

## Utilizing a theoretical framework for the creative process of theatrical costume design in a fashion history course

Sara Jablon-Roberts, Johnson & Wales University

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**Introduction:** Costumes and fashion are typically considered separate and distinct, though they have significant overlap in aspects such as textiles, apparel construction, and the need to understand fashion history. At a private mid-sized university in the Northeast, as part of the term project for a fashion history course, undergraduate fashion merchandising and retailing students utilized the Jablon-Roberts and Sanders (2019) theoretical framework for the creative process of theatrical costume design for historically set productions. The framework offered a step-by-step process to help students explore, research, and identify the clothes a historical person would wear in the context of a theatrical play and was intended to increase interactive learning, “effective for developing skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation” (Lattuca & Stark, 2009, p. 197).

The use of this framework spurred students towards the successful achievement of the course’s six objectives, including “Identify and analyze the psychological, social, aesthetic, economic, technological, religious, and geographic factors that influence dress” and “Utilize and apply a variety of sources to analyze the history of dress.” This presentation will describe the framework, the project, and the results of implementing the former to complete the latter.

**Framework:** To design the costumes for a historically set production, the framework developed by Jablon-Roberts and Sanders (2019) describes a process influenced by several factors and consisting of four iterative strategies. The factors are unique to each production and are imposed from without (e.g., attainability due to resources, performability due to directorial choices). For this project, only one factor was relevant: “applicability, or the relevance of historical accuracy” (Jablon-Roberts & Sanders, 2019, p. 41). To promote the exploration of the chosen time period, students were told that all images must be primary sources and historically accurate.

Once the production factors are analyzed, the framework advises costume designers to employ four iterative strategies. The first strategy was incubation, or “simply thinking” (Jablon-Roberts & Sanders, 2019, p. 43). The second strategy was research, including the use of textual, pictorial, and artifactual sources, followed by the third strategy of role play: “anticipating the attitudes of others, and then using those conjectures to guide their decisions” (Jablon-Roberts & Sanders, 2019, p. 44). The *others* for whom students were told to role play were the characters (e.g., “If I were this character, what would I want to wear?”) and audience (e.g., “If I were in the audience for this play, what would I think if I saw a character wearing this?”). In fact, role play was identified by Lattuca and Stark (2009) as a particularly valuable strategy in interactive learning.

At each stage, students were reminded that this was an iterative process, and that after each step, they should be prepared to return to the beginning for more incubation, research, and

role play. The last strategy was image selection, in which students finalized their choices.<sup>1</sup> The process was discussed several times in class. An adaptation of the Jablon-Roberts and Sanders (2019) visual model and an abridged version of the article in which the framework appeared were also shared with students.

Project: To provide a frame of reference for students, they were told they work for a fashion manufacturer setting up a collaboration with a movie, but the producers of the movie did not know the era in which it would be set. Students were given a short script, *The Light*, by Patricia Ione Lloyd (2020), which is written so that it can be set anywhere at any time, with characters who are described as “any race any gender” (Lloyd, 2020, 1). In teams, per the concepts behind interactive learning in which students “engage actively with the content of a course” (Lattuca & Stark, 2009, p. 199), students analyzed the settings described in the script, identified demographic and psychographic traits for each character, and chose a time period. Using primary source images, they developed a gallery of historical images for each character, creating head-to-toe looks. The project’s deliverables were oral, visual, and written reports.

Results: Overall, students reported enjoying the novel experience of costume design and submitted well-researched and well-reasoned reports. Student feedback indicated they appreciated the clear process (“Once my group members and I did these steps in this order, the project became easier to navigate”) and the model (“This chart helped us realize that you have to jump around and keep going back to your original idea to make the most cohesive project”). Project instructions will be revised to make expectations clearer, but the only change in terms of the framework will be to introduce it earlier. The framework helped students to “see all of the different types of fashion in one time period,” rather than only seeing a few examples, as well as to imagine people in the past “as real people we were dressing.” As these are two of the instructor’s teaching goals for this class, using the framework with the project was considered effective and a success.

Conclusions: In all, this project and the use of the Jablon-Roberts and Sanders (2019) framework helped students achieve the six course learning objectives. It enhanced their understanding of the historical period they chose not only in terms of fashion, but also socio-cultural aspects as well. Additionally, through this project, students further developed their skills in critical thinking, teamwork, communication, and digital and information literacy. Though the instructor will continue to implement revisions and improvements to the project, this pedagogical technique is presented in the hopes it will be of interest to other educators looking to increase student engagement with historical fashion.

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<sup>1</sup> The fourth strategy in Jablon-Roberts and Sanders (2019) was historical manipulation, adapting the source material. As a fashion history project, students did not manipulate the research, instead selecting the images they found most appropriate for each character.

References:

- Jablon-Roberts, S., & Sanders, E. (2019). A theoretical framework for the creative process of theatrical costume design for historically set productions. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 37(1), 35-50.
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