

## The Academic as Knowledge Purveyor: Deontological Considerations

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**Abstract:** The author refers to the results of the research conducted with 2,000 respondents who, in the light of their personal experience, presented their own assessment of academics' work. Among the received information, the author eventually singled out, for the needs of this paper, the attitudes which referred to the academic as a knowledge purveyor. The process of delivering knowledge is executed through didactic classes, typically in the form of lectures or classes. Analysis of the poll respondents' answers suggests that this process does not always proceed in the way it is expected to. Among the undesirable aspects of lecturers' attitudes, the students paid particular attention to their lack of preparation for classes, lack of engagement, not holding classes in a content-related way, conducting classes in an incomprehensible or uninteresting way, lack of communicativeness, not observing students' time, and lack of manners. As far as desirable attitudes are concerned, the students' primary expectation is the determination of 'game rules' at the very beginning of a series of classes. As for further positives, the respondents also paid attention to, among other traits, the teacher's preparation for classes, professionalism, personal engagement, utilizing interesting forms of transmitting knowledge, interactivity, indicating the source materials for self-study, openness to students' questions and criticisms as well as to students' expectations, kindness and supportive attitude shown to students, punctuality, and personal good manners. The above-mentioned good and bad sides of teaching lay certain responsibilities upon an academic. The author tries to articulate the most important ones.

**Keywords:** deontology, academic, attributes, classes.

### Introduction

The term *deontology* (from the Greek *déon* = "one must, one should" and *logos* = "mind, science") is an ethical theory which concerns duties and obligations in general (defined for the first time by Émile Littré in the 19<sup>th</sup> century). This term has been further defined through the course of time and applied to professional law, where it is used to describe rules resulting from statutes or customs. Professional deontology provides imperative practical solutions within the scope of performed duties. In order to protect the integrity of a worker who performs a given professional function, deontology underlines moral character and obligations by incorporating general moral standards and by structuring the abidance of them (see Rosik, 2001). In other words, it is a professional ethics, a collection of moral standards defining the *actions of representatives of a given profession*, or in a wider context: a section of normative ethics (a theory of duty), consisting mainly of ethical standard issues as well as factors determining the moral value of human acts. Professional ethics often take the form of an ethical code of a given profession, describing a socially accepted ideal (see more in Nowakowski 2007b).

Over forty years ago Tadeusz Czeżowski, a well-known Polish philosopher, logician and ethicist, wrote that "professional ethics is in direct relation with what used to be called

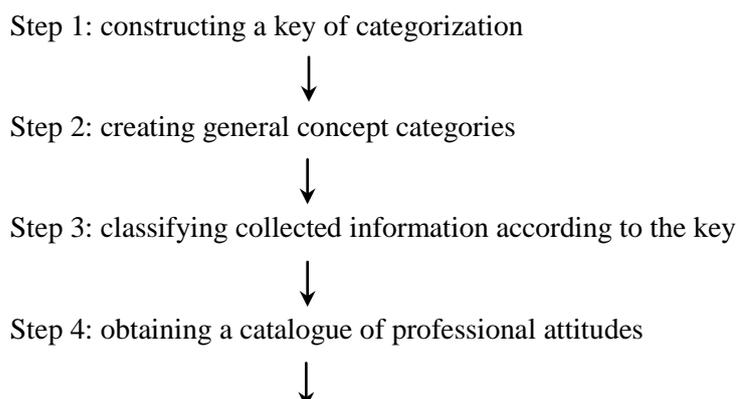
professional honor or dignity; anybody who breaks the orders of professional ethics, degrades this dignity. Craftsmen, merchants, barristers, doctors, and clerks as well as teachers and scientists have such an ethics” (1967). It does not seem necessary to persuade that such deontological rules should exist. Certain structures of standards enable workers to function effectively in a given profession, but it also protects them from mistakes which are axiologically significant. Deontological standards are preserved by the traditions of subsequent generations. Thus, an ideal pattern of professional perfection is formed – as important as the ideal of technical efficiency. Czeżowski, referring to the obligations and duties of an academic in particular, indicated that the contents of such a deontology are customarily transferred along with professional learning, but attempts at codification are also made (1967).

## Project of Research

One function of academic workers is to teach students. In turn, they are monitored by their students, even informally, in how they perform this function. The students happen to be clear-sighted observers and critics. They are also able to appreciate attributes worth recommendation. Even though they are not always objective in formulating assessments, their opinions can be a basis for the solid reflection of more than one research worker. To achieve this aim, a poll was conducted with 2,000 respondents who, in the light of their personal experience, presented their own assessment of academics’ work. These were present or former students of 123 higher education institutions in Poland; therefore, the context of these considerations will be distinctly Polish (see more in Nowakowski 2007a).

Two questions posed referred to undesirable and desirable attributes of academics: 1) “Give an example(s) – along with a short description and reasons – of *unethical behavior* of a university worker noticed or experienced by you,” together with the addition: “‘Unethical behavior’ is understood as behavior assessed by you as reprehensible, bad, or contemptible conduct of an academic. It can refer to a wide range of occurrences: own duties, relations with students, attitude to other university workers, etc.”; 2) “Give (an) example(s) – along with a short description and reasons – of *ethical behavior* of a university worker, noticed, or experienced by you, which should be emphasized nowadays,” together with the addition: “‘Ethical behavior’ is understood as behavior assessed by you as good or commendable. It can refer to a wide range of occurrences: own duties, relations with students, attitude to other university workers, etc.”

Figure 1: Method for processing the collected information



### Step 5: singling out attitudes which refer to the academic as knowledge purveyor

This survey was qualitative, as it was not concerned with defining the intensity of each attribute of the academics, but was more focused on the presentation of their variety, with special consideration of their classification, interpretation, and final assessment. As a result of the survey, I received information which was diverse with respect to its content. Next, I had to construct a specific key of categorization. To do this, I read as much of the collected data as possible and then created general concept categories which included all the information gathered. The next step was to classify this information according to the key. This step included all the contents obtained as a result of applying the research method. The procedure was to assign all information to its appropriate concept category. I obtained a wide catalogue of professional attitudes of academics, among which I eventually singled out, for the needs of this paper, the attitudes which referred to the academic as knowledge purveyor (see Figure 1).

## Undesirable Aspects

The above-mentioned process of delivering knowledge is executed through didactic classes, typically in the form of lectures or classes. Analysis of the answers of the poll respondents suggests that this process does not always proceed in the way it is expected to.

Among the undesirable aspects, the students paid particular attention to a *lack of preparation for classes*, what manifests itself in behavior such as sticking strictly to notes, using old, out-of-date worksheets, and lecturing by reading directly from books, among other behaviors. Lack of preparation can also transpire as “obstinate sticking to one subject by a lecturer” or by “talking about everything and nothing.” “If such a situation takes place once,” explains one of respondents, “it would not be an unethical behavior, however reading books to the adults (students) on every lecture is unethical, in my opinion. A person who gives lectures should demonstrate knowledge on a given subject and deliver it to the others in an appropriate way.” The following opinion is evidence of this problem’s importance: “One of my lecturers conducted classes in an exceptionally boring way. Well, first he checked attendance (it was the most interesting part of classes), next he opened his veeeeery old notebook, from which yellowed sheets of paper fell out and he dictated information to the student for more than an hour, without a word of explanation. The worst thing was that this lecturer did not add anything himself and information he dictated was many years old. He stopped at a certain stage, because it was obvious that he had nothing to do with any modern advances in the field.”

Another problem is a *lack of engagement*. We can read in one questionnaire about a lecturer who “performs her duties improperly. The lectures are very short, because she thinks that there is no need to lecture on a subject matter, as we can elaborate it by ourselves from the books. Because of it, many themes are often unclear.” Another student adds, in turn: “A lecturer comes only for a few minutes; he checks attendance, gives homework and leaves. He faces no consequences of not performing his duties.” It also happens that lectures “are substituted by another person who dictates notes and adds nothing himself.” Further, the respondents pointed out that classes are not held *in a content-related way*, rather the content is focused around, for example, one of the lecturers “delivered their own personal opinions on political, social, or personal matters, not related to the subject matter at all.” One of the students mentioned a lecture, during which “there was nothing about the subject matter, only

tales and events from lecturer's life, therefore the student must spend a considerable amount of time on studying books, as practically no knowledge was delivered during the classes."

A substantial matter, which was commented on by many respondents, was *conducting classes in an incomprehensible way*: too quietly and monotonously, too quickly, using incoherent speech – the result is the same, it is difficult to take notes on the lecture. Many detailed reports of the respondents were related to classes on pure science: a university teacher conducting math classes "behaves as if this subject was created only for him; he elaborates exercises which cannot be done during the classes and he does not come back to these exercises in the next classes," another lecturer "used up a felt-tip pen and did not notice but actually kept on writing"; a math professor "gives the lecture for himself – he writes exercises on a blackboard, he turns his back on his students and nobody can hear him"; a descriptive geometry professor "does not pay attention to the fact that there is not sufficient time for anybody to finish copying the examples he draws on a blackboard"; a portion of lecturers "do not pay attention to whether the whole group understands, it is enough that only one person understands and they then move on to another subject matter." Another student commented: "A lecturer was explaining something very badly and therefore most of students understood nothing, when they asked him to explain, the lecturer answered that there is no time for this: 'One should pay attention during the lecture,' he added."

The students become discouraged by their lecturers *conducting classes in an uninteresting way*. "There are lecturers at university who conduct classes monotonously, boringly, they cannot arouse students' interest," was written by a student of a technical college. Others pointed out that their lecturers are "giving boring lectures, using only textbook knowledge, not giving practical examples to support this knowledge" or "reading books slowly without a comment and arousing interest, prolonging in order to fill out time." *Exhausting forms of didactic process* are also not conducive to the reception of a lecture's content, for instance in the situation when "a lecturer does not take any breaks during 6-hour lecture."

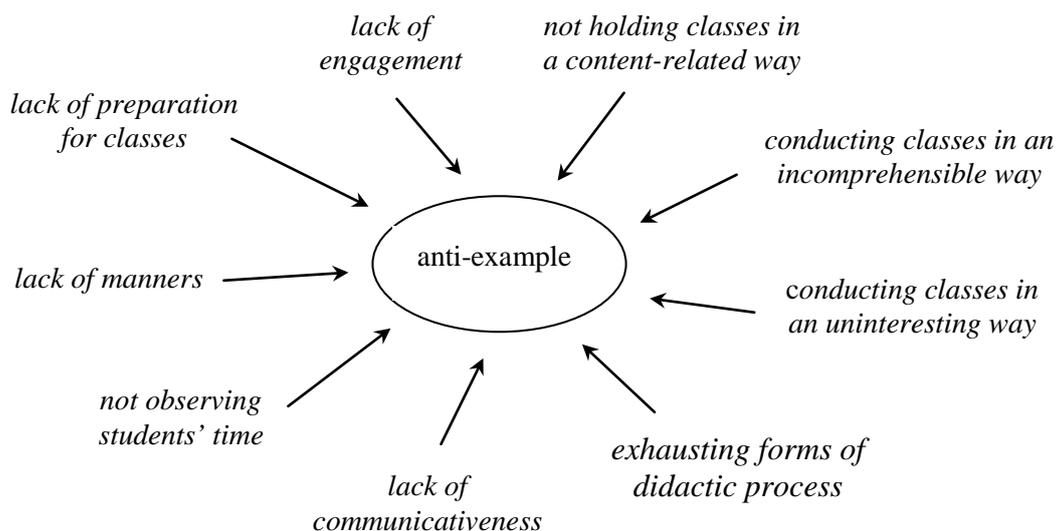
*Lack of communicativeness* in an academic is related to many of the behaviors mentioned above. For instance, the inability to establish relatively close relations with students, putting students off and not answering questions when asked. A student of a medical school spoke in such a way about a lecture: "for 90 minutes, she dictated things we did not understand at all. There was no time for asking questions or explaining anything. We could not even smile during the classes as the doctor of medicine lost her temper immediately."

The next remarks concern *not observing students' time*: for example, being late for a lecture or canceling it without prior notice. "One of my lecturers was late for every lecture. He was 15 minutes to 1 hour late. He did not even apologize for being late," we read. Prolonging classes was also a problem: "The university lecturer prolonged classes by about an hour without settling it with the students first, other classes started during this time. The students' explanations that being one hour late for the following classes would result in being marked as absent were futile." Non-observance of students' time is also expressed when a lecturer who conducts classes leaves the classroom too often: "A lecturer who takes breaks or leaves the classroom too often not only neglects the students but also, as a result, the lecture becomes incomprehensible." The completed questionnaires also included lecturers who concentrate their efforts only on "doing anything just to fill time. They often 'steal' a couple of minutes by being late for classes or shortening them."

The respondents also mentioned a *lack of manners* characteristic in some academics, demonstrated by “untidy clothes during the classes” or simply offending students, evidence of which was an attitude of a lecturer who was convinced that “students of extramural studies are less intelligent and one should speak to them plainly so that they do not have to listen to a lecture with a foreign words dictionary.” Use of cellular phones during the classes is also evidence of a lack of culture, as well as a violation of the fact that “a lecturer should do his private businesses during the breaks between lectures.” One of the students also mentioned a lecturer who “had his mid-morning snack: he gave a lecture with a sandwich in his hand, there was a teacup on the table and he had his mouth full of food.”

If the above-mentioned defects and incompetence are numerous, they create, in the case of any given lecturer, a constellation of attributes which constitutes a specific *anti-example* (see Figure 2). One of the students rated poorly the lectures of a professor who “was habitually late for classes and did not forewarn his students of his possible absence. He was often not prepared for classes. He was a questionable academic authority, which he attempted to compensate by giving numerous failing marks and creating an atmosphere of fear during the examinations.” Another student remembered a lecturer who “did not have a vocation for his profession. He gave lectures ‘higgledy-piggledy.’ He spoke incoherently and sometimes not to the point and afterwards during the exam he required information the students had no knowledge of. We received only titles of textbooks and we had to choose by ourselves which was the most important. It was like ‘looking for a needle in a haystack,’ because we were not always able to predict the right choice of information.”

Figure 2: Undesirable attributes which constitute an anti-example of a lecturer



## Desirable Aspects

As far as desirable attitudes are concerned, the students’ primary expectation, often neglected by academics, is the *determination of ‘game rules’* at the very beginning of a series of classes, which is demonstrated by a respondent saying: “lecturers inform students at the first classes of number of hours, form of credit (e.g., test, paper) as well as acceptable levels of absence.”

As for further positives, the respondents also paid attention to, among other attributes, *their teacher's preparation for classes*. One of the students stated that, at his university, if lecturers “cannot explain anything at once, they admit to it and prepare themselves for the next time.” *Professionalism* is coupled with the above. The students appreciate the fact that “information is given over directly, without using notes” and that “lecturers try to fill time as well as possible, they deliver knowledge in a clear and logical way, explaining difficult issues repeatedly.” One of the statements referred to a lecturer who “was demanding of his students, but he was also solid and thorough and he was always prepared very carefully for the classes.” With regards to didactics, it is not possible to achieve a high standard without *personal engagement*, mentioned by a student of one of agronomic schools: “Some lecturers were characterized by so-called passion, their desire to deliver as much knowledge as possible. A professor of forest botany presented himself particularly well in this respect: for him work was a joy of life and a vocation at the same time. His engagement in work and supporting students resulted from his internal convictions.”

*Interesting forms of classes* was another issue. The lecturers made attempts to arouse interest by resorting to making their lectures more attractive: materials for students, educational films, multimedia presentations, experiments, case studies, anecdotes, or curiosities of a given discipline, creative methods of teaching, etc. In this way they encourage students to be engaged and productive. Generally, it is a question of “giving a lecture in such a way that a student understands and memorizes as much content as possible.” One of the statements referred to the discussed issue in more developed way: “The behavior of the lecturer was praiseworthy; he made his lectures interesting for the students. Instead of delivering uninteresting information, he started to give lectures in a ‘conversational’ way, which made a reciprocal exchange of the lecturer’s and the students’ opinions possible. A solicitude that the students understood the contents and referring to his own experience concerning the lecture’s issues were also characteristic.” A specifically understood *interactivity* is connected with the above, it is especially concerned with the ability to establish a relationship with students and to conduct classes not in the form of a monologue, but by dialogue, the example of which was a characteristic of the lecturer who “expected students not only to listen passively, but he also provoked students to discussions, not criticizing at the same time,” or another academic who “did not give ‘dry’ lectures but wanted students to come to correct conclusions by answering subsequent questions.”

The students articulated the need for *indicating the sources* which should be used to deepen a lecture’s subject matter. It happens that “a lecturer gives copied materials.” One of respondents appreciated lecturers who, “when starting classes, give students literature they can use while studying a given subject.” Another respondent mentioned a lecturer who, if asked, “never refuses, lends students his own books and understands that it is not always possible to borrow a book from a library.”

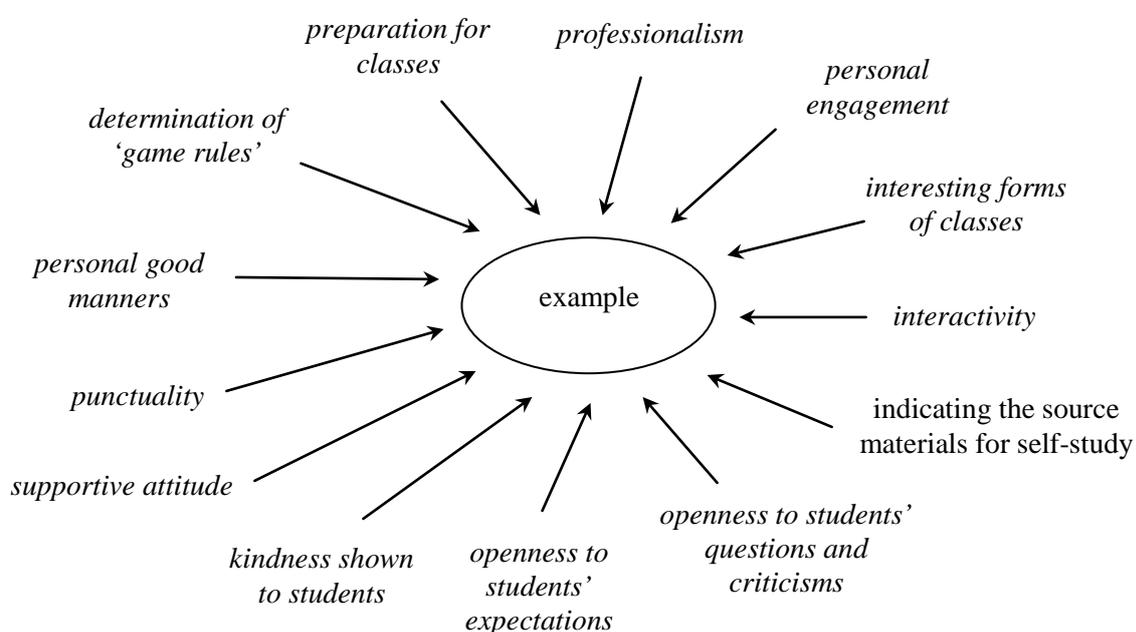
In the opinion of the respondents, *openness to students’ questions and criticisms* was important. Many lecturers, after classes, ask students if they have problems with any topic, if they understand everything, if there are any ambiguities concerning a given lecture, etc. “It is extremely important, because it makes the student feel that in the event of any ambiguities, (s)he can ask a lecturer and, beyond any doubt, will be explained any ambiguities,” wrote one of students. Another respondent similarly liked when students “can talk to a lecturer, ask for certain information which has not been understood by them. The lecturer treats them with

respect, he is patient, kind, tolerant and he wants to help as well as he can.” Another respondent drew attention to the fact that answers for “questions asked by the students during lectures should help them to explain any incomprehensible issues. Such questions do not constitute a problem for a lecturer; quite the contrary: they show that a given student wants to know as much as possible, i.e., the lecture is given properly.” Openness also refers to *students’ expectations*. One of respondents wrote about a lecturer who proposed that students should “point out issues which he could explain more in detail.”

Another indication concerns *kindness shown to students*: “When we could not come back home after classes by any means of transport, a professor let us finish earlier and study at home. However, in order not to be disloyal towards her employers, she stayed with the rest of the group until the end.” A *supportive attitude* is also a desirable trait, the evidence of which is demonstrated in the following statements: “Once we reported some ambiguities resulting from a difficult source material and the lecturer devoted his time to explaining it once again. He said: ‘that is why I am here’”; “I was understood by a lecturer when I was not able to comprehend some contents; after the classes the lecturer devoted his time to explain it carefully to me.”

*Punctuality* is appreciated as far as both the classes should start punctually and finish according to the schedule. One of the respondents expressed his satisfaction: “I do not have to wait half an hour for a lecture to start.” *Personal good manners* of an academic are also valuable for the students. It concerns both his/her behavior and clothing, described by a student from eastern Poland: “The dress of a professor is evidence of his outlook and approach to the work he performs. Smart clothing should be a distinction of a lecturer because he is to show us important issues. University is not a primary school, a junior higher school or a high school; however, I think that in these schools one also should be dressed neatly, because it is evidence of the kind of approach taken to a teacher’s duties.”

Figure 3: Desirable attributes which constitute a positive example of a lecturer



All the positive features of an academic mentioned above can form a particular *personal example* (see Figure 3) which was described by a respondent: “The university professor is perfectly prepared for classes with students. The subject matters he prepares are very interesting and supported with examples. He tries to involve students in discussion. He listens to what they want to say. He does not try [by force] to prove he is right. He treats students as adults and partners in work and study. The students always participate in his classes with pleasure. They are excellently prepared. Many of them pass tests and examinations to a high standard. He is an example of an academic who likes his work and students. He tries to give a lot of information which is not covered by books. Students know this and they respect him for it.”

## Conclusion

The above-mentioned good and bad sides of teaching lay certain responsibilities upon an academic as a lecturer. We will try to articulate the most important ones. *Firstly*, the necessity to overcome routine of lectures, which manifests itself in the fact that a lecture, once prepared, is copied during the whole educational career of a lecturer. *Secondly*, the need to fight lecture duplication (especially the reading) of scripts and textbooks. Józef M. Bocheński formulated both these issues very succinctly: “If professors, instead of repeating from their desks issues which were printed by others or by them a long time ago, were engaged first of all in teaching students as researchers, the world, a world of humanists, philosophers, theologians and similar at least, would have less prattlers, and more people who perform their work reliably” (1994). *Thirdly*, a duty to take care of a lecture’s form, manifesting itself in the ability to: create and shape structures of problems and arguments, present the relationships between one subject matter and another and between one discipline and others, and observe a uniformity of theoretical and methodological assumptions in proving and justifying assertions. Krzysztof K. Przybycień (2008) highlights that an academic lecturer’s duty is to work scientifically and educate students to the best of their research work. One can say that a lecturer does not teach, but he expresses his scientific views in public. Teaching and researching compose one entity. *Fourthly*, the necessity to prepare presentation materials: schemes, graphs, tables, models etc., educational aids and using technical means to facilitate the transfer of knowledge (Nazar & Popławski, 1995). *Fifthly*, it should be added that a lecturer must perceive the student’s benefit in this process. What is the sense of teaching if this requirement is not met?

Nazar and Popławski (1995) state that establishment of particular academic’s personality in the social consciousness and forming an image of him-/herself depends not only on published works, but also on the place of this personality in the university’s tradition, in public memory and with the subsequent generations of students. Perhaps it is the didactic process which constitutes daily confirmation of the aim of academic work that can provide personal satisfaction.

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