



Opinion

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National Teaching Fellow (NTF) James Derounian Counterpoints Two Books that Set Down Differing Paths Towards Learning Development

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Introduction

"Fee-paying parents expect a return for their money in terms of a sound qualification, senior management at universities desire excellent results from the National Student Survey, while employers wish to be satisfied that new graduate recruits are appropriately skilled for meeting the demands of the twenty-first-century workplace" [1]. It's against this backdrop that I would encourage learning developers to read Iain Hay [2], then in the spirit of the title, to meditate on Berg and Seeber's Berg M, Seeber BK [3] clarion call for *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*.

Here's a quote from Hay I [2], around "the world, university scholars are struggling to satisfy the many and often growing demands placed upon them...everywhere it seems there are and more strident expectations to teach more students better; to more fully engage with professional and social communities; to publish high-quality books and papers and more of them; to get more grant money and to otherwise develop and then maintain ceaselessly a stellar career"! It's exhausting just reading this list and of course - superpowers (academic or otherwise) don't actually exist. Hay's thesis seems to be that you can have it all, as a learning developer: stellar career, unblemished relationships, manageable parenting and eldercare. At times Prof Hay's work seems to play to the idea of employee resilience, so that productivity does not dip. So, it is with some relief, to turn Berg and Seeber's 2016 book which seeks to extend "Slow principles to academia".

As a youthful 62-year-old who has been in academe for 25+ years, the idea of a measured approach has great appeal! It also brings to mind a slow cooker we used to have which you set going the night before, in order to enjoy a meal 24 hours later! The forward sets the irreverent tone; in which Stefan Collini (page x)

urges us to "explore our thinking more, and only publish when we are sure we have something worth saying". Ouch - but well said! He goes on to echo the authors' exhortation "to pleasure in doing what we do...to be more open-handed with our ideas, our support... Building real collegiality" (ibid. pxii). Learning development surely is for all - satisfying development for staff, quality teaching for, and engagement with, students; application of evidence-based learning to tackle real-world problems and opportunities.

Most important the *Slow Professor* represents an anti-venom to capitalist poisoning: a manifesto urging learning developers in HE to adopt "the principles of Slow into our professional practice" on the basis that it "is an effective way to alleviate work stress, preserve humanistic education, and resist the corporate university" (xvii).

Given my own background in community development and enabling citizens - whether members of the public, students or staff to influence decisions directly affecting them - I am very struck by Berg and Seeber's emphasis on their publication as "a self-help book"; that features chapters focusing on and advocating "Collegiality and community" (chapter 4) and "Collaboration and Thinking Together" (the Conclusion). They go to quote Csikszentmihalyi's work on "flow": that is "an optimal state of inner experience in which there is order in consciousness" that "makes us better people". The experience of timelessness fires creativity which in turn leads to a sense of timelessness. A virtuous circle.

The authors deal with practical, and very personal issues, admitting that the "most stressful moments are waiting for the previous teacher to...finish talking to his students"; and "I am a nervous teacher, but I've learned to accept it" (41). pausing, breathing, laughing and listening are also discussed - with

suggestions! And “pacing” – which I do. definitely a polar bear in a zoo! On p51 they cite the university of google: “Affirmation of standards may mask an imperative for homogeneity”. This book will make a wonderful focus for discussion, and I would encourage learning development colleagues to read this book, back-to-back with Prof. Iain Hay’s 2017 work, how to be an ACADEMIC SUPERHERO. The Slow authors also dip into fiction, novels like the hilarious Moo (1995) by Jane Smiley. Which features a researcher who has created a robot cast adrift in the university’s swimming pool; in order to test (human) reactions to isolation. Cutting a long story short, the automaton throws itself into the water, thus destroying a lifetime’s data and research! Darkly comic but pointing to the uselessness of some academic research.

My only quibble would be the claim that this is a feminist ‘take’ on learning development. On p63 it is claimed that the humanities and social sciences are undervalued (I teach aspects of the latter) and that this “has a deleterious gender component”? I have no problem with the likely poor valuing...but for me this would cover men and women. Likewise (66) they lambast the idea of a 3-minute thesis explanation. But I am with Shakespeare on this – “Brevity is the soul of wit.”; or as an allied point - and attributed to Einstein - “genius is taking the complex and making it simple”. In this regard, I would reserve a special place in Hell for postmodernist writers who seem to take intelligible ideas and obfuscate them. So, the poor reader becomes like a miner, in spending a longtime digging through mountains of slag to gain the odd nugget.

I was particularly taken with chapter 4 on Collegiality and Community. In which Berg and Seeber pull no punches: Looking out

and looking after colleagues is perceived by the ‘system’ as wasted time. They go on to note wryly that “Dean’s reports tend not to have sections with headings such as ‘helping a colleague’ ‘offering support’ or expressing enthusiasm for a colleague’s new research project” (72). They set down some wonderful truisms such as (84) if “you want an event to be joyless, make it mandatory”!

In conclusion, quoting Petrini, Slowness should not be seen as “slow versus fast – but rather between attention and distraction; slowness, in fact, is not so much a question of duration as an ability to distinguish and evaluate, with the propensity to cultivate pleasure, knowledge, and quality”. (89/90). I encourage all learning development staff – in universities and colleges across the globe - to read this insightful and challenging book.

Acknowledgment

None.

Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest.

References

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