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Dress for Success in the Classroom (But what is Success to You?

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Dress for success in the classroom (but what is success to you?)

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Session Description:

      This session explores the implications of how we dress in the classroom. The image that attire conveys, and how attire impacts our own sense of self, consciously and unconsciously reflects our own identities and reveals issues of identity dissonance. Finally we examine how different attire can lead to different student outcomes or different forms of success. We examine literature from management, social psychology, education, communication and others to lead discussion that we hope will allow participants to better understand and/or question how and why they dress as they do and how that can determine success… in their own terms.

Planning Details

Proposed audience:	Instructors at all levels can learn and gain insight from this session. New instructors can learn what image their dress conveys while experienced instructors can explore issues of identity and identity dissonance.
Maximum number of participants:	Approximately 20. This will allow for focused and personalized discussion (consistent with the authors' own identities as instructors).
Type of session	Presentation followed by discussion.
Special requirements:	Smart classroom technology (PC, VGA-hookup for Macs, and LCD projector) with chalk or whiteboard.
Length or Type:	60 minutes.

Introduction

It is likely that in your college or department there is a variety of attire among the faculty. Some come dressed in full business attire while others may be seen in sandals, shorts and t-shirts. Many are between these extremes. The facilitators of this session have been known to buck the dominant mode of dress at their own schools and wondered what this said about them -- their own identities, the image they conveyed, the impact it had on their students' socialization and on interactions with other faculty and finally on student-related outcomes. We hope that, no matter their style of dress, this session's participants will have many of the same questions. Thus, for session outcomes we hope we can help answer those question and encourage further research, questioning, or insight. As a basis for those outcomes we will review relevant theory and empirical research related to instructor attire. We will elicit discussion on these topics with a set of questions based on the literature.

Theoretical Grounding:

We sometimes experience pressures to wear attire that is more in line with the costume of business professionals than the frumpy attire we may don at home. Research suggests that such professional attire (e.g., suits) does indeed convey a message to students that professors possess greater seriousness, credibility and intelligence (Lavin, Davies, & Carr, 2010; Leathers, 1992, Carr, Lavin, & Davies, 2009a; 2009b).

However, such formal business attire may not ensure positive learning experiences for the students or motivate them to communicate with their professors (Myers, 2011). While students may have higher esteem for professors who dress more professionally, they may be less likely to believe instructors are willing to listen to student needs. Rollman (1980) found that "warmer perceptions" were associated with casual dress such that students may assume the professor will be more likely to be fair, flexible and enthusiastic during social interactions. Myers (2011) also found evidence for social attractiveness; there is greater appeal for students to reach out to professors who wear casual attire. As teachers, what image do we wish to convey to our students and what outcomes do we hope to achieve?

Beyond the issue of image, our attire may be a means of socializing our students (Costello, 2004). Is socialization part of our role as educators? If so, what culture are we expected to socialize our students to? Are the pressures for complete "homogeneity of dress" (Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993) a threat to individually? Are we comfortable with socialization expectations and if not, how do we resolve this identity dissonance (Costello, 2004)? What impact does it have on our own comfort and our own teaching when we feel a sense of identity dissonance? As a result of our attire do we experience a homophily effect with our students (Anderson, Albert, & Golden, 1977)? What are the outcomes related to this homophily? Does such an effect decrease as we age? Is there a difference with non-traditional undergraduates or graduate students (particularly MBA and MPA)?

Session Description:

As you can see from the previous section, there is a plethora of literature that can be brought to bear on the issue of instructor attire. The literature invites insight and we will plan the session accordingly. There are a few reasons we would like a 60 minute session…

Activity	Time
Overview of session topic and brief introductions from presenters	5 minutes
Presenters convey their own experiences with attire in higher education that led them to question the influence of dress on their interpersonal interactions with peers, students and stakeholders; a review of the literature will also be briefly introduced.	10 minutes
Presenters facilitate an interactive discussion where session participants reflect on their own experiences; there is a strong likelihood that varying viewpoints will stimulate a rich debate about the role of and consequences associated with attire.	30 minutes
Conclusion with a summary of main points of argument and opportunities for further exploration and reflection.	15 minutes

Application to Conference Theme:

The issue of educator attire brings to mind a few issues of sustainability. First, thoughtful attention and insight into our own attire may allow educators to sustain their commitment to the resultant messages and outcomes, even in the face of pressures to modify that attire. In a controversial opinion article from the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) publication, *Academe*, Lemos (2007) proposed a dress code for faculty with the primary purpose of projecting authority, confidence, expertise and professionalism in the eyes of students, administrators, and employers/alumnus.

Second, and in direct relation to the first point, a sense of self is important as identity dissonance may bring stress and makes us poorer educators. If we can gain insight into how our attire reflects our identity, we can sustain our sense of identity and mental health. The etiquette argument by Lemos (2007) and the "power tie" costume imagery (Soper, 2010) may be an attempt to stifle individuality and constrain identity exploration as members of the academy. As colleagues we should embrace diversity in attire because it sustains freedom and expression of self rather than the cold, mechanistic replication of the dress perceived to be professional by our external stakeholders in industry.

Lastly, if we determine that it is, indeed, our role to socialize students our attire may be part of that socialization. Socialization is, by definition, the act of sustaining a culture.

APPENDIX

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