Faculty *focus*

Highlighting innovation in teaching at UM-Flint

Corsets, Hoop Skirts and Panniers:
Redesigning Fashion History

by Jennifer Ross

Assistant Professor and Resident Costume Designer Shelby Newport loves clothes. To her, though, clothes are no ordinary obsession: they are an academic devotion. Recently, the Thompson Center for Learning and Teaching (TCLT) helped Professor Newport delve more deeply into that absorption and bring it back to students. She was awarded the Spring/Summer Course Design Fellowship from the TCLT to redesign the Theatre Department's Clothing in Western Culture course, a class that covers 5,000 years of fashion history. "We all plan classes in any tiny moment," Newport confesses, "I felt like I just needed the time and focus" for redesigning the class. The TCLT fellowship offered her the means to shift away from traditional computer research and "go somewhere." That somewhere was the Bath Fashion Museum in Bath, England.

Newport began with the course's textbook. What Newport calls "the daunting tome" of Survey of Historic Costumes "turned students off from learning on day one." While in England, she searched for a more manageable replacement, eventually selecting The History of Underclothes and …Isms: Understanding Fashion for their small sections, good photographs, and ease of reading. Though smaller and less expensive, these books were less intimidating to students while still conveying the sense of time Newport was trying to establish in the class. Newport also participated in study sessions at the Bath Fashion Museum where

Shelby Newport, Assistant Professor
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she researched fashion history, inspected historical garments, and took plenty of pictures to share with her students. "To see the clothes," she says, "to be inspired by them . . . was the most innovative for me." These study sessions and Newport's engagement with fashion history and historical garments kindled Newport's excitement and deepened her understanding of production techniques, materials used, and the effects of age on individual pieces. She writes of her experience, "I really feel like having these photos and the experience of holding these garments in my hands created a new excitement about historic garments for me, which in turn transferred to the students."

After returning to the States, Newport began work on redesigning the course syllabus and incorporating active learning strategies into the curriculum. Newport says she was inspired by the layout and design of Katherine Joslin's *Edith Wharton and the Making of Fashion* (2011), a book which examines the national fashion industry, and wanted to give a similar

Redesigning Fashion History (continued)

"little twist of history" to her Clothing in Western Culture course. "I knew I didn't want to teach it like a history class," she says. Rather she sought to "use touch and feel and importance of clothing in culture to . . . kick start the class," making the course not just about memorizing facts and dates, but about learning through a story.

Often that story involved active learning strategies to pull students into the lecture and engage them with the material. Newport brought costume pieces from the theatre department's stock for students to feel, inspect, and even try on. She replaced the traditional midterm exam with a midterm "enquete," an assignment that tasked students with finding a variety of Greek, Roman, and Tudor styles lines in downtown Flint. The most extensive and most successful active learning technique came in the form of an ongoing Timeline Morgue, or a constantly evolving collection of research data and images.

Through the Timeline Morgue, Newport hoped to create a learning atmosphere in which students became "mini-experts" on a specific article of fashion history. Students chose a particular item such as hats, shoes, or undergarments to research over the course of the semester. Following their selection through history, students completed templates that asked for origins, identifying features, and an image of the article. Students then presented a thirty second report on their artifact when Newport called their names during attendance. Later, when that student's article came up during lecture, he or she would be able to contribute to the lecture by discussing the characteristics of their article at that particular moment in history. Newport's Timeline Morgue worked so well in engaging students in research and

pulling them into the lecture that the department has incorporated it into several other classes.

When asked what challenges redesigning this course posed, Newport pointed to lecture preparation, the broad span of time, and the amount of material. Newport says, "Like any class that you teach for the very first time, you feel daunted by the material." How do you prepare complete and engaging lectures? How do you balance ancient periods of fashion history with modern eras? Most of all, how much information is too much? Or too little? Despite these questions, Newport looks forward to her next occasion to teach the class and fine-tune her syllabus and lectures.

The TCLT's Spring/Summer Course Design Fellowship offered Shelby Newport the opportunity to restructure the Theatre Department's Clothing in Western Culture course to include numerous active and experiential learning elements that engaged students in lecture and provided them with memorable activities to supplement their theoretical knowledge. Newport feels that the TCLT fellowship spurred her to "re-think the material covered and the mode in which it was delivered." The changes she made to the course produced an eagerness in the students that touched Newport personally. "I loved seeing them get excited about the object they chose," she says, "and felt connected to the passage of time and excitement in their faces."

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