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Learning Professional Dress through Peer-Evaluation

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Aspects of professional attire/dress and its influence have been examined in both the educational and non-academic settings, suggesting the importance of appearance management in the work environment (Okoro & Washington, 2011; Cardon & Okoro, 2009). Furthermore, there has been much discourse on pedagogical aspects of teaching professionalism, including what is usually deemed ‘appropriate’ for one’s profession. However, our literature review suggests a gap in research addressing what and how college students entering the general apparel and textiles industries should wear to internships and networking events. For the last three years, I have been teaching a 300 level course focusing on the creating, marketing, manufacturing and retailing of textiles/apparel/home fashion goods; the business of fashion. Most enrolled in my course are juniors and senior-level merchandise management students actively seeking or preparing for job interviews and internships. One of the course objectives includes having students “develop a clearer career path and cultivate professional development through mentoring and newfound knowledge of the textiles and apparel industry,” covering discussions on email etiquette, networking, effective presentation skills, mutual respect for colleagues, and professional business attire. I chose to include a discussion on professional dress after noticing our students struggling to grasp what is “appropriate” to wear to a professional presentation, which is an integral component to their final term project.

In order to teach students concepts of professional dress and stimulate the process of students’ exploration and understanding of clothing in the professional environment, a two-prong “modified” peer-evaluation technique was incorporated into an in-class discussion exercise. The first prong to this exercise implementation involved collecting actual images of merchandise management students in what they considered as “appropriate professional dress” a year PRIOR to implementation of actual in-class discussion exercise. Photos of participating students from the neck-below were taken as part of a research project I conducted for a graduate-level course in fashion theory. Participants were asked to come to a focus group interview wearing “professional dress”; no other indicators or description were provided prior to the interview. These former students came in various levels of professional dress as discussed by Ruetzler et al. (2011), ranging mostly between formal business dress and business casual. I noticed then, from my research participants (all fashion merchandising students), that a general lack of consensus on appropriate outfits within students was enough merit to revisit my project and use as a point of discussion for professional dress.

The second prong to the implementation of this exercise involved my current/recent cohort of students; the portion I call the ‘modified’ peer-evaluation. Students were first instructed to get into groups of fours, where half of the class (roughly six 4-students groups) were given a set of six images of my former students; the other half of the class received a different set of six images of my former students. All were instructed to first study these images (each image labeled with numbers) and, as a group, make notes on a hand-out any aspects of the outfits that were considered “appropriate” or “inappropriate” professional dress to an interview, networking event, or internship opportunity. I encouraged students to consider the clothing appearance (e.g. color, level of conservativeness, and

levels of professionalism as in business formal, business casual, or casual), factors borrowed from the Ruetzler et al. (2011) study. Students were also instructed to note of any confliction/disagreement within group members on any aspect of the outfits presented to them. The first set of six images was then projected on the screen. Half of the class shared their “peer-evaluation” based on their knowledge of professional dress. This process was a “modified” version of a traditional peer-evaluation because the actual “peers” being evaluated/assessed are not benefiting from the evaluation but rather used as a visual representation of the peers within this current cohort of students (to mitigate risk of negative commentary directed at any current student). The displacement in time to use the photos of former students was employed to lower likelihood of current students identifying/singling-out any of their own peers, thus concentrating more on the objective of evaluating the outfits for discussion and understanding. After both sets of images were discussed, each group was asked to identify their top 3 recommendations on what “appropriate” professional dress should be. Collectively as a class, the recommendations were consolidated on the board. Students then took note of these recommendations and were encouraged to follow them in preparation for an upcoming career symposium (networking event) held at our university. Timing-wise, this in-class exercise (which is the central learning activity) was intentionally conducted roughly two-weeks prior to a career symposium to allow ample time to reevaluate and one’s outfit for the day and coordinate any new acquisition of clothing accordingly.

Students were given in-class activity points for engaging with the in-class exercise. The handouts were collected. The career symposium and an informal post-event debrief acted as a learning assessment. Overall, a majority of students reported back with positive impression of other attendees’ outfits, noting a general feel of increase in readiness and confidence at the symposium due to the prior discussion of professional dress in-class. One student in particular reported that reviewing actual outfits (of former students) “was super helpful that we got to have actual visuals of real outfits that work or don’t work and for what reasons...sometimes just the styling doesn’t work as ‘professional.’” This respondent went on to further note that she had a heightened acumen to appropriate attire in a professional setting and found all students considering attending a networking event (or entering the work force) can and would benefit from the professional dress discussion, especially fashion students.

For future classes, I propose to revise this learning opportunity by including images of male students by recruiting more male samples to expand on the scope of discussion (based on the limited sample available from the initial research project conducted). Plans to collect samples from across different undergraduate class standing levels (e.g. freshmen, sophomores) within the apparel/merchandising/interiors program may be of interest to identify any meta-curricular assessment to incorporate critical discourse of professional practices including dress. Lastly, a gap identified through literature review suggests a future research opportunity in exploring the phenomena exhibited in fashion students’ perspectives on ‘appropriate’ professional dress and comparing with opinions from students in various other disciplines.

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