



A Service Learning Collaborative to Build a Sustainable Enterprise
for Underprivileged Women (SEuW)

Andre West, Cynthia Istook, Anne Porterfield, & Tushar Ghosh

North Carolina State University, USA

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“Service-learning programs must have some academic context and be designed in such a way that ensures that both the service enhances the learning and the learning enhances the services” (Furco, 1996, p. 5). Robert Sigmon defined service learning as an experiential education approach that is reciprocal learning (Sigmon, 1979). His position was that both the provider of the service and the receiver of the service learn through the experience. The goal of this ongoing service-learning project is to step outside the traditional classroom to engage fashion and textile students in a real world production experience, thus learning about the design and manufacturing process and culture through their activities. The skills and knowledge that the students are developing can go way beyond the traditional monetary manufacturing/retail outcome objectives, touching and influencing people’s lives with a global sustainable perspective.

A mutually beneficial strategic collaborative effort was organized between an international non-governmental organization (NGO), graduate and undergraduate students at a US University, a large multinational company with extensive ties to Indian manufacturing and the US retail market, and a grassroots women’s manufacturing group in Jaipur, India. A number of goals were developed to help support a group of poor and disadvantaged women to become self-sufficient and provide for their families’ basic needs, through a textiles-apparel service-learning project. The ultimate goal was to develop products that can be sold in the United States that have a broad appeal to western taste utilizing and building on the fundamental skills of the local artisans.

The objectives have been established to create a repeatable model, enabling all parties to grow from the relationship. The goal of Sustainable Enterprise for Underprivileged Women (SEuW) is to provide vocational training to the women to improve and complement their traditional skills in handcrafts, tailoring and embroidery. Thereby, building a sustainable capacity to manufacture and market handcrafted contemporary decorative pillows and garments with a distinct product identity and unique characteristics of the local area while appealing to the American and Indian urban markets in the United States.

The first stage of this effort involved second semester freshman fashion and textile design students enrolled in a core first-year design course. A class project was developed with input from (1) the American based designer group of the Indian brand, (2) the NGO that aids in support of the SEuW, (3) the organizational leader of the SEuW, and (4) faculty mentors regarding the needs of the client

and the skills of the Indian artisans and workers. Members of the design group visited the University and shared design trends and a detailed SWOT analysis of the current market. Once provided with this information, students were challenged to design a decorative pillow that could incorporate block printing, applique and/or embroidery techniques characteristic of the Jaipur area. Faculty demonstrated the traditional design methods used by the women in Jaipur. In conjunction, principles of design were taught weekly over the year-long class. Progressive instruction incorporating both off-the-shelf and industry textile and design software was offered so that students could learn using real-world tools.

The students created their designs electronically (2D), as well as using traditional wood blocks. They also experimented with 3D printing to reverse engineer the traditional wood block designs. Faculty and student peers critiqued each student's designs before they were submitted to the US design team of the Indian company for review. Further assessments were completed through electronic file sharing to align the student's work with the trend forecaster's vision of the current trends.

Armed with a group of accepted designs, a small team of students, faculty, a University administrator, and an alumni took the designs to Jaipur, India to work directly with the women and the grass roots organizers. The goal of the week long visit was to communicate the fundamental design ideas for a retail product using a mixed methods approach; design, training, retooling, and connecting to incorporate the unique traditional local handicraft and materials with the contemporary needs of the market. In addition, the visit provided an opportunity for the faculty and students to learn more about the handicrafts native to the area and to develop a greater understanding of the strengths and weaknesses relative to the raw materials (fibers, fabric structures, dyes, & water), processes, resources (financial, transportation, & technology), and culture. Close up observations of block creation, natural dye creation, block printing, fabric tying, embroidery and rudimentary construction processes provided inspiration for future work while bringing the group back to the reality of life in India. It also provided an invaluable connection between the two groups encouraging a greater "buy-in" from both, since all benefit from the relationship.

At this time, the women are in the process of training in the skills of embroidery, cutting and sewing. Appropriate tools including sewing machines, computers, etc. are being installed to help in the implementation of new practices for design quality. The university team is planning the next step in the process, so that more students have an opportunity to be involved through class projects, internships in India, and study abroad trips. Finally, the program aims to connect the women's enterprise back to the market place using an Indian based multinational company through the innovative use of retailing and social marketing.

Furco, A. (1996). Service-learning: A balanced approach to experiential education. *Expanding Boundaries: Service and Learning* (pp. 2-6). Washington DC: Corporation for National Service.

Sigmon, R. (1979). Service-learning: Three principles. *Synergist*, 8(1), 9-11.