CoLab: A Two-fold Development Model Utilizing Studio Collaboration To Inspire Product And Professional Development.

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Introduction. The global economic recession has left many small fashion companies lacking the resources to invest in pre-production development of textile applications and signature details for their lines. While it is true that new product design and development is more often than not a crucial factor in the survival of a company, in an industry that is changing quickly, firms must continually revise their design and range of products (Devere, 2008). Small-scale and emerging fashion companies simply lack the funding, space, materials and skills to experiment as they are putting all energies into pushing the business forward into the next season. Recent graduates and students of textile and design experience constraints due to the financial crisis. For many students, getting a foot in the door at a company is difficult. CoLab is one example of a collaborative model of product development that pairs a small fashion company seeking product innovation with a group of dynamic and talented students seeking industry exposure, with *both* sides of the partnership eager to teach and learn. Through skill-sharing (both by students and Industry Professionals), the academic studio serves as testing ground towards the creation of collectively designed signature textiles.

Project Scope and Objectives. The primary goal of CoLab was to reframe the global recession into a point of entry by asking, "If the opportunities are not there why can't we create them ourselves" and by testing a product development collaboration model that literally brings the industry to the classroom. The objectives of the project were two-fold, benefiting both Industry and Student participant through:

1. Ensuring students are offered Industry experience and direct interaction with Industry Professionals in their school studio where they (students) can demonstrate, assist with, and share their talents and skills directly.
2. Facilitating hands-on experimentation and textile product development for small companies who are interested in development but lack studio resources and know-how.
3. Allowing students to witness the development process from concept through to final product and inviting students' input and assistance in significant and meaningful ways.

Implementation. The project unfolded over two sessions that included an alternative spring break and a summer intensive session. The designers-in-residence from SA VA (A Philadelphia based fashion brand, SA VA is locally made, globally inspired and community based fashion. According to Sarah Van Aken, founder, ninety percent of the garments sold at SA VA are locally made in-house) worked on-site at the Maryland Institute College of Art Fiber Department. The department volunteered the print and dye studios to the fashion company. In exchange, a team of students worked alongside the SA VA designers as production assistants to sample and produce a

small run of textiles for apparel. Student production assistants each received a sample book and professional images of the final product as well as title of *Production Assistant* and all press generated for their portfolios.

Outcomes. Data was collected from interviews pre- and post- project, and survey questions at the end of the experience, these data offered the following conclusions: (1) Industry/Student collaborations are beneficial to students "on their own turf" in their school studio where they can show off, assist with and share their talents and skills directly (e.g., In her evaluation of CoLab, one student remarked: "*I taught Katya and Sarah how to wrap an arashi shibori pole, interacting with the them in our studio I felt confident and was able to help them problem solve.*") (2) Industry/Student collaboration facilitates hands-on experimentation, learning and development (e.g., An Industry partner remarked: "*I never realized how much work goes into the processes, I learned so much in the past few days, I am going to look at all of our fabrics in a new way.*"). (4) Collaboration should be embedded into curriculum (e.g., One student reflected on studio collaboration, suggest that "*this kind of experience should be required for all students, maybe as another alternative spring break or summer session.*") According to LaBlat, the frequency of university designers who develop collaborative projects with Industry is likely to increase as internal funds for research become scarce. The collaborations will also increase as industries are pressured to improve a product or to present a new product that meets or exceeds competition (LaBlat, 1999).

Plans for Continuation. Moving forward, a model such as CoLab would work very well as a dedicated special session or short course. The short time periods are essential for industry professionals who cannot leave the worksite during the business week. Additionally, the model would benefit from more front-end development time. At the core, the CoLab model presents a gift of time and space to designers to learn, play and experiment aside from the pressures of business. The "creative conviviality" offered to all participants is beneficial to everyone involved.

References

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