



Cross culture education: Sustainability and slow fashion

Keywords: Slow fashion, handcrafting, experiential learning

This paper describes a four-week project that partners university students with Somali refugees in our local community. The aim of the project was to develop a socio-cultural skills exchange between students and refugees with the objectives of [1] experiential transfer of handcrafting skills and fashion business expertise, [2] encouraging slow fashion production methods and sustainable fashion techniques and [3] embed these concepts within a small scale commercial enterprise framework.

In early 2017, we were approached by a Somali refugee organization that needed help to sustain their work in teaching members of their community to sew garments in a small production setting. Many of them had done sewing at home, by hand, or knew how to embellish garments with embroidery but few had used sewing machines and now were in need of jobs to support themselves in their new country. Their organization had previously received grants which allowed them to purchase home sewing machines and a few other necessities but they were concerned about the funding for grants being lowered or taken away altogether.

The faculty members aim was to establish a socio-cultural exchange between the students and the refugees that would combine the refugees sharing their traditional skills and knowledge with the students knowledge of production sewing and commercial fashion. Secondly, we felt that this was a good opportunity for the students to work on a slow fashion project which encompassed social entrepreneurship and responsible business practices.

The following learning outcomes were developed for the students:

1. Develop an understanding of slow-fashion concepts and small scale sustainable production techniques in the context of a fashion enterprise.
2. Conduct market research that focuses on localized markets and supply sources in relation to sustainable products.
3. Develop inter-cultural cognizance and sensitivity.

Once the basic concept was developed, the students were introduced to the project. Lecture-based workshops were planned to discuss the project and move it forward along with active studio sessions. The initial studio sessions were held with the design-oriented students conducting fashion forecasting research, marketing research and developing initial garment silhouettes. Product development students focused on the creation of tech packs, sourcing and production. The students were challenged to develop the product design based on trend forecasting reports to determine the style and type of garment which would resonate with a identified target market.

After presentation and discussion with the refugee group, it was decided that a basic garment, such as an A-line dress, that could be changed easily into a top, a tunic or a longer garment would be best as an initial product. Only basic sewing skills were required and it could also be made out of a variety of fabrications to allow for four season selling. Details could be added to further the variability of the garment based on trends, seasonality and fabrications.

Refugee women also had some embroidery skills and these could be utilized to add value to the garment.

Students finalized the garment design, created the pattern and graded it out to 5 sizes (XS, S, M, L, XL). Samples of the garments were developed by students in both whole cloth and t-shirts which had been cut for this purpose. These were shared with the refugees as a visual guide for ideation and to understand how to stitch the garments. The commercial aspects of the design development were presented by the students and discussed.

Due to the fact that we had very little startup capital, we decided to work with the sustainability theme, and used recycled textiles that were donated from a local thrift shop. In our state alone over 1.4 billion pounds of clothing and textiles are disposed of each year (Xxxx State, 2018). Tee shirts are thrown away in immense quantity and the thrift organization was willing to donate large bags of them to our project. A local dry cleaner washed all the tee shirts before we brought them to the location. The refugees would sort through the tee shirts to separate by color and determine garment structure. Small stains were not considered a problem as they could be covered with an embroidery design or cut away.

Students worked with the refugees to develop efficient production methods suitable for the skills of the workers and to simulate a small scale commercial fashion environment. Local retailers were approached to carry the garments and suggested marketing tools were presented. Finally, students were required to review their learning activities and reflect on these activities, professional development, as well as the benefits and any difficulties they encountered.

From the class perspective, we felt that this project was a success. Overall, we felt that this project gave a meaningful experience that generated a series of educational, experiential and enterprise based outputs. The project's focus on the benefits of slow fashion oriented modes of business, interaction with local refugees and the opportunity for the students to apply their education to a real life project was truly beneficial. The students noted in their reflections that they liked feeling that they made a difference in the community and being able to meet people outside their social groups.

Future plans for this project would be to take it to a larger scale to include more students and additional refugee groups. In particular, we would like to have students generate suitable marketing communications materials that demonstrate a clear understanding of emotional marketing toward product attachment and transparency in fashion enterprise as a value added offer. The addition of a mentorship program for refugees demonstrating an aptitude to commercial fashion concepts is proposed that would support the college's objectives toward community engagement and issues of diversity. We also feel that this business model could be duplicated in other cities with similar populations.

References

Xxxx State Association for Reduction, Reuse and Recycling. (2018). *Textile Recovery*. [online] Retrieved on March 22, 2018 from <https://www.> [removal of identifying information]