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Niche Design – Integrating A Curriculum Progression Specializing in Children's Wear

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Introduction and Purpose

Specialty niche markets are an area for intensified study within a design program. With current statewide and university pressure to limit credit hour requirements and a broadly developing set of design resources and industry trend incentives, finding the balance within the design curriculum can be challenging. Thus, as program curriculum is surveyed and adapted from year-to-year, this instructor's program has identified and developed a methodology for introducing a specialized niche in the children's wear apparel market. A strategy of programmatic content implementation at progressive levels with broadening scope has been useful in adding essential niche content to a capped curriculum. Selected specialty niche market classifications have been neatly integrated into existing design curriculum to allow students to build specialization into their degrees. Students blend foundational design concepts and classifications with niche target markets, which in turn enhance their marketability in the industry.

Methodology

Five courses within the Fashion Design curriculum were selected to aid in niche specialization. The strategy was a progressive development of content and scope from an introductory course through a senior level capstone or honors class. Bloom's taxonomy and revised taxonomy aided in building the framework and identifying the stages in development (Bloom, et. al., 1956). The knowledge level, moving into comprehension was presented in a freshman level course. Bloom's application and analysis stages of the learning process were integrated at different phases into a sophomore and junior class, while synthesis and evaluation culminated in a junior and senior level capstone course. Across all levels, in teaching students how to design for the children's wear market, elements of fashion, fit, and aesthetic are introduced and studied through both textbook and practical application.

An overview of the children's wear product category is presented in an introductory fashion design class focused on fashion product categories in the marketplace. In this class, an overview of fit size ranges, labeling, government standards, and laws and regulations are introduced for children's apparel. Product lines are briefly observed and retail and wholesale venues for children's wear are presented. A second stage of introduction for children's design is addressed in a sophomore level production and manufacturing process class. Building on the freshman overview, an in-depth study of children's wear design is presented with application points including competitive shopping analyses and garment inspection. Upon completing these tasks, students are presented with a group project in which a four ensemble collection is designed

within a target size range and customer profile. Students then pattern, cut, and sew garments to present for final critique. Along with the collection, students present branding, marketing, and business strategies including proposed retail venues, and production and distribution processes.

A third stage, analysis of the niche market, introduces students to children's apparel product lines at a major market center while assisting with the production of a children's fashion show. Students have the opportunity to observe and interact with 25 to 30 children's wear showrooms in a major fashion market center, and over 60 children's wear apparel lines. In addition to handling children's apparel in multiple size ranges, students gain knowledge regarding price point, accessory enhancement, product assortment, and show room management. The experience they gain is invaluable. In addition to their exposure to a wide variety of creative and functional design categories in children's wear, they also gain insight into fit and function of garments on the children during the fitting and showing of fashions in the market sponsored fashion show. Analysis of products and varied industry practices is integral to the student learning process. Students observe and manage garments that are missing closures that don't fit over a toddler head or pant legs with ankle openings too tight to pull over a foot -- common elements of the learning process during a fitting. Each of these experiences helps educate the student. Observing industry niche market applications aid the student in synthesizing the learning process into reality.

Further study within the children's wear niche is completed in a junior/senior level course in computer aided design and advanced patternmaking. Here, students are able to select their niche market and design patterns for their apparel collections. Story boards are developed in CAD and are followed with print and knit design for that given market. The previous semesters of introduction and application of the children's wear niche market offer the foundation for product development. The CAD class allows the student to synthesize the various elements learned previously into a viable children's apparel collection. After age appropriate prints and patterns are developed for textiles, students begin to design and construct the apparel through computer aided patternmaking. Blocks and dress forms also offer a strong foundation for fit and function of the apparel. Hilde Jaffe's (1990) *Children'swear Design* is used as a textbook for pattern development. Patterns are developed for selected garments within the collection and two ensembles are constructed. A final course offering allows students to specialize in a capstone collection of children's wear and develop a business plan for introduction into the marketplace.

Students gain expertise through a progressive introduction and study of the children's wear market. Many who specialize enter the marketplace in children's wear design because of the directed curriculum and a portfolio of work targeted at the niche market.

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