

A sorry parade

I still remember the introduction of the overhead projector on campus. Its fortunately rare users solicited general scorn and contempt, because the gadget was considered a crutch for incompetent speakers that could not deliver a good lecture on their own. The crutch was perhaps okay for presentations by computer salesmen, but for lectures by scientists it was considered profoundly inappropriate. This condemnation of the gadget was only vindicated by its most common defence, viz. that it enabled the speaker to show much more than he would be able to do with chalk and blackboard.

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In the early 70s, I performed once or twice in London under the auspices of "Infotech". I remember it because it was my introduction to the commercial lecturing circuit (and its only thinly disguised fraud). Infotech specialized in very expensive "State of the Art Reports" and conferences where, for large amounts of money, the lesser mortals could listen to the words of wisdom of the semigods. Telling you, that Infotech-speak for attendees or participants was "delegates", should suffice to characterize the organiza-

tion. In my innocence I was shocked by the Company's instructions to speakers; one thing was very clear: we had to treat the delegates as morons. (They were treated as morons and did not rebel, so Infotech was probably right, but that is here beside the point.) We were actually instructed to be quite offensive, as we were instructed to be condescendingly repetitive: we were not allowed just to give our lecture, we had first to announce what we were going to say, then we were allowed to say it, and finally we had to summarize what we had said. Needless to say, the whole performance was a travesty of what it pretended to be.

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I was reminded of the above by our yearly spring ordeal, the Parade of the Faculty Candidates. Apart from minor differences in vocabulary, they essentially give the same presentation.

Not having the faintest notion how to give a decent lecture, these poor kids present a show of their foils instead, a show to which they add little more than gesticulation and a reading aloud of key sentence fragments. They sometimes try to say something that is not on their

foils, but such effort is courting disaster since they have never been taught to speak in complete, unambiguous sentences.

For the structure of their presentations, they religiously adhere to the Infotech pattern. At the end they complete their disqualification by announcing for the years to come their proposal to do more of the same. One of them had a special way of insulting his audience: for a small section of his talk he felt obliged to apologize in advance because of its "academic content".

This is not the end of the tragedy. After these pitiful performances, the Department, true to the American tradition of ambivalence towards competence, declares almost all candidates "above the hiring threshold", but God help our students!

P.S. Sorry, but I had to get this out of my system.

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