

Are you listening to how I look?

Reflections on the Role of Emotional and Aesthetic Labour in Higher Education.

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Abstract

This paper offers an evaluation of the more widely researched forms of emotional labour coupled with aesthetic labour in the context of teaching in higher education. Lecturers are emotional workers, responsive to the demands that their occupation makes on their emotions. The purpose of emotional labour is to promote in others a feeling of being cared for. When you engage in emotional labour, you regulate your feelings to satisfy the goals and expectations of your organisation. The related line of inquiry in the paper is the inclusion of aesthetic labour as an emotional labour strategy. Aesthetic labour is about looking good and sounding right in an organisational setting. Both emotional and aesthetic labour are under-researched areas in higher education and deserve more attention in educational research than they have received to date because of their critical importance towards the quality of teaching and learning.

Keywords: Emotional labour, aesthetic labour, higher education.

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1. Introduction

The premiss of this reflection is that lecturers, whether consciously or subconsciously, engage in emotional and aesthetic labour to generate an effective learning environment for students, yet for the most part remain unrewarded extrinsically for this type of labour.

Hochschild's seminal work on how flight attendants performed emotional labour defines the term as the "management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display." (1983, p.328). Grandey's (2000, 2003) more comprehensive approach to emotional labour suggests regulating feelings and expressions in order to conduct our teaching. Bolton contends that emotional labour "remains unaccounted for and undervalued in terms of employee reward", (2000, p.156). Emotional labour in effect is another form of paid work.

Body language, dress sense and style are components of aesthetic labour. How important is our image and appearance as we teach? Has our employer recruited us for our aesthetic skills? A research team at Strathclyde University developed the concept of aesthetic labour (Warhurst et al., 2000). The authors posit the view that aesthetic labour is "an under-developed and under-appreciated" form of labour in the service industry. The provision of higher education can also be considered a service.

2. Emotional Labour Strategies

The literature frequently cites three types of emotional labour strategies. They are surface acting, deep acting and genuine emotional labour, (Mann, 1997; Morris and Feldman, 1996; Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987). While the first three strategies are widely used in understanding emotional labour, the fourth one, aesthetic labour has been researched in isolation, (Warhurst et al., 2000; Witz et al., 2003; Nickson et al., 2005; Berry and Cassidy, 2013).

2.1 Surface Acting

Surface acting necessitates conformance to the display rules of the job by imitating emotions that are not in truth experienced. An example of surface acting would be to display enthusiasm for the content of the lecture through upbeat delivery but actually wishing you were doing something entirely different.

2.2 Deep Acting

Deep acting focuses on inner feeling. For example, a lecturer may prepare in advance of delivering a lecture by listening to upbeat music to increase personal energy and motivation or use examples that evoke the associated emotions when explaining terms.

2.3 Genuine Emotional Labour

Genuine emotional labour is the expression of naturally felt emotions (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). Employees do not have to summon the correct emotions, they naturally occur. For example, a lecturer may naturally feel empathy and concern for a student who requests an extension on the deadline for an assignment due to extenuating circumstances. These are naturally felt emotions in this case. Yin (2015) concludes that genuine emotional labour and deep acting are potent emotional labour strategies for educators to employ.

2.4 Aesthetic Labour

By shifting the focus from emotional to aesthetic labour Witz et al., critically engage with the “somatic or corporeal” aspects of emotional labour (2003, p.35). Lecturers manifest aesthetic labour continuously both consciously and subconsciously in a learning environment by how they stand, speak, walk and thereby feel and think. This form of aesthetic labour is in line with Bourdieu’s (1990) concept of embodied dispositions which alludes to corporeal patterns in the performance of aesthetic labour.

| Emotional Labour Strategies | Description |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surface Acting (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993) | Display appropriate emotion, displays do not reflect true feelings. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deep Acting (Lazányi 2010, Yin 2015) | Feel and experience the actual emotions, engage in thoughts and activities that foster those emotions. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genuine Emotional Labour (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993, Yin 2015) | Spontaneous and genuine feelings, comply with social expectations, emotions occur naturally. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aesthetic Labour (Warhurst <i>et al.</i>, 2000, Nickson 2005) | Attitude and appearance, self-presentation skills. |

Table 1: A summary of emotional labour strategies.

3. Emotional and Aesthetic Labour in Higher Education

According to Constanti and Gibbs “the literature on emotional labour in higher education is limited, the exception being the education of nurses”, (2004, p.243). As emotional labour is an under-researched area in higher education it requires further investigation. A crucial skill of lecturing is to teach well, to deliver the content in an enthusiastic fashion and to engage students. Emotional labour is a key factor in achieving this (Isenbarger and Zembylas, 2006; Palmer, 1997).

There is a compelling argument that educators’ emotional labour is distinctive from other occupations. Interactions with students can be “long-term, repeated and intense”, (Wrobel, 2013, p.2). This is in contrast to commercial services where the relationship can be described as short-term and once-off.

Teaching is emotional work. Jaskani et al., describe emotional work among university lecturers as the “degree of adjustment of someone’s inner feelings or external actions to show the appropriate feelings”, in the delivery of their classes (2014, p.108). A lecturer during one lecture may exhibit various gestures and postures, frequent eye contact with students, varied intonation and emotive facial expressions in delivery, movement while lecturing, and use of humour and engaging examples. The aforementioned are examples of emotional and aesthetic labour in the lecture theatre. Giardini and Frese’s results have practical implications for recruitment policies in higher education to ensure that emotional competence is reasonably considered when selecting and training teaching staff (2006). Bolton claims that emotional labour remains unrewarded due to a lack of clarity around describing what constitutes emotional labour (2000). To provide a balanced review Filby is concerned that emotional labour is over-inflated by describing it as skilled work (1992). He claims that some expressions of emotion are so ordinary in nature and expected from the employee that they do not constitute skilled work but merely a component of task accomplishment. Most research to date examines teacher effectiveness at primary and secondary level. However, I believe it is now time for a lens to be shone on the impact of emotional labour in higher education.

Higher education institutions in Ireland do not have a dress code for academic staff. Depending on the discipline an implied dress code may be in evidence. Based on my experience the dress code is implied, ignored or left to the individual as to how to present themselves in class. The aesthetic labour of employees is a commercial imperative for some organisations. Recruitment strategies based on this notion dangerously flirts with the equality legislation[1] in an employment setting. I wish to open a wider academic debate on exploring

aesthetic labour among academics in higher education and its ethical and legal implications.



Source: <http://openeuropeblog.blogspot.ie/2012/05/sneaking-in-on-franco-german-axis.html>

4. Conclusion

Anyone who has pursued a higher education qualification can recall their favourite lecturer. Embedded in an effective teaching and learning environment is the emotional and aesthetic labour expressed by the educator. This paper offers academic colleagues cause to reflect on emotional and aesthetic labour in order to deliver a successful lecture. The possibilities for further research on a greater scale are compelling.

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[1] Victoria in Australia is the only jurisdiction where legislation pertains to discrimination on the grounds of aesthetic labour. (Warhurst *et al.*, 2009)