Developing Soft Skills through Multi-Disciplinary Cooperative and Situated Learning

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Introduction. According to a recent article in Time online, reasons for low employment rates among college graduates include a lack of *soft skills* rather than *hard skills*, which refer to STEM skills, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (White, 2013). Soft skills refer to "the cluster of personality traits, social graces, facility with language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism that mark each individual to varying degrees" (Soft skills', 2002). It is known that soft skills complement STEM skills, which are the technical requirements of a job. Several employer surveys (e.g., Workforce Solutions Group, Adecco) reported that areas of greatest gap were: motivation, interpersonal communication skills, critical thinking, creative problem solving, appearance, punctuality and flexibility, and collaboration (Talent shortage survey, 2013). Internships can decrease these problems; however, only 8% of student respondents considered internships a worthwhile pursuit (Bridge that gap, 2013). Therefore, it has become critical that the curricular body of knowledge expands at the college level in order to develop student ability in communicating and working with teams, authority figures and diverse groups as well as, prioritizing and organizing work, developing critical thinking skills and practicing creative problem solving through collaboration.

Theoretical Background and Objectives. Situated learning theory indicates learning as a pervasive, embodied activity involving the acquisition, maintenance, and transformation of knowledge through the processes of social interaction (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The theory argues that acquisition of objective knowledge is best achieved as the accomplishment of knowing in action through everyday practice in organizational and other social settings (Handley, Clark, Fincham, & Sturdy, 2007). According to the theory, situated learning allows students (a) to apply cognitive and conceptual knowledge acquired from conventional class settings in organizational and social settings, and (b) to achieve integrated knowledge and more realistic experiences through activities and interaction that are organized within work places. Based on the theory, authors propose a teaching method to enhance student acquisition of soft skills through a more social application of their specific discipline knowledge. Objectives of this study were to increase (1) student application of current discipline knowledge in the assigned activities, (2) student gains in advanced knowledge through practical performance, and (3) student development of soft skills through the cooperative and collaborative process.

Implementation. The current proposal employed a situated learning environment for the students in four disciplines: fashion merchandising (FM), fashion design (FD), fashion stylist (FS), and interior design (ID). The learning environment required cooperative project work in order to reach specific professional goals. A scenario was given in which students were challenged to develop apparel companies by following key activities in the fashion industry. Groups representing different apparel companies were formed with students from four disciplines.

Students from the corresponding disciplines were asked to use their own project work in cooperative effort in order to incorporate their discipline expertise in a semester-long series of five sequential projects. For example, ID students created retail environments of the physical store for the brands developed by FM students. Students from each discipline held official and unofficial meetings to communicate ideas and goals. The results of each sequential project were presented formally as written reports, visual boards, sample garments, and oral presentations. *Assessment and Evaluation*. Upon project completion, 33 students participated in a semi-structured survey: FM (n = 16), FD (n = 5), FS (n = 4), ID (n = 8). Students responded to constructed phrases, 7-point Likert scale questions, and open ended essay questions. Questions were developed by the authors and adapted from previous research (e.g., Shuayto, 2012). Students agreed that they were able to apply factual knowledge in the assigned activities (M = 6.00, SD = .84); to gain advanced knowledge from practical performance (M = 5.62, SD = 1.01); and to develop soft skills through the cooperative and situated learning process (M = 5.66, SD = .97). ANOVA revealed that there was no significant difference among four disciplines in developing soft skills [F (3, 32) = 1.67, p = .196]. Open ended essay responses reflected both insight and frustration related to communication (e.g., "I experienced what it may feel like to work for consumers, not for me", "I learned a little about persuasion… working within the boundaries of clients' needs was not as difficult as I thought", "It is tough to negotiate sometimes", "It was terrible. My group members did not get along and it created arguments every step of the way. They did not effectively communicate", "I recommend more meetings"). *Future Plans.* The current proposal suggests that the multi-disciplinary cooperative and situated learning method helps students acquire knowledge and soft skills. Incorporating various tools (e.g., Skype) for frequent and effective communication among students, this method will be implemented possibly with different courses and different countries.

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