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January 16, 2012

The Ideal Professor vs. The Typical Professor

By: [Maryellen Weimer, PhD](#) in [Teaching Professor Blog](#)

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It's a new year and a new semester, with new courses and different students—along with perhaps a few favorite courses and students you get to spend time with all over again, and maybe a couple of each you won't miss at all. In other words, it's a new beginning.

As we begin again, I thought this characterization of “The Ideal Professor” might be of interest. It's offered by students who were asked to compare their Ideal professors with their Typical ones. This cohort of juniors and seniors rated professorial characteristics in three areas: personal, course design, and policies and behaviors. The items were selected for the survey based on research in each of these three areas.

Perhaps a bit surprising is the lack of strong distinctions between Ideal and Typical professors. “We found that preferred qualities and behaviors were not wholly absent in the Typical professor—they simply appeared less pronounced than in the Ideal professor.” (p. 182) Despite overall similarities, the research team does describe some of the differences between the two as “striking” and eight of these are listed below. The numbers reflect the percentage of students who endorsed this characteristic for their Ideal professors and the percentage who said they characterized the Typical professor.

Teaching Characteristic	Ideal	Typical
Professor speaks clearly/not monotone	93	80
Course and daily goals appear on the syllabus	83	52
Students have a voice; input on course policies and procedures	40	7
Professor talks informally with students sometimes	43	15
Professor lectures	78	93
Professor uses discussion	58	37
Professor does in-class activities/demonstrations	57	21
·Uses humor often/occasionally ·Uses humor occasionally only	97	75
·Cheating/plagiarism policy—investigates and resolves incidents	58	

·Do not know what approach is used to deal with academic dishonesty		
Solicits anonymous, written, informal feedback on teaching/course	68	17
·Solicits student feedback two or more times per term ·Never solicits student feedback	72	30

The research team offers this succinct summary: “Overall, our research suggests that Ideal professors are highly accessible to students, allow student input into the course policies and procedures, provide for significant variety in the course, and provide a comfortable learning atmosphere for students.” (p. 182)

Two findings are worth noting as we launch a new year and another semester. First, students indicated that overall, personal characteristics were not important for their Ideal professor. I take that as a validation of our individuality. Ideal professors aren’t all cut out of the same cloth. We can be who we are; we shouldn’t try to create some inauthentic teaching personae. And I think it’s encouraging that the characteristics these students identified as belonging to those teachers who most effectively taught them were not absent in Typical professors. They just weren’t as pronounced. I take that to mean, if you aspire to be ideal, you don’t have to do new things, just more of those good things you already do.

The question not answered by this research is whether the characteristics identified as ideal have any bearing on student learning. Based on other research, it is probably safe to say that most of the characteristics don’t cause learning but they may make it a more likely outcome of a classroom experience.

Reference: Epting, L. K., Zinn, T. E., Buskist, C. and Buskist, W. (2004). Students perspectives on the distinction between ideal and typical teachers. *Teaching of Psychology*, 31 (3), 181-183)



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Jen Leigh · [23 hours ago](#)

This was a perfect study to bring to the first day of class and solicit students reactions. Thanks for your timely and relevant introduction to the information.

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John Thompson · [19 hours ago](#)

In the blog article, the data in the first row of the Teaching Characteristics table for "Professor speaks clearly/not monotone" are reversed from the data in the article in Table 1, p 182: Ideal Teacher = 93.30 and Typical Teacher = 79.70.

In summarizing their research, the authors note the following: "Our data also provide a picture of what the ideal teacher and classroom--that is, the best, most inviting learning environment--look like from the students' point of view." This point parallels Ken Bain's "Natural critical learning environment" (What the Best College Teachers Do, 2004) in which effective teachers and engaged students together construct a safe and challenging space which evokes "deep learning." A collaboration in learning.

Again, thank you Maryellen, for bringing this article to our attention.

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[Mary Bart](#) 19p · [19 hours ago](#)

John, thank you for pointing that out. We've corrected the table.

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Connie · [18 hours ago](#)

This study was with student in an onground face-to-face environment. I would like to see how online students would have responded.

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Dewey Dykstra · [11 hours ago](#)

What I find surprising is that the criteria checked into seem to imply or assumes that the good prof basically presents portions of the established canon by approved methods. For several reasons one can call this the folk theory of teaching. There is a VERY large body of research published in peer reviewed journal which reveals that such an approach to teaching leaves students essentially unchanged in their understandings of the aspect of the world studied and has no impact on the development of reasoning of the students.

In my experience if there is any responses to this it will be a defense of this folk theory of teaching generally to the effect: it worked for us and it works for our students. Let me challenge challenge such responders to actually measure what happens with their own students.

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