AROQ Just-style.com
your best choice for textile, apparel and footwear industry news, analysis and research

Feature Article

Educating students for a global industry

03 May 2004
Source: just-style.com

The increasingly global nature of the fashion industry has made it imperative for apparel and textile students to recognise the value of cultural awareness and adaptability. Here, assistant professor of the Fashion Industry Management Department at Philadelphia University, Natalie R Weathers, tells of her experiences in fostering such skills at an academic level, and the role industry can play in this development.

In December 2003, I presented a paper at the Asian Textile Conference in Delhi, India entitled 'Educating Textile and Apparel Students for the 21st Century'. I was concerned with how those of us who are educating the merchants, designers and sourcing strategists of tomorrow could use teaching methods and a teaching philosophy that produced broad minded and critically thinking students.

Attendees at the conference hailed from countries such as India, Iran, the Czech Republic and South Korea. Despite the vast geographic range represented, it was clear that we were all concerned with the same basic goal: how do we educate students who will best serve an industry that is constantly changing and requires technical competency?

Teaching textiles and apparel necessarily incorporates aspects of culture, public policy and international relations. Industry experience has taught me that issues of culture were sometimes overlooked in forging business relationships, and this was unfortunate.

The textile and apparel industries have been the nexus for economic development in countries throughout the world. Subsequently this is a field that attracts students from a range of backgrounds and perspectives.

There are three basic stakeholders in this educational effort: the university, the industry (employers) and the students themselves. It was very clear from the comments and questions after my presentation that there is a tension between the industry's demands and academia's supply.

Academia struggles to maintain a balance between producing the "super-student" (one who will excel in his or her first month on the job) and the adaptable "generalist student" (one who industry has told us is not expected to know the ins and outs of a company immediately). The newly minted graduates should know how to "think first" and that a lot of the real training will be on the job.

The textile and apparel students graduating today will need to understand how to work as a team, often in virtual contexts (via email, video or teleconferencing) in order to problem solve with colleagues whose backgrounds are different from their own. Their colleagues will be different from them culturally and complementary in terms of skill base.

Gone is the American apparel firm whose vendors are based in the southern United States and whose customers range from New York City to Los Angeles, with colleagues whose first language is English and with everyone operating in the same time zone. More often today, management values are an organisational structure based on teams consisting of individuals with complementary skill sets.

Because our industry is a global one, it is imperative that associates appreciate working with people who are different from them, and have had some exposure and practice doing so. In fact, management will seek out employees whose added value is having a "modular sensibility" - ie, an ability to adapt in terms of culture and

skill set - to get the job done. The old paradigm required tolerance. The new paradigm requires engagement.

The student as stakeholder
Looking at Philadelphia University as an example, students attracted to studying textiles and apparel are coming from all over the world and from a range of backgrounds.

However, despite this broad pull, the bait that got them hooked to studying fashion in the first place was often a narrow one: the family business, or the local shopping mall. That is, they enter these studies relatively naïve about the complexity, breadth and global aspects of what is involved in designing, manufacturing and marketing (for example) a pair of khaki pants for Abercrombie and Fitch.

For many of the American students, their introduction to fashion is via the shopping mall or fashion programmes on cable television. Conversely, many foreign students (those from Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe) are attracted to such programmes either to add value to their family business or to follow a career trajectory where they will work in the United States in the retail and marketing side of the industry. The foreign students' perspective may often be more global than the American students' perspective because they are exposed to the international customers of their family's business.

The international students at Philadelphia University make up a revealing barometer of where the locus of production has shifted. For example, in the recent past, there has been a growing representation of students from Turkey in the university's School of Textiles.

Correspondingly, I had a conversation with a men's wear designer who said that on a recent sourcing trip to Turkey the level of sophistication in product from Turkish knitting mills was beginning to surpass that of what he has seen in Italy! Also, at the beginning of each season I browse through the specialty chain stores to collect raw data on country of origin labels. At H&M and The Limited stores for the autumn 2003 season, approximately half of all knitwear was made in Turkey.

What an awesome asset, then, these international students are for their American counterparts, some of whom have never set foot in a factory or a mill. There is a great opportunity to draw on the backgrounds and experiences of each other to have a holistic understanding of what is involved in today's apparel industry, and who is involved.

Students are not only interested in the nuts and bolts of the science of textiles or the engineering involved in managing an apparel factory; they are also interested in human rights issues, social compliance, environmentalism and the impact of new public policies on the apparel and textile industries.

They embrace learning about the human aspect involved in developing a sourcing strategy. They appreciate learning the historical context of sweatshops in America. They want to debate the ethics of a company faced with closing down a factory that was in violation of US labour standards, but faced with the reality that the closing of that factory will mean the loss of jobs for women in the immediate area.

The presence of those foreign students from countries where children often work to help bring in money to feed their families adds an important component to these types of discussions. For example, while American students are fervently insisting that it is wrong for children to work, that they should be in school, a student who comes from a country where education for every child can not be assumed, points out that the case is not so simple.

This provides a great "teaching moment" and opens an entire lesson on cultural relativism and the many shades of grey that exist. Students learn in studying business choices within the apparel industry that few things are "black and white".

Preparing for today's industry
There are two components of looking at students' preparation for industry today: the content of what they are learning, and the means by which they learn the content.

The content of today's curriculum adds value. In addition to learning the core components of design,

manufacturing or marketing, a significant portion pulls in technology, public policy, foreign language skills, analytical skills and cultural awareness.

Because technology has become the engine of how textile and apparel businesses run, students need to learn, or at least be exposed to, CAD (computer aided design), automated marker making, software such as that developed by General Sewing Data, and information systems that depend on EDI1 and CIM2 communication within and between organisations.

Even if the students do not use these technological tools on a daily basis once they enter the workplace, exposure to technology introduces students to the applications that assist in working through the constraints and pressures of the industry. This exposure equips them with the knowledge to ask the right questions.

The analytical skills should be ones that train students on how to connect the dots, delve beneath the surface and ask critical questions. Analytical skills can be cultivated in the traditional research paper, but also in classes that alternate between lecture and seminar formats.

It is very easy for American students to get by with only knowing English, because most of the world caters to the English language. However, an educational environment that requires and encourages foreign language study will be doing its students and the industry a big favour.

Language is the window into a culture and once one knows the language of a people, the world from their point of view becomes clearer and more accessible. Language can either be the bridge that connects us to each other, or the barrier that ensures our understanding of one another will be limited. We have all heard the phrase "something got lost in the translation" - a confirmation that some concepts can only be understood once you cross over to "my side" and I give you my culture's words to express it.

Educating students to learn more than their own native language is practical and builds global citizens.

The importance of culture

Culture is not some touchy-feely abstraction. Integrating cultural understanding as a tool for learning is very useful. Culture is our learned behaviour, our way of making sense of the world given our environment. In business, each associate's cultural background is a reality to be reckoned with when it comes to communicating effectively, getting an order out on time, and working collaboratively. Culture matters because it is the means of getting the job done, and depending on where we come from, we will each approach the challenges that arise differently.

Thus, it is necessary for professionals in textiles and apparel to be not only conscious of the way others approach problems and challenges, but also to be self-conscious about the ways we ourselves approach those challenges and the assumptions we make. Why risk poor communication, inadequate negotiating skills and lost business to understand that?

One of the courses I teach is 'Apparel Production' to students studying Fashion Design and Fashion Industry Management. Students leave this course with an understanding of topics such as loading a factory line, PBS3 versus modular manufacturing, quality control and the pros and cons of different needle types.

However, students also leave the course having been exposed to the cultural issues involved in building a sourcing strategy, or the cultural implications of having an on-the-ground presence for quality control management. In the way that I teach 'Apparel Production', it is necessary to incorporate issues of political stability, culture, and human resource management.

For instance, it is interesting to examine the different ways in which an American sourcing agent and an Indonesian factory manager might deal with the dilemma of late fabric delivery from the mill to the factory.

The Indonesian, in order to "save face", may delay until the last possible moment to explain to the American that the fabric delivery will be delayed for two weeks. For the Indonesian it is a matter of pride and a desire to demonstrate competency that cautions them against revealing the problem to the American partner. Indeed, the Indonesian factory manager may have experienced wrath from the American in the past when he or she

presented bad news but did not have an alternative backup plan.

Suppose in this example that by the time the Indonesian associate notifies the American of the problem, the delay has extended to three weeks and in the meantime the American agent has promised the retailer (customer) that they will be able to increase the order incrementally over the next 2 months with "no problem". The American now views the Indonesian as not having worked as a team player, as being "irresponsible", closed and uncommunicative. The Indonesian views the American as harsh, crass, unrealistic and not comprehending the complexity of the situation.

If expectations of how to problem-solve are laid out respectfully on both sides ahead of time, then problem solving can happen jointly and with minimal stress to the business relationship.

Teaching methods
These types of situations can be avoided in the future by exposing students to real life challenges. One way is by incorporating group projects into curricula so that students simulate a situation like the one above.

For example, in my 'Survey of The Apparel Industry' course, students complete a group project where they design, merchandise and produce a sewn product for a needy organisation in Philadelphia. In the past students have produced products such as smocks for children's after school programs; head coverings for patients recovering from cancer; and curtains for new homeowners in the Habitat for Humanity organisation.

Within each mock company, students are divided into marketing, merchandising and manufacturing teams. Inevitably, this simulated structure of industry exposes students to many frustrations that occur regularly within industry. For example, a designer may want to change details at the last minute in response to a new marketing analysis, or a manufacturer may have to delay the start of production because it is unable to procure high quality fabric on time.

While this project is only a semester long, and a simulation, students are forced to communicate with one another, take ownership and contribute where they have a skill that complements the group. They come away from the project with enhanced skills for working in a team and knowing to leave assumptions at the door in order to work well with people. Those two by-products are transferable to future employment where they may one day work in a foreign country or with a global interdisciplinary team on a new product development initiative.

Team-based learning becomes a way to prepare students to work in teams internationally. Team-based projects are often awkward, uncomfortable and inefficient in the beginning. It is an educator's job to create a structure within which students can re-channel that discomfort. They learn to use each other and work with one another to problem-solve and to complement each other's strengths and weaknesses. To the extent that reality in the apparel industry can be simulated - where the only thing one can count on is change - then the better the project is for students in terms of learning about process.

Another way in which academia can expose students to being culturally sensitive is by providing opportunities to study abroad. At Philadelphia University, the most popular semester-long programs for apparel-oriented students are in Rome, Italy and London, England, but there are an increasing number of two-week "short courses". Short courses have grown in popularity because they are more affordable than semester-long programs while still giving students exposure to industry in a foreign cultural environment.

One example of this was a two-week short course for students studying Fashion Industry Management and Fashion Merchandising in Cuernavaca, Mexico. In this course, students took mini-seminars with professors from the business school, attended lectures from managers of local factories and mills, visited these firms and did a group project where they developed a strategic plan based on a real life industry problem in Mexico.

The industry as stakeholder
Private apparel and textile firms have traditionally been a tremendous asset in the education process by donating funding to colleges and universities and by providing internships to blossoming students.

However, there may be some additional ways for industry and educational institutions to collaborate. The model is found in other industries such as financial services or technology where management training

programs are rampant. For example, there are few textile or apparel firms that aggressively recruit newly minted MBA students from top universities to be employed in management training programs.

One reason for this may be due to the fact that textiles and apparel have historically consisted of family-run businesses. This has often translated into an insular environment that doesn't welcome "outsiders". Textiles and apparel are fields where associates work their way up the ladder. It is rare that a non-garmento with an MBA or other advanced degree be admitted seamlessly into the management ranks. While other industries welcome a newcomer who may bring "outside the box thinking" to business growth, apparel and textile firms have been slow to be open to this possibility.

What can result is a reactionary stance to changing markets, to incorporate new technologies and to be open in general. The lack of openness, even on a very subconscious level, negatively affects the way associates respond to cultural differences.

If we begin now to encourage atypical employees with valuable skills, who add value in an interdisciplinary way, then more apparel and textile firms will be touted as models to learn from. Additionally, an enriched relationship is established between academia and those apparel and textile firms who seek innovative employees.

Some of the ways in which textile and apparel firms can participate in the education of students include giving feedback to deans and professors, setting up advisory councils for schools and departments, sponsorship of professors to work in firms on either an observatory or consultancy basis, internships for students, management training programs for graduates, and continuing education for their own employees at colleges and universities with relevant coursework.

Breaking down barriers

One could argue that these points about the importance of integrating culture and the like are important to all industries. This is true, but culture plays a unique role in the apparel and textile industries because they are global industries where very few businesses can afford to work within the comfort zone of their own cultural norms.

The rate of adapting to change is more intense given that apparel and textile manufacturers are dictated to by market driven economies.

Whether you are the Swedish retailer who has become a hit success in America, or the South African apparel mogul who goes from being king of the hill in South Africa to naïve newcomer in the US market under the African Growth and Opportunity Act, cultural sensitivity is a crucial and often-overlooked skill.

As we approach 2005 and the diminishment of the quota system, the message is that barriers are going away both symbolically and in reality. The more we educate to have a "modular sensibility" so that today's students will be responsive colleagues and leaders (versus reactionary ones), the better off we will be as an industry.

It is necessary for both the academic and the apparel/textile corporations to work in alliance and to learn from one another. It benefits each of us, on an individual level, to align and look forward to our differences in order to grow. We are an industry where the high rate of change dictates that we get to know each other better.

By Natalie R Weathers.

VAT No: GB785642391. REGISTERED IN ENGLAND No: 4307068.
Tel: +44 (0)1527 573600 Intl. 1-866-545-5878 Toll Free US.
Fax: +44 (0)1527 577423. Email: info@aroq.com