



“Creative Teaching of Engaged Visual Merchandising Courses with Limited Resources”

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Background and research purpose. Previously, two visual merchandising courses were taught as lecture-based classes with no real-world applications. According to Barkley (2010), interpreting and determining the meaning of new information requires the brain to draw on prior similar or associated knowledge if it exists, which then strengthens that previous learning. The instructors wanted to reinforce student knowledge of lectured concepts by incorporating various modes of creative teaching to provide hands-on application and real-world experiences to help students transfer learning to different contexts (National Research Council, 2000). The challenge was to circumvent the lack of current program resources and limited available space for the storage of visual items.

Methods. A variety of creative teaching methods were employed in these two visual merchandising courses to provide students with engaging, real-world applications. Instructor-owned, *visual display props* were brought to three consecutive class periods. Students worked with these props during classes to practice visual display concepts. Other props were obtained by thrift shopping and a store closing as well as loans from family and friends. Full and half-body mannequins were donated by local stores. *Partnering with retailers in the local community* gave students real-life experience in analyzing and creating visual merchandising. Students participated in a scavenger hunt to analyze the visual merchandising practices of various local retailers. In addition, instructors prearranged times and dates for students to work with local retailers to reset the floor, rearrange merchandise, and update the visual displays. Students worked with a local mall that had vacant storefronts and created two sets of display windows using merchandise loaned by the mall’s anchor stores. Course fees gave students a small budget for creating these displays. *Interdisciplinary partnerships* also gave students opportunities for visual window practice. The college art department permitted the use of their display window for a total of five weeks, allowing students to change the window once per week to maximize experience. Students were also invited to *promote the college career fair* through the creation of a visual display. To further student applications for visual merchandising, students constructed *window display maquettes (small-scale displays)* using a theme of their choice. These miniature displays were constructed from shadow boxes and cardboard shoe boxes. *Course assignments* required higher student engagement to foster critical thinking and creativity of visual merchandising concepts through real-world applications. For instance, students drew on their learning and furthered practice of signage concepts for an assignment. Students were required to

visit two retailers to identify, analyze, and suggest improvements for signage. Then students create two signs: (a) an improved version of the retailer sign using Adobe Photoshop and (b) an original boutique sign of their own. Bowen and Watson's (2017) method of surprise was also adapted for an in-class assignment: (a) students had to plan a visual window, researching props, and creating a list of items needed, (b) while students watched a brief video, the completed list was taken from them and items were scratched off, declared no longer available, and (c) the lists were returned for students to write a Plan B for their window display.

Results. Due to donations, borrowing, and thrift shopping, *visual props* were obtained for student practice at little to no cost. All borrowed items were returned, eliminating the need for storage. However, donations required a minimal amount of storage. The size of the half-body forms permitted storage atop bookshelves and cabinets. Students voiced excitement over opportunities for hands-on applications of visual merchandising concepts. Student feedback on *partnering with local retailers* included comments such as the following: (a) "Knowing how to merchandise in a real store will benefit me in my future career in retail," (b) "Visiting a real store to practice merchandising helps me understand what we have been learning in class," and (c) "I like hands on practice for retail because it helps me know how to do things in real life." To obtain garments and accessories at a low cost for the *career fair display*, students met the instructor at the local Salvation Army store as a treasure-hunt mission. The creation of *window display maquettes* from shadow boxes and cardboard boxes provided a low-cost, creative solution for students to practice visual merchandising concepts on a small scale. *Course assignments* also permitted students to apply the visual merchandising concepts to real-world scenarios. The adaption of Bowen and Watson's (2017) surprise technique was successful in fostering critical thinking and problem-solving for students: (a) "This assignment made me realize I might have to make multiple plans in real life so I can do my job" and (b) "I can't believe you did this to us, but it really made me think about what I might have to do for a job in visuals."

Conclusions and implications. Partnering with the local community and other collegiate departments provides access for student practice of visual merchandising course applications and also eliminates equipment costs and storage space issues. The window display maquettes greatly decreased the cost of supplies for students and reduced the need for life-sized displays requiring mannequins and props. Course assignments fostered higher student engagement, critical thinking, and creative skills by immersing students in real-world applications, reinforcing lectured concepts. These creative teaching methods have implications for other apparel and textile courses. Fashion programs with limited resources and for those lacking storage space could benefit from these techniques, circumventing challenges for generating an engaged learning environment.

References

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