(r)EVOLUTION RETOLD – An experiential collection created collaboratively between merchandising and design students

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Abstract

This project provides experiential learning to students through a collaborative, real-world opportunity to design, develop, merchandise and market a small collection for a retail setting. It is becoming more important than ever for higher education to integrate these types of learning environments that encourage teamwork, communication, critical thinking and creative problem solving. Students were broken into teams of 3-4 to lead certain portions of the process which included buying and planning, communications and outreach, store planning design, and product design management. Each student took on an industry role that empowered them to engage in scenarios that required high-level problem solving, critical thinking, compromise and clear communication. It was discovered in student reflections that the students were able to strengthen their weaknesses, compromise and adapt to different ideas, and practice clear communication through this experiential learning adventure.

Project Description:

The purpose of this project is to facilitate real-world, experiential learning by supporting students with an educational opportunity to work collaboratively to design, develop, merchandise and market a collection for a retail setting. Highly collaborative students are continuing to become more valued in the workplace making it integral for higher education to develop learning environments that cultivate teamwork, communication, critical thinking and creative problem solving in groups. According to the Association of American Colleges and University, candidates who are able to think critically and solve complex problems combined with exemplary communication and teamwork skills are highly sought out by employers (Hart Research Associates, 2015). However, Chi, Liu, Salusso and McCracken (2018) identified that corporate recruiters feel recent college graduates are not completely prepared to acclimate to these industry standards of leadership, problem-solving and communication skills. As educators with industry experience, we've recognized evident gaps in our students' ability to adapt in collaborative environments between the two majors of merchandising and design. Traditionally, students in higher education institutions can become siloed within their major. The goal of this

project was to begin to dissolve these silos and provide an experience for students to hone these industry needed skills.

In this semester long project, students were broken into smaller teams that were responsible for certain aspects of the process such as buying and planning, communications and outreach, store planning design, and product design management. Each student in this course took on an industry role as a form of experiential learning that would mimic the fashion industry. In this way, the project set out to generate a real-world educational experience by empowering the students to live out their future roles in the classroom. Through this experience students engaged in scenarios that required high-level problem solving, critical thinking, compromise and clear communication. It is common for textile and apparel undergraduate curricula to utilize team-based projects as a collaborative learning environment that is comparable to the apparel industry (Karpova et al. 2011). When students have the ability to practice professional skills through engaging in real-life problem solving, students welcome these experiences with great enthusiasm and meaningful understanding of the tutor's intention for learning (Shreeve et al., 2008).

A. Course(s) for which activity is appropriate and when course(s) fits curriculum

This project could be appropriate in a variety of courses that focus on apparel design, product development, buying/planning and visual merchandising. The key component is that it looks to connect design and merchandising in a collaborative experience. The specific project presented for this Rutherford Teaching Challenge was incorporated into a Special Topics course in which a university grant was received to develop innovative course material. The intention was to create an educational experience for upper level juniors and seniors to mimic the industry with the opportunity to practice industry roles. It would be recommended that this project be incorporated in courses with twenty students or less to efficiently manage groups. In the circumstance of this course two faculty team-taught, one from design and one from merchandising. However, in other scenarios, there is potential to teach it in two separate classes, one in design and one in merchandising, but it would be recommended that there would be some common time overlap in the course schedule.

B. Instructor and students' knowledge/skills required to complete activity

This project requires both instructors and students to have an overall capacity to embrace an evolving process that comes with unpredictability. It requires an adaptable perspective that resembles industry's urgency to pivot when necessary and let go of what is not working. While this knowledge and skill set seems a bit abstract in a traditional learning environment, it is

evident in recent occurrences that this mindset can be beneficial for our future ways of working. Beyond this, the design instructor should have a basic rounded knowledge in apparel development and manufacturing. The merchandising instructor should have foundational knowledge in buying/planning and product development. Students should have completed coursework in at least one of these areas. While it is likely that all participants will not be experts in everything, there should be a tone set in the classroom that aims to collaboratively research when needed, (instructors included). It also requires transparency from instructors to acknowledge when they are also learning something new and how this will relate to future professional development scenarios for students when in the industry. This helped to create a community of practice amongst the class and situates the instructors as supporters of the students.

C. Recommended format (in-class or homework activity, individual or group-based, online activity, etc.)

The recommended format for this project includes significant group-based activity. Students are broken into smaller groups of 3 or 4 based on their skill sets, experience or interests. These groups include Buying and Planning, Communications and Outreach, Store Planning Design, and Product Design Management. Depending on the circumstances of the institution, more or less groups could be created based on the objective of the collaborative collection created. This class met twice a week for an hour and twenty minutes. The first class of the week was used to meet as an entire group to discuss important topics or related issues to make sure the entire class was on the same page. The second class of the week was used to meet with the groups individually. There was significant outside classwork between the teams which fluctuated throughout the semester depending on each group's calendar.

Detailed Description of the Activity Including:

A. Clear explanation of integration of how the teaching challenge theme is integrated into the activity

This course development incorporated experiential learning into the textile and apparel classroom in every aspect by providing students the opportunity to “live” out their future industry roles in a classroom setting. Through the ability to collaborate on a collection to be made, sold, marketed and displayed in a retail setting, students in this course were consistently challenged to problem-solve a variety of real-world challenges that are not commonly found in a traditional academic setting. Developing this course involved carefully adapting fashion industry product development calendars to a semester-based schedule by considering what is achievable with the time frame and skill set of the students.

B. Learning objectives, direct and indirect assessment tools

The learning objectives are as follows:

- 1) Develop leadership skills including problem-solving, creative thinking and task delegation.
- 2) Develop collaborative skills and effective communication to successfully complete tasks in group settings.
- 3) Develop a concept, vision and strategy for a collection to be sold in a retail setting.
- 4) Address factors required in running a successful retail setting including customer, budget, product, services and merchandising.
- 5) Apply learned skills to address manufacturing and marketing the vision of the collection which may include a combination of design, product development, tech pack and patterning development, sourcing, visual merchandising, event planning and advertising.

The major focus of assessment for this course was through three Job Reflection Reports that were done at each phase of the process 1) Planning 2) Development 3) Production. These job reflections were used for the students to gain better insight and understanding of their strengths / weaknesses and those of their group members. Reflections were valuable for the junior and senior level students as a way to look back on skills learned in other coursework and also to better understand their personal aspirations and how they might fit in industry. Weil and McGill (1989) states that reflections have been a beneficial and central part of an experiential learning process since the 1980s. Throughout the course, students were indirectly assessed through check-ins with individuals, small groups and the entire class.

C. Directions and resources needed to complete the activity

In order to create this small collection, an approximate budget of \$2000 was needed. This came from a result of an internal grant from the department. Any profit from sales of the collection went back to the department. Other resources needed to complete the activity included sewing machines and related items, fabric, retail props, and general marketing materials such as posters, social media account, etc. The course started with three weeks for Phase 1: Planning which included color and trend forecasting, customer research, and concept board creation. All students had to collectively agree upon a theme through detailed discussion. As an entire class a concept board was developed with images, a color palette and four descriptive words. Phase 2: Development was six weeks long in which students broke into their smaller groups of Buying and Planning, Communications and Outreach, Store Planning Design and Product Design

Management. Each group created individual timelines and presented deliverables to the entire class when needed. Decisions on product assortment, retail planograms, and advertising were made at this time. Finally Phase 3: Production lasted six weeks where students worked to source or produce all necessary items such as garments, other products, advertising materials, and retail displays for an unveiling event at the end of the semester.

D. Evaluation Process

By the end of the semester the students were able to celebrate (r)EVOLUTION RETOLD, a small collection that included lifestyle goods such as soap and candles, handmade jewelry, upcycled laser cut denim, and four zero-waste designs all in small batch quantities. Students welcomed customers with an unveiling event during the last week of classes. Three photography students from another department initially reached out to take product images. As a result, the (r)EVOLUTION RETOLD magazine was created as a portfolio piece for all participating students. While this project was not without its challenges, it provided both students and instructors an incredible experiential learning opportunity.

SEE MAGAZINE:

<https://flipbookpdf.net/web/site/3c2f1ccba5221c07aa5bda972e4a71c4061d88c6202006.pdf.html>

photography credit - Gabby Boshara, Dana McKinney, Rachel Feinstein

Conclusion explaining:

A. Number of times the activity has been delivered the course

Since the Fall of 2018 instructors have explored how to connect design and merchandising students together in collaborative coursework that pushes them to experience real-world challenges of communication, compromise and critical thinking. Based on previous feedback of students and instructors' passion to recreate these experiences, this specific course was developed. The Fall 2019 semester was the first time this course was taught.

B. Changes that have been made to the activity (if any) and rationale

Both students' and instructors' dedication attributed to much of the success of the course outcomes. However, there could be modifications to the course calendar to better allow more

appropriate timing for Phase 2: Development which included design, product development and sourcing, product assortment, retail planograms and advertising concepts. By shortening a few earlier activities, an additional two weeks could be added to this second phase. As the course continued, more thorough group calendars were developed for possible future semesters to give more clear tasks to each group. Because of the true experiential nature of this course, some of these insights were not revealed until both faculty and students were set into this learning environment. However, especially due to recent events, both students and instructors have found this adaptability incredibly valuable to the future educational setting. Student and Instructor reflections also identify other revisions to the course relating to better communication and how often each group needs to touch base as an entire class. It now would be recommended to schedule this course for a longer time period such as two and a half hours to provide more time in class to do the project-based work.

C. Assessment of learning outcome(s) results. Students' quotes or reflections about the activity are recommended.

The impact on student learning from this new course also aims to further bridge academia and industry by providing real-world experiences for students. The combination of knowledge and experimentation happening in this new course enhanced critical thinking skills that are highly desirable in the future landscape of fashion. Students in this class were able to test out ideas to understand broader implications for the fashion discipline and the broader retail industry. Themes from the job reflection reports revealed students had opportunities to strengthen their weaknesses, understand compromise, and practice communication. Several students pointed out how challenging it is for them to speak up while others learned how important it can be to let go of your own ideas that might not work. See responses below:

Theme: Opportunities to Strengthen Weaknesses

"I think my challenge is voicing my opinions and concerns with the group(s) simply because I worry about being too outspoken. I was not happy with the images on the mood board, and while I did eventually speak up and voice my opinion, it took a lot of internal back and forth."

"One weakness that I identify coming into this semester is my quietness and ability to speak up. I maybe spoke up about three times in class this semester and I would say that's more than I ever spoke up in my fashion classes."

“One of my strengths is that I’m a natural leader. I’m very good at recognizing strengths in other in order to efficiently delegate jobs out to them. I also have the discernment to know when to step back and allow others to lead in certain areas. Throughout this course, even though I still lead, I have recognized that I am not good at everything and that I cannot lead in every situation. I have realized that sometimes my opinions are important to group decisions and sometimes that are not. Now I am able to better tell when I need to be a leader and when it is equally as important for me to just be there for the team.”

“I still need to work on speaking up and voicing my own opinions in group settings. I also need to get comfortable with the fact that everyone’s not going to like/agree with every idea I have and vise versa!”

Theme: Understanding Compromise

“One weakness I came into the semester with was my inability to let a project flow and change as it goes. Often, I get so stuck on what I want the final product to be, that I try to force it into something that doesn’t work. However, this weakness is slowly evolving as I work with budget and time constraints. I am more able to let go and let a project be what it’s going to be rather than obsess over the vision I have. This change actually helps project turn out better than I expected because I am not forcing an idea that may not work.”

“A weakness of mine is that I always seem to prefer my own ideas as opposed to the ones of those around me (unfortunately!) This is still something I constantly struggle with in class especially when we enter large group discussions based on opinion and I’m sure I have been spotted standing in the back looking unconvinced about the final decisions we as a class have made on a few topics. However, this has been very valuable for me to feel this way and experience the results of decisions that I do not agree with because I have discovered something very important: the world does not end. Although I may not agree with a decision it has not caused the downfall of our campaign, or destroyed our credibility, or ruined the creative direction of the collection. As I enter the workforce many decisions will be made with which I disagree so I am happy to be learning how to support my team and the success of a project despite disagreements.”

“A weakness of mine is that I tend to want to take charge when working in groups. I become very excited and attached to my own ideas that I can be disappointed when decisions are left to others which at times slightly discourages me. However, within my small group I have learned that the solution to this issue is open-minded collaboration and a shared standard of quality.

Theme: Communication

“I think one of the challenges of working in a group can be communication. Whether it is communication of ideas or actual communication.

“I have always had good communication skills; however I feel as if I’ve really developed them this semester. I have been able to talk to people higher up than me, finding ways to email people professionally, as well as be focused on the task at hand.”

“I believe a strength of mine is knowing that I do not have to talk every moment possible. I am cautious with my thought process and how I communicate with my team.”

“I struggle to communicate my opinions in a confident yet respectful manner. I am either too passive or too blunt.”

D. Recommendations/Advantages/Disadvantages of using this activity

It is recommended that anyone embarking on this type of experiential learning adventure, be open to an evolving process. As students shared successes and frustrations, instructors were able to contribute their similar learned experiences from industry. When answers were unknown, instructors were transparent and joined in the journey of discovering what was needed. This shifted the dynamic of a traditional classroom lecture to instructors as facilitators and supporters. As an advantage, this project pushed many students beyond their comfort zones. Throughout this process students became less focused on traditional grading and gained more perspective for the bigger picture. Students became less focused on failing and more determined to support the teams and entire class in the common goal to create a marketable collection by using their personal strengths. This project did have disadvantages. It took an additional amount of energy from instructors to lead this educational experience. The instructors knew going into this that there would be unknowns to solve along the way and students would get frustrated at times. However, these are the same challenges that we know students need to be experiencing. In the end, seeing what was accomplished made this experiential learning rewarding.

See Link to Magazine

<https://flipbookpdf.net/web/site/3c2f1ccba5221c07aa5bda972e4a71c4061d88c6202006.pdf.html>

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