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**Dress Practices as Embodied
Multimodal Rhetorics**

Age, Ability, and Self-Expression

The Question of Purpose and the Intersections of Comfort in the Classroom

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Introduction

Historically, marginalized groups have been criticized for their dress. Even if we examine events that happened 20 to 30 years ago, many masculine women were targets. As Brower (2013) outlined, Darlene Jesperson, a well-received bartender, refused to wear makeup and was fired in 2000. In 1989, Ann Hopkins was denied a promotion, despite her excellent work, because according to her work, she dressed and acted more masculine. As Brower pointed out, this created a double-bind: “the job requirements demanded traditional masculine traits such as assertiveness and forcefulness, yet when Hopkins displayed those qualities,” she was refused a promotion.

More recently, we find that people have been fired because of their cultural practices. Brittany Noble, for instance, was a black news anchor who asked her director if she could stop straightening her hair and wear it naturally. The director agreed, but after a month, the director told her that her hair was unprofessional and that Mississippi “needed to see a beauty queen” (Santi, 2019). Similarly, a Yemeni teacher who wore a hijab in metro Detroit was fired. She was written up, despite her competent teacher and connection with her students, and her supervisors told her that she would need to resign or get fired, and to “go find a job in Dearborn,” which is a nearby city that has a high population of Muslim individuals (“Lawsuit,” 2018).

There are many more accounts of the expectations of how teachers dress, particularly because they are “role models for students” (Freeburg et al., 2011, p. 37). In particular, according to a number of the handbooks include guidelines for teacher dress (out of the 82 that Freeburg et al. analyzed), teachers are to “project a positive image in the community,” “create an environment conducive to learning,” and “instill respect for authority, traditional values, and discipline” (p. 37-38). It is clear that teachers have a responsibility to the community as a whole to dress the “right way,” and certain clothes send certain messages. In addition to the handbooks that teachers are provided, they have another group to keep in mind: students. Sebastian and Bristow (2008) found that professors who dressed formally led to “greater

attributions of expertise,” but women professors who dress formally were deemed less likeable (p. 200).

These examples demonstrate the often complicated intersections of purpose, choice, and external expectations when it comes to analyzing dress practices as embodied rhetoric. Professors or instructors in particular must consider the “meanings” that are “articulated beyond language” in their clothing and how it affects themselves as well as others (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 39). Though instructors may be aware of how their bodies (as well as others’ bodies) are “figured into [their] work [specifically, teaching],” they cannot often control these external expectations from institutions, bosses, peers, students, and dress codes (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 39). What the examples above fail to uncover are the “hidden” purposes by the individuals wearing the clothes as well as implicit dress codes made by those in power behind dress practices. In “Wearing Multimodal Composition: The Case for Examining Dress Practices in the Writing Classroom,” Manthey (2015) stated, “Considering dress practices as multimodal composition means realizing that appearance is something that is constructed for a purpose, and that the only way to know for sure what the author’s intended purpose is, is to ask them” (p. 342). In other words, purpose is not always externally apparent, and as we will argue, the purpose behind an instructor’s external appearance is possibly complicated in terms of the intersection of choice and necessity. As our stories will demonstrate, we are aware of the audiences, their implicit dress codes, and the potential messages our dress may send when we teach; however, we sometimes aim to subvert these dress codes due to discomfort (for a number of reasons), a disjuncture in our identities. And, we find, that even when we (attempt to) meet these implicit or explicit dress codes, they do not guarantee power, safety, or comfort.

Furthermore, clothing is something that is easily added or removed from the body and can serve to alter or hide different areas of the body according to the wearer’s purpose. This is important to recognize, as the body itself is something that a person often has little immediate control over in terms of appearance or external perception. One example of this is age perception, or how old or young one’s body looks regardless of actual age. Another related example is external appearance and perceptions of ability. Differences in ability are not always externally perceivable, and dress practices may work to highlight, accommodate, or hide differences in ability depending on the wearer’s purpose. Moreover, dress practices in both of these cases are related to the concept of self-expression, as how one dresses is almost always related to their perception of their identity and their place in the world.

In this article, we wish to call into question definitions of purpose as they relate to our embodied teacher personas, especially as these personas relate to the question of both physical and emotional comfort. We will demonstrate this idea by discussing the implications of dress and age perception—particularly, how dress can alter age perception in order to achieve a desired response from students. We will also discuss how external appearance may be complicated by differences in ability, and how different abilities might necessitate certain types of clothes, fabrics, and styles so that the instructor can perform the various tasks their teaching style and/or class requires. The question of purpose is further complicated by self-expression,

which involves interplay between considerations of age and ability as well as culture, socioeconomic status, gender, sexuality, and any other considerations of identity the instructor can express through clothing. All of these separate accounts (Amy's of ability, Hillary's of age, and Mariel's of self-expression) will reveal how dress clearly influences our comfort and our ability to perform as teachers. Further, through our photo essay, we will provide images that accompany stories of how we arrived at our respective levels of and definitions of comfort through our own unique purposes, some voluntarily, others that are a result of circumstances beyond our control.

Dr. Amy Latawiec: “Don’t you have to teach soon?” A Narrative about Ability

Not too long ago, I was invited to a friend's house for tea. I had to teach that afternoon and her home was mid-way between my place and campus so I thought it would be nice to stop by for our visit and just head right to the classroom afterward. At least an hour into our visit, and in the middle of an unrelated conversation, she paused suddenly and in a mildly concerned voice, said, “Don’t you have to teach soon?” Without hesitation, I said, “Yeah.” I glanced at the clock face on my Fitbit and added, “If I leave here in 20 minutes, I’ll have plenty of time to get there.”

I didn’t read into her question at all, but she didn’t even give me time to. She immediately looked me up and down and said, “Oh. I... I guess I thought that teachers had to dress...”

I stared with a blank expression. I wasn’t going to fill that one in for her. Consider this data collection, I thought.

She continued, confident yet hesitant (it’s a thing, really), “... ya know, more professionally.”

I laughed. “What? This doesn’t cut it?”

Because you are all dying to know, I was wearing a pretty expensive pair of black leggings (that were certainly not designed for the gym) along with a long, solid colored tunic sweater and pair of black knee-high boots. To be honest with you, this was the high end of “professional” attire for me. It certainly was not how I would typically dress outside of the classroom. That said, five or six years ago (before Multiple Sclerosis and hip reconstruction surgery), the outfit would indeed have been different - I don’t know by how much, because I think that’s ultimately a subjective assessment, but my contribution to this discussion of purpose and dress practices in academe revolves around this perceived difference.

What follows here is a narrative about the intersections of identity and purpose, whether those are ascribed, crafted, or both, and whether and how the ways in which we often define purpose—rhetorically—allows for circumstances like my own history of “professional dress.” Most notably, though, is the ways in which the question of purpose is so intimately related to embodied multimodal rhetoric as I contend with both the impact of my body in the classroom and the desire to erase it from any potential impact in favor of other forms of communication (namely verbal and written). In fact, the idea of “obscuring the body” is something that scholars

have discussed at length (Lunsford and Fishman 2005; Foss 2013). As I wrestle with how my physical presence itself is rhetorical, I often wonder if it hinges on whether every way our bodies are “read” is interpreted as a purpose that is chosen rather than a purpose that is necessary. Ultimately, this specific story is told in an effort to highlight how the rhetorical concept of purpose can be perceived versus how it might actually been constructed.

How do we understand “purpose?” At face value, purpose feels intimate - after all, it’s often positioned as an individual or a group’s mission or primary driver for doing and being. Purpose is also understood on a smaller scale - as part of a broader rhetorical framework wherein we are considering our audience and other factors that might affect the way we present ourselves. Outside of those beliefs about fate, the cosmos, and any other not-of-this-world determinants that we sometimes see as the crafting of our purpose, the whole idea of purpose is, more often than not, something that is chosen. Even if we do not choose it, it is common to hear people believe that purpose must be carried out even if they feel they were led there by some outside force (like God, for example). So, what if purpose is not by choice? What if the choices we make (and the purpose for those choices) is something that is visited upon us? In this particular story, I will wrestle with the purpose of my dress practices and how - because of their “non-conventional” nature - I have been regarded as purposefully bucking the perceived norms of my profession. The truth of the matter, however, is that my dress practices (a primary part of them, at least) are a choice made not because of rhetorical purpose, but because of necessity. It is a choice made to facilitate comfort in the face of disability.

One might argue that necessity and purpose are related insofar as one’s purpose—in this case—is the necessity of function. I think this might be a cynical view of purpose especially since it removes the main ingredient of rhetorical aims: the audience. How am I addressing audience if my (assumed deliberate) purpose is to serve my own physical comfort? I know—because this is me I am talking about—that it serves my audience because they now have a teacher who is not suffering a physical limitation and more chronic pain due to the dress practices she has chosen. My students (my audience) do not know this. As far as they’re concerned, their professor has always and does always dress this way. Unless my students have furiously Googled me prior to showing up in my classroom (and even then their searches might not yield the evidence necessary for this devil’s advocacy), they would have no idea that in prior to suffering a hip injury and being diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, I had a fancy for pencil skirts and tucked in blouses.

I know that when I ask my students to consider the rhetorical situation, purpose is always discussed as the chosen reason or desire for conveying a message to their audience. A student’s purpose for writing a persuasive letter to the Dean of Students is to potentially change roommate selection practices for the dorms. A student might also say that their purpose is driven by the necessity of their comfort and mental health while living on campus, but nevertheless, they have chosen to take this action (the letter) and have considered their audience (the dean) as they crafted the letter.

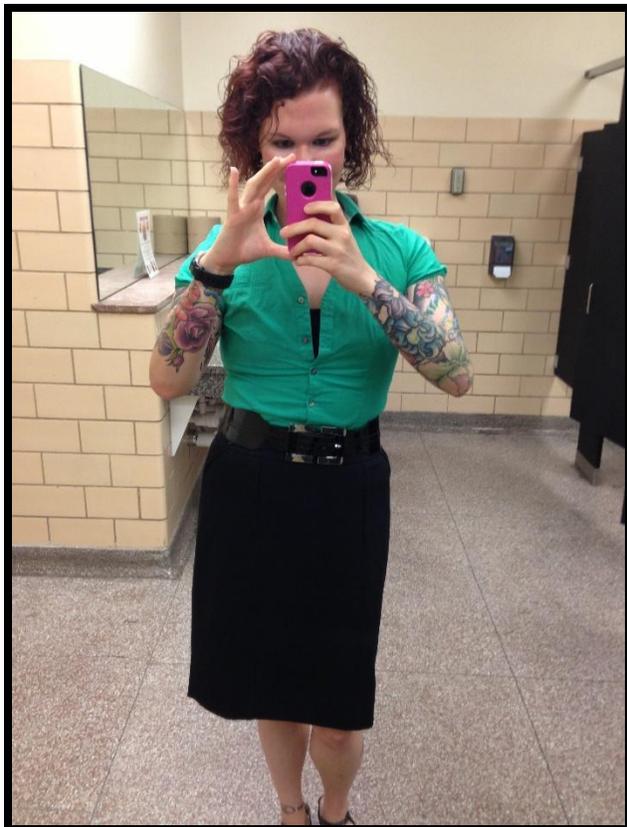


Figure 1: Amy takes a bathroom mirror selfie before teaching in June of 2013.

When I think about my purpose for wearing leggings, stretchy-fabric'd skirts, and A-line dresses in the classroom, I think about the fact that because I have torn the labrum in my left hip, had it stitched back together and completely reconstructed, spent months in prescribed rehabilitation and additional months beyond that in my own healing practices, I have no choice but to wear clothing that allows me to frequently stretch my hips, legs, and lower back. If I am in any way to avoid either A) becoming a heap of useless human flesh on the floor or B) uncontrollably sobbing in a nearby bathroom stall, I have no choice but to wear clothing that allows me a wide range of motion.

It is not out of the realm of possibility that this change in my dress practices happened as a response to a deeper purpose—one, perhaps, that signaled a level of confidence and comfort in a professional world that I had existed within long enough to, for lack of a better

term, “let go” of previous dress practices that explicitly performed “a professional woman in the academy.” So, for example, one might ascribe purpose to my decision to move from wearing tights and pencil skirts to leggings and A-line dresses as a fashion choice. They might believe that the former—something traditionally seen as professional dress for a female in academe—is a perfect platform from which to deviate. The observation might also be that this transition happened to come after I had secured a full-time position in the same department that I was once a graduate student teacher. Perhaps I had gained a level of confidence in my new position so much so that I decided to (rhetorically) adopt a dress practice that more fit my personality and/or other aspects of my physical self (heavily tattooed, large gauged earrings, and dramatic hair styles). My choice of dress in Figure 2 above appears to support this theory—that my purpose in discontinuing the “professional” attire that I had chosen early on in my teaching career evolved also into something intentional. A purpose to not only be functional, but to also be comfortable (and perhaps buck a trend or two). The fact of the matter still, however, is that in Figure 2 my dress choice for that day is a response to multiple environmental and physical factors: 1) during the summer months in the Midwest, it is not uncommon to experience extreme heat outside and extreme cold inside, both of which I struggle with as a person with Multiple Sclerosis, and 2) I was still in physical therapy as I recovered from reconstructive surgery on my left hip which made it difficult to change in and



Figure 2: Amy takes a bathroom selfie prior to teaching two months after hip reconstruction surgery.

out of clothing, causing me to opt for these particular leggings (which were the most comfortable and functional I had at the time). Though it's important to acknowledge that we have often been reminded that "the author of a text does not have control over the readers' interpretation" (Manthey, 2015).

Rhetorical purpose moves beyond just defining goals. Instead, rhetorical purpose is persuasive - it wants to affect the way a particular audience might view a subject or even understand the subject altogether. My story is one of two distinct purposes: ascribed and actual. You might ask, do you feel that your identity is reflected in the clothing in Figure 2? Does the dress practice in Figure 2, while functional and comfortable, also fit your rhetorical purpose as a professor of writing at a four-year institution? I think

it's safe to say the answer is yes. So, while this is ultimately a case of "both/and" not "either/or," it still remains the case that though we might believe that our purpose in rhetorical dress practices is one dimensional, it is multi-layered, multi-faceted, and not always an intentional practice. It is my hope that my story might lead us in a direction of continuing to consider not only what it means to "dress professionally," but to stop short of assuming that dress practices (whether they be conventional or non-conventional) are enacted with a purpose that always has an audience (that is, one that is external to oneself) in mind.

On that note, let's conclude a story - one that relies mostly on the consideration of purpose as part of the overall rhetorical situation - with a discussion of audience. I must confess that my audience is almost always my students. My context is providing effective instruction that avoids distraction by privileging comfort and authenticity. My purpose in what I wear for this audience and context has been informed by factors that are beyond my control (surgery; chronic illness). Therefore, when I think about how embodied multimodal rhetoric intersects with my own purpose, I already understand that I am considering these things due to the performativity of my work - due to the fact that there is so much stock placed in the objectification of my body and what I choose to wear. I see this as parallel to Manthey's (2015) discussion of her own dress practices the following passage:

I see all of these accessories as rhetorical objects—material things that can be manipulated to cater to a certain situation (audience, context, purpose). This is not an exercise in personal preference—in a society where bodies, beauty, and gender are commodified, the woman in the third picture is more likely to be taken seriously than

the woman in the first picture because of her appearance, manipulated through dress practices, even though the person is the same in both photos (p. 339).

I think, quite plainly, that the idea here is that the manipulation of material things is, indeed as Manthey asserted, not always an exercise in personal preference. Though, while sometimes our purpose may not be our personal preference, it might also not be about being taken seriously, either. It might be about responding to and honoring our body's disabilities. And even though I don't believe many people would doubt the latter, there is value in calling attention to it in a world where we regularly regard irreverence and whimsy as a purpose in and of itself.

Hillary: Being Presented Versus Presenting Yourself

I student taught 5 years ago, and let me tell you, I am so glad that I teach college students. Every time I teach a class, actually, I tell this to college students. I don't usually get into details like I do in this article, though. 5 years ago, I was still somewhat uncomfortable with my body, and definitely uncomfortable with my teaching persona and the authority—in particular, how much should I exert, and when? This discomfort, as well as the expectations put upon (new) teachers, reflected in my dress practices.

Student teachers, much like many other workplaces, are to follow a dress code. As the head of teacher education at my undergraduate institution explained, the dress code is, to this day, “no jeans, no sweatshirts, no tennis shoes, use an iron if the shirt/pants require it, keep pants hemmed, sweater sleeves the right length, and always noting the ‘3 B’s....no boobs, no belly and no butts!’ The bottom of the top must meet the top of the bottom” because their “philosophy behind our dress code is to represent the professional side of our candidates.” In other words, in order to be taken seriously as a teacher, by both your students and the other teachers and staff that you worked with, and eventually get a job, you needed to follow this dress code: to wear slacks, skirts, button down shirts, blouses. Clearly, this dress code—or embodied multimodal practice—“upheld hegemonic norms” that “transmit [certain] values and traditions,” as Cedillo & Elston (2017) stated (p. 7). While the institution may argue that this is what professional dress culture looks like in elementary and secondary schools and will earn the respect of students and staff, this is subjective, ableist, and classist, at the very least. It's something I didn't know I wanted to subvert until much later, although I still feel uneasy about it.

For me, however, it was relatively easy to follow this dress code (see Figure 3). Although I did not have much money and therefore less variety in terms of dress clothes, I was able to look presentable in the eyes of the middle school and my institution. In addition, during my student teaching, I was in a stage in my life where I still wasn't comfortable with my body. I would always make sure that I was “covered up” in all capacities, especially my chest. Growing up, I received unwanted attention because of my figure, particularly my sizeable breasts for my small stature. From middle school onward, I wore clothes that concealed a lot of my body.

Although I followed this dress code, I realized later that dressing this way did not guarantee professional behavior from others. I felt like my slacks and blouses matched my attitude—



Figure 3: Hillary in 2014, dressed in typical student teaching clothes: slacks, a blouse, and a cardigan. Layers and certain colors distract from the body, as you can see here!

respectful but friendly, confident but not necessarily domineering. However, there were parts of my dress practices that I really did not have much control over, namely how young I looked.

During student teaching, I was a 23-year-old who looked like she was 16, as my parents and strangers at the grocery store love to tell me. *You'll look younger than everyone else your age when you get older!* They exclaimed enviously. However, what they seem to forget is the here and now. Looking young does not earn the respect of your superiors, your peers, or even your students. And, looking young and having a prominent figure does not help in this instance.

Boohoo, the skinny, pretty, young white cis girl has to deal with compliments. How sad. I sympathize with this mindset. I've often thought about my privilege as being a younger, thin, white, and feminine cisgender teacher, especially in a rural setting. Being a younger woman means you will never be told that you're "too old" for the clothes you are wearing. Being a thin woman means you will never be fat-shamed by staff or students. Being a white woman means you will never have racial slurs thrown at you or comments about what you do and don't do with your hair. Looking feminine while identifying as a woman means you will never be harassed about looking too masculine in certain clothes or having anyone question your gender or sexuality. But these characteristics also mean that people, especially students, will still try to undermine your authority.

I have two stories where students attempted to dismiss my authority as a teacher in the classroom during student teaching. While these two stories do not reflect the majority of the students that I have taught at this time or have taught more recently, they have stuck with me. They have made me reflect on the way I present myself and the way I have been presented in the classroom, and how these two often clash.

The first story is about a student who constantly made loud remarks about how attractive I was nearly every day. These ranged from booming out in the middle of the lesson, “Ms. Weiss is so hot!” to greeting me, with infatuated eyes, “Ms. Weiss, you look pretty today.” Usually, I brushed these comments off, like I was taught. I never took him aside to reprimand him. I just rolled my eyes or ignored him, hoping he would get the hint that I would not engage with those comments. Since this time, I had never thought about the power in the situation. This student, whether he realized it or not, was diminishing my power in the classroom. Now that I reflect, I realize that this student affected the way other students acted toward me in the class: students would look at me with sympathetic eyes, or some of them would talk more after this student made these comments, causing the majority of the class to lose focus. In this moment, this student affected the way I was being presented in the classroom; that is, by drawing attention away from school and to my appearance and his interest in me, he diminished the authority I had in the classroom. I wished for students to not be distracted by my appearance, which is why I dressed more conservatively. However, this didn’t seem to matter; if I had to speculate why, it may be because of my young and feminine appearance as well as my friendly and caring persona.

The second story is about a student who acted out every class period and who I believed schemed ways to disrupt the class instead of focusing on his work. Let me preface this by saying that I do sympathize with this student because I knew that he needed help, and I tried to help him, but he was resistant, which is perhaps why he acted in the following manner. One class well into my student teaching, I was on the move, helping other students with questions they had. All of a sudden, I heard this student’s booming voice from across the room, asking if “Ms. Weiss has a fire crotch” (the interesting thing is that he was also a redhead). Other students around me froze, and stared at me, petrified but curious how I was going to react. From what I remember, I ignored it, perhaps blushing slightly, and continued to help students. I’d like to note that I like to play this off when I tell this story in person, like it’s no big deal, but it still makes me slightly embarrassed writing it. Somehow, the bullying that I didn’t receive in school about my hair came out in student teaching.

As a natural redhead, I was showered with compliments growing up, how gorgeous it was, how so many people pay to have my hair color. My hair was never fiery red like Ron Weasley or Dana Scully (except now, because I use henna to color my hair), but more of an auburn when I was born, and then grew into a dark copper color. When I hit my undergrad years, my hair had lightened into a sandy red (slightly darker than strawberry-blond). In addition to my hair color, I am privileged because I somewhat meet American beauty standards in terms of body type (thin-ish, hourglass-shaped-ish, no physical disabilities), which is most likely why I did not face

any bullying. But now that I was in a position of power, particularly with middle school students, I was a target.

Why did this student's comment bother me but the other student's comments did not? I have a half-formed answer: the student commenting about pubic hair made a direct comment to my body, specifically about a private, sexualized part of my body. And although redheads are sometimes celebrated, redheads' pubic hair normally is not, because it is unique. Though both students seemed to be trying to devalue my authority in the classroom, the first student did not make as direct comments about any specifics of my body (at least that I heard).

In these situations, I did not have much power over how students reacted to the way I presented myself. Although I constructed my appearance with a purpose of not distracting students, because of many other factors at play—including my identity and the way I portray myself as well as the students' identities and biases—my purpose was sometimes irrelevant. These experiences ultimately changed how I approached teaching these students in particular. I would deliberately act a bit more guarded and answer their questions directly, with less emotion.



Figure 4: Hillary in 2019, feeling more comfortable (but sassy because of politics) in these clothes.

It has been two years since I have taught, due to my writing center position and my research assistant position. However, as I shared with the other two authors of this piece when we began writing this together, I tutor high school students online, and more recently, I wear comfy clothes to tutor. Moreover, no matter what, I always wear tennis shoes to campus, especially because of my walk (in any circumstances, though, I refuse to wear high heels). This, I have found, matches my teaching philosophy more than the rigid clothes that I wore in previous years (see Figure 4).

As I am sure I will find when I enter the classroom again, my dress practices will affect the interactions between I and my students, probably both positively and negatively. Until I have a stable job, though, I will always have second thoughts about subverting the implicit dress codes in academia. Multimodal embodied rhetoric such as dress practices can welcome some and alienate others, but

they can provide “liberatory possibilities” (Cedillo & Elston, 2017, p. 7). I hope to use my thin, white, cis, able-bodied privileges to start conversations in and out of the classroom about how to work on liberatory possibilities for more marginalized teacher bodies.

Marriel: Dressing Authentically

For a long time, especially throughout my teenage years, my clothing and dress represented an area of stress. I, Marriel Krupansky, grew up in a wealthy suburb of Detroit, and felt a lot of pressure to look and dress a certain way when I was at school. Whereas in the summer months one would find me sporting an endless array of t-shirts and soccer shorts, my hair pulled away into a ponytail (see Figure 5), the school year marked a period defined by tight, layered, name brand t-shirts, low rise boot-cut jeans, and burnt, stick-straight hair. While the clothing itself was not particularly uncomfortable, I remember a feeling that the clothes did not really look “right” on me, or, more specifically, that they did not feel like a good representation of my personal style (see Figure 6). It was an emotional, visceral reaction that I ignored for the sake of fitting in or, at the very least, for the sake of not being noticed. I now recognize that my attempts to “fit in” in high school—rhetorical choices I made about the clothing and hairstyles I sported—were indicative of a need to please others, to project an image, or to hide insecurities, and for those reasons, I spent years of my life feeling uncomfortable in my clothing.

As I entered adulthood and established a professional life (for a time as a graduate student and graduate teaching assistant, and briefly as a high school teacher), dress once again became an area of heightened concern and discomfort. How could I craft a professional and instructor identity through clothing? What types of clothing did my students, peers, and professors expect me to wear? These questions intersected with my desire to be taken seriously and were intensified by the knowledge that I presented as a very young, small-framed, cisgender woman. Clothing was a way I could establish authority, and likewise a way to mitigate the effects of the things I could not easily change or did not want to change about my body—such as my height or youthful appearance. I shopped for “teacher clothes,” which in my mind consisted of ankle



Figure 5: Me, in high school, with straight hair and a tight T-shirt.

length dress pants and blouses, leggings paired with long tunics or baggy dresses, and neat, respectable flat shoes (see Figure 7). This clothing, I hoped, sent a clear message: Marriel was a serious, professional scholar and instructor.

Similar to the way I would abandon my uncomfortable high school clothes during the freedom of summer, I soon found myself shedding my “teacher clothes” as soon as I walked in the door of my home. My clothing might have been sending the message that I was a serious, professional scholar and instructor, but it said little else. It felt like high school all over again—I was attempting to “fit in” to a role by wearing clothing that did not reflect any aspect of my personal style



Figure 6: A typical example of "teacher clothes" I would wear.

and comfort. This led me to realize that there was an uncomfortable dissonance between my roles as an instructor, graduate student, and other identities and roles I regularly took on outside of the classroom and that the work I was doing felt similarly fractured. I felt as though I was "putting on a costume—putting on an identity" (Manthey, 2015, p. 341). In attempting to embody a "teacher" persona via the rhetorical choices and messages of my clothing, I had abandoned the importance of my personal identity for the sake of putting on a "teacher" costume: my clothing reflected rhetorical choices based on some abstract idea of what a teacher should look like, but did not represent the multifaceted identity of *Marisel Krupansky*—a teacher, yes, but also an assemblage of countless other roles and identities that were ignored and hidden as I stepped into those sensible, but uncomfortable and somewhat impractical, black flats.



Figure 7: Dressed authentically.

In other words, the clothing on my body did not feel *right* because it reflected rhetorical choices that had nothing to do with the other facets of my identity, and did not reflect the different ways I wished to represent myself, in the classroom and out of it. Furthermore, I realized that, if I were to pursue a tenure track or lecturer position after finishing my studies, I would be faced by a similar fracturing of my identities unless I attempted now to reconnect them. While other careers perhaps require a more distinct separation of roles, the nature of academic work requires a certain fluidity and authenticity that is not so easily disconnected from one's personal life. In my case, my area of study (rhetoric and composition) directly correlates to my area of instruction (first year writing). Why was I creating distinct roles for myself as scholar and instructor, when it would be much more beneficial to combine these roles with my other identities and let them inform each other?

I do not mean to suggest that changing my clothing choices immediately resolved this fracturing of my professional and personal identities. It did, however, symbolize the joining of my identities through embodied rhetoric. My identity as a teacher, student, researcher, and individual are tied together, and inform all areas of my life. I am the embodiment of all experiences, roles, and identities—past and present—and my clothing is an important way I can express my personal style. I no longer dress to distinguish which role I am fulfilling at any given moment (see Figure 8). To do so, at least for me, feels disingenuous: I am never completely a teacher, student, or researcher, but am all three, all the time, just to varying degrees. And through this realization, I have learned that authority does not come from masking my small,

young-looking body, but from embracing the authenticity of who I am. Dressing authentically to one's personal and professional identities has come to represent a feeling of self-acceptance, which provides me with more confidence as I move through my various roles. My authority originates at this point of self-confidence and self-expression, which is largely expressed through my clothing practices. I want my clothing choices to say "*this* is who Mariel is, and it will not be compromised."

Conclusion

The best part (subjective, but still) of all this is the all-important "so what? Who cares?" moment. Now that three people have told their personal stories calling into question the concept of rhetorical purpose as it relates to dress practices and identity, what are we to do with this information? A fair question, all around. The implications will be detailed in three categories: pedagogy, personal growth, and professional development. Readers are, of course, welcome and encouraged to continue this conversation and—in some way or another, perhaps through a panel at an upcoming conference or via a thread on social media—add their own implications that might be helpful as we all wrestle with this very important topic.

Personal Growth

Those of us that have served as mentors to graduate student teachers will know how deeply a teacher's personal growth (especially during graduate education) informs their practices in the classroom. What does it mean to "manage" our personal growth as it relates to our identity as teachers? First, whether we can present our true selves through our physical identity is an issue we must continue to interrogate while we work through concepts like professionalism and professional dress. To be sure, this concept of physical presentation of identity is layered and complex (rightly so), and we do not mean to distill it or dilute it at all just for the purposes of wrapping this up neatly. That said, dress is often a critical part of so many pieces of our identity and we are not always permitted access to those aspects of dress that would adhere to our identities, thus hindering personal growth. So, the first implication of these narratives is whether and how the places we work are amenable to those parts of ourselves that we identify through dress. As we continue to work on those systems that might seek to prevent (unwittingly or wittingly) us from dress practices that provide us comfort, identity, necessity, all of the above or more, we can also think about how to support teachers as they move through these systems. After all, the personal growth of a teacher and their ability to be comfortable in their dress and physical presentation in the classroom relates to the next implication: pedagogy.

Pedagogy

It might be easy to think of teachers—when they are in the classroom—as a uniform entity existing to deliver information to a group of people. In fact, in a world of dress codes and common curriculum, it is entirely simple to view the profession in that way. What we lose if and when we give in to this belief is the very real fact that, statistically speaking, the primary factor

related to a student's success in higher education is a bond they develop with an instructor. At the risk of oversimplification¹ we believe that dress practices, and the consideration of rhetorical purpose relating to them has a direct impact on the ways in which instructors engage with their students inside and outside of the classroom. After all, if we understand rhetoric as not just something that we speak and write but also something that we embody, it would follow that our expression (our multimodal embodied rhetoric) may dictate our ability to deliver the words, to teach the concepts, and ultimately to write effectively for any rhetorical situation. Taking into consideration the various factors that affect rhetorical purpose as it relates to our dress has the potential to increase the engagement between student and teacher.

There exists a large body of research on student engagement and faculty behaviors as it relates to whether and how students feel empowered to succeed in postsecondary education (see Meikeljohn; Tinto; Price), and while an instructor's own physical and emotional comfort in the classroom is rarely (if ever) part of these studies, we might ask ourselves, "how could it *not* be?" Perhaps this photo essay can encourage conversations amongst those who are interested in pedagogical practices (and evaluating them to determine outcomes) leading to (additional) qualitative research that seeks to understand faculty member's perceptions of their own personal purpose and agency within the classroom and whether and how that might influence their pedagogical practices.

Professional Development

The stories contained within this essay all deal with, in some way, feelings about and considerations of professionalism in our workplaces. We have all been confronted with the concept of "professional development" in one way or another whether it be through an entire graduate level class devoted to the topic, a formal mentoring relationship with a senior faculty member, or through informal discussions and group interactions with our peers. The idea that we grow and evolve within our profession is pervasive not only in the field of Rhetoric and Composition but in most career paths and professional environments.

Professional development is often defined as comprised of the following practices: "Continuing Education; Participation in professional organizations; Research; Improved job performance; Increased duties and responsibilities; Skills Based Training; and Job Assignments."² In every single one of these aforementioned practices, we dress. In fact, our dress practices and our identity play a role in whether we are able to move through many of these professional development practices, namely job assignments and participation in professional organizations. What the interrogation of rhetorical dress practices and rhetorical purpose does for professional development is to open a line of questioning into what the assumed norms might

¹ Really, we know the body of research here spans multiple disciplines and ranges from the theoretical to the grounded-theory data-driven analyses of classroom practices and student outcomes. Here in our implications, we hope to demonstrate how these narratives might ground some of this work and encourage more.

² <https://hr.buffalostate.edu/professional-development-examples>

do to create visible and invisible barriers to success for people who are grappling with age, ability, and self-expression.

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