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13TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
ON EDUCATION AND NEW LEARNING
TECHNOLOGIES



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DEVELOPING SOFT SKILLS IN FASHION DESIGN EDUCATION. A RESEARCH AROUND THEORIES AND DIGITAL PRACTICES TO IMPROVE ABILITIES RELATED TO PERSONALITY

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Abstract

Today, the fashion industry is a highly complex pluralistic and heterogeneous sector, in which physical and immaterial products, cultural capital and human resources are integrated. In the current context, in order to meet contemporary challenges and generate innovation, the forms of cross-fertilisation are becoming ever more daring, the number of the sectors involved is growing and require increasingly specialised skills. Fashion's boundaries, which are open to the boldest forms of research and experimentation, are the result of the interplay and mutual integration of highly diversified and specialised fields. As Fashion involves diverse, heterogeneous disciplines, it makes it extremely difficult for a single student or professional to be able to hold all the specific knowledge needed in each sector. Therefore, collaborative work in this context is fundamental: interdisciplinary experience are needed to enrich all team members by creating an exchange of knowledge, facilitates learning and management of different topics that require different specializations.

The aim of the paper is to investigate innovative methodologies for the development of soft skills in fashion design higher education.

First of all, the paper focuses on the importance of soft skills in fashion design education, reporting data from ongoing research developed within the framework of "FTAlliance. Weaving Universities and Companies to Co-create Fashion-Tech Future Talents", a three-year (2020-2022) Knowledge Alliance Project co-founded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union (GA 612662-EPP-1-2019-1-IT-EPPKA2-KA). Companies are looking for graduate students with highly developed soft skills. Next to discipline skills, it is ever more important that students have the ability to work in a team, know how to listen, understand and interact with people of different backgrounds. Interdisciplinary courses and teamwork experiences are essential both in the academic training as well as in the workplace environment to train transversal skills and generate innovation.

Then, the paper describes and analyses the outcomes of a case study, a virtual didactic experience taking place during COVID19 pandemic, aimed at developing the soft skills of fashion students within the third year of the Bachelor's Degree in Fashion Design at Politecnico di Milano. The five-day workshop was conducted in digital distance learning mode, alternating moments of frontal lectures, interventions by professionals from heterogeneous fields, and practical group exercises with the aim to transfer to students knowledge about how to work in team in an effective manner, to manage stress and to know how to present themselves in the best possible way.

The paper concludes with insights and suggestions on how digital educational experiences can stimulate the development of soft skills in the fashion design field.

Keywords: Soft skills, Fashion design education, COVID19 pandemic, digital educational experience.

1 INTRODUCTION

The fashion industry is a very complex and heterogeneous field, in which physical and intangible products, cultural capital and human resources are integrated. Today, in order to respond to contemporary challenges and generate innovation, forms of cross-fertilisation are becoming increasingly daring, the number of sectors involved is growing and increasingly specialised skills are required. The boundaries of Fashion, open to the boldest forms of research and experimentation, are the result of the interaction and mutual integration of highly diversified fields. As Fashion involves different disciplines, it is extremely difficult for a single student or professional to possess all the specific knowledge needed in each field [1]. Therefore, collaborative work in this context is crucial: interdisciplinary experiences are necessary to enrich all team members by creating an exchange of knowledge, facilitating learning and dealing with different topics that require different specialisations [2]. The increased specialisation in the fashion field creates the need for interdisciplinary roles to facilitate and support specialists throughout

the design, prototyping, production and sales process. Activities are becoming more complex and roles more specialised, while there is a need to maintain a holistic view. Generic competences or soft skills will allow different actors to connect and become familiar with diverse dedicated skills.

In particular, our research aims to investigate innovative methodologies for the development of soft skills in fashion design higher education, taking into account some of the new needs that smart working has brought with it.

The world is changing, and the pandemic has only massively accelerated a process that was already underway [3]. Data collected by Gartner Research in 2019 [4] indicates that around 10% of employees at that time were working remotely full-time, while another 20% were working from home part-time. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic almost 100% of employees who were able to work from home did so. This situation emerged towards the end of March 2020 and continued throughout April and early May of that year. According to Jay Van Bavel, Associate Professor of Psychology and Neural Sciences at New York University, we have just undergone the largest behavioural change experiment in human history. COVID-19 can be considered one of the most important test markets in the history of HR practices, forcing companies to adopt a real work-from-home policy. As for future trends, data collected by Gartner Research from HR executives [4], business leaders, CFOs and real estate chiefs indicates that the percentage of work-from-home will increase 10% 20% over 2019. Another 28% will work from home some of the time. "We all know that work will never be the same, even if we don't yet know all the ways it will be different," says Slack co-founder and CEO Stewart Butterfield [3]. The pandemic has therefore normalised remote working. But while digital connections have enabled immediate remote collaboration and brought people closer together in a dematerialised dimension, they have also brought with it new challenges. There is no longer a precise dividing line between space and time, between public and private, between work and leisure. This pervasive condition potentially forces workers to manage workloads in a continuous flow. It also forces people to rethink the way they communicate and connect with colleagues at work: the workplace is a social environment and business in any form is a social phenomenon. Robin Dunbar, Emeritus Professor of Experimental Psychology, University of Oxford [3], points out that as face-to-face engagement, casual encounters around the coffee machine, the traditional 'flow' that makes things work, and work fast, is lost. Teams quickly lose focus, and sense of belonging - and commitment to the organisation and its aims and objectives - is lost very quickly. Hence the need to find new ways to enable people to collaborate digitally, empathise with each other, do team building and network remotely. Moreover, the digital world of video calls is struggling to replace face-to-face meetings: technical and content interference continually threatens communication and undermines people's attention spans and attention spans drop. Hence the importance for employees to be able to communicate efficiently and to transmit information in a shorter time. All these observations led to our research question: how can higher education support fashion design students in developing soft skills that take into account these new challenges?

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 A premise

Our analysis is first of all based on results emerged within an ongoing research developed within the framework of "FTAlliance. Weaving Universities and Companies to Co-create Fashion-Tech Future Talents", a three-year (2020-2022) Knowledge Alliance Project co-founded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union (GA 612662-EPP-1-2019-1-IT-EPPKA2-KA) [5]. In particular, some useful results emerged by the validation of the Fashion-Tech curriculum [6] produced within "Education4Fashion-Tech: Interdisciplinary Curriculum for Fashion in the Digital Era", a three-year (2017-2020) Strategic Partnerships for higher education project co-founded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union (GA 2017-1-SE01-KA203-034601) [7]. Three parallel focus groups were organised and co-developed in collaboration with the consortium partners to collect feedbacks aligned with current and future industry practices and needs. Each focus group involved industry representatives from the consortium - each partner was tasked with inviting at least one of three professionals from the design, HR and management departments. It was decided to explore different territories and directions in fashion technology in order to complete the results of the work package objective. The project objective for the focus groups involved revisiting and interrogating the general and specific competencies for Fashion-Tech in order to review and fine-tune their current relevance and applicability to the industry. In light of COVID-19, the devastating impacts to the fashion industry have forced companies to accelerate, change and evaluate options to transform and respond to several difficulties. Focus group planning and delivery took place during the global pandemic, and that fashion

is operating in the context of a rapidly changing landscape. Of all businesses, fashion industry has faced different challenges, responding to economic impacts such as financial layoffs, temporary and permanent closures of physical shops and workplaces. The devastating impacts have forced companies to accelerate change and evaluate options to transform, innovate and move into digital space. The findings from the exploration of current and emerging job roles provided an understanding of employability within Fashion. What emerged as result of the focus group is that companies are looking for graduate students with highly developed soft skills. Soft skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, communication, teamwork, independent work, interpersonal skills become particularly useful in interdisciplinary processes where different departments within the same company have discussions to bring out and flourish new ideas. Soft skills could, for example, make an interdisciplinary exchange between designers and engineers more connected and efficient. Collaboration and role creation/development (i.e. the ability to develop/adapt/transform one's own knowledge and skills to meet the future needs of the company) are important to create interdisciplinary facilitation skills to fully co-operate and co-design with diverse professionals. Specialisation and generalisation as well as the development of "hybrid" competences across disciplines are extremely relevant for the future of fashion education. Therefore, alongside disciplinary skills, it is increasingly important that students have the ability to work in groups, to listen, understand and interact with people from different backgrounds. Interdisciplinary courses and teamwork experiences are essential both in academic training and in the work environment to form transversal skills and generate innovation. Generic skills enable students to think independently and make complex judgements in a collaborative working environment.

2.2 Soft Skills for Fashion Design

With the aim of investigating innovative methodologies for the development of soft skills in fashion design higher education, we conducted an educational field experience, the results of which we describe and report.

The short course, entirely carried out in digital mode due to COVID 19's restrictions, took place from 15th to 19th June 2020 on Microsoft Teams and was organised by Proff. Livia Tenuta and Susanna Testa for 150 students in their third year of the three-year BA Fashion Design course at Politecnico di Milano (Milan, Italy) [8]. The aim of the course was to train transversal skills which may contribute to support the subject specific ones. Starting from the results and considerations emerged through the above-mentioned research and desk research activities, some of the most relevant skills for the sector were identified, selected and grouped into three main areas:

- 1 performance: being able to convey and share ideas clearly and concisely with one's interlocutors; being able to listen and willing to engage in constructive discussions.
- 2 teamwork: ability and willingness to work in a team; ability to lead, motivate and drive team members towards ambitious goals and objectives; ability to adapt to different companies and contexts; resourcefulness, spirit of initiative and proactivity.
- 3 organisation and coping with stress: ability to carry out assigned tasks without the need for constant supervision; being able to react to work pressure and maintain control without losing focus on work priorities; identifying objectives, priorities, time constraints and organising the work of any resources available; commitment, ability and determination to achieve the assigned objectives and to go beyond them; knowing how to acquire, organise and distribute data and knowledge from other sources and people; ability not to lose control when facing with an unexpected problem and having the lucidity to intervene and solve it.

These three macro groups formed the thematic skeleton of the short course. From an organisational point of view, the five-day course was structured with guest speakers in the mornings and practical exercises in the afternoons. Starting from the principle that the integration of different fields and the transversal nature of the contents are successful in transferring information, the guests involved were professionals coming from different areas, such as cinema, theatre, sport, cooking, therefore not belonging to the world of fashion but embodying transversal soft skills. The guests were chosen for being best practices in their field as well as in one of the 3 mentioned above soft skills area. All activities were planned with a view to a digital implementation of the course and in order to train students' soft skills considering future digital work environment interactions. Table 1 shows the course programme.

Table 1. Short course programme.

| Day 1: 15 June 2020 | Day 2: 16 June 2020 | Day 3: 17 June 2020 | Day 4: 18 June 2020 | Day 5: 19 June 2020 |
|---|--|--|--|---|
| PERFORMANCE | TEAMWORK | ORGANISATION AND COPING WITH STRESS | LEARNING ABOUT THE WORLD OF WORK | PRESENTATIONS |
| 09:30 - 10:30 // Prof. L. Tenuta, Prof. S. Testa, Arch. D. Fossati, Course introduction 10:45 - 12:30 // Daniela Marra, Actress 14:00 - 15:00 Giulia Lamarca, My Travels: the Hard Truth, Influencer and psychologist | 10:00 - 11:30 // Chef Davide Oldani, Cucina POP 11:30 - 12.30 // Ing. Giuseppe Falco, Managing Director BCG | 10:00 - 11:00 // Ing. Aldo Chiarini, Former CEO Manutencoop, Former Chairman Engie Italia 11:15 - 12:30 // Carmine Bellotti, Coach AS Roma Official | 10:00 - 11:00 // Niccolò Umattino, Designer at Alexander McQueen 11:00 - 12:00 // Cristina Novati, Designer at Jaeger-LeCoultre 12:00 - 13:00 // Bianca Brandi, HR Manager Prima Assicurazioni | 10:00 - 13:00 // Group 1 - 10 presentations 14:00 - 17:00 // Group 10 - 20 presentations |
| 15:00 - 18:00 // Exercise: MESSA IN SCENA (SCENE SETTING) | 14:00 - 18:00 // Exercise: LA CENA VISIVA (VISUAL DINNER) | 14:00 - 18:00 // Exercise: BEAT TIME | 15:00 - 18:00 // Finalising presentations | |

2.2.1 Day 1

In the introduction to the course, after presenting the timetable and introducing the topic to students (performance; teamwork; organisation and coping with stress), the following indications were given to encourage active participation:

- always keep cameras on;
- keep the microphone off when not speaking;
- be participative;
- collect information about guests and note down questions related to the theme of the day;
- familiarise with your working group and exchange personal contacts, because it is important to build solid and happy relationships.

The attitude of the teachers was as positive as possible, in line with the 'Happy-Happy' theory by Professor Lars-Johan Åge [9]. In summary 'Happy-Happy' gives directions to achieve a happy negotiation. The main steps, presented to students, are based on the idea that with a positive attitude learning is facilitated and results are better. The five steps to success are briefly described in Table 2: keep a positive attitude; reflect; establish a relationship; choose well your words; always have a plan B ready. 'Happy-Happy' is based on creating a dimension of agreement by focusing on four elements: satisfaction, relationship, collaboration, future.

Table 2. 'Happy-Happy' principles.

| | <i>Description</i> | <i>Actions</i> |
|--|---|--|
| Maintaining a positive attitude | It is easier to get along with others if you are in a good mood. Feeling positive emotions is one of the main success factors when it comes to getting along with others. When you are in a good mood you are more intelligent and creative, it is easier to find solutions to problems and resolve social conflicts. The reason is that the brain discerns dopamine, a substance that activates the rational lobe responsible for all these abilities. You can trigger a dopamine surge in your brain in different ways: eating something nutritious that raises your glucose level, repeating positive words in a low voice or smiling with your eyes are scientifically valid methods. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try not to be on an empty stomach when you want to get along with someone. • Try to repeat a positive emotional formula or make a smile with your eyes before you start. The conversation will be influenced in a positive way. • When you feel the urge to criticise a proposal, feel irritated or frustrated, use the STOP technique: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • stand still where you are; • take a breath a couple of times; • observe how you feel and name the impulse ('I am angry'); • plan and work out the next line. |
| Reflect | It is important to be prepared, aware of what really matters, for oneself and for one's interlocutors. For this it is necessary to evaluate all alternatives well. It is often stressful to argue with someone who has different ideas about something that is very important to us. It is therefore important to act in such a way as to increase the possibility of agreement. You can do this by thinking, formulating and writing down what you think is important. This reduces the risk of losing sight of what you really want, but it also gets rid of one of the main obstacles to finding satisfactory solutions: your own selfishness. Thinking in the best way also involves proposing several alternative solutions. The more solutions we have, the higher the probability of finding one that is optimal for both sides. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When getting along with someone it is important to do something to find out what you both consider important. You can use either the 'one sentence' method, the 'one minute' method or the priority list, and the chances of getting along will increase. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Method one minute: ask yourself "What is important for this person?", a few seconds will pass before you are really intrigued by finding out what the world is like through the eyes of others. • Write what you want in a sentence to steer the discussion in the right direction and better resist pressure. • Before meeting the person you have to get along with, it is good to reflect, google and get informed, and try to find as many alternative solutions as possible. |
| Establishing a relationship | Create a favourable mood by showing curiosity and understanding towards the other person. If you want to establish good contact and a good relationship with another person you have to show curiosity and understanding, as well as making sure that you are not perceived as self-centred. Setting up the relationship in this way deserves the right to be right and makes it easier for others to talk about themselves and what they want, which is essential to find a solution that satisfies everyone. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When you need to agree with someone, you can try to show curiosity and understanding by asking "What?" and "How?". When further explanations and information are needed you can use "Help me understand...". • When the other person starts talking, it is time to nod and listen. |
| Choosing the right words | Avoid hard bargaining and instead steer the conversation in a constructive direction. When you start haggling over your positions, there is a high risk of three major disadvantages: wasting time, making bad decisions and worsening the relationship. In this case it is necessary to redirect the discussion in a more constructive way. One possibility to do this is to start talking about needs and alternatives, i.e. what is important to each party, and how to find a solution that satisfies everyone. Differences may prove to be a good ground for making a decision together. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When you have to agree with someone and you find that there is an entrenchment of principled demands, you can try to divert attention to needs and alternatives. Ask questions and listen, e.g. by saying: "What makes you think _____ is so important?" or "Can you help me understand how _____ could solve the situation?". |
| Always have a plan B ready | This is essential when one senses that the situation has reached a dead end. If you have done the first four steps to the best of your ability but find yourself at an impasse, it is probably because your instincts have taken over from your reason. Then you need to have a plan B. The best plan B in these circumstances is to ask questions and listen, helping the other person to come to their senses. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When you get the impression that your interlocutor has stuck to his or her guns, you can ask something like: "I understand that you want _____, can you just help me understand how getting it can solve your problem?". Or use an alternative scenario, perhaps with the roles reversed: "If you were in my shoes and someone said what you are saying, how would you take it?" • When someone criticises you personally or your proposals, it is better not to start defending yourself but to solicit further criticism by saying for example: "It is clear that you do not like my proposal. Can you help me understand? What do you think is wrong?" |

The introduction was necessary to create empathy with students, to directly address problems that are faced in everyday life but also in the working reality, especially when digital media can represent a limit in the communication. Following the introduction, the first guest was introduced.

First guest: Daniela Marra, Italian actress with a cinematographic and theatrical background. The importance of having the intervention of an actress was to help students understand which methods to use to communicate themselves in the best possible way, how to modulate the tone of voice according to the audience and how to empathise with the interlocutor (colleagues in the workplace or HRs during an interview). In particular, the moderators defined some key points around which to articulate the conversation: "what were the key moments in your training?" (i); "how do you perfect public speaking? How do you create engagement/empathy with your audience?" (ii); "how do you prepare to face the audience (crew, spectators,...)? Are there any exercises to overcome one's limits (stress, shyness,...)?" (iii); "how to speak to different audiences and/or impersonate different characters?" (iv); "what is the role of body language / of proxemics in a speech?" (v); "what tips would you give to our young talents (preparing the role they will have to play according to the situations - at work, for an interview, during presentations)?" (vi).

Second guest: Giulia Lamarca, psychologist, business trainer and successful travel blogger and influencer [10]. The conversation with Giulia Lamarca was aimed at understanding how to overcome one's limits in difficult situations. The following questions were asked: "tell us about yourself" (i); "how to translate thoughts into action?" (ii); "how do you overcome your limits?" (iii).

At the end of the speeches, the first exercise was launched.

Exercise: *MESSA IN SCENA (SCENE SETTING)* (individual work - digital mode).

Table 3. *MESSA IN SCENA (SCENE SETTING) Exercise.*

| | |
|------------------|---|
| objective | The aim is to build one's own character and modulate the same content according to three different storytelling. |
| brief | Telling yourself to a child, to your colleagues (many people), to a person you want to impress (personal or professional). Keep in mind vocabulary, clothing, proxemics, tone of voice. |
| modality | 30 seconds videos |
| timing | 3 hours |

2.2.2 Day 2

The second day was dedicated to stress management.

First guest: Davide Oldani [11] is a Michelin-starred chef, a great charisma and an excellent communicator. His restaurant D'O is in Cornaredo, a town in the Milanese hinterland with around 20,000 people. The relatively 'peripheral' location is the ideal choice for combining quality and sustainability. A mix of sobriety, taste and innovation, always in the name of quality and respect for the customer: these are the principles that inspire POP cuisine proposed by Oldani. Oldani's focus on teamwork and stress management in such a renowned kitchen were the reasons why we chose him. The following topics were discussed: how to combine creativity and organisation (i); how a typical day is organised (organisational steps and coordination) (ii); how to handle the unexpected (iii); tips for young talents (iv).

Second guest: Eng. Giuseppe Falco, Managing Director for the Italy-Greece-Turkey-Israel System and Senior Partner & Managing Director of Boston Consulting Group (BCG) and at the time member of the COVID 19 emergency task force. The following questions were asked: "how to manage time efficiently and not be overwhelmed by work?" (i); "you managed major business transformations and crises. How do you face the stress of having such a strong impact on certain realities?" (ii); "what was the most difficult moment in your career path? How did you overcome it?" (iii); "how is competitiveness and personal success combined with teamwork?" (iv); "what advice do you have for our young talents?" (v).

At the end of the speeches, the second exercise was launched.

Exercise: *LA CENA VISIVA (THE VISUAL DINNER)* (teamwork - digital mode). 20 groups were created by choosing each member verifying that he or she had never worked before with the other team members.

Table 4. LA CENA VISIVA (THE VISUAL DINNER) Exercise

| | |
|------------------|---|
| objective | The aim is to test organisational skills to achieve maximum results in a short time and under stress. |
| brief | Prepare a “visual” dinner in 4 hours, from 14:00 to 18:00. For the dinner decide and prepare: the theme/mood, the menu, soundtrack, serving. |
| modality | A .pdf presentation or video or collage. These should be accompanied by a summary slide describing the steps/timeline according to which the work has been organised. |
| timing | 4 hours |

2.2.3 Day 3

The third day was dedicated to the value of teamwork.

First guest: Mr. Aldo Chiarini, Former CEO Manutencoop, Former Chairman Engie Italia. The conversation focused on the role of the leader and leadership ("Teamwork managed with leadership is what allows the best cohesion and value to be achieved: well-channelled conflict, diversity, participation, listening, loyalty and transparency are the drivers that help the company grow." to quote Mr. Chiarini), on the issue of motivating employees with a view to enhancing diversity ("In a management team, diversity of style, gender, culture, origin and managerial attitude is an asset that helps to arrive at the best decisions").

Second guest: Carmine Bellotti, Coach AS Roma Official. Here following the questions posed: "how do you motivate a team?" (i); "how to do team building? Are there exercises or techniques?" (ii); "when there is a problem between team members, how do you handle it?" (iii); "what advice do you have for our young talents?" (iv).

At the end of the speeches, the third exercise was launched.

Exercise: BEAT TIME (teamwork - digital mode).

Table 5. BEAT TIME Exercise

| | |
|------------------|---|
| objective | The exercise must show coordination and organisation between the different members of the group. |
| brief | Do something together: a choreography, a sports exercise, sing a song, make a show.... be creative! |
| modality | A video of maximum 2 minutes in which you see everyone together (zoom or skype and make a recording of the conference). |
| timing | 4 hours |

2.2.4 Day 4

On the fourth day, the world of fashion was given space by inviting former students now holding prestigious positions in fashion and accessory brands to talk about their experiences (Niccolò Umattino, designer at Alexander McQueen and Cristina Novati, designer at Jaeger-LeCoultre).

At the end of the morning, it was crucial to have an HR - Bianca Brandi, HR Manager Prima Assicurazioni - simulating interviews with the students to test them and bring out the most common mistakes during an interview and how to bring out their strengths.

2.2.5 Day 5

The last day was dedicated to presentations.

Table 6. Final presentation

| | |
|------------------|--|
| objective | Showing the results produced within the shrt course |
| brief | The final presentation should consist of: - From exercise #1 // One video in which each participant introduces himself/herself (30 seconds per participant - choose the video in which you think you managed to present yourself best) - From exercise #2 // 5 minutes presentation of the dinner organisation. - From exercise #3 // 2 minutes video of coordination exercise - Commenting on what was learnt from the course experiences |
| modality | 15 minutes for each group to present the work |
| timing | 10:00 - 13:00 group 1 – 10 presentations 14:00 - 17:00 group 10 – 20 presentations |

3 RESULTS

During the entire course students showed active participation through questions, comments and curiosity about guests not only to acquire more knowledge about soft skills but also to better perform during the exercises. The results were surprising and beyond our expectations considering the time available. We report them below to show the tangible transposition of intangible soft skills such as communication, stress management and teamwork that were the subject of the digital short course.



Figure 1. La cena visiva – The visual dinner exercise. “Odyssey” project.



Figure 2. La cena visiva – The visual dinner exercise. “Isolated Dinner” project.



Figure 3. La cena visiva – The visual dinner exercise. “ALL YOU CAN...” project.

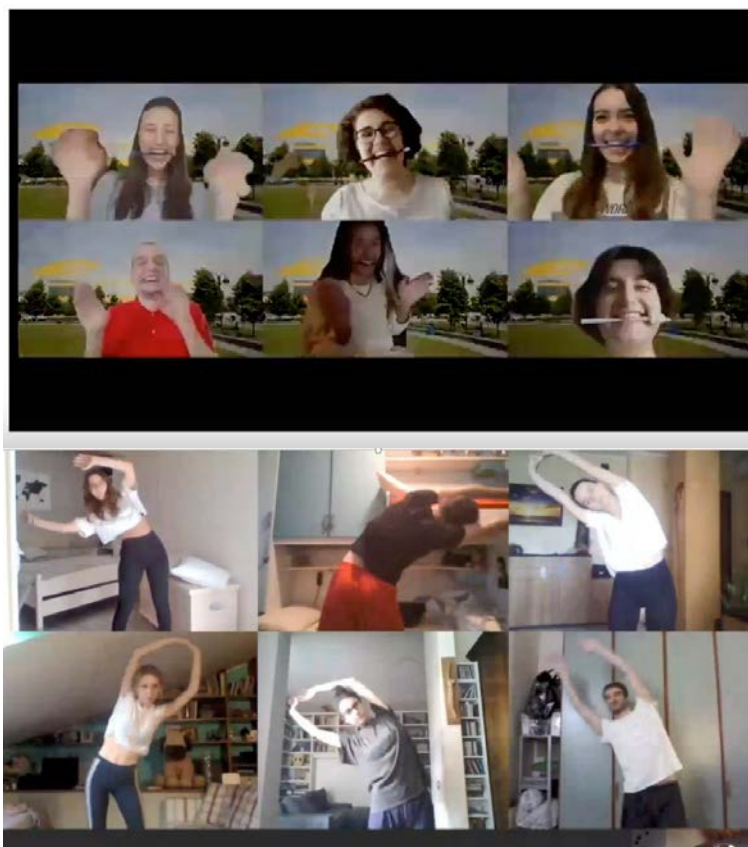


Figure 4. Beat Time exercises.

Lectures and presentations were fully recorded in order to be able to have transcripts and accurately analyse the results. During the presentations, students were also asked to conclude the presentations with a comment on the most significant lessons learned during the 5-day course. Comments were asked as well also at the end of the didactic experience in the form of digital anonymous questionnaires. Here below some of them are reported: “*Testimonials from worlds other than fashion were very useful*” (i); “*Working with a positive attitude and managing stress improves creative input.*” (ii); “*More awareness of what the working world expects from us young people.*” (iii); “*Working together in a more positive way. We re-evaluated the beauty of working with people we had never met before.*” (iv); “*Improved ability to meet deadlines with a positive attitude and clear directions, finding ideas quickly and developing them, adaptability to the situation.*” (v); “*Everyone better understood their own value and the real contribution they could make to the team.*” (vi); “*It was useful to identify one’s own abilities and weaknesses.*” (vii); “*I liked being able to compare myself with people I didn’t know before. This helped me to get out of my comfort zone.*” (viii); “*It would have been useful to have more interventions related to the fashion*

industry.” (ix); “It would have been useful to have had the course in the first year of training because it would have given them the basis to tackle the three-year course.” (x).

4 CONCLUSIONS

The paper first highlights the need to train fashion design students in an interdisciplinary collaboration perspective. Besides desk research, this emerges as well from some results of "FTAlliance. Weaving Universities and Companies to Co-create Fashion-Tech Future Talents", a three-year (2020-2022) Knowledge Alliance project co-founded by the European Union's Erasmus+ programme (GA 612662-EPP-1-2019-1-IT-EPPKA2-KA): an interdisciplinary approach is essential to stimulate innovation. Therefore, companies are looking for people with soft skills, especially interpersonal and problem-solving skills. Besides disciplinary skills, it is important that students have the ability to work in a team, to listen, understand and interact with people from different backgrounds.

The presented study reports on an experiment of innovative teaching in fashion design higher education. The short course dedicated to the development of soft skills, carried out entirely in digital mode due to COVID 19 restrictions, combined lectures delivered by experts from different sectors with learning by doing activities (individual and teamwork exercises). In particular, it emerges that with such a large number of students (150), digital tools enabled everyone to actively participate. The course, even though reported some criticalities (such as the timing), proved to be an opportunity to provide students with tools to team build at distance. What is more the digital mode made it possible to host high-calibre professionals who otherwise would not have been able to join due to space and time constraints. The presence of different guests and the fact that students had to face challenges that went beyond their usual realm facilitated a collaborative dynamic among them, stimulating socialisation and dialogue.

In the current practice of Fashion Design, the use of dialogue is shifting the perspective from a single, partial vision to a holistic, integrated and inclusive one. Interdisciplinary courses and teamwork experiences are essential both in academic training as well as in the work environment to train transversal skills and generate innovation. Since the future of fashion is increasingly oriented towards digital interaction, it is useful for students to acquire proxemics and a way of communicating that takes into account the constraints of the digital world, which have different dynamics than those of the physical world.

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