Applied learning and case studies: Preparing students for the 21st century
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Introduction

There has been an increased interest in incorporating applied learning in higher education. Applied learning involves the inclusion of an activity that incorporates the following five criteria: 1) it must be authentic and structured; 2) requires preparation, orientation, and training; 3) includes monitoring and continuous improvement; 4) promotes structured reflection; and 5) must be assessed and evaluated (Approved applied learning, n.d.). Furthermore, inquiry-based learning (IBL) promotes student-driven research or inquiry (McKinney, 2014). IBL provides a versatile framework for learning that encompasses problem-based learning, project-based learning, field work, and case-based learning (Aditomo et al., 2013; McKinney, 2014). IBL promotes the use of simulated questions or problems which encourages students to take leadership over their learning process (Albers et al., 2017; Lazonder & Harmsen, 2016).
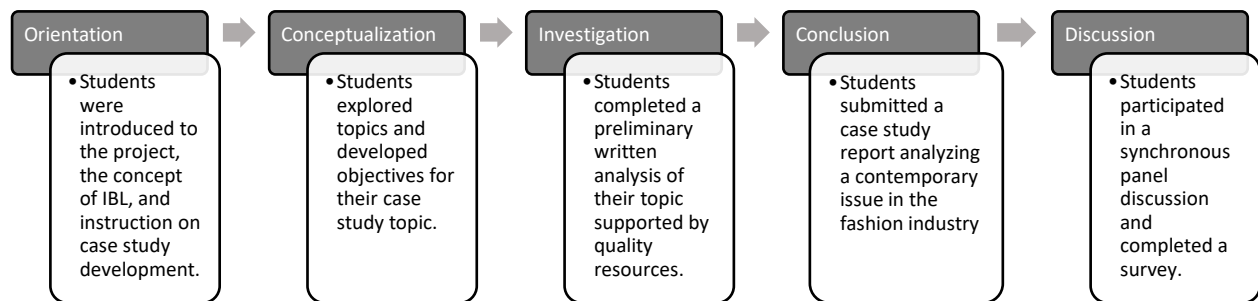
Framework

Higher education values authentic learning, like applied learning, which is promoted by IBL (Albers et al., 2017). IBL also supports 21st century skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, self-directed learning, and communication (Marks, 2017). IBL encourages students to become actively engaged in the learning process and apply real-world cases and solutions rather than being a passive learner (McKinney, 2014; Marks, 2017). This experience helps better prepare students for future careers. Pedaste et al. (2015) proposed five phases intended to provide structure for students working through the IBL process: orientation, conceptualization, investigation, conclusion, and discussion. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of applied learning using the inquiry-based learning framework, a versatile student-driven pedagogy, in an upper-level fashion course through student case study development. A questionnaire was used to evaluate students' experience with the project.

Project Development

As many college courses shifted online during the pandemic, students struggled to remain engaged due to reduced hands-on and applied learning. The course used in this study focuses on contemporary issues within the global fashion industry. In the past, published case studies readings have frequently been used as a teaching tool. To encourage students to apply what they learned in class, students were asked to research and write a case study based on a contemporary issue in the fashion industry. IBL was implemented as a framework to guide students through their inquiry process (see figure 1). Throughout the five-stage process of IBL, students were first provided orientation to the project and how to write a case study. Next, students were expected to develop objectives for the topic of their choice. At the midpoint, students submitted a preliminary written analysis of their topic using reputable resources. After the final case study was submitted, students participated in synchronous panel discussions with their peers to review and compare their case study topics. Students were provided instructor feedback and required to write a reflection following each stage of the project. In the reflection, students were given the opportunity to ask questions and address instructor feedback.

Figure 1. The IBL process and its implementation for the applied learning case study project.

Orientation	Conceptualization	Investigation	Conclusion	Discussion
• Students were introduced to the project, the concept of IBL, and instruction on case study development.	• Students explored topics and developed objectives for their case study topic.	• Students completed a preliminary written analysis of their topic supported by quality resources.	• Students submitted a case study report analyzing a contemporary issue in the fashion industry	• Students participated in a synchronous panel discussion and completed a survey.

Results

At the conclusion of the case study project, students answered seven open-ended questions that were developed based on the IBL process and project objectives (Gam & Banning, 2011). The results of that survey were coded and analyzed resulting in four themes: self-directed inquiry, information processing, skill development, and future applications. Each theme had two-four subthemes. Within the theme *self-directed inquiry*, students expressed that they recognized value in taking personal responsibility for gathering information and identifying relevant quality sources. The second theme, *information processing*, emphasized the importance of working through challenges and problems, applying quality analysis and critical thinking skills, and learning from their peers. For the third theme, *skill development*, students discussed selected skills that they gained or improved upon during the project including scholarly writing, research, and time management, as well as factors that contributed toward skill building such as the importance of instructor feedback and the five-stage process of IBL. The final theme, *future applications*, focused on how the project helped students acknowledge the importance of lifelong learning and recognize how the case study project helped prepare them for their future career.

Conclusions

When students learn in an authentic way, it prepares them for life beyond the classroom (Marks, 2017). Furthermore, case studies have become a valuable tool for evaluating future business decisions in the fashion industry (Building the business, 2021). Students expressed how applied learning and self-directed inquiry encouraged problem-solving, critical thinking, and information literacy, which is important for 21st century learners (Marks, 2017). Discussing their case studies on a panel with their peers helped students to make connections and apply further critical thinking about issues in the global fashion industry. Because students selected their own topics and resources, they believed that the project helped to better prepare them for working in the industry. Self-reflections helped students better analyze their processes and encouraged self-directed problem solving. Students stated that the instructor feedback provided guidance and helped to build confidence in the self-directed inquiry process. Students overwhelmingly expressed that this process assisted with gaining knowledge and understanding on how the course content is relevant and related to the contemporary global fashion industry. The use of IBL has implications for other applied learning fashion courses.

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