

Perception in the Classroom: Students' First Impression on Professors

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Abstract

The following paper explores and reviews many peer reviewed articles based on the topic of perception and first impressions. This paper will uncover many underlying themes that are associated with first impressions in the classroom. Making positive first impressions is something that is pretty important when it comes to interacting in everyday life. Those initial judgments that someone makes about you as an individual are pretty hard to break, especially if it's someone in a social role you don't self-disclose with on a regular basis. This paper is going to take this idea and explore it even further from within the class room. The first day of classes is always a drag- the break is over and the whole semester lays ahead of us, but what people don't realize is how crucial those first few days of classes are. The first impression that students make about their professors sets the pace for each student individually and impacts the outcome and satisfaction of the course. We will look at some common themes that are drawn from the textbook Adler and Proctor (2011). One theme discussed I previously mentioned; the initial impressions of the first day of class establishes the tone and outcome of the course. This paper will also look at effectively approaching the first day of class and teaching styles that positively and negatively affect student's first impressions.

Keywords: perception, first impression, social role, self-disclosure

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The perception process is something that we as humans do in everyday life. When you meet someone new, right away you start the process of selecting, organizing, interpreting and negotiating. It's from that process that you make your first impression about the person. It's no secret that the first impression you leave is usually the one that sticks, so it's important to make a good first impression. According to Myers when you take a closer look at what actually affects our perception it comes down to physiological influences such as our senses and age, cultural differences, social roles and occupational roles (2009). As humans we are influenced by the obvious and have a tendency to cling to first impressions. The first impression that instructors have on their students generally has a lot to do with the student's outcome for that class. It's not rocket science, as a student, if I walk into class the first day and really like my professor then I'm instantly going to try harder. On a different note, if I walk in and have negative feelings towards my professor I won't try as hard, or will blame the outcome of my grades on their teaching skills (or lack of). As human beings, this reaction is only natural and in fact, is something that people rarely recognize they're doing. Through a variety of research methods and studies, these assumptions have been made about perception from numerous different perspectives and can be linked together through extrapolations of data and connections in conclusions drawn. However, each of these studies contains limitations and focuses on varying topics to study concerning perception and first impressions in the classroom.

Literature Review

Over the years studies have been conducted to analyze the various effects on first impressions students have on their professors. These studies have drawn conclusions that support a lot of the inferences Adler and Proctor (2011) made in their textbook. These common themes all support the idea that first impressions within a class room can set a precedent for the remainder of the semester. These main themes discovered also overlap and converge with other themes highlighted in different sources. Considering the fact that majority of the sources that were used are from 2009-2011 enhances each argument because they are recent and still applicable to today's time.

Effects of First Impressions in the Classroom

Guerrero and Miller (1991) focus on the relationship between nonverbal behaviors and the initial impressions of an instructor's competence and course content. The results of this study found that after college students watched the videos of their instructors they rated them on aspects such as involvement/enthusiasm and expressiveness/warmth while also judging the instructor's competence in terms of likeability and trustworthiness and course content in terms of interest and value. There is a positive correlation between student's first impression of their instructor and their overall rating of the instructor's competence and course content. According to Hayward (2003) the initial impression has a lot to do with the amount of effort the student will put towards the course, how interested they feel about the course, and how important they feel the course is.

Effectively Approaching the First Day of Class

It's important to realize that students aren't the only ones who are doing the sizing up. Professors, like any other normal human beings, also make perceptions about their pupils. If you're the kid who is always on your phone or the person blankly staring off, you're professor sees that and automatically lowers their expectations for you. If you're the person in the front row taking notes and nodding in agreement with the professor, odds are they will assume that you're going to do pretty well. It's so easy to get off on the wrong foot on either side of the relationship.

Students need to be prepared when starting the semester off. If it's the first or second day of class and you're missing out on some assignment because you're the one person who didn't print out the syllabus, well, that look bad. If the professor initially thinks you're not serious about their class then they won't take you serious either, which could potentially affect the outcome of your grade.

Effective Styles of Teaching

Coldren and Hivley state that a student's first impression of their teacher, whether positive or negative has a lot to do with their teaching style (2009). Students rated the authoritative style as most positive and authoritarian as least. In an authoritative teaching style a professor would be less rigid, enforce less strict rules and concepts and encourage their students to be involved and participate in the class sessions. A professor with an authoritarian style of teaching would be someone who lectures and provides little feedback to their students, has strict class sessions and doesn't try to incorporate more innovative ways to learn. Everyone

in college has had classes with both types of professors and from personal experience would more than likely tell you how much more they enjoyed their professors who practiced the authoritative style of teaching.

Limitations

With every research undertaking, there will always be some limitations when it comes to the actual study. The articles I used to outline this paper are no exception. To start with, every article I used focused on graduate students as the subjects of study. To have a more correct and credible study all levels of school should be incorporated. This subject isn't something that is only applicable to students in college. To get a better understanding of the full effects that perception has on a student to teacher relationship it needs to be looked at and considered from all angles. Because of this the studies come off as being biased. Incorporating other grade levels and ages would provide better and more reliable results. Another limitation within the studies was the sample sizes, which varied from 30 subjects to 100. Because of the smaller sizes used for the research it is harder to gain much statistical significance.

Future Research

The research done so far on this area of study does a good job of being thorough and providing useful information, regardless of the limitations I previously mentioned. However, there would be some different outlooks and areas on the matter that would be interesting and beneficial to study. Research in the future could examine all ages and grade levels and the perceptions of both students and teachers. These research questions could produce better and more accurate results on the study of perceptions in the classroom.

RQ1: How would the results vary in all ages and grades were incorporated in the research? Perhaps taking a closer look at that would uncover new innovative and better ways to teach students from kindergarten on.

RQ2: If research studies found a way to look at a much larger population for the study, in a less controlled environment, how would the results differ?

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