A Valuable Lesson: The potential benefits and pitfalls of real-world community projects.

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Abstract:

This article presents a reflection of a case study carried out in 2017, which aimed to combine assessment for fourteen costume design and production students, studying on the Bachelor of Fashion (Design and Technology) at the Southern Institute of Technology with a local community theatre company. It addresses and discusses some of the challenges faced when forming such a collaboration between a real-world project and a costume paper for assessment. The discussion highlights positive outcomes achieved, despite real-world setbacks, and shares experiences encountered through example and student feedback. Observations were noted throughout the entire project and conclusions drawn, with a view to recommending future improvements in experiential teaching practices and/or learning experiences for tutors and students alike. Qualitative data was also obtained through reflective discussion and tailored questionnaires at the end of assessment project for further analysis.

Keywords: experiential learning; community collaboration; costume design and production; real-world challenges and benefits.

Background and Rationale

This real-world project was intended to be a mutually beneficial collaboration between a local theatre company and costume design and production students, studying on the Bachelor of Fashion (Design and Technology) at the Southern Institute of Technology. It was anticipated that this collaboration would provide a win-win situation for both parties. The costume students involved would receive an enriched and authentic learning experience through designing, fitting and constructing costumes for real actors, whilst fulfilling assessment criteria. At the same time, the theatre company would inherit a variety of appropriately designed, fitted and constructed garments free of charge, that were suitable for a specific stage play to be seen by the public in a series of shows.
Providing a safe and nurturing learning environment in which to deliver new information, demonstrate skills, and learn is paramount. But to what extent can we as educators ensure that our students leave the somewhat artificially cocooned institutional environment amply prepared and ready for real-life scenarios in a constantly changing world?

One of the foremost thinkers on the subject of experience and education, John Dewey, theorised that to understand the world, learners needed to act directly with it. He proposed that all genuine learning comes about through the construction of knowledge from experience, stating that experience was the foundation of education (Shellman, 2014).

Kolb also suggests that by trying to simulate the natural process by which individuals learn from experience throughout life, we can guide and enhance specific learning (Kolb, 1984).

It follows then that by employing experiential learning as an assessment tool with which to enrich students’ learning, task/s are given a context, thereby providing true meaning and offering greater student accountability. Perhaps more so than if the student were just set a hypothetical task by the tutor in a classroom environment, real-world projects can assign more meaning and weight to classroom material for assessment. This often aids in motivating the student to learn skills and complete task/s to the best of their capability within the timeframe stated.

Creating real-world opportunities within assessment pushes the student in different directions that perhaps he or she would not normally choose (Caulton, 2011) an important consideration from both a learning and real-life perspective. As real-world projects typically define limitations both creatively and financially, which may otherwise be difficult to control if the student has free rein to create according to their own aesthetic style.

Professor Richard Shaw from Massey University also comments on employing experiential education as a tool for student learning, empowerment and success when he talks about the importance of ‘live’ case studies with real organisations alongside important skills and knowledge taught in the classroom. He stresses the necessity to be able to constantly test ideas, question current practice, and adapt to changing circumstances. Claiming that these are the skills that enable a person to make sense of the world and figure out how things can be done better. Concluding that in the future, these are the type of employees that organisations will want and need (Shaw, 2017).
Likewise, Grant, Malloy, Murphy, Foreman & Robinson agree that education must go beyond the classroom in order to prepare students for today’s job market (Grant et al, 2010). Students today not only need to be challenged, they must be flexible in their approach to learning, in order to deal with the ambiguous and ever-changing nature of the real world.

It has been expressed that by improving students’ life-skills with the use of project-led experiential learning through authentic assessment, students feel a greater sense of achievement and an increased confidence to deal with new challenges (Caulton, 2011).

Other researchers in the field of experiential learning have also reasoned that the resultant empowerment which comes from this kind of learning, problem-solving and reflection can also facilitate feelings of hope, alleviate stress levels, provide psychological strength and other resources necessary for individuals to persevere in life (Shellman, 2014).

Offering a real-life working situation through assessment provides students with the opportunity to network and create personal and professional relationships that may be beneficial in the future, whilst preparing them for what lies ahead once they leave the educational institution. Engaging students with hands-on real-life learning experiences enables them to mature, whilst enhancing their personal and professional skills (Karpova et al., 2011).

There is no doubt that adding real-world experiential dimensions to assessment can improve learning and offer many positive outcomes and opportunities for the student during and beyond the educational institute. It can also prove beneficial and rewarding for both the community and tutor. However, as a tutor one needs to be aware of the extra groundwork involved in fostering those community relationships before, during and after the process. Being flexible and relinquishing some of the control inherent in working within a structured, institutionalised environment can be quite challenging and a little nerve wrecking at times. It is equally important, however, to maintain enough control by mitigating as many potential real-life hazards or disrupters as possible, in order that the assessment learning outcomes can be successfully achieved by the student.

We, as educational facilitators and tutors have a responsibility to deliver a prescribed amount of information to our students - according to learning outcomes defined within the paper descriptor content. This content must be delivered in a manner that the student is able to understand and achieve within a timetabled deadline. However, when external real-world
dimensions are introduced to the classroom, both tutor and student are exposed to a number of unknown variables good and bad, which can be difficult to predict and sometimes beyond control.

Like many other fashion schools around the world, we have also introduced and implemented real-life projects, such as designing, patternmaking and constructing garments for competition entry, collection runway shows, internships, and more recently bespoke garments for real clients from outside of the Institute (Caulton, 2011). We understand the benefits of combining paper descriptor learning outcomes with actual events for the student and realise the importance of real-world experience beyond the safe confines of the educational institute.

An additional stimulus behind choosing to implement a real-world experiential learning project for costume in 2017, came from the positive feedback given by our external moderator in 2016. Whereby, admiration had been expressed at the level of student achievement attained for all assessment criteria, within the short timeframe of a project-led design and production process.

Student feedback was also received through an evaluation survey for costume that same year, where fashion students made suggestions and reflected on their own efforts. Approximately half of the students had stated that, they really liked the freedom of the brief, although they found that, choosing or creating their own character to research, was challenging given the short timeframe.

Some of these same students expressed that they would have also preferred to design and create costumes for a defined stage play with specific characters. The remaining students stated that they would have liked more direction or greater limitations concerning the assessment parameters rather than carte blanche, which was interesting to discover given the creative nature that the assessment presented. Predictably, a few students just wanted more time in which to complete the paper.

Armed with this feedback, the knowledge of past real-world success projects within our department, and my own previous experiences liaising with various local film producers, directors, costume historians, theatre company individuals and committees regarding costume design and production, I felt equipped to take on the challenge of providing a similar platform for my costume students.
The Collaboration

Designing and/or producing costumes/garments for community theatres/groups are usually considerably time-poor projects, although extremely interesting and fulfilling. The aim of this project was to create a mutually beneficial collaboration between a local theatre company through its committee members and myself initially. This collaboration would provide a real-world platform for the costume students to engage with members of the theatre company and public by creating new theatre costumes as part of their assessment for a play set by the theatre company in time for public performance. It was suggested and agreed that experienced, external stakeholder guidance, or feedback would be given concerning the student’s designs as they progressed regarding performance criteria such as fit, wear-ability, visual effect and characterisation according to the script brief.

As previously stated, the intention was that a real-world community collaboration would not only provide the costume students with some valuable insight into costume design and production beyond that which a classroom environment could offer, but test their skills in communication, organisation/time-management and professional etiquette.

Although real-world costume projects vary in theme etcetera, a set format can usually be followed:

- An initial discussion about the play and/or script where the theme is discussed with the director and/or producer.
- Ideas are exchanged before the designer sketches and collates any necessary historical research material that can be developed.
- Timelines and budgets are also discussed as these are two major guiding parameters.

Continued communication between both parties ensure that what the designer has in mind and creates is what the director and/or producer requires.

It is also usual that actors are cast in a timely manner so that body measurements can be obtained, patterns designed, drafted, and fitted to the actors comfortably, or that ready-made items can be sourced and pulled from elsewhere. However, this is not always the case and occasionally some actor’s sizes are unknown until closer to the time of the show and rehearsals have commenced.

With these factors in mind, the local theatre company was approached and the offer of a student/community collaboration was proposed at their annual general meeting.
**The Project**

The first requisite that needed to be established was timetabling. The costume papers needed to coincide with one of the stage plays that the theatre company were planning to show later in 2017. Timing was crucial, as the costumes needed be designed and produced by the students and submitted for assessment before handing over to the theatre company’s wardrobe team – ideally four to six weeks ahead of opening night so that any final fittings or alterations could be done.

Once this information was discussed and the theatre committee members agreed to the proposal, an agreement was established for a student/community theatre collaboration.

- Fourteen fashion students from the second and third year would design and produce a variety of costumes for a stage play set by the theatre company.
- The fashion department provided a set material budget for the costume students to design around. Enabling the students to purchase everything they needed in order to create one complete look each.
- The financial cost to the theatre company in receiving the student’s costumes would be zero.
- The student costumes produced would be accepted and used by theatre company at the director’s and/or producer’s discretion.
- The student’s costumes, patterns, and paperwork would be assessed as usual against the learning outcome criteria set by the costume paper assessment brief, before handing over their costumes to the theatre company.
- It was expected that the director and/or producer of the agreed stage play would give initial direction, with additional feedback being offered as required at certain points during the design and production process.
- Appointment times would also be organised by the students for fitting the actors either at the theatre or during class times (to suit the actors).
- The opportunity for costume students to participate in the final fitting and alteration process backstage was also discussed and it was agreed that this would be a valuable real-life experience.
• The theatre company committee assured that both SIT’s fashion department and the students would be referenced in the programming and advertising.

• Show tickets would also be offered to the costume students to see the play and their costumes in action.

• The costumes would be returned briefly to the students after the stage play for their end of year graduation show. After which the costumes would be donated to the theatre to be used in future productions or hired through the affiliated Costume Hire Shop; thereby extending the efficacy of the costumes.

In essence, this real-world assessment project enabled the fashion students studying costume, to experience a taste of designing, producing, and fitting a range of set period costumes for real actors in a real-life stage show seen by the public. The theatre committee were reassured regarding my own experience in guiding the students through this process and the benefits for all involved in the project reiterated. The theatre committee members’ response was very positive at the prospect and everyone agreed that this would be a wonderful opportunity for all parties involved, a win-win situation for all.

The initial discussion about the collaboration with the theatre’s committee had gone very well, the only question left unanswered was - How now to contact the director of the play? As all my initial attempts of phoning, leaving messages, emailing, and Facebook-stalking had had been in vain.

**The Process**

As the semester rolled on, the time came for the costume students to begin their assessment. Still no closer to making contact with the director of the play, despite my best efforts, we turned to the Internet for information and found detailed analysis of the play through *SparkNotes*, an online resource.

This information consisted of:

• The plot and storyline explained scene-by-scene,

• A breakdown and analysis of all major and minor characters within the play,

• The context in which the play had been written from the playwright’s perspective, as well as his personal background.
Providing the students with an insight and added understanding for the messages conveyed within the script as well as the themes and symbols used within the storyline, was extremely useful and important so that the students could draw on this information, utilising it as part of their design inspiration and additional research.

This information and other online links showing various portrayals of the play were made available to the students online through the Institute’s web-based server software ahead of the limited timetabled class hours. This measure was done based on the student feedback previously received around the limited time given to complete and the ‘block time-tabling’ that had been allocated for the costume assessment, which was very brief. This solution gave students more autonomy in deciding when to begin their research and design. It also allowed the students more time to process the research information for themselves.

The assessment design and research brief was also distributed and discussed face-to-face with the students ahead of class time, enabling opportunity for questions, ensuring clarity around the assessment criteria and nature of the real-world project.

The costume students were required to research the play in its entirety, but only chose one character to interpret and design a total look around. It was irrelevant if some students chose the same main characters, as there were many scene changes. What was important, was that every student researched the same historical time-period, giving considerable thought to the location and socio-economic influences within the storyline, as this would be the ‘glue’ that would connect the different ideas and characters together.

Having had no luck in contacting the director of the play, it was decided to design for the historical era in which the play had been written, in the hope that this would be agreeable with the theatre company. The students played music through the classroom speakers from the time-period and location of the storyline as they designed and discussed ideas, stating this helped with their historical costume inspiration and interpretation of the characters.

Versions of the play were projected during class via YouTube during the design development process, giving the students a deeper understanding of the script and the characters. This also prompted questions from the students regarding the storyline and/or characters, which could then be discussed individually or as a class group.
The time came in the assessment schedule, when the sizes of the actors were needed in order for the students to begin drafting the necessary patterns for each character. However, nobody had been selected or cast for the play by the director.

It was evident at this point that the real-world project was changing course somewhat and that the students would need to design and produce the garments for assessment with very little direction from any external stakeholders if they were to fulfil the assessment criteria in time.

This real-life scenario was not ideal and could have spelt the end of the collaboration between the students and the community theatre. Instead, it highlighted a very real-world problem; that being unpredictability, which would require some more creative thought if it was to succeed.

**The Solution**

The scope for initiative became far greater and necessary because of this real-life dilemma, rather than had the project been a purely hypothetical classroom assessment brief. Students now had to pay considerably more thought to constructing the garments in generic sizes, so that the costumes could fit a range of unknown body-types, rather than fitted to an individual. This also meant that costumes needed to be more easily altered if necessary and conventional construction methods adapted.

Although this is usual practise for many amateur theatre companies (who operate on shoestring budgets) to rely on this process of altering readily available costume wardrobes, it was not what I envisioned for this real-world experiential collaborative project. The largely unguided initial considerations of aesthetic, performance, and function were now compounded by the need to consider other critical factors such as adjustability and size.

However, these real-life hurdles forced the students to think on their feet and consider every design and construction detail differently, from:

- Sewing/finishing seams and design features,
- Faux and real opening and/or fastenings,
- Finishing raw edges, and hems
- Design-line adjustability for fit and size adaptability
• As well as the usual considerations regarding performance-appropriate fabrics for visual effect, historical authenticity and function.

In many of the other fashion design papers at SIT, a variety of methods and techniques are demonstrated that are usually industry-standard ways of designing and producing garments. Students usually learn how to draft prescribed standard and bespoke patterns to fit standard and/or specific body shapes. However, in this instance, the students needed to use and adapt this knowledge in other ways, the aim being to create a cohesive and authentic historical look without compromising on fit and function, whilst considering adjustability for unknown sizes, therefore:

| • Equally wider seam allowances on adjoining elements for easy adjustment |
| • Deeper hem allowances and turn-up cuffs added for a wider range of statures |
| • Raw (unfinished) hems left for final adjustments |
| • Longer stitch lengths for quicker unpicking |
| • Seam allowances overlocked or ‘pinked’ separately |
| • Side and sleeve seams sewn through together |
| • Crotch/side seams and waistbands sewn through together |
| • Additional design lines/seams for a greater scope of adjustment |
| • Historical aesthetic was maintained with faux features and practical openings for quick scene changes were disguised |
| • Fastenings sewn directly on/underneath rather than in between layers for easy adjustment |
| • Volume was incorporated into historical designs for greater movement and adjustability |
| • Additional tabs or partially elasticated waistbands |
| • Less shapely designed that could be easily cinched to fit were designed |
Surface details also extended into the wider seam allowances

Finer, transparent fabrics strengthened from underneath where necessary, enabling the same wide seam allowance treatments

Just two days before the garments were submitted for assessment, the theatre company made contact, revealing that they had only just received the rights to produce the play. Although they had applied for the rights months in advance, prior to our ‘collaboration’ agreement, they stated that they had never known this to take so long.

Having never experienced this lack of communication before, admittedly I was unnerved, especially since the goal had been to create a ‘real-world’ learning experience for the students. Regardless of this real-world setback, the students had all but completed their costumes for assessment; however, it was some small consolation to know that the stage play would go ahead as planned and perhaps some of the costumes might be useful.

**The Handover, Debrief and Reflection**

The assessed costumes were handed-over to the theatre company, during which time I finally met the director of the play. Much to my relief the costumes were gratefully accepted and taken away to be fitted onto a newly cast team of actors.

Surprisingly, despite the lack of guidance from the theatre company’s director and no fittings with any of the actors, most of the costumes were able to be used or adjusted by the theatre wardrobe team. The students were given the opportunity to help with this process (as promised); giving them the opportunity for a little real-world experience.

Approximately one week after the play had shown, a debrief session was arranged between the costume students, the director, and the wardrobe supervisor of the theatre company. This provided some valuable real-world feedback and everyone was finally able to share thoughts around the costumes that had been created for the show.

A range of issues were discussed regarding:

- Communication and what could be done better next time.
- What could be done better regarding the costumes’ fit, adjustability, and/or design.
- What worked well regarding quick scene changes and what did not.
• What details were necessary and what were not.
• What fabrics and fastening were preferable and what were not.
• Whether the theatre company would like to collaborate in the future again.

Although there had been very little communication from the external stakeholders with the students during the design and production process, it was still possible to reflect on the varying levels of success regarding the costumes, postproduction. Valuable ‘real-life’ qualitative information was captured for future project information, further reinforcing and enhancing the positive and constructive feedback given to each of the students during assessment.

The matters discussed surrounding the costumes during the debrief session not only supported individual student assessment material; it added weight to the feedback. By placing the feedback in a real-world context, the costume students were better able to see and understand the need for some of the changes or choices made, or conversely ignored in the designing and making process. Thereby, adding further value to the assessment feedback received whilst strengthening the students’ reflective justification based on real learning outcomes and consequences.

Qualitative written feedback is always given to the student in summative assessment (at the end of a project) yet, it is difficult to know whether this is actually read or reflected upon. However, by allocating a time beyond the assessment deadline, to revisit and discuss the outcomes as a group, (after seeing their costumes perform on stage) students were able to digest and process the whole experience, reflecting with greater clarity and objectivity. Providing good evidence of learning through transformation and reflection in most cases.

In addition to the debrief discussion, a questionnaire was devised regarding the real-world project, which was handed out at the end of the assessment project and completed voluntarily and anonymously by the costume students. Naturally, the initial intention of the questionnaire changed somewhat due to the unforeseen circumstances that had occurred. However, valuable qualitative information was obtained regarding the student’s thoughts surrounding the real-world collaborative project.
This questionnaire comprised of both open and Likert Scale style questions such as:

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<th>Question</th>
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<td>Rate your level of experience and apprehension felt in doing a real-world project</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rate the level of satisfaction/external direction received</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rate the delivery and quality of research material, given the real-life scenario</td>
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<td>Reflect on how well you think your costume performed regarding function and visual aesthetic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evaluation of your costume, listing any changes you would make in the future</td>
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<tr>
<td>List what you liked and disliked about designing and constructing a costume for a real-life stage play</td>
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<tr>
<td>List and explain valuable lessons experienced or learned by doing a real-world costume project</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rate the level of satisfaction felt at seeing your costume perform on the real stage in front of an audience</td>
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Once again, the feedback from this questionnaire helped reinforce my own thoughts. It was also a pleasant surprise to learn that the majority of students were very satisfied overall with the way in which the real-world project had been led, with some students commenting on:

- “The clarity of vision that the research material had given them for their design inspiration and interpretation of characters.”

With only one student stating:

- “(I) felt put out, as I couldn’t create an original idea.”

The rest of the students commenting:

- “Really good to focus on a particular time period, play & character – very satisfying and invaluable as a young designer.”
It was really cool to see the finished product actually being used and making the costume so that it worked for a certain era and character, I really like this project and it was really good for learning.”

“It was equally interesting and valuable to do. I learnt a lot, it was exciting seeing what my costume looked like on a real person and in the period. More time to do the project would have been good.”

“More effective and useable, it was good to see my costume being used and not just sitting in storage. It makes your work feel worth the effort and time put in to it.”

“Feedback from the costume women was good as it confirmed a couple of things I had thought of and things that I could have made easier for myself. I was really rewarding to see the costume functioning on stage as well. I would definitely do it again.”

“I found the real-life deadlines & situations valuable.”

It was clear from the questionnaire feedback that even those students who were initially reticent about the play’s subject matter, were soon motivated to design. However, after researching the playwright’s background, discussing and understanding the context of the play. They commented:

“Quite excited about designing for a set brief and stage play.”

“Very excited about the challenge.”

“I was very excited to be part of a real play and to possibly see my garment on a real actor.”

“It was a great experience and seeing it in action was amazing.”

“I felt good. It was going to be interesting to learn about easy adjustments and quick-change techniques.”

“Initially, I was not excited for this project because of the brief, but once I began designing, I really enjoyed it.”

“It was very interesting and a great opportunity to take part and do something new.”
The only negative issues expressed by the majority of participating costume students regarding this real-life collaboration was that there had been very little time and involvement or direction from the Theatre Company Director during the course of the timetabled classes. They commented:

- “Not having contact with the people we were designing for.”
- “Not knowing the sizes for the actors.”
- “Did not have the chance to meet the person who I had decided to design and produce costume.”

These unavoidable real-life issues made it virtually impossible to conduct an active collaborative engagement throughout. However, it did highlight the many challenges involved around combining experiential learning with assessment whilst allowing far greater problem-solving skills to emerge.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, the success of this real-world project was measured by the way in which most of the costume students were able to conduct and apply themselves by learning to adapt to the all too real unforeseen circumstances that occurred outside of their institutional learning environment. The students succeeded in producing twelve suitable costumes for stage out of a possible fourteen costumes, despite having virtually no outside communication reciprocated, information regarding actor’s sizes, historical or performance guidance from the Theatre Company. Due to the nature of this real-life situation, students recognised the need for greater flexibility and adjustability within their garments, and the importance for considered and cohesive historical research set both by the assessment criteria and the real-life context; that of a publicly performed stage play. Although the students experienced very little of the external communication hoped for, they learned how crucial good communication needed to be. Possibly learning so much more than had the project been a hypothetical classroom assessment.

It surely makes sense then, that if we as facilitators and tutors want our students to succeed we need to arm them with the right skills, knowledge and capabilities; placing equal importance on non-cognitive life-skills such as, good communication, adaptability, teamwork, time management, and professional conduct. What better way to do this than by introducing and integrating relevant, real-world scenarios into our assessments to assist our
way of teaching and enhance learning; enabling our graduates to grow as humans and go with confidence into an ever-changing complex real world. It may require extra time preparing, negotiating and thinking outside the box when events do not transpire the way one anticipates, but what better way to learn, reflect and highlight life after study.

References


