



What do students really learn from a fashion show?
A theoretical approach to a project-based learning activity

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Introduction: Many nationally recognized fashion programs feature an annual or biannual student-produced fashion show, which includes designs and styled looks from current undergraduate/graduate students. Additionally, student organizations, campus groups, community organizers, and nationwide campus tours throughout the United States organize, promote, produce, and execute fashion shows using student talent and products. Currently, there is very limited research on the value or educational objectives associated with student engagement in a fashion-show production. Therefore, the purpose of this investigation was to apply a project-based learning, theoretical framework (Blumenfeld, Soloway, Marx, Krajcik, Guzdial, & Palincsar, 1991) to a merchandising/promotions project that involved planning and executing a student-directed fashion show.

Theoretical Framework: A project-based learning, theoretical framework proposed by Blumenfeld et al. (1991) was applied to the project design and guidelines. Being defined as a holistic approach to teaching through engagement in an investigation, project-based learning encourages students to investigate and create solutions to nontrivial problems through question development; multiple-solution proposals; information collection; solution refinement and acceptance; communication of ideas within a team; and creation of an artifact for presentation (Blumenfeld et al., 1991). A project-based learning assignment requires a problem that organizes or drives the work and culminates in a final product—in this case, a fashion show. The framework by Blumenfeld et al., has been used in research ranging from online technology use (Ravitz & Blazevski, 2014) to sustainability (Wiek, Xiong, Brundiers & van der Leeuw (2014). However, the application of the framework to textiles and apparel pedagogy is rare.

Project Description: Students enrolled in a merchandising/promotions course participated in the project-based learning assignment. Between August and December 2014, students were assigned to organize, promote, produce, and execute a fashion show with the theme *Discovery:*

Conservation. Being supported through the Importer Support Program by Cotton, Incorporated, this project showcased student design and merchandising projects. Participants ($n = 34$) were divided into committees and tasked to elect a chair, to establish regular meetings, and to divide the labor among the members. The committees established were budget, facilities (plan and stage the production), personnel (recruit and manage volunteers, including models), products (recruit and manage student designers and establish project-submission procedures), and promotions (market and promote the event). After the event, students completed reflection exercises, which asked them to evaluate themselves and team members and to offer advice on the project overall.

Qualitative Analysis: Student reflection papers included six prompts (questions) related to their reflection on the assignment, including: (a) What were your personal accomplishments? (b) List

positive feedback would you give about each team member. (c) List negative feedback for each team member. (d) Evaluate each team member A – F. (e) Advice you would give to someone in your role next year. (f) Overall assessment of the project related to learning and instruction. In overall personal and team assessment, the major themes across committees were communication and availability. Responses indicated the critical importance and demand for increased communication among team members. Responses indicated that without open group communication, making decisions was often difficult, and meetings were not efficient. Inclusion in communications was referenced by attendance at meetings and availability outside of regularly scheduled class times. An alternate theme related to communication was the leadership skills needed to effectively participate as a committee member. Some recurring responses included leadership traits, such as organization, communication, idea sharing, attendance, attention to detail, and a positive attitude—especially during stressful situations. Among responses related to project reflection, the primary theme was time management. This was evident in responses on advice for future students and reflection on the instruction and overall project assessment. Universally, responses indicate a critical need for participants to manage time effectively and not to waste opportunities to meet or communicate early in the process. Sub-themes among the suggestions included attention to detail in scheduling and planning; developing an effective means for communicating schedule dates and times; managing personal expectations within time constraints; and providing a substantial time commitment outside the classroom for successful project completion. Hence, these results indicate that students engaged in a project-based learning activity, albeit a fashion show, are actively learning many of the soft skills necessary for success in the workplace, namely communication and time management.

Discussion: Many programs offer students the opportunity to produce and execute a fashion show as an extracurricular activity, as part of a student organization, or as part of a senior project. In this investigation, students reported a desire for more communication skills and highlighted the importance of communication for team dynamics. Additionally, students reported a critical need for time-management skills, which improved their personal skills in the process. In developing project-based learning activities, instructors provide students the opportunity to engage in a contextualized, realistic problem-solving environment. This bridges the gap between the classroom and real-life experiences and provides a fun and exciting project that increases engagement and awareness of professional soft-skills.

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