

Understanding Students is the Key to Be a Good Professor

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Unlike many writings about the quality of a “good professor” by educators in higher education, the authors attempt to identify the key attributes of good professors from the point of view of students, not professors. Through the open ended questionnaires administered without notification in business and economics classes with respondents remaining anonymous, the study reveals that the four most important attributes of being a good professor are understanding the students, organized presentations, enthusiastic excitement, and knowledge on the teaching subject. This data was gathered from business students of a state university in mid-west, USA. Based on the findings, the authors present strategies for success in classroom teaching along with practical suggestions for new aspiring professors who are eager to launch their teaching career as well as those that are eager to improve teaching performance in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Professors as teachers are one of the main pillars of our progressive society. They bear the weight and responsibility of teaching, and they are the main source of advanced knowledge for students. At the same time, good teaching requires some very specific skills and there will always be room to improve. Therefore, the professors will strive to teach more effectively.

Teaching business courses is a complex task of many activities on a spectrum ranging from a subject based in-classroom presentation to writing a letter of recommendation for students’ employment upon their graduation, to becoming a reference for an entry-level job. In the process of teaching, a professor has to interact with a number of stakeholders that include: university administrators, faculty colleagues, students, industry executives, and on occasion parents. Among the many different tasks of a professor’s, classroom interaction is the most important. It has been well documented that good teaching has a powerful, long lasting influence on the students. The focus of this writing is on the classroom experience; specifically on the desirable attributes of good teachers in higher education.

The significant role of teaching within the educational process has generated a large volume of literature on the specific attributes of good professors in higher education. Since teaching is a multi-task and multi-dimensional in nature, the expression “good professor” is somewhat elusive. However the authors believe there are identifiable common attributes that characterizes good professors. Isolating and identifying the most desirable attributes will help professors to improve their teaching in the classroom.

Subsequently as students experience good professors this will help them gain knowledge and better prepare them to face the challenges of “the real world” upon graduation when they launch their career.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURES

Much of the pedagogical research on good teaching in education has attempted to identify desirable attributes for good teachers and good professors. Unlike a common belief that the knowledge of the subject to teach is the utmost element to be a good teacher, some assert that good teaching is more than transmitting knowledge. Among the five most important attributes of good teaching identified by Simendinger and others, knowledge of the subject stands out as the most important. Knowledge is followed by fair dealing with students, creating a comfortable atmosphere, providing worthwhile information, and providing practical examples in teaching (Simendinger, Galperin, LeClair, and Malliaris 2009).

In *The Journal of Effective Teaching*, *Going beyond the call of duty* is mentioned first among the four attributes (Herman 2011) that is followed by: *know the material*, *teach the material well*, and *understand the student*. Few readers of this article will deny that teaching is opening minds to learning and also helping students to “decide they can learn and accomplish more than they previously thought possible,” (Patterson 2009). For example Minnesota’s Department of Education has established four areas by which teachers’ effectiveness is evaluated: subject mastery, communication skills, relationships, and participation in the school as an enterprise.

Other research of good teaching asserts that passion for teaching tops the list of attributes. Nine other attributes that follow include: substance of knowledge, communication with students, creative balancing between being an authoritarian dictator and a pushover, teaching style, humor like making innocuous jokes, caring for every student, visionary leadership, mentoring, and finally having fun to experience intrinsic rewards (Leblanc 1998).

A good professor teaches a subject that they are passionate about but are still in touch with where their students are in understanding the material (Beyer 2010). It is important to recognize the separation between the professors’ passion for their subject and the passion for teaching (Krishnan 2012). For professors that have a narrow focus on a subject, as they come to master it, they are more likely to be passionate about it. However, these same professors can lose interest and motivation on a class topic that is broader than the professor’s research focus. Therefore, a truly effective teacher is one that complements the passion for his subject with a passion for teaching the students. (Meador 2015; Crowley 2015).

To be an effective professor, readers are advised to take actions in eight areas: (1) aim to make a good first impression the first day, (2) establish attainable goals, (3) show passion for both teaching and your discipline, (4) reinforce the learning with periodic review, (5) know the material, (6) be a role model, (7) know yourself, (8) and engage students with interaction. (Herman 2011).

Some research emphasizes the teacher’s personality to be the most important criteria for an effective teacher and that the *teacher as a person*, is the most important attribute. This assertion is based on the teacher as a representative of both the university and the content material to students. (Strong 2007). Just like a salesperson, a professor many times becomes a representative of their entire higher education organization. A teacher in and outside the classroom makes an impression on administrators, colleagues, parents, and students. Frequently students link the academic subject to a preferred professor. This association of subject and professor can have a long lasting impact on student’s careers and lives.

Vast amounts of research on good teaching conclude that professors make a difference in student progress. This view cites factors such as who the professor is and how the professor relates with their students. In such research, professor-student relationships rank as the most important attribute followed by the professor’s expectation and clarity (Eldridge 2010).

METHODOLOGY

Sample Selection

At the end of Spring 2015 semester, 86 respondents participated in an open-ended, unstructured, and qualitative questionnaire that contained the questions shown in Appendix A. All the sample responses were usable for analysis. This questionnaire was presented at the beginning of classes with one week remaining in the semester. Students were not prompted in prior classes that they would be asked these questions; their hand-written responses were spontaneous. Further, the respondents were asked not to identify who they were; all data was anonymized. No demographic questions were asked, not even their genders. The table below describes the student classification profile of the respondents. As shown in the table, the students are mostly juniors and seniors in a mid-west state university. All the data collected is from business courses: economics, marketing, finance and accounting. The sample numerically is large enough so that the authors believe that for an explorative research in qualitative terms, this representative sample avoids bias.

TABLE 1
SAMPLE PROFILE

Course Name	Course Level	# of Respondents	Time Period
Economics	Sophomore	20	Spring 2015
Accounting	Sophomore	15	Spring 2015
Personal Finance	Junior	18	Spring 2015
Principles of Marketing	Junior	19	Spring 2015
Industrial Marketing	Senior	14	Spring 2015
Total Sample Size		86	

The data collected was compiled based on the first item stated by each of the respondents. The authors believe the first item should be weighed more significantly than any others listed. Seventeen attributes were identified that were distinctively different from the others; they were ranked by the frequency of mention. However, as shown in Table 2, in ranking order only 8 attributes were noted since several items received duplicate mention.

ANALYSIS

Unstructured Vivo Analysis

The qualitative and unstructured data collected required a special technique to avoid the authors' bias and self-reference criterion, and the Vivo analytical technique was utilized by creating 17 nodes and 8 rank orders of the responses as shown in Table 2. The Vivo application efficiently helps to pinpoint key themes and patterns of the students thinking. Much previous research has identified passion for teaching as the most important attribute for good professors and teachers.

This current study reveals that human qualities of professors matter. Understanding students through good communication is the most frequent attribute mentioned by the respondents followed by organization of presentation and enthusiastic excitement about what professors teach. Further, unlike the common perception that knowledge is most important to be an effective professor, knowledge is mentioned frequently in this survey but does not lead the list of attributes being placed fourth.

The different conclusions of our research findings compared to previous research may come from a variety of factors such as the research setting, the spontaneity of the survey, the experience that students have had with previous instructors, economic and social circumstances that college students have encountered in their own lives while taking courses, the culture of the university or college that can be

public or private, nature of the course subject, etc. Ignoring many possible unidentifiable variables, the authors are confident that understanding students is the utmost priority to be an effective professor. This takes into consideration the contemporary school-work, learning-earning situations which students are increasingly experiencing while in college.

Since 1984, the fraction of college students aged 16 to 24 who also work full- or part-time has increased from 49 to 57 percent (Orszag, Orszag, and Whitemore 2001). With the continuing rise in college tuition the percentage of working students potentially could be much greater for educational institutions, particularly for those that have a significant percent of commuter students, commonly called non-traditional students who are over 25 years of age. The authors believe that these time-pressed students that try to balance between school and work life demand more understanding from professors for greater degrees of flexibility with their limited time.

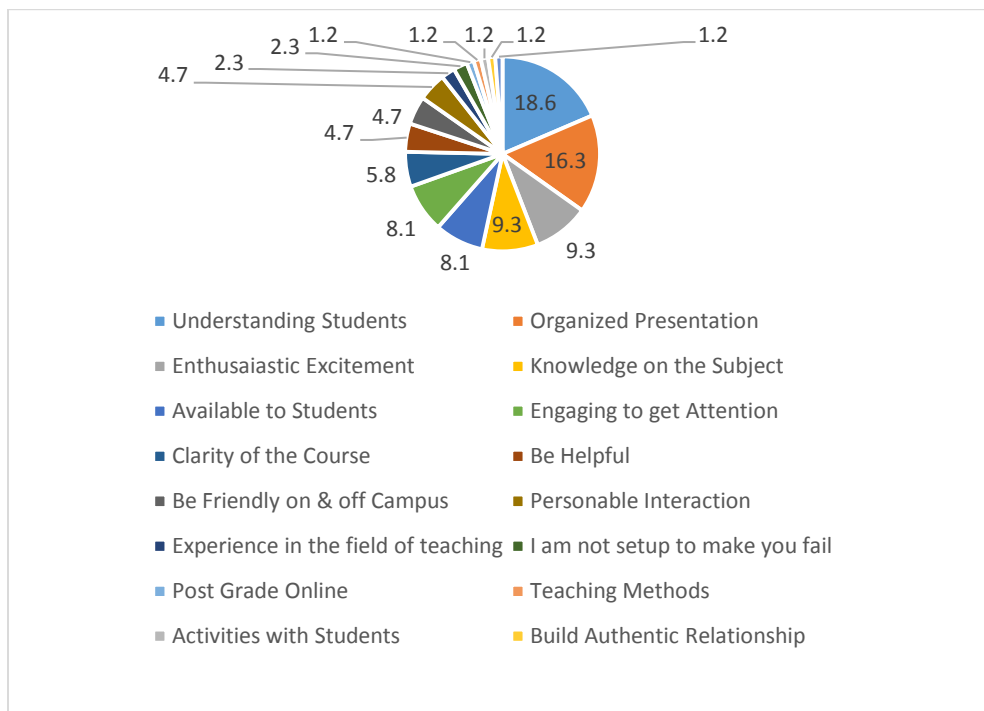
Top Four Attributes of Good Professors

As shown in Table 2 and Figure 1, among the 17 attributes mentioned by the 86 respondents, the top four characteristics deserves further analysis. They include understanding students, organized presentations, enthusiastic persona, and knowledge about the subject taught.

TABLE 2
RANK ORDER OF ATTRIBUTES TO BE AN EFFECTIVE PROFESSOR

Rank	Node	Attributes	Frequency	%	Cum. Frequency	Cum. %
1	1	Understand students through good communication	16	18.6%	16	18.6%
2	2	Organized to present material in a way that makes sense	14	16.3%	30	34.9%
3	3	Enthusiastic excitement about what he/she teaches	8	9.3%	38	44.2%
	4	Knowledgeable about what he/she teaches	8	9.3%	46	53.5%
4	5	Available to students and respond quickly to emails	7	8.1%	53	61.6%
	6	Engaging ability in speaking by grabbing student attention	7	8.1%	60	69.8%
5	7	Clarity of the course requirements	5	5.8%	65	75.6%
6	8	Helpful throughout the semester	4	4.7%	69	80.2%
	9	Friendly by greeting students on and off campus	4	4.7%	73	84.9%
	10	Personable interaction with students	4	4.7%	77	89.6%
7	11	Experience in his/her field of teaching	2	2.3%	79	91.9%
	12	Having a "I am not setup to make you fail" mentality	2	2.3%	81	94.2%
8	13	Post grade online for students to know where they stand in the class	1	1.2%	82	95.3%
	14	Effective teaching methods	1	1.2%	83	96.5%
	15	Activities involved with students	1	1.2%	84	97.7%
	16	Build authentic relationship	1	1.2%	85	98.8%
	17	Honest about the class	1	1.2%	86	100.0%
		Total	86	100.0%		

FIGURE 1
ATTRIBUTES OF EFFECTIVE PROFESSOR BY %



Understanding Students

From the first class day – students pick up the tone and demeanor of the course and the professor. Within a few class sessions students decide if the course will be interesting, what effort they might put forth and if the course is worth attending. Students sense if there will be interaction, how their questions are answered and if the professor will consistently be patient and flexible. Among the many traits of good communications students ask professors to be ‘active’ listeners; to exhibit good listening skills. Most importantly professors are being asked to be empathetic; to recognize and understand students’ individual circumstances; appreciate the importance of their busy lives – the goals and the challenges they face. Clearly stated in their responses students want professors to care about them and about their success. They see the professor as one who not only sincerely answers their inquiries but who is in touch with the class to where the professor is able to anticipate their questions.

Organized Presentation

Students look to professors to bring order; encourage understanding (not memorization) of materials. On a daily basis student are inundated with information, headlines, news feeds, a variety of social media and an assortment of commercial stimuli. Much of this reaches students in the form of brief snippets of information in rapid and condensed form. Good professors have the ability to sort out substance from the noise thereby guiding students to understand the primary ideas and concepts with relevance and benefits to their lives.

Enthusiastic Excitement

Students expect an atmosphere where they want to be and where they want to learn. Students are keenly aware of the attitude of the professor and message delivered in the classroom. They respond to messages that reflect a positive outlook of life and where materials are presented in terms and illustrations understood by all. Students want professors to elevate and challenge their thinking. Through their

professors they seek real understanding of the material – helping them expand their perspective so they begin to see the bigger picture. Good professors invite students into discussions helping them discover and recognize connections between concepts, ideas and applications; connections that are meaningful to students.

Knowledge about the Subject Taught

Good professors are current in their academic field, who can offer relevant examples and applications involving a variety of sources. Professors know their discipline to such an extent that they can convey its meaning to individuals from a variety of backgrounds and interests. Students expect good professors to bridge the gap between theory and practice explaining through relevant examples how this knowledge can be applicable in their future lives.

**TABLE 3
TOP FOUR ATTRIBUTES OF GOOD PROFESSORS AND STRATEGIC SUGGESTIONS**

Order	Attributes	Meaning	Key Strategic Suggestions
1	Understanding Students	Students today sense professors' care about them. Expect professors know about their double-life, learning in the class and earning of money.	Be Flexible in Time and Space where you can be available
2	Organized Presentations	Students today are inundated with information in headline news, social media, and commercial stimuli.	Sort out substance from the excessive noise, and convey primary ideas and concepts only relevant to benefit their career.
3	Enthusiastic Excitement	Students today expect professors full of energy to stimulate their intellectual curiosity.	Keep the students engaged in the class - giving attention to their feedback. Keep the spatial distance closer to mean at the same level as the professor.
4	Knowledge on the Subject	Good professor is current on the subject teaching. Capable of bridging the gap between theories and practice.	Explain the concepts with examples as current and applicable as it can be.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

It is a formidable challenge for anyone to define a good professor in precise terms. The first caveat for the authors is to wonder if saying a good professor would be deemed the same as an effective professor. As many researchers on the subject in the past have expressed the adjective 'good' and 'effective' are interchangeable, we too were puzzled as to which way to go. Good professors may be good persons because they are nice as a human being such as being friendly, but good professors may not be effective in deliverance of knowledge on the subject taught. While we recognize the ambiguity of the meaning of good vs. effective, however, we see good professors as a better adjective for the purpose of our research.

The second caveat in our research is the background of the respondents. Depending on the discipline in which a respondent is majoring, the expectation of a good professor may be significantly different from students in different areas of studies. For example the student's thinking process may be oriented

differently for those enrolled in the soft versus hard sciences. As expectations of disciplines vary so too will students' response to different approaches by professors. That is the reason why the authors made it clear that the subjects of this research are all business students.

The conclusion of the four significant attributes amongst the seventeen attributes that were identified from our respondents could have the potential to change the mindset of professors each time they enter their classrooms. Understanding this mindset before delivering the knowledge is the key to being a good professor. This information may serve as a reminder to all instructors and administrators in higher education that it is understanding what really matters to students. This reaffirms a guiding principle of good teaching which is "know thy audience."

For furthering studies in this area, we believe this qualitative information can help the researchers to formulate a quantitative approach. Using only the four identified attributes or all the seventeen attributes, a researcher can design a good-professor research project in an interval Likert scale or a ratio measurement scale to have the results tested statistically.

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APPENDIX A

Questionnaire Administered

Dear Respondents:

As part of a research project we are in the process of gathering data on in higher education. We would like your response to these two questions, and appreciate your active participation on the research.

What do believe are the most important **qualities** of a **good professor**? (This is about professors in general -- the question is not referring to the professor teaching the course in which you are currently enrolled). Please limit to five qualities and explain why you think each of the qualities you list is important.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

What do believe are the most important **qualities** of a **good student**? (This is about students in general -- the question is not referring to the students taking the course in which you are currently enrolled). Please limit to five qualities and explain why you think each of the qualities you list is important.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Thank you for your participation.