

Partnering with a University Garden for a Non-traditional Materials Fashion Design Assignment:  
Collaboration, Creativity, and Community Engagement

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### **Innovative Strategy**

The innovative teaching strategy was partnering with a University Garden to obtain non-traditional materials for advanced fashion design students' creative projects. Situated on a 17-acre site, the University Garden is a year-round attraction features distinct gardens both indoors and outdoors on a 17-acre campus, a Conservatory with seasonal displays, a 2,500-square-foot Butterfly Wing, and a Gift Shop. Benefits of this partnership included: (a) unique materials for students to work with, (b) improved cross-departmental relationships, and (b) opportunities for students to engage the local community with their creative work.

### **Purpose of Strategy**

The purpose of this teaching strategy was to find a new source of materials for students to work with for an existing non-traditional materials project in an upper-level Creative Design class for fashion design majors. In the past years, students had worked with materials from a home-improvement store. While these materials were non-fabric, they were primarily planar in form and could be constructed using traditional sewing techniques, such as the 301 lockstitch. As such, they were not providing a sufficient challenge in terms of pushing students to think "out-of-the-box."

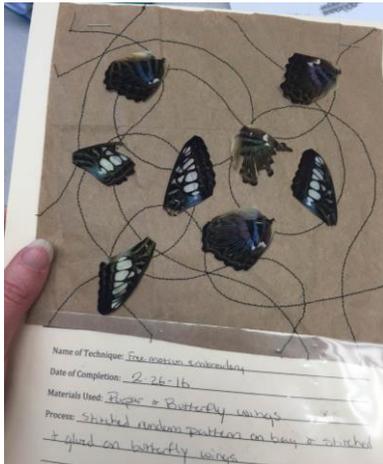
### **Implementation of Strategy/Practice Clearly Delineated**

The inspiration for this project stemmed from the author's interaction with a university colleague from the entomology department. The colleague brought to the author's attention the interest of entomology academics in wearing apparel and accessories made of materials from or referencing insects. (See hashtag #entofashion on social media.)



Figure 1 Materials collection

In the semester prior to the strategy implementation, the author contacted the University Garden to propose this collaboration. The instructor met with the Gardens' Butterfly Wing Curator and the Education Manager to plan the partnership. The Gardens' staff were extremely enthusiastic about the idea and shared that they had numerous materials for use. It was decided that the apparel designs would be completed in half-scale to best feature the small-scale materials available, such as butterfly wings. After the meeting and prior to the mid-semester start of the non-traditional materials project, the Gardens' staff saved a wide variety of materials for the students to select from. These included: plant packaging materials, bamboo stalks, butterfly



**Figure 2 Sample notebook page**

wings, cocoons, dead insects, pine-cones, dried grasses, and more.

At the start of the project, the students and the instructor visited the Gardens to collect materials (Figure 1). The students then had two weeks to develop a notebook of 20 different manipulation or construction techniques to experiment with ways they could use the collected materials (Figure 2). Then, students developed a series of garment sketches. In discussion with the instructor, students selected one design to create. Students had two weeks to produce their designs. Half-way through the garment creation process, the students participated in an in-progress critique. At the end of the project, students presented their completed projects to the class (Figures 3 & 4), then to the public at the University Gardens.

### Effectiveness of the Strategy and Plans for Continuation

The teaching strategy was effective in fostering the desired teaching/learning outcome of getting students to engage in innovative thinking about apparel design. Students had to forgo traditional concepts of apparel construction. They were forced to think about questions such as: “Is a seam allowance really necessary?”, “Does this material require an edge finish?” “How can I attach this item, which would be destroyed by machine stitching?” Another challenge was the fragility of some of the materials. Solutions included encasing items in tulle or clear tapes, or felting materials together, when machine stitching would damage the materials. Students learned that experimentation was key and that a solution that works with one material does not work with another. For example, Super Glue is great for pinecones, but does not work on foil plant covers. Students were active in seeking out information and sharing their findings. The formal in-progress critique served as an effective forum for students to share challenges and solutions. At the end of the project they repeatedly expressed how much they had learned, and stretched their creative muscles.



**Figure 4 Dress with woven and felted silk yarn from cocoons**



**Figure 3 Completed designs featuring butterflies**

Additional benefits of the strategy were inter-departmental collaboration, community engagement, and positive PR for the department. The local TV station featured one of the garments in a news story. The instructor and students have been invited to present the garments again at the University Gardens this summer, as part of the Entomology department’s annual Pollinator Festival. This collaboration will be continued in future semesters.

Course content will be added on successful construction techniques with these materials, based on the class’ findings.