Changing the Face of Higher Education

Digital Image Manipulation and Avatars in Identity Management

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Changing the Face of Higher Education: Digital Image Manipulation and Avatars in Identity Management

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Abstract: Face-to-face classroom interaction in higher education contexts incorporates various aspects of personal appearance in its visual dimensions. The advent of online delivery of education (such as utilization of internet platforms including Blackboard and Desire2Learn as well as social media) is creating new spheres of intellectual communication along with new forms of representation of individuals, including selfies and manipulated photographs. For example, the growing popularity of avatars in higher education provides a new spectrum of representational choices for individuals. This article discusses issues involving personal image modifications in higher education and their implications for intellectual interaction and policy development as well as the monitoring of cheating and student impersonation. The ability to choose avatars with which to associate oneself or to alter one’s image digitally can be construed as liberating affordances and well within the spirit of creative higher education. Many of the narratives concerning the personal choices of image or avatar reflect themes of freedom, possibility, and the exploration of self-identity, although others lament the amount of time invested in these choices. However, use of manipulated images and avatars rather than less heavily modified human faces for interaction can also serve to increase the real-world invisibility of many disenfranchised individuals and decrease awareness of their life circumstances in ways that ultimately are more escapist and confining than life enhancing.

Keywords: Diversity, Online Education, Photography, Self-identity, Avatars

Introduction

Higher education is largely a realm of ideas. However, it is also the realm of human beings who have physical bodies that can represented through various means, including videography and digital photography. Representation of participants in higher education is tightly coupled with bodily images, often constructed in the course of everyday academic interaction but sometimes also conveyed through an explicit process of portraiture, as outlined in the analysis of various artifacts and images in this article. In past centuries, higher education participants had few choices as to how to represent themselves. Individuals generally looked at each other’s facial characteristics and clothing while participating in academic discourse, so many of the choices pertained to facial hair, cosmetics, and apparel. Many of the dress codes of academic institutions also delimited the available views of body parts and tattoos (Ramachandran 2006, Ahrens and Siegel 2019). In contrast, current higher education contexts are exploding with representational choices for individuals, many of which are squarely in the realm of the virtual as well as the physical, including selfies (Liu 2018), holography and augmented reality (Diaz et al. 2018), and manipulated or doctored photographs, videos, and avatars (Messinger et al. 2019; Oravec 2012a, 2012b; Zheng et al. 2016). Personal identification issues are also of importance in ascertaining who is producing particular academic items (such as scholarly articles), as well as in detecting cheating and exam impersonation incidents.

This article addresses a number of emerging issues related to personal representational choices in higher education, primarily in the arena of digital image manipulation and avatars. In confronting these and related concerns, this article does not convey primary research, but provides a platform for further exploration grounded in research and analysis of widely-available

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sources. The representational choices outlined can have reflexive effects on the interactive capabilities of participants as well as their self-esteem (Jackson 2019; Nuñez 2009; Oravec 1998; Van Dijck 2008). They can also have substantial implications for future career prospects, as many employers search social media for images of potential employees (Hooley and Cutts 2018). Nearly all academic participants have the means to construct and modify digital self-portraits or in other ways alter their visual representations, with the expenditure of time and effort in these endeavors often outweighing the monetary costs involved (Winston 2013). The article focuses on aspects of these choices that can be liberating for individuals, especially in educational contexts in which experimental approaches toward ideas and interaction are fostered (such as the innovative interdisciplinary settings described in Lau and Pasquini 2004). It also warns of dangers that can result when the choices made by individuals reinforce current stereotypes as to what is desirable in human imagery. Narratives are plentiful that describe how participants in academic interactions feel liberated when they no longer have to deal with the stigma attached to their current bodily forms (as described in an upcoming section). However, these narratives can also serve to introduce the unsettling notion that the underlying forces related to the stigma are often reinforced rather than countered by these interactions. Higher educational institutions themselves can become less rich and vibrant if their participants choose to mask important aspects of their personal identities in efforts to gain acceptance, shield themselves from bullying, obtain employment more readily, or fit various stereotypes.

The issues raised in this article are expanding in importance. Many practical applications are emerging for digital image manipulation and avatars in higher education; for example, avatars are often used in medical trainee and student teacher exercises (Andrade et al. 2010; Sawchuk 2011; Zipp and Craig 2019). Online education as a whole has become more popular as various economic and social considerations have increased the overall expense of maintaining classrooms in which the participants are co-located. A number of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) and other large-scale educational initiatives are connecting thousands of students in dozens of countries. This article poses questions about how faculty, students, and staff as individuals will appear in these online learning environments and what affordances these presences will have for intellectual and social interaction. Being able to produce online entities that are stereotypically beautiful or notable in other ways may have unfortunate side-effects: a dystopian view of the “classroom of the future” can indeed involve a composite of perfectly-rendered online images of air-brushed, attractive, and charismatic human beings or other chosen characters rather than of diverse, blemished, and real-world faculty, staff, and students.

Methodology

The methodology for this paper is to construct a “rich picture” (Checkland 1981) in narrative form of a set of complex issues concerning self-identity expression in educational contexts. The process constructs “a tool through which to engage stakeholders in reflection, interpretation and further inquiry” (Conte and Davidson 2020, 2), providing an “emergent” form of investigation through which the many individuals who read, commented on, and contributed to this paper in the past years played important roles.

Rich picture methodology has strong roots in futures research, in which it is used to explore and discuss the potential consequences of certain emerging trends. The narrative portraits and reflections that originally populated the rich picture of this research were gleaned from academic and popular literatures, as outlined in the references. Other narratives were added as the readers and reviewers of this material suggested sources rooted in an eclectic variety of fields and disciplinary backgrounds. As outlined by Shepperd, Rothman, and Klein, “Numerous theories buttress our understanding of self and identity by specifying how cognitive, affective, and motivational features of self-systems develop, interact, and influence behavior” (2011, 409), so interdisciplinary approaches are required in these analytic efforts. Higher education presents a
particularly complex and multi-faced setting from which to ask questions about self-identity expression and the impacts of interactive technologies (Woolhouse et al. 2020).

**The Classroom as Frontstage**

This section explores aspects of the traditional settings of higher education for perspectives on how our current spectrum of representational choices has emerged. Images of faculty members, academic staff, and students interacting in various ways fill movies, theatrical performances, and television shows, providing a view of intellectual activity to observers. Consider the classic film *Paper Chase* (Bridges 1973). It portrayed a law school classroom as the “frontstage” of academic life (Goffman 1971), a place that displayed the intellectual and social interactions of participants as well as exposed them to critique. The noted Professor Kingsfield wore long-sleeved shirts and tweed jackets or suits along with the well-heeled students he taught. If in real life he was overweight (or what was then labeled as “portly”), this fact was readily available to his students and other observers. However, if he or any of the other class participants had tattoos or other bodily markings, this fact was not revealed in the course of the academic proceedings unless the markings were on the exposed skin of the hands, neck, and face. The academic participants of *Paper Chase* and comparable co-located classrooms displayed faces and voices in their intellectual interactions in class as they did in their personal contacts in coffee houses or their own residences.

In such traditional face-to-face classroom interaction as that just described, the genders as well as racial and ethnic dimensions of individuals were generally apparent and occasionally were influential in the proceedings. Unfortunately, these gender, racial, and ethnic identifications often played roles that were inhibiting to authentic and productive academic discourse, molding the discussion in various ways or even serving to silence particular members (Banks 1988; Edwards and Esposito 2018). Educational research shows that these identifications may play strong roles in evaluation of faculty performance as well (Ambady and Rosenthal 1993; Mitchell and Martin 2018; Pozo-Munoz, Rebollos-Pacheco, and Fernandez-Ramirez 2000). However, the physical presence and exhibited competence of a variety of representatives of social and economic groups in the classroom eventually served to influence higher education to some extent. This is especially the case in the field of law where participation of some minorities has increased in past decades and gender balance in enrollment is often tipped toward females (Crowley 2008, Young 2018), potentially inspiring changes in curricular emphasis.

Even in traditional classroom settings, individuals indeed have a range of choices to make in terms of personal image (Manathunga, Selkrig, and Baker 2018). In past decades, the decisions of whether to grow a beard or wear clothing of various fabrics have been seen as consequential for males, and choices concerning the wearing of dresses as opposed to pants have been assigned weight for females (Lightstone, Francis, and Kocum 2011), and choices concerning tattoos have been viewed as important across gender affiliations (Leader 2015). Beards, fabrics, and dresses in particular constructions have been associated with various roles and with greater or lesser degrees of formality. Other, less standard and even quixotic kinds of representational choices are also available: as discussed in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, a number of faculty members have even chosen to have tattoos placed on their bodies that reflect their chosen field of study (Monaghan 2010). The meaning of beards, fabrics, dresses, and tattoos in the classroom has varied over past decades depending on external factors, such as the state of the economy or various celebrity-related fads. The fact that individuals have a level of capability to transform their personal images to fit various molds has been reified in the notion of the “makeover,” in which fashion and styling experts provide assistance in revitalizing personal appearance (Weber 2009). For individuals who feel that their age, weight, or other physical status gives them a disadvantage, more drastic opportunities are available (such as facelifts or gastric bypass surgery). Morgan (2011) laments that the “liberatory” discourses related to many treatments for obesity often disguise deep-seated oppression; other discourses relate to “health” themes but can also be considered as microaggressions (Hunt and Rhodes 2018). Although the individuals obtaining the appearance-
related treatments are construed as “finding their true selves,” the treatments serve to reinforce unfortunate stereotypes as well as be physically unhealthy in the long run.

**Representations of Individuals in Online Settings in Higher Education**

In contrast with the face-to-face interaction of *Paper Chase* and many other traditional classroom settings, online classes provided on the platforms of Blackboard, Desire2Learn, or social media sites can involve the frontstage exchange of ideas with only oblique clues as to the human circumstances of their originators. On these platforms, individuals generally choose the image, if any, with which they are associated. In particular cases, individuals can refrain from choosing any image at all; a standard silhouette is subsequently placed in the spot the digital image would have taken. In these cases, names alone provide clues as to gender, ethnicity, and related matters, which often does not sidestep certain kinds of stereotypes based on gender, ethnic, or regional identifications (such as the negative gender-related stereotypes described in Cokley et al. 2015). In past decades, participants used “emoticons” (or other linguistic units that are combined in ways related to certain psychological or rhetorical signals) in online interactions to connote various psychological states and rhetorical flourishes that would have been conveyed through physical smiles or winks in face-to-face settings (Garrison et al. 2011); emojis have served some of the same purposes in recent years (Ge 2019). However, in examination situations, choice of image is often not an option, as administrators and faculty work to reduce impersonation and related cheating behavior in online education contexts (Oravec 2018).

If individuals were entirely alike in their circumstances and physical forms, representational issues would indeed be interesting but somewhat unproblematic. However, social stigmas abound even in online realms, rooted in economic and social contexts as well as superstition (Gergen 2000). Goffman (1963) outlines how in face-to-face interaction, individuals are generally afforded capabilities for strategically managing information about themselves related to various social stigmas (for example, concerning obesity). They are afforded means to control what others know about them, often by the selective disclosure or concealment of information. Online interaction provides an even wider range of means for controlling such information disclosure. For instance, instead of using a recent photograph reflecting current age and weight in an online profile, a faculty member can use a photo from previous years or one that has been heavily modified with Photoshop or other software package. In settings in which there is at least some level of face-to-face contact, individuals eventually are given social pressure to provide portraits with reasonable resemblance to current facial status; such pressure is apparently not as forthcoming online, with the exception of the identification photos or videos specifically taken for impersonation and cheating detection purposes.

**Critical Issues in Digital Image Manipulation**

Image manipulation can be conducted by nearly any individual with access to a computer and photo enhancement software. Video and photography were once considered as reliable witnesses to human interaction; however, they are becoming widely recognized as malleable media that give photographers considerable leeway in modification, leading to issues involving the trustworthiness of photographic documentation (Chalfen 2002; Cromeoy 2010; Oravec 1998). For example, photos can be enhanced to make it seem as if face-to-face interaction occurred that never indeed transpired. Selection of certain photos from among hundreds of selfie shots can also elicit angles of presentation that are stereotypically desirable in terms of the appearance of bodily weight (Liu 2018). Enhancement of photos in popular magazines so as to improve the appearance of models and celebrities has been common, often being labeled as “digital dieting” (Spindler 1997). Such enhancements include the removal of blemishes, wrinkles, and the appearance of “extra” body fat. These image-related practices have consequences for individuals’ perspectives and well-being. For example, research conducted by Bissell (2006) shows that even with
rudimentary knowledge of media manipulation techniques, young women often expressed their preference for heavily doctored images of women rather than images that were less enhanced and more reasonable in terms of weight. Digital portraits can be readily modified as to mitigate the effects of aging, hair loss, or weight gain, and many individuals have the ability to do certain aspects of this work on digital photos of themselves as well as photos involving everyday scenes (Kuo, Zhang, and Cranage 2015). Some of this image modification can be performed simply to avoid being “cyberbullied” by those who gain something by attacking individuals with particular characteristics (Oravec 2012b). Other efforts can be related to self-identity issues linked with the ready contrasts and comparisons of the personal images of various individuals in online contexts, which can increase the potential for negative personal ramifications (Warfield 2018).

With digital media, the management of choice opportunities is a major concern since production of a large number of images is not only inexpensive in comparison with chemical-film photography. Production of digital images does not depend on the availability of film or the storage of negatives (Oravec 1998). Hence, a surfeit of portraiture possibilities can be made available to individuals making the choice of what image to place on a Facebook profile page or other social media platform. These choice processes can play positive roles for individuals in exploring their self-identity. Mindful decision processes involving the choice of which portrait to present to the world can also be a tool in therapy. Nuñez describes a growing “compulsive representation of the self” in modern society and links self-representation with a sense of immortality:

Following Rembrandt and Van Gogh, more and more people today feel a strong urge towards self-representation, to leave a lasting image of themselves which will outlive them. This need may be felt more urgently at certain moments of our lives when our identity is in question, or it may respond to the deeper compulsion of the artist who, as Bob Dylan says, is in a constant state of becoming: every seven years we change all the cells in our body and with every major change we must re-programme our identity. (2009, 57)

The expanding public response to online education and social networking in general may in itself reflect some of the needs Nuñez describes; many individuals may indeed participate in such vehicles in order to leave particular reflections of self that will outlive them. There are increasing varieties of social media options available, with many of them involving a heavy image-related emphasis (such as Pinterest). For a number of years, Facebook has attracted the attention of many faculty members, with some obtaining a reported “cult” status with a large number of students and colleagues as followers (Rae 2011). Research conducted on Facebook interaction patterns is showing the relevance of gender and age factors in choices of images and acceptance of friend requests (Karl and Peluchette 2011). Strano (2008) showed that women tend to change their Facebook profile image more frequently than men; women also tended to emphasize the theme of friendship in the images they choose to display.

As experience with Facebook and related social media platforms in higher education expands (and as research reveals, more patterns) faculty and staff will have enhanced guidance as to how digital profiles will influence intellectual interaction. Just as MySpace was at least temporarily replaced by Facebook in popularity, new platforms may eventually emerge that provide new sets of image modification capabilities and related issues. Experts who can provide professional assistance in digital media imagery are located in close proximity to many higher educational institutions, often giving faculty, staff, and students some assistance in producing portraits that more precisely convey their desired traits. Examples of these professionals include social media, marking, and “branding” specialists who can guide faculty and staff in their quests to present themselves online in desired ways (Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017).
Avatars in Intellectual Interaction and Expression

Use of Second Life (created by Linden Lab) and other immersive online environments has dramatically expanded in higher education in the past decade (Wankel and Kingsley 2010; Gallego, Bueno, and Noyes 2016). Proponents such as Goral often extolled the adaptability of the Second Life platform to a wide assortment of uses:

Much like real life, Second Life is precisely what you make of it. If you want to socialize with people from around the world, there’s always a party going on somewhere. If you want to explore the works of filmmakers, painters, and sculptors, Second Life has no shortage of such food for thought. If you want to discuss politics or religion, or play a game of chess, you’ll find plenty of likeminded people. On the other hand, if you want to speed around a beach in a missile-firing hovercraft, no one will stop you from doing that (but such behavior will result in your banishment from certain locations). (2008, 60)

Another early account of educational activities in Second Life in Foster provides a sense of the excitement of many academics about its applications in intellectual interaction:

Professors use Second Life to hold distance-education classes, saying that communication among students actually gets livelier when they assume digital personae. Anthropologists and sociologists see the virtual world as a laboratory for studying human behavior. University architects use it as a canvas on which to explore design. (2008, 12)

Avatars generally have the capabilities for motion, thus providing their developers with more than just a single image or snapshot as a vehicle for representation. In Second Life, as well as in many videogames, avatars represent individuals in ways that can incorporate various personal characteristics and even “quirkiness.” Foster describes them as “digital characters who fly from place to place, chat, and form communities” (2008, 12). A Virtual World Watch report on the use of Second Life in academic contexts entitled “Zen and the Art of Avatar Maintenance” lamented the amount of time and attention devoted by participants to the fine-tuning of their avatars rather than to academic subject matter (Fearn 2010). Switches between and among avatars and other personal representations can consume time and mental energies that could be invested in other dimensions of academic interaction. However, in a variety of classroom contexts (such as preparatory courses for adult education teachers), construction of narratives of self is indeed a major component (Michelson 2011); in these settings, a great amount of time and attention spent on developing the most suitable personal image or avatar could well be consciously and tightly integrated with other academic objectives.

Negative responses on the part of academics to the representational aspects of Second Life in higher education are also emerging. Herring has taken a highly critical stance toward its advent in postsecondary libraries, reflecting concern about its heavy focus on online representational issues and related time expenditures:

In Second Life, one can become everything, or rather anything, that one wants to be, so long as it isn’t entirely human. In one trek to that virtual world, I met several librarians, some with green, spiked hair, others with pink or magenta hair and looking for all the world like hedgehogs with piercings. Others appeared with, well, somewhat human countenances but with added accoutrements that even genetic splicing could not unfurl. One encounter informed me that so-and-so was there to my right: “I’m the one with the pink wings.” (2007, 59)
Although Herring found experimental approaches toward identity management to be unsettling, others have described them in more positive terms. Campbell’s narrative below discusses the creation of difference between the online and face-to-face realms:

I wonder if you, savvy readers of this blog, would “recognize” me if we met outside of cyberspace. By this, I don’t mean recognize me physically, of course—you probably have not seen my picture—I just mean that a personality can be quite different when channeled through a different format, and I might seem quite different than you imagine me. (2011, 1)

Avatar development has also been coupled with larger themes of spiritual and political expression. The processes of self-discovery linked with avatar development and interaction have been described in religious terms (Hayse 2010), with deeply-held beliefs and assumptions being involved. Balkin describes “virtual liberty” as “freedom to design and freedom to play in virtual worlds” (2043, 2004). Jin (2010) describes how certain individuals associate more closely with their created avatars than with images that reflect what they see in the physical glass mirror. Sensitivity to these emerging perspectives on identity representation will be needed in order to craft humane organizational policies concerning these issues.

**Policies Involving Digitally Modified Images and Avatars**

Higher educational institutions are forms of human organization, and organizational policies have generally played considerable roles in shaping and constraining the presentational choices available to individuals. These constraints can vary from formal dress codes to supervisor-applied pressure. Uniforms, still common in medical and military establishments and even various schools, can greatly constrain these choices (Kohn 1998). Such professions as nursing (Giles 1971) and elementary school teaching (Hudgins 1972) have also undergone self-examination concerning dress codes and equity in terms of gender and racial presentations and have often modified potentially oppressive codes. Various colleges’ dress codes have triggered discussion of gay rights issues (Chappell 2010, Sánchez 2019). The online sphere provides a comparable set of choices for organizations and their participants. Rules concerning the online imagery associated with individuals have been slow to emerge but may certainly become a factor in personal choices as well as in organizational activities and administrative responses (Oravec 2019). Since many people choose animal or even automobile images for their avatars, a kind of an online “uniform” may emerge in certain online settings so as to have at least some form of standardization of personal images (for example, so that the images chosen are at least mildly recognizable as “human” images). Conrad, Neale, and Charles (2010) show in their pioneering study of higher education avatar choices how many participants do prefer avatars that have at least some kind of resemblance to their own physical forms, although the study was indeed limited in size and scope.

As discussed in previous sections, digital images can be modified in a variety of ways. These capabilities often provide tempting prospects to those who wish to tease if not bully others. For example, smartphone cameras have been used in locker rooms or other personally-compromising contexts to take embarrassing photos that have subsequently been modified and used in ways that hurt their subjects (Brown and Buckler 2017; Miranda 2005; Oravec 2012b). These images can be widely disseminated via social media venues with few ways for their subjects to mitigate the damage. The sexual nature of a great deal of interaction on Second Life and related platforms has been increasingly discussed by academics who are worried about potentials for student distraction and potential bullying (Foster 2008). Organizational policies are being developed for Second Life expression and behavior in ways akin to those crafted for face-to-face organizational settings (Goral 2008; Wiederhold 2018). Butler and White describe the early development of policies for the “QUT Island” (established by faculty and students at the Queensland University of Technology): “A
shared location like QUT Island requires structures to be put in place for the effective, orderly and amicable use of the space. This includes allocation of spaces within the location and an agreed charter governing use and ‘in world’ behavior’ (2008, 3). A “Second Life Democratic Movement” subsequently emerged that seeks increased “liberty” for avatars and decreased emphasis on commercialism and censorship (Harambam, Aupers, and Houtman 2010). Gender and multicultural studies can also provide insights and direction as to how to proceed in affording freedom of expression in online realms while protecting individuals from abuse (Chase 2010; Ibrahim 2017).

Policies concerning copyright are another, related venue for organizational intervention in these image-related spheres. Copyright factors are indeed often mentioned in policy-related discourse involving online personal images; for example, individuals are often warned against using images for which copyright matters are not cleared or other legal pressures are instituted (Aerbach and Christensen 2018; Blakeman 2010). However, censorship can also be an issue as certain images or avatar characteristics counter various prevalent organizational norms and trigger administrative, political, or legal attention. Such censorship can be misplaced and eventually withdrawn: for example, in 2011 Facebook censored a photograph that displays the kiss of two gay men (Grindley 2011), but altered its early stipulations concerning this image in the face of public pressure. Facebook has also censored photos of breastfeeding mothers (Ibrahim 2017).

Conclusion and Reflections

The traditional modes of academic interaction (largely involving physical classroom or seminar room settings) often placed faculty, staff, and students in particular roles that were reinforced through their physical body images. Decades ago, those seeking higher education had few alternatives for instructional settings than classrooms filled with faculty, staff, and students clad in wool and tweed. These individuals debated ideas with considerable awareness of the gender and economic status as well as racial and ethnic affiliation of participants. The current modes of interaction described in this article, in contrast to those of the era of Paper Chase, have dramatically expanded the variety of available representational forms in academic settings. For example, many individuals in higher education with access to a computer or smartphone and photo enhancement software are willing and able to modify, if not transform radically, the digital photos that are associated with them. Their online contributions to discussion groups or Facebook interactions can be enhanced with photographic representations, avatars, or other online constructions that make them look thinner, younger, and otherwise more conforming to stereotypes of “desirable” qualities (Messinger et al. 2019; Oravec 2012a). The choice of avatar can empower individuals to create an academic persona that can differ in image, often markedly, from that of their physical persona. Although they may not choose to go as far as to acquire tattoos that associate them with a given academic area (as previously described), academic participants may indeed seek enhanced ways to reflect their disciplinary or other identification. For example, they could make their avatars more closely reflect their intellectual fields or chosen professions.

The image-related choices described in this article have all expanded in some way the scope and range of human communications, providing new and sometimes confusing dimensions of interaction in higher education (Kellner and Kim 2010; Salminen et al. 2019). Video advances multiply these choices as well; for example, YouTube videos of high production quality have lampooned academic life for many years (Troop 2011), disseminating worldwide comedic themes about college activities. The time involved in these efforts has indeed been an increasing concern. Students, faculty, and staff who focus on their online imagery are often diverting attention away from other academic matters at hand (Herring 2007), although as participants become more skilled at image manipulation and avatar choice some time and effort economies may be achieved. The side effects of this expansion of choice can also include the visual shaping of academe so as to exclude a range of currently stigmatized images (for example, images of older, heavier, or otherwise less stereotypically appealing human entities). Institutional decisions
sometimes reinforce these trends: marketing professionals in higher educational settings have often selected images of stereotypically-attractive individuals for brochures and websites so as to modify the overall image of their institutions (Kirp 2004). The personal choices that individuals make in this regard in their Facebook profile or selection of avatars can also serve to bolster this unfortunate selection process and reinforce stereotypes.

We cannot know yet what faculty and students in the near future will look like, if indeed online images will provide us with clues. Will academic participants choose to modify their images over time, evolving in terms of self-representation in response to classroom or external societal influences? Will they choose relatively static forms of self-representation, possibly because of inertia or perhaps allegiance with their other processes of self-identity construction? Moderate forms of photo manipulation have indeed been available for decades, and most of us have taken the “red eye” out of photos, removed blemishes and wrinkles, or done other sorts of visual tweaking. However, streams of image-related choices that are skewed away from representations of societal groups that are currently underprivileged in particular dimensions or seen as stigmatized could change the character of higher education. In one scenario, an individual who is older, overweight, and balding (three unfortunate sources of stigma in today’s society) can choose as an avatar the image of a younger individual who is thinner and more hirsute. These simple choices may seem inconsequential; however, as individuals do not convey reasonable age, weight, and follicle parameters, over time unfortunate stereotypes can be reinforced. In another unsettling scenario, individuals who belong to certain targeted groups could decide to attempt to avoid the potential for being somehow typecast or stereotyped in discussions (or even bullied) through modifying their personal images or refusing to provide them at all. For educational institutions, the policies and practices related to personal representation can have larger impacts on the range of life chances of individuals, affecting how they are given opportunities, recognitions, and awards. These relatively small, individual choices involving personal representation and self-identity can literally serve to change the face of higher education.

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Ubiquitous learning is a counterpart to the concept “ubiquitous computing,” but one which seeks to put the needs and dynamics of learning ahead of the technologies that may support learning. The arrival of new technologies does not mean that learning has to change. Learning should only change for learning’s sake. The key perspective of the journal is that our changing learning needs can be served by ubiquitous computing. In this spirit, the journal investigates the affordances for learning in the digital media, in school, and throughout everyday life.

Ubiquitous Learning: An International Journal is a peer-reviewed, scholarly journal.