

Dead lectures

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There seems to be general agreement that as far as traditional university lectures go, ‘live’ lectures are better than recorded lectures. I believe there are two main reasons for this opinion. First, lectures have always been ‘live’, so they must be better that way. Second, if lectures are not in fact better ‘live’, then those who pay for (or sell) lectures will need to do some serious thinking about whether they are getting (or giving) good value for the money. Better not to think about it!

Are ‘live’ lectures really better? I will argue that ‘live’ lectures are not only worse than recorded lectures—they’re also deader. There is nothing particularly original in what I’m going to say. I am not the first to notice that the professor wears no clothes.

To begin with, what exactly is a ‘live’ lecture? If Prof. Jones is there in the flesh, speaking without a microphone, and I’m sitting in the front row, awake, facing front, then I am undoubtedly at a ‘live’ lecture. Now, what if Prof. Jones’s class is oversubscribed, and I am listening to her amplified voice from the back of a huge lecture hall? What if I am watching on closed circuit TV in an overflow room next door, or across campus? What if I had to miss class, and I’m catching up by watching the tape later that day at the media center? What if I had the quarter off when Jones taught the course, so I’m watching the tapes as part of a reading course I’m doing with Assistant Prof. Smith? What if Jones gave the course years ago, but has now retired, or died? What if Jones could never be coaxed to spend a quarter at my

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university, but we've managed to borrow the tapes from Harvard? At what point did the lecture cease to be 'live'?

One obvious answer is that the lecture is 'live' as long as I retain the opportunity to interject a question or a comment. In this case, then, the performance was never 'live', because it is universally known that Jones will brook no interruptions. Years ago, one unfortunate student made the mistake of asking her to clarify a point, and it was the most embarrassing experience of his life. No one has tried it since.

Another plausible answer is that the lecture is 'live' just as long as I have no opportunity to interrupt it. From this point of view, it is 'live' if you are watching it 'as it happens'. I think this is probably what most people would settle upon as the definition of a 'live' lecture. But notice that where our first attempt at a definition tried to characterize a 'live' lecture as one that we could interrupt, a 'live' lecture now appears as precisely one that we *can't* interrupt.

When I skip the 'live' lecture and go to watch it in the media lab, if I suddenly discover that I'm so hungry that I can no longer focus on Jones's splendid insights, I can go grab a snack without missing a single word. While watching the lecture, I can pause if my brain needs an extra moment to absorb one of Jones's subtler points, or if I want some time to think things out for myself before Jones spoils it by giving her version of the answer. If Jones makes points that bear repeating, I can repeat them. I can go back and review earlier parts of the lecture, or parts of earlier lectures, which may take on new significance in light of what was said afterwards. I can skip ahead whenever I feel Jones is belaboring the obvious. (She is doing so because others will not find it obvious, just as I have struggled with parts that others find obvious). And I can even ask questions, if I bring along some fellow students, or my TA, or Assistant Prof. Smith. We can watch together, pausing to ask each other questions, or to compare our understanding of sticky points.

In fact, maybe Assistant Professor Smith will decide to show the Jones tapes in his own class, letting the class interrupt with questions, or interjecting his own. This way Jones does the lecturing, while Smith does the *teaching*. Of course this will have drawbacks over the media center, since as a student sitting in Smith's class I won't be as free to control how the tape is used. But the tape will still be available in the media center if I want to go down there and watch it on my own.

Better yet, the recorded lectures will be available on the Internet. That

way I can watch them on the computer in my room. I won't need to march around to lectures, or haul myself down to the media center. This is good, because maybe I'm not a college student at all: Maybe I'm a doctor in Alaska, or a high school teacher in Saint Louis, or an out-of-work actress in New York City, or a junior high school student in San Diego, who just happens to get interested in what Jones has to say. I won't have classmates to confer with, but if I need people to think with, maybe I can make contact with my alter egos over the net (postings to alt.jones, or whatever). Of course I will not have access to Assistant Professor Smith, but after all we aren't claiming here that the university is totally irrelevant, right? Only that it is irrelevant to the extent that it is in the business of providing 'live' lectures.

There are some other objections to the demise of the 'live' lecture that merit at least passing mention.

Q: What about that electric feeling that you get just knowing that Jones is there, right now?

A: The fact is that I get a buzz from Jones on tape that I never get from Smith, no matter how 'live' Smith may be. And if watching Jones on tape doesn't give me quite the high that watching her 'live' would have, it's a better way to learn what she has to say, for reasons that we've already been through.

Q: What about the fact that not all lecturers are as inhospitable to questions as Jones, and while maybe only a handful of students actually ask questions, the questions they ask are the ones that are on everyone's mind?

A: Those questions that are on everyone's mind will be right there, along with the answers, on the tape.

Q: How can recorded lectures compare with TV when it comes to production values? Aren't today's students used to a quality of video production that will make your recorded lectures look like America's Funniest Home Movies?

A: Obviously, we can't hope to compete with TV—nor do we wish to. Those who need great video to keep up their interest can stick with MTV. They are not the students we have in mind.

Q: If video lectures are so great, why haven't they caught on already?

A: I think the answers to this one are pretty obvious, given a little thought, and I'd prefer to leave this as a puzzler for those who see it as a genuine issue.

Enough objections. The fact is that after a while, answering objections to the migration of lectures to video becomes as pointless as refuting arguments about why machines can't fly, or why machines can't think. Once

recorded lectures are freely available, ‘live’ lectures will take their rightful place alongside roll-your-own cigarettes.

There is one other point worth making. This concerns not the desirability of recording lectures, but the feasibility. What makes us think that the redoubtable Prof. Jones will cast her pearls before those who haven’t paid admission? After all, we aren’t expecting Assistant Prof. Smith to undercut his own product by giving it away for nothing. Why should Jones?

Well, for one thing, Jones is probably convinced that her insights are uniquely important to the future of humanity, and will consider it her duty to cast them as widely as possible. Besides which, Jones is getting on in years. At this stage of her life and career, she doesn’t need money: She needs to know that her insights will live forever, and that her approach to the subject will just as widely available to future generations as those of her arch-colleague, Prof. Cojones. Smith, whose insights are a commodity, wisely sells them dear. Jones, whose insights are priceless, wisely gives them away.

Regarding the rivalry between Profs. Jones and Cojones, please note that while those who attend Jones’s ‘live’ lectures may feel Jones’s influence as predominant, those who meet the lectures on the net should have the option of contrasting Jones’s approach with that of Cojones, or any of 10 other scholars whose lectures are available there. If Jones hopes to prevail over Cojones, it must be by dint of the superiority of her ideas or her presentation, rather than by a monopoly on her students’ attention. Of course, people learn in different ways. It may be that Cojones has something to say to students that Jones cannot reach. This is particularly important in cases where Jones and Cojones are trying to get the same point across (for instance, the ‘chain rule’), rather than defending competing ideas.

All this is to point out the paradoxical fact that what is called a ‘live’ lecture is ‘live’ exactly to the extent that it can’t be interacted with. As far as the relationship with the audience goes, a lecture is ‘live’ precisely if it is dead.