Slow Pedagogy for Themed Writing Courses

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Abstract

Within academia, proponents of slow pedagogy advocate for student learning experiences that promote mindful, deliberate reflection and embodied knowledge. The complexity of real-world issues raised in the ELA program's themed content invites an exploration of how slow pedagogy can encourage students to engage in meaningful reflection about these topics in ways that contribute to identity development. This paper explores trends in the slow movement that are salient for developing approaches to teaching themed writing courses. After a brief overview of interdisciplinary slow movement scholarship, I examine the potential value of slow pedagogy for academic writing instruction. Slow pedagogy can offer tools for instructors to rethink normative productivity enforced in fast education and to seek teaching practices that foster students' meaningful engagement with content themes.

In the English for Liberal Arts (ELA) program at ICU, teaching within the constraints of a 10-week term can often feel like a race against time. The ELA curriculum covers a wide range of academic literacy skills, while also engaging students in interdisciplinary themed content. A typical Stream 3 ELA student, for example, will move through three terms with different themes: higher education (Spring), perception, intercultural communication, and social justice (Autumn), and bioethics (Winter). An ongoing challenge among instructors is therefore not only how to balance skills-based and content-based learning within the allotted time, but also how to get students to engage meaningfully with themed material in ways that contribute to developing, as stated in the ELA student handbook, "a sense of individual and cultural identity, and place within the global community."

The need to "slow down" in order to make room for meaningful engagement has been voiced by scholars and practitioners across a variety of fields and industry sectors. Often inspired by the slow food movement, proponents of "slow" approaches in education encourage mindful, reflective, and deliberate modes of work and sense-making, to push back against adverse effects of increasingly fast-paced academic curricular demands. In this paper, I examine exigencies for and potential applications of slow pedagogy in the context of themed writing courses, such as those in the ELA. I draw from literature on slow pedagogy in environmental education, identity development through writing, and critiques of normative pacing in writing classrooms to suggest that slow pedagogy can help instructors create learning conditions that can encourage students' productive engagement with challenging content themes.

In literature on the slow movement, authors often give a nod to Carlo Petrini, whose notion of slow food indicates a context-sensitive approach to cooking and mindful enjoyment of ingredients of diverse climates and changing seasons (Shaw et al., 2013, p. 320). The slow movement has since been taken up across diverse disciplines and sectors. Slow tourism, for

instance, as a critique of unsustainable forms of mass tourism, focuses on quality over quantity of experiences while encouraging travelers to embrace opportunities to "connect with local people and places on a deeper level" (Heitmann et al., 2011, p. 118). Similarly, the slow art movement invites people to take more time to look at, reflect on, and appreciate art more intimately: Slow Art Day, celebrated annually, is based on the notion that "once people slow down and begin to look, then that triggers a curiosity to learn more"—a curiosity that then drives further self-motivated learning, offering a basis for a "fundamentally non-patronizing and radically inclusive" model for enjoying art meaningfully ("About"). These and other offshoots of the slow movement, including slow medicine, slow fashion, slow parenting, and more, align conceptually with Petrini's original philosophy of being cognizant of the value of mindful, deliberate engagement.

The slow movement has also branched into the realm of education, under varying labels such as slow education, slow scholarship, and slow pedagogy. While some specialists have focused on childhood education (Carleson & Clark, 2022), others have examined higher education settings, especially the exhausting effects of the corporatization of university culture, leading to increasing teaching loads, course sizes, and pressures to publish. O'Neill (2014) examines the anxieties associated with scholarly performance in fast academia and its detrimental effects on well-being and knowledge production. She argues that "*slow* might offer a way of thinking and practicing a different way of being, of resisting 'being on all the time' and creating mental space, spaciousness, to think and reflect" (p. 16). Though O'Neill focuses on experiences of faculty, there are clear parallels to students' situations as well. Hartman and Darab (2012) point to how the accelerated nature of institutional settings tend to lead to "speedy pedagogy" which only allow students to "view snapshots rather than the fuller picture, let alone engage in reflection and/or praxis" and disrupts the processes of deep learning (p. 56). In advocating for slow pedagogy, O'Neill (2014) and Harman and Darab (2012) similarly focus on the correlation between *time* and the sort of *mental capaciousness* that is necessary for academic work and creative knowledge production in a university environment.

Contributions from the field of environmental education help bring to light what slow pedagogy might look like in practice. Payne and Wattchow (2008), outdoor educators based in Australia, were drawn to slow pedagogy in response to what they saw as disturbing changes in their teaching environments: streamlined curricula, limited time and resources, standardized programming of outdoor experiential education that focused on abstracted rote learning of skills and a consumerist mentality toward equipment and branded gear, resulting in an increasingly "objectified and instrumentalized" nature backdrops (p. 25). In other words, they feared that "fast" outdoor education curriculums were compromising students' capacities to experience a kind of immersion that leads to the development of a genuine ethic of environmental care and sustainability leadership. Within this "fast" outdoor educational model, nature was merely something to be "'passed through' or 'over' as distinct from 'paused or 'dwelled' in" (p. 25). These concerns spurred them to reimagine their outdoor education course with slow values in mind, to create more opportunities for students to develop a more embodied sense of place and their own relationships to nature. Payne and Wattchow's course featured discussions of assigned readings and activities which followed a cyclical pattern of memory work, theorization, discovery, reflection, representation, and re-theorizing / re-discovery (p. 35). Memory-work asked students to reflect on their prior experiences with nature to help shed light on "the sorts of assumptions and expectations they had developed in the past about being-in-nature via different experiences and preferred activities" (p. 31). In reflective activities, students experimented with various genres and modes of expression beyond academic prose in their

reflections (p. 34). Payne and Wattchow observed a significantly positive shifts in student engagement and embodied sense of place and self.

This brief overview of slow movement scholarship reveals some conceptual overlaps with challenges faced in the ELA, with regards to balancing English academic writing instruction and the content-based terrain of real-world issues. Irrespective of the specific texts assigned, ELA content themes are cognitively, intellectually, and emotionally demanding and have large potential for supporting students' personal growth. Instructors might ask, to what extent are students merely "passing through" or "over" these content themes? In what ways might instructors draw from slow pedagogy to help students "pause" and "dwell" on these topics—and if so, how?

Slow Learning and Writing Instruction

In writing studies, it is commonly acknowledged that students write as an expression of their thoughts *and* as a means of discovering what they think. The acquisition of academic literacy skills thus facilitates students' journeys of self-discovery. Duffy (2014) lists questions students might be prompted to ask themselves as they navigate real-world topics in the writing classroom: "what kind of person do I want to be? How should I live my life? How should I treat others?" (p. 213). When students discuss opinions in groups, annotate readings, express ideas in writing, and support their arguments with evidence, they not only practice various academic skills but concurrently engage in the process of getting to know themselves: thinking about what piques their curiosity and interest, how their life experiences have shaped their perspectives and biases, and how their opinions relate to those of others. As Villanueva (2016) states, "writing provides a means whereby identities are discovered and constituted" (p. 56). Themed writing courses, then, can offer valuable opportunities for students to confront complex real-world issues and think about their positions about matters that may have direct impacts on their lives outside of the classroom.

Within the liberal arts context of ICU, it can be assumed that ELA's content themes are offered through the framework of equality and inclusivity, as indicated, for example, by the university's human rights consultation services and gender-neutral bathrooms on campus. Echoing Winans (2012), academic writing instructors may "desire students to think and live in ways that create a more just, equitable world" (p. 151). In other words, much like an outdoor educator might hope that students develop a more embodied sense of responsibility and care for the environment, writing instructors may hope that students not only improve their academic literacy skills, but also develop interpersonal sensibilities such as empathy and tolerance. The inner work that is required for critical self-reflection and undoing deeply engrained assumptions takes time—as Winans claims, "this work is incredibly slow" (p. 167).

In many respects, process-writing-based courses like ARW contain elements of slow pedagogy. Student-centered classroom activities, one-on-one tutorials, and peer review are examples of practices which appear to align with slow pedagogy approaches. Scaffolded assignments can structurally allow space for students' deep reflection on content topics as they revise their written work from draft to draft. However, scaffolding itself may not necessarily encourage habits of slow thinking. Instructors may hold onto optimistic visions of the contexts in which students write and think: the image of the solitary writer sitting at their desk, with ample time to read and re-read, ponder and contemplate deeply as they compose on the page. While this might describe the conditions of some writers, the reality for many students is far from this ideal, as they juggle challenging workloads, part-time jobs, club activities, and

fluctuations in productivity affected by mental and physical health. Recognizing the time-poor, fast-paced conditions of our students' study environments is a first step toward approaching classroom activities and assignments to encourage more meaningful reflective work.

It is worth examining how pacing of writing assignments, without consideration of students' pacing needs, can inadvertently uphold notions of idealized productivity and interfere with students' deep learning. Instructors must constantly make time-based decisions when scaffolding assignments (e.g., how many days to allow in between drafts) and may draw from prior experience working with certain groups of students to estimate what they may deem a reasonable, fair amount of time to complete the task. However, as Kafer (2013) notes, "expectations of 'how long things take' are based on very particular minds and bodies" (p. 27). In other words, time allotments for assignments hold students up to a singular standard of productivity and idealized student performance. Some writing studies scholars have drawn from the concept of "crip time" from disability literature to critically examine how imposed timelines can run counter to efforts to accommodating diverse students in writing courses. A central aspect of crip time is flexibility, which can serve "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" (Kafer, p. 27). Wood (2017), in her study on students with disabilities in writing classes, reveals students' experiences feeling overwhelmed and left behind by rigid normative time frames in writing courses, unable to think and learn in the ways that would allow them to thrive. Wood encourages instructors to stay flexible with pacing of assignments and allow students to collaboratively negotiate deadlines. Her findings have relevance not only with students who require accommodations, but all students who, for whatever reason, may at certain points of their academic trajectory find it difficult to adhere to dominantly assumed norms of pacing and productivity.

Slow pedagogy can help writing instructors think of alternative frameworks to resist the detrimental effects of fast pedagogy. In recent times, the pandemic has forced us to grapple with disruptions in long-held understandings and perceptions of our own work processes and conditions for productivity. As Freeman (2021) states, "Covid time is "crip time" for the masses." One way to start creating conditions for students to engage in mindful contemplation of content themes, then, is to be critical of how traditional approaches to time and pacing may be antithetical to the kind of inner reflective work we hope students engage in, and to think about how we might adapt certain practices to be more conducive to slow learning.

Implications

How such pedagogical adaptations are taken up would depend on various factors, but here are just a few examples of how slow learning could be incorporated into an academic writing course.

Connections across Terms

A cornerstone of liberal arts education is interdisciplinary thinking. By taking classes across disciplines, students are pushed to consider issues from different disciplinary perspectives and to obtain more holistic understandings of real-world phenomena. Content themes in the ELA, for example, offer rich potential to replicate the kind of interdisciplinary critical thinking that is encouraged more broadly in the liberal arts, and can serve as way to foster habits of slow learning. That is, students can develop an understanding that connections across disciplinary lines are not only possible but a valuable form of knowledge-making. By

asking students to make connections to concepts they learned in previous terms, instructors can reinforce the notion that learning about a subject does not simply end when the term ends, or when the final paper is submitted; rather, each term is just the beginning of their engagement with these topics.

Reflective Exercises

Many courses include writing reflections, though the nature of this reflective work varies by course and by instructor. Given the importance of introspection, reflection, and "memory work" (Payne & Wattchow, 2008) when engaging meaningfully with challenging topics, it is worth thinking about how to avoid assigning reflective writing as mechanical busywork. When designing a reflective activity for class, instructors might ask: What, specifically, do I want students to reflect on, and why? How long is a reasonable amount of time to spend on the reflection? Should it be in written form, or are there other forms of expression that might be conducive to achieving the goals of the reflective task? Literature on contemplative pedagogy (Barbezat & Pingree, 2012) and reflecting about writing processes (Giles, 2010) offers valuable insights to this discussion.

Models of Slow Learning

It is common practice to share samples of student writing to review topics in academic writing, such as paragraph structure and in-text citation format. To model slow learning, instructors can also share student writing to explicitly demonstrate a sample progression and deepening of ideas, from draft to draft, regarding the research topic. This would help convey that the drafting process is not only about students revising to express their ideas more clearly in English, but also about developing and deepening those ideas and working toward a better understanding of their own perspectives. Instructors might also share their own experiences with writing, especially with respect to the time it takes to revise and how the writing process itself contributes to new ideas.

Addressing Fast Education

In some cases, it may be possible to explicitly address fast education as a content topic for discussion. Hearing about a common, stressful experience as something to be theorized in the classroom can be a relief for students and an important way for them to understand how to critique those pressures. Students can be asked to reflect on prior experiences with fast education as well as their current work conditions as college students. Questions can aim to help students reflect on what pacing feels comfortable for them to engage in different tasks, what obstacles they face accessing time and space for meaningful thinking, and preferred study conditions. This should shift the focus to each students' individual learning styles and preferences, away from the usual terms of "time management strategies", which center on meeting deadlines and avoiding procrastination. Students should understand that asking for extensions need not be a sign of "failure" to meet expectations, but of taking responsibility to create optimal conditions for their own learning workflows.

The points listed above are a small sampling of possible applications of slow pedagogy in academic writing instruction. Slow pedagogy invites alternative notions of time management and student work, loosens expectations of how much time intellectual activities "should" take, and offers methods to realistically and effectively encourage students to engage meaningfully with material. It is important to note that slow pedagogy has less to do with the literal slowing of pace than being attuned to how to work against and within time constraints when engaging

in various activities. It recognizes, for example, "the need for the slow tempo of contemplation and reflection *and* the faster energetic rhythms of discovery and research" (Vostal, 2014, p. 88). Applications of slow pedagogy should involve situation-specific adaptations to increase students' potential to engage with content in ways that contribute to creative knowledge production and personal growth. It is thus worth continuing inquiries into how time-deprived conditions impact student learning, and how classrooms can offer students the mental space they need to engage in deeper thinking that makes academic work fulfilling and meaningful.

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