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My History of Fashion classes, for many students, are about as pleasant as a trip to the dentist.

Why must they study ancient times and places that don’t exist anymore? Who cares what they wore in Assyria a couple of thousand years ago?

“You can’t convey what you need for the future unless you understand the past.”

During the current period of rapid social and technological change, FIT fashion students will enter an industry unlike that of the past. It’s my job to illustrate for students the ways in which society, events and technology, throughout time and geography, have affected the clothes we wear. And to make clear that they will encounter, in the future, the same forces that will influence what they design, the clothing that we will wear.

Therefore, I closely follow the “Flipped Classroom, Reverse Design” philosophy to have them consider the past when they think about the future with the knowledge that technology is changing more quickly than ever.

Often, when we discuss fashion history and/or its importance in relation to 21st century life and design, international students contribute viewpoints that are interesting, exciting and different from those of US students. These culturally diverse students may know about the history, society and customs of the areas that we talk about; they enliven class discussions when they contribute their knowledge. Others know about designers of the past, and participate in dynamic class discussions. The NEA workshop has emphasized the importance of including these students in class conversations, that the difference in language is not a barrier to overcome, or a problem to manage, but may be useful as a resource for producing common understanding, At the other extreme, I sometimes have foreign students whose grasp of English is poor and who don’t fully understand my lectures. For the class, (and for those students), I have annotated and posted my slide images on Blackboard, for them to review and study. I also encourage the students to begin to collect a fashion library---buy books on sale, paperbacks---to expand their knowledge, use the wealth of libraries and museums in New York (and of course, at FIT), visit easily accessible department stores and designer boutiques, study fashion magazines, daily newspapers and websites to add to their knowledge.

There have been spontaneous study groups in some of the classes; I will suggest that the students form groups early in the term and study together.

As a history professor, the workshop has given me ideas and tools I can use to show my students that what they learn about historical people, events and technology will help them understand the influences of modern society and technology on their endeavors; they will succeed by being adaptable pioneers in the future world of fashion.

Sheila Marks

Fashion Design Art

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