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# Teaching Social Justice through Three Time Periods of Sweatshop History

Teaching Social Justice

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Abstract Due to the plethora of political, economic, and social challenges experienced on a global scale in the 21st century, students need to be concerned with more than their immediate surroundings (Johnson, 2005). When implemented in an educational setting, topics encompassing social justice may provide students with the confidence and skills to become "reflective, moral, caring, and active citizens in a troubled world" (Banks and Banks, 2009, p.5). The purpose of this article was to provide examples of undergraduate lessons focused on sweatshop conditions within three time periods of United States history that incorporate social justice into the course curriculum. By implementing social justice lessons into the curriculum, students can engage in critical reading, writing, and thinking about injustices faced by society. Girded with knowledge of past oppression within the apparel industry, students may become actively engaged in challenging social injustices in our world.

Key words Sweatshops, Social, Justice, History, Apparel, Undergraduate

# Introduction

Due to the plethora of political, economic, and social challenges experienced on a global scale in the 21st century, students need to be concerned with more than their immediate surroundings (Johnson, 2005). The ability to approach the world from various vantage points will prove advantageous to current students and future leaders. When implemented in an educational setting, topics encompassing social justice, such as environmental, socio-economic, and labor issues may provide students with the confidence and skills to become "reflective, moral, caring, and active citizens in a troubled world" (Banks and Banks, 2009, p.5).

Scholars have defined the term social justice in a variety of ways, ranging from the equitable resource distribution of goods and societal positions to the fair and just execution of the law. More commonly, social justice can be described as the overall structure and institutional context of society and the effects of domination and oppression that fuel injustice (Gewirtz, 1998; Young, 1990). The idea of social justice implies that there are socially constructed inequalities, which are deeply ingrained in present day society, and must be overcome to create an equally just world. Ideally, society should be forced to eliminate the injustices that citizens encounter (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1997).

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Some universities, colleges, and other educational institutions have incorporated the understanding of social justice components into their curriculum and learning objectives (Iowa State University, 2014). Social justice curriculum expectations of students generally include the idea of gaining a clear concept of equality and promoting awareness of the inequalities in society. The overall goal of integrating social justice into undergraduate curriculum is the transformation of society and elimination of oppressive institutions. However some faculty may struggle to develop learning activities to address social justice within their curriculum (Li, 2013).

The purpose of this research was to provide examples of undergraduate textiles and apparel lessons that incorporate social justice into the course curriculum. Three periods of sweatshop conditions in the United States ready-to-wear apparel industry including: 1880-1915, the 1930s, and the 1990s were selected because they represented significant occurrences in the history of sweatshops in the United States, including demonstrations held by unions, disasters, government legislation, and coverage by the popular press media.

# **Background Information**

Sweatshops are found in almost all industries, but are most often associated with the garment trade. The term "sweatshop" became a part of the general English language around the late 1880s to early 1890s. It described the abusive labor practices carried out by ready-to-wear manufacturers (Bender, 2002; Liebhold and Rubenstein, 1999). The manufacturers were called "sweaters," for they were, "an employer who underpays and overworks his employees, especially a contractor for piecework in the tailoring trade" (Liebhold and Rubenstein, 1999, p.11). Regardless of the type of work, sweatshops have remained, "an exploitative workplace associated with the garment trades and still synonymous with the lowest most degrading kind of American employment" (Hapke, 2004, p.1).

Sweatshop environments within the ready-to-wear apparel industry may be considered a topic of social justice. Sweatshops were, and continue today, as immoral workplaces where employees work long hours, for minimal pay, in unsafe and unhealthy conditions (Bender & Greenwald, 2003). They began in the United States prior to the 20th century and still exist in the 21st century. In most cases, sweated garment workers have included immigrants, individuals of a minority ethnic race, undocumented or non-native English speakers, and women. Sweatshops are violators of domestic and international labor and human rights laws, with conditions that create one of the most dangerous and physically arduous working environments (Brooks, 2007; Dickson, Loker, and Eckman, 2009).

Repeatedly, sweatshop conditions have been brought to the forefront of the public's consciousness as specific events have captured sympathy. However, the topic seems soon forgotten as the events became less current. By studying sweatshop conditions in the U.S. ready-to-wear apparel industry, students can learn about the lack of societal benefits afforded to marginalized workers (Green, 1996). Hapke (2004) stated, "Charting the idea of sweatshops to the citizens of the United States is an important act of historical reconstruction" (p. 5). She further discussed that learning about sweatshops should be done through remembrance and acknowledgement of the struggle, the history, and the institution (Hapke, 2004). Because of the difficulty in establishing a voluntary boycott of products made in sweatshops and the more difficult deconstruction of the system of competition that produces sweatshops in a capitalistic economy, it is more achievable to protect the workers through laws and awareness (Tuckwell, 1906/1980).

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Examining sweatshops of the past can provide "a foundation for understanding the dynamics of the present" (Ulrich, 1995, p.49). Examples of the treatment, lack of opportunities, and conditions of workers in the garment industry can offer students a learning experience that addresses social justice core curriculum components implemented by many universities. Girded with knowledge of past oppression within the apparel industry, students may become actively engaged in challenging social injustices in our world.

# Methods

This study explored the history of sweatshops in the garment industry and applied the content to create lesson plans for undergraduate instruction. The time period 1880 to 1915 represented the growth of apparel manufacturing in the United States as well as the formation of industry unions. The 1930s marked the Great Depression. During that time, legislation was passed to restore and revive many industries, including enactment of codes of conduct to provide a safe working environment for workers. In the 1990s, the apparel industry shifted to one of off-shore production to save on labor and production costs; and sweatshops proliferated both globally and domestically. The lessons derived from the authors' searching of literature related to sweatshops within these three time periods. The periods corresponded to the dates covered in the authors' Twentieth Century Fashion history course. The course begins with discussion of the late nineteenth century and finishes with examination of the 1990s period.

The three lessons were incorporated into an online writing assignment in a junior level history of dress course at a land-grant university within the Midwestern United States. These online lessons and student generated written posts were developed as part of the first authors' master's thesis work. The College in which the authors belong, established four undergraduate core curriculum components in 2009 that guide expectations for all undergraduate learning. These components include: communication, self-assessment/self-reflection, critical thinking, and social justice. According to the College, the core learning outcome of the social justice component is to "articulate and demonstrate a clear concept of a just society in which individuals and groups equitably share in societal benefits within a global community" (College of Human Sciences, 2009). To meet the curriculum expectation, a student must demonstrate an "appropriate level of competence in at least one significant educational activity embedded in coursework at introductory, intermediate and advanced levels" (College of Human Sciences, 2009).

The core competencies that direct the College are echoed by the International Textiles and Apparel Association, "a professional, educational association for scholars, educators and students in the textile, apparel, and merchandising disciplines in higher education" (ITAA, "About Us," para 3, n. d.). Meta-goals

IJCF Vol.15 No.1 that direct curriculum of apparel baccalaureate programs guide the development of "creative, knowledgeable, and effective professionals" (para 2) that will contribute to the industry and field (ITAA, "Meta-goals," 2008). According to ITAA, graduates of apparel programs should be capable of comprehending and utilizing knowledge regarding the depth and ability of dress to create cross-cultural connections grounded in historical, political, societal, and psychological factors. Graduates should also recognize how these factors impact industry processes and employ both critical and creative thinking skills to critically evaluate and compare diverse perspectives, as well as understand how diverse individuals have influenced the apparel industry (ITAA, "Meta-goals," 2008). The lessons were developed by the first author to provide an example of curriculum that might meet the expectations held by the College and the International Textile and Apparel Association.

The sixty-five students enrolled in the course were instructed to log into the course Black Board website and view the three lessons. Following their examination of the lessons and reading of the lesson materials, the students were prompted to respond to instructor-posted questions. Following the completion of the assignment, the authors read each of the students' posts. Respective quotes from each of the three time periods were selected to illustrate the students' perspectives following their reading of the material (Spiggle, 1994). The authors selected the comments that were most commonly stated by the majority of students.

#### Sweatshops from 1880 to 1915

At the beginning of the twentieth century, women's apparel manufacturing in the United States was a fledgling industry based on the production of corsets, bustles, and outer wraps. American firms expanded dramatically after 1900, at least in part due to the shift in population to major cities (Farrell-Beck and Parsons, 2007). In New York City, the industry's center, the number of women's apparel companies grew 350% between 1900 and 1917, increasing from 1,856 to 6,392 firms (Selekman, Walter, and Couper, 1925). By 1900, sweatshops were located any and everywhere (Hapke, 2004). They ranged from small to large spaces within factories and homes and rarely included bathrooms or drinking water. Workers often had to pay for machine use, electricity, chairs and materials (Dickson et al., 2009; Starr, 1948). The worse the conditions and the more illegal the violations a shop could face, the harder it would be to find the location. Pauline Newman, a garment worker described the setting:

I will remember the factories being located in basements and backyards; no proper ventilation, hardly any illumination except gas jets burning from morning till night, no toilet facilities except in the yards. Filth and dirt were a part of the industry. I remember working from 70 to 80 hours a week, seven days a week. The factories were very dangerous indeed —they were practically fire traps. We endangered our lives every day we spent there (Starr, 1948, p.194).

Before 1890, several attempts were made to initiate unions within the apparel industry, with little

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progress, largely because the work was decentralized, completed by a majority female and immigrant workforce, and the industry had only just begun to thrive. As time progressed, more unions were developed as the heterogeneity of workers in gender and nationality, educational awareness, and the continued contracting system ensured that they were needed. Labor organizations worked to rid the garment industry of sweatshops (Pope, 1905/1970). Groups included the National Consumers League (founded 1899), the United Textile Workers of America (founded 1901), the National Women's Trade Union League (founded 1903), and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (founded 1914) (Hapke, 2004; Liebhold and Rubenstein, 1999). In 1900, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) founded the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) as a charter. The ILGWU focused on the welfare of women and children in sweatshop factories and advocated worker education and industrial rights. The ILGWU education program strove to prepare immigrant workers for full-time citizenship and active political participation (Starr, 1948).

Unions, such as the National Consumers League and the ILGWU, used the idea of clothing manufactured in disease-infested areas as a possible transmission route to consumers, as a way to increase societal awareness of sweatshops (Pope, 1905/1970). Other strategies included branches of unions working together to strike and protest to make a larger impact. Workers were eager to fight for better conditions and many of the first strikes and walkouts were against the poor working conditions in garment factories (Hapke, 2004).

#### Sweatshops and Legislation during the 1930s

By the 1920s, little conversation existed regarding sweatshops, especially related to the oppressiveness of the system on the human workforce. Any discussion relegated the sweatshop as a memory of the past (Bender, 2002; Hapke, 2004). In 1929, the stock market crash sent the United States into a financial tailspin. The Depression initially had little effect on the New York City garment trade as it remained the preeminent center for production in the United States (Marcketti, 2010). As the decade progressed, however, businesses in the apparel industry, mostly high-end firms, began to close from bankruptcy. Thousands of people lost their jobs, including many union members, forcing individuals to take what work they could get, including the worst of sweatshop employment (Hapke, 2004).

The intense retail competition caused by the Depression magnified the importance of a differentiated product and presentation (Farrell-Beck and Parsons, 2007). Workers maintained 60 to 70 hour work weeks for a couple of dollars in unsafe and unsanitary conditions. Consumer groups urged shoppers to recognize that the lowest priced items were often sweatshop-produced (Ulrich, 1995).

In November 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) was elected President of the United States. FDR and his administration believed that the Depression occurred, in part, because of the under consumption of a low paid workforce. Congress held a special session in 1933 for FDR to present his New Deal policies which included several programs for the domestic rebuilding of the country (Liebhold and Rubenstein, 1999). In the New Deal policies, sweatshops were recognized as both legally and morally

wrong (Hapke, 2004).

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A New Deal policy, the National Recovery Act (NRA) promised to aid the industries of America. The NRA made it illegal for employers to oppose labor organizations and fought against sweatshops and child labor. It called for trade associations to create "codes of fair practices and competition" which were subject to government approval (Cates, 1934). The codes were needed to help the country out of the Depression, by recovering both industry and employment. The hope for the codes established by various industries, but specifically in the garment industry, was better working conditions, the elimination of dishonest competition, and the repair of the relationship between consumers and workers (Marcketti, 2010). FDR and his administration believed that giving workers the ability to become consumers once again would kick-start the American economy (Hapke, 2004).

Although the NRA was ruled unconstitutional in 1935, it paved the way for other legislation, such as the 1935 National Labor Relations Act which declared employees had the right to organize and bargain collectively, and the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act which standardized a minimum wage (Fitzpatrick, 2009). Further, the NRA contributed to the revival of the union. As stated by David Dubinsky, the longest serving President of the ILGWU, "because of the NRA we are not hated any more. The word 'union' is not a curse. The government said that labor has a right to organize" (Parmet, 2005, p. 101).

#### Sweatshops during the 1990s

Beginning in the 1940s, immigration laws fostered the migration of people from China, Korea, Southeast Asia, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and other countries in Central and South America. An increased reliance on contracting allowed the new immigrant population to be exploited by sweatshops on American soil (Green, 1996; Liebhold and Rubenstein, 1999a).

As sweatshops continued in America, they also emerged throughout the world. Beginning in the 1960s, the retail industry became increasingly global, with garments cut and sewn in one country and finished in another, with no sole location for the construction of a garment (Liebhold and Rubenstein, 1999). By the middle of the 1970's, American manufacturing had declined as manufacturers were able to pay overseas workers less and reduce their manufacturing costs, ultimately reducing the price for the consumer. With the increase in overseas production, union membership decreased, lowering protection for those who worked domestically (Hapke, 2004).

The U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), in 1994, defined the sweatshop as a workplace that violated more than one federal or state labor law. These violations included minimum wage, overtime, child labor, and occupational health, among others. The definition given by GAO made the sweatshop a quantifiable place, allowing estimations to be made regarding where they were located; however it disregarded the complexity of causes for sweatshop abuse (Bender, 2002).

Efforts to improve sweatshop conditions by labor organizations in the late 20th century proved difficult because the garment industry was increasingly complex and had many hierarchal chains (Brooks, 2007). In an effort to increase effectiveness, the ILGWU and the ACW merged in 1995 to become the Teaching Social Union of Needletrades Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE). UNITE worked to organize the new group of garment workers and tried to use public examples of sweatshop conditions to increase awareness (Wolensky, 2003).

## Lesson Plans

In the following section, the lessons developed for the periods 1880-1915, 1930s, and 1990s are presented. Each lesson plan includes a short summary of the assignment and a description of instructions followed by representative student comments.

### 1880s-1915

Within the course website BlackBoard, students were instructed to view the Lower East Side Tenement Museum's virtual tour of a reproduced tenement building and information about the living and working conditions of the families who lived there (The Lower East Side Tenement Museum, 2009). The visualization of the experiences, lives, and hardships faced by immigrant garment workers that lived in New York's Lower East Side demonstrated the ways in which the home played a vital role in the sweatshop production of garments.

Upon viewing the website, students were asked to post reflection comments on BlackBoard to the questions: What did you find interesting about the virtual tour? What was life like for immigrants that lived in tenements in New York City's Lower East Side? What are the key differences and similarities from work done today in homes to work completed in the early 1900s? What would be the consequences of tenement manufacturing today?

In their reflections students alluded to the poor quality of life lived by immigrants, particularly discussing the hardship and difficulties faced in tenement housing because of lack of space. Students commented that the "American Dream" was unrealistic and did not immediately come to fruition. One student stated, "Many of these families traveled to America expecting a better life and in all reality life was not much better for them, for some it was worse." An overall element of surprise on behalf of the students, regarding the condition and history of tenement housing led to comments such "they were able to function every day in a way I do not think today's Americans would be able to under those circumstances."

## 1930s

Many labor unions function with the overarching goal of improving quality of life for their members and other industrial workers. The ILGWU used cultural and educational initiatives to teach, encourage, and provide recreational activities for their membership (Foner, Rich, & Bernstein, 2010). Students were instructed to go to the ILGWU website and respond to the question: What information did you learn about Justice

#### the ILGWU?

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In this lesson students were exposed to unions, along with the struggles and involvement of workers to secure and maintain fair and humane work conditions. Students posted comments such as, "even though they all come from different places culturally. The fact that they were able to overcome language and cultural barriers to come together for a common cause is pretty cool." Several students indicated a shift in their regard for the immigrant labor force. An example of which: "immigrants are usually portrayed as being willing to take the low paying jobs and not fight for better working conditions. This article showed a different side." One student expressed, "I found it inspirational how the public united to fight for the cause. I feel like back then the public had more of a voice and an influence on the country."

#### 1990s

Sweatshops and sweatshop conditions continued into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The exhibit *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* held at the National Museum of American History features representatives from garment brands, political figures and activists, as well as union members ("Between a Rock and a Hard Place," n.d.). Students were instructed to examine six selected spokesperson's statements about U.S. sweatshops and respond to the following question: Which spokesperson's statement was the most compelling to you? Why?

Students discussed feeling emotion due to a statement made by contributor Julie Su, a community activist and lawyer, regarding social responsibility, where "manufacturers need to realize that immigrants, no matter how poor, do not check their humanity at the border." Students agreed that it is important to treat all people with respect, regardless of their background and that taking advantage of workers was unfair and inhumane.

Several students argued that by raising awareness, sweatshops can be prevented. Concern for awareness was encouraged at the consumer level, as citizens of the world, and for manufacturers to know where and how their product is being made. Others resonated with comments made by celebrity designer Kathie Lee Gifford, which prescribed action as the only way to rid the world of sweatshops. One student commented, "Although some companies seem to be operating for a good cause, we need to triple check the details and use our own common sense. But anger won't solve the problem. Only action will." Students stated that consumers, themselves included, needed to pressure companies to not use sweated labor.

### Discussion

Applying the content from these lessons can assist in raising the awareness of the history of garment manufacturing and begin to address continuing problems in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Students were exposed to immigrant sweatshop workers' living and working conditions, labor led union efforts, and ways to end sweatshop conditions.

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By visiting the virtual tour of the tenement in New York's Lower East Side and discussing the families who lived there, students were able to glimpse the experiences, lives, and hardships faced by immigrant garment workers during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This online lesson helped students visualize the poor living and working conditions forced upon newly arrived immigrants to the United States. Exposure to the plight of this group provided students opportunities for critical analysis of the social position of immigrants during this time period in U.S. history and helped them begin to re-envision notions of the immigrant experience.

In the ILGWU lesson, students uncovered the history of labor organization's use of cultural and educational programming. By examining each of the key efforts, students were provided opportunities to learn significant facts, identify relationships between groups of people, and gain understanding of the fight for equality in the labor movement. The lesson encouraged creative approaches to labor organization as a way to highlight education and activism.

Through the online exhibit, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, students learned about sweatshops of the 1990s. Students were able to critically examine exhibit content while applying it to their personal perspectives and values. Development of their own opinions on the oppressive labor conditions and possible solutions to sweatshop practices enabled students to consider ways to become more thoughtful citizens of the world.

The lessons were developed to highlight historically oppressive work environments in an attempt to expunge these issues in present day society. Sweatshop history can expose students to new knowledge; preparing students with life skills to actively fight injustices in society. By implementing these types of lessons into college and university curricula, students can engage in critical reading, writing, and thinking about societal injustices. Recognizing that there are differences between people, specifically the dynamics of power and position in society, can help students understand injustice. The history of sweatshops and accompanying lesson plans can be used by teachers in a variety of disciplines to expose students to the ideas of inequality and the need for social justice. This topic becomes all the more important particularly given the 2013 collapse of the eight-store Rana Plaza garment factory in Bangladesh's capital city of Dhaka. Because the top floors of the building were added illegally, the weight caused the lower stories to buckle, killing 1,129 people. Many of the victims were young women sewing low-priced clothes for Western brands (McManus, 2014). Future work will allow in-class opportunity for students to determine action steps for confronting social injustices within their careers.

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