

The risk of university teachers' professional distortions

This topic seems to be very important. We can discuss different approaches and methods of teaching. We can discuss what helps us to improve teaching, and what prevents to teach better.

I argue that significant obstacles are the teacher's professional distortions. Some of them have a national identity and cannot be completely understood by those who are out of context of the national education system. But some are universal and don't depend on national features of education.

Two years ago, I started a discussion on this topic in HETL-community. Discussion turned out rather stormy. Part of the participants believed that the most likely high school teachers have professional distortion. The university professors exposed to this danger with less. Others, analyzing their own experience, found in it only positive changes of them. However, there was a large group of participants, who found this topic as extremely important.

I would like to present my understanding of the phenomenon of professional distortion; to describe briefly some of them; to point out the factors that cause their appearance; and to outline some possible ways to reduce them.

I would like to start by asking a question:

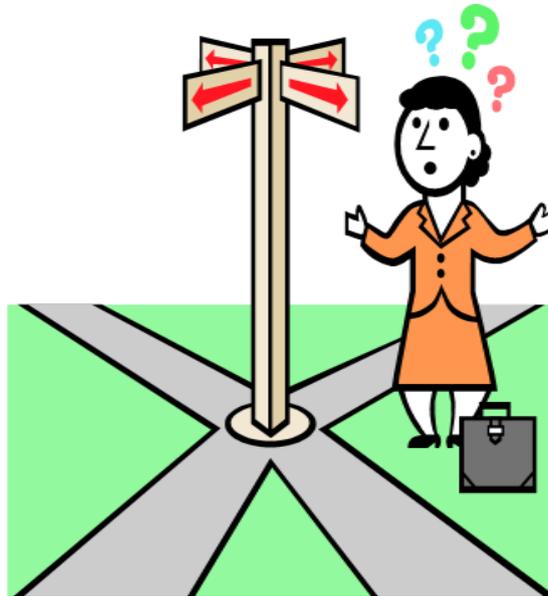
Is a teacher's professional way the direct movement up and forwards?



I think most of us will say "yes" because the thesis, "You can teach other people only until you learn yourself", is generally recognized. However, in

reality, we can see the different trends of professional way. I propose to focus on two polar vectors.

Akmeological direction is connected with the desire for personal and professional peaks.



Akmeology as a term is derived from the ancient Greek word “akme”, which means the highest point, peak.

The second direction is distorted one. It is manifested by the emergence of negative traits.

The regularities of positive (akmeological) teachers’ development are studied in detail. Equally important, in my opinion to study the dangers of destructive development vector. It is important not only to study these dangers, but also to warn future teachers and those who have already started his professional teaching career about these dangers.

I propose to review the professional distortions in the context of spaces of teacher’ being. Russian psychologists identify three such spaces.

The first space is a personality (in this space the teacher realizes himself/herself as a subject of life, different activities and social roles).

The second space is professional activity (it consists of content and structural characteristics of activity).

The third one is the space of relationship (in different spheres: the relations in professional fields, out of professional sphere, the relations to himself or herself).

Distortions can affect each of these spaces, as well as their combination. Here is a list of some distortions that affect teachers.

***Distortion of professional values;**

***Reduction of the sense of professional activity;**

- *Inability to self-reflection;
- *Loss of ability to engage in dialogue;
- *Tendency to assess everything and everyone;
- *Scientific snobbery;
- *Cruelty;
- *Rigidity of thinking and behavior;
- *Formal, impersonal, conflict relationships with students;
- *Professional stagnation;
- *Transfer of professional role behavior into the areas out of profession et al.

I will explain these distortions. So, the first two points are closely related. They can be illustrated by well-known proverb. Three men dragged the huge boulders on the mountain, sweating. The question "What are you doing?" one said: "I'm carrying stones", the second said: "I'm making money" and the third said: "I'm building a temple".

If a teacher considers his job only as making money or as lecturing, it shows, in my view, the loss of meaning and distortion of professional values.

The third point: Inability to self-reflection, how I understand it, is the inability to look at himself/herself, to make his/her own activities, his/her own professional features in the object of introspection.

The fourth point: We know that dialogue is very important in education. A genuine dialogue is not an exchange of words and phrases, but the exchange of personal meanings. Therefore, the teacher must be able to organize and manage the dialogue. But it is a difficult task that requires much time, emotional and intellectual effort. A convincing and eloquent monologue is also important in the educational activity. In addition, it is easier to implement. But it contains fewer opportunities for personal and professional development of students. If the teacher avoids dialogic interaction with the students, it can be one of the signs a professional distortion.

The fifth point: Assessing is one of the professional functions of a teacher. However, when a teacher does not restrict this function by professional work, and extrapolate it to the different spheres of life, it may be a sign of professional distortions.

The sixth: We can recognize the scientific snobbery when the teachers' behavior is arrogant. As belonging to the scientific community, they do not show respect for colleagues who do not have the advances in science, or for the students. They do not accept different points of view that are contrary to

their own insisting on the ones seem to them the only true and scientifically proven. They do not allow students to discuss with them because they set out a scientific position.

The seventh: Cruelty is manifested in the fact that a person feels pleasure, causing suffering to another. For example, when the student cannot answer the question at the exam, the teacher enjoys, saying mentally or aloud: “This is your payment for the fact you do not attend my lectures”. To add another example, when the teacher makes an insulting statement to the student and observes how he felt ashamed and awkward that classmates hear this statement. This distortion is because the pedagogical activity gives the teacher a kind of power over student.

The eighth: Rigidity of thinking and behavior due to the fact that many aspects of the teaching are repeated from year to year, from semester to semester. This is the reason of templates in teaching. These templates help the teacher in familiar situations. However, sometimes they do not correspond to the new circumstances. But if the teacher used to work in accordance with the templates it is difficult to recognize the changes in the situation, its new requirements one’s own activity.

The ninth: Formal, impersonal, conflict relationships with students. These relationships occur when a teacher is afraid to show students his/her incompetence, or when students are not interesting for him /her. It may be fear, or incompetence, or indifference, or inability to communicate. In any of these cases, a teacher reduces relationships with students to the minimum; he/she put on a mask to hide his/her identity. If the students are satisfied, we can say about deprivation of relationship, about their formal features. But if they do not accept such relationships, there are likely conflicts between them and a teacher.

The tenth: We used to think that the teacher is a person who is constantly self-improving, self-developing. That is why he/she has the right to teach other people. This is not always true. Sometimes the teacher comes to the conclusion that his knowledge, experience, competence are enough to carry out his/her teaching. Sometimes, if he/she sees that the students do not want to study hard, it leads him/her to the conclusion that he/she should not spend time and effort to self-improving. Students do not need it. Sometimes fatigue accumulated over the years stops the teacher’s self-development.

The next question is “**Are these or other distortions inevitable**”? My answer is “No”. Nevertheless, there is a danger of their emergence and fixing

in the personality of a teacher. That is why I suggest the approach to distortions as to the risk. This approach means that distortions are not fatal,



but probability. Risk is the potential danger (it can be realized or not realized). The minimization of risk is possible. It is called “risk-management”

If we want to anticipate the potential danger and to manage the risk, we need to understand the risk factors that can provoke the emergence of distortions. There are some classifications of these factors. But I will focus only on some of them. The first and second factors, in my view, are universal, and the third one reflects the Russian specifics.

We can talk about the internal and external factors. I will briefly characterize some of the external factors

The first factor is called “Specific characteristics of professional activity”.

What are these characteristics? Here are some of them:

- personality of teacher as a major factor of teaching and learning (The teacher uses in his work different methods, technical devices, information resources, and many others. But first he/she uses himself/herself: values, intellect, emotions, image, behavior, voice, etc.);
- education as an activity aimed at support and assistance (Such activity requires special personality traits and determines that the teachers expend their energy, emotions, time for their students);

- overlap of work and spare time (We can never say that we are free from work. We always have a magazine that should be read, the article, that urgently should be written, the lecture, that should be prepared).

The second factor is “Conditions of work in a certain university”. It means:

- the values prevailing in the professional community of university;
- the psychological climate in the university;
- the style of management;
- the organization of the educational process....

Distortions will likely increase if the values of humanism are not dominant, if psychological climate is negative, relationships between colleagues are strained and conflict and management style is repressing).

The third factor is the “modernization” of Russian system of higher education. Its features are:

- the situation of uncertainty;
- on the one hand, greater freedom for university in the design of the educational programs, on the other hand, the need to focus on state education standards, the content and wording of which cause a lot of questions;
- the contradiction between the declared competency approach to training specialists and the lack of the necessary conditions for development of their competences;
- unavailability of many teachers to work in the new environment (discrepancy of old ways of teaching to the new requirements).

The third factor is specific to Russia. However, maybe anyone find some of their analogues in educational systems of other countries.

To manage the risk of distortion means to consider these factors and to reduce their negative effects, using psychological, administrative and other tools.

In closing, I would like to outline some of the ways to reduce the risk of distortion. We can find them at three levels.

The first one is the state level. I do not claim the complete coverage of the actions to be taken at this level. This is the duty of politicians. But some aspects are clear. The prestige of the teaching profession, teachers' salaries should be raised. This will allow attract the best people to the teaching.

Education reform should be discussed, understood and accepted by educational community.

The second level is the university one. It is necessary to create conditions that encourage akmeological direction of professional development. This is a responsibility of management of different structural units: departments, deaneries, colleges and university as a whole. Of course, these conditions depend in some way by every teacher.

The third level is personality. It assumes the efforts of teachers to develop such important features as:

- ability to accept feedback as a source of critical self-assessment;
- self-reflection;
- readiness to change.

They allow the teacher to prevent the appearance of professional distortions.
