

CELEBRATING ETHICAL FASHION

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In this article, Verity argues that, if teachers are to encourage critical thinking about how we are connected to the rest of the world through the stuff we buy, we need to do more than just cite facts and figures.

Fashion is moving in every way: it moves with the times, production requires the movement of goods around the world, and the human and physical effects of the fashion trade are both emotionally moving and helping move us ever closer to global crisis.

Fashion Revolution is a global charity, active in over 90 countries and uniting people to work towards changing the way clothes are produced, consumed and disposed of. It was born out of the desire for change following the Rana Plaza garment factory disaster of 2013, in which over 1000 garment workers in Bangladesh died. The charity's work, and the themes that can be investigated through the clothes we wear, make for a

purposeful way of enabling young people to think about trade links in the geography classroom. However, if teachers are to encourage pupils to think critically about how their connections to the wider world through the stuff their families buy, we need to give pupils more than just facts and figures. After all, this information can be depressing when we consider the carbon footprint related to production processes or working conditions of those involved in a commodity chain. David Hicks (2019) points out that providing knowledge is just the first of four steps to effectively engaging young people in global crisis. We also need to provide time for them to consider their feelings about these crises, followed by time to identify appropriate choices for positive change and then further opportunities to engage in appropriate action. Thus, young people become active agents of change for a future of their choosing, rather than being left anxious over a decaying world with no sense of hope. Here, I take the example of using clothing to open the doors to such positive pedagogies and frame it through Fashion Revolution's mantra of 'be curious, find out, do something'.

Be curious

Every young person has a favourite jumper or pair of trousers, a special pair of socks or coat with a rip in that tells a tale of some adventure or other. This is a great starting point to think about the threads we wear before asking the question 'who made my clothes?' (Figure 1). Take off those school sweaters or bring in your favourite t-shirt and look at the label. You'll find a brand name, but not the maker's name. Whet the appetite of pupils' curiosity – ask them to think about who might have made them. Turn to the care label to discover where it was made. Often young people are amazed at the places their clothes have been without them even knowing. Now take a closer look and find out what their clothes are made from.

Find out

Once the pupils' curiosity is ignited it is time to find out more and take a journey of discovery with clothing. The label may say 'made in Portugal', but what was that factory like? How many people were involved in the production process? Were the people paid fairly and looked after at work?



Figure 1: A good start is to ask the question, 'who made my clothes?' Photo © Verity Jones.

Where did the raw materials come from? How were they processed? It is time to discover things we never knew about our clothes – for example, that a large percentage of world cotton comes from America; nylon is a product of crude oil and is produced on a massive scale in China; bauxite for the aluminium in zips is frequently quarried in Australia. The journey a single garment makes before coming to rest in a young person's wardrobe (or perhaps more likely bedroom floor) zig zags across the world.

Using Fashion Revolution's 'Worker's diaries', you can bring the voices of those who make our clothes into the classroom and learn more about how they live and work. Compare and contrast different lives and find similarities to our own. You can use the Centre for Alternative Technologies card game, 'Where's the impact' to create flowcharts of the commodity chain (in English and Welsh). This activity allows your pupils to think through the story of their clothing (or any other commodity) from raw materials right through to purchase and disposal. The cards can be used as tools to develop explanatory language or as a story map onto which a narrative can be hung.

Develop numeracy in calculating the distances garments travel, convert the miles to kilometres or calculate the cost of making each section of a garment by measuring the panels. Challenge young people to write their own SATs-style numeracy and comprehension questions to test each other based on these real and meaningful contexts. For an extra challenge, share the brilliant poem 'Refugees' by Brian Bilston (which can be read top to bottom and vice versa see *PG*, 97, p. 11). Challenge pupils to write about the plight of garment workers from the perspective of the factory owner and contrast this with that of the garment worker. Or they could compose sonnets about favourite clothes and the secret journeys they have been on before they get to be worn.

Do something

Leaving pupils with just the knowledge of these trade links is not enough. We also need to allow time for pupils to consider their own feelings about these networks and, where appropriate, show how they could use this knowledge to engender a more sustainable relationship with clothing. As educators, we need to recognise there are no simple answers. Throwing out all clothing that is deemed 'bad' means buying more stuff and adding to our carbon footprint. Kicking up a fuss when parents and carers buy from certain shops might lead to financial strain. Perhaps pupils need to think about how to care for their clothing to make it last longer? Learning skills such as sewing buttons on and patching holes is a great way to develop fine motor skills for a purpose.

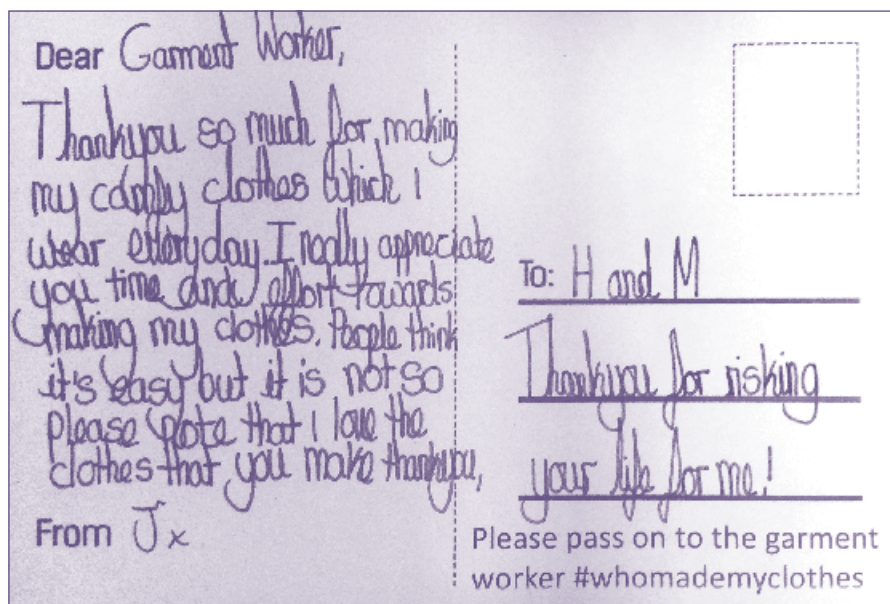


Figure 2: Using postcards to gauge response from clothing manufacturers. Photo © Verity Jones.

But what else can they do? Spreading the word is really important. Writing for younger audiences is always a purposeful challenge and helps to spread the word:

- Share 'The Day the Crayons' Quit' (Daywalt, 2014) – renaming it 'The Day the School Uniform Quit'. Pupils can take parts of each garment and write a persuasive letter to the young owner explaining where they are from and why they need to be looked after. This can then be presented to a younger class.
- Download the postcard template from Fashion Revolution's free resources and write a postcard to the makers of your clothing (Figure 2). Tweet these to the manufacturers and see what response you receive.
- Write to the manufacturers to enquire about their commodity chain and whether it is fair. Or, take part in Fashion Revolution Week each April to mark the anniversary of the Rana Plaza disaster and have young people's voices join a global movement for change.

To deliver challenging, pertinent lessons on the ethics of fashion teachers need both the subject knowledge and the opportunity to share successful pedagogy. Here are some suggestions:

- Fashion Revolution's Pinterest boards and free educational resources are a good starting point.
- Watch documentaries such as 'The True Cost', 'Walmart: The high cost of low price' and 'The Machinists'.
- The free online course 'Who Made My Clothes?' (Futurelearn) brings learners from around the world together to think more deeply about these questions. (See web panel for links.)

When the world seems to be a little crazy and everything seems to be doom and gloom remember the importance of being curious, finding out and doing something for a more positive future, whatever the focus of your lessons.

References

- Daywalt, D. (2014) *The Day the Crayons Quit*. London: HarperCollins.
- Hicks, D. (2019) 'Climate change: bringing the pieces together', *Teaching Geography*, 44, 1, pp. 20–3.

WEB RESOURCES

CAT's education resources: <https://store.cat.org.uk/products/wheres-the-impact>

Fashion Revolution education resources: <http://fashionrevolution.org/get-involved/education/resources/>

Fashion Revolution Pinterest boards: <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/fashrevglobal/>

Garment Worker diaries: <https://workerdiaries.org/>

Garment Worker podcasts: <https://workerdiaries.org/listen-to-the-fashion-revolution-podcast/>

'The Machinists': <https://www.rainbowcollective.co.uk/the-machinists>

'The True Cost': <https://truecostmovie.com/>

'Walmart: The high cost of low price': <https://www.bravenewfilms.org/walmartmovie>

Who Made My Clothes?: <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/who-made-my-clothes>

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