

Editorial

In defence of the lecture(d)

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In my previous editorial, I had reflected on the effects of our 'technological society' and its slavish devotion to ever-increasing efficiency. I had not, however, considered the loss of efficiency that occurs when such technology fails. Producing this issue has been hindered by an email blockade between the university and the Trusts. This was put in place following a cyber-attack on the university's computer systems earlier in the year. Nevertheless, we have made it to press, albeit possibly a little later than scheduled. Perhaps unsurprisingly, as society slowly emerges from the shadow of Covid-19 and lockdown, we have a number of papers describing the effects of the pandemic on various specialties. We also have papers pertinent to undergraduate and postgraduate education and contributions on medical history. A guest editorial commemorates the bicentenary of The Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society, a body that has some shared history with the development of the medical school in Belfast in the person of James Drummond.

Last time I had written about the growing use of e-learning and online meetings and their effects on staff and teacher. I had promised to follow this up with some thoughts on how this affects students. Clearly, they have not had the university experience they had hoped (and paid) for. They have experienced, online lectures and seminars, virtual tutorials, and the wonders of flipped-classrooms. What many of them have not experienced is personal contact. I want to focus my thoughts on that much-maligned teaching medium – the lecture. An article in the Atlantic notes

Commentators frequently single out the lecture as the prototypically old school, obsolete learning technology, in comparison to which newer educational techniques offer interactive, customized, and self-paced learning alternatives.¹

Another wag has described the lecture as

as a process whereby the content of the professor's notebook are transferred by means of a fountain pen to the student's notebook without having passed the mind of either.²

But, to quote 20th century philosopher Joni Mitchell,

Don't it always seem to go

That you don't know what you've got

Till it's gone³

I would like to consider some positive aspects of the lecture. But, rather than focusing on the purely educational points, I want to think about the lecture as a social event. The gathering together of the year for a lecture promotes group identity and bonding. Where else will you see who is in your year group? Many of this year's first year medical students have only 'met' the other members of their case-based learning tutorial group – and that has been online. The lecture also brings the lecturer before their audience: They are more easily questioned and held to account about their material. They can sense the mood and atmosphere of the room and the auditors. Such immediate feedback is important – as anyone who has attempted humour in an online lecture will recognise! They can judge whether the students are receptive or looking puzzled over an inadequately explained point. The lecturer being present also allows for those quiet questions at the end of the talk, the ones that you might not want to voice in front of the whole group on Zoom, in case you feel foolish. A lecture can also be performance art. I imagine whatever medical school you attended, in whatever time period, you and your peers will remember certain lecturers; the larger than life personalities whose lectures were eagerly anticipated rather than endured. When we look back at our time in medical school, these are some of the nostalgic memories that spring to mind. Will the present generation hark back to that amazing Zoom tutorial in the same way? I somehow doubt it. Finally, online teaching can certainly impart information, perhaps it may even be better than a lecture for this, but I doubt that it can convey enthusiasm. A lecture can be inspirational.

I hope that the enthusiasm that has been shown for online learning will be tempered with acknowledgement that it is not the be-all and end-all. The traditional lecture can aid group identity and bonding, help hold the lecturer to account, provide some joy in learning and – if well done- provide inspiration to our students.

REFERENCES

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