Chapter 18

A Costume Odyssey a.k.a. Teaching Costume History in a 21st Century Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will explain how we have integrated the Course Management System-WebCT into the teaching of Costume History at the University of Houston’s School of Theatre and Dance. It will focus on two topics, (1) delivering the course in hybrid mode to enhance student learning experiences, and (2) conducting course evaluation to collect student feedback on the course design and delivery for future improvement.

INTRODUCTION

The University of Houston, as an urban University, with a large enrollment, limited classroom space and a predominantly commuter student population already utilizing sophisticated computer technologies and networking tools in their learning environment, Costume History seemed a likely candidate to be modified for delivery in hybrid mode. The course content of any Costume History class depends heavily on visual images, extant vintage garments, various museum collections and a variety of art works. The support graphics chosen to illuminate a particular era must be both appropriate and authentic. The available textbooks are often inadequate in either their scope or their specificity, prohibitive in their cost or in some cases out of print. WebCT delivery facilitates solutions to all of these concerns.

Costume History is an investigation through visual resources into the Art of Dress. The emphasis of Theatre 3364 and 6634 courses is on how dress reflects the values of our western culture and our western civilization. The greater is the exposure to the art, the furniture, the technology and the fashion of an era, the greater is the appreciation of the attitudes that they reflect. In the History of Costume the goal is to visually verify the importance of clothing as an essential form of communication revealing status, identity, aspirations and attitudes. In the theatre, a discipline devoted to the
presentation of dramatic actions, it is beneficial for a student to understand and recognize their garments as more than clothing. It is important for them to appreciate their clothing or costume as a physical extension of their personae. It is critical for them to take personal responsibility for their learning of the material by taking the initiative in the weekly research assignments. The Course Management System - WebCT offers help in achieving these goals. With the assistance of an instructional designer, the instructor was able to pick and choose the tools that are most appropriate for the theatre majors.

DELIVERING COURSE IN HYBRID MODE

A principle objective of a course in Costume History in a School of Theater and Dance is to familiarize the students with the important vocabulary, concepts and theories related to the evolution of clothing in each of the eras that are studied. WebCT allows the students to actively manage their learning expectations in a virtual classroom. The course is delivered in a hybrid mode in which students and the instructor meets face to face weekly with a lecture utilizing the same web information that is then available to them 24/7. The ubiquitous availability of this data introduced in the classroom setting is one of the greatest benefits of the web management option. The advantage of this hybrid mode allows the instructor to offer weekly navigational guidance on a face to face basis. This guidance steers them through the delivery and format of the course materials. By maintaining a consistent unit protocol, the student becomes familiar with the delivery system repeated in each chapter. This protocol becomes comfortable so that the focus pleasantly migrates the attention to the data to be digested.

The course Introduction literally raises the curtain on a parade of fashionable attired individuals representing the silhouette of each of the eras that will be covered during the semester. This runway is delightfully accompanied by the familiar theme music of 2001 A Space Odyssey. The recognition of this theme both introduces and reinforces the overall objective of this course as a personal odyssey into the history of clothing. Figure 1 is the screen capture of the course instruction.

The Syllabus is revised yearly to include changes in the organization of the class, the objectives, the books on reserve in the library and the expectation for the rubric governing their weekly costume plates. To enhance this narrative, a link is provided to demonstrate the format expected in each of their unit assignments. The grading
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