So…What is Your Story? Senior Capstone Design Course Introduces Storytelling

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Telling an engaging story is one of the oldest and most powerful tools of influencing and persuading people. Storytelling is a way to connect with other people by communicating one's experiences so others can understand and relate, too. It touches people's hearts and the tender side of even the most defensive adversary (Simmons, 2013). Therefore, it is not surprising that businesses began sharing the stories behind their brands with their customers. Brand storytelling is a cohesive narrative that intertwines facts and emotions that a brand elicits (Lundqvist et. al., 2013). The technique in marketing is significantly effective in engaging with customers on a deeper level and lengthening brand recall (Aaker, 1996; Lundqvist et. al., 2013).

Storytelling was integrated into two consecutive senior capstone design courses, as meaningful stories inspire people and build faith in the storyteller. The senior capstone courses included Brand Development and Collection development courses, which are offered over two consecutive semesters. The goals of the Brand Development course are to (1) develop a professional portfolio that is representative of the individual student and (2) design a fashion collection in the context of market and professional opportunities. In the Collection Development course, students produce the garments that were designed in the Brand Development course. At the end of the Collection Development course, students present their collections at a fashion show.

As the title of the course suggests, the student is encouraged to develop him/herself as a brand in the Brand Development course. A portfolio should represent a student and their brand, while also serving purpose in their job hunt or application to graduate school. Storytelling perfectly fits into the process of creating a portfolio, designing a collection, and disseminating it to the public, with the aim to inspire, influence, and often persuade one's audience. Resumes and design projects demonstrate skillsets to potential employers but may not be personal enough to persuade them. A portfolio and design collection with a meaningful story produce faith in the presenter and higher engagement with the viewers.

The objectives of this learning practice are to narrate the integration of storytelling fundamentals into the senior capstone design courses, its influence on students' design work, and enhancement of their learning and career competencies. At the beginning of the Brand Development course, students were asked to reflect about themselves and identify who they were, why they were here, and what they wanted to share with the world through their designs. Often, students did not have clear answers to these questions.

A mind map technique was utilized to facilitate in the search of the "who am I" process. Mind mapping is a graphical representation of ideas or topics with the addition of an individual's associations with the ideas in a radial and non-linear manner. Mind mapping arose from the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci (Gelb, 1998). Like da Vinci's notes, it is a multi-sensory tool

that uses visuospatial orientation to integrate and develop information and solve problems (Buzan & Buzan, 1993). Thus, it is a useful technique in encouraging students to reflect, identify, and organize their ideas.

Students were asked to create multiple mind maps about their personal and professional self as well as perceived self based on feedback from their significant others. In addition, the following questions were asked: How would you describe yourself in five words? How would your family and friends describe you in ten words? What are your strengths and challenges? Students added dimensions of pictures and colors to their mind maps, which eased in the visualization, organization, and clarity of their ideas, while also appealing to a wide range of students with diverse learning styles.

Strong, favorable, or unfavorable associations in the mind maps identified an individual student's uniqueness and values. Once students were clear about who they were, they were able to make confident decisions on how to build their portfolios to reflect themselves. Furthermore, the mind maps suggested ways of how a student should build a strong, unique, and convincing story in their portfolios, brand identities, and professional websites. In addition, students expressed that their stories helped them to develop their senior collection designs and fashion show presentations in the Collection Development course.

The stories that the students built were not limited to who they were and why they were here, but also included their personal experiences or fictitious imaginations, such as Scottish folklore, struggles of a loved one, or an unspoken story of human trafficking. Although a story is a narration of an event, there must be a difference between retelling a simple account of an event versus communicating a meaningful story. Good storytelling is multidimensional and is enhanced with emotional content and sensory details. A design collection with a moving story weaves detail, fluidity, character, and events into a whole that is greater than the sum of the individual garment pieces (Simmons, 2013).

Integrating storytelling in both capstone courses was successful. All 36 students made positive comments about building and sharing their stories with others. When asked to compare their initial concepts for their collection on the first day of the Brand Development course with those of their final collection, one student said, "My initial inspiration was jellyfish. It's pretty but there's no substance and there's no connection to me other than this tangible thing that you can look at. … I feel like my collection, the way it has evolved is completely mine and it's so personal to me. 'this is my life.'….be able to share that and hope that someone else gains something from it."

The plan for the future of this successful learning practice is to continue to integrate the storytelling method into the capstone courses, at an even deeper level. In addition, storytelling should be introduced to lower level design courses. It took around four to eight weeks for the senior students to identify who they were and to build the stories they wanted to tell through their collections. The time taken to understand this concept will shorten if students familiarize themselves with this process at an earlier year in the program. Introducing this technique earlier will allow students to think proactively about themselves and the story they want to share as designers.

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