

Experiential Learning in the Fashion Sustainability Classroom: The Development of a Fashion Revolution Week Event Using Creative Problem-Solving

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Introduction

The contemporary fashion industry is plagued with sustainability issues spanning the entire lifecycle of apparel products. The increasing speed of fashion industry practices and increasing volumes of fashion products have led to global environmental, social, cultural, and economic crises (Burns, 2019). Although knowledge of the fashion industry's sustainability issues is increasing due to fashion brands' sustainability initiatives, many consumers are still unaware of the detrimental effects of their consumption and disposal practices. In fact, the average American doesn't wear 30% of their wardrobe (WRAP, 2012) and generates 82 pounds of textile waste each year (The True Cost, n. d.). With 7.5 billion people in the world all wearing and consuming clothing, it is essential to provide education on best consumption and disposal practices of apparel products.

Many higher-education fashion programs recognize the need to prepare their students to tackle sustainability issues in their future careers and embed sustainability themes into their curriculum (Armstrong & LeHew, 2014). In 2008, ITAA published meta-goals to help guide fashion programs to include sustainability themes into their four-year baccalaureate programs, emphasizing the understanding of the impacts of the global fashion industry as a system, along with problem-solving skills. Fashion sustainability education has been found to emphasize experiential and hands-on learning to develop students as change agents.

Experiential learning is an informal approach to education that has recently taken rise as a significant method of active learning in the classroom (McGuire & Gubbins, 2010). Experiential learning can include real-world experiences and problem-based learning (PBL) and has found particular success in topics of innovation and creativity, social responsibility and ethics, and decision making (Potter, 2009). For example, Cao, Carper, Cobb, Silverman, and Jelenewicz (2017) embedded PBL projects into four apparel and textile classes, finding that students gained sustainability content knowledge and demonstrated problem-solving skills. In addition, Cobb, Born, Shaffer, Cao, and Jelenewicz (2019) launched a sustainable pop-up shop on campus as a participatory learning experience for students, with strong outcomes. Creative Problem-Solving (CPS) methods are beneficial to experiential learning, allowing students to approach challenging problems from convergent and divergent perspectives (Creative Education Foundation, 2016).

Experiential learning methods can be applied to engage fashion students as change agents, particularly in the area of fashion sustainability. Fashion Revolution is an organization that views all people as change agents to improve the sustainability of the fashion industry (Fashion Revolution, n.d.). The organization was started after the devastating collapse of the Rana Plaza factory in Bangladesh in 2013 and promotes events across the world each year on the anniversary of the collapse during what the organization has coined "Fashion Revolution Week" (Fashion Revolution, n.d.). The purpose of this study is to propose an innovative teaching concept that can be used in a fashion sustainability course to engage students in the planning and execution of a Fashion Revolution Week event using experiential learning and creative problem-solving techniques. Two objectives of the research are proposed:

1. To engage fashion students in an experiential learning activity using creative problem-solving methods to understand the importance of sustainability in the fashion industry.
2. To educate the university community about issues related to fashion sustainability.

Method

This study included the development of CPS activities, project guidelines, and a course schedule to embed this project into an established fashion sustainability primer course at the University of Delaware. The outcome of the experiential learning project will be a fair event located at an outside venue with tables set up for students to share informational tri-fold posters and discussion provoking activities with the university community. Students will work in groups of 3-4 and will focus on one of eight areas of fashion sustainability (textile production, garment production, distribution, consumption, garment use and care, design for longevity, advertising and body image, and post-consumer disposal). Preliminary execution for this event is set for the Spring 2020 semester.

Results

The results of this study include the development of the CPS activities, project guidelines, and course schedule to execute this project. The assignment grading breakdown is shown in Table 1. The first CPS activity is to be completed in-class in groups of 3-4. Students will create mind maps with “Fashion Sustainability” as the focus. Next, students will be assigned to their project groups and topics. The students will make individual collages to explore their topic and represent it visually. From there, students will work in class to identify the characteristics of the potential event attendees through empathy maps. Students will also work in class on an “Ideate” activity to initiate ideas for the activity they will develop. The next step is for the students to complete research on their assigned topic through a structured Research Guide. After submission of the Research Guide, students will take their research and visually represent the important content about their topic on a virtual tri-fold poster, to be printed out for the event. The students will also propose their developed activity, identifying the materials required. Students will work the event, leading their activities and engaging with the university community on discussions about their topic. After completion of the event, students will complete a reflection on the learning experience and the execution of the event. The course schedule embeds the CPS in-class activities and assignment due dates into the schedule of topics for the fashion sustainability primer course.

Table 1. Project Grading Breakdown

Assignment	Points
CPS Activities	25 pts.
Brainstorm Mind-Map	
Collage	
Empathy Map	
Ideate	
Research Guide	25 pts.
Poster Rough Draft & Proposal Paper	25 pts.
Final Submission	30 pts.
Tri-fold poster	
Activity materials	
Event Attendance & Participation	20 pts.
Reflection	15 pts.
Peer & Self Evaluation	10 pts.
Total	150 pts.

Discussion

This innovative teaching concept will provide important learning outcomes for fashion students enrolled in the fashion sustainability course as well as other students and university colleagues at the University of Delaware. Students in the fashion sustainability course will experience a unique learning opportunity allowing them to act as change agents. Other students and colleagues will become educated on fashion sustainability issues, hopefully impacting their apparel consumption and disposal practices. Perhaps the greatest implication of the development of this experiential learning experience is the potential for it to be shared to other universities across the world and put into practice during Fashion Revolution Week.

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