Social Responsibility Initiative: A Multi-Class Project for Developing Reusable Food Bags

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Background and Problem

In teaching apparel and textile product development, it is critical that our students understand the larger social responsibility context of how the knowledge they have learned can benefit people. We learned of a community service project where our local Community Action Food Bank needed reusable food bags for their clients. Sustainable design approaches include multiple usage, upcycling, minimum waste, and computer aided design that reduce time and materials or insure long term use. Taking a sustainable product approach deepens their contribution as students learn to develop products in a process that minimizes textile product waste while maximizes product usage. Since the product development process involves multiple steps, it was an ideal framework for fostering collaborative learning.

Purpose and Theoretical Underpinnings

Our purpose was to implement a collaborative learning framework into a product development process of creating reusable food that served a social responsibility initiative. Our process began with the service project request. In order to deepen student exposure to collaboration and service learning, faculty agreed to engage in the service project across several classes. Collaborative learning involves groups of learners working together to solve a problem or create a product (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012) and results in higher achievement and greater social competence and self-esteem (Johnson, 2009).

Design Process and Method

Working with our university's Center for Civic Engagement to meet the expressed need of our local Community Food Bank, three faculty worked together to develop a multi-stage collaborative project where a total of 150 students from different classes contributed to creation of reusable food bags. We found the four-step sustainable apparel design and production model (Gam, Cao, Farr, & Heine, 2009) was a useful paradigm for this project. Problem definition and research included visiting the Food Pantry location and investigating their need. This was followed by product design and sample making. The project was accomplished collaboratively across three areas of the apparel design and textile discipline: apparel assembly, textiles, and computer-aided design. In the textiles course, students learned about various textile materials and their properties, end uses, and caring methods. Based on their knowledge, students sourced post-consumer textile waste containing fabrics durable enough to hold the weight of cans and dry goods, such as drapes, tablecloths, and pants, from friends and families, thrift stores, and past student projects. Finally, textile students sorted and cut fabrics for components of the bags and packaged kits for assembly. In beginning apparel assembly courses, students who had spent part

of the semester learning to sew applied those skills to making the bags from kits provided by our textile students. Knowing they were making a contribution to the community, students were careful to create quality bags. Each bag featured a digitally printed textile label created in our computer-aided design studio. Students added their signature to the label in waterproof pen to personalize the bags and to communicate to the Food Bank patrons that students made the bags for them. We hoped that this personalized touch encourages patrons to use their bags long-term.

Proposed Strategies and Implications

We propose a social responsibility initiative framework for a multi-class project that fosters students working collaboratively and participating in community service. Figure 1 shows this framework that is well-suited to product development projects.

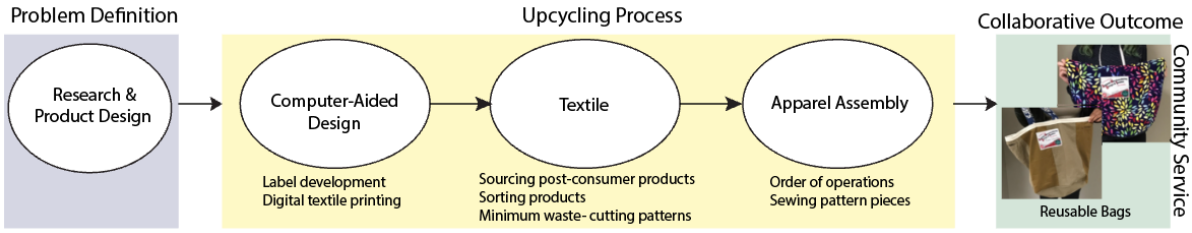

Figure 1. Social Responsibility Initiative Framework for Student Collaboration and Community Service.

According to our local Food Bank Director, eliminating disposable shopping bags saves about $3,000 a year. This savings translates to more food for the almost 700 people who rely on it every month. This project is just one example of the many ways that the textile and apparel curriculum classes can be designed to collaboratively combine learning expertise while making a contribution to our communities and meanwhile emphasize the need for sustainable processes and products. By fostering a social responsibility initiative in our curriculums, we raise our student's self-esteem along with their sense of giving back to society.

References

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