

*Best Practices for Medical Educators*, ISBN 1-4225-0049-7

Stephen M. Stahl & Richard L. Davis

“Teaching”, a recent editorial in the *British Medical Journal* notes, “is a central function of clinical practice”; and that “good teachers directly improve patient care”. But the sad truth is that teaching takes a back seat to research and clinical care in universities. The authors of this book put this in an even more colorful language: “In medicine, research flies first class, clinical care and administration fly coach and education is just cargo”. One often hears the old adage that crystallizes the attitude toward teaching: Those who can, do; those who cannot, teach. Little surprise then, that we teach our students research methodology but not how to become effective teachers.

It should, however, be pointed out that in medical schools, most teaching occurs not in classrooms but at bed side; where trainees serve as apprentices and observe senior clinicians practice their craft. Some students then supplement this experience with literature searches and occasionally read a chapter or two from the recommended textbooks; and much of this information can be accessed from hand held computers. True, lectures do have a role in medical education; but as the authors themselves point out, students now a days study by themselves and occasionally view recorded lectures, at their convenience, in their homes or in libraries. Unfortunately, this book does not address bedside teaching or individual or group supervision in medical schools; the emphasis is on lectures and guidance about becoming effective communicators through lectures.

And speaking of lectures, who better to guide us in becoming effective lecturers than Stephen Stahl and his co-author Richard Davis, whose names on marquees are guaranteed to attract large crowds to their lectures? Stahl is the author of several books on psychopharmacology that one is apt to find on every practitioner’s bookshelf these days. It is fair to say that these authors have the ability to make sense to average listeners of complex mechanisms of drug actions and their efficacy. They have mastered the art of communicating to wider audiences. What is unique in their style of teaching is the use of visual aids to buttress the points, and above all to hold the attention of

listeners. Most readers will find those chapters devoted to use of such aids particularly useful. Predictably, this exposes one to criticism that these maneuvers emphasize style over substance. Most of us can recall sitting through a lecture where arcane data was presented without visual aids, only to discover toward the end that one’s mind had wandered far afield and little of the substance was absorbed. Clearly, both style and substance are important.

The authors attempt to ‘discuss how to communicate the science by using the science of communication’; and here the authors have succeeded. The book is replete with references to the work of several eminent scientists of communication. But science does not always support the notion that science of communication can be used to better outcomes. For example, consider the frequently cited study showing that a few seconds exposure to videos without sound of teachers is a good predictor of how the lecturer will be evaluated. Furthermore, student ratings themselves have come under considerable scrutiny in the past few years: there is growing suspicion that they are not as reliable as they were made out to be.

And finally, there is the problem of individual styles of learning. How are we to calibrate our lectures or supervision to address every student’s idiosyncratic style of learning? One wonders if the method one adopts to teach the freshman class is the one that would be appropriate for senior practitioners attending a continuing education session.

This book should be mandated reading for all those aspiring to be in academic medicine. Having read the book though, it is a matter of guesswork as to who among us will actually adopt some of the suggestions of the authors. Many senior members of the faculty – and this reviewer counts himself as one of them – find it difficult to transition from the blackboard and chalk to slides; and then the transition to PowerPoint slides is even more difficult. One can only hope that this book will make the transition smoother for persons like me.

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