Artifacts Improve Learning in a Fashion History Course

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The belief that artifacts are able to teach more than words or images alone has been a guiding principle of university teaching collections and museums comprised of historic dress. Seeing an object first-hand allows a viewer to engage more personally with a specific moment in the past. One systematic way in which students have participated in active learning with unfamiliar artifacts is object based learning (OBL). Through OBL, learners use their senses to analyze an object as they learn more in-depth about a course topic. Past researchers have supported the use of OBL in the college classroom, stating the method promotes a more profound connection with a topic than may be achieved through simply viewing a photograph of an artifact (Chatterjee, Hannan, & Thomson, 2015; Simpson & Hammond, 2012; Tam, 2015). "Garments are complex objects, particularly when multiple pieces are assembled into an outfit on the human body or representation of the body. Illustrations and photographs add further complexity in that the representation of garments does not allow examination of the real objects (Cosbey, Damhorst, & Farrell-Beck, 2002, p.110). Artifact analysis of garments is a common type of OBL used in fashion history courses (Banning & Gam, 2013; Butler, Stonewater, & Kinney, 2005; Marcketti, 2011). To date, however, little research exists documenting student perceptions of using artifacts as a teaching tool. The purpose of this study was to identify how students perceived their interaction with historic items of dress influenced their learning in a 20th century fashion history course.

Students in this study were enrolled in a 20th century fashion history course at a university in the Midwest United States. The course was required for students in a fashion design and merchandising program and taken as a junior or senior. An in-depth OBL assignment was completed by students once during the semester as a way to provide first-hand experience with 20th century dress through the department's historic costume collection. The OBL assignment included a detailed artifact analysis framework developed for the course, based on work by Severa and Horswill (1989) and Banning and Kuttruff (2015). Students signed up for a 20th century time period from an instructor-created list and chose a garment in the historic costume collection from that time period to analyze. Garments were analyzed from decades throughout the entire 20th century. Initial analysis, including identifying and evaluating aspects of the selected garment, took approximately an hour to complete inside the collection, while cultural analysis, interpretation, intuitive analysis and relating the garment to what was learned previously in class took additional outside time. On assigned days throughout the semester, students gave short presentations about their analyzed garment during class. Collectively, this provided the opportunity for each student to learn deeply about one item of 20th century dress, but to see broadly a wide range of other garments from the collection first-hand during the semester. Following presentations, students also viewed additional items from the collection

relating to the featured time period brought by the course instructor and had the opportunity to interact with any item they chose as class ended.

At the end of the semester, students wrote a reflection based on the question, "Discuss how analyzing items of dress from the [name of historic costume collection] influenced your learning of different time periods in fashion history." Researchers received informed consent from 30 of 36 students enrolled to analyze their reflection responses for the present study. A grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to code student responses and group them according to theme.

Three themes emerged from student responses about their experience with artifacts: 1) positive influence on learning, 2) deeper understanding of course content, and 3) appreciation for artifact details. Students were unanimous in their enthusiasm for the use of historic items of dress in the course. Every student response reflected a positive reaction to the use of artifacts, with many indicating that artifacts created excitement for learning and made the process more enjoyable. A majority of students noted that the artifact analysis and viewing of artifacts in class helped them understand course concepts better. This point was emphasized by students who said that by seeing the artifacts first-hand they were able to visualize the garments being worn by others or even themselves. One student commented, it "brought the entire course to life." Finally, most students referred to being able to see details in the actual items of dress that could never have been seen through only a photograph. Students discussed fabric, construction, and design elements that were both seen and felt, as well as the ways in which those characteristics could not be experienced in the same way through a two-dimensional image. Student reflections supported the assertion that artifacts improve learning.

Based on student feedback, the OBL assignment will continue to be a required assignment in the course and additional artifacts will continue to be brought to class to emphasize specific course topics. In order to increase student engagement with garments students view in class but have not analyzed personally, an additional assignment will be introduced in the future on days when artifact presentations are given during class. The short written assignment will require students to write about their favorite garment shown that day, focusing on what characteristics attracted them to the garment. This will provide students an opportunity to think more actively about what they see, rather than view passively.

Limitations to this study include the limited class time for students to view and handle extra garments when brought to class. Additionally, students experienced only what was available in the historic costume collection; given that the collection is comprised primarily of community donations, it does not completely represent all time periods. This study is a first step in documenting the value of artifacts in fashion history courses. Future studies should investigate the level of connection between student interaction with artifacts and final course grade as well as examine the effectiveness of OBL in relation to a students' preferred style of learning.

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