

MUSEUM AS CLASSROOM OF THE FUTURE

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How can museums offer space to reflect critically on problems stemming from our current education system in a democratic and collective way?

Over the past two years, this question has stayed with us at the Fashion for Good Museum, especially when it comes to themes such as sustainability being implemented in mainstream education systems. Often these systems evolve slowly, shaped by policy and political ideologies. Due to a lack of time and resources for experimentation, curricula also tend to exclude important perspectives, which are necessary in shaping the future. This leads to minimal space being given to different learning styles, appropriate to themes such as sustainability and historical contexts. Museums can counterbalance this, as they can foster experimentation when it comes to education, acting as an extension of the classroom or a laboratory for the exploration of radical teaching methods.



Fig. 1

The following article explores how we amplified and demonstrated the importance of museum education to help shape the educational system in the Netherlands. Furthermore, it explores how museum education can support and empower teachers in gaining insights and tools to include themes in their lessons they might feel less comfortable exploring. The Fashion for Good Museum in Amsterdam (2017-2024) was a museum for sustainable fashion, which chose over these six years to place emphasis on behavioural change, particularly using educational methods as tools to encourage behavioural change in the

museum's visitors. We are examining this practice both from the perspective of working behind the scenes of the Fashion for Good Museum but also as museum professionals reflecting on the potential of museum education. From pilot programmes to student-led exhibitions and open source toolkits; we have focused on targeting the climate emergency by empowering students in the classroom to collaborate and support each other.

The Dutch education system

Throughout history, museums and classrooms have had many things in common,¹ acting as spaces for learning and critical reflection on the rapidly changing world around us. Unlike the classroom however, museums have the unique potential to create worlds themselves. These worlds operate in parallel to society, building a bridge to reflect on the times we live in, as well as cultural and social ruptures like the climate crisis, overconsumption in the clothing industry, and amplifying lesser recognised narratives. The educational system of the Netherlands is shaped by characteristics such as its great inflexibility; placing prospective students in very specific categories and hierarchies between more practical education and more theoretical streams. This engrained rigidity makes it difficult for the system to keep up with the fast pace of our ever-changing society. Not only that, student's opportunities are also dependent on their socioeconomic status which quickly becomes problematic. Combined with the heavy workloads of teachers, this leaves educational institutions with very little space to come up with creative, innovative and inclusive curriculums, which cross-pollinate each other through shared knowledge and collaboration.

Concurrently, recent years have seen a shift, recognising the necessity for diversity, equity and inclusion in curriculums, as Western countries increasingly come to terms with their colonial histories and legacy². Providing a safe space in the classroom is necessary to start conversations with students on these topics and connect the dots between past events and current ways of life. Many teachers are noticeably struggling with the creation of an educational environment suitable to these conversations. This is partially due to these topics not being compulsory, but also to educators not having or being able to find the tools and resources to accommodate these topics in a sustainable way. This plethora of issues formed the starting point of our research, as we tried to understand how to create a toolkit which both students and teachers could benefit from.

Museums as spaces for sustainability and radical learning

As Esther Muñoz Grootveld, curator and programme maker, and collaborator of the Fashion for Good Museum describes: "museums (can act) as a safe space for dangerous ideas."³ In recent years, there has been a wider movement in museums towards systems of care, as museum practitioners recognise that topics discussed can evoke an emotional reaction for

¹ Escribano-Miralles, A.; Serrano-Pastor, F.-J.; Miralles-Martínez, P. Perceptions of Educational Agents Regarding the Use of School Visits to Museums for the Teaching of History. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 4915. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13094915>

² "Promoting Diversity and Inclusion in Schools in Europe." 2024. May 27, 2024. <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/publications/promoting-diversity-and-inclusion-schools-europe>.

³ From a conversation with Alyxandra Westwood and Yophi Ignacia.

visitors.⁴ This is similar in the classroom, when it comes to learning about issues such as contested histories or the climate emergency, making the museum a wonderful place to facilitate programmes to explore new tools for learning about these topics.

This same development is echoed in the global museum field, with a recently increased awareness for museums' responsibility to prioritise education, inclusivity and sustainability in recent years. The ICOM (International Council of Museum) 2022 summit ratified a new museum definition which states: "A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing."⁵

Through multiple conversations and focus group sessions with teachers and students, it became clear to us that there is not only a need for more critical reflection, but also for schools to share knowledge and work together more effectively. Considering all these elements and recognising that a vast majority of students in vocational education in the Netherlands will go on to contribute to the future of fashion as both practitioners and wearers locally; we decided to address schools with a creative fashion focus.

Knowing Cotton Otherwise education programme

Our research took the form of an in-depth pilot education programme, unfolding in three phases in the Fashion for Good Museum, and resulting in the creation of an exhibition that showcased student work and emerging talent as well as an educational toolkit.⁶ The main focus was to explore the classroom of the future through the lens of the cotton industry and the four pillars of sustainability (environmental, social, economic and cultural), as well as the eight themes of the exhibition *Knowing Cotton Otherwise* (October 2023 - October 2024).⁷

We especially wanted to focus on creating an opportunity for MBO (vocational education in The Netherlands) and HBO (higher- vocational education in The Netherlands) streams of education to collaborate, in order to tackle a prevalent stigma and hierarchy between the two. Upwards of sixty percent of the Dutch population attends or has attended MBO education, yet it is still stigmatised as a less desirable and inferior form of education. The playing field within the fashion industry must be levelled, every role becoming equally vital, yet we found that the education system does not reflect this. Through our programme and toolkit, we brought students together to learn from each other and collaborate, pushing back against this system. During the course of our research, we collaborated with a wide range of experts including teachers, educators and students, as well as researchers, designers and creatives from the fashion industry and beyond. We uncovered their individual ideas of what

⁴ Varutti, M. 2020. 'Vers une Muséologie des Émotions,' in Cultures et Musées, Vol. 36, pp.171-177. <https://journals.openedition.org/culturemusees/5751>

⁵ "Museum Definition." ICOM. <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>

⁶ Download the toolkit here (Dutch language only): https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/17Wj_HagO9GHEb19-I_VcPZ-DRst6Egg5

⁷ For more information on this exhibition, see: <https://fashionforgood.com/museum/past-exhibitions/knowning-cotton-otherwise/>

the future classroom should look like, and considered what the best routes could be to get there together.



Fig. 2

The pilot programme was designed to help students recognise and map out their own design process with a focus on materials and stories. The first phase explored an introduction to the programme and the topic of cotton with an emphasis on people, materials and planet. The second phase saw students explore both their own interests in more depth as well as participating in workshops with inspirational makers who are changing the system locally, including Yasmina Ajbilou, Farida Sedoc, Naomi Nagtegaal, Bonnie Ogilvie and New Optimist, to name a few.

The final and third phase of the programme offered students the opportunity to showcase their new work in an exhibition titled *News From the Future* (October 2023 - January 2023), creating space for a new generation of makers to reflect on the future of fashion and major environmental and social issues. During the project we also collaborated with four different schools: HKU University of Arts Utrecht (Utrecht), Saxion College (Enschede), Zadkine MBO (Rotterdam), and MBO Rijnland (The Hague). One of our aims was to decentralise the programme from the location of the museum in Amsterdam and we spoke to a wide range of MBO and HBO schools across the Netherlands before finalising these collaborations.

The educational toolkit, titled *Classroom of the Future: the Stories Behind Cotton*, has been developed as a physical culmination of the project and was launched open source on Fashion for Good's website in March this year. The toolkit consists of a six-week course around the theme 'cotton' and includes podcasts, videos and engaging content to support

teachers in the classroom - towards the future. This project has given us great insight into the possibilities which museum education can have to create prolonged impact. The toolkit is sure to be the first of many alternative educational resources, offering a new perspective on creative education locally and leading the way to a more collaborative approach of support and awareness for increased educational equity. At the end of the day, education should be a safe space for everyone which reflects the evolving society around us.



Fig. 3

Figures

Fig. 1 Naomi Nagtegaal presenting during the education programme for Knowing Cotton Otherwise, 2023 - Credit Elzo Bonam.

Fig. 2 Bonnie Ogilvie and Farida Sedoc presenting during the education programme for Knowing Cotton Otherwise, 2023 - Credit Elzo Bonam.

Fig. 3 Students at work during the education programme for Knowing Cotton Otherwise, 2023 - Credit Elzo Bonam.