

## The Whys and Wherefores of Lectures

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One of the things which most educators agree upon is that the purpose of a lecture is more than to dictate information for students to memorize and recall. If this were not the case, lecturers could be replaced by review outlines and note pools. What is it besides dispensing nuggets of information that only a lecturer can provide? Some would say that the lecturer, by being entertaining, makes the lecture more fun or at least more palatable. For example, some lecturers will tell jokes to develop an *entre nous* rapport; they send the message that they know this is awful stuff but that they, and the class, are in it together and that they, the lecturers, are not bad guys. An alternative to this is to do some stunt which, it is hoped, will become associated with a particular point the lecturer is trying to make. Often the performer endears himself to his audience - but the point of his stunt is lost. Other people seem to think that the job of the lecturer is to further eviscerate the most bare-boned outline to what is 'really important'. This is a sort of editorial function maximally to compress the lesson the student is to commit to memory.

Really, these considerations miss the point, for they tell nothing about the purpose of the lecture; only why a lecturer is needed. Let us acknowledge that the living, interacting presence of the lecturer is more effective than either the sound of his voice from a loudspeaker or his presence in a movie. Then we can get back to identification of the reasons for the lecture itself; with finding out what effect an effective lecturer has and is intended to have.

In the present context, the effect sought is to educate, from the Latin *educare*, which means to lead forth or to bring up. This is quite a different process from transferring or delivering information to a passive recipient. Instead, there is an action upon or an interaction with the person being educated. The lecturer/educator is leading the student by the hand, heart or mind over a difficult and unfamiliar path. The educator

serves as a helper, not an exhibitor or dispenser. He accompanies the pupil, explaining each turn and twist; showing how to cope by use of illustrations and by applications to familiar tasks. He can only do so because he has the experience of having travelled this way before. In his lecture, he shares this experience, including the process of finding out, with his listeners.

Frequently, the student comes to the lecture like one who has been blindfolded. He is sure neither where he is nor how he got there because there are no clues to connect what he is being told to the world he knows about. He is unsure whether that circle on the blackboard is a microscopic or telescopic view of something or is a part of his experience: a histologic section or a structure he saw in gross lab. He is equally uncertain as to where this new information fits into what he has learned before in this or other courses. Finally, he is troubled by the pragmatic question. So what? Therefore, the lecturer must show the orientation of his topic, how it fits (is integrated) into the larger and more familiar setting known to the audience, and (as always) why it is important. Does it introduce a wholly new aspect? Does it pull together and show the relationship of discrete pieces which have been discussed before? Does it develop a strategy for solving a clinical problem or for understanding some aspect of a living process? It helps the student immensely to know where he is going or being led and why. He can then be a thoughtful contributor to the occasion instead of a passive spectator. He is able to grow as he listens instead of stockpiling data for later processing.

Hopefully, by exercise of leadership, provision of orientation and establishment of relevance, the lecturer raises the level of knowledge and understanding of his hearers. But, what is the purpose of his doing this

to the students? The goal is to effect in them new competence to pursue these paths on their own; to be able to use the information and skills in further studies and applications; to incorporate these into their repertoires. What makes this possible? The new information is learned in a memorable context in which the student has already established a mental and experiential file.

Perhaps we can conclude that a lecture is not a treat (*i.e.*, a giveaway to passive recipients), but a treatment. Through it, something is being done to the students to widen

their horizons, to help them understand what they learn and to see how they can use this new knowledge for their own purposes in their own working environment.

Thus, when we stand before our students, we must remember how much more we can do and be for them than the 'great dictator'!

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## Simple Improvements to Staff-Student Communications

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### INTRODUCTION

A problem for lecturers is to know whether they are presenting their material in a sufficiently interesting and understandable fashion and at a pace suitable for student comprehension. New and occasional lecturers tend to be nervous, feel they must put across everything they know and assume that students can comprehend more in a given time than is realistic. Thus they often proceed too fast and try to cover too much material, although they are usually enthusiastic and make their subject interesting. More established teachers, while generally aware of students' capabilities, may be bored with the material they are presenting for the *n*th time, particularly at basic level, and some fail to update sufficiently frequently.

Another problem is assessing how much previous knowledge students have in a particular subject area. Repetition and reinforcement is not necessarily bad, but in excess will bore students. Equally, unjustified assumptions of knowledge can leave students floundering and unable to understand new work. Both problems result in

students performing below their best and this can have adverse effects on their future prospects. Associated with this is the question of the level at which material should be pitched, particularly to a class which is not known to the lecturer. Introductory lectures which would be incomprehensible to honours or even post-graduate students are not unknown! We could all cite lecturers we would consider brilliant, boring, incomprehensible and so on, and yet we expect our students to have equal enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a subject regardless of who is delegated to teach it. In this Department, as in many others, comprehensive objective lists are used in introductory courses to overcome some of these problems but at honours level, while it is relatively easy to define the skills we expect our students to acquire, it is less easy to define the knowledge we expect them to have, as all have different interests, projects, etc. Indeed, it is debatable whether we should even try to impart a specified body of knowledge to our advanced students. While Course Organisers have overall control over what is taught in their courses, it is much more difficult to