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Learner-Centered Approach to Students

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Comment on public access to data, ethics and conflict of interest
The described research (survey) was conducted without funding or grants.
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Abstract: For domestic pedagogy, the concepts of 'learner-centered education' and 'learner-centered approach' are no longer new. Can the learner-centered approach (style of interaction) be applied to students in higher education institutions? Or it may only be possible in preschool education institutions or in general education institutions?
A many years' experience in applying the learner-centered approach to pupils (students) in practice shows that such approach has been effective at all levels of general and vocational education.
This article discusses the specifics of the implementation of the learner-centered approach in the sphere of higher education, presents the criteria and indicators of such approach as well as the results of the student survey aimed at identifying the type of pedagogical interaction used.

Keywords: learner-centered approach, style of pedagogical interaction, students, teachers, survey results

1. INTRODUCTION.

Relevance of the problem

At present, the feasibility of using a learner-centered approach is being discussed at all levels of education (preschool, school, vocational and higher education). However, not so long ago

the following question arose and was discussed: whether such approach should be used towards the students of the educational institution of higher education?

Such question is logical because the learner-centered approach was first developed primarily to be used for the preschool and school children. And it was considered that more independence in the process of study had to be provided to the students of the educational institution of higher education (the hours are allocated in the curriculum for the independent work on the course of study; and this is not done at school, and much less in the classes in kindergartens).

But this is on the one hand, and on the other hand, based on the experience of the author, it can be said that once a practical task is given to students for independent work, most of them immediately start to look for the answers on the Internet and do not show any creativity or independence; therefore, when they encounter a task (assignment) to which there is no ready-made answer (thus, for example, the application of the case study method in training is close to that), many of them trip out and do not know what to do. And in this case, the learner-centered approach presumes a reasonable and necessary support, for example, in the form of a solution to a similar but not completely identical problem.

The author has been using this approach in her work for over 20 years and based on such experience it can be said without prejudice that the learner-centered approach can be used everywhere, at all levels of study: in kindergartens, schools, colleges, universities and even at work, in the professional activity of people.

Let us take, for example, the interaction styles underlying the approach employed by teachers (tutors) to students: authoritarian style (autocratic or disciplinary approach), democratic style (learner-centered approach) and liberal style are employed everywhere — at home: children and parents, at work: manager and subordinate, etc.

And the following questions are constantly being discussed: which style is better, which style is more conducive to the acquisition of knowledge, skills and abilities, etc. And still there are no unambiguous answers to these questions. Again, let us give an example based on the author's experience: praise one person and he or she will continue to do his/her best, while another person should be criticized a bit in order to encourage him/her to complete any task or assignment. All people have individual features. Therefore, it is recommended to apply a combined style of interaction with students, i.e. somewhere to force (authoritarian style), somewhere to give full freedom and independence (liberal style), and somewhere to be on an equal footing with a child and give the chance to express his/her opinion (democratic style). And the democratic style in the learner-centered interaction should undoubtedly prevail. It should also be noted that the learner-centered approach consists not only in the use of the democratic style, but it is *a priori* based on the loyal (good) attitude to all people, perception of them as they are, providing them with all possible help and support, in this case, in learning.

Can a teacher (tutor) be learner-centered only for students or only at home? The answer is definitely not. This style (approach) is mainly used when interacting with all people that surround him; this is the life style of a person (teacher). For example, the authoritarian style can be somewhat veiled, i.e. in the presence of a superior boss be not a dictator, but a democrat, and with the subordinates use only the authoritarian style, but the democratic style

which is the basis of the learner-centered approach is a life style of a person, such person always treats everyone from the perspective of this approach.

During the formative years of personality development, while getting a pedagogical degree it is still possible to change the style of interaction; however based on the author's experience, will be practically impossible to do it later. Perhaps in individual cases, it would be possible to adjust the style a little when using (taking) certain efforts.

Analysis of Literature

The analysis of the concepts of the learner-centered model (technology, approach, style) of teaching enabled to define the basic concepts as follows (Nadtochiy, 2002):

1) Learner -centered teaching is the teaching, the main value of which is the recognition of the child's personality, his or her individuality; it implies the creation of conditions for the identification and development of opportunities and abilities of each child subject to his or her needs, interests and experience;

2) Learner-centered approach is the organization of the learning process which implies focusing on the child, his or her personality (interests, abilities, opportunities and development trends) and is based on the subject-to-subject interaction of the teacher and the child.

The classification of styles of interaction between the teacher and the child is based on the research of K. Levin, R. Lippitt, and R. White of leadership styles in a group (Levin, Lippitt, White, 1939). The authors identified three styles as follows: authoritarian style, democratic style and laissez-faire styles (Table 1).

Table 1. Leadership styles (Levin, Lippitt, White, 1939)

Authoritarian style	Democratic style	Laissez-faire style
All aspects of group policy are determined by the leader.	Policies are developed based on the leader-led discussions and decisions made in the group.	Full freedom of group members to make decisions with a minimum participation of the leader.
All steps in the group activities are consistently dictated by the leader.	In the course of the discussion, general stages to achieve the goals of the group are defined. The leader often proposes a choice of two or more opportunities.	The leader provides materials for the work and answers questions, if any.
Assignments are determined by the leader.	The responsibilities are divided at the discretion of the group	Lack of the leader's active participation.

Different authors discuss and describe the styles of interaction between a teacher and a child (a student is also considered as a child, since any human being up to the age of 18 years is recognized as a child (age of majority) (Federal Law N 124-FZ); any human being up to the age of 18 years is recognized as a child unless under the law applicable to the child he or she reaches the age of majority earlier (Convention on the Rights of the Child) in the course of learning. Thus, for example, V.S. Mukhina identifies the following styles (Mukhina, 1986):

1) Imperative (authoritarian) style requires unconditional, strict submission from the child; the teacher seeks to manipulate children, assigning primary importance to the task of organizing the discipline;
2) Democratic style provides the child with an active position: the teacher strives to involve the children in cooperative relations; this style puts the teacher and children in a position of a friendly mutual understanding;
3) Liberal or laissez-faire (anti-authoritarian) style represents an unacceptable tolerance, condescending weakness, laissez-faire approach harmful to a child, and such style does not ensure children's joint activity either, i.e. the criterion behavior is simply not organized, and every child behaves as dictated by his/her bad manners.

Generally, the imperative style governs the discipline, but distorts the development of the child's personality. The democratic style requires more professional skills for the organization of the discipline, but it is the only one acceptable for upbringing of positive qualities in the child's personality in the organization of his/her cognitive activity. Although the liberal or laissez-faire style does not emotionally overload the child, it gives him/her no positive conditions for personal development and for the learning activities. In reality, each teacher introduces the elements of all styles to the practice of communicating with children, and still each of the teachers knows which style of communication with children dominates in his/her activity.

Also, different authors constantly compare the opposite models of learning, such as a disciplinary teaching model and a learner-oriented teaching model. Let us discuss the analysis of D. G. Levites' learning models (Levites, 1998) by such indicators as learning goals, attitude towards a child, communications tactics, etc. (Table 2).

Table 2. Comparative analysis of the teaching models (Levites, 1998)

Indicators	Disciplinary teaching model	Learner-oriented model
Learning goals	Knowledge, skills and abilities	Development of the child's personality and prevention of dead end development
Attitude towards the child	Educational system target	Actor
Communications tactics	Orders, admonitions, lectures, shout, threat	Cooperation
Organizational characteristics of teaching	Front-end forms of work, strict regulation of educational activities	Individualization and differentiation of learning, prevalence of forms and methods of active learning
Learning outcomes	Exclusion of children from the learning process	Interiorized knowledge and work methods

The following functions, skills, traits of activity and techniques, personal mindset of the teacher, his or her worldview implemented in the learning environment are distinguished (Klarin, 1998):

1) Flexibility — the teacher's ability to quickly navigate in an ever-changing environment of the learning process;
2) Sincere interest in the student — concerned attention to the student, patient listening, interest in his opinions, points of view, etc.;
3) Width — free expression of his/her opinion without suppression of others, persuasion without imposing his/her point of view;
4) Tolerance — calm perception of possible errors in reasoning, encouragement to clarify a thought or idea without abruptly cutting off the initiative;
5) Creativity and constructiveness - support of ideas, thoughts, and direction to search for results;
6) Acceptance of the child's personality — unbiased perception of his/her thoughts, interests, positive attitude towards the student's personality.

Criteria and indicators of the teacher's learner-centered approach to teaching the children have been identified (Nadtochiy, 2002). Based on the author's long-term experience in using the learner-centered approach (interaction) in his pedagogical activity, it can be said that the same criteria and indicators can be used in relation to the teacher of an educational institution of higher education (Table 3). The latter criterion can be augmented with the teacher's personal inner readiness to use this style of interaction with students (with children, and generally with others).

Table 3. Criteria and indicators of the teacher's child-centered approach to teaching

Criteria	Indicators
1. Humanistic orientation of the teacher's personality	The child is recognized to be a core value of the educational process. The child is understood, recognized and accepted as an equal partner. Encouragement of child subjectivity Building up synergies through cooperation, mutual understanding, mutual assistance and coherence
2. Child-centered teaching	Differentiation of tasks, content and forms of teaching Organizing pedagogical support: using the techniques to advance success, improve motivation Variability of learning depending on individual abilities, opportunities and trends in the development of the child
3. Professional competence of the teacher	Ability to use different types of teaching Readiness to act considering the position of other actors in the learning process Creating conditions for the child's development, disclosure of self-learning mechanisms, development of cognitive and moral activity, creativity Need for self-education; development of pedagogical creativity

Conditions, ways and means of the learner-centered interaction of the teacher and children are constantly studied (Timofeeva, 1999):

1) Conditions for self-realization of the personality: humanization of pedagogical communication; improvement of professional competence; introduction of game forms of learning; enrichment of the subject and space environment; creation of a situation of success;

2) Ways and means of interaction between the teacher and children: trustful and open relationships; unbiased acceptance; empathy; ensuring the child's comfort and safety; encouraging the child's creative self-expression; active involvement of parents in the educational process.

As mentioned above, students are perceived as adults, independent grown up persons; and, in this regard, in the educational institution of higher education, the very attitude towards students is changing in comparison to school and even to college. Students at university have more responsibility for their studies. The choice is up to the student whether to study or not or how to learn. And the student is responsible for his or her attitude towards learning. Therefore, the use of the learner-centered approach changes somehow. The use of this model in relation to the students involves the creation of positive motivation for learning activities, conditions for creativity, taking into account their interests and aptitudes, and an individual approach to each student; this contributes to the successful acquisition of knowledge, skills and abilities required for future professional activities.

2. STUDIES CONDUCTED

The author has been researching the possibilities of using the learner-centered approach in the process of teaching the children, for many years (since 1998). Thus, from 1998 to 2002, as part of her dissertation research, it was studied how the teacher can develop the learner-centered approach to children in the process of teaching them.

Purpose of research

The purpose of the research was to develop and test a system of formation of the learner-centered approach among the teachers towards teaching the children as part of the methodological work in a preschool institution.

Research stages

The research was conducted in three stages.

At the first stage (1998 – 2000), a historical and theoretical analysis of the current state of the problem was performed; philosophical, psychological, pedagogical and methodical literature was studied and analyzed. The lessons learned at preschool facilities were reviewed, and the experience of preschool education specialists was studied. These enabled to formulate the problem, goal, objectives and hypothesis of the research, to define the conceptual framework, to carry out primary diagnostics at the summative stage (prepare a program) of the experimental work, and to develop a program of its formative part.

At the second stage (1999 – 2000), the experimental work was carried out, the specific characteristics of the teachers' approaches to teaching the children were studied, and the strategy, content and technology of formation of the learner-centered approach among the teachers to the teaching of preschool children were developed and tested. This stage included the analysis and evaluation of the data received in the course of the experimental work and

the correction of the developed methodology for the formation of the learner-centered approach among the teachers.

At the third stage (2000 – 2001), the experimental work was completed, the control stage was carried out, the obtained results were theoretically conceptualized, verified, summarized and systematized, the conclusions were formulated, and the dissertation research was finalized.

Research methods

Theoretical analysis of philosophical, pedagogical, psychological and methodical literature; study and analysis of pedagogical experience; pedagogical observations, conversations; questionnaires, expert assessments and self-assessments; experimental work including the formative, summative and control stages aimed at identifying the initial level of teachers' awareness of the learner-centered teaching model and recording the results achieved after the formation of the selected components; pedagogical correction; mathematical methods (ranking, scaling, calculation of average values).

Experimental research base

The research was carried out on the basis of eight pre-school institutions of the city of Moscow; Moscow City Pedagogical University (MSPU), and Moscow Teachers' College No. 6. The research involved 309 teachers (teaching methodology experts, tutors, teachers of additional education), 125 students (intra-extramural and extramural departments of the MSPU; the full-time and evening departments of the Teachers' College), 12 experts from among the heads of the preschool institutions (directors, teaching methodology experts).

Stages of the experiment

Let us briefly discuss the stages of the experiment.

Summative stage — It was conducted in three sub-stages. The objective of the summative stage was to study the approaches employed by the teachers of modern preschool institutions to teach the children. The analysis of the summative stage data enabled to make a conclusion that modern teachers have a variety of approaches to teaching the children. A clear disciplinary teaching approach has been identified among 40.9% of teachers. A significant part of teachers (43.2%) combine the disciplinary teaching approach with some attributes of the learner-centered approach to a greater or lesser extent. It was found that 15.9% of teachers predominantly use the learner-centered approach with some attributes of disciplinary teaching approach.

Formative stage — In the course of the formative stage of the research, the strategy, content and technology of the learner-centered approach to teaching the preschool children were developed and their effectiveness was verified. The analysis of the psychological and pedagogical literature and the summative stage data enabled to assume that process of forming the learner-centered approach among the teachers to teaching the preschool children can be effected as part of further training of the preschool teachers on the basis of the preschool institutions, using traditional and new forms of methodical work (consultations, seminars, creative reports, talks, discussions, role-plays, teachers council, training sessions, viewing fragments of educational work, recommendations for self-education, etc.). It included five stages of forming the learner-centered approach among the teachers to teaching the children and the three units. The psychological and pedagogical training for teachers was developed.

Observations and analysis of classes of the teachers that underwent psychological and pedagogical training showed to what extent they have mastered the elements of the learner-centered approach, as well as the ability to design an author's technology for the learner-centered teaching. In the course of the formative stage, the teachers succeeded to improve their level of theoretical competence in the use of the learner-centered model of teaching the children and interaction with the children within the framework of that model, develop skills for implementing the learner-centered teaching technology in their practical work, broaden the teachers' understanding of how to practically build up the learner-centered interaction with children and understanding of specific features of the individual application of such interaction in their pedagogical activities (subject to the situation in the learning process, individual and personal qualities of teachers and children, as the case may be), as well as to create prerequisites for the development and implementation by teachers of the author's technology of the learner-centered approach to teaching the children.

Control stage. The data received in the course of the control assessment enabled to identify the difficulties encountered by the teachers in the process of mastering the technology of the learner-centered teaching of children, and to make changes in the training unit: to develop assignments and exercises for the psychological and pedagogical training taking into account such difficulties and problems. The follow-up examination was intentionally carried out using the method similar to that of the summative experiment, as the results of the tasks were not discussed with the teachers at the summative stage.

Based on the results of the data received during the control stage, it was concluded that the change in the teachers' motivational and value sphere enables an easier switch from the disciplinary didactic model to the learner-centered model; those teachers succeed to quicker abandon their stereotypes and attitudes that existed in their teaching activities. Thus, the reorganization of the teaching activities based on the changes in the teachers' motivational and value attitudes has proved to be the most effective in mastering the learner-centered technologies by them. It was found that the formation of the learner-centered approach among the teachers to teaching the children without using the training produces less effect than the similar work based on the specially designed psychological and pedagogical training enabling the teachers to develop practical skills in implementing the learner-centered teaching technology.

Study of the style of interaction between the teacher and the students in the educational institution of higher education

It should be noted that at the moment there have been no significant changes in the use of the learner-centered approach in the learning process, and the above-mentioned models of learning (disciplinary teaching approach and learner-centered approach) and interaction styles (authoritarian style, democratic style and laissez-faire style) still exist.

In 2015, an attempt was made to study the style of interaction between teachers and students at the university (teacher-student interaction style). A questionnaire *Styles of Pedagogical Interaction* was selected for doing so.

There are many teachers at the university (unlike at school) therefore it is impossible to conduct a survey in relation to each teacher, so the students were asked to evaluate the style of interaction generally used by teachers.

The survey was attended by the 1st, 3rd and 5th year students of the Moscow State University of Instrument Engineering and Informatics (now it is MIREA — Russian Technological University). 113 questionnaires were collected in total.

The survey questions are as follows:

1. While explaining the learning material, the teacher, as a rule, sits at the teacher's desk (stands behind the lectern).
2. In the course of the lesson, the teacher often gives examples from life to illustrate what has been said.
3. The teacher, as a rule, explains the learning material without breaking away from his/her notes.
4. The teacher often involves the students in discussing the topic of the lesson.
5. The teacher encourages the students (pupils) if they enter into a dialogue with him/her when he/she is explaining the topic of the lesson.
6. The teacher makes good jokes during the class.
7. Any noise, murmur, buzz, bustling in the classroom drives the teacher crazy.
8. If the teacher feels disregarded, he/she often raises his/her voice or makes a pause.
9. The teacher welcomes if students ask questions during the explanation of the material.
10. The teacher will immediately react to any remark made during the lesson.
11. The teacher notices changes in the students' mood during the lesson.
12. The teacher often uses an emotional story when explaining the material.
13. The teacher often gets carried away with his/her monologue and does not have enough time in the class.
14. The teacher acknowledges the student's right to make a mistake.

The students were asked to read each question carefully and to mark each question with a "+" if they can agree with the statement and a "–" if they give a negative answer. In most cases, all questions are considered in relation to all teachers.

3. RESULTS

In the oral interview after the survey, part of the respondents (about 20%) admitted that they mainly evaluated the author.

The survey results are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4. Student survey results

Question No.	Answer "+" i.e. "yes" corresponds to the type of interaction					Answer "–" i.e. "no" corresponds to the type of interaction				
	Type of interaction	1st year students	3rd year students	5th year students	total	Type of interaction	1st year students	3rd year students	5th year students	total
1	Suppression	74%	74%	46%	71%	Cooperation	26%	26%	54%	29%
2	Cooperation	70%	81%	100%	76%	Indifference	30%	19%	0%	24%

3	Indifference	29%	13%	31%	25%	Cooperation	71%	87%	69%	75%
4	Cooperation	71%	87%	92%	78%	Indifference	29%	13%	8%	22%
5	Cooperation	62%	71%	100%	69%	Suppression	38%	29%	0%	31%
6	Cooperation	67%	61%	69%	65%	Indifference	33%	39%	31%	35%
7	Suppression	57%	16%	38%	43%	Indifference	43%	84%	62%	57%
8	Indifference	84%	74%	38%	76%	Suppression	16%	26%	62%	24%
9	Cooperation	96%	87%	92%	93%	Suppression	4%	13%	8%	7%
10	Cooperation	62%	32%	54%	53%	Suppression	38%	68%	46%	47%
11	Cooperation	49%	39%	46%	46%	Indifference	51%	61%	54%	54%
12	Suppression	46%	42%	62%	47%	Cooperation	54%	58%	38%	53%
13	Suppression	55%	19%	38%	43%	Indifference	45%	81%	62%	57%
14	Cooperation	88%	90%	77%	88%	Suppression	12%	10%	23%	12%

The highest percentage in terms of the type of interaction means the strongest propensity for a certain type of interaction.

Thus, the following results were received (Fig. 1):

1) Cooperation (100% * 820) / (11 * 113) = 65.9% (democratic style);
2) Suppression (100% * 368) / (9 *113) = 36.2% (authoritarian style);
3) Indifference (100% * 394) / (8 * 113) = 43.6% (laissez-faire style).

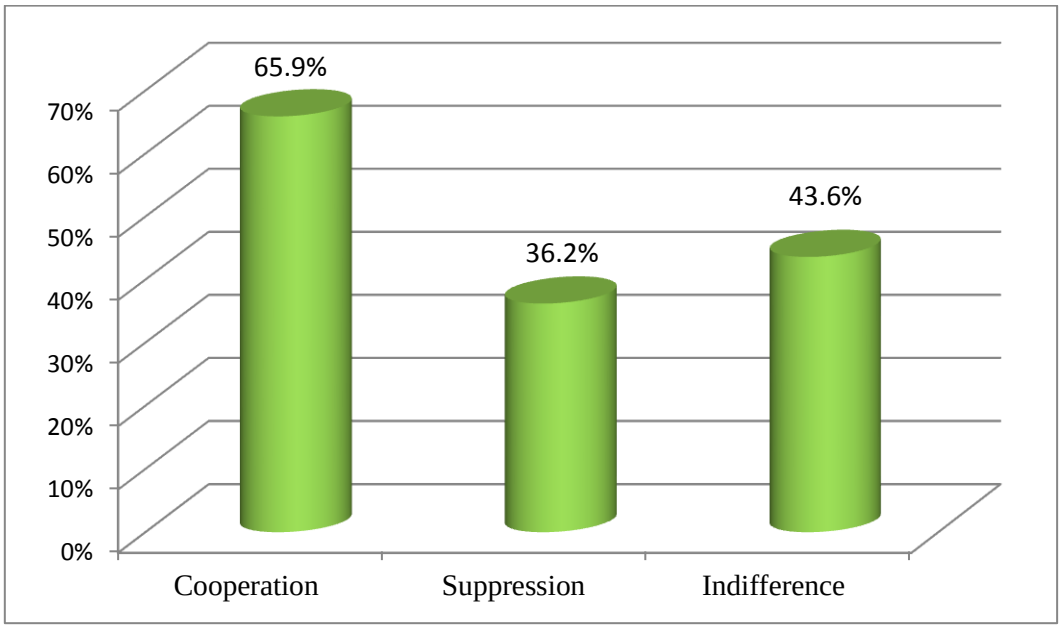

Fig. 1. Percentage of each type of interaction based on the results of the student survey

In most cases (65.9%), the respondents mentioned that the teachers use cooperation, and it is exactly this style that underlies the learner-centered approach.

The comments received from the students in the questionnaires are presented below (presented verbatim).

1st year students

1. Lessons are usually positive. And the subject itself is interesting.
2. Lessons are positive. The subject sparks my interest and positive emotions.

3rd year students

1. There are good teachers at the MIREA.
2. Much depends on the individual and, for example, on the mood, as well as on the subject being studied, the topic of the lesson.
3. Teachers need to be more loyal to students if the students work (combine their studies with work).
4. The disadvantage is that teachers give us knowledge aimed at earning money. Since the very school days, we have been taught numbers and facts.

5th year students

1. Thank you for giving us knowledge!

Questions to be discussed

Based on the results of the conducted studies, it can be concluded that first of all, it is necessary to consider the requirements for the arrangement of the pedagogical conditions for teaching the children (students) within the learner-centered approach, such as:

– Creation of optimal conditions at any lessons for the child to experience joy from the work done (subject to the zone of immediate development, i.e. by complicating difficulties for children from lesson to lesson);

– Use of different types of teaching in the classroom and play techniques in order to maintain children's interest in the process of activity, as well as to get the desired result;
– The teacher shall provide every child with the development of motivation for cognitive activity;
– Use of effective assessment of the children in class (avoid formal (unmotivated) negative assessment; use of negative assessment of a child's activity against the background of a child-friendly attitude and understandable to him/her);
– The teacher's ability to consider in the process of teaching children the age and individual characteristics of each child, specific situation arising during the lessons and, with this regard, ability to quickly rearrange his/her interaction with children and change the structure of the lesson.

In each of the above clauses, the word *child* may be replaced by the word *student* or *pupil*.

4. CONCLUSION

Considering the fact that now most teachers in educational institutions do not have pedagogical background, often they are former students (as at the department in which the author works and in the majority of departments of RTU MIREA), it is necessary to carry out awareness-raising work in the field of implementation of the learner-centered approach in relation to students in the process of learning.

It is also necessary to create conditions for testing this approach in practice, with further correction of errors and their adjustment in line with the real conditions of use thereof.

A learner-centered teaching of future teachers is a necessary element of preparation of the modern specialists capable to effectively put their knowledge in practice, use the learner-centered technology in the teaching and educational process at the teachers' training college and teachers' training university.

Thus, for the formation of personal orientation of future teachers, the experience of their interaction with tutors in the process of their own learning becomes important.

A modern learner-centered teacher must be geared towards such approach, use the principle of granting subjective freedom to students, be mentally prepared for appropriate interaction with students because the issue of choosing a profession (future professional activity) and mastering the activity is part of the problem of meaning of life.

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