

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS IN INTERDISCIPLINARY LEARNING

Kate Schaefer and Melissa Gamble

Columbia College Chicago, Fashion Studies Department, kschaefer@colum.edu, mgamble@colum.edu

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ABSTRACT:

This paper explores whether experiential learning facilitates interdisciplinary thinking by exposing design students to the strategic needs of a fashion business. In order to teach students the critical thinking skills required to succeed in the workplace, Columbia College Chicago (CCC) has developed an integral partnership with the Chicago Fashion Incubator (CFI) at Macy's on State Street. Through experiential learning, graduating seniors at Columbia College Chicago work directly with a designer-in-residence at the Chicago Fashion Incubator. Students are required to use critical thinking and problem-solving skills to assess the strategic needs of the designer-in-residence and develop a plan to assist the designer in bringing the product line to market. Each student experience is as different as the emerging designer with which they are paired. These opportunities expose students to the varying facets necessary to launch a fashion business.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article provides an overview of the community partnership between the Fashion Studies Department at Columbia College Chicago and the Chicago Fashion Incubator. Two distinct theories are explored, arts integration and experiential learning, and how they facilitate learning and assist the fashion student in transitioning to a career in the industry by exposing them to the strategic needs of a fashion business.

Columbia College Chicago's (CCC) Fashion Studies Department takes a very practical and hands-on approach to learning the art, craft and business of fashion design. Through full-time and adjunct faculty, all of whom have significant experience in the fashion industry, students begin the process of learning about the design or business side of the industry. They learn skills in a classroom setting; class projects are directed at real-life applications and culminate in their senior year with a critical-thinking senior decision-making class, or capstone course, where they apply their skills to a real design-entrepreneur's business.

This capstone course utilizes elements of arts integration (also known as interdisciplinary learning) and experiential learning in order to transfer student learning from comprehension to analysis, application and problem-solving.

CCC works within the arts partnership framework to enhance the student learning experience. Arts partnerships are often involved in the integration processes, making the role of community central to the conversation about the focus and structure for the content of arts integration. (Burnaford 2007).

Graduating fashion business and fashion design students at CCC work directly with design-entrepreneurs at the Chicago Fashion Incubator (CFI). Students and designers work collaboratively to apply coursework from previous and/or concurrent classes to real-world situations, enabling students to connect learning outcomes to careers and real-world problems, resulting in not only experiential learning, but also an integrated learning experience for both disciplines.

Through this partnership, students begin to rely on a process of discovery, development, skill acquisition, and evaluation as they work together to solve a series of problems. The onus lies on each student to develop skills such as leadership, decision making, and problem solving. These skills are learned through the integration of course curriculum in their design-entrepreneur's business. (Gollins, Paisley, Sibthorp and Gookin 2011).

The Chicago Fashion Incubator provides six emerging designers with the resources, workspace, showroom, curriculum, technologies and mentoring to grow their business and establish networks in the community. These designers-in-residence are accepted into the program following an application process. They then spend one year completing an intensive curriculum that combines workshops in a classroom setting as well as real-life application on everything from sourcing materials and production to developing and implementing a marketing plan and distribution channel; these opportunities assist designers in the transition from academia to the industry. Through mentorships, events, and developing industry contacts, the design-entrepreneurs have the opportunity to showcase their lines at local events, meetings with buyers, and fashion shows to gain exposure as they launch their own company.

CCC students and the CFI designers work as part of a team to address the needs of these emerging designers who have just graduated from design school and have been in business 0-3 years.

The capstone course is challenging for students, as the learning process in academia is typically structured; course expectations are methodically outlined for students. Assignments have clearly defined due dates and students have the opportunity plan accordingly. However, as an entrepreneur, roles and responsibilities vary from hour to hour, day to day. Designers are required to fill every role in their nascent organization. They are the designers, product developers, marketers, accountants, public relations staff and much more. Prioritization and the ability to recognize business needs and issues are keys to success.

The learning approach, collaboration, and the immersion in an existing design business allows students to develop the critical thinking skills required to succeed in the workplace. When working directly with the design-entrepreneurs, students are forced to learn the importance of flexibility and adaptability in the workplace. Additionally, both designers and students are provided the opportunity to learn key business skills through integrated and experiential learning processes. Through experiential learning, students are immersed in the business of their chosen design-entrepreneur.

2. THE THEORETICAL BASIS

Experiential learning theory (ELT) defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience"(Sternberg and Zhang 2000). The theory is called "Experiential Learning" to emphasize the central role that experience plays in the learning process, an emphasis that distinguishes ELT from other learning theories. (Sternberg and Zhang 2000).

The learning environment in an experiential education "classroom" is supremely different than the traditional classroom setting; these differences play an important role in the application of course material as well as individual intellectual development. In a traditional classroom setting, students

are on the receiving end of "well-structured" problems that have definitive answers; class time is spent assessing these situations in order to reach a final determinant. In contrast, the experiential classroom, in which students split time between the classroom and the industry, presents "ill-structured" problems in which there is no definitive solution. In order to facilitate the learning process, ill-structured problems require students to navigate between more or less feasible solutions. At the CFI, students and designers must also work within the constraints of limited time and budgetary restrictions. (Kitchener and King 1990).

As one method of facilitating the problem-solving of these ill-structured problems and understanding issues present in a separate discipline, arts integration is used to assist the teamwork among fashion students and the fashion designers.

Arts integrated learning has many different definitions, all relating in some way to interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary learning. However, one literature review created categories that encompass the various definitions including: (i) "arts integration as learning 'through' and 'with' the arts"; (ii) "arts integration as a curricular connections process"; and (iii) "arts integration as a collaborative engagement." (Burnaford 2007).

Both the fashion designers and fashion students are able to comprehend, apply and problem-solve more challenging concepts in the business areas by applying them to a design business and design process.

3. THE PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Regardless of the importance of arts integration, industry professionals confess that "despite years of talk, the higher-education and industry sectors of the United States still don't collaborate enough to ensure that students are adequately prepared for jobs" (Gonzalez 2011). The city of Chicago, and its partners, recognized this gap between academia and the industry, and created the CFI to break down these barriers by allowing CCC students to work directly with members of the industry in a workspace housed in Macy's on State Street in Chicago.

It is of paramount importance to integrate the wants and needs of a fledging design-entrepreneur who is working to create a viable design business with course curriculum in a capstone course because design students receive little to no exposure to business coursework while pursuing their degree. According to 4 out of the 5 designers-in-residence surveyed, they received no business education or exposure to business issues prior to graduating from design school (Personal interviews), supporting the idea that the framework for students to understand how to use their designs to support a business is virtually non-existent. The ability to market oneself or manage a team is rarely addressed; design coursework is focused around design, construction and pattern making, with little regard for marketing, branding, costing, and small business ownership. Therefore, upon graduation, these very students are unaware of how to support the business of their designs. Their time in academia has not prepared them for the industry in which they are embarking upon.

According to Designer-In-Residence, Nora del Busto:

The Incubator acted as the missing component of my design education. Before the Incubator, I did not understand the production cycle of the garment industry...especially how it works here in Chicago. The curriculum was more helpful than what I learned in school because it was tailored to small business owners in Chicago. Everything I learned about production in design school was about big corporations that manufacture everything overseas. The Incubator curriculum was definitely more relevant to my needs. The curriculum at the Incubator impacted my design process by opening my eyes as to how much time I would actually need to produce a line. I was completely oblivious as to how many "hats" I would wear in addition to being a designer! Designing for mass production is definitely different than for design school, and it was a lesson quickly learned at the Incubator." (Personal Interview 2011).

In order to expose graduating students to the very situations they will face in the real world, CCC fashion students spend their graduating semester working with a designer-in-residence at CFI to bring each designers' products to the marketplace. Rather than emulate real-life situations, CCC students are active participants in the industry. Their semester project is determined based on the

needs of their chosen design-entrepreneur. They may develop a profile of the designer's target market, create merchandising plans, assist the designers with costing, resolving fit issues, develop branding concepts and materials or ideas for future growth of the business. Utilizing the Project-Based Learning (PBL) teaching model, students work on interdisciplinary projects, investigating, problem-solving and making relevant decisions for the design business (Thomas 2000).

These projects are built around the intersection of topics from two or more disciplines (design and business) and involve the transformation and construction of knowledge (by definition: new understandings, new skills) on the part of students (Bereiter and Scardamalia 1999). Fashion business and fashion design students rely on their expansive yet differing coursework to inform and transform the learning experiences of one another.

In the spirit of self-selection, each semester the partnership between students and designers begins with round-robin interviews in which the designers-in-residence and students interview one another about company and personal mission statements, vision, goals, skills and experiences. At the end of the interviews, groups of 2-3 students are paired with each designer-in-residence. For the duration of the semester, class meetings are divided between the CFI and the classroom. This structure allows the students and designers to participate in a collaborative effort to assess the strategic needs of the emerging designer and develop projects that address particular issues the designer identifies to the team. These could be marketing or merchandising plans, costing analysis, sales plans for buyer outreach, or any other issues the designers needs to help move their nascent business forward. These opportunities expose students to the varying aspects of launching a fashion business.

Each student experience is as different as the emerging designer with whom they are paired. Although the learning outcomes for each student are the same, the weekly projects and assignments differ from student to student; these projects are a culmination of the wants and needs of the designers-in-residence as well as the skills and talents brought forth from each student. To some degree, the projects are student-driven but most certainly incorporate real-life challenges. Projects are not outlined in the course syllabus, but rather are created as the semester progresses. These ill-structured problems challenge students to think about any number of roadblocks and hurdles they may be faced with in their own fashion business. The benefit is that they are faced with these challenges as part of the 'classroom' learning process, where the ramifications are much less expensive and less far-reaching than when faced with these same challenges in their own design business (Thomas 2000).

According to CFI Executive Director Lara Miller, "I have seen the curriculum at CFI very strongly influence and impact the designers' design process all three years. The largest impact on their designs and on their process has been the calendar, the marketing plan, and the product development/costing workshops. The designers did not have a sense of how to design their garments based on their target market, especially based on what their target market is willing to pay until they took the various marketing plan and costing workshops." (Personal Interview 2011).

Graduating seniors at Columbia College Chicago rely upon coursework in areas such target market (fashion business) and costing (fashion design) as well as critical thinking and problem-solving skills to assist their emerging design-entrepreneur in bringing their products to the marketplace.

"The two semesters (Spring and Fall) are very different, however, both are very important, I feel, for both the designers and for the students. Whether the designers are able to see the immediate effects, I feel the collaboration provides the designers with a stronger vision for their marketing plans and overall brand vision. At times this is because they become more aware of their visions as the students present ideas that they hadn't thought of. At other times it is that what the students have presented is so not what their vision is, that it helps to further solidify their initial concepts" (Lara Miller Interview 2011).

Immersing business and design students in a collaborative effort is imperative because "almost all the examples of project-based learning attempt to capitalize on the successes of cooperative or collaborative learning in some manner" (Marx 1997).

4. CONCLUSION

The disciplines of business and design are symbiotic and lend themselves to not only project-based learning but also integration. According to the Harvard Interdisciplinary Studies Project, there are

three core factors that indicate quality in interdisciplinary work. First, “have the appropriate disciplines been selected and are the concepts used in accurate ways?” This factor is also referred to as “disciplinary grounding.” Second, does “Integrated Leverage” exist? “Is there a new understanding that would not have been possible using a single discipline?” Finally, “does the integrative learning withstand critique?” This last factor is referred to as “critical stance” (Mansilla 2004).

The fashion design and business sides of the industry are two very different sides of the same coin. They are interdependent and require some fundamental learning on both sides in order to be successful.

Disciplinary grounding exists with the partnership between the Chicago Fashion Incubator and Columbia College Chicago as students apply the business and design disciplines they have learned in their respective curriculum in a real tangible way to support and enable a start-up fashion business within the industry.

Integrated leverage can be found in the learning of the designers about the business side of their industry which begins to shape their design process around the fashion calendar, their target market and how to cost their goods to allow a successful business to take root. The business students gain a new understanding of how to communicate with designers as well as the needs or requirements of designers in order to execute their craft. The last factor applied to this partnership is critical stance. Fifteen of the eighteen alumni of the Chicago Fashion Incubator continue in the fashion business with their brands. Their businesses are based in the Chicago market, and a community has developed around the partnerships created between the designers and the students, each group beginning to understand the value the other brings to their business (Lara Miller Interview 2011).

CCC’s partnership began during the research and development phase of the CFI as students spent their graduating semester working alongside city and industry professionals to research and identify the needs emerging fashion designers in the city of Chicago. Three years later, their efforts came to fruition when the current Chicago Fashion Incubator (CFI) was launched in 2008. With the growing success of CFI, Columbia College Chicago’s involvement continues to evolve. Students now work directly with the designers-in-residence to help grow his/her nascent business. Where the partnership was once strictly a research component, students are now an integral component of the emerging business.

The CFI model has been so successful that San Francisco recently launched the Fashion Incubator San Francisco at Macy’s Union Square (FISF) and another incubator based on the Chicago-model is scheduled to open in Philadelphia in 2012.

As educational theorist, John Dewey, stated, “The principle of continuity in its educational application means, nevertheless, that the future has to be taken into account at every stage of the educational process.” For the decision-making students at Columbia College Chicago, the continuity of their curriculum and experiences sets the stage for their transition into the industry with a look forward to their own careers through the lens of the designers of the Chicago Fashion Incubator.

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