

Francesca Sterlacci

A fashion designer founded an online university for sewers



Francesca Sterlacci channels her passion for sewing and design into the University of Fashion.

She began her career as a fashion designer specializing in high-end and custom clothing. After many years in the business, Francesca decided to dedicate her time to creating and maintaining an online fashion school. The University of Fashion (UniversityOfFashion.com) was founded in 2008 and has gathered students from around the world seeking to learn about fashion design and sewing techniques. *Threads* spoke to Francesca to learn more about how the University came to be.

*Erica Redfern is *Threads*' assistant editor.*

***Threads* magazine:** *When did your love of fashion begin? How long have you been sewing?*

Francesca Sterlacci: At age 9, I taught myself to hand-sew using scraps from my mother's freelance embroidery cutting job. I made clothes for my and my friends' Barbie dolls. By age 15, I moved on to my mother's sewing machine. My sewing addiction morphed into experimenting with patternmaking. This resulted in a flourishing custom-made clothing business. While I was still in high school, I designed and sewed more than 15 prom dresses. In senior

year, I had the opportunity to sew production for my friend Barbara Arata, who was selling her designs to various trendy New York boutiques. Following in Barbara's footsteps, I attended the Fashion Institute of Technology and spent the next seven years designing for New York-based fashion brands and traveling the globe, before opening my eponymous high-end fashion label, selling to Saks, Nordstrom, Bergdorf Goodman, and many other fine specialty stores around the country.

TH: *What would you consider your forte?*

FS: My preferred design discipline, by far, is draping. For me, working in 3-D allows me the most freedom and is where I feel most creative. Draping provides a more tactile experience than patternmaking and fashion drawing, though I often use patternmaking for more basic designs.

TH: *What was the best thing about starting the University?*

FS: The University of Fashion (UoF) is a unique way to preserve the craft of fashion design while also supporting people from 177 countries, who either are currently attending fashion school, or who dream of attending but might not have the access or the financial capability. We now have thousands of people accessing our site and that number continues to grow. Our subscribers include fashion industry companies whose employees use us to upgrade their skills, professional groups such as the Association of Sewing and Design Professionals and the American Sewing Guild, students and teachers at high schools, colleges, fashion colleges, aspiring designers from around the world, and the "fashion curious." The numerous testimonials posted on the UoF website are proof that what we offer is making a difference in the lives of many, many people.

TH: *What kinds of classes does the University offer?*

FS: The UoF produces lessons, not courses. Our research has shown that people learn best in brief bursts, producing quick results, as opposed to committing to a class that will take many weeks to complete, which is how typical school courses are designed. We currently offer lessons in 13 disciplines: draping, patternmaking, sewing, fashion drawing, accessories, children's wear, menswear, knits, product development, CAD patternmaking, CAD fashion art, fashion business, and a lecture series that covers topics such as: trend forecasting, color theory, fashion history, textiles, interviews with famous designers, and much more. The lessons in each hands-on discipline are broken down into three skill levels: beginner, intermediate, and advanced.

TH: *Can you take me through the process to create a lesson?*

FS: Based on an instructor's demonstrated area of expertise, I ask them to submit a proposed lesson outline. I review the outline and offer tips on how to improve or amend it. Once the lesson is approved, the instructor writes a step-by-step script to bring the lesson to life. We then schedule the lesson for filming, where I direct the videographer to shoot all the steps in the lesson from the instructor's perspective. I follow along as the lesson is filmed, keeping an eye on the script to ensure that the instructor isn't varying from the script or, worse, making small mistakes that might affect the quality of the end product. Even great teachers sometimes make mistakes and part of my job as the director is to catch and correct mistakes early on, not later after discovering the garment or project doesn't look or fit right, requiring a complete reshoot.

TH: *What is your approach to teaching fashion and design classes?*

FS: I have always adhered to the adage, "You've got to learn the rules in order to break them," which is why I structured the UoF videos into beginner, intermediate, and advanced skill levels. For me, a successful designer is one who really understands all the processes, such as design, manufacturing, and marketing. A designer who only knows one thing has very limited scope and will not achieve their maximum potential.

TH: *What advice would you give to young people interested in fashion?*

FS: I will pass on words of wisdom that were once given to me and my graduating class at FIT by designer Pauline Trigère: "If you are not willing to eat, sleep, and drink fashion, then get out of the business now." Fashion is a business and, like any business, to be successful you must be passionate, skilled, creative, hardworking, and driven. Aspiring designers should educate themselves in all fashion disciplines, be aware of who the key players are in the industry, be adept at social media, and, if they want to venture into their own brand, they must also learn about fashion business and law. It is just not enough today to want to design.

Francesca works on a video about drafting a kimono sleeve with a gusset alongside University of Fashion instructor Fiona Liu.



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