



# Slow Down, You Move Too Fast! Stillness Is Key to Creativity and Insight in Higher Education

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## Life as an Educator: How We Arrived Here Is Unsurprising

**I**N HIGHER EDUCATION, we have long been moving at an increasingly frenetic pace, prioritizing productivity and efficiency at the expense of stillness and receptivity. It seems that higher education continues to serve as a knowledge mill for students to enter—apparently well-prepared—the “knowledge economy.”<sup>1</sup> Academia in service to the knowledge economy teaches its lieutenants—both educators and students—that they as the knowers are entirely separate from the knowledge being taught and learned.<sup>2</sup> Knowledge is *a priori*, theoretical, an abstracted currency far removed from personal experiences, deep connection, and, well, real life. When teachers are consumed by serving the knowledge economy and checking things off to-do lists, they are pulled away from what is happening in the moment.

In higher education, I note daily that rich pedagogic opportunities are continually being lost. I also note that, contrary to my initial hope, the situation has worsened since the start of the global pandemic. In my experience, academics increasingly prefer to save time, hurriedly designing curricula they deliver even more hurriedly, emphasizing success in passing exams and teaching only perfunctory “how-to” skills. Many teachers now favor technology-enhanced learning over simple no-frills exploratory talk. “Student-centeredness,” taken to extremes, means that students are employed as interns—for little or no pay—to design and build academic programs. Constantly increasing loads of administrative duties keep teachers busier than ever, while so-called solutions to workload management consist of converting as much content as possi-

ble into “self-directed” online learning modules—thus freeing teachers on the ground for even more administrative duties! Owing to its assumed “insignificant” impact on the global brand image of the university, research into higher-education pedagogy and curriculum receives little or no encouragement, and only the most quantifiable of outcomes are commended. We educators are consumed by ticking objectives off our endless “to do” lists, all the while being reminded that not meeting our objectives is due to our own poor time-management skills. This bias towards efficiency we in turn pass on—blindly and foolishly—to our students. We are going through the motions, more and more easily disembodied, as the body is demoted even further by the seemingly never-ending shift to blended, distant, or online working. There is simply, it seems, little heart. little soul, and even sometimes, dare I say, little mind.

In reimagining the higher education of the future, Arthur Zajonc’s “epistemology of love” is as inclusive and integral as one could hope for:

The university is well-practiced at educating the mind for critical reasoning, critical writing and critical speaking as well as for scientific and quantitative analysis. But is this sufficient? In a world beset with conflicts, internal as well as external, isn’t it of equal if not greater importance to balance the sharpening of our intellects with the systematic cultivation of our hearts?<sup>3</sup>

I wish I could agree at least that “the university is well-practiced at educating the mind for critical reasoning, critical writing and critical speaking.”<sup>4</sup> However, being mindful of the speed and shallowness at which academics are now expected to both teach and research, I find it difficult these days to convincingly and whole-heartedly concede even that. Why must our teaching lives be so hurried and shallow when it seems clear that sometimes “slowing down is a matter of ethical import,”<sup>5</sup> and “being ethical may actually mean being inefficient at times.”<sup>6</sup> In my sixteen years as a pedagogue in higher education, I have witnessed the most unrefined, reductionist, and short-sighted solutions to problems welcomed as cost-effective, smart, and efficient. Scholarly knowledge is dependent on who is seeking the knowledge, and the knowledge-seeker is formed by what they encounter. Therefore, taking a solely instrumentalist approach to teaching, learning, and knowing means becoming monotonous and machine-like. And becoming machine-like is to become “a neoliberal subject.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, it seems, the most critical elements of higher education are being shrunk-en, contracted. We need *slow time* and *slow space*, and so do our students.

In Parker Palmer’s seminal book *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life*, he makes the foundational point that “good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.”<sup>8</sup> As Palmer argues, integrity is paramount for

the future of higher education: “by choosing integrity, I become more whole, but wholeness does not mean perfection. It means becoming more real by acknowledging the whole of who I am.”<sup>9</sup> Integrity itself is *sensed*, not *thought*. It requires stillness to be felt, received, and ultimately embodied. Growing as an educator is to do what is alien to academic culture: slow down, engage in exploratory talk about our inner lives, and refrain from falsely divorcing the personal from the professional. If finding safety in the technical, distant, and objective is the dominant academic model under which educators now teach and research, what are the consequences for our students?

## The Quiet Resistance of Contemplative Practice

One quiet form of resistance to the culture of speed in the academy is to turn our awareness inward, first and foremost, and then outward: first towards the body and then towards everything else in relation to the body. This progression toward integral being and student-centeredness must begin first with the teachers themselves.<sup>10</sup> A question thus emerges: why would someone engaged in higher education find slowing down and honoring stillness to be a means of resisting the neoliberal academy—that is, the university that seeks to function more as a capitalist business than as a site of creativity or freedom of thought? As teachers in the classroom, non-doing allows us to remain open to whatever emerges, without striving for the specific, performance-oriented, tangible outcomes we have come to expect: positive student evaluations of our teaching, sustained engagement from our students in the classroom, completion and submission of work that results in high grades for our students—and the list goes on.

The quiet resistance of contemplative practices acts as antidote, both precursor *and* partner to “louder” resistance. The essence of contemplative practice is to sense harmony with self, other, and the nature of reality. Contemplative pedagogy is an antidote to living with a certain “existential angst that derives from an awareness of the gap between one’s actions and one’s limited grounds for those actions.”<sup>11</sup> Among other far less conducive conditions, I maintain that higher education offers rich and fertile conditions for both teachers and students to explore their capacity for this creative knowing,<sup>12</sup> provided teachers can create a classroom space for honoring stillness and receptivity.

Let me note that these far less conducive conditions, which also contribute to the worsening of the psychological wellbeing of teachers and students, cannot not be addressed by contemplative practices alone. They are part and parcel of a neoliberal management approach whereby teachers must increase their productivity without the resourcing they need, such as reduction in scheduled

contact hours and reprieve from some administrative duties, to compensate them for their extra efforts. Material conditions in higher education need to change to better facilitate stillness—and the creativity, insight, and resulting psychological and physical wellbeing that stillness can help emerge. Contemplative practices quietly push back against neoliberalism’s productivist impulse and its amplification of the default mode network (DMN)—the mechanism in our brains that is in constant flux between past and future thinking. However, we also need louder pushback, in the form of collective struggles to change material working conditions on campus. Indeed, these antidotes work well together. Beginning with quiet resistance, in the form of individual, inward-focused contemplative endeavours, can serve as a precursor to and also work in tandem with broadening this resistance into a louder collective approach. In short, the quiet pushback can foster and support recognition of possibilities for louder pushback, giving educators the time and space they need to take stock, reassess, and readdress.

## Honoring Stillness: The Importance of Slow Time

Thomas Eriksen distinguishes between “fast time activities,” such as completing our marking or writing a report by a set deadline, and “slow time activities,” such as contemplative reading of a text or creating a work of art.<sup>13</sup> Because of our limited time, and the pace and intensity at which teachers and students in higher education work, too often the activities that carry deadlines are privileged, and we fail to give slow time activities the time and space they need. Liah Greenfeld notes that underestimating the time needed for slow activities can be an obstacle to “spiritual restoration”:

We are busy, not because our physical and economic survival requires constant exertion on our part, leaving us little opportunity for spiritual restoration—relaxing, getting rid of the sense of busyness—but because we are incapable of perceiving and taking advantage of the opportunities for repose. We are restless.<sup>14</sup>

Stillness is an antidote to this restlessness within us all, as it is a state of receptivity that can inspire creativity and insight. The inner nature of learning that generates creativity and insight is such that it can only really occur as a slow time activity. We must be able to zoom out, step back from doing, sustain our attention and resolve, and allow time and space for all manner of as-yet-unknown ideas to come to the surface of our conscious awareness. For ourselves and our students, meditating, walking in and connecting with nature, and engaging in creative making or other contemplative practices give

the mind time and space in which to simply observe. In this time and space—present and mindful—we are more fully engaged in life and receptive to all its happenings as they unfold. This receptivity is an openness that activates the imagination, illuminating the time and space in which the attention is engaged and allowing creativity to flourish.<sup>15</sup> In an academic culture that compels teachers and students to live frenetically, slowing down and honoring stillness is a tender act of resistance that can nonetheless instigate, foster, and support meaningful change.

## Sustained Attention as Stillness and Receptivity: Why Relaxing The Default Mode Network (DMN) Works

Discussed ubiquitously in the fields of neuroscience, psychology of education and mind, mindfulness, evolutionary psychology, and evolutionary biology, the default mode network (DMN) of the human brain involves thinking about the past, as in rumination, and about the future, as in anticipation. It is the part of the medial prefrontal cortex that is involved in self-referential processing.<sup>16</sup> It also involves thinking about others, such as mulling over a past interpersonal conflict, as well as general mind-wandering and daydreaming. The DMN's constant fluctuation between past and future thinking has an evolutionary explanation.

Often there is a mismatch between the causes of our past and future thinking and our responses to them, because we have inherited from our early human ancestors a complex survival mechanism suited to life circumstances very different from our own.<sup>17</sup> Essentially, as Gregory Bratman and colleagues state, the DMN is “a maladaptive pattern of self-referential thought that is associated with heightened risk for depression and other mental illnesses.”<sup>18</sup> That mechanism may have worked well for nonhuman primates and later for human hunter-gatherers who were entirely concerned with averting threats by depending on reaction speed, but it has worked far less well for us, as our cultures have become as complex as they are today. Our default mode of thinking is neither restful nor restorative, conducive neither to creativity nor insight nor concentrated reasoning. Practices that relax the DMN, therefore, induce attention to the present moment, which in turn can have positive consequences: an increased capacity to engage with deeper and more complex educational happenings, an enhanced sense of wellbeing, and a fuller engagement in our life, with others, and with what we are doing or experiencing. Meditation and other

contemplative practices are especially effective at relaxing the DMN, enabling us to rest, sustain attention, and thus generate stillness.<sup>19</sup>

The DMN's automation in the human brain is not "by default" a part of our conscious awareness. Learning to understand the DMN's impacts on our thinking is not intended to erase past or future thinking altogether, since both have their utility: past thinking enables us to recollect positive memories; future thinking enables us to recognize trends and emergent patterns, and so on. However, habitual engagement in slow time activities like meditation and other contemplative practices, coupled with intention, essentially trains the mind, body, and heart. In this way, teaching and learning opportunities emerge through enhanced presence-centeredness, and through practice we can increase our overall capacity for sustained attention. By relaxing the DMN, meditation and other contemplative practices provide a way to experience slow time, since there is no problem to be solved: the task is simply to be aware of the passing stream of consciousness, without allowing reactivity or restlessness to push us into getting something done. Numerous other practices, such as walking in and connecting with nature, can also reduce the activity of the default mode network.<sup>20</sup> When one is not absorbed by analysing the past or worrying about the future, the brain is better prepared to engage in a different mode of being—one that can be experienced as more meaningful.

## Engaging in Embodied Practice in Higher Education Today: Strengthening Our Resolve for Stillness

I often say that the current state of higher education is unsurprising—precisely because this same inbuilt apparatus is inherent within us all. Keeping this in mind not only reminds us to have compassion for managers and leaders in higher education who seemingly condone or promote the frenetic pace. It also serves to remind us that we essentially have one collective mind, a mind that has immense capacity for—and that can also hinder—the flourishing of creativity and insight. Ultimately, if unquestioned—and not within our conscious awareness—the dominant fast time activities that are concerned with productivity, efficiency, striving, and doing are all we have—and running on the treadmill simply continues.

The idea of slowing down, sustaining attention, honoring stillness, and integrating meditation and other contemplative practices into our daily lives and teaching is hardly new to those engaged in higher education. By now, for many contemplative educators, such practice is an ordinary and congruent endeavour. Resolving the discrepancies between contemplative pedagogy and

the neoliberal academy remains a challenge, since the academic culture within which we maneuver daily is highly conducive to fast time activities, and not at all to slow time ones. But we must sustain our resolve nonetheless, otherwise change cannot happen. As Robert London describes it, contemplative practices in higher education offer a transformative approach that supports faculty to become holistic educators in “unholistic” settings.<sup>21</sup> This inward-focused endeavour can begin to disrupt the limiting neoliberal structures in higher education from the inside out and from the bottom up.

Ultimately, when we make time and space in higher education for meditation and other contemplative practices within the very fabric of our teaching and learning, beyond an occasional workshop, drop-in session, or wellbeing initiative, we can find that it leads to creativity and insight. Creative solutions may emerge, individually at first, and collectively over time. Unseen connections between familiar known ideas, people, and things become palpable. The same is true for our students. Incidentally, making this time and space likewise enhances our capacity and minimizes our stress during those all-too-common fast time activities as well. In short, drawing upon educational practices that sustain our attention and therefore generate stillness—meditation, contemplation of nature, creating art—teaches our students to quiet the internal mental chatter at the forefront of fast time activities, and to rest in presence-centeredness, in which creativity and insight can flourish. The role of stillness in undergirding meaningful living and embodied action has been and continues to be overlooked in higher education. If we as teachers are willing to commit, beyond our own personal practice, to more fully integrating meditation and contemplative practices of stillness into our teaching lives with our students, we may find precisely what we need in that time and space, hidden in plain sight and waiting to be discovered.

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