

Embracing the slow: on the deliciousness of pedagogical conversations

Virendra Mistry

Teaching and Learning Academy, Liverpool John Moores University, Exchange Office, Tithebarn Street, Liverpool L2 2QP, UK

Contact: v.mistry@ljmu.ac.uk

Fast is busy, controlling, aggressive, hurried, analytical, stressed, superficial, impatient, active, quantity-over-quality. Slow is the opposite: calm, careful, receptive, still, intuitive, unhurried, patient, reflective, quality-over-quantity. It is about making real and meaningful connections – with people, culture, work, food, everything.

Carl Honoré – *In Praise of Slow*

Rome 1986: a resilient group of activists assemble at the historic Piazza di Spagna and, each ‘armed’ with a bowl of *penne*, vent their displeasure at the opening of a McDonald’s. It was a seminal moment that triggered the birth of the Slow Food movement which by 1989, spearheaded by the charismatic Carlo Petrini (2001), was embedded as a vibrant global and grassroots programme to counter both fast food and ‘fast life’. According to *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Social and Political Movements* (2013), Slow Food – whose symbol is a snail - has amassed supporters in 150 countries, determined to link the pleasure of good food with a commitment to their

community and the environment. However, in an age of speed walking, speed reading, and speed dating, or ‘living in the fast lane’ and ‘hurrying through life’, slowing down may not come so naturally to many. Especially if we consider that ‘walking’, ‘reading’ and ‘dating’ are moments that should be imbibed and enjoyed rather than as activities to be speeded up.



Of course, being slow and deliberate has its compensations. Slowness in human relations, cultivating camaraderie and togetherness to forge understanding is, as journalist Carl Honoré (2005) has commented, necessary for humanity’s

growth. Being fast therefore risks neglecting some of life's significant gifts. Taking time may make one more conscious and appreciative of the incremental changes, such as subtle seasonal fluctuations, shifts in birdsong – perhaps a deeper shift in the mind? However, as Honoré has argued, a 'cultural taboo' has been erected against slowing down: slow has become a byword for laziness, or even giving up. How often do we hear of this in the workplace?

When evaluating teaching, many will appreciate the value of taking time to talk with learners and to understand them: to engage in qualitative enquiry, or even to step back, to be patient, and to examine trends over a long period, rather than to arrive at quick conclusions. There can be nothing so fulfilling as considering practice from these perspectives. The conclusions we reach can enrich our discussions with colleagues – offer food for thought - as we compare notes or even build alliances and collaborate, to spark further that intellectual curiosity. Some may allow their ideas to marinade further, whilst carefully combing other research, and committing that reflection in papers to peer-reviewed journals. All this takes time, space, commitment and resources.

However, this may be difficult to achieve in a higher education system that seeks greater standardisation, and where power is transferred from academics to managers: where the 'bottom line' eclipses pedagogical and intellectual concerns (Berg and Seeber, 2017). Holligan and Humes (2007) go a step further and, in an indictment on the nature and context of applied research in education in the UK, strongly assert that the integrity of knowledge is being corrupted

through an engagement with – and capture by – particular academic and non-academic tribes. These tribes may have political interests that lie beyond academia in the economic and political spheres and, therefore, “pose threats to objectivity and independence” (p. 24).

At a time when metrics are proving difficult and contentious in their depiction of 'teaching excellence' in England, might there be a crumb of hope from Slow Food? It is easy to be rueful about our lack of speed and mobility, to grow nostalgic about how good teaching might have been – maybe it is a good time to embrace principles and values that can help anchor good pedagogic research practice? Consider then the following 'education manifesto' presented by Slow Food Italia at their 7th National Congress in 2010 (emphasis in original, oh, and do please take your time when reading it!):

Education for Slow Food

- Is about **pleasure**, a light and convivial occasion to feel good and enjoy ourselves
- Teaches the values of **slowness** and respect for our own and other people's rhythms
- Is learning by doing, because hands-on **experience** increases and strengthens educational outcomes
- Values the **diversity** of cultures, knowledge, skills and opinions
- Recognises everyone's needs, and stimulates the interests and **motivation** of each individual
- Approaches topics in their **complexity**, favouring a multi-disciplinary approach
- Means taking **time** to understand, internalise and elaborate one's own vision

- Encourages **participation** by facilitating dialogue, self-expression, **cooperation**, listening and mutual acceptance
- Is a personal journey that involves **cognitive, experiential** and **emotional** dimensions
- Is nourished by its own **context**, giving value to memory, knowledge and local cultures
- Facilitates exchange among local networks, reinforcing the sense of **community**
- Develops **self-awareness** of everyone's own role and actions
- Stimulates **curiosity** and trains intuition and **critical thinking**
- Promotes **change** generating new and responsible thoughts and behaviours.

Do these ideas strike a chord with you? I trust that they do. In fact, they link very neatly to each of this issue's papers. The first of the viewpoint pieces presented relates to the Walkabout Weeks introduced at LJMU's Faculty of Science. Phil Denton offers an overview of an informal peer observation initiative where teachers invited their colleagues to watch them in action. The Walkabout Weeks enabled staff to develop their 'significant networks' – promoting collegiality and a better understanding of the context of practice. I think the intimate setting of the observation at a disciplinary level is very much like, as Slow Food reminds us, a meal at home: feeding our imaginations and educating our senses.

Continuing the theme of social bonding, the Roma are the focus of Helen Collins' and Patricia Harrison's paper. Their work with the Liverpool Roma Employability Network (LREN) represents an important step in facilitating the exchange of information

between numerous local groups, whilst enabling the Roma community to develop their professional and social contacts. Applying Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social capital, these are the conditions under which individuals enjoy access to face-to-face networks of people. As explained by Collins and Harrison for the Roma, who exhibit very strong family ties, social capital can be bonding and encourage social mobility.

The final viewpoint paper represents a significant milestone for *Innovations in Practice*; our very first contribution from John Moores Students' Union (JMSU). Howisha Penny offers a personal perspective as a black, female elected officer on what has been a significant academic year for JMSU and the sector as a whole. On the latter, the Commission for Equality and Human Rights launched their inquiry on racial harassment on the campus in December 2018 and in May 2019, Universities UK and the National Union of Students published their report on the black attainment gap. JMSU has played a significant role in helping many BAME students make the most of their university experience and, as explained in the paper, new representative roles and structures reflecting the various liberation groups (including a BAME Equality Rep) have been introduced in 2018/19, injecting a different dynamic in JMSU-LJMU conversations.

The Research in Practice paper is an essay that started life as a review of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSoTL) conference, which took place in Bergen, Norway in October 2018. The paper was inspired by a keynote presentation by Torgny Roxå, who reflected on SoTL as a

social movement. In these times of change, as the sector seeks to understand what teaching excellence is, is it time to think about things more organically – to develop networks and communities – to reduce the fear of metrics and embed more enduring change? As the REF and TEF (and KEF) vie for our attention, might it be worthwhile distinguishing between ‘prestige’ and ‘reputation’ as a means of defining our teaching-research cultures and communities? This, of course, brings us neatly back to Slow Food, and how we may wish to encourage debate and discussion in this area.

Three book reviews are included in this issue, by Jack Tillotson (on research-informed teaching), Gwenda Mynott (on personal tutoring) and Jim Turner (on learning in the digital age). Finally, I wish to offer my sincerest thanks to all who have contributed to the journal, our authors and reviewers – and, in particular, to Cath Dishman (LJMU Library Services) for offering technical guidance and for her unfailing support.

I hope you enjoy this issue and, if you do wish to submit a paper, or offer a review, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Virendra Mistry

Editor, *Innovations in Practice*

June 2019

#LJMUIiP

References

- Berg, M. and Seeber, B.K. (2017) *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press
- Holligan, C. and Hume, W. (2007) ‘Critical reflections on the orthodoxies of UK applied research in education’, *Research Intelligence*, 101: 24-26
- Honoré, C. (2005) *In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed*, London: Orion Books
- Petrini, C. (2001) *Slow Food: The Case for Taste* (translated by W. McCuaig), New York: Columbia University Press

Image: ‘Shell’ is licenced under CC0 1.0