

The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy

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Abstract:

This paper explores the principles of the Slow Movement to counter work-stress among university and college teachers. We believe that a Slow approach to teaching and learning may be the most effective way to counter the erosion of humanistic education by the corporate ethos of consumerism, efficiency, accountability, and standardisation. We explore the principles of Slow not only to counter the consumer model of education but also to foster better teachers and learners. It is well-documented that changes in academic work have created significant stress among academic teachers (Catano, Francis, Haines, Kirpalani, Shannon, Stringer, & Lozanksi, 2007; Miller, Buckholdt & Shaw, 2008), and students (Dabney, 1995; Brown & Ralph 1999; Rowbotham and Julian 2006), but what requires further attention is the link between the corporate reliance on efficiency and the problem of lack of time in learning and teaching. Corporatisation has sped up the clock. The Slow Movement—originating in the Slow Food Movement—has gained recognition as a way to resist both globalization and the frantic pace of contemporary life. While slowness has been lauded in architecture, business, urban life and interpersonal relations, among others, it has yet to be applied to academia. Yet, if there is one sector of society that should be cultivating deep thought in themselves and others it is academic teachers. The consumerism that has taken hold in higher education propels the belief that time is money, resulting in superficial learning (Coté & Allahar, 2011b; Readings, 1996). Perhaps the most damaging effect of corporatisation in the universities is that individual educators feel paralysed in the face of overwhelming odds. Our focus on individuals and their own professional practice is conceived as political resistance to corporatisation.

Key Words:

Slow movement; Corporatization; Stress; Student learning.

Introduction

Studies document that academic stress is on the rise (Catano et al., 2007; Miller et al. 2008). Our project explores the principles of the Slow Movement to counter work-stress among university and college teachers. When we look at studies of academic stress, we are struck by how many apparently diverse situations identified as sources of stress are actually about lack of time. It seems to us that time poverty is directly connected to what has been called the “McDonaldization” of higher education (Parker & Jarry, 1995, 321). We believe not only that corporatisation has sped up the clock, but also that a Slow approach to teaching and learning may be the most effective way to counter the erosion of humanistic education by corporate culture. We explore the principles of Slow not only to counter the consumer model of education but also to foster better teachers and learners.

Our project began in a series of telephone conversations about coping with our academic jobs. Not reading an email sent by the department chair at 10:45 pm until the next morning led one of us into paroxysms of guilt about not working hard enough. Being asked to vet essays for a prize within ten days (without advance notice) prompted a discussion between us about when it is OK to say “no.” Reading Carl Honoré’s *In Praise of Slow* (2004) turned our desire to be less harried into a philosophical and political commitment to shift our sense of time. Honoré’s remarkable book documents the benefits of extending the principles of Slow Food to other areas of our lives: architecture, medicine, sex, work, leisure, and child-rearing. Although education is noticeably absent, Honoré’s inclusion of a quotation from Dean Harry Lewis’s open letter to Harvard undergraduates entitled “Slow Down: Getting More out of Harvard by Doing Less” left us hungering for more (Honoré, 2004, p. 246-248). If there is one sector of society that should be slowing down in order to cultivate deep thought in themselves and others it is academic teachers. Our telephone conversations became more upbeat as we generated strategies to alleviate our time stress which ranged from checking email at noon to rethinking what we mean by coverage in a course. One day, one of us laughingly observed, “We should write this down,” and the other responded, “We *should* write this down.”

While we were unflaggingly playing therapist with each other, we came across the first-ever national survey on occupational stress conducted by the Canadian Association of University Teachers in 2007 (Catano et al., 2007). The results are based on 1470 participants from 56 universities across Canada and concur with previous studies in the UK and Australia (Catano et al., 2007, p.3). Ironically, it was liberating to learn that “stress in academia exceeds that found in the general population” (Catano et. al., 2007, p. 7). We realized we were not alone. Particularly compelling was the significant impact of stress on psychological and physical health: 13 % of respondents “reported...psychological strain” and 22% “reported...physical health” symptoms, and many reported use of medication (Catano et al., 2007, p. 38). While there were differences according to gender, age, faculty rank, employment status, and language, the conclusion is that “stress levels...are very high” overall. It turns out we were not constitutionally weak or not cut out for the profession. We shifted our thinking from “what is wrong with us?” to “what is wrong with the academic system?” to “what can we do about it in this context?” We did not make this shift overnight. Academic training

includes induction into a culture of scholarly individualism and intellectual mastery; to admit to struggle undermines our professorial identity. The academy as a whole has been reticent in acknowledging its stress; to talk about the body and emotion goes against the grain of an institution that privileges the mind and reason. Furthermore, the long-standing perception of professors as a leisured class has produced a defensive culture of guilt and overwork. How many of us find ourselves snap at the cheese counter when we have to explain yet again, “No, I don’t have four months off in the summer.”? We are busy countering the widely-held notion of the ivory tower.

In the current global context—in which universities are faced more than ever with justifying their existence—to speak of professors’ stress might appear self-indulgent. Indeed, some colleagues have suggested that we stop whining, while others have described our project as brave. These opposing responses articulate our own inner struggle. Being an academic has privileges not enjoyed by the majority of the workforce: job security provided by the tenure system; flexibility of hours and the changing rhythms of the academic year; and the opportunity to think, create new knowledge, and to pass on our enthusiasms to others. We wanted to become professors because of the joy of intellectual discovery, the beauty of literary texts, and the radical potential of new ideas. These ideals are realizable, even in today’s beleaguered institution, although the ever increasing casualization of labor makes them harder to attain for many of us. Even the privileges of tenure have a downside. Flexibility of hours can translate into working all the time, particularly because academic work by its very nature is never done. Our responses to student papers could always be fuller; our reading of scholarly literature could always be more up-to-date; and our books could always be more exhaustive. These self-expectations are escalated by the additional external pressures of the changing academic culture. In the past two decades, our work has changed due to the rise of contractual positions, expanding class sizes, increased use of technology, and downloading of clerical tasks onto faculty—all part of the corporatization of the university. As the protagonist in David Lodge’s most recent campus novel, *Deaf Sentence*, explains to a graduate student who complains that her supervisor is never available: “He probably just doesn’t have enough time.... He’s probably too busy attending meetings, and preparing budgets, and making staff assessments, and doing all the other things that professors have to do nowadays instead of thinking” (2008, p. 89).

The more we reflected on the links between our own experiences and the findings of the CAUT Survey on occupational stress, the more certain we became that individual professor’s well-being has far-reaching effects. We believe that our focus on the professor is not entirely self-serving. It goes without saying that stress is bad for the individual, and has direct consequences for society. The harmful effects of stress on our well-being, health, and communities are well-documented and now generally acknowledged. What is less evident is that addressing individual professors’ stress has ramifications in the academy that are both educational and political. The Slow Food movement promotes the small-scale food producer in an effort to resist agri-business, and we, in turn, want to focus on the individual professor precisely because the corporate model of education undermines, and, indeed, threatens to efface, the role of the professor. In Bill Readings’ analysis of the “posthistorical university,” it is “the

administrator rather than the professor” who is the “central figure” in what is fast becoming a “transnational bureaucratic corporation” (1996, p. 3). With increasing corporatization, power is transferred from the faculty to managers of the university, economic justifications dominate, and the familiar “bottom-line” eclipses pedagogical and intellectual concerns. Benjamin Ginsberg, in *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters*, writes:

Every year, hosts of administrators and staffers are added to college and university payrolls, even as schools claim to be battling budget crises that are forcing them to reduce the size of their full-time faculties. As a result, universities are filled with armies of functionaries—the vice presidents, associate vice presidents, assistant vice presidents, provosts, associate provosts, vice provosts, assistant provosts, deans, deanlets, deanlings, each commanding staffers and assistants—who, more and more, direct the operations of every school. (2011, p. 2)

Why does this matter? For example, strategic planning and reporting documents are specific manifestations of this transfer of power. Ginsberg demonstrates that rather than identifying the unique strengths and future directions of each institution, universities’ strategic plans are nearly identical. He concludes that the point is “not the plan but the process” (2011, p. 51): an “assertion of leadership” (2011, p. 49) and the erosion of the power of the faculty. It is the *appearance* of process that counts. Another consequence of the shift in power is time poverty. The administrative university is concerned above-all with efficiency, a corporate value which results in a time crunch, making those of us subjected to it feel powerless. So, talking about professors’ stress is not self-indulgent; *not* talking about individual professors plays into the corporate model.

We have noticed that studies of the corporate university imply that change might well lie in the hands of individual professors. It seems to be an effort to give us back a sense of agency within a potentially overpowering bureaucracy. While Jennifer Washburn in *University Inc.* suggests policies to “safeguard...the universities’ autonomy,” equally, if not more, crucial, she says, is the “willingness” of individuals “to stand up and defend traditional academic values” (2005, p. 240). Readings explicitly avoids proposing policy changes, because, as he sees it, this serves to exacerbate what is already a top-heavy institution. Readings is clear that he addresses his remarks to the professor rather than the administrator, and “The Scene of Teaching” (the title of his penultimate chapter) rather than the provost’s office. Our focus on the personal might seem solipsistic in the current climate, but, at the risk of repeating ourselves, we see individual practice as a site of resistance.

Faculty stress directly affects student learning. We know from our experience that when we walk into a classroom breathless, rushed, and preoccupied, the class doesn’t go well; we struggle to make connections with the material and our students. Hard data is beginning to emerge which confirms this. In a 2008 study reported in *The Journal of Educational Psychology* on “Teachers’ Occupational Well-being and the Quality of Instruction,” researchers conclude that “a combination of high engagement with the capacity to emotionally distance the self from work and cope with failure (resilience) is associated with high levels of occupational well-being (low levels of exhaustion, high job satisfaction) and better instructional performance, and in turn leads to favourable

student outcomes” (Klusmann, Kunter, Trautwein, Lüdtke & Baumert, p. 702). In other words, professors’ well-being is inextricably linked with students’ learning.

Corporatisation has led to standardized learning as well as a sense of urgency. As Readings argues in *The University in Ruins*, education now is “the passage from ignorance to enlightenment in a particular time span” and “‘Time to completion’ is now presented as the universal criterion of quality and efficiency in education” (1996, p. 128). Standardization loses sight of the open-endedness of intellectual inquiry. The consumerism that has taken hold in higher education propels the belief that time is money, resulting in superficial learning. It is extremely difficult to resist the universities’ ever onward and upward mentality. Stefan Collini, among others, has drawn attention to the damaging “no standing still” conception of “excellence” in the current academic ethos: “standards must always be driven up. Benchmarks exist to be surpassed” (2012, p. 109). We suggest that “standing still” now and again may be beneficial.

If the corporate model induces panic, ironically so do the very books protesting corporate values. James E. Côté and Anton L. Allahar’s *Ivory Tower Blues* is sub-titled *A University System in Crisis* (2007a), and the opening sentence of Martha Nussbaum’s manifesto *Not for Profit* reads: “We are in the midst of a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance” (2010, p. 1). Frank Donoghue points out the ubiquity of the language of crisis. We also question the language of crisis but for reasons that differ from Donoghue, who “think[s] that professors of the humanities have already lost the power to rescue themselves” (2008, p. xi). We take a more optimistic approach. While in their more recent *Lowering Higher Education: The Rise of Corporate Universities and the Fall of Liberal Education*, Côté and Allahar qualify their definition of “crisis” as “a turning point...rather than a situation of impending doom,” they nevertheless maintain that the “university system has developed a set of problems that require some sort of decisive action *now*” (2011b, p. 91). We do not deny that intervention is necessary. However, the discourse of crisis creates a sense of urgency—act quickly before it is too late—which makes us feel even more powerless in the face of overwhelming odds. The discourse of crisis is part of the problem we face.

We argue that approaching our professional practice from a perspective influenced by the Slow movement has the potential to disrupt the corporate ethos of speed. Slow living, as Wendy Parkins and Geoffrey Craig explain, “is not a simple matter of ‘slowing down’ but rather it is more fundamentally an issue of agency” (2006, p. 67). We envisage Slow Professors acting purposefully, thereby cultivating emotional and intellectual resilience, enabling them to challenge the corporate university and maintain the values of liberal education. This takes time. Thomas Skovholdt and Michelle Trotter-Mathison observe in *The Resilient Practitioner* that “experience does not seem to increase expertise” (2001, p. 131). They have found that professional development—which in our case is evolving a unique teaching style—requires three conditions: practice, a supportive and open environment, and reflection. “If we are busy *doing* there is no chance to *be*,” they say, “Yet it is *being* that produces the chance to learn” (2001, p. 28). This is as true for our students as it is for us. Time for reflection is not, then, a luxury, but crucial to effective teaching and learning. The Slow movement has prompted us to be more deliberate in all aspects of our professional practice and not to be swept along by the ever accelerating pace.

Furthermore, insisting on our need for time to think may promote organisational change. It is important to de-pathologise work stress, which is usually accompanied by feelings of guilt and loneliness (Carlyle & Woods, 2002, p. xiii). We feel guilty because our colleagues seem just as busy as we are, and then we deny being overwhelmed, even to ourselves. Denise Carlyle and Peter Woods point out that research into stress predominantly employs “a discourse of individual responsibility where people are deemed vulnerable to stress due to unique personal profiles.” Such research fosters “a false separation of the individual and the social context” (2002, p. xi). Andy Hargreaves and Elizabeth Tucker argue that even our private guilt is “a public issue”: it is “socially generated and mediated, emotionally located and practically consequential” (1991, p. 504). Being honest about our stress may be a first step in challenging the culture of speed.

In response to the colleagues who have told us to wake up and get with the program or that they are simply too busy to slow down, we wish to emphasize that the slow movement is not nostalgia for the “good old days” that never existed in the first place. Rather, it is, as Parkins and Craig put it, “a process whereby everyday life—in all its pace and complexity, *frisson* and routine—is approached with care and attention...an attempt to live in the present in a meaningful, sustainable, thoughtful and *pleasurable* way” (2006, p. ix). And we agree with Parkins and Craig that the Slow movement has the “potential” to not only “reinvigorate everyday life” (2006, p. 119) but also “repoliticize...everyday life” (2006, p. 135). One of the distinctive features of Slow Food is its combination of “Politics and Pleasure”—the subtitle of Geoff Andrews’s *The Slow Food Story* (2008). We want a cure that not only will work but also feel good. As Jennifer Lindholm and Katalin Szelényi conclude, “it is critical that we...strive to develop habits of conducting our work and our lives in ways that promote both our own and others’ well-being” (2008, p. 36). Corporatisation not only speeds up the clock but also compromises academic values. By taking the time for deliberation, reflection, and dialogue, the Slow Professor takes back the intellectual life of the university.

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