



Enhancing student learning by modeling historic costume replicas

Dina Smith-Glaviana
Virginia Tech

Keywords: Artifacts, Costume replicas, Dress history, Object-based learning

Despite having access to an extensive costume collection, I regularly integrate dressing demonstrations where I model historic *costume replicas* (interpretive copies of historical costume styles; Davidson, 2019) into lectures and in-class activities. Not only do replicas serve as (potential) substitutes for non-existent artifacts dating before the 19th century in the university costume collection, dressing in costume is entertaining, engaging, and useful in teaching about costume history (Shirley, 2000; Wilcox-Levine, 2015). For example, Wilcox-Levine (2015) reported that wearing costume when conducting guided museum/living history tours provided patrons with a visual connection to the past and invited questions about what people wore and why. However, to my knowledge, costume replicas have not been investigated as an educational tool for teaching costume history courses. Furthermore, while research on observing artifacts has shown that it has enhanced student understanding of course content (Diddi & Marcketti, 2014; Marcketti & Gordon, 2019), it is unclear whether or not costume replicas serve a similar purpose (Diddi & Marcketti, 2014; Marcketti & Gordon, 2019; Reiley & DeLong, 2021). Thus, findings from an analysis of perceptions of learning regarding costume replicas may be worth sharing with other educators. The purpose of this project was to examine student perceptions of learning regarding costume replicas. I specifically aimed to determine if costume replicas were useful in helping students identify design characteristics of historical styles (e.g., silhouette, fabrics, neckline, sleeve, and skirt styles, etc.; learning outcome 1), as well as to identify who wore the styles when, and why (learning outcome 2).

Design and Implementation

While I regularly teach costume history as a hybrid course, the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated me, like other educators, to find engaging ways to teach costume history courses online (Reiley & DeLong, 2021). Therefore, in spring (2021), I enthusiastically created videos of myself and family members modeling replica costume (including appropriate undergarments). These videos were integrated into “lectures as quizzes” and assignments for an online asynchronous course format in Spring 2021. They were retained while teaching the course in a hybrid format in Fall 2021. However, the videos were supplemented by two in-class dressing demonstrations when resuming the hybrid format.

Videos and live demonstrations were designed to fulfill the learning objectives. For the videos, footage of the front, back, and side views of replica garments and wide shots of models walking, running, or otherwise moving were recorded via iPhone. The wide shots were taken to demonstrate the garment’s silhouette, and close-ups were taken so that viewers could examine smaller details such as the fabrication and embellishments such as embroidery, beading, decorative buttons, and closures. Videos were edited using iMovie to include voice-over narration, titles, and captions that identified the time period (when the garment was worn), who

wore the styles, and indicated social, political, economic, and other cultural factors that explained why the garment was worn. During live demonstrations, I discussed and pointed out important design details, explained the garments' historical and social context (when, who, and why), and provided students with opportunities to view the garments up-close. I also created videos showing 360° views of actual artifacts from the university costume collection mounted on forms with narrations, captions, or labels and showed artifacts in class to compare student perceptions of costume replicas with their perceptions of actual artifacts.

Methods and Procedure

In Fall 2021, data were collected from 12 students using a qualitative survey and were coded via thematic analysis using predetermined codes relating to the literature (Saldana, 2009). NVivo Qualitative Coding software was used to code the data. The data revealed two main themes: the use of costume replicas was engaging and enhanced their learning.

Results and Discussion

The majority of students (9) noted that the use of costume replicas (either through videos or live demonstrations) were more fun and engaging, confirming previous research (Shirley, 2000). In addition, most students pointed out that the costume replicas were superior to other visual aids as they could see how historical styles moved on a human body. As Student 10 explained, "I do personally find the video/live demonstrations of replica garments to be fun/entertaining because. . . we get to see more movement in the garment and get more of a feel for it. I think it also breaks up PowerPoints well, giving a fun visual aid." Costume replicas also enhanced their learning. As Student #3 stated, "The ability to see someone actually wear the garment as opposed to seeing a painting or even a picture was very helpful in relating to what we were learning and also remembering the material." Student responses also indicated that both learning objectives were met. The replicas helped students identify silhouettes and design details connected to certain time periods (Students #1 & 6) and provided a deeper understanding of the historical and social context (Student #11). Above all, the replicas brought costume history to life, confirming that dressing in costume can humanize the subject (Shirley 2000). For example, Student #4 explained that the replicas "emphasized the fact that these garments were real and helped me envision the past." Finally, when comparing student responses regarding how both costume replicas and actual artifacts enhanced their learning, most students did not distinguish between costume replicas and actual artifacts regarding their impact on learning, suggesting that replicas may serve as legitimate substitutes when artifacts are unavailable to observe. Replicas, like artifacts, bring history to life and serve as superior visual aids as artifacts "can be used actively as evidence rather than passively as illustrations" (Prown, 1982, pp.1-3; Marcketti & Gordon, 2019). Also, like artifacts, replicas can enhance students understanding of silhouettes and design and construction details of historical garments (Reiley & DeLong, 2021). In addition, the non-distinction between replicas and artifacts raises questions about the importance of authenticity of replicas when teaching costume history. Shirley (2000) noted that while authenticity may enhance the learning experience, costume replicas do not have to be authentic. However, the author dressed in costume for a math course; thus, the costume was not the teaching subject. Would not authenticity be more important in teaching costume history than an unrelated subject?

In the present study, every attempt was made to select replicas that were as “authentic” (historically accurate) as possible (Shirley, 2000). However, most replicas had details detracting from their authenticity, which were disclosed to the students. Students perceived the replicas as representative of historical styles despite their inauthentic details.

Conclusion

This research revealed that costume replicas, regardless of how authentic they are, might be useful in teaching costume history and yielded a potential implication for educators. As authentic replica costumes are expensive (Wilcox-Levine, 2015), educators may not need to spend valuable resources (e.g., time and money) producing or acquiring authentic costume replicas. This research inspired me to continue using costume replicas as a teaching tool and to acquire more replica garments to increase the number of dressing demonstrations. In addition, I plan to collect data throughout each iteration of the course to increase the sample size, thereby contributing to the reliability and validity of the data.

References

- Davidson, H. (2019). The embodied turn: Making and remaking dress as an academic practice. *Fashion Theory*, 23(3), 329–362. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2019.1603859>
- Didi, S., & Marcketti, S. (2014). The role of museum exhibits in teaching textile science. *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences*, 106(1), 47-49.
- Marcketti, S., & Gordon, J. F. (2019). “I should probably know more:” Reasons for and roadblocks to the use of historic university collections in teaching. *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies* 17(1), 1–12. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5334/jcms.169>
- Prown, J. D. Mind in matter: An introduction to material culture theory and method. *Winterthur Portfolio* 17(1), 1–19. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/496065>
- Reiley, K. & DeLong, M. (2021). Evaluation of object-based student learning experiences. [Conference Presentation]. 47th Annual Symposium of the Costume CSA@Home” Virtual, May 18 - 29, 2021.
- Saldana, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage.
- Shirley, L. H. (2000). A visit from Pythagoras--Using costumes in the classroom. *The Mathematics Teacher*, 93(8), 652–655.
- Wilcox-Levine, M. (2015) Dressing history: Costume as communication in Massachusetts historical tours [Unpublished master’s thesis]. University of Rhode Island. <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/theses/713>