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Editorial

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To stand before an audience and make them think your thoughts after you is one of the greatest pleasures you can ever know.

Dale Carnegie and Berg Esenwein in The Art of Public Speaking (1915)

First a little background: in 1970 a beautiful and now famous experiment was run where three groups of experts, professionals, and graduate students attended a lecture on mathematical game theory and its application to physical education. Afterwards they were asked to rate the lecturer. Unbeknownst to them, the whole thing was an experiment to see if people could be presented with an entertaining lecture that was in fact full of errors and unrelated humour and still be fooled into rating the lecturer well.

The conclusion was that they could be fooled and the experiment is often referred to as the "Dr Fox Effect" in honour of the actor, Michael Fox, who took on the role of the lecturer, the fictitious Dr Myron L. Fox.

Now, in most stories there are the good guys and the villains, and the two are easily identified. But in what might be called *The Curious Effect of Dr Fox* the story is often presented as consisting of two sets of villains with a third pulling the strings and a fourth helping them in their dastardly work.

Dr Fox, the actor pretending to be a lecturer, is obviously one of the bad guys. He has been hired by some other villains (the experimenters) to deliver a lecture full of nonsense. The material he was presenting was based on a published paper but a third set of villains carefully edited it to remove any semblance of sense and left just a hollow shell.

Dr Fox's task was to present this in an amusing and engaging way, filling in the blanks with jokes, presenting conclusions that did not follow from the material, and generally making a mockery of the whole process. The final – and chief – set of villains was the audience, and it is on these that the real scorn is heaped. Some of it may have been a little unfair, given that they were set up, but here were groups of educated people, some of them educators themselves, who were completely fooled into rating the lecturer favourably.

How could they be so naive? How could they be so easily fooled? What does this say about the serious real-world process of having students rating their teachers?

While it is true that the reviews were generally favourable, and this has been taken ever since to cast doubt on the usefulness of student ratings of lecturers, it is worth observing that the reviews were based on what might be considered carefully constructed questions.

"Did he dwell on the obvious?"
[The majority said no.]

"Did he seem interested in the subject?"
[The majority said yes.]

"Did he use enough examples to clarify his material?"
[The majority said yes.]

"Did he present his material in a well organized form?"
[The majority said yes.]

"Did he put his material across in an interesting way?"
[The majority said yes.]

Each of these could be answered favourably, and probably should have been, given that the actor had been told to be engaging and entertaining. He was. He did use examples, although to be fair, they were not generally relevant to the argument that he appeared to be making at the time. However, the question that is of most interest to the modern educator should be:

"Did he stimulate your thinking?"
[The majority said yes.]

This question should be the key to the whole exercise, but is a hard one to pursue because there is no clue at all to the quality or nature of the thinking. If Carnegie and Esenwein had their wish then the audience should have been seduced from the straight and narrow, but it is unlikely to be as simple as that. The people in the audience were not asked what they had learned. They were not asked if they understood the lecture. They were just asked if it had stimulated their thinking and over 90% said it had. In the real world, away from the villains in their laboratories, this would be seen as a huge vote of confidence in the lecturer.

This experiment, with its obvious and subtle lessons on the dangers of style over substance, demonstrates the importance of not only asking students to rate their lecturers, but also ensuring that those ratings are read in the light of an objective measure of their learning. It is interesting – and worrying – to note how often lecturers are asked to supply the former, with little or no reference to the latter.

David Walker

Note: There are a significant number of articles on the "Dr Fox Effect". The original details are contained in: Naftulin, D.H.; Ware, J.E. Jnr. and Donnelly, F.A. (1973) The Doctor Fox Lecture: A Paradigm of Educational Seduction. Journal of Medical Education, 48, 630-635.