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## My Professor: the Personality of a Teacher through the Eyes of Students

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### Abstract

The article examines students' essay portraits of their favorite higher school teachers. These essays were submitted as a credit assignment in the course “Methods of Teaching Journalism in Higher Education” at the master's program at St. Petersburg State University. The essays were written in a free form. The research includes portraits written during the period 2021–2024. The texts were subjected to quantitative analysis according to a set of parameters, and the results were summarized in a table. Unlike typical studies of students' opinions about teachers, this research is based not on answers to standardized questionnaire, but on students' personal impressions. The aim of the study was to identify which qualities of a teacher make the strongest impression on learners, and to outline the optimal (from a student's perspective) style of communication between teachers and students. It turned out that ideally, students would like to see their professors as harmoniously developed individuals with high professional qualifications and bright personal features.

**Keywords:** journalism education, professor, student, essay portraits, impression, evaluation.

### 1. Introduction

The authoritative observers argue that currently journalism education “has become one of the fastest growing academic fields in the world” (Goodman, Steyn, 2017: 254). It is clear that researchers seek to identify opinions about its quality and effectiveness. In particular, surveys of media professionals are conducted to determine views and suggestions of the main consumers of journalism school productions (Gavrilov, 2025: 190-194; Shesterkina, Marfityna, 2017; Tinák, Gálik, 2026, etc.). As one might expect, their main focus is on strengthening the application aspect of the program. For example, to the anniversary of the Faculty of Journalism of St. Petersburg University an information portal Lenizdat.ru published a series of interviews with experienced media professionals – they talked mainly about the need to bring training closer to the practice of news industry (Korkonosenko, 2016: 48).

Logically, it may be assumed that attention is also focused on those people who are the recipients of teachers' efforts, namely students in specialized fields. Of course, such surveys are conducted in different countries and cover various thematic aspects. According to the observations of some authors, “most of the research is quantitative and survey-based and mainly focuses on students' vocational motivations, their perceptions of the role of journalism, the ideals of journalism, students' views on ethical and professional standards, and the influence of education on journalism cultures” (Milojevic et al., 2016: 84). This conclusion is supported by the thematic focus of several major projects. For example, a comparative study based on material from eight countries explored the impact of motivations, education, and gender on the journalism students'

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professional views (Hanusch, Mellado, 2014). Another large-scale international project was aimed at students' appreciation of journalists' roles (Arcila Calderón et al., 2021). In other words, the perception of the educational process as well as interaction between students and teachers (which is particularly relevant to our paper) are not the main focus of the study.

Therefore, there are strong arguments in favor of the following conclusion: "The insights of journalism students matter in journalism education and pedagogy but their views have not been heard much in the scholarly literature. Scholars, educators, and professional journalists have flooded the discourse on how journalism is best taught and learned. Yet the study of journalism pedagogy relegates journalism students to mere subjects or recipients of certain pedagogical approaches" (Macasiray, Opiniano, 2022: 167). Perhaps the quoted statement is too categorical, but in general, it is clear that there is an imbalance in how the two sides of the educational process are studied, and this imbalance needs to be addressed. Our research aims to contribute to resolving this issue to some extent.

## 2. Materials and methods

As noted above, the survey method is widely used in research on the topic we are studying. With the obvious advantages of this toolkit, it is able to reflect mainly average representations on the educational process, primarily because the interviewer formulates the questions and thereby defines the evaluation vectors. The said also relates to the study of students' opinions about teachers: the survey is able to present assessments of the teaching staff as a whole, but not the effects of interpersonal relationships between specific students and their specific mentors. The survey results can paint a picture that is both favorable and very unpleasant and disturbing. For example, in one educational institution, it was found that the students' confidence in the teachers' competence was 5.9 out of 10 points possible; the teacher's ability to demonstrate the connection between their academic discipline and future profession was also 6.1; the teacher's passion for their subject was also 6.1, and the teacher's willingness to help students was rated only at 5.6 (Sukhova, 2022: 37). Undoubtedly, this data is useful for the teaching body. However, it rather reflects the current situation in a pessimistic way than provides models for improving teacher-student relationships. To create models, we need real-life examples of pedagogical excellence that can be imitated.

Our analysis was aimed at personalizing the information received, both about the teacher and the student. It was conducted as part of a course on the subject "Methods of Teaching Journalism in Higher Education" at the master program of St. Petersburg State University, which detailed description of the purpose and methodology of teaching can be found in the corresponding publication (Korkonosenko, 2018). The long experience shows, that many graduates from our master's programs later begin teaching communication or journalism-related subjects in formal or informal educational settings, and in fact, they become media educators. The final task for each student was to write a portrait essay titled "My Professor". Master's students were asked to choose a teacher with whom they had worked in higher education and describe their professional and personal qualities based on their impressions. In total, we analyzed 37 essays for the period 2021–2024, with a variety of universities, specialties and regions where the authors came from with bachelor's degree. The manuscripts were quantified, and the numbers obtained were tabulated. However, the frequency of mentioning certain characteristics has no statistical value, but reflects their distribution in terms of the brightness of students' perception.

The goal of the study was to identify which qualities of a teacher make the strongest impression on learners, and to outline the optimal (from a student's perspective) style of communication between teachers and students based on this information. We hypothesized that bachelor's degree students prefer to interact with teachers who are harmoniously developed individuals with high professional qualifications and bright personal features.

## 3. Discussion

The discussion of the impact of a teacher's personality on students is directly linked to the endless debate about the purpose and content of education. Characteristic comments on this topic were made in connection with the updating of education legislation in Russia: according to the legislation, "education is understood as a task-oriented process of upbringing and teaching ... However, development still remains an 'educational component' of teaching" (Khovov, 2009: 76). For the training of journalists, the questions of personality development and the realization of his

potential have the greatest methodological significance and practical importance. His future professional activities will involve mental interaction with audiences and the expression of personal opinions, intentions, and emotions. As experienced teachers emphasize, in the Russian system of journalism education “the teacher has always played a significant role as the main driver of the educational process. His status as a pedagogue, mentor, and role model, whose personality impacts both the acquisition of knowledge and the development of students, was being emphasized” (Saenkova-Melnitskaya, 2023: 452). Here, the emphasis on national tradition is not accidental. The expert recalls the stylistic originality of Russian journalism, where ideological and spiritual characteristics are an integral part of reality coverage. Reputable American observers talk about “morally uplifting ‘literature’ as journalism, which is the foundational ethic in Russian journalism” (Erzikova, Lowrey, 2017: 935). Naturally, the properties of the press should be reflected in the training of workers for it.

It is worth noting that in other cultural and national contexts, the importance of moral values may not be as apparent. In the memoirs of the alumni of the American journalism school, there is a series of portraits of his best professors. Let's take a look at the impressions of a former student about his mentors:

*“He also circled misleading headlines and inaccurate photo captions. He didn't miss much. It proved to be an irritating but effective teaching tool.”*

*“Do your research. Get the story and get it right, he said. Assignment editors don't want excuses.”*

*“He had a military bearing about himself, ramrod straight with a deep voice. He distributed a sheet with approximately 20 instructions. ‘Follow directions.’ he said.”*

*“He wanted us to be thinking about story ideas, angles and leads before we sat down to type our stories in class under deadline” (Caraher, 2009).*

It is easy to see that the main impressions are related to the labor technologies that the professor introduces to students. Of course, this methodology cannot be considered wrong or ineffective, but it has qualitatively different priorities compared to Russian pedagogical attitudes.

At the same time, despite existing and possible differences in pedagogical approaches, there are threats that are common to different cultures, threats to education in its very essence, not just in details. Acting journalism professors describe the dangers as follows: “An instrumental approach has been actively promoted in professional education, and discussions about technologies and formats have pushed the problems of meaning and content into the background. We seemed to understand that the pedagogical process is a close fusion of learning and upbringing, but in fact we forgot about the latter” (Yerofeeva, 2023: 443). The upbringing process requires interpersonal contacts; this is an axiom. However, effective technology-based learning is also difficult to achieve without direct interaction. The experience of enforced isolation during the COVID-19 Pandemic has provided an expressive demonstration of this. For example, students from one of the Russian universities wrote a letter to the rector, expressing their concerns about the disadvantages of distance education during the quarantine and asking for a reconsideration of the concept of digitalization, with a focus on reducing the online component. This position is also shared by journalism educators, who advocate for a direct dialogue between all participants in educational activities (Grabelnikov et al., 2020: 719).

The discussion provides material for the conclusion that in journalism school, the upbringing impact on a student's personality is an essential component of the educational experience. As researchers say: “The formation of a holistic media personality is, in our deep conviction, the main goal of university media education” (Gavrilov, 2025: 180). In turn, this implies that the teacher plays a crucial role in the organization of education. The diminution of this role cannot be compensated for by using technological, administrative, or commercial resources. Therefore, it would be appropriate to emphasize the importance of the teacher's individuality and the need to grant him relative freedom and autonomy in the academic setting.

#### 4. Results

At the same time, it should be noted that the personality of the teacher often receives priority attention when considering interpersonal relationships. The interaction between personalities implies an equal interest in the other person, namely the student, not as a member of the masses but as a sovereign individual. Researchers rightly draw attention to misconceptions of those university actors who “do not take into account the level of autonomy of the student's personality ...

individuals with a specific motivation and a well-developed value system often choose to study journalism, which the teacher cannot (and probably should not) change” (Khubetsova, 2022: 203). Accordingly, the student is guided by his representation of what a journalism teacher should be in order to meet his value orientations. For our research, it is important that, choosing a character for a portrait – from a large set of candidates, – the author is finding the living embodiment of his ideal (My Best Professor). On the other hand, the portrait itself serves as a short essay on the desirable features of a teacher.

The characteristics noted by students are summarized in a table, as far as it was possible to identify certain attribute in the texts (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Teacher characteristics (number of mentions)

Post					
Professor, Associate Professor			Lecturer		
28			10		
Type of training lessons					
Lecture			Seminars, practical training		
11			20		
Professional teaching qualities					
Competence, scientific qualification		Clarity of presentation, fascination		Applied usefulness	Innovation, originality
25		19		18	12
Personal qualities					
Communicability	Demanding/gentleness	Empathy, responsiveness	Range of interests, off-duty activity	Appearance, manners	
21	11	19	18	10	

Of course, a small sample size does not provide reliable quantitative results. However, it does reflect those distributions of quantities that a qualified analyst could predict based on their pedagogical experience. Thus, in portraits, professors and associate professors (28) noticeably prevail over colleagues of below post ranks (10). Apparently, the perception of students is influenced by the age and qualification level of the first group's representatives, although this general rule is not absolute. At the same time, it is predictable that stronger impressions are not left by lectures, but rather by seminars and practical exercises (11 vs. 20). It seems that a professor is remembered as an outstanding lecturer, but seminars with a smaller audience allow for individual, face-to-face communication, and better revelation of the teacher's personal qualities.

The position and kind of lessons relate to organizational, rather than human, factors of interaction in the university classroom. The main interest arises from those traits that allow students to keep warm memories of their teachers. Competence and erudition are among the most important qualifications (25):

*“His knowledge of the history of Russian journalism makes my head spin.”*

*“She is completely, almost fanatically immersed in her field.”*

*“Despite the fact that his main research area is the history of ancient Greece ... in parallel, he has always been interested in the history of medieval Europe, the ancient and medieval East, the history of the state and law.”*

*“A very good teacher, competent and well-versed in his subject.”*

High evaluations of academic knowledge and erudition raise doubts about the validity of students' accusations of laziness and lack of interest in cognitive activities. Targeted pedagogical research reveals more complex interdependencies that we consider to be true: “Currently, demotivation, lack of cognitive interest, worldview and existential indifference of the students are perceived as a matter of course. One of the reasons consists in how the school and university pedagogues deliver the material” (Gusev et al., 2021: 13). The impressions of undergraduate students about the skills of teachers are formed in accordance with the latter thesis. There are many mentions of clarity and fascination of presentations (19), which is actually about the ability of

the mentor to engage students in the subject being studied and overcome the barrier of initial misunderstanding:

*"He can turn even the most boring biography or book into something interesting and engaging."*

*"He has a way of making people listen to him that I've never seen in another teacher."*

*"His ability to present information in a way that is both engaging and emotional, monitoring the audience's response and adjusting accordingly."*

Innovation and originality in arranging classes are directly related to clarity and fascination (12):

*"She conducts vivid classes by incorporating theatrical elements, music, films, and even Russian cuisine to demonstrate linguistic nuances."*

*"Through active gestures, she figuratively helps us imagine how a journalist gathers, processes, and communicates information."*

*"His classes are characterized by their lightness and humor. Typically, historical stories are remembered by students thanks to his interesting and understandable presentations."*

At last, the applied usefulness of learning provokes a very positive reaction (18). This trend is particularly evident in the case of journalists, whose profession is inherently practical:

*"Working in a team is like working in a TV studio, where emotions run high."*

*"She is one of the few in the journalism department who talks about new technologies in the correspondent's profession."*

*"The class was different from others due to its friendly atmosphere and emphasis on practices, which could not but please."*

However, although the practice-oriented approach is generally justified and effective, its straightforward dominance raises doubts and objections. In response to the emotional statements of students, some authors hasten to make such appeals: "When students arrive at university, they should feel like journalists. Teachers should be their colleagues, not just pedagogues. A model of the editorial staff can be created in any discipline, and the editorial atmosphere can be applied to the entire educational process" (Avdonina, 2018: 17). Such statements cannot be considered correct, and not only because not all subjects in the curriculum aim to imitate a media company. The editorial office of the media and the university are different institutions with differences in goals, products, and other aspects, which creates specific challenges for teachers of professional subjects. In our opinion, there is a ground for discussing his dual identity, namely, his simultaneous involvement in the academic community and the mass media, and the intertwining of pedagogical and industrial professional ideologies (Korkonosenko, 2023: 59). We suppose that this synthesis will be well-received by students.

In the Personal qualities section, the symbolic leadership belongs to communicability (21). This is an expected result, as without this quality, there would be no possibility for interaction at all. However, it does not mean that the teacher simply should be available for contacts.

*"The ability to reveal the individual needs of each student and adapt the approach according to them."*

*"I was pleased that the teacher was willing to work with me, and it seemed to justify my right to play a role in this world."*

*"True passion for their subject and a sincere desire to teach students to think independently."*

*"This leaves the students with room for self-discovery, allowing them to begin forming their own individual style even during the learning process and helping them fall in love with their profession."*

In students' perception, communication is organically combined with empathy and responsiveness (19). That is, a dialogical approach to communication is valued, and the sincere interest of the teacher in the unique personality of the student is appreciated. Of course, for university employees, with their many official duties, this can be an uncomfortable style of behavior. However, firstly, this style attracts young people and, therefore, has educational efficiency. Secondly, the analyzed portraits show that it is not uncommon in university life:

*"She is the kind of person who you can always turn to for help or advice. It was noticeable that she cares deeply and rejoices in the success of her students."*

*"Her warmth and kindness allow students to perceive her not only as a teacher but also as an older sister."*

*“If someone is feeling worried or emotional, she will never ignore it. She will come and listen, discuss the issue, and offer support.”*

Certainly, such assessments should not be mixed with a condescending attitude towards laziness or idleness (which is partly covered by the demanding/gentleness parameter – 11). Instead, a teacher's rigor and respect for own subject do not prevent him from being the “My best professor” for a student:

*“She is characterized by an absolute demand for knowledge of the subject (discipline), and as a teacher, she does not accept a superficial understanding of the material.”*

In studies using formalized methods, it is usually not possible to capture those aspects of the teacher's personality that extend beyond their official role; at least, it is not possible to enumerate such “extra” activities. However, working with student impressions reveals that they value getting to know their teachers' interests and activities outside of work (18). Such knowledge not only enhances the teacher's image but also makes it more relatable, clear, and attractive.

*“During the summer, my teaching schedule takes a break, but my journalism and creative activities come to life. When I have free time, I devote it to this creative process.”*

*“She is a person who does not remain indifferent to the problems of others. Recently, a non-profit organization has appeared that helps homeless people. She not only personally takes part in the activities, but also involves students.”*

*“In different periods of her life, she had different hobbies: music, singing, directing documentaries and theater performances. Despite having already earned more than one diploma, she decided to enroll in higher directing courses.”*

*“Almost any literary works that are named by representatives of the younger generation are familiar to the professor, he can always keep up the conversation and stays abreast of current trends. It is very important for students to feel that the teacher understands them and is open to dialogue.”*

If a profession is presented by mentors with a broad outlook and diverse hobbies, it seems to be enriched with colors in the eyes of students. Regardless, exposing oneself to the audience informally does not interfere with the availability of educational material or the preservation of the teacher's image in students' grateful memories. Correspondingly, the same can be said about the perception of appearance and manner of behavior. The relatively low mention rate (10) is likely due to the fact that not every lecturer has a bright, memorable appearance. This, of course, is not a disadvantage. However, if a lecturer does have an extraordinary appearance, then their image merges with the mental representation of the profession and leaves a lasting impression on the students' minds:

*“She has a unique style. Her image has always been an example of good taste, intelligence, and education.”*

*“He has the voice of a true orator – sometimes he slows down the speech and speaks in a soft whisper to emphasize the significance of his words, making you think; sometimes he raises his voice with a solemn tone; and sometimes he pauses suddenly.”*

*“She always came to class as if she was from a movie set, elegantly dressed and with a cup of coffee in her hands. She also taught this grace to the female half of the audience.”*

Since we are discussing the impressions of teachers and attempts to draw their portraits, it is impossible to do so without considering the visual aspect. The examples above show that appearance and style of behavior can be a valuable part of pedagogical skills, as they help to engage students in the subject matter. As stated in the literature on the psychology of pedagogy, the issue of the influence of a higher education teacher's appearance on the formation of their positive or negative image among students has not been adequately explored. At the same time, a survey of students at pedagogical universities revealed that “appearance of teacher is considered by students and trainees as an important part of his successful professional activity and affects the efficiency of interaction in diad ‘teacher-student (listener)’” (Gaponova, 2017: 187-188). Examples from the portraits of favorite professors provide strong confirmation of these conclusions.

## 5. Conclusion

First of all, the research conducted provides a basis for a conclusion regarding the effectiveness of the chosen method. The students' vivid impressions, presented in their essays reflect the teacher's priority characteristics, by their opinion. His personality combines high methodological qualifications, erudition, exactingness, talent for communication and striking

individual traits. Accordingly, in ideal, students imagine the learning process as active interpersonal communication, rather than just the acquisition of normative knowledge and skills. Thus, they actually describe the desirable style of behavior for teachers, which goes beyond simple following official regulations.

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