

## **Are lectures obsolete? By R.K. N\*r\*yan**

*Author:* Terence Rajivan Edward

*Abstract.* This paper responds to the question of whether the Internet has made lectures obsolete and Matthew Pickles' investigation of why lectures persist. It is written as a pastiche of R.K. Narayan, about whom a somewhat parallel question is probably asked. Pickles refers to a logic lecturer so dry people went swimming, and a pastiche approach is an alternative.

The minor philosopher was approaching the door to his apartment building. A tall black man in army-style clothing was holding a plant and trying to use the intercom system.

“Are you from the army? Are you here to invade?” the minor philosopher asked the black man. The black man smiled a little. The minor philosopher used his key to open the door and the black man followed him into the reception area. “You’ve invaded. I’ve failed. I’ve failed to protect Ukraine!” said the minor philosophy, enjoying his own current affairs humour. The black man laughed. The minor philosopher gazed at the man’s grey beard. Suddenly he appeared Tolstoy-like. But was not Tolstoy a moralizing bore who was forever lecturing people? This was a laughing Tolstoy. “I must retreat to my base,” said the minor philosopher and climbed the stairs to his apartment feeling slightly intimidated.

He did not pay for the Internet, but suddenly he wanted to use it. Letters advertising a broadband company were regularly posted into his mailbox. Nowadays they were using some rhyme, along the lines of “Fit for a gigabit.” British Telecom would let him use the Internet briefly if he paid, but it had not been working since Easter so he had sat outside the nearby

hospital one evening and used their free Internet. Suddenly BT was working. How long would it last for? “Fit for a little bit,” thought the minor philosopher.

There was an argument he had heard on various occasions: lectures were obsolete. Probably people had been making it since the invention of the computer. Certainly he had encountered the claim that essayists would be replaced by automatons in nineteenth century literature. He paid for one hour’s access and searched the Internet for information. The first hit using a popular search engine was an article by Matt Pickles of the British Broadcasting Corporation. Matt must be short for Matthew. Matthew Pickles – that was a suitable name for a writer employed at such an organization. The minor philosopher pictured pickles in jars, fine English pickles. What did Pickles have to say? Opening section: “many predicted that digital technology would have killed off the lecture by now. Why would you want to sit through someone telling you something, when so much more information is available at your fingertips whenever you want it?” Yes, it’s surely a crime for lectures continue and yet they do! Who or what is to blame for this?

Next section, entitled “Attention deficit”: “It’s not because it’s particularly effective. Research shows that students remember as little as 10% of their lectures just days afterwards.” Pickles was like an old-fashioned English detective, ruling out the suspects. But wait, what’s this? “A Harvard study in 2014...” What was Harvard doing here? What happened to the great British universities of Oxford and Cambridge?

Next section, “Research status,” and more problems. Pickles had managed to rule out one suspect – “Lectures are criminally effective” – what was the suspect being considered in this section? It was unclear. How could the British Broadcasting Corporation do this to readers? The structure became ever more unclear as the minor philosopher proceeded. What

happened to that great structure that was emerging: introduce the puzzle of why lectures continue, a section ruling out one answer, then a section ruling out a second, and so on, followed by “And this is the answer...”? Instead, in the midst of discussing alternatives to lecturing, Pickles says, “Another practical reason for the lecture’s durability is that it is a relatively cheap way of giving students contact time with an academic.” Where was reason number one? The minor philosopher suddenly felt he would like a pleasant well-ordered lecture on the topic, accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation!

That got him thinking. Perhaps lectures were not so bad. Consider a standard topic: Pierre Bourdieu’s explanations of inequality, with his four kinds of capital – economic, social, cultural, and symbolic. When he had taught for the anthropology department, it always came up. But symbolic capital, what was that? Should that even be there? It is not money or property but titles and honours and certificates conferred upon a person or institution. There is a criticism of the notion over here, buried in one book, and a criticism over there in another book, as long as a Russian novel, and a third criticism somewhere else. No one had gathered together all the criticisms in a neat document online. There were thousands of other examples like this, across the disciplines. Even if university lectures were more expensive to run, the lecturer could continue, because he (or she) has the information in summary form, in a neat list – in many cases the Internet does not and producing that summary is hard.<sup>1</sup> To put the lecturers out of business: why not? But it would be a very demanding project indeed.

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<sup>1</sup> [Probably one should distinguish between subtly different cases, such as the information is all online and in accessibly written documents but scattered; the information is all online but scattered and also not all in accessibly written documents; the information is not all online. It seems to me that mild online scattering is something that in itself can keep a lecturer “in business,” even if the first possibility described obtains, making summarizing easier, while further obstacles enhance the lecturer’s prospects – an example of mild scattering being if all the criticisms of Narayan are in twenty online documents with “Narayan” in the title.]

The minor philosopher began to wonder whether there are people in very respectable jobs, that one has to be very clever to do, who are deeply puzzled by the society they live in. Why does this institution exist and why does that practice continue? How long could such a society hang together for, he wondered.

## **Reference**

Pickles, M. 2016. Shouldn't lectures be obsolete by now? Available at:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-38058477>