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I teach...so how should I dress

## **Introduction**

From a phenomenological perspective, clothes are never merely representational or functional but complex locales for a range of intentions, affiliations, ideals, subversions and practices. In this respect clothes are an extension of our bodies and an integral part of our identity in whatever professional role we are performing. We think, occupationally, through our body and, because it is usually always dressed in most professional contexts, we are therefore required to think and present our thoughts through clothed actions. The practice of dressing is one that involves both our bodies and minds in such intimate ways that it is difficult to perceive either as separate entities. Phenomenologists thought that the mind/body dualism resulted in a reduced understanding of human experience. It was not immediate enough to fully engage with knowledge. These ideas enable us to approach clothes and dress as embodied experiences rather than just rational objects that serve a specific purpose.

The ways in which bodies are clothed are frequently the results of imagined and anticipated audiences that will be encountered throughout the duration of an occupational day. If clothing allows us to imagine future identities, this must be an integral technique when it comes to developing and maintaining professional selves<sup>1,2</sup> Clothing becomes both a literal and metaphorical thread between present and future everyday identities. But, also, it becomes a creative technique by which we, in our occupational roles, can embody our professional philosophies and practices. With that in mind, this article explores the role of dress in the context of higher education and the way academics present their teaching practice through their clothed bodies. The discussion will focus mainly on the British higher education experience because this is where I am based, however, I am very interested in applying these ideas to other locales in the future.

## **A personal story**

When I began my career in education twenty years ago, as an undergraduate student, I was required to complete 'teaching blocks' whereby I was placed in a local primary school to be given structured opportunities to practice 'teaching', as taught by my university tutors. It

was also anticipated that my understanding of 'learning' would become less academic and more practical, providing me with necessary experience required to fulfil the professional elements of 'teaching' as an occupation.

Alongside all my concerns and anxieties about putting pedagogy into practice was the fact that I would be presenting myself to an unknown audience of around twenty-five people, all of whom would be encouraged to focus on every aspect of my body from my appearance to my voice, from my actions to my intentions, from my knowledge to my experience. Knowing I was to be under such scrutiny and not knowing how that would bear out once I was there left me feeling quite ill at ease.

The only thing I could have some control over was what I would be wearing on the day and so I set myself the task of creating a sartorial identity that would prepare me for the unknown. I began to imagine what kind of 'teacher' I would want to be, drawing inspiration from a range of sources including personal memories of teachers I had had, fictional teachers depicted on screen whom had inspired my interest in education as well as friends of my parents whose dress I took a particular liking to. Yet, these possibilities were also influenced by bodily concerns such as my particular physique, colours I liked, textures I preferred touching my skin, fashionable silhouettes of the time and what I would be doing while teaching. For example, would I be sitting down with children on a chair or a carpet? How often would I be in the playground facilitating games and would it be cold or warm, depending upon the time of year? Furthermore, my notion of what I might look like as a teacher would also be defined by what I could afford, which shops I had access to and how much time was available to create my ideal (clothed) 'teacher'.

As Entwistle <sup>2:11</sup> suggests, dress and identity always operate on a situated body, located in time and space, where social, historical and cultural relations are ascribed to both getting dressed and being dressed. We consider both our persona and our physicality as individuals in relation to clothes in the present and experiences in the future. This complex triangulation creates what Entwistle describes as a 'sartorial consciousness'<sup>2:9</sup> whereby what we decide to wear are also techniques used to create a sense of occupational 'habitus' and capture necessary 'cultural capital' in order to appropriately fulfil our professional roles. Another way of thinking about this<sup>1</sup> is that dress is an occupation in itself rather than just a discrete completed act taking place once a day. This could be described as 'doing dress' thus emphasising agency when it comes to 'the actions that individuals take to manage identities,

[and how] these actions contribute to subtle shifts and changes that may occur in the social, cultural world.'<sup>1:101</sup>

### **Dressing for the academic world**

Yet, throughout my teaching career in higher education, the topic of clothing and its role when it comes to my occupational identity has rarely been discussed or reflected upon further. It has often felt that the role of the educator at university is mainly concerned with activities of the mind and their relationship with their body is always secondary, if not completely ignored. Teachers favour the Cartesian split when it comes to presenting their ideas and knowledge to students, creating a pedagogical hierarchy that favours intellectual activities over bodily practices. As a result, the clothed academic body is made to be invisible, both to itself and others, whether they are colleagues or students.

So why is the clothed academic body often invisible, unseen, overlooked? This seems to be the most critical question and perhaps a timely one given that with the advent of the TEF, the role of the academic as a teacher will become more visible and arguably more scrutinized from a range of political angles. As previous professional systems and mechanisms are pulled apart, reorganized and re-represented, assumptions about the role of education in society are revealed and revised. Agendas regarding what an higher education institution should provide are contradictory - while there is emphasis on widening participation, there is less and less money to support this. This raises interesting questions about the role of appearance, in particular that of those who identify with academia, with regards to their scholarly production and pedagogical success.

In her article "Frumpy or Chic? Tweed or Kente? Sometimes Clothes Make the Professor" Alison Schneider<sup>3</sup> suggests that there are two opposing perceptions regarding the role of dress as it relates to the professional status of those teaching in academia. Firstly, there are those who view their appearance as an unnecessary distraction from scholarly work as well as an inappropriate distraction for students when teaching. Schneider argues that this perception is more widespread, becoming the dominant discourse concerning the professional dress of academia. It explains why academics become apologetic or defensive when discussing their appearance in relation to their work.<sup>4</sup> As a result, this materialises as a kind of anti-fashion stance, where dress is seen as a problem, associated with the capitalist wastefulness and popular conspicuousness of the business of fashion. It is this

perception, subsequently, that has led to academia being dismissed as sartorially insignificant by others interested in dress and fashion studies.

Yet, as Entwistle observes, anti-fashion is by its very nature still *of* and *related to* the fashion system. But it's more than that. Clothing has an inherent subjective quality as clothes constitute an interface between ourselves and others, making them embody multiple meanings, open-ended explanations and complex social, cultural and political lives. They are so integral to our social identities it is almost impossible to be indifferent to their presence, which means that even in those contexts where dress is considered unimportant, Entwistle's 'sartorial consciousness' is still at work. hooks<sup>5</sup> reminds us that a refusal to acknowledge dress is often a way to convey, maintain, social and cultural power in a given context. When hooks was a student, some of her professors would wear exactly the same clothes suggesting that their teaching was 'neutral, objective facts'. By ignoring their own presence through dress, hooks argues, they also ignored that of their students and so denied any attempt to literally challenge or debate their body of understanding. In return, the students were unable to reflect upon their own embodied experience and, in the case of hooks, not until she started teaching herself.

For me, it is unsurprising that hooks became aware of her professors' clothing once she began teaching given that much of its praxis involves the presence of others and is therefore performative in nature. It is this that underlines the other perception identified by Schneider when it comes to the role of dress in the context of academia. They are those who believe that clothing and the practice of dressing are critical to the success of their pedagogical approaches and scholarly credibility. This discourse is, no doubt, less influential amongst those who teach in higher education and yet it is certainly there. I can recall two esteemed colleagues who both made a habit of wearing certain items when lecturing on gender and design in an effort to engage students beyond the words and images presented on their slides.

Entwistle<sup>2</sup> suggests that dress is performative when it comes to assembling our professional identity because in the act of getting dressed, we attempt to project ourselves into an imagined future where we will present our bodies to a range of audiences also understood through their own clothed bodies. Those who see themselves as academics/scholars/teachers in universities are always conscious of the 'other' as they carry around the mirror of a student and staff body, which is also informed by social characteristics such as gender, class, sexuality and ethnicity<sup>6</sup>

A university professor will imagine the different roles they will take on in any one day and then dress in relation to how they understand those roles in relation to their own values. They might choose to dress more like their students because they do not desire to be associated with a managerial or authoritarian role<sup>7</sup>. Within academia, we think about appearance all the time, whether interviewing potential colleagues, writing references for doctoral candidates, giving a lecture to students or presenting research at other institutions<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, our disciplinary interests influence our choice of clothes so whether we are a historian, engineer or performer, we constantly present these specialisms through our dress. On a very basic level, this has been described as 'enclothed cognition', however I think this barely touches on the practice of 'doing dress'. This thinking is invariably complex and, at times, 'troubling'<sup>9</sup> because, as professional teachers, we want to both fit in and stand out. I believe that academia's relationship with dress is one of constant ambivalence, however, I would also argue that this is not only necessary but also critical in the context of innovative higher education.

The practice of dressing, whether it be considered fashionable or not, is a potentially highly imaginative and creative process whereby what we wear becomes a liberating experience for both ourselves and others. Rather than perceive of clothes as proponents of judgemental social systems, why not reimagine them as fantastical, magical even, where their value lies in making visible the kind of future world I want to find myself in? I agree with hooks, who suggests that we need to recognise our bodies when teaching because we are all 'subjects in history'<sup>5:139</sup>. To claim otherwise is disingenuous and because our bodies are always dressed in the classroom, we ignore clothes at our own creative, pedagogical peril.

## References

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