



The Denim Supply Chain as Global Multi-Disciplinary Classroom: A Learning Experience from Field to Factory to Showroom Floor

Kelly Cobb, Martha Carper. The University of Delaware. Nioka Wyatt, Philadelphia, University, USA

Keywords: sustainability, apparel product development, supply chain, immersion learning

Introduction. Fashion is cross-cultural, multifaceted and on a daily basis merges design, manufacturing and engineering, business and management. It is imperative that students in undergraduate textile and apparel programs develop a global mindset that encompasses multiple perspectives. Future industry leaders and consumers will be required to consider issues and build a holistic understanding of complex problems facing the textile and apparel Industry. (LeHew, 2005). This paper provides an overview of a semester-long global multi-disciplinary learning model that combined immersive “on-the-ground” learning in partnership with industry, with the objective of teaching, learning and disseminating knowledge demystifying complexities inherent in textile and apparel supply chain. The learning experience involved 6 students from two Mid-Atlantic Universities, whose academic disciplines include apparel design and merchandising, fashion industry management and sustainability participated in an immersive learning experience guided by university faculty and industry partner Denimatrix, a Guatemala-based denim apparel manufacturing subsidiary of Lubbock, Texas-based Plains Cotton Cooperative Association.

Implementation. Students participating in the Global Multi-Disciplinary Classroom traveled to Texas, Guatemala, North Carolina and New York, NY during the spring and summer of 2012 to learn about the denim supply chain from field, to factory, to showroom floor. Student teams combined knowledge specific to their individual fields (apparel design, merchandising, fashion industry management, sustainability) to trace the complex network of facilities that are involved in the production process of denim, from the procurement of raw materials to the production of intermediate and final products, to the delivery of products to consumers through a distribution system. In the process, students documented their learning, research, interactions, reflections and challenges via a team blog, self-published magazine and interactive video. This Immersive model of learning offered students an opportunity to work together to define and offer innovative solutions to problems facing the present and future of cotton with a specific focus on ethical sourcing and sustainable supply chain solutions related to apparel product development.

Objectives. COTTON LAB 2012 project objectives focused on advancing awareness of the global nature of our field and fostering multi-disciplinary learning in future industry professionals. A number of objectives were implemented to foster the objectives of the project such as: **Objective 1 - Focus on Sustainability** – The project offers an immersive “Factory Floor” learning experience that supports our students in developing an awareness of

accountability toward issues of social responsibility and sustainability. **Objective 2 – International Scope** –The project involves interaction with global communities in innovative and collaborative ways. The project fosters emerging apparel design, merchandising and management specialists who will shortly be joining the global fashion and apparel industry. **Objective 3 – Support Initiatives involving multi-disciplinary research teams** – Fashion is cross – cultural, multilingual and on a daily basis merges design, manufacturing, engineering, business and management. Our goal is to train students to work beyond their discipline to solve problems and create solutions.

Outcomes: Students achieved the intended learning outcome regarding **Collaborating with future colleagues in the field of design, merchandising and supply chain management** as evident in reflection statements (e.g. the student reflecting on how the experience has altered her view of jeans and the supply chain: *This experience has really changed the way I shop and look at my jeans-- I now obsessively check where they were made and the fiber content and admire how much work I now know went into producing that special hole, whisker mark etc. The best part for me has definitely been all of the people we got to meet through each step of the supply chain; putting a face to each "bale." It still shocks me to think about how many people are involved in making just one pair of jeans.*) As well, Students did achieve the intended learning outcome regarding **Reviewing vertical integration and how it ensures quality control from the cotton fields to the final garment** as evident in reflection statements (e.g. the student reflecting on how the experience has “put a face” on the production process *“It was exciting to travel to North Carolina, New York, Texas, and especially Guatemala! I keep putting the faces of all the people we met to each step in the process. Without these people working in the fields and factories, we wouldn't have jeans to wear. I have a much better understanding and appreciation for the industry now that I have seen it in person.*)

Plans for Continuation. With the support of our international industry partner, student participants developed an applied knowledge of potentials that consider the complexity and extensive apparel supply chain on an accessible scale. As educators we feel strongly that first hand international manufacturing experience offers students a competitive edge vs. students who do not have this experience, our hope is to continue the development of immersive and collaborative teaching modules that offer opportunities for students from different programs and disciplines to collaborate with real life industry scenarios. **Acknowledgement:** Project funded by The Cotton Incorporated Student Sponsorship Grant

References: LeHew, Melody L. A. and Deborah J. C. Meyer. (2005) Preparing Global Citizens for Leadership in the Textile and Apparel Industry. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, September 2005; vol. 23, 4: pp. 290-297.