

My lectures and what I learned from them

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IT IS A PRIVILEGE of age before, or sometimes after, senility sets in, to reminisce. Perhaps a few long-term memories of some of those who tried to teach me, may be of interest to others in our profession.

It is well over fifty years since I first attended a lecture. I don't recall who gave it or what it was on. I do remember quite vividly most of the staff I met during my first degree course, which was in English, French and History. I'll just mention the main ones. In English, there were Mr Pettet, Miss Hyde and Dr Brown (he had just completed his PhD on 18th Century sermons). They did Modern, Old (Anglo-Saxon) and Middle (Chaucer) English. What I mainly got was an introduction to areas I knew nothing about, but enjoyed. What they actually said has left scarcely a trace. French was Dr Bowley, who was related, I think, to Ted Bowley, the famous Sussex cricketer. He used to play in staff-student matches until his wife decided he was too old and hid his cricket boots. He was a good teacher of language, though he never made me fluent. In literature, which was most of the course, his method was to read the text aloud, occasionally adding comments. The historians were Mr Green, efficient if dry, and Dr Marjorie James, the only one I recall really positively. She was a real enthusiast, and conveyed it. I remember her saying (or at least this is how memory now has it), rather wryly: 'I'm a mediaevalist, and an English mediaevalist at that. So I lecture on modern European history. You should always lecture out of your period. It's very good for one.' I think, *mutatis mutandis* for Psychology, that this is true. Research may make one an expert, but that has been defined as someone who knows more and

more about less and less. Teaching needs a wider perspective. In fact, I found Dr James actually better out of her period. She knew so much about that, and wanted to pack it all in. Out of it, she presented a clearer overview, but with the same zest. It is true that in me she had a willing audience. History has always been a major interest and still is, but she added to it. She was a confirmed smoker and died of it in her prime.

After that I did a teaching course, and came across some psychologists. I heard one lecture by Sir Cyril Burt, though as I've recorded elsewhere I recall little more than a distant small figure in round spectacles. There was a three-line whip on attendance, and a large hall was packed. If Burt is remembered now, it is probably as an alleged fraud who faked data on twins, and, wrongly, as one of the architects of the tripartite system of secondary education. The faking charge is still controversial, but if it is true it relates to the last phase of his long career, when he no longer had an academic post or research resources, and when his views were coming increasingly under attack. He remains, as I later realised, an important historical figure, the first educational psychologist in the country, and a pioneer of the systematic and statistical study of individual differences. Thus having heard him has become more important as time went on. I also heard lectures from Philip Vernon, and of these I do recall something, in the same field of individual differences – intelligence and personality. I also remember slides of him and his wife, enveloped in fur parkas, off to test Eskimos (as they were still called). Cross-cultural studies were one of his major contributions. It was his commitment to sci-

entific method that impressed me, and the way in which this can enable us to distinguish between valid knowledge and poppycock. On a quite different tack, the Principal of Goldsmiths' College where I was, himself a chemist, was an enthusiast for C.G. Jung, and did his best to make us so. I was not converted but I was intrigued, and read more. I do in fact think that Jung had some valuable insights, too often obscured under a mass of verbiage and mysticism.

A little later I embarked on a Psychology degree, part-time at Birkbeck College. The head of department was C.A. Mace, a widely respected figure who, in his early sixties, had the appearance and reputation of a Grand Old Man, one of the few people (possibly the only one) to be President of both the British Psychological and the Aristotelian Societies. He took a traditional Head's role, which I later did myself, of lecturing to first year students. What impressed me was first that I was now coming into touch with the premier league, as it were. Mace had known, and knew, everyone who was anyone in Psychology (admittedly then still a tiny profession). Second, he had that wider perspective I have mentioned, informed by philosophy, history and humanism. Psychology was a new, and better, way of tackling questions that have puzzled thinkers throughout recorded history. Third, he said things that I still remember because they seemed get to the heart of something, for example the essence of various kinds of explanation, or what thinkers of different periods were actually saying, and what its relevance might be now.

Mace said that his preference in choosing staff was for 'choice selected hybrids' (he was a keen gardener). He wanted people who were not just academic psychologists. This too I followed when my chance came, and I think it was a successful policy. I modified it, however, in looking also for good teaching experience.

The Birkbeck staff in my time were certainly varied, but with two exceptions teaching was not high among their skills. One of the two was Thelma Veness, a former teacher

and herself a Birkbeck graduate, a social psychologist. She had a good academic grasp, was an effective teacher, and had a warm and interested approach with students. She suffered the same fate as Marjorie James. The other was Brian Foss, unusually MA Oxon and Cantab, and later my PhD supervisor. His strength, as I see it now, was intellectual grasp and enthusiasm. He always seemed to be abreast of new advances, and gave stimulating and exciting lectures. Though full of ideas, he lacked the persistence to be a productive researcher. Alec Rodger was a leader in occupational psychology, and besides, it was said, 'had a finger in every (psychological) pie that was ever baked'. He conveyed to me some basic principles of assessing people. His manner, possibly deliberately to add gravitas, was slow and marked by endless use of 'er', which seemed almost a word in its own right. Harry Hurwitz was a Berliner via South Africa, and a Skinnerian. In his first lecture he announced that he had just returned from America, and on the way had lost all his lecture notes. He made no attempt to replace them but simply reminisced. From him I learned nothing, though I know at least one other student found him stimulating. Which 'simply goes to prove, if proof were needed', to quote that now forgotten humourist, 'Beachcomber' of the Daily Express. John Brown researched immediate memory, and taught what would now be called cognitive psychology. I remember only one thing that he said, that if you want to count in seconds, you can do it by repeating the word 'Mississippi' after each number – 'one-Mississippi, two-Mississippi' and so on. And I recall him nearly falling off the dais when stepping back from the blackboard. Of such is higher education composed. The philosopher Richard Peters taught history and philosophy of psychology, nowadays too often neglected, in my view. This came as a salutary shock, as he laid bare the assumptions underlying what we had largely taken in without much question. Like Mace, he also showed how thinkers of different times had tackled basically the same questions. I

would still urge students to look at some of his writing. These were the core. After Mace retired in 1961 all gained chairs, and all are now deceased.

Others came and went. I'll mention four without naming them. A, a behavioural geneticist, when I was sitting at the back as a postgraduate demonstrator, answered a student question by saying 'You don't need to know that' (possibly because he did not himself). This I felt, and still do, exemplifies bad teaching. B was a rather brilliant young man, straight from Oxbridge, an artist as well, who was lumbered with teaching child development to a class largely of parents and/or school teachers. It was embarrassing. And C also did child development. Her method of lecturing involved a box of record cards, each with a summary of an experiment. These she took out and read rapidly in turn. I found it impossible even to take notes, and I was a very conscientious note-taker. D was a sociologist, and a very popular lecturer, but to me typifies 'Dr Fox', one who can fascinate his audience while saying very little.

More memorable were some distinguished visitors. Birkbeck had a policy of inviting them to give a series of three lectures. E.G. Boring, the great chronicler of Psychology, belied his name, being benign and jolly. He had been a student of Edward Bradford Titchener, himself a student of Wilhelm Wundt, a tenuous link to the very first psychological laboratory at Leipzig in 1879. Even more notable was Wolfgang Köhler, one of the original Gestalt psychologists, famous for his study of the intelligence of apes on the island of Tenerife. 'This historic man', Brian Foss rightly called him in urging us to attend. He talked about physiological isomorphism, the theory that the brain replicates the pattern of the external environment. He did not know it was about to be debunked by more precise studies. From a little later period, others I heard on one or more occasions included the ethologist Niko Tinbergen, B.F. Skinner, A.H. Maslow (also a student of Titchener, whom he apparently found tedious), A.R. Luria the outstanding

Russian psychologist, and the philosopher Karl Popper. Luria and Tinbergen impressed me by their ability to make spontaneous jokes in English, not their native language, though of the content I recall nothing. In the middle of a (public) lecture by Tinbergen, I do recall, someone at the back suddenly shouted, 'Shall we sing now?' With great presence of mind, I thought, Tinbergen said, 'Not yet', and the would-be singer subsided. At the end he said we might sing, if we wished, but we didn't. Karl Popper was much in demand and his lectures were sometimes taken by an assistant, whom I actually found more enlightening than the great man. H.J. Eysenck, just a bit later still, had an eminently lucid presentation, in which complex experiments invariably turned out to support his predictions.

As a postgraduate I was introduced, briefly, to Sir Frederick Bartlett. Like Burt, Boring and Köhler, he was born in the 1880s, and was probably the most respected British psychologist of any period, with a broad eclectic, non-dogmatic approach, and a fore-runner of social and cognitive psychology when Behaviourism was dominant. He had a great influence in shaping Psychology when it expanded from the sixties on, through his former students, many of whom headed new departments. I think myself that this influence was not an unmixed blessing, but that is another story. There were others, perhaps less well known now, such as W.K. Estes the learning theorist, who seemed to me almost robotic in his delivery, and in complete contrast the radical psychotherapist R.D. Laing, dressed in Left Bank existentialist black. The value of these one-way contacts to me lay in their being among the top practitioners of my discipline. Though no musician myself, I have felt the same with some outstanding musicians, classical and traditional. Dr Reg Hall, himself one of the latter, has spoken of 'heroes within touching distance', and I think this an important experience for students.

I may have given the impression that I retain very little of what I was taught. This is correct, as far as detail is concerned. I got

enough to get through the exams. In those days the first degree rested almost entirely on one marathon sequence of papers at the end of the course. I used my many volumes of notes when I came to lecture, though they soon needed updating. I eventually sold them in one of the periodic book sales that I held in aid of Save the Children. What the purchasers made of them I don't know. Of the content I could now tell you little, partly of course because it has nearly all been superseded by new stuff. I did not get an overview of Psychology as I have come to see it since, far broader than the series of specialized topics that were taught. I think a first degree should attempt at least something of a wider perspective, and some integration of the widely differing approaches to human behaviour. I suspect that the current fad of modules may make this even more difficult.

What then did I learn from my lecturers? As I have already hinted, from the better ones, it was more intangible: attitudes, interests, enthusiasms, principles. These may well be more long-lasting. A student of mine, George Butterworth, when he had become a distinguished professor, once told me he remembered me saying in an introductory lecture, 'I've been studying Psychology for twenty years, and I hope to understand it soon'. I had forgotten this. He added, 'I thought you were mad. But now I see what you meant'. I still enjoy history and literature, and retain quite a lot of what I have read over fifty or sixty years (I can even quote a line or two of Anglo-Saxon). I would not have done so without the guidance and inspiration of at least some teachers. Psychology came across as something new, important and exciting, and I felt privileged to be part of it. And I still see it in that way. The elder statesmen I heard increased that, and many tied in with my historical bent. From an intellectual point of view, one was being presented with the cutting edge of

thinking and research, or so I felt. From a teaching point of view, I learned some things not to do, such as snubbing students, putting too much or too little into lectures, poor presentation, and so on. I don't say I always profited from these lessons, but I should have done. More important, I learned what I subsequently found is supported by experience and research, that the informal is as necessary as the formal. Teachers and students need to interact spontaneously, and that needs time and opportunity. At Birkbeck, students dashed in from work and after lectures hurried home. But some staff would be available in breaks, or afterwards in a pub, or at social occasions. This too I emulated and did my best to provide for, and in the opinion of at least some students it worked. Good teaching is labour intensive, in my view, and always will be. Content is vital, but it is genuine interest, in the subject and in the student, plus the ability to convey these, that mark the good teacher. Content changes quite rapidly. Lecturers want to, and should, present what is up to date. But lasting value comes I think from discussing basic issues, trying to distinguish the important from the trivial, putting it all in context (historical, conceptual, cultural, ethical, political and more), the principles of methodology, and, ambitiously, what it is all for.

If anyone is interested in psychological reminiscences, the Society at its London office is building an archive of such things, with the title of the Oral History Project (contact Mike Maskill at the Society). I contributed in 2008, and also put what I had to say in writing. This can be had by e-mail from me.

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