



Utilizing Reflective Writing and Design Theory to Improve Student Learning Outcomes

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Educational theory suggests that reflective writing can be an effective tool in helping students in their metacognitive processing while working on large, term projects (Gulwadi, 2009). Additionally, reflective journals have been used successfully in interior design courses to aid students in understanding concepts and developing improved comprehension and skill with the design process (Gulwadi, 2009).

Within the field of Clothing and Textiles, there has been a call for increased exposure to theory at the undergraduate level (Pedersen, 2007). Thus, it is possible that introducing design theory at the undergraduate level can aid students in moving through the stages of design and accomplishing more successful design outcomes.

Therefore, the purpose of this project was to implement reflective writing and a series of design theory readings within a senior-level collection development course in order to improve student understanding of the design process. Furthermore, the teaching module was established to provide students with opportunities to be more introspective and improve their metacognition when approaching design.

To accomplish the purpose, a teaching module was developed utilizing two teaching methods (reflective writing and design theory readings). The module was incorporated into a senior-level apparel collection development course at a large southern university. Students were given design theory readings throughout the course to help them gain a more holistic understanding of design. Readings included seminal apparel design process articles in the field of Clothing and Textiles and research from other fields, such as industrial design.

Additionally, students were given various reflective writing prompts early in the term to aid in their metacognitive processing while designing their senior apparel design collections. Reflective writing prompts encouraged the students to think about the challenges they would encounter while making their garments, how the target consumer might react to the finish garments, and how the consumer might feel about the chosen source of inspiration.

Methods and Procedures

Students in the course participated in the teaching module described above. Following the administration of the teaching module, the students were asked to complete a single open-ended response questionnaire. Students were asked to provide their honest opinions of the reflective writing and design theory readings that were part of the course.

Once institutional review board approval was gained, the researchers collected student responses for analysis. A total of 12 responses were collected (100% of the enrolled students). Data were analyzed using Atlas.ti 7 TM qualitative data analysis and research software.

Results and Discussion

All the students enjoyed the reflective writing exercises, with the exception of one student. Many of the students said the reflective writing helped them to explore their own minds

and think more deeply in regards to their design processes. Two students commented that the reflective writings were a form of personal stress relief and a way to work out issues they were experiencing with their designs. Despite the one student who did not enjoy the reflective writing exercises, all students agreed that the activity helped them in their design processes. They recommended that future design students should use reflective writing when designing their collections. The student who did not enjoy the reflective writings commented that his or her design process was more influenced by tangible aspects, such as working with the fabric itself in order to determine if the design could come to fruition based on the properties of the fabric.

The assigned design theory readings were fairly effective in helping students to better understand design. One-third of the students commented that the articles used lexicon and writing styles used by professionals, which ultimately inhibited their comprehension. One student noted that the professional writing style and lexicon lost his or her interest/attention. Nonetheless, another student mentioned that further discussion of the academic articles in class helped to provide a better understanding of the readings and design in general.

Overall, the students were evenly divided in regards to their familiarity with the design process prior to being introduced to it through the teaching module. A few students remarked that previous classes had glossed over the concept with no in-depth discussion of the design process provided. Prior to being exposed to the design process in the present course, the students had their own rudimentary method of designing, with very few steps involved and/or lack of in-depth thought. After being introduced to the concept in the class, the students almost unanimously agreed that they had a better understanding of the design process and how it can be incorporated into their design work. All students agreed that it is useful for design students to know about the design process in order to effectively and efficiently create and develop the best end product. One student remarked that “without knowing the proper design process, one is sewing without a purpose...meaning you’re nothing more than a seamstress.”

Conclusion

The reflective writing exercises and design theory readings generally helped the students in their design processes. As a result, many of the students felt that they had become better designers and were more organized in their design processes after participating in the teaching module. The students appear to be more motivated in their design work and had more confidence in their design abilities. All of the activities utilized in the class were useful teaching tools in which the students were allowed to think more deeply about their design processes and feel more accomplished in their design endeavors. Future research in this area should determine ways to aid student comprehension of design theory and more methods for integrating theory into the design studio. Additionally, reflective writing should be further explored as a method for aiding students in their design process.

Gulwadi, G. B. (2009). Using reflective journals in a sustainable design studio. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 10(1), 43-53.

Pedersen, E. (2007). Theory is everywhere. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 25(1), 106-128.