

REVOLUTION RETOLD: classroom to real world

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Abstract

Revolution RETOLD is a project that aimed to create real-world learning opportunities for students to solve sustainability and collaboration challenges in the fashion industry using a School of Fashion's retail store located in the USA. The project's purpose was to revitalize the School of Fashion's retail store by addressing a need for sustainable practices, experiential marketing and create a conversation around a new era of retail and manufacturing through collaboration from design and merchandising students, outside majors, and the local community. The School of Fashion Store Learning Lab course was developed, and 15 students decided upon a theme Revolution, to coincide with an important event within the local community and university. The students developed a concept and trend board to enable hosting an open buy day calling for theme-related submissions including apparel items, garments, illustrations, retail experiences, visual displays, technology, and advertising campaigns. Key items bought for the store focused on more sustainable manufacturing processes such as upcycling, zero-waste patternmaking, and local labor. Research producing tangible, shareable outcomes was conducted throughout the semester. This included weekly working reports, peer evaluations, self- reflections, and concept ideation/prototyping descriptions. Field work with students (i.e. sales reports, store traffic etc.) and future plans for the store (i.e. virtual reality, experiential retailing, workshops, etc.) on a daily basis was expected to determine outcomes that benefit advancement of curriculum for the Learning Lab course and for future involvement from other areas in terms of collaboration inside and outside of the classroom. Findings indicate the impact of student learning through enhanced negotiation and communication skills, real world applicable insights, as well as impact on empathy and understanding of critical thought and awareness of self and others.

Introduction

According to over twenty-five years of research on generational change in the workplace, Tulgan (2015) has seen the soft skills gap with younger generations exponentially growing in recent years. Soft skills can be identified as “interpersonal qualities, also known as people skills, and personal attributes that one possesses” (Robles, 2012: p. 453). As highly collaborative students continue to become more valued in the workplace, it is becoming critical for higher education to develop learning environments that foster teamwork, communication, critical thinking, and creative problem solving in groups. Based on observations, students in both design and merchandising seem to have limited experience in academia to apply soft skills such as negotiating, working towards a common goal, and problem solving as reflected in industry practice. These observations are further supported by Chi, Liu, Salusso and McCracken (2018) who found that recent college graduates and corporate recruiters feel students are not thoroughly prepared for industry standards of leadership, communication, and problem-solving skills.

Higher education institutions are often siloed in traditional learning systems where students can become isolated within their major. According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities survey of employers, “many companies are seeking candidates who possess excellent communication and teamwork skills as well as a demonstrated ability to think critically and solve complex problems” (Hart Research Associates, 2015: n.p.); “Higher education traditionally resists such endeavors, which can largely be attributed to the role of departments, disciplinary silos, and bureaucratic administrative structures.” (Harris, 2010: p.22). Evidence of the importance of collaboration for students in higher education is increasing, as “The majority of college graduates are confident in the level of their abilities, while in reality their skills fall short of employer expectations.” (Stewart, Wall and Marciniak, 2016: p. 276). According to Krskova, Wood, Breyer and Baumann (2020), “In our digital 21st century, work demands a different set of skills than that of our industrial past. Educational institutions need to do more to help students both complete tertiary education and be ready for a future that will require continual learning. This chapter presents a case for improving non-cognitive skills, and particularly discipline, to achieve these and other goals. Evidence for the positive impact of non-cognitive skills is growing.” (p. 265). This student-centered approach focuses on learning development through a collaborative engaged activity. The purpose of this research is to engage design and merchandising students in a project that situates them in a real-world scenario to practice specific soft skills relating to critical thinking, problem-solving, and negotiation to achieve a cohesive apparel collection.

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Methodology

Professors from both merchandising and design connected their students in a hands-on project to provide an opportunity to apply soft skills along with specialized, developed knowledge from their specific majors. The School of Fashion Store Learning Lab course was developed, and 15 upper-level undergraduate students from both design and merchandising majors enrolled for the fall 2019 semester. In the course the students decided upon a theme Revolution, to coincide with an important event within the local community and university taking place in the spring 2020 semester. The students hosted a buy day calling for theme-related submissions from faculty and students around the community and campus in which apparel items, garments, illustrations, retail experiences, visual displays, technology, and advertising campaigns were collected and shopped publicly so that anyone on the campus could take part in voting on items for the store. Key items bought for the store focused on more sustainable manufacturing processes such as upcycling, zero-waste patternmaking, and local labor. For example, denim products were upcycled with a laser cut pattern by a junior design student. The students then continued to curate the collection and set up the store unveiling to be sold and available the next semester.

Students were asked to create merchandise and market an innovative and sustainable clothing collection for the School of Fashion Store. Students were to be the change agents in this vision and meeting the goals of unveiling a new collection in the Store for the upcoming spring 2020 semester. Student goals and outcomes were as follows: 1) Develop leadership skills including problem-solving, creative thinking and task delegation. 2) Develop collaborative skills and effective communication to successfully complete tasks in group settings. 3) Develop a vision and strategy for the upcoming season of the School of Fashion Store. 4) Analyze the School of Fashion Store's successes and failures to find ways to increase sales and traffic flow. 5) Address factors required in running a successful retail store including customer, budget, product, services and merchandising 6) Apply learned skills that address needs for marketing and manufacturing the vision of the upcoming season for the School of Fashion Store. This may include product development, tech pack and patterning development, sourcing, visual merchandising, event planning and advertising.

Roles and responsibilities were indicated by the professors and students chose their preference based on backgrounds and skill sets. See table 1.

Roles	Responsibilities
Editor in Chief / Creative Director	Management of Groups/vision, final magazine
Product Design Management:	Sampling, Tech Design, Patternmaking, Sourcing, Quality Control, Communication with the School of Fashion's Collaborative Fashion Production course
Communications	Advertising, Social Media Marketing, Brand Management
Store Planning and Design	Visual Merchandising, Store Layout, Product Placement, Logistics for Events
Buying	Organize Buy Day, Management/Follow up of submissions and Final Buys, Sourcing, Quality Control, Merchandising, Analyzing Sales Reports and Creating, Overview next semester, Management/Follow up of submissions and Final Buys
Outreach	Public Relations, Fundraising, Community, Events, Getting Traffic to the Store, Sponsored Inquiries

Table 1. Roles and Responsibilities

There were three phases to the project which indicated how the course would progress regarding the responsibilities.

PHASE 1: Planning Concept (Week 1-3)

Group 1: Trend Forecasting Group 2: Concept Design

Within Phase one, the concept of the line was determined as well as the keywords, color story, and name of the line. See image 1.



Figure 1. Revolution RETOLD Trend Board

Group	Goals
Product Design Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Come up with textile & detail samples to inspire Buy Submissions - Develop ideas to update core products - Communication with Collaborative Fashion Production course to determine production timeline and execution - Exploring the school for existing leftover materials and trying to identify new material sources

Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Advertising for Buy Day - Communicate season concept to School of Fashion classes - Developing a visual identity for season concept - Researching and brainstorming new marketing strategies
Store Planning and Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Develop visual merchandising concepts - Mockup window display ideas - Prepare store layout and space planning
Buying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communicate season concept to School of Fashion classes - Organize buy day event - Management/Follow up of submissions and final buys - Work with curatorial committee on selections and costing
Outreach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Get traffic to the store - Track and participate in local and university events - Develop new strategies for awareness of the store - Creating a press kit for the new season concept & reveal event / workshop / Experience
	Planning an event / workshop / experience for the season reveal

Table 2. PHASE 2: Planning & Development (Week 4-9)

Group	Goals
Product Design Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Editing and communicate techpacks & patterns for Buy Day selected submissions with Collaborative Fashion Production - Apply potential sampling and sourcing investigations to Buy Day and core products - Evaluate quality of products with Buyers

Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Planning all social media posts through Hootsuite - Advertising and marketing the upcoming reveal event - Implementing visual identity in all communication
Store Planning and Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Implementing window display and store floor plan - Working with buyers to develop planograms - Deciding on logistics for reveal event
Buyer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Supporting planogram development and merchandising of store floorplan - Analyzing sales reports and creating overview including possible new products and/or removal of any current offerings for the next semester - Evaluate quality of products with Products Design Management
Outreach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Public Relations, Collaboration, Community, Event - Executing event / workshop / experience for the season reveal - Distributing the press kit to local and university media outlets

Table 3. PHASE 3: Production & Implementation (Week 10-15)

A final magazine was developed, organized, and submitted by the editor in chief of the course. A reveal day was promoted and planned to include local industry representatives, alumni, and current students and faculty to attend.

Throughout the course there were three job reflections that the students completed to help them think through the process and their roles within the bigger picture of the store and the course. Questions included strengths and weaknesses, challenges, struggles, communication problem solving, and evolution of self within the entire course and in their individual teams. For example, “What do you see as a strength/challenge of the entire team in this course?” and “What is a strength/challenge you've had in working with your team. Describe a situation where you were able to help solve a challenge or contribute in a unique way.” Additionally, it was asked about their own strengths and weaknesses and performance within their roles as a team

and as an individual. For example, “What is one strength/challenge that you had coming into this semester? How has that evolved/changed/developed?”

Findings and Discussion

Research producing tangible, shareable outcomes was conducted throughout the semester. This included journalism, weekly working reports, peer evaluations, and concept ideation/prototyping descriptions. Field work with students being in and out of the daily inner workings (i.e. sales reports, store traffic etc.) and future plans for the store (i.e. virtual reality, experiential retailing, workshops, etc.) on a daily basis it was expected to determine outcomes that benefit advancement of curriculum for our Learning Lab course and for future involvement from other areas in terms of collaboration inside and outside of the classroom. Student success was measured through the shareable outcomes mentioned earlier, student reflections and a final magazine of the entire process and showcasing what was offered in the store for the Revolution RETOLD season.

The two professors involved in the collaboration (one design and one merchandising) looked at the information and data collected from the semester long project including the weekly working reports, self-reflections of the participants, and course evaluations to individually code the data and then come back for a final discussion and dissemination of findings. These findings were dissected into main themes from the two perspectives.

Findings from this project have shown to impact student learning in a variety of applicable ways. Students strengthened communication skills with those outside of their close discipline and practiced negotiation skills between varied perspectives to create a cohesive apparel collection. Students gained a broader understanding of their unique roles in the fashion industry through an applied real-world project. Through the three assigned job reports, peer evaluations, and a final discussion with the students who took part in the experience, a number of outcomes and learning points were determined including overall self-awareness regarding strengths and weaknesses. A final magazine/catalogue of the line was also developed (see image 2 and see here for entire magazine <https://www.flipsnack.com/revolutionretold/revolution-retold-magazine.html>).



Figure 2. Final Magazine

Below are the three main themes found by the two lead professors of the project based from their individual perspectives of the experience and the findings from the course work and final evaluations (see figure 3). Examples of student responses regarding each theme is also provided.

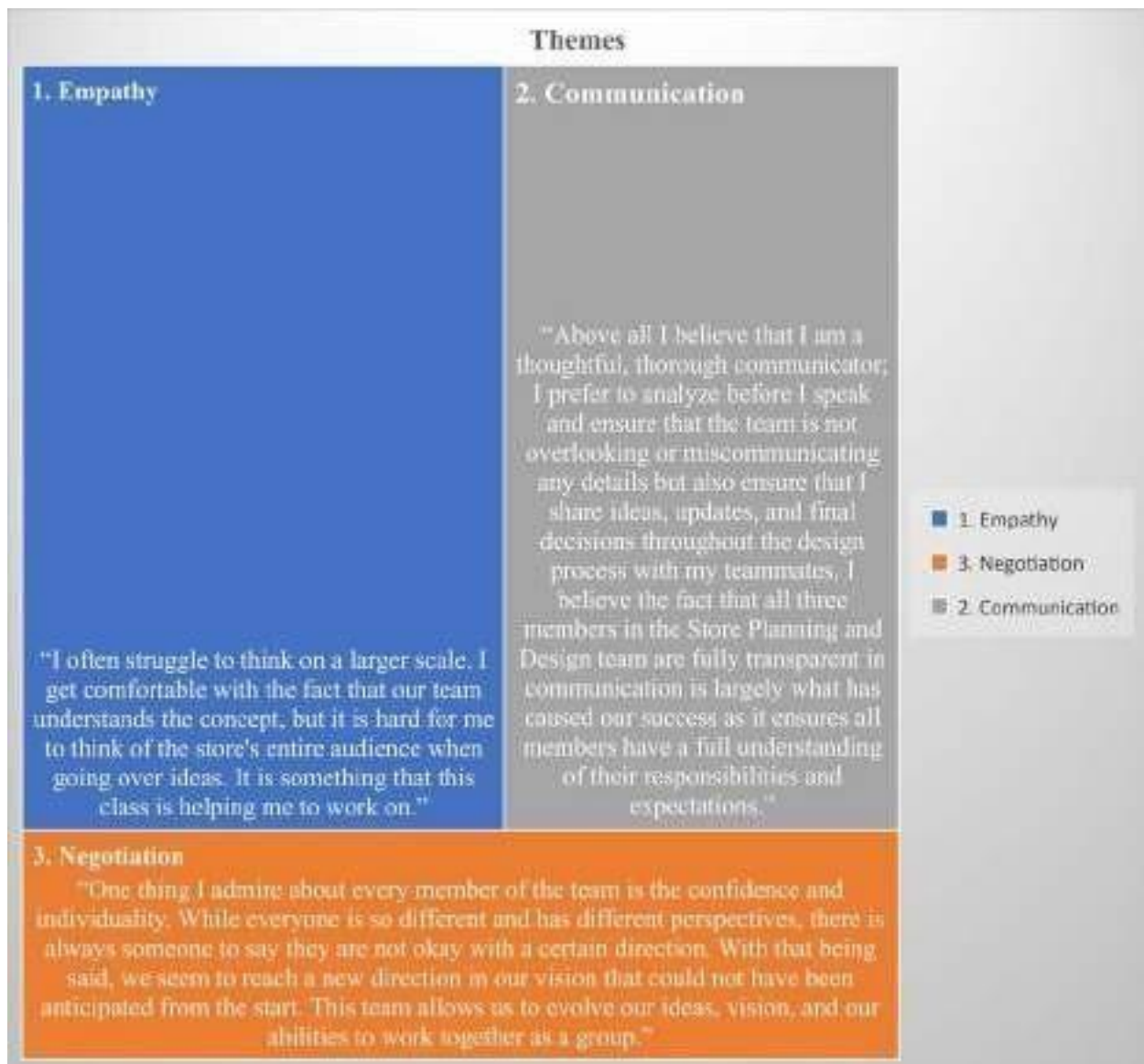


Figure 3. Themes of Research Findings

Empathetic Perspective

Overall the students showcased more empathy throughout the applied experience based on giving and receiving feedback and understanding differing opinions based on the lens of the entire class working together towards a common goal. One student stated, "This class so far has been great in preparation for the real world in industry. I love that we were able to use a real-life store and see all the behind the scenes not only on our own team but in discussion of the other teams." And another, "I've always been good at working with other people and this class has made that skill even stronger by working in more uncomfortable situations." Finally, "One weakness I had coming into this semester was that I didn't necessarily trust others with work so I would double check everything but this semester there's so much to do and I feel that we were all on a greater level of our academics where we have a greater sense of the fashion world. Also

working with the design team has had me become more trusting because it's not an area where I'm an expert in as they are."

Being able to have empathy allowed them to also have the space to recognize where their strengths and weaknesses lie in knowledge and application within the industry. Once they could become more self-aware, they able to process further understanding of self and be able to attempt to apply that in collaboration and communication in the smaller teams and as a larger group. This leads to the second themes found within the findings, communication.

Communication Skills

Overall students indicated that their communication skills were tested and evolved over the course of the experience. They better understood how to speak up and how to talk with people from different skill sets and backgrounds.

One student stated, "As a strength, I see many of the students in this course giving and receiving criticism and opinions in a positive manner." And another indicated, "I have always had good communication skills; however, I feel as if I've really developed them this semester. I have been able to talk to people higher up with me, finding ways to email people professionally, as well as be focused on the task at hand."

Again, "A weakness that I had coming into the semester was speaking my mind. I think I have become more comfortable not only with my new group but with the class as well. "And finally, "One weakness I had at the beginning of the semester was definitely my inability to articulate my ideas in a way that people with different areas of knowledge can understand. So far, over the course of the semester, I feel that I have become more confident with sharing my ideas, and having class with people from merchandising, who have different areas of knowledge, has given me direction to begin to figure out how best to share my knowledge."

The students needed to understand themselves through communication before it could be applied to the final finding of the study, negotiating skills.

Negotiation Skills

Due to the participants better understanding of their own communication skills and their peer's manner in communicating and providing a safe place for people to indicate their personal and professional opinions students learned how better to negotiate and choose when to speak up. They were able to process what was most important to them and find ways to find for their values in the project. They understood they had to be a voice for their smaller teams in a larger conversation. This was reiterated weekly to encourage everyone to check in with their smaller teams and then report back to the larger group as a whole. Over time they refined their ability to use their communication skills effectively to make change.

For example, one participant indicated, "Since I know that we are still working out the timeline and divvying up of tasks for the course, I think one of our strengths as a class is being candid

about our opinions and ideas. In addition, when there is pushback, it has been mutually respectful. The members of our class are able to give and take constructive criticism without being defensive, which adds to the professional environment.” And another, “One weakness I had was voicing my opinion. Now I say what needs to be said and do not worry about what others say or think in the response because I stand firm in my opinion.”

Another indicated self-awareness saying, “One weakness of mine is that I always seem to prefer my own ideas as opposed to the ones of those around me (unfortunately!) This is still something I constantly struggle with in class especially when we enter large group discussions based on opinion and I am sure I have been spotted standing in the back looking unconvinced about final decisions we as a class have made on a few topics. However, this has been very valuable for me to feel this way and experience the results of decisions that I do not agree with because I have discovered something very important: the world does not end. Although I may not agree with a decision it has not caused the downfall of our campaign, or destroyed our credibility, or ruined the creative direction of the collection. As I enter the workforce many decisions will be made with which I disagree, so I am happy to be learning how to support my team and the success of a project despite disagreements. “

Finally, a participant indicated, “A weakness of mine is that I tend to want to take charge when working in groups. I become very excited and attached to my own ideas that I can be disappointed when decisions are left to others which at times slightly discourages me. However, within my small group I have learned that the solution to this issue is open-minded collaboration a shared standard of quality. I believe one of my greatest strengths as a team member is recognizing the details and inner workings required of a plan and analyzing the feasibility and potential success. For instance, after my teammate explained her ideas for the store planogram, I noticed several spacial practicality issues and we mildly edited the design to be more shop-able.”

Overall, the students understood better their own strengths and weaknesses and were able to apply those to the situation in meaningful ways.

Conclusion

This project emphasized the importance of collaboration between both design and merchandising in the fashion industry to create a well-targeted and cohesive apparel collection that would be on sale to the local community. This type of experience has been lacking in earlier research. The learning environment utilized a cooperative project to provide a real-world experience calling for students to navigate the complex challenges that come with this type of collaboration. While the project was not without challenges, this experience facilitated the learning process in an impactful way. This project will hopefully be implemented in upcoming semesters (-post renovations).

Overall it was found that students found it difficult in the beginning to begin to have those harder conversations with their peers but over time and through practice found it easier to implement constructive criticism in areas of concern to them. Through becoming connected to

the vision for the collection, design of product, buying of product, production, space allocation, and marketing the students developed ownership and more passion to speak up and make a case from their individual points of view. Also, over time the participants understood their personalities and better how to approach diverse groups with conflicting issues or differing opinions. They learned how to speak up for themselves but support their ideas and opinions with reasoning to negotiate with the opposing side.

In terms of the course content, most suggested revisions from students focused on more detailed calendars and clarifying responsibilities of each representative team member. Student feedback has also resulted in a detailed collaboration packet for the project addressing each stage and to help aid with follow through of expectations. Finally, this project has positive implications for preparing students for collaboration in the industry, specifically product development. The project has addressed the growth within product development positions in the industry and linked both design and merchandising through the process. The presentation of this project includes visuals of the final magazine and the physical store space. This would be an interesting collaboration within an online retail space to bring technology, logistics, and website management to the study.

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