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Keywords: Active Learning, Authentic Learning, Visual Merchandising, Zazzle.com, SketchUp

**Introduction.** University learning often involves abstract knowledge that is difficult for students to apply in real world contexts (Herrington & Oliver, 2000). However, employers commonly emphasize competence with successful work place transition (Ma & Lee, 2012). By combining authentic and active learning, students evaluate and apply their knowledge to solve real world problems. This strategy can increase students’ critical thinking and professional competence.

**Strategy. Innovativeness.** The Visual Merchandising and Promotion course utilized active and authentic learning by incorporating 3 main group projects. *Strategy.* Active learning lectures included in-class writing or creative construction activities and discussions. Activities engaged students by providing opportunities to practice concepts daily and progress with their projects. To ensure project progression and equal participation, each project began with set checkpoints and a group contract. Checkpoints required drafts of project components for instructor feedback, while contracts allowed group members to be fired if they failed to complete project tasks.

*Purpose.* To increase student knowledge of branding, promotion, effective merchandising display, competitor analysis, promotional budgeting, and ecommerce. Additionally, the growth of critical thinking skills and professionalism, was anticipated. *Projects.* In the first project, students designed window displays for a local business and a student organization. First, students met with both “clients” to discuss their needs and goals. Afterwards, the students drafted their window design, which the clients signed to approve. In the second project, students developed their own line of transforming garments and a promotional strategy for a national merchandising competition. For the competition, a brand, a logo and advertisement consistent with their line and target market was developed. Students also performed a SWOT analysis of competitors, position map and wholesale/retail price analysis. Finally, students drafted a 3 year promotional strategy and a mobile advertisement. For the final project, students developed 3 original prints for their own brand of clothing and accessories and an ecommerce storefront for the print on demand website, Zazzle.com. Students also prepared to launch a physical store by developing a 3D store front and layout in SketchUp modeling software with a 3 year promotional strategy.

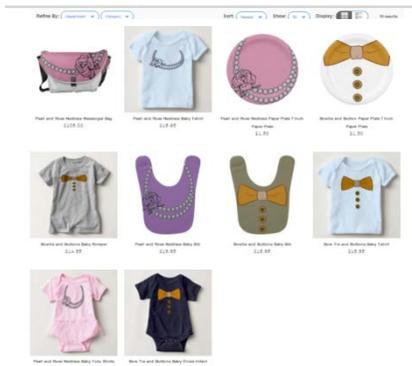
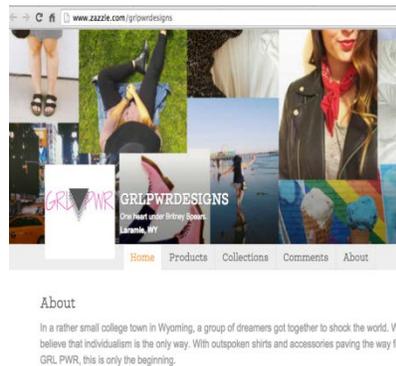
**Success of Strategy.** Students answered surveys with 5 or 7 point Disagree-Agree Likert Scales based on previous research (Ma & Lee, 2012; Walker & Fraser, 2005) and open-ended questions.

Question (Below)	Project:	1	2	3
Application of course concepts		M= 6.09	M= 5.67	M= 5.93
Developing critical thinking skills		M= 5.82	M= 5.73	M= 5.50
Acquiring work related knowledge and skills		M= 6.09	M= 5.87	M= 5.64
Perceiving the project to pose real world problems		M= 5.45	M= 5.53	M= 5.43
Project representative of tasks performed by a professional		M= 5.82	M= 5.60	M= 5.50
Feel more prepared for visual merchandising/promotion work		M= 6.00	M= 5.33	M= 5.64

**(1) Window Project.** The window project was rated the highest in the areas of authentic learning assessed. When asked about overall impressions of the project, one student commented “I loved

having a hands on project. I really enjoyed doing this because this is something I want to do later as a job in the future.” All of the clients commented that the students were professional and met their display needs and goals. **(2) Competition Project.** Rated highest in student acquisition of work related skills and knowledge, one student reflected “This was a fun project. It allowed us to think outside the box and... We all had to come out of our comfort zones & work together to accomplish the project.” **(3) Ecommerce Project.** This project was rated highest in application of course concepts, reflected in the following student impression of the project “I think this project was beneficial in leaning (learning) how to combine in store & online information to promote products & track sales. **Course Evaluations.** Overall, students agreed that the course provided instructor support (M=4.14), student interaction and collaborations (M= 4.68), personal relevance (M= 4.29), authentic learning (M= 4.01), active learning (M= 4.07), and required autonomy (M= 4.31). Course structure involved lecture, lecture activities, readings, projects, quizzes, attendance activities and group collaboration. The students reported course projects were most helpful (M= 4.57) and course readings (M= 3.36) were least helpful. One student offered that they liked best the “...applicability of the projects to actual, real life goals and opportunities.” Students ranked group collaboration as the second most helpful (M= 4.50) with one student writing that activities were beneficial as “Time to work with my group in class is priceless. It lessened the typical groupwork dread and make (made) it a good experience.” These results show the gains students made through authentic and active learning techniques implemented in a project based learning environment.

**Future Plans.** Success for course learning objectives indicated the efficacy of this approach. Minor changes would enhance the students’ learning. For the first project, students would benefit from designing windows for all the businesses. In the second project, a checklist of requirements instead of descriptions would help students organize project elements. The third project would become a semester long project so that students could better market their brand and master the SketchUP software. **Figures-** A. Business window, B. Zazzle.com store, C. Zazzle Products



## References.

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