

Creating Interdisciplinary Collaborations in a Learner-centered Global Environment

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Abstract

Strategic initiatives for major US research universities include the increased emphasis on a global education that crosses the boundaries and confinement of structural departmental requirements. These cross discipline courses are emphasized but often difficult to implement for schools and departments who operate with less time, less money, fewer full time faculty and more university general education requirements. Students are anxious to study abroad but the constraints of additional tuition and expenses, transferability of credits earned, and lack of advising direction leave students pursuing for a more definitive and challenging experience. Through several years of strategic development and the emerging relationship with an on-site campus in Florence, Italy, the VCU Arts Design faculty developed a model for a cross-discipline, study abroad summer program (one month). Based on learning simulation and loosely on action learning principles, students from interior design, graphic design, fashion design and merchandising curriculums explored the inter-relationship of their fields of study. Students earned six credits in their major and three of which were the basis of their joint project. One course was team taught by the same VCU faculty members allowing students to explore Florence and its design history from three different perspectives: interior design and architecture, graphic design and fashion. Faculty rotated to a different discipline weekly so that all students viewed their environment with a “fresh” perspective. This paper will explore the strategic goals and program development of this cross discipline undergraduate experience, and address the student learning from co-curricular projects, and the opportunity to live and study abroad.

Introduction

For the past twenty plus years, higher education has attempted to globalize the undergraduate experience by establishing study abroad programs, creating off site campuses and partnering with universities around the world. Internationalizing or globalizing the university has also included more course work with a global perspective from “*international business*” or “*global religions of the world*” to the creation of degrees such as international economics or international business. In 2007 over 240,000 US students studied abroad which was a 150% increase in a ten year period. (Paige, Cohen, & Shively) In 2012, 274,000 US students studied abroad representing a 14% increase in just five years according to the Institute of International Education. At the same time the pressure to globalize academic programs increased, there has been equal pressure for program curriculum to become more cross disciplinary or trans- disciplinary. Described by Nowotny in 2003, “*transdisciplinary*” refers to the activity that transgresses disciplinary boundaries and transcends these boundaries in the integration and synthesis of content, theory and methodology from a number of disciplines in the new knowledge production (Russell, 2005).

In the summer of 2011, the design programs at Virginia Commonwealth University’s School of the Arts in Richmond, Virginia created a cross disciplinary set of courses to be taught over a one month period in Florence, Italy on the campus of Santa Reparata International School of Art. The students were enrolled in two three- credit courses: one providing required course content in their area of major study plus an elective course that explored the principles of design from different academic perspectives: interior, graphic and fashion design and fashion merchandising. The development of this program brought the design tracks in line with the university’s new strategic plan, *Quest for Distinction*, that emphasizes the “overarching goal to graduate students who are prepared to engage in a 21st century global environment”(<http://www.global.vcu.edu/strategies/>)

Adaption of Fashion Course for Italian Program

The fashion program took an established class, FASH 380 Fashion Branding as its core required course for fashion merchandising students (an elective for fashion design students) to be offered during the one month semester in Italy. The syllabus was adapted to accommodate a longer class period but a shorter semester. Content was compacted into a four week schedule meeting Monday through Thursday for three hours, 9:00 am to 12 noon. Theory and principles of fashion branding were covered but they emphasized the luxury market and Italian brands.

Course Description for Study Abroad:

FASH 380 Fashion Branding: This course is designed to introduce the student to the concept of fashion branding and the processes needed to successfully develop or re-develop a fashion brand in conjunction with Interior Design and Graphic Design students (morning class).

Field trips were planned into the day including a “scavenger hunt” the first day of class to get students into the city center and to explore the retail environment of Florence. Students were also assigned a small project to determine the top three Italian brands (from their perspective) including actual visits to these stores and

organizational information about each brand. Students had to defend their choice of the “best” brands. Group PowerPoint presentations on day three not only gave students a better sense of the city but required team building and critical thinking as well as set the foundation for their final group projects.

The culminating group research project (30% of the final grade) was the creation of a luxury brand extension for an Italian fashion label. Fashion design and merchandising students had to research fashion brands and determine an opportunity for a new line or extension of that brand based on the luxury marketplace demographics and buying behaviors. This took place by the end of week two of class meetings and when groups were assigned: two graphic design students and two interior design students to visualize and create this new brand extension that was developed by the fashion students. Graphic designers created an image or logo, hand tags, labels, store signage and other visual images. Interior design students were assigned a “space” by the interior design professor which they were to reflect the image and mood of the new brand extension. A written project and a presentation were assigned to be completed by the final class meeting and was evaluated by all three design track faculty.

All students were also enrolled in a second course call the *“Culture of Italian Design and Craft.”*

Course description for Study Abroad:

FASH 391 Culture of Italian Design and Craft: This course explores Italian fashion design, interior design, architecture and graphic design. Includes museums, guest speakers and local field trips. (afternoon class) Taught by all professors from each track. This is an elective for both tracks.

Graphic, fashion and interior design students spent the first week of this class visiting the great museums of Florence including the Uffizi, Bargello, Palazzo Pitti and learning their way around the city. Group dinners and evening walks for gelato were part of the bonding process ensuring that all students from the different departments got to know each other.

During the second week of class, fashion students developed a presentation for their peers in graphic and interior design so they could better understand the curriculum, knowledge and skills of fashion design and merchandising students. This presentation was edited by the fashion faculty and presented in the following weeks to the other students as the faculty circulated to the design fields. Qualifying and quantifying their knowledge and skills was an excellent experience for the fashion students as they also began to understand what designers and merchandisers actually were suppose to know. This second week was also deeply involved in visiting the fashion industry and historical fashion elements of the Florence museum scene. First students attended a private tour of the Ferragamo museum followed by a private tour of the Gucci Museum. Accompanied by an Italian fashion design professor from Santa Reparata International School of Art (SRISA), students visited the costume collection at the Pitti Palace. And finally, students visited the Santa Croce leather school for an extensive tour of the school and its facilities including an in-depth lecture about leather and accessory construction by the owner of the school.

Each Wednesday starting in week two, we combined all three departments for a guest speaker about each of the areas of study. The lecture was for one hour and was conducted by a practicing professional from each area: fashion, graphic and interior design. SRISA was gracious in making these professional contacts but also providing a translator when necessary. They also assisted in making appointments at the offices of graphic design and interior design firms in Florence. These guest speakers helped to ensure the Italian perspective while educating non-majors about the industry. For example, the interior design guest speaker had just renovated the offices of the Pucci fashion design firm.

During week three, the fashion faculty member presented the background information on the fashion industry and fashion design and merchandising skills to the graphic design students. They learned about how fashion “mirrors the times” and the importance of branding to the fashion luxury market. Armed with this new knowledge, they visited the fashion museums but through the eyes of graphic designers in their new world of fashion. The questions were different and reactions stronger as the world of fashion changed the graphic design student’s perceptions.

During week four, the process was repeated but for the interior design students. Each of the faculty members had created a similar experience as they “traded” students for the week. Fashion students saw Florence through the eyes of an interior designer/architect, and also through the perspective of a graphic designer.

Students were evaluated through attendance and a daily learning journal as well as an exam on the last day of class that required them to address their personal learning about: 1.) Fashion branding and the luxury Italian market, 2.) Italy and its culture and 3.) Themselves and how study abroad had impacted them.

Considerations and preplanning

Planning for summer study abroad began about 12 months prior to departure. First the relationship with SRISA had to be enhanced to accommodate the growth from a 10-15 student program to a 45 student program (15 students from each track) that would run simultaneously. Once the space (three classrooms) was confirmed and the price was determined, study abroad had to work with each individual program director to ensure that university policy was adhered to, programs were priced and that marketing brochures and website was in place.

Marketing was the single most important aspect of ensuring that the minimum of ten students was met so the fees would cover the cost of the faculty expenses. Several initial “interest” meetings were held beginning in early October discussing the costs, the advantages, and expectations. Student emails were collected and more meetings were scheduled for those students who were committed to the summer program. Each meeting included someone from the VCU Study Abroad office that could answer questions about fees, tuition, and the more general questions. Student financial aid was probably the most asked question, and because of the six credits earned in this summer program, students were eligible for the aid. In fact, out-of-state students who enrolled in the summer program actually saw a 40% savings because of the off campus rate for tuition.

Other considerations in determining who was eligible to study in Florence included a review of student grades, recommendation of a faculty member in their major, and

whether students had any evidence of infractions of university rules. For example, if a student was on academic warning for low grades or they had a letter stating an honor code violation or a drug/alcohol violation, they would not be considered for the program. Each program director reviewed applications and could deny a student the opportunity to study in summer if the faculty member/director felt it wasn't in the best interest of the student or the program.

Addressing the costs of the program for students, faculty and the university was a combined effort of the faculty directors, the study abroad finance director and SRISA. The experience of the Study Abroad office was the most important aspect that ensured the success of the program. They addressed the money component of the program including faculty costs, currency fluctuations, faculty housing, and faculty travel. Study Abroad was pivotal in all aspects of travel including medical emergencies, evacuation, expulsion of students, reimbursement of expenses and much more. Faculty directors took several courses on how to handle emergencies and what were the proper procedures to ensure the safety of students and faculty.

Obstacles

Preplanning for the logistics and the course assignments, and lack of local knowledge were the biggest obstacles to delivering a successful overseas program. The faculty directors had to rely on SRISA, as the host school, to provide appropriate housing for students and faculty. They also assisted with logistics such as field trips, guest speakers, providing classrooms and technology. SRISA had an orientation presentation addressing Italian cultural customs and personal safety in Florence. As with any large group, dynamics were sometimes a problem including interpersonal conflict amongst students but they were at a minimum.

Because all of the faculty directors had visited Florence prior to the summer session, there was a basic knowledge of the city and familiarity with international travel. The international experience of the faculty was significant and important to the success of the summer program. Students were often overwhelmed and sometimes homesick. Faculty did not have the luxury but to "hit the ground running" as everyday was filled with obstacles which were opportunities to learn about travel, culture and oneself.

Outcomes

The outcomes for the two fashion courses and this study experience can be summarized below:

- Students will understand the roots of the twentieth century language of form, function and style with an Italian perspective
- Students will recognize the significance of vital ideas and forms, emphasizing their global value for future reference and innovation
- Students will gain insights into the patterns and implications of the temporary design environment found in Italy
- Students will understand the history and background of branding in the US and globally.
- Students will demonstrate the value and importance of branding and its impact globally
- Students will understand the characteristics of brands and their types both domestically and internationally

- Students will explore the strategies of brand growth and development on a global scale
- Students will understand the relationship between brands and the media, communications and marketing principles.

These objectives were course work based but emphasized so much more than what is listed on each syllabus. First and foremost, the courses deliberately encouraged a “reflective” component in each evaluation opportunity. Students were asked to keep a daily journal for FASH 391 that encompassed not only academic learning but cultural and personal knowledge and growth. Some students chose to make a daily blog to share with friends and family while others bound their journal in print format for later additional reflection. The journal had to include at least 20 images either drawn or photographed. They were to include field trips, classroom learning and social events. The journal could be very personal and students could mark some aspects “personal” and they would not be read by the evaluating faculty member.

A final exam in the FASH 380 Fashion Branding course had three questions and students had to write a minimum of 2 pages for each questions in the 60 minute exam. The three questions were:

1. What did you learn about Fashion Branding?
2. What did you learn about Italy and the Italian culture?
3. What did you learn about yourself during the last month?

According to Ryan and Brough ((Ryan & Brough, 2012 Vol 5); “Academic reflection, where students reveal their thinking about key ideas of a professional discipline is both highly desirable yet elusive disposition for university teachers to cultivate.” The framework for the branding project underscored the real world experience where diverse teams work together to develop presentations and professional outcomes across disciplines. The branding team outcomes were exceptional based on the short time span and the learning curve. For example, one team developed a bridal brand extension for the *Marni* label that was professional and on point. Their presentation included how this new brand extension would fill a void in the marketplace and how they visualized the brand from three different perspective: interior store with visuals and explanations, graphics for every aspect of the brand and the logic and images of the brand from a fashion perspective.

The other major goal of this summer program was to provide a cross discipline approach to teaching a core subject for each track including the creation of a unifying project that would require students to work across their discipline and comfort zone. As discussed above, the branding project was a cross discipline project that was meant to develop professional skills and application of new knowledge while facing the challenges of an unfamiliar environment and subject matter. The FASH 391 course that was replicated under the same number GDES 391 and IDES 391 provided students with the basic knowledge of a new field that they could build upon while using their core subject matter knowledge to complete a multi-disciplinary outcome.

Conclusions

The 2012 summer program in Florence, Italy was very successful based on student evaluations and the faculty director’s responses. In the following year, the faculty directors found that the recruitment for 2013 session was made easier by the previous

year's participants. All programs were at full capacity and will run again in summer 2014. Faculty have embraced this holistic approach and have expanded outside of the School of the Arts to include the School of Business's Marketing department and other departments within the school such as the Communication Arts department.

Minor changes have been made to the course content and the projects based on student and faculty input for 2014. For example, the branding project will only allow brand extensions and not be involved with rebranding of dated Italian brands as was allowed the first session. Student presentations will be made to faculty and outside professionals from the industry.

Overall, the faculty directors, Study Abroad and SRISA hope to continue a long and mutually beneficial relationship/partnership that will endure the changes in faculty, programs, and the university's vision. The Fashion in Florence program hopes to prepare students for a global fashion economy and to "*internationalize*" the fashion curriculum to align with the VCU's Quest for Distinction.

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