



Undergraduate student perceptions of industry guest speakers in the fashion classroom

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Introduction: There is a strong belief among educators that guest speakers are a valuable addition to a course curriculum, but the academic literature is often based upon anecdotal evidence or simply assumes that speakers are efficacious. Journal articles seem to be divided into several general categories. These include recommendations for strategies in utilizing guest speakers in classrooms (Dalakas, 2016; Duening & Markiewicz, 2013; Nakano, 2009) and unique models for co-teaching with industry guests (Tenenberg, 2009; Zheng, Chen, Wang, Hoffman & Volkov, 2018). Some articles evaluate specific events created to present multiple guest speakers (Metrejean, Pittman & Zarzeski, 2002; Reibe, Sibson, Roepen & Meakins, 2013; Zorek, Katz & Popovich, 2011), while others describe the use of asynchronous virtual guest speakers (Hemphill & Hemphill, 2007; Ostorga & Farruggio, 2013). The literature on guest speakers encompasses a wide range of disciplines, from the sciences (e.g., chemistry, pharmacy) to business (e.g., accounting, marketing) to the humanities (e.g., foreign languages, education). However, no academic research has been found that addresses the impact of a fashion professional speaking during one class session of a course and what value students find in this kind of experience. This study will help to fill that void and will offer guidance to fashion educators who seek to incorporate guest speakers into the college classroom.

Method: The overarching research question of this study was “What value do students get from guest speakers?” To best answer that question, a qualitative research method was devised. Students enrolled in fashion courses taught by the researchers were asked to complete a survey with open-ended questions. This survey was administered before any guest speaker had visited the class and asked general questions about students’ prior experiences with and expectations of guest speakers.

Students were instructed to consider guest speakers as professionals who work or have experience in the fashion or retail industries, or a related field, rather than guests from the university, who might come to talk about the writing center, opportunities in study abroad, or internships, for instance. Questions included: “What do you think is the purpose of an industry guest speaker in a college class?” and “What are your most and least favorite aspects of industry guest speakers?” Survey questions were developed from the literature, previous experiences, and past student feedback. The survey was administered via the Qualtrics online survey tool.

As a qualitative study, data were coded and evaluated for emergent themes. The researchers coded independently, with an inter-coder reliability rate of 89%, above the threshold recommended by Creswell (2007). Discrepancies were discussed and resolved until agreement was reached.

Results and Discussion: A total of 114 students participated in the survey. Of these, 55 were enrolled at a mid-sized private Northeastern (NE) university and 59 at a large public Midwestern (MW) university. Both samples were similar in terms of gender (89% and 88% female, respectively) and the number of upperclass students (49% and 56%, respectively). However, of the NE sample, 42% were first-year students, while in the MW sample, there were none. This perhaps explains the difference between

samples with regards to students who have never had a guest speaker in a college class (47% and 27%, respectively). Yet students have expectations of guest speakers, whether they have experienced one or not. Therefore, all responses were considered in the results of this study.

The vast majority of students¹ found it beneficial to have industry speakers in their classes (86% overall). Only 8% noted that they neither liked nor disliked the practice, and only one respondent disliked the practice. Students looked to industry guest speakers for a variety of reasons. They were relied upon for their expertise and up-to-date, insider knowledge, which allowed them to elucidate “what it is really like to work in the fashion world” (Respondent 31NE). Students especially appreciated hearing speakers’ personal stories and day-to-day experiences as professionals in the field, as well as learning about the specific career paths the individuals had taken since graduating college. Implicitly and explicitly, students sought to apply information gleaned from these practitioners to their own career plans. Students also noted that guest speakers brought new or alternate perspectives into the classroom, allowing for greater understanding of the complexity of the fashion industry and acting as a supplement to the instructor and textbook. Further, industry guests also helped to more clearly connect what was learned in the college curriculum to actual fashion careers.

Survey participants also described characteristics of the ideal speaker. Beyond being a knowledgeable professional currently working in the industry, speakers were preferred whose career choices and industry roles closely aligned with the students’ own interests and desired future roles. In addition, during the classroom visit, students hoped for as personalized an experience as possible, looking to receive individualized career advice and wanting to use the class period to ask questions of the speaker whenever possible. Industry speakers sometimes served to reassure students of their academic and career choices; in some cases, they effected a reevaluation of those choices.

Additional speaker characteristics related to the presentation itself. Students prized speakers who were well-organized, persuasive, and included visuals, such as slides or sample garments. An ideal speaker would also be engaging and friendly, they would use their polished speaking skills to deliver information at a suitable level of detail,² and they would be honest, “giv[ing] it to us straight” (Respondent 24MW). Finally, many students indicated disappointment when a scheduled speaker did not address the particular topic the class was currently studying or the student’s primary area of focus.

Conclusion: The purpose of this study was to explore student views on guest speakers in the fashion classroom. Students surveyed typically saw the inclusion of industry guest speakers in the fashion classroom as valuable, especially when the speaker’s personal experiences were seen as applicable to a student’s own hoped-for future career and when speakers could bring clarity to the student’s questions about the industry.

The next stage of this study is to evaluate student perceptions of specific guest speakers after they have visited classes, followed by comparisons of different kinds of guest speaker experiences (e.g., in-person, virtual, part of a panel). The ultimate goal of this study is to utilize the results to offer guidance to university educators to improve student experiences and engagement with guest speakers from the fashion industry.

¹ Only students who had previously taken a class with a guest speaker were asked to provide a response to this question.

² The ideal level of detail was not consistent across respondents, however.

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