

**STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE MOST DESIRABLE  
ATTRIBUTES OF GOOD UNIVERSITY TEACHERS: HAVE  
TIMES REALLY CHANGED?**

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**Abstract**

This paper focuses on the characteristics or attributes associated with effective teachers. While a large body of research has been cited, specific reference has been made to a study conducted by Charles L. Odem : “An Objective Determination of the Qualities of a Good College Teacher”. The author identifies 36 personality traits of a good teacher and ranked these traits on the basis of the weightage assigned by the surveyed students. The study was carried out in 1943 at Southern Liberal Arts College,, and data were acquired from 121 students of which 40 were freshmen, 37 sophomores, 24 juniors and 40 seniors. This study hence forth will be referred to as “the original study”. Considering that the tremendous developments over the years in the educational, socio-cultural technological, and intellectual environments, an attempt has been made to observe how students view pedagogical excellence in current times. A study was therefore conducted at the Riphah International University (RIU), Pakistan, with 290 students who assigned attributes that they perceived effective teachers needed to possess. This will hence

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forth be referred to as “the present study”. Based on the findings, a comparison between the original and present study was made to determine the converging or diverging aspects of the present and the past.

**Key Words:** Teacher, Students, Desirable Attributes, Effective, university

## 1. Introduction

The creation of new learning environments in academia requires imaginative interactive approaches to teaching. This has duly transformed the roles of both teachers and their students. Teacher-centered/subject-centered teaching has given way to student-centered teaching, whereby students have become the focus of attention, and shifted from mere passive recipients of knowledge to active learners, duly involved in the learning process. The teachers’ objective now is to integrate curriculum with instruction, in consonance with the requirements of the students.

Many researchers and educators have tried to identify and explore the specific values or characteristics that distinguish effective teachers from their less effective counterparts (Arnon & Reichel, 2007; Miron & Segal, 1978). Considering the wide variety of attributes assigned by different researchers, it seems difficult to generalize a specific set of values for teachers of all levels and for all settings. The researcher of this paper has therefore tried to put together different attributes suggested by researchers in an attempt to see if those identified in this study have relevance to those mentioned elsewhere.

Student’s perceptions about their teachers have been an area of crucial research for a long time. In their study “The Good University Teacher,” Miron & Segal (1978) mention two major categories that were identified by students as necessary for effective teachers. These include the cognitive aspects of instructors (teaching methodology), and their personal traits. Even in the present day student- centered instruction, the role of the teacher remains equally important. It is difficult to deny that the teacher is the lynch pin around whom the instruction, good or bad, revolves. In order to have effective teaching, one that fosters student learning, different researchers have cited a variety of qualities that good teachers possess (Guskey, 2009). For instance, one characteristic of effective teaching is the teachers’ initiative in discovering new prospects and broadening his/her horizons through continuous learning. Engaging in onstant

learning trickles down to students, making them more informed and current on the subjects they are taught. “Good Teachers” understand that knowledge is fluid and will build upon over time. It must therefore be continuous, entrenched, self-selected and need-based. Effective learning is co-constructed, personalized and subjective.

Noyer (1938) portrays teaching as a noble and universal experience that enables teachers to play god for small chunks of time. It is through those small enthralling episodes that people learn about themselves and their lofty potentials. It also gives them the special ability of sizing up the other person’s capabilities and the mastery to expand on those. Noyer (1938) argues, “only that person is fit to teach who can give the learner a sense of personal adequacy, a feeling of security, a release from anxiety, a sense of confidence in himself” (p. 296). Noyer (1938) contends that some strength of good teachers include the knack to criticize without arousing hostility, and offering genuine praise without a hint of flattery that preclude discrimination and favoritism.

Effective educators are also engaged in continuous reflection, and encourage problem solving and critical thinking skills in students. Reflection provides an opportunity for teachers to consider the implications of their experiences, and better adjust their roles both inside and outside the classroom. Problem-solving helps students to develop logical thinking, imagination, and to negotiate scenarios creatively while dealing with everyday issues. Such skills sharpen their capabilities to question and arrive at corrective actions in areas which others accept as norms. A critical thinking skill affords learners the ability to build upon existing knowledge. Teachers’ expertise and competence in these areas hence remains a pre-requisite.

Good teachers provide necessary feedback to students. Critiquing is an important endeavor which also improves the learning of the teachers as they have to weigh the pros and cons and alternatives / contrasting views of the diverse student populations while synthesizing inferences. Such probing, discovery, and connection building facilitates ongoing learning. Effective teachers are also good mentors. They guide and enthusiastically engage students in the learning process (Miror & Segal, 1978). This enthusiasm is infectious and heightens student receptivity and interest in the subject. The greater this keenness, the more they learn, and achieve from the subject. Research indicates that effective teachers have a strong understanding and awareness of the students they teach. While this helps teachers build necessary neuronal networks and relate learning with students’ previous knowledge base, it also helps them keep the

inter-class relationships and diversity issues in check. Meeting the needs of the students is an important part of teaching and a close student - teacher rapport helps achieve this objective. Being confident and self-reliant are also accepted characteristics of a good teacher. Understanding personal practices through reflection and developing knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy enhances teachers' self-confidence. It helps in designing, developing, and delivering well-planned and modeled courses. Due knowledge in preparing, planning, and class management techniques provides a prospect for teachers to demonstrate greater hands-on activities. This leads to a dynamic and vibrant classroom environment, increases student rapport, involvement, and learning. Investigative hands-on learning aids critical thinking and constructivism of students.

Teachers, good at their art, also demonstrate effective classroom management practices. Even the most learned and knowledgeable teachers appear ordinary if they can't create the right vibes, where it counts the most, i.e., the classroom. This apparently is the one most difficult area for the majority of teachers who experience teaching problems. Classroom management issues need to be addressed at an early stage so as not to impede teaching and learning practices. According to Arnon and Reichel (2007), an ideal teacher is one who efficiently shares his knowledge with his students thereby shaping each student. The authors further state that research that enhances understanding the nature of an ideal teacher revolves around two main areas i.e., the personality of the teacher, and her command over the professional knowledge of the subject that teacher has to impart to students. Sachs (2004) while studying five attributes, of teachers from urban areas, including socio-cultural awareness, contextual interpersonal skills, self-understanding, risk taking, and perceived efficacy discovered no support to differentiate an effective from an ineffective teacher. Carlson, Lee and Schroll (2004) used experience, relative credentials, efficacy, professional activities, and selected classroom practices as an aggregate to determine the deliverable value of special education teachers. The study revealed that special education teachers were found to possess similar attributes that are crucial for general education Carlson, Lee & Schroll (2004).

In a study involving Chinese MBA students, it was found that they valued teaching abilities, personal qualities, and commercial experience as necessary requirements for effective teachers. The authors argue that teachers should be able to stimulate discussions and create a learning classroom environment. Additionally they indicated that teachers must possess personal

qualities like openness, inquiry, enthusiasm about teaching, a sense of concern, and responsibility. They also preferred business related credentials in their teachers signifying market based experience in the field of management (Thompson, 2002). Having a good moral character is another requirement for a good teacher, one that would make him/her popular among students, colleagues, and parents. A teacher is expected to teach fairly, respect students, show consideration to different viewpoints without favoring any particular individual or group. An honest teacher should never hide or manipulate things, and be sympathetic to students' concerns. Hence a good teacher must possess virtues like fairness, respect, teaching excellence, honesty, and compassion (Osguthorpe, 2008).

Kaleem & Salahuddin (2007) in their study measuring the characteristics of a good teacher found that students preferred teachers who were agreeable and accommodating, addressed the diverse needs of different students, used modern technology in education, had better communication skills and were committed to the profession. While students disliked teachers who had strong personalities and frequently criticized students. Gage (1993) argues that students change their opinions when they find teachers struggling to overcome their weaknesses in an attempt to match students' expectations. Kraus and Sears (2008) contend that student like teachers who use a variety of interesting techniques while teaching and tried to keep students involved in interactive activities such as discussions, case analysis, paper writing, and lab work etc. On the contrary they dislike teachers who isolate students by involving them in quizzes, texts, journal writing, lectures and student presentations.

In his study Açıkgöz (2005) found that being professional in a specific subject does not guarantee that the teacher would be able to create a learning atmosphere in the classroom. In order to be effective s/he also needs to emphasize personal characteristics that are compatible with student expectations. Jenkins and Speck (2007) conducted a study using structured interviews with 29 professors who won awards on their good performance. The findings indicated that effective teaching involves a variety of instructional methods in the class room. They found that adopting a caring attitude and offering accessibility to students distinguish effective from ineffective teachers. White, Wyne, Stuck and Coop (1987) reviewed 300 different studies and found that there is no single one teaching behavior that results in better learning among the students. Instead they highlighted behavioral clusters which are instrumental in teaching effectiveness. They named these clusters as: management of instructional time,

management of student behavior, instructional presentation, instructional monitoring, and instructional feedback. Analyzing 70 studies on effective teaching, Feldman (1976) discovered that characteristics such as, enthusiasm for the subject and teaching, knowledge of subject matter, clarity and understanding, preparation for, and organization of the course, stimulation of interest, friendliness (concern and respect for students), helpfulness, and openness to others' opinions were effective practices in teaching.

Spitzer (2009) agrees that teaching is not just having a good command on the subject matter, but is actually a blend of different personality traits. Although difficult to measure, he indicated aspects such as creativity, patience, flexibility along with sound knowledge about the subject taught as pre-requisites. Bradley & Loadman (2005) found that personal interaction with students, ability to influence them, and making a difference in their lives are effective virtues for good teaching. Many other writers have come up with similar findings. Some have tried to emphasize a few characteristics while others have cited long lists. For instance Dewar (2002) compares the main features of a good teacher as discovered by three different studies (Avent,1931;Adams,1987), &Roy,1987). Lew (1977) also compares the findings of previous studies on the subject (Clinton ,1930;Bousfield,1940; Perry, 1971&Haslett, 1976).Haslett's (1976) presents the views of 219 American colleges about their good teaching. Different teachers opt for different teaching methodologies. According to Blume (1971), "teachers teach the way they were taught, and not the way they were taught to teach". Their personalities and experiences inform the practices that they adopt (Hamachek, 1999). Palmer (1998) states that "good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher". Van Gennip and Vrieze (2008) support that claim and mention that effective teaching also takes into consideration the subject knowledge, teachers' personality, along with his understanding and application of the academic rules and regulations. Verloop and Lowyck (2003) identified important characteristics relevant to effective teachers, such as knowledge, balanced personality, as a ruler of specific skills based on evidence, empirical research, and practical orientation. Sheffield (1974) highlighted the following factors:

- a. Teachers' likeness for the subject
- b. Command over subject
- c. Preparedness for the class
- d. Practical experiences to share

- e. Responsiveness to students' questions and suggestions
- f. Accessibility to students
- g. Monitoring students' progress
- h. Good sense of humor
- i. Respect and sympathy to student concerns
- j. Updated teaching methodologies

Martinazzi and Samples (2000) mentioned that while enthusiasm, passion for the subject, and necessary teaching techniques are essential, a professor must also be able to play the role of a leader. S/he should prove himself to be a role model and develop a sense of trust among students. This trust translates into students' readiness to meaningfully learn from that teacher.

## 2. The Study

In his article "An Objective Determination of the Qualities of a Good College Teacher" Odem determined 36 personality traits of a good teacher and ranked these traits on the basis of the weightage assigned by the surveyed students. The research was carried out in 1943 at Southern Liberal Arts College. Data were acquired from 121 students, distributed to 40 freshmen, 37 sophomores, 24 juniors, and 40 seniors (the original study).

Since there have been tremendous changes/advancements in society in the form of changes in cultural values, environment and knowledge since then Therefore a study at the Riphah International University (RIU), Pakistan, was carried out to (i) investigate teacher quality in a Pakistani context and (ii) explore how university students at one University perceived attributes of an effective teacher and (iii) understand their expectations of attributes they would like him/her to possess.

## 3. Purpose

The following objectives guided this study:

- To find out the most desirable attributes of a good university teacher as perceived by students in the context of Pakistan.
- To compare the findings of the original study with the findings of the present study.
- To investigate whether the time since 1943 and the change in context has an effect on students' perception or not.

- To construct a prototype of a good university teacher.
- To enable other universities to design their faculty development programs based on findings of this study.
- To provide knowledge for the professional development of university teachers..

#### 4. Research Methodology

1. The 36 attributes discovered in the original study were presented to a control group of 10 students who were asked to identify the most desirable attributes. Based on their input 18 attributes were selected for the present study.
2. The 18 most desirable attributes of a good teacher, as identified by the control group, were included in the questionnaire used for students' survey.
3. Considering "the present study" was conducted among university students, as compared to the college students in "the original study", two attributes relating to "Ability to generate and guide Research culture among students" and "Research publications" were added to the questionnaire.
4. The scales used for rating attributes included "Essential"; "Very Important"; "Important"; and "Not Important". The ratings marked by the surveyed students were used for ranking the attributes according to the degree of desirability.
5. Final ranking of the most desirable attributes (Table 2: Column 1) were ascertained on the basis of the cumulative total of the percentage rating as "Essential" and "Very Important" (Table 2: Column 5). This category involved more than 60% of the responses given by students (except in case of a few attributes). These rankings have been compared with the rankings determined in "the original study".
6. Where the cumulative percentage is the same for two or more attributes, the ranking has been done on the basis of the higher component of "Essential" in the cumulative figure (Table 2: rankings 5 & 6 and 7 & 8:).

#### 4.1 Population and Sample Size



Ample size of 290 students of RIU were selected for the survey. The sample was divided under four faculties of RIU in proportion to their relative student strength registered at undergraduate (semesters 2, 4, 6 & 8) and graduate (semesters 2 & 4) level, as tabulated below:

Table 1: Population and sample size

S.No.	Faculty	Total Students	Sample Size
1	Management Sciences	160	90
2	Engineering	219	123
3	Computing	100	56
4	Media Studies	37	21
	Total	516	290

#### 4.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers visited the class rooms of the selected batches in each faculty and explained the purpose of the study to the students and gained their consent to participate in the study. Questionnaires were distributed to the students present in the class on the day of the visit. A 100% of the distributed questionnaires were duly filled-in by the students and returned to the researchers.

Table 2: Tabulations of Results

Ranking	Attributes	Essential (%)	V. Imp. (%)	Ranking Basis (%)	Imp. (%)	Not Imp. (%)	Ranking By Odem (Average)
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	5 (3+4)	(6)	(7)	(8)
1	Delivery: Knows How to teach	25	47	72	26	2	4
2	Ability to make the course interesting	35	36	71	28	1	25
3	Honesty related to what?	30	40	70	26	4	16
4	Scholarship: knowledge of the Subject.	33	34	67	30	3	1

5	Demonstrates interest in students' point of view	27	39	66	32	2	5
6	Ability to win respect of students	26	40	66	29	5	15
7	Patience and self control	30	35	65	29	6	8
8	Justice, fairness, and impartiality.	26	37	63	33	4	3
9	Has new ideas in his field	24	39	63	31	6	39
10	Common sense	25	36	61	33	6	30
11	Appearance and neatness	28	32	60	35	5	7
12	High moral character	24	36	60	38	2	6
13	Ability to generate and guide a culture of research among students	23	37	60	34	6	NA
14	Pleasant personality	20	40	60	32	8	2
15	Sense of humor	26	33	59	36	5	11
16	Experience	24	34	58	35	7	38
17	Courtesy	21	34	55	37	8	22
8	Reasonably strict-in grades too	22	31	53	36	11	37
19	Knowledge of other subject area	22	28	50	40	10	26
20	Research publications	20	29	49	37	14	NA

**Note:** Fractions, not considered material to the study, have been rounded off to the nearest whole number.

### 5. Four Aspects of the attributes

Research mentions four aspects of attributes namely, scholarship, delivery, advising, and personal traits of teachers including sense of humour, appearance, and speech as vital for effective teaching. Therefore, data were collected according on these attributes as given in the following table:

Table 3: Aspects of Attributes

Sr. No	Attributes	Ranking (Present)	Ranking (Original)
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		Study)	Study)
	<b>Scholarship</b>		
01	Knowledge of the Subject	4	1
02	Have new ideas in his field too	9	39
03	Know Other Subjects- General	19	26
04	Research Publications	20	NA
05	Experience	16	38
	<b>Delivery</b>		
06	Delivery- How to teach	1	4
07	Ability to make course interesting	2	25
08	Ability to win respect of the students	6	15
09	Common sense	10	30
10	Be reasonably strict- in grades too	18	37
	<b>Advising</b>		
11	Interest in Student's point of view	5	5
12	Patience and self control	7	8
13	Justice, Fairness, Impartiality	8	3
14	Ability to generate and guide research culture among students	13	NA
15	Pleasing personality	14	2
	<b>Personal Traits</b>		
16	Honesty	3	16
17	Appearance- Neatness	11	7
18	High Moral Character	12	6
19	Sense of Humor	15	11
20	Courtesy	17	22

## 6. Results and Discussion

The comparison of the rankings of the present study, with the rankings of the original study, lead to the following conclusions:

- The ranking of the present study is notably different from the original study. This may well be attributed to changes/ and advancements over time, difference in context including differences in social and cultural values, environment, knowledge, effect of technology, and the educational level of students (university instead of college) as relevant for the original study. How and to what extent these factors have affected this change, however, is beyond the scope of the present study.

2. If the comparison is further confined to the top 10 attributes of both the studies, an interesting picture emerges as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Ranking Comparison of Top 10 Attributes of the Present with the Original Study

Ranking in Present Study	Attributes	Ranking in Original Study
1	Delivery: Knows how to teach	4
2	Ability to make the course interesting	25
3	Honesty	16
4	Scholarship: Knowledge of the Subject	1
5	Demonstrates interest in students' point of view	5
6	Ability to win respect of students	15
7	Patience and self control	8
8	Justice, Fairness, Impartiality	3
9	Have new ideas in his field	39
10	Common sense	30

- 3- The above table shows that only four of the top ten attributes of the original study have been ranked among the top ten by respondents of the present study. These four attributes originally ranked at 1, 3, 5 and 8 have been ranked at 4, 8, 5 and 7 respectively in the present study.
- 4- The present study also shows that students overwhelmingly favor a teacher who possesses special teaching abilities (knows how to teach, has the ability to make the course interesting, demonstrates interest in students' point of view, and has the ability to win respect of the students - ranked at 1, 2, 5, 6 respectively) as well as demonstrates positive personal traits and values (honesty, patience and self control, justice, fairness and impartiality - ranked at 3, 7, 8 respectively). The attributes relating to the knowledge of a teacher seem to have been considered relatively less important by students. For instance the knowledge of the subject, have new ideas in his field been ranked as 4 and 9 respectively).

This study provided the teachers at RIU a fairly good idea of how students at their institution perceived and understood the meaning of a good teacher. The results of this study helped them consolidate the attributes identified in the present study and they were better able to work on overcoming areas that had previously been neglected.

## 7. Recommendations

- The current study has implications for the Human Resource Department as findings can be used as a selection guide for hiring new faculty members. The study may also be used by the University for planning and executing faculty development programs.
- Faculty evaluations by students may also be re-designed on the basis of the findings of this study. This may clearly specify how RIU faculty members are perceived by their students as compared to the ideal teacher.

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