



## **Seven-Day Style Challenge: Implementing visual merchandising concepts with online learning to promote higher-order cognitive thinking**

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**Introduction.** The purpose of this paper is to report on a project designed to enrich practical student learning achievement in a Visual Merchandising and Product Presentation course through the development and implementation of an experiential online learning activity, entitled “The Seven-Day Style Challenge”, followed by a post-activity student assessment to enhance student learning outcomes (SLOs). Both activity and evaluation drew upon key cognitive processes and learning objectives, as outlined in the revised version of Bloom’s Taxonomy and experiential learning theory (ELT) and were designed to concordantly promote higher-order thinking and industry-specific strategic development (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Kolb, 1984).

**Background.** In the aftermath of a global pandemic, the rapid proliferation of digital technologies has unequivocally challenged the status quo across fields and disciplines; however, it also poses a unique opportunity for visual-centric teaching and learning. For post-secondary courses, such as Visual Merchandising, hybrid learning environments, classified as a combination of traditional, face-to-face instruction, and online education materials and assignments, can enhance higher-order student learning. The student learning outcomes (SLOs) for this course require students to have a comprehensive knowledge of specialized concepts and theories in practice (e.g., evaluating how students apply visual merchandising and product presentation skills in real-world scenarios). While face-to-face learning can facilitate students’ creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills through in-class activities, time restrictions limit the complexity of such exercises. As such, new online homework assignments developed out of necessity during the pandemic, allow students flexibility in completing tasks at their own pace, thereby promoting academic and intellectual engagement.

**Purpose and Objective.** As an extension of Bloom’s Taxonomy, the purpose of this new assignment was to encourage students to put forth more effort when tasked with more rigorous independent coursework that connects coursework to students’ lives and fosters meaning and task relevancy from the perspective of their daily apparel choices. The objective was to achieve a more advanced level of the taxonomy through the development of greater degrees of open-ended responses and uniquely personalized creativity, or “thinking outside the box”, thereby facilitating conducive active learning environments that enable students to apply learned curricula to real-world contexts (Paolini, 2015; Tabrizi & Rideout, 2017; Vinay, 2023).

**Implementation of The Seven-Day Style Challenge.** In utilizing course SLOs as a guide and measurement instrument (i.e., to create a series of cohesive fixtures that demonstrated mastery of key course concepts, such as color, texture, line composition, and types of display), the “Seven-Day Style Challenge” was developed as a virtual activity by which students could demonstrate their practical knowledge of key visual merchandising and product presentation concepts by using their existing wardrobes and imagination to create and explain seven outfits from seven distinct themes, inspirations, and occasions of their choosing, while also adhering to a seasonal theme of their choice. Further, there was a reflective component to the assignment, whereby students made observations concerning their wardrobes and any trends and/or challenges that they noticed and/or experienced during this activity. This activity allowed students to utilize their phones to take photographs and allowed creative license where visually representing the outfits was concerned (e.g., use of Canva, PowerPoint, Word, Google Docs, etc.).

Students were asked to create seven complete outfits from their wardrobes, with each outfit having a distinct occasion, inspiration, and cohesive overarching theme. One student’s theme was “dressed down luxury,” with “date night” and “texture mixing” as the outfit’s respective occasion and inspiration, and summarized the outfit as follows: “The long sleeve colorful blouse is comfortable and warm, perfect for a fall day. The flare leggings are thick but easy to move in, and paired with the blouse and the green headband, the outfit as a whole is fun and perfect to celebrate in. I chose to wear my Mary Janes to pull together the 70s inspired feel, and an eclectic shaped black pendant and silver swirl earrings to continue to emphasize bold shapes”.

To ensure understanding of the activity guidelines, students were given a specific rubric and a list of occasions and inspirations, a layout infographic, and a completed Seven-Day Style Challenge example. Activity-specific learning objectives were synonymous with course SLOs (i.e., [to] understand visual merchandising concepts, theories, processes, and techniques; [to] solve visual merchandising problems by integrating critical thinking and practice; and [to] develop displays based upon aspects of [the] image, merchandise type, target market characteristics, and promotional theme).

**Effectiveness of Desired Outcomes.** Student submissions indicated a clear understanding of concepts discussed in a classroom setting, as well as in supplemental readings, and topics explored in online homework assignments. Further, student output demonstrated creativity and critical thinking skills through thoughtfully curation of imaginative outfits that achieved cohesion between their occasional use, inspiration, and overarching themes.

In utilizing an online activity submission method, flexibility and convenience were achieved (i.e., when they completed the assignment over the course of the week and how they chose to report on each outfit). At the end of the activity, students were asked to reflect on the assignment by discussing observations that they made concerning their own wardrobes, and any trends and or challenges they noticed and/or experienced when putting together each outfit. One student reported as follows: “I noticed that I am more comfortable with color coordinating with my outfits with my shoes, than I am mixing textures and adding different textures. From this

assignment, I took a step back to see how I put each outfit together to figure where I would wear that outfit and why I picked those specific garments”.

Following this activity, students were asked to participate in an anonymous survey in which they were asked to rate their degree of agreement with a series of statements, using a five-point Likert scale. Questions assessed students’ learning outcomes from this assignment (e.g., “improved my ability to apply strategies learning in this course”; “improved my ability to integrate critical thinking and practice to meet specific visual merchandising problems”; and “improved my skills in critical thinking and practice related to visual merchandising problems to create a unifying concept that tied together separate clothing pieces”). Out of 23 responses, the majority of students reported favorably to each of the questions, though two respondents stated that more time was needed in the term to complete this assignment, and there were some reports of disagreement with the aforementioned learning outcomes (4-13 percent of respondents rated some level of disagreement with the question pertaining to enhancement of understanding).

Based on the feedback gathered, The Seven-Day Style Challenge will be modified to further synergize active learning development, specifically concerning peer review and feedback, length of time allowed to complete the assignment outside of class, and additional in-class instruction and discussion on pertinent topics (i.e., themes, inspirations, occasions, and seasonal continuity).

### References

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