

CULTURAL AND FASHION: A CASE STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

In 2011, Philadelphia University introduced a new curriculum by integrating design, engineering and commerce. The DEC core curriculum provides students with a learning framework of shared methods and a common language that prepares them to collaborate effectively and to work across disciplines.

There are five courses in the core:

Integrated Design Process. This is the first course students take in the core. The course explores ways of observing the world. Students collaborate on issues that are inquiry-based, iterative and that identify opportunity.

Business Models. This course, in the second year, provides a structure for students to bring ideas and contexts together to create value and to identify opportunity.

Methods Research. This third year course, explores the context, tools and methods for understanding people, culture and practice.

Capstone Experience. This last year course provides students the opportunity to integrate their knowledge and experience from the DEC core curriculum by participating in a comprehensive project.

Throughout the DEC core curriculum, students demonstrate the ability to:

1. Collaborate on multi-disciplinary teams.
2. Identify different problem-solving and decision-making styles.
3. Appreciate disciplinary perspectives.
4. Gain insight from people, their behaviors and cultural practices.
5. Evaluate the ways natural and human-made (political, social, cultural, economic) systems both shape and influence new products, services and/or enterprises.
6. Adapt to continually changing professional challenges.
7. Integrate knowledge to find new ways to create value.

METHODS RESEARCH: LEARNING FROM FIELDWORK

Our case study is based on the course, **Methods Research: Learning from Fieldwork.**

This course explores a range of ethnographic research tools to analyze human belief, behavior and cultural practices. Students learn to formulate appropriate research questions and conduct field-based research to address a contemporary social problem. As they conduct their research, students are required to assess and consider contextual sensitivities and to analyze and communicate their findings. Students reflect upon their impact in the community and on other ethical questions as part of conducting ethnographic research.

At the conclusion of the course, students have demonstrated the ability to:

1. Understand the elements of ethnographic research for analyzing human belief and behavior.
2. Identify appropriate qualitative research methods.
3. Develop research questions through an iterative process.
4. Design and conduct ethnographic research to address a contemporary social issue.
5. Interpret and effectively communicate the ethnographic data collected to different stakeholders.
6. Demonstrate empathy, ethical considerations, and contextual sensitivity in human-centered research.

The course provides students with an immersive-experience into qualitative research methods. They develop, research, and revise questions about a special topic based on their interactions with people in a community that is directly connected with the issue.

Assignments for this course are designed to help students develop knowledge and analytical skills for four levels:

1. Understand qualitative ethnographic research methods.
2. Apply these methods to ask pertinent questions about the topic by conducting original research.
3. Develop an awareness of the biases or assumptions within the research design, as well as how the researcher effects the information that is gathered.
4. Recognize the importance of revision at all stages of the research process.

Through field notes, students demonstrate greater clarity of observation techniques, stronger analytical skills in separating personal interpretation from observable knowledge and increased self-reflection in their roles as researchers.

THE PROJECT

We, Marcella Deh, Director of the Honors' Program, and Elizabeth Mariotz, Director of the Fashion Merchandising and Management Program, team taught this course in the spring 2014. We had begun our discussions about teaching this course several years ago. Our thought was to focus on Cultural Identity and Fashion/Dress as a theme for the course. The rationale for conducting the research project in West Africa was to enhance and enrich the students' and faculties' knowledge of the cultural and human behavior in this region of the world, study the social dynamics of the fashion markets and the rich social and political tradition in textiles. We also thought that studying this region would advance the University's general education goals to encourage faculty collaboration and experimentation in delivering a dynamic integrative educational experience.

Our plan was to conduct research on cultural identity and fashion in Ghana. We set out to learn as much about the culture and fashion by observing and interviewing. We wanted to use this experience as an example to show our students how these various research methods could be applied to conduct research.

In order to conduct extensive research, our goals were to:

1. Identify organizations and industry professionals to partner with in markets, factories and design houses, using family contacts who are well established professionally in the industry in Ghana.
2. Research the structure of the fashion industry including textile design and engineering, fashion design, production, merchandising and marketing, using family contacts and colleagues who are well established professionals in the industry in Ghana.
3. Visit historical, cultural and commercial sites that would offer a broader understanding of West Africa's cultural history and identity.
4. Create a video documentary of key sites visited and interviews conducted with various individuals on their relationship to and perspectives on fashion.

GHANA, WEST AFRICA

Visit to Accra, Ghana

Our visit to Accra, Ghana occurred December 28, 2013-January 6, 2014.

What We Experienced: (Marcella, below are some of the activities we did. I would like your input, thoughts, specifics on what was learned. This would be written as a narrative .)

Sunday, December 29: Visited a major mall; fabric stores, textiles, etc.

Family visit.

Monday, December 30: National Museum ; Independence 1957.

Cultural/Textile Center: Handcrafts from Ghana

Tuesday, December 31: Accra major port city in the country

Botanical Gardens:

Watch Night: New Year's Eve

Wednesday, January 1: Cape Coast: Slave Trade---History

Thursday, January 2: Dress maker: Judith—interviewed

Lunch: African Restaurant

Textile market: Emmanuel--interviewed

Friday, January 3: Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Par,

Flagstaff: President's House

Jazz Club (name?)

Saturday, January 4: Kumasi: Production of textiles, pottery.

Dinner with family members.

Sunday, January 5: Visit family farm. Name of town.

Volta River

Monday, January 6: Dress maker—Picked up the garments from Judith.

Other activities: Videos and observations.

1. Interviews with young women on the fashion: What we observed; what they said.
2. Streetscapes.
3. Open-air markets.
4. Hotel and its neighborhood.
5. The coast.

(SHOW OUR VIDEO OF OUR VISIT WITH A NARRATIVE FOR THE VISITS, OBSERVATIONS, ETC. ABOVE)

INTEGRATING THE EXPERIENCE INTO THE COURSE

This spring, 2014, shortly after we arrived back from Ghana, we began the course with 48 students with majors in design, engineering, business and fashion. The students were given the research topic the first day of class. We took the opportunity to explain the project and what we had experienced in Ghana. We indicated that we would be using this experience to assist them in their research work. The students were asked to identify a culture and how fashion/dress was influenced by that culture. We allowed them to “think outside the box” and this is what resulted:

1. Public Transit
2. Kiosks
3. Major Retailer
4. Coffee Shoppe
5. University
6. Exotic Dancers
7. Heritage (PA Dutch)
8. Music
9. Greek Life
10. Cyclists
11. Runners
12. Baseball Athletes

The Course

Following were the major components for the course:

1. Field Note Entries
2. Literature review
3. Final Team Project Report and Presentation

Field Note Entries

Students will learn how to:

1. Systematically recount and describe their observations.
2. Interpret and understand the meaning of these observations from the perspective of the people studies.
3. Compare their observations and interpretations with those of other researchers.
4. Discuss what a particular research method revealed to them about the topic and/or about themselves as researchers.
5. Think about how they might improve upon this research experience in the future.

Literature Review

The following information is to be included in the literature review:

1. A summary of the historical, political, economic, and socio-cultural context of the field site.
2. A summary and comparative analysis of important research about this field site and topic.
3. A discussion of how the student's research will clarify or expand previous research findings.
4. A bibliography of sources related to the field site and the research topic.

Final Team Project

The final report and presentation will include the following:

1. A summary of what the team wanted to learn and why.
2. A description of their field site and community.
3. A discussion of the perspectives of people who are part of the community.
4. An explanation of how and why the team's methods changed during their research.

5. A discussion of how the team's key questions and perceptions of this community changed as a result of this research.
6. An explanation of what the team thinks this research means and why they think it is meaningful.
7. A discussion of possible next steps for research on this topic.

TOP FINAL PROJECT: PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

1. Go over the project and what the students did.
- 2. Show the video they provided.**
3. Discuss how they achieved each of the major components in the final report.

SUMMARY

1. The value of our field work in demonstrating the application to a research problem.
2. Things that were learned.
3. Changes/adjustments to be made.
4. Recommendations.