RATING THE LECTURER:
A STUDY OF HOW DIFFERENT DISCIPLINES USED COMPARATIVE CRITERIA

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ABSTRACT: Faculty members from medicine, nursing, social work, and law, as well as a group of medical students, tested their own criteria for a good lecturer; each group focused on different aspects of the behaviors sought in the good lecture. The "Dr. Fox" paradigm was the lecture chosen; all groups failed to identify the deliberately incorporated failings. These results were then compared with the results obtained by using a standardized rating form in current use within a major university.

In higher education today, most information is transmitted to students by a lecturer who seeks to synthesize, inspire, and explicate the material to be covered in the course. In the past, European universities evolved a very simple and direct system for evaluating the effectiveness of their lecturers: each lecturer would attract a following who would in turn support him financially, as well as psychologically. The American penchant for administration has produced a university system that has institutionalized and encrusted teaching in a slot that is secondary to other university activities, such as research.

Recently attention has been directed to the instructional function of the university and, with it, a cry for greater teacher accountability has been heard. The university faculty have entered an era of evaluation; the academic future of a professor may come to depend, in large measure, on his students' opinions about his performance as expressed in ratings. These subjective judgments may actually determine whether a person is retained, promoted, or let go.

Therefore it is appropriate to inquire about the basis for these judgments and their validity. We describe one of many designs that might be used to do this. Faculty and students from a variety of disciplines were asked to propose criteria that they would in turn use to rate a lecture; they were then asked to apply the criteria to a videotaped, specifically designed sham lecture.
Research on the lecture method has been somewhat scattered and shows few consistent findings. Nonetheless, by the early 1960s there appeared to be a consensus that all was now known that needed to be known about the lecture method. Educational texts and pamphlets authoritatively described the potentials and limits of the lecture method and outlined the necessary elements that make up a good lecture. Most of the good-lecture prescriptions were cast in common-sense terms and were apparently not open to question. For example, Brown and Thornton say that lectures should be well introduced and organized, delivered in a clear and confident voice, varied in emphasis and intonation, aptly illustrated with cogent examples, accompanied by abundant “eye-contact” with the listeners, appropriately summarized, and so on.¹

However, many of these precepts appear to lack adequate verification.² Hilgard and Bower found that only one of the five studies they reviewed was supportive of the advantages of an ordered sequence of the substance of the lecture.³ The credibility of the lecturer also did not seem to influence the information gained.⁴

McKeachie summarized the findings that related the effects of learning to the numbers of students, saying, “Lectures of large size are not generally inferior to smaller lecture classes if one uses traditional achievement tests as criterion. When other objectives are measured (problem solving and attitudes), large lectures are on somewhat shakier ground. . . .”⁵

Petrie’s list of 29 descriptive items that are presumed to be essential elements of an effective lecture contained only 10 items that could be supported by empirical evidence.⁶ It is not difficult to see that the list, comprised for the most part of common-sense items, is gradually being whittled down.

Despite the current interest in problem solving, student involvement, and the use of more interactive teaching techniques, the lecture continues as the dominant mode of instruction—attacked by some and defended equally vehemently by others.⁷ Good lecturing is viewed as a skill and an art which can be learned and must be practiced. Done well, it is seen as an effective part of a varied teaching program that might include small-group discussion, computer-assisted instruction, and laboratory exercises.

Where then are the criteria for a good lecture, sufficient to allow both peer and student judgments? We describe an effort to study some criteria that were developed by diverse groups of professional faculty and students; we then explored how well these criteria might serve to rate a lecture that was designed to represent a model of educational seduction. As a corollary to this experiment, two university classes were asked to rate the same lecture, using a standard, university rating form. The lecture was a sham developed by Naftulin and his associates.⁸

Until the Naftulin study, there was no published account of research based on a sham lecture. Although there have been studies that used