Navigating Design Rules vs. Creativity in two Visual Merchandising Courses

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Keywords: Visual, Merchandising, Creativity, Design

Introduction: Instructors from two universities in two different states who both teach very different visual merchandising courses (they vary in course size and structure) discuss the challenges they've faced in navigating how students apply the rules they've learned in lecture to a creative course assignment. Course 1 meets once a week for 2.5 hours and is taught as a flipped course. The maximum enrollment for this course is 24 students. Course 2 meets three times a week: twice as a lecture with maximum enrollment at 120 students and once a week as a lab taught by a teaching assistant with maximum enrollment at 22 students.

Both instructors identified a disconnect in their courses between the lectures and the practicum. In lectures students are taught design rules and visual merchandising guidelines. In the practicum, students are asked to apply course material to a creative challenge. In Course 1, students design and implement window displays for local stores. In Course 2, students design and set up a mock Macy's store. In both practicums, students are asked to design and execute a planogram complete with wall setups.

Innovative Approach / Implementation of Practice: To address the disconnect between the course lectures and the practicum, the instructors asked students to document their work through a series of reflections in order to synthesize their understanding of the lecture material and their creative process. Both instructors structured their reflections around *Articulating Learning* (AL) and aimed at student answering the AL guiding questions: (1)What did I learn?, (2)How, specifically, did I learn it?, and (3)Why does this learning matter, or why is it significant? (Ash, Clayton, & Atkinson, 2005). Using articulating learning questions helped the instructors assess if students were meeting the learning outcomes of the course.

In Course 1, students used VoiceThread (an online collaborative space with video, voice, and text commenting) to answer a series of questions, including: How did our in-class activities (tours, field trips, in-class worksheets, etc.) guide, direct or influence your design decisions at your service site? Explain how your display is appropriate for your service site brand and target market. Describe your display in terms of design tools and rules. Compare the two spaces for which you designed a display. How are they similar and different? What was challenging about each space? What did you learn about visual displays from completing displays at two different sites? Compare your experience at the service site with your previous experiences such as jobs, working in groups, volunteering in the community, or other class assignments. What personal qualities have you developed through service-learning? In what ways do you anticipate these qualities will help you in the future?

In Course 2, a series of worksheets were added to the lab setting which enabled student to synthesize their creative process and helped students identify how they were applying knowledge gained in the lecture. This step was deemed necessary as the timing of the delivery, of the

material in lecture, did not always directly coincide with the tasks given in the lab each week. Each of the worksheets focus on creating a different visual element within the Macy's store (i.e. window display, floor display, wall display). The worksheet asks the students to explain their creative decisions and asks them to identify specific guidelines that they followed or decided to ignore. If the students felt they could not follow the guidelines, they are asked to justify why the guideline does not make sense for their created display.

Purpose for Identified Audience: The purpose of this presentation is to provide the audience with two reflection documentation ideas to use in different kinds of classes that will help students to bridge the gap between lecture and application.

Description of Success of Practice in Fostering Desired Learning Outcomes: In Course 1, the Store Windows project was implemented in both fall and spring semesters, however the VoiceThread reflection assignment in the spring as a means to bridge the gap between lecture and application in the local stores' windows. Similarly, in Course 2, the Macy's Mock Store project was implemented in both fall and spring semester, however the reflection worksheets were only implemented in the spring as a means to bridge the gap between lecture and application in the lab setting. The indication of success in both courses was evident in students delivering much stronger presentations in the spring semester. Students were better able to explain their decision making process and were able to elaborate using terms and guidelines presented in the lecture.

Indication of Plans for Continuation, Revisions or Follow-Up: Since Course 2 is taught every semester, next semester revisions will be made to the worksheets that were implemented to further encourage students to elaborate on their creative process. Although students presented stronger oral presentations that better reflected the material taught in lecture, students still lacked the ability to justify or explain their creative process. Perhaps, like Course 1, student could be asked to provide brief weekly videos in which they are asked to talk through creating their displays as they are actually creating them. This would shift some of the focus from reflection to documentation of the process which may allow for better understanding of the creative process. Since visual merchandising is a creative practice based experience, documentation becomes the vital next step because it makes the "experience accessible and discussable" (Nimkulrat, 2007, pg. 7). If student are only reflecting on their work, the results are only their conclusions of what they have created, but with the implementation of documentation their creative process can be better captured. This is important from a teaching standpoint when trying to gain a better understanding of students translating knowledge from a lecture to a practicum.

References
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