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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



(VIDEO) Does It Matter What We Wear?

Wabash Center

Blog Series: Stories from the Front

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Tags: power and privilege | embodied teaching | vocation of teaching

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Last Monday I wore a suit to work, an occurrence rare enough that my students felt led to comment upon it. “You look so nice today!” exclaimed one, to which another quickly retorted, “That makes it sound like she doesn’t usually look nice!” A couple of others joined in, debating whether I usually wore necklaces or bright colors. While I was not offended (these are students I like and know fairly well), I nevertheless felt a bit self-conscious having my fashion choices be a topic for discussion.

In “What Not to Wear, Assistant Professor Edition,” Professor Karen Kelsky confirms what most of us intuit, which is that it *does* matter what we wear, particularly if we are women, since “men just have less scope for error.” The dangers for female professors seem to lie somewhere between dowdiness and undergraduate-style “hooker-wear.” “Spend the money on yourself to look good,” she urges, assuming we have money. This will not only help us feel more confident, but also: “your students will love you, simply love you, for any effort you make to stay current. And wear colors, I beg you. Black doesn’t make you smarter.”

As annoying as this advice sounds (hooker-wear? really?), she may be stating a hard truth about the crone/temptress paradigm against which students sometimes judge their teachers. In preparation for this post, I asked a Facebook group of female professors whether they thought much about how they dressed. In short: YES. Among the dozens of responses there were a few common themes:

- First impressions matter; e.g., “I feel this [anxiety] most on the first day of the semester” (first week of class, first years of teaching, etc.)
- Women perform gender differently, either going for conservative suits and blazers because academe is “still very masculinized,” or wearing skirts because “it’s super important not to give up my more feminine self-presentation.”
- Fear of immodesty is almost universal: “No low-cut tops or above-the-knee skirts... if I bend over to pick up a dropped dry-erase marker, I don’t want to be giving the students a show!”
- Weather dictates options: “Because it’s so hot here I have a closet full of dresses;” but in cold country, “the need to wear outfits compatible with snow boots and parkas probably helps” keep things informal.
- Fertility comes with its own set of issues: “lower salaries for women, as well as trying to make a work wardrobe while being pregnant and recovering from pregnancy were major hurdles to a decent professional wardrobe.” For nursing moms, “button-up blouses are a good choice, especially in material and colors that do not show baby fluids as easily.”
- The need for a sense of authority comes into play – “I am short and look young, so I find it important to look more formal” – but this, too, varies widely: “Finding authority in my own ‘skin’ is important. If I try to speak in a voice of authority [or dress in a way] that feels weird to me, it will come across as insecure, grasping, or defensive.”
- One woman who shares my own heart wrote, “my issue is reminding myself not to get too comfortable – otherwise I would wear jeans and a sweater every day.” (Perhaps in response to the overly-comfortable among us, Duquesne University recently held a workshop for graduate students called, “She Needs a Haircut and a New Pair of Shoes: Handling Those Pesky Course Evaluations.”)

This whole thread was smartly summed up by a friend who observed that, “female professors, whatever they’re wearing, have given it a lot of thought. They’re trying to do an amazing amount of professional work with every heel, hemline, and hairdo.” Especially when we are new to teaching or when our students are new to us, we cannot help but be conscious about what our appearance is communicating to those around us. This must be true for some male professors as well, and gender questions are of course complicated at intersections with race, ethnicity, or nationality.

What is our responsibility with regard to how others perceive us? In the end, will we be judged on our clothing or on the quality of our teaching? And in the realm of embodied education, can these ever truly be separated?

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2015/03/video-does-it-matter-what-we-wear/>