Retail industry readiness through active learning: A student reflection approach

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Introduction: Students who would like to become fashion designers, product developers, or merchandisers often enroll in higher education apparel programs to obtain a degree. However, there is currently a disconnect between the skills acquired in higher education institutions (HEI) and the apparel industry's requirements (Chida & Brown, 2011; Romeo, 2016). Apparel industry leaders have noted that college graduates often lack soft skills like communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, and strong technical design skills (Chida & Brown, 2011; Romeo, 2016). While most apparel and textile programs structure their curriculum in a manner that provides the necessary skills for graduates to be successful in the industry, there seems to be a gap between the skills being taught and the skills acquired by students in the classroom.

An active learning pedagogy is not novel, with many apparel and textile HEI instructors utilizing hands-on projects with industry partners. However, what many of these projects are missing is a reflective period allowing students to create and solidify knowledge. By offering a reflective period within a hands-on, active learning project students critically review their own learning (Gleaves et al., 2008). This creates connections between new and existing knowledge that deepens learning (O'Rourke, 1998) and skills that can be carried forward into their future careers.

This study aimed to analyze the impacts of student reflective journals within an active learning consulting project on apparel design and product development students' perceived career readiness. This study holds significance for apparel pedagogy researchers regarding two main points: first, it illustrates the different impacts on students' perceived industry readiness, and secondly, the research can guide instructors of apparel design and product development classes to maximize student learning outcomes.

Figure 1: *Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle*
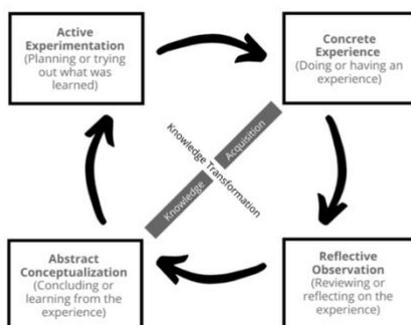
Theoretical Framework: Within experiential learning theory (ELT), or active learning, learning occurs through hands-on experiences through the process of knowledge creation. Knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (Inks & Avila, 2008). An active learning pedagogy requires that students fully participate and engage in projects through discussion, problem-solving, reflective thinking, and cognitive processing (Inks & Avila, 2008). Knowledge and skill acquisition within an active learning pedagogy are most transformative when all four stages of the

experiential learning cycle are implemented; concrete experience (CE), abstract conceptualization (AC), reflective observation (RO), and active experimentation (AE) (Kolb, 1984; McCarthy, 2016). During the first two stages, CE and AC, knowledge is acquired. In the final two stages, RO and AE, knowledge is actively transformed. As students move through the experiential learning cycle, they move from knowledge acquisition to knowledge transformation (Young et al., 2008). See Figure 1. Through active learning experiences students can 'bridge the gap' between classroom learning and real-world application (Doe, 2017). However, for students to cycle successfully through knowledge acquisition and knowledge transformation, a process of reflection is necessary (Moon, 1999).

Project Implementation: A consulting-based project with a small multi-channel retailer was utilized as a final project in a junior-level design and product development course that employed computer-aided design software (Lectra Kaledo). Upon entry into this course, students should have intermediate garment construction and trend forecasting skills. Within the course students learn to create textile designs and design apparel collections. As a final project, student teams engaged in an active learning consulting-based project with a small multi-channel retailer.

The aim of the consulting project was to propose products to expand the small multi-channel retailer's product assortment. To increase student learning outcomes, the project was structured to ensure that students cycled four times through the experiential learning cycle. Each cycle is vital so that students are acquiring and then transforming new knowledge (Kolb, 1984). To aid in the transformation of knowledge, students were asked to complete a reflective journal entry during each cycle. Students were presented with backward-looking (i.e., have you done a similar work in the past?), inward-looking (i.e., how do you feel about the project?), outward-looking (i.e., what comments would you make about your work?), and forward-looking (i.e., what will you change?) prompts to guide them through their reflection process (Edutopia, 2011).

Key components of the project were a visit to the retailer's brick-and-mortar store, analyzing the e-commerce site and social media platforms used by the retailer and interviews with managers of the retailer. These aspects of the project were concrete experiences (CE) that provided students with knowledge acquisition about the retailer's current product assortment, brand identity, target market, and business operations. After each CE, students engaged in a formative assessment with the course instructor to obtain feedback on the current state of their project and completed a reflective journal entry. After completing the journal entries, students reconvened with their teams to advance to the AE stage of the experiential learning cycle by applying what they learned. The students progressed through the experiential learning cycle four times ending with a final pitch to the retailer's management team.

Project Effectiveness: At the end of the project, students were able to build soft and technical design skills that enhance their industry readiness. Additionally, the project outputs were strategically organized to be easily integrated into a student's digital/web portfolio, supporting industry readiness from an application standpoint. Based on the qualitative analyses of the reflective journal entries, students' confidence in their ability to develop new products that fulfill

a product gap for a specific target market's need increased over the project time. Analyses also identified specific aspects of the collection development process that students gained knowledge in (e.g., competitor analysis, technical drawings, 3D rendering). Active learning projects are not new to the apparel and textile curricula, but based on the outcomes from this study, apparel and textile instructors should consciously structure active learning projects according to the experiential learning cycle and provide students with the opportunity for self- reflection. By doing this, instructors contribute to bridging the knowledge and skills gap between industry and HEIs and students become more industry-ready.

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