With a T-shirt Around the World: Reading as Active Learning in a Global Issues Textiles and Apparel Course

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Abstract
Required reading in a Global Issues course were diversified in order to achieve four objectives: (a) increase students' interest in learning about global issues involved in textile production and trade, (b) comprehend relationships among the multifaceted issues, (c) understand conflicting interest of various stakeholders, and (d) relate this information to themselves.

Keywords
reading, learning, book

Disciplines
Curriculum and Instruction | Educational Methods | Fashion Business

Comments
With a T-shirt around the World:
Reading as Active Learning in a Global Issues Textiles and Apparel Course

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Key words: reading, learning, book

Literature suggests that students understand and retain information better when involved in active learning (e.g., Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991; Liebman, 1998). A number of classic studies demonstrated that reading is a more active type of learning than listening (Hartman, 1961). Despite new teaching approaches brought by technological advances (e.g., television, computer, Internet), reading remains a primary strategy to introduce the basic information to the students. For various reasons, many instructors use paperback books or collections of journal articles as a substitute, or textbook supplement (McKeachie, 2002). Gardner and Duncan (2005) reported positive student feedback on using the New York Times as additional reading in several textiles and clothing courses. Nathan and Dunn (1997) concluded that use of business press articles resulted into “richer understanding” and “greater awareness” on the part of the students (p. 190).

Course that deals with global issues appears to be one of the most difficult in textile and clothing undergraduate education due to the amount and complexity\(^1\) of new information and concepts. The goal was to diversify required readings in a Global Issues course in order to achieve four objectives: (a) increase students’ interest in learning about global issues involved in textile and apparel production and trade, (b) comprehend relationships among the multifaceted issues, (c) understand conflicting interests of various stakeholders, and (d) relate this information to themselves. To address the objectives, The Travels of a T-shirt in the Global Economy by Petra Rivoli (2005) was adopted as a supplement reading. The book traces a t-shirt from its origin as Texas cotton that is imported to China and then shipped back to the U.S. market, describing people and organizations involved and providing historical, political, and economic accounts that explain the current state of the global textile and apparel industry.

To get students to do the assigned reading and to help them comprehend and interpret the information, two sets of questions were developed. The first set contained both low-level factual and higher-level questions and was used to guide student reading (take home quizzes). Class and group discussions were built around the second set of questions that addressed more complex issues. To assess effectiveness of the book in achieving the objectives, the students were asked to

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\(^1\) Complexity is defined by “how much the multiple elements of the information interact” (Liebman, 1998).
reflect on the learning process and express opinion about the book by writing an anonymous reflective statement. Sixty students were enrolled in the course. Most of them were seniors. The students were given in-class time to complete the essay.

A total of 52 responses were collected. A qualitative interpretation of the texts was conducted to develop an understanding of the learning process based on perspectives of the learners themselves (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). This methodological framework allows the significant issues to be culled from the data itself through an iterative part-to-whole interpretation process. The narratives were interpreted for significant themes that could be used to understand what helps students in learning material when reading. The stages of the analysis process were structured as suggested by Spiggle (1994). Three topical areas emerged from the interpretation process, including: fun way to learn, a great eye-opener, and, two-sides of the story.

The participants reported that presenting a large amount of information in the form of a story that incorporates “accounts of real people and their situations” helped them create a framework and comprehend multiple facts and details in relation to the big picture. The analysis of narratives confirms that the book was instrumental in helping students understand how political, economic, social, and cultural forces affect companies’ decisions and how historical and contemporary events affect the global textile and apparel industry. The fact that all participants agreed that the book was more interesting reading than a “conventional” textbook appears to enhance understanding of the material and facilitate development of an integrative perspective. This understanding helped the students to recognize and accept controversial issues related to textile and apparel sourcing practices. The narratives reflected wide range of emotions experienced by the students when reading the book. This involvement appears to be vital for the students to reflect and relate the learned material to themselves.

Besides presenting real world accounts in a story-like format, the book (unlike a collection of unrelated articles) provided framework, or point of reference, which is often critical in undergraduate education. Students agreed that both quizzes and in-class discussions greatly facilitated the learning process. All students have recommended keeping the book as course required reading. The only unenthusiastic comment that few students made about the book was that the text was somewhat repetitive. To conclude, the book The Travels of a T-Shirt...can be recommended as a required or optional reading for courses that focus on one of the following topics: social responsibility, economics, production, trade, sourcing, and disposal/recycling of textile-based products.

References:


