The Role of Museum Exhibits in Teaching Textiles Related Courses

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Abstract
The concept of learning outside of the traditional, formal classroom setting is an important component of educational pedagogy. Ways to learn beyond the classroom include visiting museums, accessing archives both in person and virtually, and participating in field studies.

Keywords
museum exhibit, pedagogy

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Comments
The role of museum exhibits in teaching textiles related courses

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**Background.** A constant challenge for educators, particularly in more theoretically based courses, is to keep students interested in course material as well as ensure active participation (Ramey-Gassert, Walberg & Walberg, 1994). The concept of learning outside of the traditional, formal classroom setting is an important component of educational pedagogy. Ways to learn beyond the classroom include visiting museums, accessing archives both in person and virtually, and participating in field studies (Bloom & Mintz, 2002). Despite the importance of bringing students “to the world” to spark and retain their interest, little is known about the role of museum exhibits as a pedagogical tool to enhance students’ knowledge and learning experiences in textiles related courses.

**Purpose and Significance.** The purpose of this study was to look at the role of museum exhibits in teaching a textile science course. Similar to other land-grant universities, the introductory textile science class taught at a large Midwestern university requires students to memorize factual information as well as apply their knowledge in a hands-on laboratory environment. The sophomore-level hybrid-course consists of online lecture content assignments with corresponding weekly quizzes and twice-a-week face-to-face classroom meetings consisting of individual and group assignments. This course can be compared to any theory based course where the main focus is to build a strong base of students’ knowledge in the subject. The course is primarily lecture-oriented with hands-on activities. Students are expected to thoroughly understand concepts from fibers to yarns to fabrication processes to finishing techniques to prepare them for their chosen major and future careers. By better understanding the use of museums as a pedagogical tool in textile science related courses will provide an additional pedagogical tool for other educators and instructors.

**Literature review.** Museums became informal learning environments in science related courses almost four decades ago (Tran, 2007). Textiles and clothing museums (and collections) preserve cultural and historical heritage and provide opportunities for research, teaching, and aesthetic enjoyment. Museum collections form an important educational resource for understanding theoretical knowledge through its practical applications (Bloom & Mintz, 1990). Previous research shows that teaching in informal settings such as museums and using physical objects to explain concepts helps students incorporate creativity into their thought processes and tackle complex topics (Tran, 2007). Further, educator-led museum exhibit tours have been shown to increase student interests and ability to remember information about course material (Griffin & Symington, 1997).

**Method.** The authors incorporated two curator-led museum tours as a way to educate students enrolled in an introductory textile science course about synthetic fibers and dyeing and printing techniques. The museum exhibit, “Tana-Bana: Warp and Weft of Indian Textiles and Garments”
displayed 25 objects from the continent of India. The exhibit “Style Tribes: Fashions from the 1960s” featured 25 women’s objects including polyester shift dresses, paper dresses, and accessories such as Mylar-decorated panty-hose from the 1960s. One hundred and thirteen students majoring in the apparel program met at the museum space during regular class time. The exhibition curator for the “Tana-Bana” exhibit included an explanation of dyeing and printing techniques, such as tie and dye, ikat, and block and screen printing. One of the curators for the “Style Tribes” exhibit explained the significance of synthetic fibers to the aesthetics of the 1960s. Students were also provided time to read information printed on didactic panels in the museum space. Following the tour, a questionnaire was administered to understand students’ attitudes regarding the sing museum exhibit as a pedagogical tool. The questions were both quantitative and qualitative in nature and related to students’ perceptions about the textile science course, their learning style and role of museum tour in their understanding course material.

**Findings.** A significant positive relationship \((R = 0.299)\) between student perceptions of course material specific to textile science and role of museum in better understanding of concept was found. The findings suggest that following the museum tour students indicated they were 25% more likely to visit future museum exhibits. There was also a significant positive relationship \((R = 0.629)\) between the role of visiting the museum exhibits and future interest in historic / cultural textiles. The qualitative data was analyzed through open coding and two prominent themes emerged, better understanding of the course material following the museum exhibit tour and cultural appreciation. As some students expressed:

“I learned a lot about the printing and dyeing process as well as Indian clothing history!”

“This exhibit gave me the chance to put what I’ve learned in class in perspective so that I have better understanding of what specific garments are made from the fibers I have learned about”

**Conclusion.** The results of this study indicate that the use of museum exhibit tours may provide ways to further interest students in the textile science material as well as spark their interest in historical subject matter. Students’ ability to see and hear about historic and cultural artifacts may provide them with a more holistic view of the course material. The use of creative ways to make students active participants in the learning process helps shift control from the teacher to a more independent learner.

**References.**