Effective Learning Strategies in the History of Dress

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Many undergraduates have trepidation about survey of history courses.¹ Student fears and occasional complaints may be based on the traditional methods of teaching survey courses, specifically the exclusive use of lectures, multiple-choice exams, and term papers for instruction and assessment.² These instructor-centered approaches are convenient and use class time efficiently, but they do not actively engage students in the discovery of knowledge; prerequisites for meaningful learning environments.³

In contrast, learning-centered approaches actively involve students directly in course material. Learner-centered materials encourage students to gather and synthesize information and integrate it with the general skills of inquiry, communication, critical thinking, and problem solving. These are all necessary skills in the unpredictable global work-environments that many undergraduate students will experience in future careers.⁴ Learning strategies that foster active engagement with course material have been associated with greater retention and future application of the subject, the development of intrinsic motivation, and positive attitudes towards continued learning.⁵ Furthermore, experiential learning strategies are particularly useful in large courses in order to promote deeper, longer-lasting learning.⁶

According to educational psychology, optimal learning occurs when students are interested in the subject matter, are motivated with challenging
learning opportunities, and when immersed in atmospheres that make learning enjoyable. Significant learning experiences in well-designed college courses utilize active forms of learning and provide a structured sequence of activities including lecture, discussions, small groups, and writing that support diverse learning styles and goals.

Learner-centered instruction is principally rooted in the constructivist learning theory. It has gained particular traction in education fields and is most often associated with the work of John Dewey. Constructivism refers to the idea that learners construct knowledge through active thought, interest, and meaning making. According to constructivists, successful learning occurs when the content studied has meaning and purpose to the learners, the students are engaged as planners and primary drivers of the learning process, and the teacher acts as facilitator to guide the students’ acquisition of knowledge. Meaning making often occurs through the process of talking and sharing ideas with peers and teachers.

The purpose of this study was to identify effective, learner-centered strategies in history of dress courses. This practice-driven study was framed by attempts by national organizations to reinvigorate the teaching of history and make its content more meaningful to students. The research questions that guided the study were: “What learning activities allowed for a greater understanding of the subject; encouraged students to work hard to understand the material; encouraged students to think, to learn, and to gain a greater interest in the subject matter?” and “What were student perceptions of these methods?” Criteria for effectiveness included student self-reported learning outcomes, instructor observations, and end-of-term course evaluation comments.

Literature Review

Learner-Centered Paradigm

Insights gained through the scholarly study of teaching suggest that environments and activities that actively engage students as collaborators in the learning process are more effective than passive learning styles. In the learner-centered paradigm, teaching methods directly involve students in the discovery of knowledge; enable students to relate their own experiences to materials taught; and feature opportunities for cooperative learning. Prior knowledge is transformed into a deeper understanding and interest in the subject.

In the learner-centered paradigm, students are responsible for their own learning. These environments are often perceived by students as being more difficult, moving at a faster pace, and requiring a heavier workload. However, many students demand these engaging experiences in which
they can demonstrate new skill acquisition. According to Barr and Tagg, “The learning paradigm requires a constant search for new structures and methods that work best for student learning and success, and expects even these to be designed continually and to evolve over time.”

The History of Dress Courses

The researcher’s apparel program offers two undergraduate history courses: a survey course with content from ancient times to the 20th century offered every fall semester, and a 20th-century history of fashion course offered every spring semester. Students meet during the 3-credit hour courses twice per week for a total of 150 minutes, with the stated expectation that readings and projects will require at least an additional three to five hours per week. Both courses have a particular emphasis on European and North American clothing, fulfilling the university’s diversity requirement. Prerequisites for the courses include three credits in history or art history because of the predominance of visual images. The survey course is available for non-major graduate credit and the 20th-century fashion course is offered for major graduate credit. About 72 students from several departments, including textiles and clothing, business, art and design, and journalism regularly enroll in these classes. The classes are particularly valuable as students learn to understand and decipher images and symbols, building their repertoire of visual knowledge for future use.

Learning Strategies

The four learning strategies utilized in the courses included enhanced lectures, artifact analyses, annotated citations, and student choice projects. They were created or adapted by the instructor to meet the National Council for History Standards guidelines. These standards include, “awareness of, appreciation for, and the ability to utilize a variety of sources of evidence from which historical knowledge is achieved, including written documents, oral tradition, popular culture, literature, artifacts, art and music, historical sites, photographs, and films.” The following sections include a discussion of the literature justifying selection of the strategies and a description of each strategy:

Enhanced lecture. Lectures are a traditional teaching technique that can provide material not otherwise available to large audiences of students. Lectures present little risk for students and further appeal to auditory learners. The fifty to seventy minutes of teacher talk is criticized, however, because of its inability to engage students actively with course material, its failure to provide instructors with feedback concerning the extent of student learning, and the de-emphasis on complex, abstract
material. Lectures are also not suited for engagement with higher orders of thinking such as application, analysis, synthesis, or evaluation of course content.

The use of active learning strategies within the lecture format can greatly improve the traditional lecture. Bonwell described enhanced lectures as, “a series of short, mini-lectures punctuated by specific active learning events designed to meet course objectives … The enhanced lecture can fall anywhere on the active learning continuum depending on the complexity and frequency of the strategies used.” Enhanced lecture strategies can foster greater participation, superior retention of material, and enhanced perception of the meaningfulness of the course.

Forms of enhanced lecture utilized in the history of dress courses included pauses after ten to fifteen minutes of lecture to allow students to compare notes with a fellow student—the think-pair-share strategy, in which students wrote an individual response to an instructor-posed question, discussed their comments with a partner, and then shared their answers with a larger group of students or the entire class. To appeal to auditory and visual learners, the instructor also enhanced lectures with images of dress from the period, including selected clips of past and current movies in which students were asked to critique the historical accuracy of the dress; music and television shows from the various eras housed on YouTube; audio clips relating to class content from National Public Radio; and short, photocopies of one- to two-page primary documents from the different periods of course content. The instructor also invited a period costume re-enactor to dress in late nineteenth-century attire in front of the class—from her undergarments of chemise and drawers to outer wrap. In addition to these strategies, at the end of most lectures, students were encouraged to respond with written responses to prompts such as, “Sketch or draw three inspirations from today’s content,” “What was the most significant thing that you have learned in class today?” or “From which topic that we discussed today would you most like to further research?” These responses were sometimes shared between students or collected by the instructor, but not always.

More complex forms of enhanced lecture included the use of constructive controversies regarding two relevant course ideas: design piracy and the future of haute couture or exclusive fashion. In the constructive controversy format, students were provided with primary source materials and worked together in groups of two to create pro- or con- positions regarding these concepts. After fifteen minutes of preparation, students joined four-person teams to debate their position. After fifteen minutes of this activity, students switched positions, debated their points, and finally came to a group consensus which was then shared with the entire class.
The constructive controversy format presented in Johnson, Johnson, & Smith has been shown to stimulate critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Enhanced lecture activities also included web-based discussion assignments in which students were asked to read and respond to questions and other students’ posts regarding selected primary source material housed on archive and museum websites such as the *Women’s and Social Movements in the United States 1600-2000 Index*, published by Alexander Street Press.

Artifact analysis. Material culture is the “manifestation of culture through material productions.” Material objects can be studied to discover “the beliefs, values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions of a particular community or society at a given time.” According to E. McClung Fleming, “there is an obvious, natural, universal fascination with the things [humanity] has made.” Because material culture reflects the social, political, economic, and technological characteristics of an era, it can strengthen the understanding of history and human behavior. For example, the transformation of feed and flour sacks into clothing demonstrated the great economic necessity and subsequent creativity of individuals during the Great Depression.

Researchers have written of the value of using actual historic dress artifacts within history of dress courses. These authors state that viewing artifacts allows the first-hand opportunity to examine fabrics, construction, embellishments, and general and specific garment silhouette details; can help students develop an enhanced appreciation of another era; can lead to an improved learning experience; and can support greater retention of course material. Experiences with classroom resources that engage multiple senses, (i.e., engaging students by viewing the object, lifting the object for weight, touching the fabric, hearing the sound the fabric makes when moved, etc.), can help make abstract concepts more concrete.

Within the history of dress courses, available artifacts were used in appropriate lessons to illustrate specific course content. Artifacts were displayed in the physical front and back portion of the classroom and students were periodically asked to comment on the ways in which the artifacts were indicative of the periods discussed during class time. Students were also provided with two separate class opportunities to engage in in-depth artifact analysis in which garments studied included the nineteenth century, the early twentieth century, and the late twentieth century. Students received training about how to handle artifacts, such as washing hands, wearing gloves, using of pencils rather than pens, and touching objects gently. All artifacts were in good to excellent condition and were sturdy enough to be handled by the students.
During the structured artifact analysis class meetings, students worked in groups of three to five each to identify, describe, examine, evaluate, analyze, and interpret the significance of specific garments. Students were provided with handouts derived from Fleming’s Model for Artifact Study that guided them through the process of studying an artifact. Representative questions related to history (“Describe any signs of ownership made to the garment”); material (“Describe the fabrics used
and identify the possible fibers”); construction (“examine the garment for evidence of hand or machine sewing”); design (“Sketch the front and back of the garment, and include measurements of length and width”); and function (“For what activities would the garment have been worn?”) Students were also asked to consider the relationship of the object to its culture and time period and interpret how the garment related to its possible wearer. Groups were formed with both apparel majors and non-majors to assist non-majors in proper identification of more technical aspects, such as fabric structure and fiber type.

**Annotated citations and discussions.** Writing-across-the-curriculum programs emerged in the 1980s as a response to a perceived deficiency in literacy among college students. These informal and formal programs included writing-to-learn activities, such as journaling, logs, and reflections as well as writing-in-the-discipline approaches, encouraging the writing of reports, articles, and research papers in discipline specific convention, language use, and writing styles.34 The philosophy underlying writing-across-the-curriculum programs was the idea that students can become more practiced at using writing as a communication and learning tool.35 College-level writing assignments help students develop necessary workplace skills such as effective synthesis and persuasive communication of ideas.36 Further, combined writing and reading assignments can lead to better reasoning and higher-level thinking than is achieved with either process alone.37

In the history of dress courses, the instructor assigned three annotated citations with in-class small group discussions. Students were instructed to read three scholarly journal articles about the history of dress and write annotated citations that included: proper citation of the article in APA or Chicago reference format; a 150-word annotation that evaluated the authority or background of the author, commented on the intended audience of the article, and summarized the theme of the article (see additional resources for examples of history of dress articles which the author used for student annotated citations). The annotation was followed by a 100- to 200-word paragraph that reflected how the students related the theme of the article to their educational and work experiences. Students also submitted a list of two to three questions derived from their careful reading of the article to be discussed with classmates. Student discussion leaders were selected by the instructor and e-mailed a list of five or six discussion prompts a week before the assignment was due. Students were placed into groups of six to ten to discuss the article. Discussion leaders started each small group discussion with an “ice-breaker” question and then led the discussion. After the small group discussion, leaders reported
one pertinent point from their small groups to the entire class assemblage. To provide an opportunity for many of the students in the class to assume a leadership role, the instructor selected both high achieving students as well as students that struggled, yet tried hard to learn course material.

Student choice projects. John Dewey viewed choice and student interest as interwoven and necessary conditions of educative experiences. To Dewey, student interest was central, that activities must “lay hold on… emotions and desires” and “offer an outlet for energy that means something to the individual.” Student interests needed to be stimulated, however, by teachers’ selection of appropriate learning opportunities. Dewey also

Figure 2: A student choice project, student drawings inspired by history. Permission from the student.
offered that not all choices in and of themselves were educative and that student choice needed to have a purpose, and that teachers’ responsibility was in helping students develop the end view.

Researchers have noted that collaborative classrooms in which students are encouraged to participate in the design and implementation of class materials leads to greater engagement and interest in course material, higher quality of learning, increased intrinsic motivation, improved problem solving skills, and more immediate immersion in the learning process.\textsuperscript{40} Collaborative assignments are designed to shift students from the role of “individual consumers of education to co-creators of a common life” in the classroom.\textsuperscript{41}

In the history of dress courses, students were asked to complete one project from a list of four possible project types: 1) primary or secondary research papers including oral history, 2) garment design or illustration inspired by history with an accompanying report, 3) detailed artifact analysis of at least three garments, and 4) inspired-by-history portfolios of current fashion designs and their historical antecedents (see Figures 1 and 2 for examples of student work). Students delivered the project in their choice from several formats: traditional term paper, created garment, electronic or paper portfolio, or website. The goal of the student choice project was for students to deepen their learning about methods of research and details about a selected subject in fashion history. Students were encouraged to select topics and presentation formats that demonstrated successful research, synthesis, analysis, and knowledge.\textsuperscript{42} One half of one class period was devoted to conducting research for the project and students were actively encouraged to make appointments to discuss their ideas with the instructor. Students presented a three- to five-minute synopsis of their student choice reports during the final week of coursework.

**Method**

In addition to the end-of-course student evaluation forms, the instructor created a survey which asked students to rate the effectiveness of specific learning strategies, including enhanced lectures, artifact analyses, annotated citations, and student choice projects. These strategies were employed in each of the semesters of the study. Nearly every lesson included elements of an enhanced lecture, such as images, student discussion, and artifacts when available. Formal student analysis of artifacts occurred twice each semester, typically at the mid-point and at the end of the semester as course review. Students were expected to complete three annotated citations which were due during the third, eighth, and twelfth weeks of the semester. The readings corresponded to the topic of study; for example, an article about
Figure 3: Example of an oral history report completed for the student choice assignment. This student created a ten-page paper based on a series of interviews with her grandmother and presented her project to the class in poster format. Permission from the student.
home sewing to support the World War II effort was assigned following in-class discussion of the 1940s. The student choice project was the final assessment for each of the three semesters.

The survey was posted on the password protected WebCT course site. Students could only respond to the survey once and their responses were anonymous. The instructor posted the survey during the last week of classes. It asked students to rate how effective the learning strategies were in allowing for a greater understanding of the subject; encouraging students to work hard to understand the material; encouraging students to think; to learn; and to gain a greater interest in the subject matter. The survey items derived from the researchers’ understanding of effective, learner-centered teaching and learning strategies. Space following each learning strategy was provided for qualitative comments. This was to allow the instructor an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the quantitative results. The instructor posted the survey following the fall 2007 and 2008 survey of history courses and the spring 2009 and 2010 history of 20th-century fashion courses. Because of its application as a course evaluation tool, the project received exempt status from the university institutional review board. A total of 255 students completed the survey, with about 63 students responding each semester, for a response rate of 85% of students enrolled in each of the courses.

Results

Analysis of the demographic data revealed that the majority of the students (91%) were either junior or senior classification with the remaining students belonging to sophomore (6%) or graduate student (3%) status. Over half of the students stated cumulative grade point averages above 3.0 (65%), which may have reflected a self-reporting bias. Because a majority of the seats in the course were reserved for textiles and apparel majors, most of the students stated majors in textiles and apparel (80%). The remaining students were enrolled in the majors of art and design (7%), other (to encompass majors not listed in the survey including history) (7%), business (4%), or journalism (2%). Consistent with the prevalence of female undergraduate students enrolled in textiles and clothing programs, nearly all participants were female (95%). Students overwhelmingly rated their satisfaction with the course as excellent (60%) or very good (32%).

Descriptive statistics were calculated on each item comprising the survey. To ensure consistency of the measures, the reliability of each scale was assessed using Cronbach’s standardized alpha (α ranged from .85 for the artifact analysis to .92 for the student choice projects). Based on the cumulative means for the learning strategies, the student choice
Table 1. Qualitative Statements about the Learning Strategies

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Strategy</th>
<th>Student Comments Regarding the Learning Strategy</th>
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<tr>
<td>Student Choice Projects</td>
<td>“With the good range of topics and ideas there was a project to fit almost everyone's interest.” “I was more interested and involved in the topic and project.” “I wish more classes allowed this freedom of opportunity.” “I thought it was a great way to work on something I really cared about.” “The student choice project was one that really made me think. I had never really done research like that before and I actually learned a ton, not just about the subject but about how to use the library and other resources.” “I liked this project because it gave me an option to really use my creative skills.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enhanced Lectures</td>
<td>“I loved that every lecture was a little different and there were different ways to learn. It is difficult to learn material when it is always the same teaching style.” “The music, pictures, movie clips, and debates, really made going to class enjoyable.” “Class participation was excellent. Thank you for encouraging us so much in this way and not allowing us to be mindless vegetables, even though we may have wanted to some days.” “I love the videos and all of the pictures; it really helps the material sink in.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Artifact Analyses</td>
<td>“Working with artifacts and trying to understanding the time period was very interesting.” “The artifact [analysis] has been a good experience. I have been able to try and put myself in the period, imagine who I would be, what I would be doing in these garments. It also inspired a new interest in museum work, working with garments and displays.” “I really like being able to see the actual garments and apply the knowledge learned about those time periods by trying to figure out which garment belongs to which period.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Annotated Citations</td>
<td>“Writing the citations makes you read and understand the articles better. They helped us gain more knowledge than just the textbook.” “The discussions were probably the most enlightening part of the activity because it is so often other people’s thoughts that cause me to challenge my own.” “I liked finding out there were more topics involved with fashion than just with ‘trends’ and color schemes.” “The annotations really made me think about the material by making me recall and write about it.”</td>
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project rated closest to 5 or strongly agree that this exercise allowed for a greater understanding of the subject; encouraged students to work hard to understand the material; encouraged students to think; to learn; and to gain a greater interest in the subject matter (M = 4.38). The enhanced lectures received the second highest mean (M = 4.27). The artifact analyses and annotated citations received mean scores (M = 4.15 and M = 4.08) respectively.

These mean scores were partially validated by the students’ responses to their rating of their most favorite learning strategy. The student choice project was most often selected (25%), followed by the artifact analyses (13%), the enhanced lectures (10%), and the annotated citations (4%). Twenty-nine percent of the students stated that they enjoyed all aspects of the history of dress course. The remaining 19% stated their favorite learning activities were assignments specific to one semester’s course work, such as weekly quizzes or fashion designer reports.

Students were also asked to provide written comments regarding each learning strategy (see Table 1). Analysis of the data revealed themes consistent across the strategies: student involvement, students as creators of their own knowledge, and learning as a social process. The themes as embedded in the learning strategies are explored in the following section.

The student choice project was regarded as highly successful by students because it allowed them the opportunity to decide the topic and the format in which they were most comfortable and competent. One student commented, “I enjoyed being able to choose my own topic and further my knowledge in a subject that I was most interested in.” This project automatically increased student involvement in their learning as they were responsible for finding an idea and formulating a plan for completing their research. It is to be noted, that while some students found the freedom to choose their topics enriching; several students expressed insecurity about the amount of choice they were afforded. To assist all students, instructors must provide guidance, often in the form of providing ideas for narrowing down topic ideas.

Positive comments regarding the enhanced lectures included satisfaction with the diversity of ways the material was presented. Through active participation, students were not allowed to be “mindless vegetables,” but rather meaningfully contribute to the class. One student commented, “The use of different media, such as visuals, videos, and pictures really helped me understand the different eras.” Another student stated, “Actual activities in class that had us doing something, rather than just listening, helped us grasp the information.” The diversity of techniques provided multiple ways for understanding, thus creating a “balance” of ways to learn.
Students stated enjoyment with the artifact analyses because they were able to examine and handle garments. One student stated, “I surprised myself with how much I learned from the class. The garments really made me think of the time period and lifestyle of the wearer.” Viewing three dimensional objects learned about through textbook reading and PowerPoint notes provided students an additional method to aid their learning of the subject. While some students stated frustration with fiber and fabric identification, this aspect of the analyses facilitated conversation about the impact of textiles on the fashion world; as shift dresses from the 1960s comprised of polyester fiber were significantly less wrinkled than linen dusters from the 1890s.

Although the annotated citations ranked the least favorite of students’ activities, the students often stated a sense of accomplishment. Written comments included, the citations were “thought-provoking,” “were beneficial to my learning of new subjects,” “made me think in greater depth,” “were good learning tools,” “widened my knowledge,” and “encouraged me to be analytical.” Students expressed great interest in discussing the articles with classmates, stating, “The discussions were a great opportunity to hear other people’s opinions and possibly learn a different perspective than your own.” Small group discussions seemed to help students become more comfortable with sharing their opinions and thus, more involved with the class as a whole.

Discussion

Results from this study supported the constructivist theory, which holds learning requires the instructor to act as the facilitator, learning is an active process in which students apply knowledge to their own lives, and that learning involves sharing ideas with others. By their very nature, the student choice projects were personalized to meet each student’s interests, needs, and capabilities. By allowing choice, students were empowered to transform prior knowledge and experiences into deeper understandings. Due to the large size of the typical history of dress survey course, the enhanced lectures provided a delivery method that emphasized the strengths and minimized the weaknesses of a traditional lecture format. The enhanced lectures allowed the large classes to engage in activities primarily reserved for smaller class sizes. Students stated this format provided an energetic, participatory, and challenging learning environment.

The artifact analyses provided students the hands-on opportunities to be informed and inspired by the past, testing their acquisition of course material and applying it with peers to a real-life example. The sensory knowledge gained by viewing examples of weighted silk and examining
a gown altered for pregnancy provided the opportunity for deeper thinking of different eras and cultural and social mores. The annotated citations introduced students to topics, ideas, and the writing style of the historic dress discipline. Further, the in-class discussions contributed to peer-sharing and communication of discipline-specific ideas.

Conclusions and Implications

This paper provided a discussion of four learning strategies for use in history of dress courses. Analysis of the data revealed themes consistent across the strategies: student involvement, students as creators of their own knowledge, and learning as a social process. As Davis recommended, “don’t tell students when you can show them, and don’t show them when they [the students] can do it themselves.”45 The activities, while more time intensive to prepare and grade for the instructor than traditional lecture and multiple-choice exams, contributed to student engagement in the learning process, augmented their understanding of the course content, encouraged thinking and learning, and increased student interest in the subject matter. Overall, the activities enhanced the quality of instruction for both the students and the instructor, thus providing a high quality learner-centered environment. Strategies such as the enhanced lectures, annotated citations, and student choice projects could be applied to any course within the higher education setting for their emphasis on student involvement and active learning. These activities can further students’ understanding and provide an effective means to fill in information gaps in the course textbook. Empowering students to explore and research topics of specific interest may also serve to advance students’ professional and personal development. The instructor’s body of knowledge may also be widened by the students’ diverse research topics and findings. Strategies such as the artifact analysis need not be restricted to dress history courses, but could be applied to any history or objects course (furniture, textiles, folk art, ceramics, tools) with minor modifications to fulfill instructor goals and objectives for course content acquisition.

Future studies could examine students’ preferred learning styles with their appreciation for the different forms of instruction. Measuring improvements in higher level comprehension and critical thinking could provide additional insight into the value of these methods. While instructors may not have the time or the resources to implement all of these strategies, they provide a starting point for dialogue of active learning in a history of dress course.
Notes

16. Barr and Tagg.
20. National Center for History in the Schools, National Standards for History:
Developing Standards in United States History and World History (Los Angeles, CA: National Center for History in the Schools, 1996).


28. Ibid.


32. Steele.

33. Fleming.


39. Ibid., 218.

40. Garth Boomer, Nancy Lester, Cynthia Onore, and Jonathan Cook, Negotiating the Curriculum: Educating for the 21st Century (Bristol, PA: The Falmer Press, 1992);
Hudd.


43. Barr and Tagg; Starnes and Carone.


References


### Additional Fashion Related Resources


