How Do I Look?

Over the weekend, I read an article about teaching in *The Wall Street Journal* (Akst, 2016). Unlike most articles I read (in professional journals and typically about strategies), this one discussed some recent research out of the University of Nevada, and the topic was instructor attractiveness! The question the researchers addressed was whether attractiveness influenced learning. Now, think about the implications of that for a moment!

Although the full article describes the details of this study, the gist of it is this: Westfall, Millar, and Walsh (2016) used a computer with an audio-recorded lecture on physics. In communication with the lead author, I learned that the topic was chosen because it had a closed caption for the original male faculty member so it could be replicated exactly by a female presenter. As a result, two identical audio lectures were available and presented with a female voice and photo and a male voice and photo. Again, Westfall (personal communication, August 30, 2016) informed me that four photographs were used and were typical head shots of an attractive Caucasian man and woman and a less attractive Caucasian man and woman from the shoulders up.

The subjects ranged from 18 to 45 years of age with the average age being 20, younger than what we typically encounter in continuing education and professional development. Various ethnicities were represented in the sample of 86 women and 45 men, with European descent being the most prominent.

The participants listened to the lecture while seeing the photograph on the computer. At the end of 20 minutes, they were asked to complete a multiple choice recognition task that was based on the material covered. Most of the items were questions we typically ask after such a learning event—recall questions related to the topic. The subjects were also asked to evaluate the educator’s performance—using questions we would typically ask, such as ability to convey the material. They were also asked to rate the physical attractiveness of the educator. (Previously, a group of six other individuals rated a variety of pictures to create the four photographs that were used: a physically attractive man and woman and a physically unattractive man and woman. Those photographs omitted anyone with facial hair or glasses.) The participants rated the photographs just as the prior group had in creating the set of photographs to be used.

Here is the part I found fascinating: Attractive educators were rated higher than the unattractive ones, and men were rated higher than women. It seems as if the subjects paid greater attention to the male educators and reported they were more motivated by the female ones.

The authors cite various limitations for the study; however, I kept thinking about how many courses we offer in all sorts of educational venues that are online. So if we get our photographs airbrushed just right, we may be more influential! Yet, a lot of what we do in our work involves direct contact with learners. I began to think of all the things I needed to get “fixed” before next week! But then I remembered another study!

Hewlett (2014) studied the idea of executive presence. (That is an attribute we may want to study more in nursing education!) A key finding was this: Appearance accounted for only 5% of a group of executives’ opinions about another person in the context of this study. What Hewlett suggested is critical. Appearance acts as a filter. In other words, people (e.g., educators) are typically seen first, whether in a photograph or in person. So, before others know what someone will say or do, they have judged a person based on appearance. Hewlett went on to point out that it was not about whether we were the most attractive person. Rather, appearance focused on such aspects as cleanliness, neatness, and basic grooming. That is something we all can attend to.

As I thought about these two studies together, I thought this: just as we would want to put our best knowledge into play, just as we would want to rehearse how we might make a presentation, just as we would want to control the environment as much as we could, we would want to be well-groomed. The bottom line is this—we have to have substance, we have to be competent at facilitating learning, we have to care that our learners learn, and we need to take into consideration other ideas that could influence our effectiveness. We do not know what the influence of our personhood is on learners, but it is time we found out!
REFERENCES

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