

# THE UNIVERSITY TEACHER AS A MORAL AGENT

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**Abstract:** From Aristotle to nowadays, most of thinkers believe that ethics can be taught. The research demonstrates that the students' moral profile is strongly shaped during the academic years. The actors of the university field are influencing each other and the university teacher, as a moral agent, has an important influence on students' moral development. The communication of the two main actors must fulfil certain criteria in order to teaching and changing on each side. The discourse of the professor has not only to communicate a scientific message but, more importantly, it has to create relationships, to help the transformation of youth into adults, and to recreate themselves within interpersonal relationships. The article is focusing on the importance of the teacher-student relationship during the academic years, aiming to emphasize that such a relationship really can influence the moral profile and behaviour of the student.

**Keywords:** moral model, communication, university field

„One might ask itself what is meant by saying that, in order to become just, one must practice justice and in order to become moderate, one must practice moderation; as the one that practices justice or moderation must beforehand be just or moderate, as the one that teaches grammar or music is beforehand a grammarian or a musician”.<sup>1</sup> How can one interpret the quote from Aristotle's *The Nicomachean Ethics* considering what role a professor has or at least should have in the becoming of students that are under his wing. Paraphrasing it, one can say that the teacher should be, first of all, a teacher.

The student-teacher relationship must be seen as a bidirectional one, as, in fact, it is a relation based on communication. And as the

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle (1988). *Nicomachean Ethics*. Romanian translation: *Etica Nicomahică*. Bucharest: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, p. 37

communication scheme compulsory includes an inverse connexion – feedback – the didactic staff can find out if his presence as a person and personality has produced changes on the ones he mentored. Complying with Peseschkian, one can say that „if the teacher learns nothing from his relationship with the student, the student himself will leave having the feeling that nothing significant has occurred in that time frame.”<sup>2</sup> Any communication, as Watzlavick implies, is an involvement and therefore defines the relationship. „A communication, a message, does not transmit just content, a true or false, valid or invalid information that answers the question of „what”. It transmits at the same time a behaviour that defines the relationship between the partners of the communication. (...) any message transmits an attitude”<sup>3</sup>. It is easily understood why the same message (in the present case, the same course), can have different meanings to different auditoriums.

Moreover, during evolving student-teacher relationships and not only during different contexts and time frames, the same informational content can develop different meanings.

It is not always that the didactic staff realises the impact their own person (and not just the scientific content) can have on the academic development of students he meets over the years. Furthermore, taking into account the timeframe of reason maximal development and of moral behaviour formation, the loss that appears when the mentor is not aware of his colossal power over the pupils is enormous.

In this study we dare not discuss the subject of academic communication ethics, which would be a much valuable idea for future research; instead the fact that “the word that builds” is at anytime a brick in the strong construction of youth personality. Communication is among the methods through which a teacher becomes a mentor for his students. The communication must give info, beside the consistency of the message, on the one communicating and on the one that is being communicating to. The manner in which a teacher addresses his students, the mode in which he teaches, underlines the

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<sup>2</sup> Nossrat Peseschkian (2004). „Prelegere” la Conferința Internațională de Psihoterapie Pozitivă”, Varna. See Maria Diaconescu (2007). „Repere pentru o etică a comunicării interpersonale”, in Ion Copoeru, Nicoleta Szabo, (coord). *Dileme morale și autonomie în contextul democratizării și al integrării europene*. Cluj-Napoca: Editura Casa Cărții de Știință, p. 177

<sup>3</sup> Paul Watzlavick (1980). *Le language du changement*. Editions du Seuil, p. 49

teaching staff's personality and the one of the students' as well. Better said, the image the teacher has of his students is mirrored in their eyes. Cummings's studies, quoted in one of the chapters of the present study, underline the social importance of communication for the forming of the self concept and its reconstruction. "We are not able to restrain from communication" as Watzlavick sustains, therefore there is a huge importance of the influence the didactic staff has over the people it educates. Their discourse must not only communicate the scientific message but, more importantly, to create relationships, to help transform youth into adults, and to recreate themselves within interpersonal relationships. We do not communicate only through words.

In "Tips for ethics of interpersonal communication", Maria Diaconescu underlines the fact that "notions are void of content, no longer have an emotional sense, they no longer lighten us. Maybe one of the reasons the Earth is sinking into greyness is the mould set on our words" (Diaconescu 2007, 178).

The Romanian philosopher and non-formal educator Constantin Noica used to claim that a good school is such due to its students and/or teachers. One can surely say that there is no good teacher without good students and no good students without a good master. The real "magic" is somewhere in the middle, where the two parts become a whole. It is there where the two meet in order to give and to receive (always a bidirectional situation) and to transform. If the meeting of the two parts transforms nothing, then the "meeting" was not of importance. Important people and events fulfil, reason and change. One cannot pass a person who transformed you as you would a stranger. Important people are those that you "stumble upon" from a positive point of view, a stumble that makes you stop from the maddening run of life. A true mentor is the one that stops you from seeing life by ear. Not only the "power of persuasion" is important, but more so is the "power of seduction".

Petre Andrei said that "the teacher that does not try to awaken in his students' souls that demonic or divine force has not done his duty. He must awake the young; he must put in motion the spiritual forces, leading the souls willing to find a sense in life. Courses and seminars are the direct means for this objective, being thus not only simple obligations imposed by the law". (Diaconescu 2007, 179)

Some authors observe that the teacher gifts his students with “behaviour models, brings forth -unknowingly sometimes-attitudes towards the taught subject, towards people, the whole world as micro- and as macro-cosmos. (...) the teacher will be responsible to himself when his students will opt for his course subject or for other ones.”<sup>4</sup> The teacher’s responsibility has two stages: „the first, when the profession is chosen and secondly, when he accepts his pupils.”

During the two world wars „the conditions were: *to be chosen* (by the teacher which will coordinate your activity and thus your becoming, your professional, social and moral destiny); *that the job exists* and only thirdly *that the job be posted*.” The university relation is based on the teacher and the student. “The evolution of the students and of the didactic staff ensures a new content to the above mentioned relationship”<sup>5</sup>.

The main common activity is the didactic one; “the professor is a prestigious scientific personality, a landmark in the scientific subjects he teaches (...) he has his own vision and a methodology for theoretical approach and empirical investigations (...) he is a researcher”; his activity includes a compulsory dissemination of results and research products in the academic world. In the above paragraphs, we have mentioned that the teacher-student relationship has a formal as well as an informal character. The student needs a mentor to guide him in his professional and humane formation activity, beside the “mentoring” relationships (humane, professional, behavioural, moral etc).

Actually, the teacher is the mentor – a model that guides the student in becoming „what he can become based on his qualities and guides him on the ways of his own achievements (...) an expert and a guide” helping the young student become “what he should be and offer him the tools for reaching his goal”. The relationship with the mentor is a special one “with a strong emotional character. The young person verifies his options, ideas, and thoughts together with his mentor. Mentoring is a way of protecting the young from inadequate influences and dangers for his future spiritual evolution” (Schifirneț 1997, 239). A few relevant data from a study that has as objective reviewing the students’ image on mentoring, underline the necessity of the its

<sup>4</sup> Laurențiu Șoitu (1997). „Etica formatorului”, in *Educație și valori românești în context european*. Jassy: Editura Polirom, p. 225

<sup>5</sup> Constantin Schifirneț (1997). *Studentul, agent al schimbării în campul universitar*, in "Campul universitar și actorii săi" (coord. Adrian Neculau). Jassy, Editura Polirom, p. 238

experience in order to offer the student, on a permanent basis, a model he can confront. C. Schifirneț presents the following data: 50% of the students consider mentoring as possible, 36% don't know what they are, and 10% declare that they are not possible. The results are scary when compared to the ones N. Turliuc obtained in his study, where 92% of a lot of top-grades graduates declared that they had a mentor. Concluding, we can say that professional orientation depends on the professional guiding model. Extrapolating, one could say that the present lack of motivation of students for their professional and scientific life (instead of financial enriching activities or loisir) is a result of lack of mentoring.

This study identifies the types of teachers, as they are seen from the students; point of view: 27% appreciate the quality of being receptive to creation, 23% mention the relational capacity (cooperation, dialog, opening up), 18% underline a very good professional training, 18% consider that the teacher must be a good pedagogue, 18% mention being receptive to new things, 12% accentuate personality traits (friendly, intelligent, tolerant), 7% appreciate as very important the teachers' vision on life. Other studies' results show: dress code, language, receptiveness to other activity fields, taking part in extracurricular activities, events organisation, student-teacher activities. The author concludes that a teacher represents "not only the specialist or the person with a vast culture, but also the personality with a well-contoured profile, demonstrated in his professional, social daily behaviour and in his relations with the students. The teacher's interactions with the students lead to a change in paradigm: from the influence of power to the power of influence, from a rapport of subordination to one of partnership." (Schifirneț 1997, 240)

Some other studies analyse the normality degree of an "authority and power in the university field" relationship in Romanian cases.<sup>6</sup> The results are eloquent proving the fact that the majority of students (70%) see the teacher-student relation as purely didactic. Only 10% think that an authentic communication exists in the university field. At the same time, 12,5% of the students underline the indoctrination means (authority use in excess, compulsory presence,

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<sup>6</sup> Teodor Cozma, Mariana Momanu (1997). „Formare și îndoctrinare în spațiul universitar”, in *Câmpul universitar și actorii săi*. Jassy: Editura Polirom, p.116

lack of teacher-student dialogue, personal opinions are impossible to issue, lack of empathy, hidden propaganda during courses and seminars, originality turn-down, evaluation of the course only as information source, imposing personal opinions of the didactic staff) while 67% of the questioned students believe that the university medium cannot be separated from political influences. The study accentuates the fact that indoctrination source is important: 70% of the students attribute it to an authority teacher personality, 67,5% to the legislative frame, 57,5% to maintaining the same teaching style and 50% believe that the cause is the nature of taught subjects.

The most significant disagreement between students and teachers is the ratio of didactic aptitudes and interpersonal competence when evaluating didactic staff. “While professors accentuate professional, scientific competence is the main condition (most of the times the only one) for promotion, students believe that, without exception, didactic aptitudes are the ones that are the most important, in parallel with a very good professional background. The teacher, students say, is first of all a didactic person, and then a science man, a researcher.” (T.Cozman & M.Momanu 1997, 117)

While the criterion for didactic qualities occupies the sixth place between the conditions approved by the University Senate for the position of Associate Teacher, the students would like to introduce some compulsory tests of didactic aptitudes. A study developed at „Al.I.Cuza” University of Jassy identified the elements that draw a prestigious teaching staff from the point of view of students. As determinant factors were the following:

1. competence (professionalism) – competence, professional training, professional achievements, creativity, individual work, vast knowledge, passion, experience),
2. capacity of forming relations (positive behaviour towards others, students’ appreciation, how he is seen by fellow teachers, communication, open relations),
3. morality (morality , professional ethics, fairness, seriosity, authority, strictness),
4. popularity (reputation, popularity, widely known, prestige),
5. education skill (pedagogical “style”, teaching methods, communication, open relations).

We notice that the elements concerning the academic status – academic title, position or time spent in the didactic position are weakly represented as prestige sources.

Among didactic staff competences' types that were identified in the study are: professional competence, social-relational competence, didactic-pedagogic competence, situational competence, moral-ethic competence, research competence, student relationship competence, interdisciplinary competence.

Does university education need ethics courses? Will the students change their opinion on how to deal with life's moral problems? Is the teacher a moral agent? These questions' answers need elaborate research.

Clark Kerr underlines that the members of the "new generation" of teachers that activate in the present and who sometimes neglect their didactic responsibilities in favour of their own research, do not necessarily arrive in a conflict situation between their personal interest and research ethics. "Knowledge does not only mean power, but at the same time, money, this situation being a first; teaching, firsthand, means knowledge." From the author's point of view, the academic media is moving from the "traditional paradigm" towards the "postmodern paradigm" of academic life. In traditional paradigm, the majority of academic teachers were part of a private community, a centre of life, with social responsibilities. The ethic behaviour was "completed with advice and personal pressure when it was not followed voluntarily". (Idem, 118)

The post modern paradigm or the "new academic culture" is differently built. There is less implication in the academic community and the civic duties. Teachers are more interested in the economical opportunities appearing outside the academic media. "This new academic culture is much more focusing on the personal or group advantages and opportunities", and not on the well-being of the university as a self-governing institution. The major disadvantage of mobilities and academic collaborations is the fact that less and less teachers stay to remain guardians of the institution, while many more "monads exploit the academic medium."(Idem, 10)

C. Kerr believes that the academic world is, maybe, one of the most tolerable and open-minded professional communities, thus leading to a "self-poisoning of the open society", being not willing to efficiently fight against "internal enemies". This world, through its wish to become "more open and be completely free", may soon "be susceptible of disintegration." The author stresses the fact that, in the present, within the universities, the most important is what doesn't get

the ethics issues; everything is a particular problem of many interest groups. C. Kerr underlines that, very often, teachers from the academic mediums wish that “ethics discussion should better be left for the churches” with only one exception – adhering to the scientific truth from the academic medium, here being the didactic activity (transmitting the truth to students and not personal convictions) as well as research activity (truth in scientific research). Here, one can remember the words of William James, according to which there is need of help from the outside of the academic medium, as “a confession has reformed of its own”.

A study of 2003, led by the Research Institute of Academic Education (UCLA) shows that 76% of the students “search for meaning and purpose in life” during their academic period while 56% claim that there never was an opportunity in class to discuss this problem. Three quarters of the interviewed students have expectancies that will never be answered from their teachers. “It is surprising considering that liberal education included, traditionally, character building, preparation for civic duties, youth support in developing personal and ethics values and encouraging them to learn what is really the meaning of life.”<sup>7</sup>

Usually, the teachers’ staff is resistant to questions that engulf the moral and spiritual side of the students, during the academic class. If we take into account that these are the most important years for moral reasoning development and moral behaviour formation, especially when having models to follow, one can truthfully say, that, by neglecting this path, the universities miss out in a great chance of contributing to the moral and humane character of the students.

According to McLennan, the students have spiritual and moral expectations of the teacher at the same time with the expectations of their intellectual development; the teachers must teach, not just transmit knowledge. All these aside, the teacher must maintain the integrity of the taught discipline; he must teach what is appropriate for his domain and must remain within his current abilities; the professor must determine his students to cross subjectivism and relativism, past “what I believe to be internally justified and I must not be criticized”(McLennan 2006, 2-3), the teacher must encourage his students to learn how to adopt an ethical attitude, periodically revised

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<sup>7</sup> Scotty McLennan (2006). „Moral and spiritual inquiry in the academic clasroom”, *Journal of College & Character*, vol. VI, no. 4, p. 2

in the light of critical reflection and life experience; the teacher must recognise the fact that to learn “to get to know yourself” is an important part of education of liberal arts, for the students and for the teachers as well; the professor must learn how to adopt an emphatic approach to teaching, though which the student could place themselves in the others’ place and see the world through the other’s eyes. Last but not least, the professor must teach the students not just for security and financial success, but also for marriage/family and civic responsibility.

What the professor *must not do*: not promote his own life philosophy as the only correct one; not to determine the students to feel embarrassed of their own beliefs, but to encourage them to reflect more); not to pressure the students to reveal their personal problems in public; not to categorise students according to colour, race; not to be overly critical and help the students in their reconstruction processes.

Many authors have discussed the interaction method between students and teachers. As the goal of the university is not just to transmit knowledge but also “to help students to developing their intellectual capacity – not just career-wise – but also for their participation in family life and politic field” says Roberts Eric). An adequate method, by some authors, would be “Socrates learning – teaching the students by questioning them and determining them to redefine their position by critical analysis” (Satz, Debra, quoted by Mc Lennan 2007, 2). It is undoubtedly that „the lack of knowledge, culture and education represents a horrible disease that brings only suffering”<sup>8</sup>, eventually; not only for the individual, but also for the entire community.

The Aristotlian approach is another way of maintaining awake the young people’s mind to science:“each activity is enhanced by the pleasure specific to each domain, those being more precise are those enjoying their activity.”(Aristotle 1988, 249) Therefore, the mode of teaching that aims at the affective side, not just the scientific one, gains much more. But not applied just anyhow. Here is what the philosepher says: for a didactic activity, pleasure coming from other activities is an obstacle. Flute amateurs are incapable of concentrating their attention of a philosophic discussion if they hear someone singing the flute, as they find more pleasure in its sound than in their present activity. The

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<sup>8</sup> Carmen Cozma (2004). *Introducere în aretologie. Mic tratat de etică* (2nd edition). Jassy: Editura Universității „Al. I. Cuza”, p.199

consequence is that the pleasure of hearing the flute cancels the activity of a philosophic discussion. The same thing happens each time someone works in two domains at the same time: the more pleasurable activity eliminates the latter one, reaching its exclusion. That is why, when we are very passionate about an activity, we cannot deal with anything else.” The author of *Nicomachean Ethics* claims that activities differ from each other through their good or bad character, morally speaking, being “activities worth wanting, activities that must be avoided, some that are indifferent, as is the issue on pleasures”: for each activity has its own specific pleasure, the author’s point of view being that that only the activities through which the itself activity is looked for are viable.

Other authors are more pessimistic concerning value implementation at university level to individuals that have already been home or community trained over twenty years. “The best case scenario, the individuals can assimilate critical thinking on what he has inherited and talk in a civilized way about this with others. Morality can emerge from our original communities and can be particular in this sense, but few of us lead their life as if everything is relative. The goal of the moral theory is to explain the experienced moral positions and promote reflecting upon them. It is important to learn that there are mutual exclusive perspectives that have been owned over history, but which are not all correct from a normative point of view.”(McLennan 2006, 3)

Brent Sockness, professor of “Religious studies” at Stratford University, sustains the idea that the university should turn towards stimulating critical thinking in religious aspects as well, as “promoting religious literature would be a commendable objective, as most students are uninformed or badly informed on their own religious traditions(...). if the students were better educated about religion, as a human phenomenon, we would avoid many mistakes that are done daily in the public (...) The goal of academic education is to determine the unique space dedicated to studying, critical interrogation and reflective life.”(McLennan 2006, 9) From the author’s point of view, we should not expect teachers to be upright people, to listen carefully, to be responsible creators of the discipline they teach, to believe that being a professor is a vocation or care about the students in front of them, human beings. It would be advisable from time to time that the teacher use the student’s life experience or even his own in order to elucidate a course issue. The personal point of view is not the

interesting part of the method, if the materials from the course are relevant for the students. What is important is that the student exits his own world, a goal that is beneficial morally and spiritual. Moreover, becoming an adult person, a superior human from an Aristotelian point of view “is normal, as what is most valuable for a child differs from what is most valuable for an adult and what is valuable in the eyes of a vulgar man differs from what is valuable in the eyes of a superior man.”(Aristotle 1988, 252)

In his study, McLennan concludes: „There are many different ways, to engage students in a moral and spiritual interrogation in the class room. Our task in the university is to take this project seriously. We must remember our liberal obligation, even in the big research institutions, which is to help students find meaning in adult life. We must form graduates in order to “promote public good by exercising a positive influence on humanity and civilisation”, by being religiously instructed, ethically sensitive, critical thinking’s higher abilities. They must participate in projects of self-assessment and of emphatic knowledge (...). This is when we will be able to say that we are the worthy heirs and employees of liberal arts, that have always taken care of the development of academy students and civilisation’s survival in a dangerous world.” (McLennan 2006, 2)

If the teacher limits his activity to bland doctoral exposure of accumulated knowledge, “he does not fulfil his mission, as he must awaken new powers, making his science into a living force that enters the student’s spirit and envelop him, opening new horizons and higher, more luminous and noble targets. The University does not have the role of turning young students into savants. It cannot do that, as much more time and painstaking research are needed. The University must teach students with the *scientific working method* and it must awaken in their souls the passion for science and thought”.<sup>9</sup>

To conclude, we just underline that it deserves to turn ourselves to a fundamental opinion statuated in Romanian sociology of education by Dimitrie Gusti, who claims that the academic system must be, first of all, a method that “has as objective to rising the spirits above traditional knowledge, detailed”, in order to make them worthy of the dignity for self-thinking and creating personal ideas.

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<sup>9</sup> Petre Andrei (1997). „Ce este universitatea și care este menirea ei ?”, in *Câmpul universitar și actorii săi*, op.cit., p.147

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