

Ep.3 Let's Go Further: I'm an adult learner: Get used to it!

You're never too old to start learning something new. That's the key message of this conversation with Mamello Atisa, a learner studying at Fashion Enter, a Skills and Education Group Foundation grant recipient, and a finalist in the FAB Awards 2022.

Listen as Mamello shares her passion for learning, her love of fashion, and her experience of being an adult learner. Whatever your age or stage in life, you will hear plenty to inspire you in this episode. Mamello could give you the confidence boost you need to return to education, pursue a lifelong interest, or embrace a new challenge.

Transcript

Joe McLoughlin 0:01

Welcome to Let's Go Further, a podcast that shines a light on the role of further education in transforming people's lives. In this first series, we are talking with learners, teachers, business people and professors about why further education matters to them. I'm your host Joe McLoughlin, Foundation Manager at the Skills and Education Group, an organisation that champions the further education and skills sector. In this episode, we're joined by Mamello Atisa. Earlier this year, Mamello received a grant from the Skills and Education Group Foundation to support her studies, completing her Level Two in Stitching, and is currently studying for her Level Two in Pattern Cutting with Fashion Enter. Throughout her life, she has displayed a passion for learning and a determination to overcome significant barriers. We wanted to delve further into her learning journey and ask her what's next? Mamello, hi, how are you?

Mamello Atisa 0:54

Hi, there. Yeah, it's going pretty good. We have some nice weather. So everything always feels a little bit better when the sun's out.

Joe McLoughlin 1:02

I just want to begin, just because for anyone listening, they can't see. But Mamello was recording today in a studio at Fashion Enter. So in her background, there's lots of fabrics, mannequins, designs and works in process. So Mamello, I just wanted to start really, from your perspective of where and what did you study?

Mamello Atisa 1:18

Here at Fashion Enter? I started out with stitching. And that was basically kind of garment construction and how to put garments together. And I did that at Level Two. And then I moved and did Patterns One, which was more constructing, you know, what garments you want to actually put together and creating them, and not so much the stitching, but just measuring, cutting a little and elements of design.

Joe Mcloughlin 1:52

When you've been doing that over the last like year or so, are there any sort of standout moments or sort of standout individuals from the course that you kind of often reflect on or think about as having had a positive influence or a big influence on you?

Mamello Atisa 2:05

That's a good question. I think one of the things that stands out was, there was a unit for doing illustrations, and I don't know how to draw, even my stick figures are a little bit challenged, so to speak. And I was really struggling with that unit. And it was quite an important unit, because that's really where you get a chance to illustrate what you want your garments to look like on a person in theory. And because I couldn't draw, I found that just really difficult. And it was just taking me weeks and weeks. And one of the tutors came over. And she said, "you know, I can show you some basic techniques that will help you". And it was really, it was miraculous, actually. Because just from that guidance, and that kind of input from somebody who knew what to do, and I was able to actually do a lot of illustrations and have continued to do so it's one of my favourite things now actually. So that stands out in terms of, you know, there's always this idea that you need to have some aptitude and you need to have talent to do certain things. And I think that's true. But I was really gratified to know that, you know, you can be taught and that I could learn this new skill. And yeah, I was absolutely elated. Because if I had a superpower, it would - well, one of them - it would be to know how to draw. Yeah, so I was really happy about that.

Joe Mcloughlin 3:47

Yeah, no, I think so. Absolutely. I think having that...the power of technique almost isn't it, it takes something that seems very natural and actually breaks it down into a thing that can be replicated or taught or...but you obviously take someone with a great level of skill and ability to do that, which is great. And so just kind of leaving Fashion Enter for the moment. What was your sort of experience of education like prior to attending Fashion Enter? Because I know we've spoken before about the pressures of school reunions?

Mamello Atisa 4:13

Yeah, I loved learning and I've always liked learning. I think probably when I was 18. I had always thought I didn't like school. I never made the distinction until then, that liking school and liking learning were two very different things. So I left school hoping that whatever I was going to go and study, you know, was going to be enjoyable because I hadn't enjoyed the environment of school and algebra and geometry. I didn't understand the point of it. And I didn't like the social aspect of school. Nobody particularly bullied me but I was not necessarily, you know...I was just an invisible character on campus. So I think after 18, I realised that actually, I really liked learning. And I liked learning in different aspects, not necessarily just in a classroom environment, but I was very curious about a lot of things. And I did better at college than I had at school, that defining moment was quite important, because that's what kind of has spurred me after that, to do short courses, to study to take up longer courses, and to continue to develop myself, almost like a road of self discovery, because I wasn't really sure what I was good at. So for me, education was, I guess, a therapy of some sort, in trying to figure out how I can engage in this world and what my place was. And yeah, by discovering what my skills are, what my interests are, and what my capabilities are.

Joe Mcloughlin 6:05

I think there's definitely something about when you're 18, returning to it as an adult, right, or being in charge of your own education, so that you might look into this particular area or that particular area because you're passionate about it. So for instance, I since leaving school, I don't think I've ever picked up a maths book ever. But I have read an awful lot of history books, because that did interest me. And you know, that's something that you've taken on and you move forward with. So with that sort of being the case, then did you sort of see yourself returning to kind of, like full institutional education as an adult? Or were you always happier with just online courses or short courses? Or what triggered the jump basically, to getting involved with Fashion Enter so directly and so clearly?

Mamello Atisa 6:45

I think, interestingly enough, when I was 18, again, seems to be a very significant moment in my life, I was offered a fashion scholarship. And I didn't understand why I was being offered a fashion scholarship because from my point of view, I'd never expressed any particular technical interest or desire, per se. And I certainly didn't think I had the skills to pursue it at university or college level. But I definitely had an interest in fashion, which is probably why my careers advisor put me forward. So I'm not sure if I'm answering your question.

But that moment, actually, just reflecting on that, I realised that the only thing that had always prevented me from going into fashion itself was because I didn't think I had the aptitude. I liked clothes, I liked styling people and that sort of thing. But I didn't know that I had the ability to actually have skills that I could take forward and make anything of a career with.

Joe Mcloughlin 7:57

If it's about that confidence, was it about...as you returned to it as an adult, is it just having that bit more confidence that you have a few years later as a grown up that you just didn't have as a teenager? Was that part of the reasoning behind why you kind of reached out and got involved recently?

Mamello Atisa 8:12

What comes in my mind was I had nothing to lose. Because of the time I am in my life, I thought, I've been doing all these different things. And I thought, what do I really have to lose by exploring something that I've actually had an interest in? And I might as well do it now. And I think as you say, there was probably an element of confidence, because I was committed to it in my mind. And quite uncharacteristically, I was not as hard on myself about what I knew and what I didn't know about it. I was just prepared to do my best.

Joe Mcloughlin 8:50

Yeah. So you went in one, feeling more confident, but two with a willingness to learn almost?

Mamello Atisa 8:54

Yeah definitely. I knew I didn't know. And I think the confidence was necessary, because in a lot of the classes, there are people who have really, you know, very evolved skills, they've been doing it or they seem to have a really high aptitude for it. And I think one of the things that I realised I thought, it doesn't matter, I'm gonna find my place here. And there's something here for me, because I've been carrying this desire for a long time, whether at the front of my mind or in the back of my mind. So I think that was the confidence aspect of it, but I don't mind what other people are doing. I'm gonna figure out what I need to carry on.

Joe Mcloughlin 9:38

Because ultimately, it's not about them is it, it's about your educational story or experience. And so having kind of gone through it and having kind of carrying on with it, what are sort of some of the benefits either unexpected or expected that you'd say, have been as part of your sort of Fashion Enter journey?

Mamello Atisa 9:54

This is certainly one of them coming in contact with the opportunity to apply for the grant, and then being awarded the grant. Speaking of standout moments,

that has definitely been an aspect of thinking, actually taking it a notch further and thinking actually, I can imagine even more, there's so much, there's even more scope to think about what it is actually, because I think in applying for the grant, I needed to express why I wanted to do this. So it was a really good opportunity to really reflect on that question, and to really think about, how do I want to move forward with it? And you know, why am I applying to do this? Why am I applying for funds to continue to do something like this?

Joe Mcloughlin 10:46

So I'm understanding it then...kind of one of the benefits of going back as an adult learner going back and going through the process and applying for funding with us. One of the benefits was that it helped you clarify your thinking around why it's important and why you're passionate about it. And just kind of help clear your thinking, I suppose?

Mamello Atisa 11:00

Yes, absolutely. Absolutely.

Joe Mcloughlin 11:04

Great. And then I suppose the flipside of that coin is what's some of the challenges of returning to education as an adult? Because I know you've spoken just a while ago in the chat there about people who had a great aptitude or tremendous levels of experience already kind of what are some of the other sort of challenges you are navigating day to day?

Mamello Atisa 11:21

I think the outward one was age, coming into an industry that favours youth. On the surface, I don't think that's the case. But in terms of when you're starting out, and learning skills, there is if you're not particularly good at it, so to speak, or show a particular talent for it. It's easy to be dismissed. And I'm not saying that in a disparaging way to people who are involved with the process, you kind of get relegated to the back of the classes, you know, somebody who is doing it just for fun to occupy your time, you know, the age thing was quite surprising for me, surprising because for me, this was a new skill. And so I was learning something. So I didn't have anything to draw on from my work experiences, or you know, other things I've done. And yeah, I was actually surprised by how much being older and the references to my age, were quite relentless. And that surprised me, that was a little bit of a shock, actually, and quite a challenging barrier to slightly get over. I had to think again about myself in terms of questions of how I identify myself, what how I think about myself, and it can be quite a difficult process. You know, maybe I just remember, there was one time there was an element that we were learning, and I was really struggling with it. And the idea was that I was struggling with it. Because I think the comment was, it's not easy to learn when you're older. And I thought, yeah, this is a new skill. And I was quite resistant to that comment, because I thought no, there are

lots of things I can learn because I have some kind of, you know, knowledge or background or aptitude. But this is difficult, because it's really new. So I was just, was looking for self acceptance, and then finding the tools where I could find my place and be accepted and to be able to continue without feeling that there was no place for me. And that was very important and critical. I had a couple of false starts. Because I left thinking there's nothing here this is too...you know, I'm not progressing. And when I came back to it, I thought, no, I want to do this, and I'm gonna see it through.

Joe Mcloughlin 14:06

And then so as you move to sort of reframe yourself and kind of get away from that age issue, did other people start to reframe and change their views as well? Or was that kind of a persistent barrier?

Mamello Atisa 14:18

I think what was interesting was that when I looked around, objectively, there were people of all ages actually. And it was interesting how I had aligned myself. It just so happened that a lot of the other learners that I had aligned myself with were much younger, but there were lots of other learners who were mature, if you like, and just kind of doing what they needed to do. But I think what I'll say is that I decided to get over it. I decided that it's too big of a social barrier. And I kind of felt like it's none of my business, my business is just to become good at what I'm doing in whatever that means.

Joe Mcloughlin 15:06

Absolutely. And so having kind of decided all that then and agreed to sort of truck on, what would you say to someone who was thinking about taking the plunge and kind of rejoining education as an adult, whether it's Fashion Enter, or whether it's another college or another training provider? What are some of the things they should be excited about? What are some of the things they should be wary of? You know, are there any practical tips that you'd pass on?

Mamello Atisa 15:29

I'd say, don't be discouraged. And just be aware that there are social attitudes out there about age, those barriers exist, but they don't have to be the reason you don't progress. I'd also say find your people. Find a tribe of people who you're learning with who you're able to express - not on a necessarily on a deep level - but who you are open to letting help here and study with and work with,

you know, that's not necessarily to do with age, because there are people who, you know, we gravitate towards people. And I would say, find people who you can relate to. And but, absolutely, I mean, we're not static as human beings. So if you've been a lawyer, and you think actually, this was never my, my jam, I always wanted to be an artist, and you have that window and opportunity, then go and do that. But just be resolute and honest with yourself about why you're doing it, and what it fulfils for you. But I'd say for anybody, education is there for all of us, and the classroom environment and the taught environment is a really helpful foundation for us to find expression, to reinvent ourselves in whichever way we want. And also that it's not necessarily easy. So just to be a little bit persistent and patient with ourselves.

Joe Mcloughlin 17:14

Just for the last few questions now, I just want to focus in a bit more on fashion, because I know it's something you're passionate about. What is it about fashion that interests you particularly?

Mamello Atisa 17:23

I love it. It's like a blank canvas. Yeah, everything. I remember, sorry, to quote Gok Wan, he said something which I really loved. And he said, our clothing is the outward expression to the world. And how we dress and how we style ourselves, is the conversation we're having with the world. And I think fashion is that broad. And I think being involved in fashion, you know as somebody who's involved in fashion, I think we provide and contribute to, if you'd like a dictionary, where people can look up different things, to help them develop that language or that conversation, and find their place in terms of how they want to express themselves through clothing. I also like the fact that fashion, I know we think of fashion as something, you know, being stylish or, but we all wear clothes, at least we're supposed to. And that the way we dress and the way we step out of our front door. All of those things, were already finding a voice. Just by the way, were dressed, whether we want to blend whether we're hiding, whether we're a bit flamboyant, and it gives a range of who we are, consciously or subconsciously. What I like about fashion is that it does have the potential to have a very positive impact on people's lives. Whether you're styling people, whether you're designing clothing, that suits their physicality, or it says something about them, whether it's changing the buttons on somebody's winter coat, because just that touch of change expresses a little bit more about that person. So I think fashion, it's just the range and scope of what it can do in terms of how it can reach everybody. And everybody can find their language, their conversation through clothing is really important. And yeah, this is what I love about fashion. I love the glamour of stuff from folk. But equally I like the upcycling as well. I like when people bring things they've had in their cupboards and ask you to kind of redo them give them new life, because that in itself is also telling a story, that they have something that they liked maybe five years ago, six years ago, maybe it doesn't fit the way it used to. Maybe they just want

it to be re imagined. But it just says that they're evolving, and they're embracing the changes of their life. So I think fashion has a lot of good jobs to do when harnessed properly.

Joe Mcloughlin 20:35

I suppose at a time where where you can't turn on the news without seeing mentions of the environmental crisis or cost of living crisis, I imagine that kind of push for upcycling garments is probably going to be more and more a feature isn't it as money gets tighter, but people want to do more, or people want to be conscious of the environment, but they want to style themselves a little differently or change a little differently. So I suppose it's a really, really kind of lively and exciting time to be so engaged in that part of the industry.

Mamello Atisa 21:03

Yeah, and I think also re educating ourselves about, you know, there's so much throwaway fashion. And I mean, there are lots of retail shops, that gives us the chance to wear a T-shirt, you know, for two pounds, three pounds, perhaps we need to think about our own attitudes to waste, to sharing. I think charity shops are good for things like that. But I think it's also...we can renew things that seem kind of useless. Or I've gone into people's wardrobes and they still have the tags on the clothes. So that tells a story in itself. Maybe the clothes just don't fit them. And if you're able to adjust things and give them use, that's wonderful for the owner, and for the garment as well.

Joe Mcloughlin 21:55

And then finally, what's your plans for the future?

Mamello Atisa 21:58

I'd like to see myself continuing to work to find my place professionally in the fashion industry, whether it's through writing blogs, or talking about these very issues around how to maximise our clothing, the social...having maybe that platform to talk about social issues that really matter through the lens of fashion. I'd also like - ideally, that's a little bit further down the road - but I would like to create some kind of collection of mainly accessories, to add touches, maybe a few like exclamation marks and punctuations to people's fashion already. There are a lot of things I'd like to do. In the immediacy, I'm signing up for another course to develop and refine my technical skills. And also, well, recently, I've also been talking to a studio not very far from here about how to develop the garments they already have. But I would say my first love is certainly reimagining and upcycling clothing. That's very important. I don't want to kind of make claims about understanding about the environment. I think I understand it in a superficial way and I do what I need to. But I think in terms of my own involvement, I would like to contribute to not creating more waste and



looking at fashion, as a place where people can actually be, not frugal, but more responsible. It's a very simple contribution we can all make to fashion whilst it being aesthetic, but also aware of the world we're living in and what we perhaps need to do to help our world be better.

Joe Mcloughlin 24:08

Thanks for listening to this episode of Let's Go Further, which was produced by the Skills and Education Group. Don't forget to subscribe to receive future episodes, and you can let us know what you think about what you hear on Twitter and LinkedIn. So join us next time for more honest, insightful and inspiring conversations from Let's Go Further.