



Incorporating Magazine Project to Teach Fashion Styling Course

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Key Words: styling, fashion, magazine, pedagogy

When college students first enter a fashion apparel/textiles design and merchandising program, they seldom know the exact career path they either wish to enter or would excel in. Partially due to the vast career opportunities available in apparel merchandising, retailing and promotions within the greater fashion industry, fashion students are often left confused of their career path as they matriculate through their academic program. Although most fashion-related programs offer some form of curricula structure to allow undergraduate students the opportunity to explore various sectors within the courses offered at the institution (often referred as “elective”, “specialization” or “emphasis” courses), some career topics are still left untapped. One way to ensure flexibility in course offerings as an academic program and allow both students and instructors to explore new topics as potential ventures for program expansion is to offer “special topics” courses. From engaging in informal discussion with undergraduate students enrolled in a junior/senior-level product development course revealed a strong collective interest in topics related to fashion merchandising, retailing, and promotions not conventionally offered regularly in the program curriculum. Two topics amongst a list of courses requested by students were visual merchandising and styling. This paper details the development of a special topics course in fashion styling, which incorporated a magazine project as the central learning activity.

Moeran (2006) takes a cue from Howard Becker’s analysis on the art world, examining the ‘networks of people’ working symbiotically, and furthermore, noting that “fashion magazines are both cultural products and commodities” (p.725). These fashion magazines exist to not only create content that is driven by a multitude of perspectives collectively archived on the pages while simultaneously providing a venue for advertisers to promote merchandise and brands to the magazine’s ultimate readership. Editorials can be seen as an environment for these fashion magazines to promote its advertisement accounts (e.g. fashion houses, consumer product companies) to continue business. Therefore, when embarking on an exploratory fashion styling course geared towards mainly fashion design and merchandising students, building course content around a magazine term project as the focal point and framework to study styling was justified.

Students were tasked to create a mock fashion magazine for its inaugural September issue (known in the industry as the pivotal issue of the year with the most page volume and content featuring fashions to transition between two major fashion seasons, spring/summer to fall/winter). Clear objectives as a publication were set for students to consider when brainstorming for editorial ideas. Objectives included:

- *to better inform consumers of apparel products and how to style them properly
- *to inform readers of relevant topics related to fashion, career, lifestyle, current news, etc. that is timely and season-appropriate
- *to feature stories captivating to the audience and have worth of reading
- *to promote and celebrate diversity reflective of the community we live in

Students were then tasked to assume of the leadership roles commonly found in fashion publications, which included: Accessories/Apparel Director, Art Director, Editor-in-Chief, Fashion Features Director, Features Director, Locations Director, Photo Director, and Production Director. A detailed summary of each role and their

responsibilities were provided in a term project guideline and all positions were filled on a self-nomination-basis. To ensure collaboration between roles, each director was assigned an assistant to carry-on various tasks. Once the Editor-in-Chief was assigned, a general list of procedures were assigned to all members of the “magazine staff” to execute, including but not limited to brainstorming editorial ideas to feature in a Fall issue, collectively deciding upon which ideas to execute within the timeframe allotted, and writing captions/production information/dialogue to provide context to the magazine. Regarding content, a list of “must-include” content requirements were given including 1) at least one fashion editorial shoot with either a strong historical or decade-based influence (e.g. 80s punk, 20’s silhouette revival), 2) one trend/style watch (popularized by websites like polyvore.com), 3) one street-blogging styled fashion feature (much like the popular Sartorialist blog), and 4) one industry-driven story featuring an interview with an industry professional working within the function of fashion styling and/or image management.

It is important to note here that the first three “must-include” content requirement were implemented to assess students’ understanding of topics discussed in course lectures. An expert presentation by a scholar in costumes and fashion history studies offered a rich overview of the silhouettes/fabrications/styling details prominent during each decade following the turn of the century. As a learning assessment, students were first required to take a written exam on the presented topic of fashions from each decade and pass with a 90% or higher (collectively) before being allowed to commit to a fashion editorial shoot with either a historical or decade-based style influence. Topics on the importance of stylists being resourceful and vigilant with information on relevant brands/retailers and “hot items” for upcoming seasons were covered as a precursor to the trend/style watch content requirement. This section in the magazine was designed to provide aspiring styling students to practice coordinating articles of clothing, accessories and related consumer products in a cohesive and purposeful manner, synonymous with the function of a successful merchandiser. Students were also expected to provide relevant product information including product image, brand name, retail price, and a location (either physical or online) where readers can purchase exact or similar merchandise. A savvy stylist, magazine editor or merchandiser would have the skillset to aggregate and promote an array of available merchandise in the market into aesthetically-appealing outfits appropriate for a specific target audience within an accessible price-range for the consumer. The street-blogging styled fashion feature stemmed from a discussion in-class on various theories of fashion influence (e.g. trickle-up theory) and the power within ordinary consumers that inspire fashion trends and novel styling practices for industry professionals. Students were instructed to roaming about the city and approach city by-standers to casually interview them about their style descriptions and where/how certain pieces were purchased or acquired. This activity was designed to teach styling students to stay open to sources of inspiration and analyze outfits based on real application of design elements (e.g. color, proportion, shapes, texture) as discussed in class. Other course lecture topics covered included the taxonomy of stylists, fashion influencers and style-icons, commercial styling as it relates to brand identity, technical styling tips, and organizing/managing a successful photoshoot. Evidently, the spectrum of topics within the broad umbrella of fashion styling covered in this exploratory “special topics” course and the mock fashion magazine project, in extension, provided enough allowance for students to experiment an aspect of fashion styling with minimal risk.

As a form of assessment, students were asked to submit a set of peer-evaluations and responses to self-reflective open-ended questions with the submission of their group term project. A majority of students learned the value of good communication amongst colleagues in a collaborative project such as creating a magazine and organizing/executing photoshoots, and the concept of styling as a powerful communication tool that requires one to undergo an iterative process of training (the eye and mind) and practice.

Moeran, B. (2006). More than just a fashion magazine. *Current Sociology*, 54(5), 725-744.