during the first synchronous project session (and referred to throughout the delivery of the project).

Colleagues in the LCF Digital Learning Team supported the CHS tutors in the use of H5P for organising and uploading project content to Moodle (figures 1 and 2).

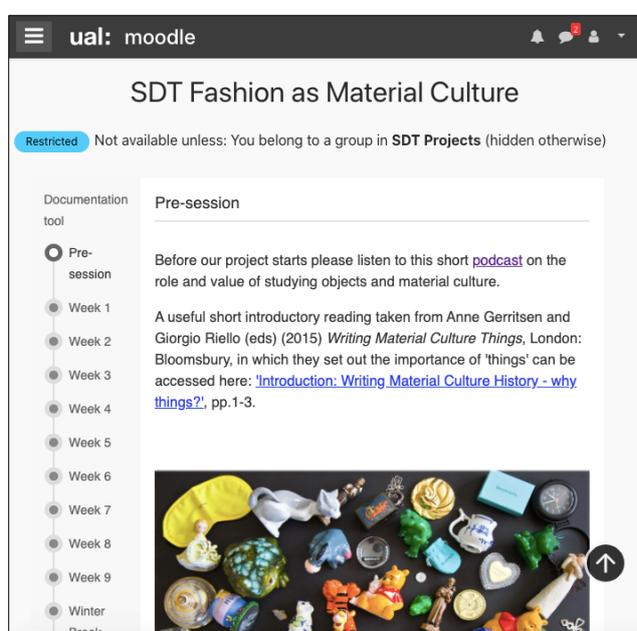


Figure 1: Screenshot of Moodle content and layout using HP5, LCF. Photo: Author (2021).

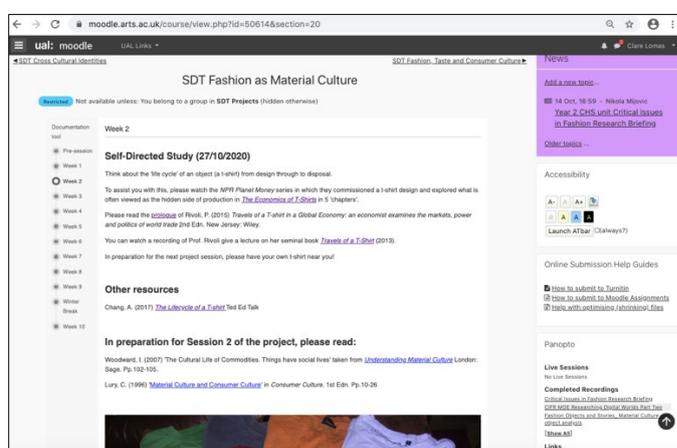


Figure 2: Screenshot of Moodle content and layout using HP5, LCF. Photo: Author (2021).

The planned weekly scheme of learning for the project included key group activities for students undertaken remotely during synchronous delivery. Activities and the types of common fashioned objects were selected to encourage a range of experiences to be shared: the first synchronous session included outlining the method of Object Analysis using Prown's (1982) approach of a staged analysis moving through the discrete stages of description, deduction and speculation. The object chosen for this first session was a face mask. It was with some trepidation that these activities were undertaken given the tutors were unsure what engagement and responses would be forthcoming. However, the choice of face mask proved to be successful as it allowed for different cultural experiences and backgrounds to be shared (see Figure 3 for examples of face masks). For example, a student with a medical background talked about the safety protocols for putting on and removing a face mask, while students from different countries who had recent cultural history and experience of respiratory infections (such as SARS and MERS), indicated how they already had face masks as part of their home first aid kits. Students engaged in further discussion (by speaking and contributing to 'chat') around the sensory experience of wearing a face mask: how to tighten a mask for a better fit by twisting and altering ear loops; glasses steaming up; issues around face mask exemption; the problems of listening-hearing and comprehending especially with reduced visibility of large areas of speaker's faces and facial expressions.



Figure 3: Assortment of Face Mask: disposable, purchased, branded and home-made. Photo: Author (2021). Students also shared how some had made their own face masks at home using innovative recycling of garments and fabrics they had at hand (such as a face mask made from a bra) and, using press images, engaged in discussion of how face masks were being used to signify political beliefs and allegiances (Nicola Sturgeon, First Minister of Scotland and Leader of the National Scottish Party in a tartan face mask; MEPS in 'Euro flag' masks) and face masks as part of the 'fashion system' (luxury fashion houses launching branded face masks). By observing student interaction in the digital space through the 'chat' facility, it was evident that a large number were able to both reflect on their individual experience and make critical observations of face masks as part of material culture and in the discourse of fashion.

Independent activities between the sessions made use of a variety of accessible resources to support the activities: these ranged from listening to podcasts; watching *YouTube* videos; reading academic texts and newspaper articles. Independent activities that proved popular and engaging during this period were considering the lifecycle of a cotton t-shirt (Rivoli, 2015) with a particular focus on its potential post-consumption life (Brooks, 2015); undertaking a wardrobe analysis (Woodward 2007;

Fletcher and Grimstad, 2017; Twigger Holroyd, 2017); analysis of clothing items that were well-worn, mended, recycled or upcycled (Dant, 1999; Crewe, 2017; EAC, 2019; Hunt, 2014; Sampson, 2020); and calculating their own 'fashion footprint'. Common fashion objects that were used by many students were face masks (Figure 3), jeans (Figures 4 and 5), trainers and plimsolls (Figure 6), t-shirts and jewellery items (rings, necklaces and bracelets).



Figure 4: Worn and torn Levi jeans. Photo: Author (2021).



Figure 5: Mended and patched Levi jeans. Photo: Author (2021).



Figure 6: Photograph of well-worn Dunlop plimsolls. Photo: Slocombe, D. (2016) *Dunlop Plimsolls*. Courtesy of Author, 2022.

While all synchronous group presentations were recorded and uploaded to *Panopto* and made available after each session with auto-captioning, synchronous seminar discussions were deliberately not recorded to encourage and allow open conversation. The provision of safe space to discuss, question and debate allowed students to collaborate, extend and share knowledge and ideas, with examples, references and images posted onto *Padlet* (to which the students contributed during and after the synchronous sessions).

Approaches to delivering Material Culture content: ‘online gloves’

Despite the great success of specialist distance learning establishments such as the Open University, which have delivered wide ranging discipline content – including material culture – remotely for many years, initial development of the FaMC project online content and how to approach translating the material and tangible aspects to the digital space proved challenging, particularly during Covid-19 and lockdown.

Nevertheless, there were several multi-media projects that used objects to tell stories to ‘distant audiences’ available as reference points. For example, the British Museum collaborations with BBC Radio 4, *The World in 100 Objects* (2010), which in effect, told a history of humanity through 100 objects from across the world that have survived time and space and are now in the collection of the British Museum. Leaving aside any critiques of the British Museum project, what was useful for FaMC project tutors to consider was timing. The 15-minute long broadcasts of each programme describing and telling stories associated with the different objects to a listening radio audience who cannot see the object itself proved useful in ensuring student engagement and reducing information overload. Furthermore, *The World in 100 Objects* provided a model by which students could engage with an object themselves and then structure their written submission.

Many historians and anthropologists wish to – and see the need to – engage with original artefacts. Historians of material culture have regularly extolled the virtues of handling objects as a process they believe can unlock an object’s meanings and change our interpretations of a past otherwise almost exclusively understood through text. Working with, and handling original artefacts, is however dependent on the privileges of experience and knowledge. The majority of audiences are rarely allowed to touch, smell, or indeed, hear an object when it is on display in a museum, but we still consider examining the object visually in the museum context a valid research method, and a valid experience of the artefact itself.

It should also be noted that many of the professional historian's haptic practices are in fact, mediated and mitigated by the curator's gloves. In approaching and studying objects online, the computer screen becomes the museum's display case for the interested public. Consequently, the experience of studying examples of material culture online is no more – and no less – diminished. Material culture online simply draws attention to the primacy and value of the visual in description and analysis, in both object-based and object-driven approaches to the study of material culture. Nevertheless, student's own choice of objects, perhaps drawn from their own wardrobes (rather than museum artefacts), also allowed for a sensory experience of objects of everyday material culture with which they could engage.

The mix of object-based and object-driven focus

In contrast to an object-based (also known as object-centred) focus, an *object-driven* approach is defined as “an approach to the study of material culture that starts with the broader context in which objects are located and then works towards greater understanding of the object” (Open Learn, 2016).

Using a mixed method approach encouraged students to use their visual analysis, and organisational skills in 'ordering information' and to move across visual language to written/oral language, as well as considering objects from material culture in their historical and contemporary social, political, economic, technological and personal contexts. Using both object-based/centred and object-driven research in relation to how students drew from their own cultures, lived experiences, thinking about histories/*herstories*/*theirstories* proved valuable in decolonising the curriculum and critiquing the established western/Eurocentric canon.

A significant decision was made by the project leader to share, within professional boundaries, their engagement with the suggested independent activities, such as their own wardrobe analysis, the calculation of their fashion footprint, their stories related to objects they owned, and their use and disposal of fashioned objects post-consumption. It was notable that the decision to ask students only to undertake activities the tutors were also participating in, and were sharing their experiences of, was a way of generating trust and authenticity in a digital space, as well as fostering connection between tutors and students alike. However, where students were not comfortable using their own experiences or fashioned objects, they were encouraged to use examples from online museums, archives and collections, or stories shared and reported in the media.

Dispelling myths

The delivery of the FaMC project remotely, online, allowed for the dispelling of some myths. For example, that the studying of material culture means 'hands on' analysis of objects (the 'curator's gloves' mentioned above). Contrary to reinforcing traditional hierarchies that have made certain fashion artefacts worthy of study, such as designer items, those that are economically valuable, unique objects/garments or those with a celebrity provenance, object-based/centred and object-driven approaches used in material culture encourage students to consider a much wider range of fashion objects. Disruption to the assumed hierarchies of objects usually studied facilitated students' engagement with, and reflection on, a variety of different and shifting cultural values and practices. Consequently, the FaMC project dispelled the 'myth' of museum archive collections as 'wunderkabinets' assembled by accepted discourses – the institutionalised and axiological approach – as the main sources of knowledge through the evidence of material culture. The project allowed students in this context to give voice to objects from their own experiences of material culture and became a powerful feature of essays submitted for the project's summative assessment.

Assessment

During 2019/20, all year 1/ level 4 honours degree students at UAL were moved to a 'Pass / Fail' mode of assessment, via new *No Detriment Regulations*, brought in in response to the pandemic (UAL, April 2020). This meant that *Fashion Cultures and Histories* had been assessed purely as 'Pass

/ Fail' with feedback provided in the general comments section of the UAL Assessment Feedback tool. Therefore, the student cohort progressing into year 2/level 5 study in 2020/21 had no prior experience of CHS assessing their work using letter grades (grades A+ to F-).

The summative assessment for all projects on the *Critical Issues in Fashion Research* unit is by means of an essay, where the learning outcomes are mapped to four of the UAL assessment criteria: enquiry, knowledge, process and communication. CHS tutors on the FaMC project perceived two potential risks for the 2020/21 cohort. Firstly, it was vital that students were reminded, and understood, that while they could discuss examples from their lived experiences and embodied fashion practices in their essays, they would not be graded in relation to their own individual experience(s), but for *how they positioned and discussed* examples within a material culture framework. Secondly, students needed to be reintroduced to letter grading and the assessment criteria and made aware of level 5 requirements.

Opportunities for discussing essay plans and ideas with students were designed into the delivery model through access to drop-in online office hours and webinars in 2020/21. In 2021/22, a different approach of offering optional online *Fashion Research Reading and Writing Cafes* were piloted, led by colleagues from CHS supported by colleagues from LCF's Academic Support team. These different approaches to supporting students in their academic research skills for CHS with colleagues from Academic Support, have offered further points to evaluate and consider for future iterations of blended provision.

Reflection

The experience of delivering the FaMC project wholly online in 2020/21 (where it had previously been delivered entirely face-to-face) required the content to be rethought for delivery in a blended approach in the ensuing autumn and winter of academic year 2021/22. Limited return to campus due to social distancing restrictions required careful consideration of what activities could be undertaken during in-person teaching sessions.

The importance of "connection before content" (Littlefield and Wise, 2017) in an online environment was also seen to be paramount. Only by establishing trust and authenticity as a person and tutor, can rapport be built with students in a virtual space. It is vital to retain high levels of academic rigour, but also keep low barriers in relation to inclusive teaching practice to provide a facilitated space to think through complex concepts without fear of judgement, thereby fostering a "community of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1998) that respects and values all voices to be merited and heard. This was encouraged by taking a few minutes at the beginning of every synchronous session as an unofficial start to have an open question, or prompt, for students to connect with each other. This personal connection allowed the group to share and build trust amongst each other before moving into curriculum concepts and the structured content of the session.

The selection of wider, more ubiquitous fashioned objects for discussion (face mask; t-shirt; trainers; jeans and jewellery items) allowed for students to engage using items they had to hand regardless of their remote physical locations during the delivery of the project.

The choice of set essay questions for the FaMC project brief were designed as 'open questions' that related to the curriculum content but allowed students to respond in different ways, for example, through individual personal and family objects and stories; or through community-wide stories and those related to objects in a range of national and international institutions or accessible via the internet. No formal student feedback was received, as unit evaluation was not undertaken. However anecdotal feedback from students during the delivery of project sessions, drop-in office hours and via email communication indicated that students appreciated the structured scheme of learning for the

project, the digital accessibility of key texts and resources provided through links, and the availability of recorded sessions along with access to PowerPoint slides that could be revisited.

Regular synchronous delivery was valuable as it allowed the students and tutors on the project to come together 'live' as an inclusive, collaborative community, re-establishing connections each session and continuing a narrative of learning through the project. Rather than perceiving student silence (in discussions or in chat) as a lack of student engagement (or actual presence), the deliberate building in of pause or 'stop and think' points in the online delivery not only mitigated information overload, it demonstrated that some silences were the result of students looking, thinking, and reflecting on, the session content and examples. This approach appeared to result in wider participation in the smaller group workshop activities, debates and discussions.

Clearly indicating which parts of the sessions would be recorded and available after the sessions with auto-captioning and with chapter sections through *Panopto* appeared to be universally appreciated by the student cohort. The value of recording material and making content available in a variety of formats has long been valued as inclusive practice in that it supports a range of learning styles, time constraints, personal or employment commitments. During this period, when students were scattered globally with additional concerns around time zones and unreliable WIFI connections, the knowledge that content could be revisited through watching a recording became a form of reassurance.

Delivering content digitally is a collaborative practice and does require an attitudinal shift from the teaching teams involved. It was recognised that there was a need for trust in colleagues in teaching teams: A mutual understanding that colleagues would step in should internet connection or other technical difficulties occur, or contribute to online debates and chat to encourage flow and answer student queries; and that colleague's contributions are seen as positive and not as challenging the 'authority' of the project leader or tutor leading the session. Delivery of content to effect active student engagement and then taking ownership of their learning also requires a shift and change in staff thinking about the hierarchies and ownership of the curriculum and content.

There was also recognition of the place and value of low-tech solutions, such as holding things up to camera to show an object or the detail of an object. Low-tech is arguably not just a simple alternative, it has value of its own, for example, "let me show you..." and "let me describe the physical qualities..." facilitate further discussion around the questions of how and what we see.

Building in pause or 'stop-and-think' points to allow for students to absorb information, to consider and reflect, and then type a response in the chat function, raise a hand or reply verbally via the microphone speaker function, appeared even more important in an online space in comparison to face-to-face delivery. There was discussion amongst the tutors on the project, and across CHS, in relation to the 'chat' function in *Blackboard Collaborate Ultra* or *Microsoft Teams* spaces: Referring to the commentary function as 'chat' undersells the pedagogic value of this function as a discussion panel or forum, which can be used to move beyond being a space for ice-breaker activities to be much more sophisticated in terms of becoming the space where questions around content are posed, discussed, and key points reiterated or questioned.

Conclusion

In relation to delivering curricula online the over-riding lessons learned were in relation to 'less is more' and information overload. Online delivery of FaMC thus required scrutiny and selection of essential content that will continue to support the student's holistic pedagogical journey from their first to final year of honour's degree studies.

The speed and pressure under which teams in Higher Education work (during the Covid-19 pandemic and prior to) often meant that what is seen to be successful delivery of curricula and adopting it as an

educational model, without understanding and reflecting, can be problematic. Thinking time and constructive reflection have been imperative for considering ways to take lessons learnt from the last two years of (primarily) remote teaching delivery and limited face-to-face interaction within CHS units, into the opportunities and challenges future blended learning situations present.

Blended delivery does raise issues about the logistics and additional associated costs of digital delivery. Active engagement and participation by the whole unit or project team is fundamental to achieving a successful learning environment, and roles of experienced, hourly paid associate lecturers need to be factored in to effect successful delivery. It is challenging for the unit or project leader to undertake everything in online-only sessions – deliver, explain, monitor engagement, answer questions and comments in chat – and respond and deal with any technology or platform issues and queries. Only by operating as a collaborative teaching team, whether in an online-only or in blended learning, can an effective and successful approach be maintained for both online and face-to-face teaching. Challenging existing discourses, for example that material culture demands a 'hands-on' approach, is of no value if we do not first consider our own institutionalised ways of thinking about how we can, or might, collectively and effectively, teach online or in the analogue world.

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Biographies

Clare Lomas is Principal Lecturer and Head of Curriculum Development and Assessment at London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London, where she is also a lecturer in the Department of Cultural and Historical Studies.

Maria Costantino is a researcher and associate lecturer in the Department of Cultural and Historical Studies at London College of Fashion.