

Student use of ratemyprofessors.com to memorialize professors who have died

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Introduction

- Online memorials through social media (i.e., Facebook) and other websites (i.e., Legacy.com) have become commonplace in society (Church, 2013; Degroot, 2012; Hume & Bressers, 2010).
- Anecdotal evidence suggests that ratemyprofessors.com (RMP) has also been used as a platform, specifically for students to memorialize professors who have died.
- To the authors' knowledge, there has been no formal research on RMP regarding this topic.

Purpose of study

- The purpose of this study was to explore common characteristics that are memorialized by students on RMP regarding professors who have died.

Methods

- The data was collected in November of 2020
- An advanced, systematic search of RMP was performed using the search terms “RIP” and “passed away”
- The search retrieved 726 student comments about 383 professors who died
- Individual comments were considered the unit of analysis for the study (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).
- We were “immersed” in the data by reading the comments several times during and after data collection (Borkan, 1999).
- Then, we worked together (MacQueen et al., 1998) to identify and refine the overarching themes that emerged from the comments (Borkan, 1999).

Results

- There were 4 minor themes not included in the study, but are worth mentioning:
 - 1. Notifications: students notified others about the professors' deaths
 - “*To all: Professor _____ passed away 8-12-18.*”
 - 2. Condolences: students expressed sympathy about/to the professor
 - “*I thank him from the bottom of my heart for the all the good he did for me. With love and respect...*”
 - 3. Complaints: students complained about professors, even after the professor's death
 - “*hes a tough teacher but now that he has passed away maybe his students will pass this semester*”
 - 4. Defense: students defended professors that were complained about
 - “*Professor _____ passed away shortly after the previous comment was written about her. She devoted her last days to doing what she loved: teaching. Even when "reading directly off powerpoints" was all she had the strength to do--she did it! May her spirit, endurance, and dedication live on. _____, you will NOT be forgotten.*”

Results

- Four major themes emerged from the data:
 - 1. Pedagogy: students appreciated their professors' teaching abilities
 - 2. Passion: students were inspired by professors' passion
 - 3. Care: students expressed gratitude for professors who were caring
 - 4. Happy: students remembered professors with positive, humorous attitudes

Results – Theme #1: Pedagogy

- Pedagogy: students appreciated their professors' teaching abilities
- *“He was the most amazing teacher I've ever had. He improved my writing abilities tenfold and made me thoroughly enjoy going to his classes. I'll miss him a lot.”*
- *“...As I look back and reflect on my experiences, I find it difficult to put into words how great of a teacher this man was. I don't think I have ever learned as much - and had as much fun learning - as I did in ASTR 100. Rest in peace, _____. We all miss you so much.”*
- *“One of the best teachers I've ever had. _____ taught me how to do things that I was naturally not good at and he did it with caring and grace. I took his calligraphy class and while I was one of the least talented, I worked very hard and those lessons are still with me. R.I.P. to one of the greatest teachers ever.”*
- *“Mr _____ opened my eyes to the reality of politics. It has now been 15 years since I was in his class, and I am completely convinced that he was one of the most unbiased and fair Political Science professors that has ever lived. I remain a free-thinking, engaged, yet cautious, politically-aware citizen to this day.”*

Results – Theme #1: Pedagogy

- *“_____ was the best teacher I've ever had in my whole life. As proof there were at least 20 of his students at his funeral.”*
- *“This tragic event utterly broke my heart. He was an amazing professor. Every time I would come by his office, he would ask me how he could improve his methods for us and the following years, or what we needed to grasp the concepts with ease. He welcomed all questions and did everything in his power to help hard-working students succeed. RIP <3”*
- *“_____ passed away recently. He was the most challenging teacher I have ever had. But I learned the most in his class. He pushes his students to be their best. His style was a bit unconventional but effective. I am grateful that I was able to have him as a teacher. I will always remember his class. Thanks for everything”*
- *“_____, you changed my life. I never thought I could succeed in math until I took your class. You helped me so much, and a teacher like you comes once in a lifetime. RIP _____. Thank you so much for your presence in this world and my life. I will never forget the impact you had on me.”*

Results – Theme #2: Passion

- Passion: students were inspired by their professor's passion
- *“RIP. ONE OF THE BEST TEACHERS WHOM WILL GREATLY BE MISSED. HE INSPIRED AND DARED MANY TO DREAM AND ACHIEVE OUR GOALS FOR THAT THANK YOU”*
- *“Thank you _____ for inspiring all of us. I'll always remember our conversations during office hours and your motivating words. I will miss you.”*
- *“Dr. _____ inspired me to become an influential scholar. No teacher has influenced me more than Dr. _____. We met every week to discuss more than the class material; we discussed the philosophy of life. R.I.P Dr.”*
- *“Dr. _____ was truly one of the best professors I've ever had. He inspired me in more ways than he ever knew. He helped to shape me into the student I am today, and for that I will be forever grateful. Thank you for everything, Dr. _____! None of us will ever forget you!”*

Results – Theme #2: Passion

- *“I miss him so much. R.I.P. never have i met a teacher so into his study he cared about it so much he made such an impact on my life and i will never forget him, i hope to learn from him as being a future teacher, he has taught more then just about history but about life i will always miss you.”*
- *“Professor _____ passed away this Tuesday. His course was the course that made me sure I wanted to be a History Major. I never got a chance to thank him. This is the only place I could think of to properly say that.”*
- *“Dr. _____ passed away year before last. When I found this web site I was drawn to his name first. Had classes under him in mid 1970's. Have never forgotten him. Amazing teacher. Amazing man. Easily the most influential academic influence of my life. So sorry future students will miss his passion and compassion. Rest in peace Dr. _____.”*
- *“Pro. ____ was an inspirational man & attorney. He was fascinating & intriguing & all of his stories had an important lesson behind them. After taking his class I wanted to be an attorney. He helped me achieve that dream & 10 years later I am a practicing lawyer & professor.”*

Results – Theme #3: Care

- Care: students expressed gratitude for professors who were caring
- *“Dr. _____ was one of the most amazing professors I have ever had. He cared so much about his students and I am still waiting to encounter a professor who was as caring and compassionate ... He is sorely missed. RIP.”*
- *“I will miss you _____. You were a great professor and always encouraged me to do my best. Often we spoke and you helped me through some hard times. RIP. We'll meet again one day. :)”*
- *“Just ran across _____'s obituary. I didn't know he had passed and am deeply saddened to hear it. He reached out and was wonderful and supportive to me at a time I desperately needed it, yet he didn't even know me all that well. I only knew him briefly, yet he made a huge impact and, I can honestly say, he saved my life. Thank you _____.”*

Results – Theme #3: Care

- *“Dr. _____ was the best professor I have ever had in my entire life. She was my mentor and person I could always go to. She GENUINELY cared for every student she had. I used to go visit her just to talk. We became close friends after graduation, but unfortunately she passed away on an excursion to Greece in 2018 after I graduated.”*
- *“He was a great teacher, I took Math 203 with him and gotten a D+ when I had to take a Math 206 next semester with him he took me aside and said that he was disappointed that I never came to him for help before. He gave me ton of books to read and asked me to come and see him every week to ask him questions. I have ended up with A+ RIP and Thank U!”*
- *“I am so so sad that he is gone. He passed away right after our class was over. He was such a kind and CARING man. He cared deeply and fought for those who were overlooked...”*

Results – Theme #4: Happy

- Happy: students remembered professors who had positive, humorous attitudes
- *“RIP Dr. _____ - You were always so alive, happy, and bigger than life, that it's a shock to find out that you're gone ... You were always there with a smile for your students, even if it was just to chat. You will be sorely missed. God bless you.”*
- *“Professor _____ was an amazing professor with a great sense of humor! He brought smiles on every face in the class room, even at 8 AM! His intense adrenaline rushes woke the class up and got everyone participating... You are missed, _____. RIP.”*
- *“RIP Dr. _____! He was the best teacher ever. Hilarious and could turn a potentially dull class into something exciting. If he was still here, I'd highly recommend him, but I can't. I'm here to spread his good name and say that was awesome and will be missed by all. BEST teacher ever...”*

Results – Theme #4: Happy

- *“Professor _____ was a good professor. RIP _____ You were full of energy and smiles every single day, and full of laughs too.”*
- *“Prof _____ was an exception person that was dedicated to his students and family. An all around good person. Our last conversation i had mentioned i saw his great ratings on RMP and that's why i decided to choose his class, he responded jokingly, do i have any of those hot peppers? And i just giggled. So this hot pepper is for you Prof! RIP”*

Discussion

- The findings reflect previous research on RMP, in that students appreciate professors' teaching ability, passion, care for students, and positive attitudes (Addison et al., 2015; Chou et al., 2021; Hartman & Hunt, 2013; Jalbert, 2020; Kindred & Mohammed, 2005; Symbaluk & Howell, 2018)
- Our findings are unique, however, in that students still remember and cherish these qualities after a professor has died.

Discussion – Limitations

- Lack of generalizability
- This study included a convenience sample
- Additional search terms may have retrieved more comments
- This study was based from a single website

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Activity – Think, pair, share

- 1. What is the value of leaving a lasting legacy in the hearts and minds of students?
- 2. How can we improve on the characteristics that students tend to memorialize about their professors?
 - Effective instruction
 - Passion about academic discipline
 - Care towards students
 - Having a positive attitude