Visual Reflections for Visual Merchandising

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Innovative Approach or Practice that Merits Sharing with Others

Reflection activities are generally regarded as an essential part of service-learning. Reflection activities can take many forms, the most traditional of which is to write thoughts about an experience, sometimes in response to prompts. For a visual merchandising class, it can be difficult to understand reflections referencing a visual display that does not accompany the written reflection. VoiceThread is a tool that allows students to share and discuss documents, presentations, images, audio files, and videos. Students in my visual merchandising class completed a window display, uploaded an image of the completed display, and recorded reflections (responses to a list of provided prompts) while simultaneously using a pen tool to draw on the image as they discussed it. This technological affordance opens up a new realm of reflection activities for visual fields.

Purpose for Identified Audience

The purpose of this presentation is to introduce VoiceThread and pedagogical application for various apparel classrooms. The presentation will cover how this tool was used in a visual merchandising classroom, the benefits of using this tool for student reflection, challenges in using this technology, examples of student projects, instructor reflections on best practices, and a discussion on how the assignment has been improved over time.

Implementation of Practice Clearly Delineated

The National Survey on Student Engagement shows that the deepest learning tends to happen outside of the classroom through "high impact practices" with "opportunities such as learning communities, service-learning, research with a faculty member, study abroad, internships, and culminating senior experiences" (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012).

This service-learning assignment was designed to resemble these high-impact practices. In groups of two to four, students are asked to design and implement a visual display for a local business or non-profit agency. This occurs on four separate occasions during a semester. They are to apply curriculum, such as design principles and elements including line, color, shape, texture, balance, etc.

The instructions for the assignment are as follows:

Upload a full image of your visual display and answer the following questions thoroughly using VoiceThread. Feel free to use all of the features available on VoiceThread, including the option to videotape your response, draw on the photo, etc.

Course-Focused Questions:

- How did our in-class activities (tours, field trips, in-class worksheets, etc.) guide, direct or influence your design decisions at your service site?
- Explain how your display is appropriate for your service site brand and target market.
- Describe your display in terms of design tools and rules.
- Compare the two spaces for which you designed a display. How are they similar and different? What was challenging about each space?
- What did you learn about visual displays from completing displays at two different sites?

Self-Focused Questions:
- Compare your experience at the service site with your previous experiences such as jobs, working in groups, volunteering in the community, or other class assignments.
- What personal qualities have you developed through service-learning? In what ways do you anticipate these qualities will help you in the future?

Description of Success of Practice in Fostering Desired Learning Outcomes

This assignment requires students to evaluate visual promotion strategies, which is a course objective. The related Student Learning Objective is to recognize and verbally explain visual merchandising design as a means of communication in the cultural context of the store's target consumer. The assignment described above has been the most successful in fostering the desired learning outcomes compared to previous assignments and strategies. Students are able to more clearly explain the visual merchandising techniques used in their display, as they are encouraged to complete a more thorough evaluation of their visual promotion strategy. Additionally, students have responded favorably to the use of VoiceThread compared to more traditional written reflections I've used in the past.

Indication of Plans for Continuation, Revisions or Follow-Up

This assignment has benefited from four semesters of iterative improvements. In its present form, it stands as a compelling improvement over previous methods. I plan to continue using this assignment as described above in coming semesters. I think this assignment is a strong starting point for a discussion on best practices for reflection activities for visual fields.

Works Cited

NSSE Annual Results. (2012). Retrieved November 5, 2013, from National Survey of Student Engagement: http://nsse.iub.edu/NSSE_2012_Results/pdf/NSSE_2012_Annual_Results.pdf