

## education

# Attention on attire

The right clothes can yield results in the classroom, writes **Owen Thomson**.

**T**he clothes we wear send clear messages to those around us. Choosing to dress formally or casually, for the beach or the office, gives clues to others about our character, our goals and how we want to be treated. Teachers who give thought to their attire before stepping into the classroom can reap rewards in terms of student rapport and behaviour.

"Kids are highly judgmental," says Evelyn Lundstrom, head of the First Impressions image consultancy. "They'll look at their teachers and they are drawn to the ones that seem to have a bit of fashion savvy. If a teacher looks good and has a little bit of fashion flair, then rapport is built a lot more easily."

Using your clothes to your benefit in the classroom doesn't necessarily mean dressing like a fashion plate. The bottom line is choosing clothing that is appropriate to the circumstances and matches the message you want to convey.

For those new to the profession, finding the balance between too

fashionable and not fashionable enough can be a challenge.

Doug Hearne, a personal development, health and physical education teacher with 26 years' experience in education, says there are traps that some young teachers fall into. "For me the core of it comes down to this thing called professional distance, which is about respecting that you're not a kid and the kids respecting that you're not one of them," says Hearne, a head teacher mentor at Ambarvale High School.

"However, some young teachers think that they might gain acceptance from students, particularly in high school, by dressing like them in terms of the latest brand of surf gear, for example. I think kids are pretty savvy and can see through that. If a young teacher was wanting to wear T-shirt and board shorts on a day-to-day basis, I think I'd be a bit uncomfortable about that."

Hearne says styles needn't be too stiff, with dress jeans and a collared shirt or a collared polo and tailored shorts being appropriate.

Subject specificity can also play a role in determining attire.

In the case of home economics, Elizabeth Macarthur High School's head teacher, Jenny



Illustration: Rocco Fazzari

**'They love their teachers putting in a little bit of effort.'**

**Evelyn Lundstrom**

Lawrence, says safe, closed-in shoes are a must, as is an overall corporate image. It shows the students what it is like to dress for work. "That doesn't necessarily mean suits, but certainly appropriate pants or skirts and jackets or shirts, or jumpers in winter, things that would be acceptable in any workplace. I think if you turn up for work looking like you actually are at work then kids are going to see it's more than a casual day's relaxation around the pool. What they can see is that you're snappy and sharp and ready to work and it's not about relaxing."



**Debbie Murray**  
Teacher at Dubbo School of Distance Education

**What was the last lesson you taught?**

A year 8 visual arts lesson via satellite. Students were introduced to a unit of work that they have received on CD-ROM.

**What makes a good teacher?**  
They must be compassionate, willing to be flexible, yet fair. They are also happy to learn new things from their students and able to laugh at their own mistakes.

**What is the most important thing you teach your students?**

Teaching students skills that they will have for life and that will enable them to maximise their opportunities and to become well-balanced individuals.

**What's the most challenging thing about your job?**

Keeping up with the changes, particularly in technology. The way our students access and digest information has changed from teachers being the deliverers of knowledge to becoming facilitators of learning.

Revealing, figure-hugging outfits are definite no-nos.

"We don't want to have anyone displaying too much cleavage or anything to the young boys, otherwise there's going to be a whole lot of leering going on and that's not a good idea," Lawrence says.

Lundstrom says slacks and tops with sleeves are smart for women.

"Jewellery's a nice thing so long as it doesn't keep moving when you've stopped moving," she says. "A lovely necklace and earrings, girls love that. They love their teachers putting in a little bit of effort."

## Make it bright for little critics

Dressing suitably when teaching young children has its own set of challenges, experienced teachers say.

"I tend to teach infants and I have a 1-2 class and I find the best thing is pants or jeans and a top, but nothing low-cut," says Freda Vlahos from Condell Park Public School. "With little kids you're forever on the floor or bending over marking work. Obviously any clothes that are see-through or

anything that's ripped or too short, in the sense of dresses, is also inappropriate."

She says it's also worth incorporating bright colours – a big hit with a younger audience.

"The younger kids are very observant and honest and you often get remarks," Vlahos says. "They'll notice the slightest thing. Even if you wear a different coloured lipstick, they'll pinpoint it."