Slow(ed): Lessons on Slowness within Projects of Inclusivity

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Being called slow is not usually a compliment. Slow poke. Slow learner. Slow reader. Slowness is hindering. Slowness is boring. We want to move, think, *be* fast. For those of us who spend a significant portion of our lives within the halls of academia, the act of slowing down seems to be of necessity deliberate, a decision made in the midst of the relentless pace of scholarship, teaching, and service. Slowing down becomes a kind of subversive, even political act, contravening the norms of academic life. Indeed, it can be precarious in light of the potentially deleterious effects of slowing down on our status and livelihood. Moreover, slowness is not always a choice. For some, being slow is a lived condition, structured by one's embodied relation to the demands of the academic world. One is sometimes simply slow in one's movement or pace of thinking, other times one is slow*ed* by external constraints that affect performance, movement, or competence. *Being* slow, or being slow*ed,* seem different than *doing* slow – that is, intentionally slowing down.

The reclamation of slowness is appealing for inclusivity in education. Resistance to speed brings with it possibilities for questioning the disabling mechanisms of schooling, mechanisms that reproduce ideas about *normal* pace and performance in the classroom. If slowness is celebrated as an avenue towards more democratic, holistic schooling, then could the presence of slow learners, slow thinkers, and slow movers be celebrated as well? Can an "ethics of slow"[1] encompass those whose slowness is less deliberate, for whom slow thinking means not slowing down thinking, but rather *coming to something slowly*? If slowing down can generate deeper meaning, more careful questioning, and richer engagement with knowledge production, can being slow do this as well?

These questions highlight the possibilities and tensions in calls to embrace and expand a politics of slowness in education. In arguing for slowing down our scholarly productivity, what room do we open up for disability, and

particularly for those whose embodiment is seen as incompatible with the demands of academia? I explore these questions through my reflections within an inclusive college course in which notions of pace, productivity, and scholarly rigor were regularly challenged, both intentionally and unintentionally. I begin by describing and then critiquing the need for speed in academia. Drawing on the recent work of Kathy Hytten, Riyad A. Shahjahan, and Cara Furman, I attempt to delineate what is meant by *doing* slow as a project of educational renewal and enrichment. Next, I discuss *being* slow as a different relationship to *doing* slow. Drawing on my observations in a mixed ability classroom, I explore how this particular embodied/minded relationship to slowness can be pedagogically enriching.

THE NEED FOR SPEED

In a recent paper, Hytten described the drive to produce quickly and in large quantities as a dominant one in academia and beyond. Faculty are regularly evaluated in ways that quantify their productivity and are rewarded for output, sometimes to the detriment of scholarly depth or quality. Hytten argues that this emphasis on measurable productivity leads to troubling habits of inquiry in our scholarship and drives the "ontological insecurity" that we feel as members of the academy, namely the sense in which we become alienated from our work and lose sight of its meaningfulness.[2] Importantly, it is not only quantity that is encouraged – expected even – but also a rate of production that seems to be ever increasing.

Susan Wendell offers a similar critique of the dizzying speed of academia, although she focuses more explicitly on the disabling effects of pace.[3] Wendell argues that pace of life involves "the social construction of disability through expectations of performance" and plays a significant role in creating disabling social conditions, something usually not recognized by non-disabled people who take the pace of life for granted.[4] The disabling effects of increasing expectations for quicker and greater output are exemplified in Wendell's experience of being forced to expand her disability leave, even while her own

embodiment remained unchanged.[5] Wendell's analysis reveals how so-called invisible disabilities become visible – and are even *created* – in their interactions with environmental expectations. On my campus, the limited time between classes (10 minutes) can mean that a student is rendered chronically late not by her own body, but by the expectations of pace over which she has no control. While being chronically late may not be on its own disabling, the effects of lateness on academic performance can be, a condition exacerbated if and when a student has an existing physical, energy, or other bodily impairment which increases transition time. Some students are forced to let their bodily needs lead their course selection, a strategy that undermines their opportunities for learning and their participation as full members of the academic community.

As pace of life increases, so do expectations placed on individuals to be more productive and to sideline their health in order to do so. Shahjahan puts this well: "Our mind is constantly thinking, our eyes are perceiving screens or books, our ears listening, and our mouths speaking. Yet what about those other parts of our bodies: stomach, chest, shoulders, legs, knees, backs and so on? Amid deadlines and reviews, these non-productive parts of our bodies are rendered invisible."[6] The proliferation of calls for "self care" in higher education, or expressions of concern for the psychological health of students implicitly recognize the pace of productivity as disabling. While welcomed, such conversations rarely *politicize* the disabling effects of the demand for speed, as they are taken up as issues to address through increased mental health services, rather than through changes to curricular expectations, performance standards, or institutional recognition and reward structures. And yet, these remain structural and political problems. Faster paced societies render slow thinking, slow moving, or low energy people as conspicuous, pushing them to the margins of what is considered productive citizenship.[7] This conspicuousness is exacerbated by the presence – and normalization – of technologies of cognitive enhancement, such as the use of amphetamines amongst college students.[8] The cultural prevalence of such cognitive enhancements raises the bar on normal and expected levels of performance, shutting out those who will not or cannot participate.

Wendell's analysis underscores the ways in which disability is created

within and through physical and social environments. With respect to pace, performance, or productivity, any increase in expectations for output has the effect of moving otherwise "normally" functioning people into the category of disabled people. Of course, it is not only those whose bodies have low energy as a result of disability, or who have cognitive impairments, or physical disability that are affected by the need for speed. Parents and caregivers, especially women, are similarly disabled by changes in pace, or by expectations of time commitments that force them to choose (when they *can* choose) between professional obligations and home obligations. The internalization of normalized pace can also be harmful to individuals who culturally occupy a different relationship to time. For example, Shahjahan describes Navajo students' experiences of feeling "less than" in relation to university expectations of productivity and guilty about time taken away from their home, parents, and community.[9] Says Shahjahan, "Time and the use of time mark unruly bodies as out of place in academic institutions."[10] Recognizing the role that productivity plays in creating conditions of precarity, Shahjahan argues that Eurocentric and capitalist notions of time "colonize" our lives: "Time is a key coercive force in the neoliberal academy that prompts us to view our own potential 'lack of fit' as a form of failure."[11]

DOING SLOW

Thankfully, calls for slowing down have been growing through slow movements, which call for more purposefulness in how we connect to our surroundings.[12] Hytten calls for a politics of resistance to the repressive and irresponsible projects of academia that push us to privilege an economic model of learning over a humanistic one. We must slow down our scholarly productivity so as to engage in an "ethics of slow" that involves focusing on relationships, communities, and making meaningful contributions to the world.[13] Hytten argues that "Slowing down supports a vision of more genuine scholarly community, which involves working with others to make ideas matter, not competing with others for artificially limited rewards."[14] More than simply an act of self-protection, then, slowing down is political and virtuous.[15] Importantly for Hytten, slowing down is not to be understood as a kind of reduction – "movements towards

slow are not necessarily about doing less, or about being lazy, or even about pace" – but rather as a way of "occupying and controlling time differently."[16]

Just as slowing down in our research and scholarly endeavors is important to engaging in more purposeful and rich knowledge production, it is also important for learning. Teachers regularly report feeling pressure to move quickly through prescribed lessons so as to meet content and competency standards set by the state.[17] Teachers yearn for, but rarely receive, more resources in the form of time – time for preparation, time for collaboration, time for experimentation, and so on. In a recent paper, Furman describes the frenetic pace of teaching life: "I know that, when I open the door, the children will burst through, and that I will not have a moment to breathe deeply or consider my thoughts until eight hours from now when the last child has left the room."[18] This rushed schedule, says Furman, can "occlude the learner from the teacher" and neglect the life worlds of students.[19]

In response to this frenzied pace, Furman argues that we can use slowness in deliberate ways to enrich our teaching and allow for the kind of reflection that is needed in order to connect with learners. She describes "Stopping Time," a project developed by the Brookline Teachers Research Seminar that allows teachers to attend to individual students through a process of taping, listening, and discussing.[20] Particularly interesting is how Furman thinks about the program as affording the opportunity to attend to children's sense-making. She writes that the Stopping Time method allows teachers to pay attention to how each individual child "constructs understanding" by "honoring the sense that each individual makes and how the individual understands the world."[21] Stopping Time opens up what Margaret Price calls a "kairotic space,"[22] creating opportunities for knowledge production outside of the linear force of time that pushes reflectiveness into oblivion.

Occupying time *differently*, however, may not be the same as occupying time full stop. Shahjahan is similarly interested in slowing down as a way of resisting the disconnections produced by discourses and projects of productivity in higher education. However, in contrast to Hytten, Shahjahan calls directly on doing less, being idle, and "being lazy" as ways to *re*-occupy time by pushing

back on the colonization of/by time: "By 'being lazy' I am referring here to being at peace with 'not doing' or 'not being productive,' living in the present, and deprivileging the *need for a result* with the passage of time."[23] Whether it is centering silence, listening, mindfulness, prayer, or relationship-building outside of content learning, the act of slowing down re-centers the body and the relationship between the body and mind.[24] Slowing down "is about inviting abundance thinking in the present and focus[ing] on our bodies now for [their] intrinsic value as a knowledge producer."[25] It is important to note that the use of "being lazy" is intentionally provocative here, as Shahjahan is calling attention to the colonial and racist connotations of the term, where laziness is attributed to black and brown bodies because of their resistance to colonial projects or simply because their embodiment is regarded as lesser. This framework elevates the possibility of being idle in the classroom to the level of acceptable, even transformative.

Gauging the extent to which Shahjahan and Hytten are in disagreement about the meaning of slowness and its relationship to productivity is difficult. Both emphasize the need for connectivity and deeper thinking. Both recognize the constraints, damage, and danger of the drive for production at the expense of richer engagements with learning and knowing. Where they seem to be in tension is over the role of idleness in slowing down. Where Shahjahan explicitly calls on us to embrace moments of non-productivity, Hytten seems to push back against the association of slowness with idleness. Says Hytten, "Philosophical thinking requires us to slow down. Slowing down is good for us as individuals, colleagues, and knowledge producers. *Slow does not mean idle,* rather it provides a space for meaningfulness and genuine inquiry."[26] Of course, this tension may consist in the meaning that is made of being idle. Is idleness in Shahjahan's sense unproductive? Or, does it gesture towards a more elusive meaning of productivity?

BEING "SLOW"

Slowness is mapped onto people whose modes of learning fall outside

of an expected pace in schooling. As the story of Cookie in Jonathon Mooney's *The Short Bus* illustrates, such attributions can work to safeguard normalcy and ease anxiety about difference. Mooney writes that Cookie, an artist, "was never able to fit in or conform to our culture's cognitive norms."[27] In Cookie's experience, the label of slow operated discursively, positioning Cookie as outside of expected norms of cognitive speed and capacity, or what Julie Cosenza calls "able-bodied intelligence."[28] This "ability to think quickly, process, and verbally respond"[29] appears to inhere in those who exercise quick thinking. Indeed, we are more culturally ready to read intelligence onto quick thinking people than to recognize it in slow thinking people.

Paradoxically, though, able-bodied intelligence bears only a tenuous relationship to quickness, and quickness on its own does not earn one entry into that status. Not all students who are labeled with disabilities of the mind – cognition, processing speed, executive functioning, attention, and so on – are rendered as slow. Some students are regarded as outside of able-mindedness because they are seen as too fast in their modes of learning. Jay, a student profiled by Kathleen Collins, is an example.[30] Jay's behavior in the classroom exceeds what is considered tolerable levels of energy, movement, or noise; he is loud, speaks out of turn, moves about, shouts out answers, and doesn't follow directions. It isn't being *slow* that disrupts Jay's learning; rather, he's not slow enough. Even while Jay's comportment enables his own understanding of the material, it also hinders his ability to demonstrate the kind of attentiveness required to position him as a valued member of the learning community. In the instances that Collins describes, Jay does not conform to the expected norms of careful inquiry in the classroom, which seem to require a slower speed than Jay can tolerate. Thus, able-bodied intelligence isn't ascribed to all those who demonstrate quicker thinking, just as one's being attentive isn't always demonstrated through norms of good behavior. Beyond their shared intellectual and artistic talents, what the too-fast Jay and the too-slow Cookie have in common is that their pace is seen as unproductive and counter to pedagogical projects.

In their more colloquial usages, slowness and idleness can easily be associated with boredom and lack of challenge – in short, with non-rigor-

ous education. Indeed, one of the common fears voiced about mixed ability classrooms is that they will invite an undesirable idleness into the classroom as more intellectually advanced students are forced to wait for their less advanced counterparts to catch up. In particular, the perception is that including students with disabilities in general education involves reducing the challenge of learning by "dumbing"[31] down expectations regarding content or pace.[32] Of course, this perception misunderstands both the meaning and goal of substantive inclusion, which involves not simply placing kids with disabilities in regular classrooms, but rather transforming the way all children are taught. That is, to ensure that all students have access to high quality instruction, inclusive practice begins with the assumption of differences in learning speed and forms of engagement and builds in practices that cultivate learning in the context of presumed difference.[33] In fact, the practice of differentiation, which is central to inclusive pedagogy, could be understood as a way to ward off idleness as it focuses on developing instruction that "maximizes each students' opportunity for academic growth."[34]

In my own teaching practice, however, I have found that the energy I put into differentiating instruction is often backed by a kind of panic about the need to ensure productivity and avoid idleness in my students. This anxiety about idleness is especially pronounced in an inclusive higher education course that I teach at my university. Students from a local post-secondary program for students labeled with intellectual disabilities join non-labeled students[35] for a half semester of coursework. Together, students learn about the disability rights and self-advocacy movements, engage in questioning meanings surrounding adulthood and intelligence, and complete social action projects intended to address a community problem. Among the many ethical and epistemological questions this course raises are the types of learning that students are engaged in and whether and how their engagement with course materials reflects rather than shifts normalcy. Against the backdrop of an institutional environment that both explicitly and implicitly validates fast-paced and didactic models of academic rigor, this pedagogical project seems both immensely important, and enormously precarious.

The promises and tensions surrounding the meanings of slowness as

deliberate or non-deliberate, as a mechanism for sense-making, and as a challenge to able-bodied/minded normalcy are very apparent through an examination of my pedagogical journal entries. Many of these entries display anxiety about productivity and pace throughout the course. Indeed, my own abiding discomfort with the often-slow pace of the class and with students' participation was striking. I spent considerable time in my journals worrying about whether an activity was too easy: "Is it rigorous?? Are they bored? Do they think it's basic??" Such concerns were prominent even when I simultaneously recorded that an activity went very well, or that all students were engaged, or that students from both programs expressed that the activity was "hard." This anxiety was so prevalent that one non-labeled student gently asked me to give them more time to think and contemplate during class discussions.

Thus, despite my own desire to see this class as transformative, I found myself expecting and then disciplining students to perform in ways that more closely resembled a traditional university pace and form of engagement. For example, I worried extensively about how students – labeled and non-labeled – were "pulling their weight" in project work and based a lot of my conclusions about participation on behavior that resembled what I know to be normalized modes of engagement, such as eye contact, verbal communication, and linear thinking. Of course, concerns about equity in classroom engagement are important, but an unevaluated adherence to traditional or normalized metrics in measuring such engagement is troubling.

While my anxiety about pace and difficulty was pervasive, it was also clear that the structure of the class lent itself well to the kind of purposeful slowing down that Hytten and Furman describe. During a class discussion about barriers to learning, one non-labeled student made an insightful connection between our readings and the role of capitalism in creating disabling meanings about productivity. She used the term "capitalist productivity" in doing so. I wrote about this moment in my journal:

> I used the opportunity to make a point about accessibility/to
> differentiate by asking [the student] to explain it for others
> who might not fully understand capitalism or its link to the

notion of productivity. She said, "I guess it's like we're all obsessed with money." This made me think – about not only how to ensure that the meaning behind a concept is retained in making it accessible, but also realizing that students often throw around big academic words without totally knowing how to define/explain them [as was the case here]. It's a good exercise [to unpack them].

Making language accessible, ensuring that one understands terms used, and that those terms are understood by others, is an important component of deep learning for all students. Indeed, stopping to define and elaborate upon the meanings of concepts and ideas, which need not involve reducing their richness and complexity, encourages better communication and collaboration in making sense of our social world.

The potential of slowing down for enabling sense-making was also clear on a number of occasions when non-labeled students were forced to halt their usual ways of completing projects – typically through learned efficiency – so as to attend to the ways that they were excluding labeled students. Sometimes this meant confronting their occlusion of those students' competencies, namely their ability to carry out and follow through on projects, albeit with support. When the need for support was recognized, students could then think together about how to scaffold participation so that everyone formed a part of the planning process. This was often slow, awkward, and anxiety-provoking for all participants. And yet, even as the outcomes were imperfect, the process of engagement yielded new ways of making sense of one another. As one non-labeled student put it in her own reflection paper:

Looking back on my frustrations, it's easy to see how caught up I became in my own Time – meaning that I expected this project to adhere to the deadlines I set for myself in my other work at [this university]. I formulate a plan for my work around project deadlines, and any unexpected changes or obstacles easily frustrate me … [But] there were many other ways to complete [my peer's] part of the project that

did not make her feel uncomfortable. Taking a step back
from deadlines and my own work ethic helped me to realize
that there were many other ways to finish the project that
were more beneficial than frustration.

Thus, while my anxiety persisted throughout the course, my observations and
student testimony challenged me to think in complex ways about what produc-
tivity looks like in the recognized presence of bodyminds[36] whose physical or
cognitive comportment appears "out of time."[37]

SLOW(ED) PEDAGOGY

The lessons on slowness from this course leave me with more ques-
tions than answers. I'm slow(ed) by them. My impulse to see moments of being
slow as unproductive, even pedagogically negligent, was strong, but so was my
"torpification," to use Ann Diller's apt term.[38] Mid-way through the course I
wrote the following in my journal:

the pace of class is very different, and that there's a lot of
times where we go off topic – today was an example! I'm
struggling with how to navigate this … I'm trying to create
a learning environment in which there is engagement across
differences of ability. Engagement doesn't always look pretty
or pristine, or happen in ways that fit with a paradigm of
learning that we see in other classes (in *my* classes). But the
things that I've learned from people with disabilities over the
years hasn't been so linear in its delivery … There's been a lot
of navigating differences in verbal ability and in modes of
engagement using verbal language, and in how I read behavior
and what behavior indicates about what a person thinks or
feels (and also how it *doesn't* always indicate what a person
is thinking or feeling). There's a lot of starts and stops …

Outlier bodyminds overflow and disrupt linear time, one of the many reasons
that they are often pushed out or otherwise excluded from educational institu-

tions. In disability communities, by contrast, halting, meandering conversations – punctuated by deeply personal comments or requests, a spirit of inquiry, of conflict, of collaboration, or whatever other (ir)regularities emerge in community life – can be embraced rather than dreaded. Of course, this contrasts so greatly with the normalizing forces of higher education that squeeze and force out the quirks.

Disability theorists have described these temporal divergences as "crip time," meant as both a description of difference and a politicized antidote to the frenzied pace of the social world that disables bodies and minds that are marked as out of sync. Kafer writes, "The flexibility of crip time [is] not only an accommodation to those who need 'more' time but also, and perhaps especially, a challenge to normative and normalizing expectations of pace and scheduling."[39] Crip time restructures an understanding of pace, speed, production, participation, effort, energy, and so on as outside of the dominance of normalcy. It is at once recognition *and* reclamation of slowness: it recognizes that *being* slow is an embodied reality for some people, but also reclaims the meaning of slowness as an intentional relationship to action in the world.

In practical terms, a slow(ed) pedagogy is difficult to enact, not least because an evaluation of learning must take place outside of our ready heuristics for measuring productive learning: quick-thinking, deliberately verbal and mobile bodies and minds. Its starts and stops provoke deep anxiety in light of existing meanings about productivity and engagement, even those that tend towards filling time more intentionally and mindfully. However, as we aspire towards slowing down – doing slow – in order to engage in more meaningful inquiry, it's important to grapple with the relationship between slow and idle, slow and unproductive. What happens when classroom moments that appear to exemplify able-bodied/minded idleness are in fact spaces of meaningfulness, or generative learning? How do we recognize them amidst the anxiety around being slow? I'm working, slowly, to answer these questions.

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1 Kathy Hytten, "Ethical Scholarship and Information Overload: On the Virtue of

Slowing Down," *Philosophy of Education 2017*, ed. Ann Chinnery (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2019), 2.

2 Hytten, "Ethical Scholarship," 6

3 Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

4 Wendell, *The Rejected Body*, 37.

5 Wendell, *The Rejected Body*, 38.

6 Riyad A. Shahjahan, "Being 'Lazy' and Slowing Down: Toward Decolonizing Time, Our Body, and Pedagogy," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 47, no. 5 (2015), 494.

7 Wendell, *The Rejected Body*. See also Stacy Clifford Simplican, *The Capacity Contract: Intellectual Disability and the Question of Citizenship* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

8 Jasbir K. Puar, "Prognosis Time: Towards a Geopolitics of Affect, Debility, and Capacity," *Women & Performance* 19, no. 2 (2009), 168.

9 Shahjahan, "Being 'Lazy'," 492 (citing Brandt).

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 489; 491.

12 Hytten, "Ethical Scholarship," 10.

13 Ibid., 2.

14 Ibid., 9.

15 Ibid., 11.

16 Ibid., 10.

17 Doris A. Santoro, *Demoralized: Why Teachers Leave the Profession They Love and How They Can Stay* (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2018).

18 Cara Furman, "*Stopping Time* to Attend to Care of the Teaching Self," *Philosophy of Education 2018*, ed. Megan Laverty (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2019), 5.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., 9.

21 Ibid.

22 Margaret Price, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 60.

23 Shahjahan, "Being 'Lazy'," 489.

24 Ibid., 495-6.

25 Ibid., 498.

26 Hytten, "Ethical Scholarship," 13 (my emphasis)

27 Jonathan Mooney, *The Short Bus: A Journey Beyond Normal* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007), 151.

28 Julie Cosenza, "SLOW: Crip Thoery, Dyslexia, and the Borderlands of Disability and Ablebodiedness," *Liminalities* 6, no. 2 (2010), 5.

29 Cozenza, "SLOW," 5.

30 Kathleen M. Collins, *Ability Profiling and School Failure: One Child's Struggle to be Seen as Competent* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

31 Note this colloquial expression itself employs ableist terminology.

32 Mara Sapon-Shevin, "Ability Differences in the Classroom: Teaching and Learning in Inclusive Classrooms," in *Common Bonds: Anti-Bias Teaching in a Diverse Society*

(Olney, MD: Association for Childhood Education International, 2005).

33 Susan Baglieri and Janice H. Knopf, "Normalizing Difference in Inclusive Teaching," *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 37, no. 6 (2004): 525-529.

34 Carol Ann Tomlinson, *Leading and Managing a Differentiated Classroom* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2010).

35 I refer to students enrolled at my university as non-labeled students. Although they may have been labeled in other ways, they were not labeled with intellectual disabilities as were their peers from my partner program.

36 See Margaret Price, "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain," *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 268-284.

37 Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013).

38 Ann Diller, "Facing the Torpedo Fish: Becoming a Philosopher of One's Own Education," in *Philosophy of Education 1998*, ed. Steven Tozer (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1998).

39 Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 27.