



Rethinking Soft Goods Design Education

Susan L Sokolowski, PhD
University of Oregon, USA

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According to Merriam-Webster (2017), soft goods are items that are not durable —ones made of textile products. For most of us, when we think of soft goods, we think of sewn items like apparel. In the past, professors relied on students learning basic soft goods/sewing skills from their parents, in home economics classes or through clubs like 4H. From there, those basic skills were enhanced during the students' university design educational experience. However, today's university students are entering without any skills, due to the decline of learning opportunities. Students have no fundamental context regarding soft goods. They do not understand grain lines, seam allowances or notches. For university programs that do offer general soft goods/sewing courses, they tend to be apparel-based and restrained in content. Students typically learn to make small seam samples and an apparel item from commercial patterns or ones that the professor provides. This pedagogical method is outdated, because students are not taught how to work with a variety of materials, machines or learn how patterns are derived. This method also neglects teaching students about other soft goods products like footwear, automobile and furniture upholstery, sports equipment and wearables. The modern-day design student needs a new approach, so they can acquire a solid foundation of soft goods skills to be successful in their field of study. By considering all of the design majors that may need to learn this information, a new pedagogical model was created for a 10-week (quarter system), 2-credit course in soft goods design. The weekly goals for the course are outlined below:

1. Week One: The first week of the class provides students with an understanding of basic textiles: fiber, yarn, construction and finish. These principles are taught through material swatches that are relevant to the students' field of study(s). For example, if the student is studying sports product design – then sport materials are shown and discussed. Another example would be automotive interior design. Since materials is now a large part of design innovation today, it is important that students understand the fundamentals of textiles before they learn about pattern making and construction, as the materials may affect how the product is drafted and made (E.g. an engineered knit product). For this week students are also tasked with inventing a new material – so they can understand at a high level how materials alone could be the “new design” of the product. It is important to note that this week's subject matter does not replace an entire textile science course, however in many design programs these courses are not available or have disappeared from the curriculum due to resources/funding.
2. Week Two: The second week is focused on acquainting students with basic sewing machinery. They are taught how turn the machine on/off, how to thread it (including the bobbin), and how to set the machine to make basic seams/finishes.

3. Week Three: During this week students are introduced to their first design project – where they design and make a 2D 11” x 17” monster out of a non-woven (felt) textile. Students learn how to draft simple 2D patterns (in Illustrator) with seam allowances and cutting directions. They also learn how to construct the monster, with “no-sew” adhesives, poly-fill stuffing, and basic straight and zig zag stitches.
4. Weeks Four and Five: In the fourth week students are taught how to draft their own T-shirt patterns with use of a spec sheet. They start with a t-shirt that they already own and learn how to collect spec measurements. From the measurements, they draft a T-shirt pattern. In week five, the students learn how to cut out the t-shirt pattern out in a jersey knit and sew it together with a serger (including how to thread it).
5. Week Six: Next, the students learn about quality control through measuring their new T-shirts, to see if they are on spec. This exercise teaches the students about the effects of careless pattern making and sewing, and how it can affect a company’s business. During the same week, students are taught how to make patterns from existing woven products – through a “knock-off” rubbing process (with the use of a dark crayon or tailors wax). Like the T-shirt project, the students work from existing products that they own, so they can take measures along the way to insure the work they do is accurate.
6. Weeks Seven and Eight: From the woven products that the students created patterns from in week six, they will now redesign the product - changing at least 5 features. This redesign will now become the final project for the class. Students will modify their patterns, using basic techniques like shortening, lengthening, slashing and spreading or adding details like collar and cuff shapes, waistbands and pockets. The students will also write the construction directions – so they can think about how all of the pieces come together, including seam finishes and what machines will be needed to do the work.
7. Weeks Nine and Ten: For the remainder of the course, students will make their final woven product and prepare a small presentation to share at the final class, explaining their new design, materials used, how it was made and what they learned along the way.

By developing this new course, students of any design/engineering discipline are able to learn basic textiles, general pattern making and construction for any soft goods product. They also learn how to thread and operate basic sewing machine equipment and work with non-wovens, knits and wovens. This course had been taught experimentally for the last 2 years, and as a result the quality and depth of student design projects have increased substantially. Students are less afraid to design complicated products and work between different stitching machines. This course will be submitted for curriculum committee review next year, with anticipation of permanent adoption into the program.

Bibliography:

Merriam-Webster. (2017). *Soft goods*. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/soft%20goods>