

Slow learning: reflective scholarship in a time of mobilities and transitions

Patricia A. Gouthro
Mount Saint Vincent University, Canada

*I'm in a hurry to get things done
Oh I rush and rush until life's no fun
All I really gotta do is live and die,
But I'm in a hurry and don't know why.*

Alabama

Introduction

The first time you view the world from the window of a high speed train, it can be disorienting. The landscape flies by. Hills, fields, cows, trees – all pass in a blur. Sensory information flits into consciousness and then dissipates. So must the world have seemed when first viewed from the window of a Model T Ford travelling twenty miles an hour down a dirt road.

In the same way as technology has radically changed travel, lifelong education is now approached at high speed. Accelerated courses, prior learning assessment, and distance delivery are all utilized to ensure that students can more rapidly accumulate academic credentials.

This, we are assured, is progress. Having more people assigned additional credentials ensures that the economy, and therefore the broader society, will benefit. Education is all about competition, ensuring that the strongest will thrive.

As a theme for this conference, Transitions and Mobilizations characterizes the often hectic pace of change that seems endemic to late modern society. Robertson & Keeling (2008: 232) argue that 'higher education has become regarded as a critical 'motor' for national and regional competitiveness in the global economy, and a global battle has begun for the minds and markets to support this'. Innovations in technology are changing the way that education is being 'delivered' – as though it can be understood as a UPS package that needs to arrive swiftly on your doorstep – whilst universities across the globe are checking out the markets, both to draw in international students and to export their educational programs. The emphasis on credentials means that both individuals and nation-states worry about how to produce more of them, and always there is a sensation of the clock ticking – if one does not hurry up, then one will fall behind.

Sometimes speed is a good thing. We are all happier when a flight takes less time than scheduled because the headwinds are working in our favour. Taking into account the complexity of people's lives and competing demands on their time by offering them creative alternatives to continue their educational experiences makes sense.

Yet it is important to realize that a valuable part of learning is the journey itself. To truly appreciate the beauty of a small village, you cannot flash past it at a train crossing. You have to get out, spend some time there, walk the streets, talk to the people, admire the architecture, poke down narrow alleyways, and learn about the history. The longer you spend, the more you are likely to learn and to appreciate the character of a particular place. The fastest way through a town is rarely the most interesting.

In this paper I want to explore this notion that lifelong learning should be conceived of as an interesting journey for both learners and educators. I begin with an overview of how changes in mobilities and transitions provide new opportunities for education and then discuss how neoliberal values have impacted on current learning contexts. I point out some of the concerns with emphasizing speed if it compromises the potential to savour the richness of educational experiences. I then consider how lessons from the slow movement may be useful to take up in a lifelong learning context and explore some strategies for educators to consider regarding the benefits of 'slow learning'.

Change, mobilities, and transitions

Change, and the need to be able to adapt to it, has been a central characteristic of discourses in lifelong learning since the time of the Faure et al. (1972) report, *Learning to Be*. As Zhao & Biesta (2012, p. 333) note, there has been 'an emphasis, at least within policy discourse, on modes of lifelong learning that facilitate adaptation to changing socioeconomic conditions'. Understanding change in relation to mobilities and transitions draws attention to some of the central debates in adult education in late modern society.

Mobilities and transitions in lifelong learning can allude to a number of different possibilities for change. Glastra, Hake & Schedler (2004, p. 292) note that globalization 'entails the increase in mobility as witnessed, for example, in the international financial markets, on the Internet, and in migration processes'. Opportunities for mobility in a globalized context also means that many educators and learners are less restricted than they were in the past by geographical location. For example, for twelve years I taught our Master's program in Adult Education/Lifelong Learning on-site in Kingston, Jamaica, while still residing and working in Canada. My colleagues and I would take turns teaching courses whereby twice a semester we would fly out on a Thursday, teach all day Friday and all day Saturday, and fly home again on Sunday or Monday. This enabled our students, most of whom were women, and most of whom were single mothers, to remain and work their own community while furthering their education through a degree that was not otherwise available at the time in Jamaica. As I noted in a previous paper (Gouthro, 2004, p. 455), one Jamaican student summarized these benefits: 'so the fact that I could work and do the course was attractive...one, I didn't

have to leave my husband, two, I didn't have to quit my job and then search for a scholarship.' In addition to having on-site classes, emerging technologies such as the internet and on-line database provided our students with resources that previously were not accessible to them. So certainly, having opportunities for faculty and/or students to travel and to access information quickly has transformed and in many instances enriched possibilities for engaging in lifelong learning.

Neoliberalism and learning contexts

Although changes in educational format and delivery enable opportunities for learning in new ways, the growing influence of neoliberal values that emphasize individuality, competition, and the needs of the marketplace are shifting learning contexts for adult educators and their students. In their analysis of UK literacy policies, for example, Appleby & Bathmaker (2006, p. 708) argue that over time 'there is a gradual policy shift toward privileging skills acquisition for national economic performance, at the expense of an entitlement to lifelong learning'. They note (p.709) that a part of the motivation for this is to 'enable a transition from industries of the past to the knowledge and information economy of the future'.

Critical educators believe neoliberal influences often encourage a reductionist approach to adult education. Within this framework, lifelong learning becomes, as Grace (2007, p. 87) says 'a socioeconomic cure-all'. If the emphasis for learning is primarily on skills acquisition to adapt to the fluctuating needs of the economy, this may drive decisions, for example, to offer credentials through prior learning assessment, to utilize distance technologies for course delivery, and compress academic programs into tightly packaged modules that can be tailored to learners (or employer's) expressed 'needs'. Justification for these changes often focus on the belief that in order to be competitive, societies need to have more people with higher qualifications, so strategies are required to 'upskill' workers quickly.

Certainly the quality of time spent on learning matters as much or more as the amount of time. In their examination of learning and life course transitions, Evans, School & Weale (2013, p.37) draw upon the work of Biesta (2011) to 'explore 'ecological' understandings of aging through the life course, [to] argue that it is the quality of involvement of lifelong learning that determines how learning might influence life chances, through its effects on identity development, personal agency and action'. Learning that requires individuals to reflect upon important matters, to develop greater insights into motivations and reasons for behaviour, and enhance their capacity for critical thought, may have a more positive impact upon an individual's ability to negotiate transitions throughout their lifespan. Various kinds of 'deep learning' may 'keep people mobile and employable rather than increases in qualifications *per se* and its recognition in the labour market'. Instead of concentrating on developing narrowly defined skill sets to meet predetermined educational outcomes, therefore, it might be wiser to consider how to create educational experiences that foster this deeper form of engagement in learning.

Brookfield (2003) argues that it is too simplistic to critique accelerated learning courses simply because of the perception that they are driven primarily by marketplace objectives – getting students through a program faster to draw in more clients, and therefore more income. Disputing the idea that condensed programs that require less class time are automatically poorer in quality, he argues that they may instead foster more time spent on individual reflection and self-directed learning. Brookfield (2003, p. 74) makes the valid point that ‘if an adult learning environment is characterized by incompetence, duplicity, narrow-mindedness, confusion, or an abuse of power, extending the amount of time learners spend in this environment does nothing in and of itself to address or change these factors’. Learning can happen independently as well as collaboratively.

While dialogue and debate are an intrinsic and important part of most adult education contexts, quietly reading and reflecting upon a well-written book may indeed be an often undervalued aspect of adult learning. Michael Collins’ (1995) *Adult Education as a Vocation* is a beautifully written text that makes one reflect on the reasons for choosing a career path as an adult educator. Michael Newman’s (2006) *Teaching Defiance* sets forth an elegant argument that it’s worth fighting for a different kind of world. Reading a fictional novel, such as the classic *Frankenstein* (2002; c.1818) by Mary Shelley or more contemporary *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) by Khaled Hosseini can raise important questions about social relationships, inclusion, technology, and violence.

But the problem for many of us is finding the time to engage in any kind of meaningful learning, regardless of whether it is quiet reading and solitary contemplation, or a lively and engaged dialogue. As a ‘push-back’ to the constant sense of urgency created by a frenetic global economy and the social, technical, and cultural obliteration of traditional ways of producing, preparing and consuming food, the Slow Food movement has gradually gained momentum and broader-scale social interest (Honoré, 2004). Retaining traditional recipes and methods of cooking, supporting local food producers at farmer’s markets, and taking time to linger over a meal and converse with friends, are all important components of this movement. The Slow Movement has broadened out into other areas, such as considering how we should design our cities, and it may also have important lessons for us to consider as adult educators.

Considering ‘slow learning’

Transitions and mobilizations are terms that capture the essence of a world rushing on fast-forward. In our roles as educators and students in lifelong learning we are deluged with information about events, activities and publications, and are constantly bombarded with requests to attend to seemingly trivial, yet urgently requested, tasks and questions. Life becomes a series of constant interruptions. Plumb (1999: 157) argues that ‘the shallow and fragmented temporality of contemporary society militates against those social and cultural adult education processes that strive to foster an understanding of historical connection, a capacity for deep remembrance, or an illuminating spark of imagination’. Similarly, Willmott, a councillor of Leicester City Council, argues that we need to draw upon the wisdom of the pioneers in adult education who recognized the

importance of lifelong learning from a holistic perspective, 'valuing both learning for work and skills and learning for personal, social and cultural growth' (p. 26).

Yet increasingly academic work is shaped by narrowly construed concepts of productivity, which determine how we manage our time as scholars. At the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE) conference I am joining a symposium of current and past journal editors to explore how metrics are impacting upon academic scholarship (Nesbit *et al*, 2013). Assessments of 'quality' around scholarship frequently involve bibliometrics, whereby journals are quantitatively ranked. As academics, our levels of scholarly productivity are calculated increasingly on a quantitative basis, according to the number of papers we publish, how high a particular journal ranks, and how often our work is cited (in particular journals). Smeyers & Burbules (2011, p. 1) note that the world of academic scholarship is being radically transformed in that 'what we are witnessing is a broad-scale quantification for scholarship, with fundamental implications for future trends in both publishing and academic employment'. The problem with this narrow, technical-rational approach to assessing academic productivity is that it constrains our understanding of the purpose of academic scholarship. The editorial board for *Antipode* (2011, p. 190) argue that 'the repercussions of adopting the "impact factor" might be severe. It stifles risk-taking scholarship and creative thinking, rewarding a production-line mentality that undermines academic work quality'.

As adult educators we cannot slow the entire world down, nor would we necessarily want to. Technology has many benefits, as well as drawbacks. Taking a four hour train ride instead of an eight hour one may allow us more time at our next destination. Often we need to be expedient and strategic about work and education.

But what we might want to think about is the importance of sometimes learning slowly. Holt (2002, p. 269) discusses his ideal of a 'slow school' for children and youth as 'a place where understanding matters more than coverage' and where 'the intellectual space for scrutiny, argument and resolution' would be fostered. The sounds like a Habermasian approach to communication and learning, that resonates with critical scholars. For those of us who value the importance of theory to inform our work, we realize that this kind of deeper learning around complex ideas and concepts takes extensive concentration and reflection, as well as dialogue with others. In a previous paper, Holloway & Gouthro (2011), my SSHRC (Social Science and Research Council) collaborator and I note there is often resistance to engage with critical theories because of the difficulty and amount of time required for this kind of scholarship.

A slow learning approach to scholarship might be taken up in a variety of ways that on the surface may not seem to be expedient or purposeful. Yet in an interesting paper examining the research of three high achieving scholars working in different areas, Rathunde (2009, p. 88) notes that one commonality was that each person believed in giving themselves free mental space on a regular basis, or 'allowing some unhurried time each day for solitude and not getting anxious about the fact that time was being used for seemingly unproductive purpose'. Pacing one's work by taking breaks for a

walk or to run errands, or do some other seemingly unrelated activity, was often beneficial in terms of sustaining long-term focus and engagement in one's work and enabling creativity to surface.

If we were to think about what slow learning might look like, it might involve reading a book not directly related to a course or a research project that provokes an exploration of new theoretical ideas or methodological approaches. Fictional novels may also be a valuable resource for learning in a wide range of contexts, given the way novels can mentally transport us to other places, investigate complex social issues, and stimulate new ideas and discussions.

Slow learning could involve chatting with colleagues or students about research instead of corresponding solely by email. Last year I started a new collaboration with a colleague who visited for a week. As we ambled along the picturesque streets of Mahone Bay and drank coffee on a deck overlooking the Lunenburg Harbour, we discussed approaches to doing scholarly work, ideas around theory, and thoughts about possible directions that our research could take. Having time to talk about ideas face-to-face in a leisurely fashion can help forge deeper understandings of what others are thinking. In a current research study, I look at conferences as learning sites, noting that they often provide excellent opportunities for students and faculty to engage in informal as well as formal learning. Relaxed conversations during a whisky tasting social may prove to be more valuable in terms of learning than listening to a carefully crafted keynote address!

Volunteering to teach in the community may introduce one to a whole new and different set of learners. I recently taught a course set up in partnership between my university and the local library on *The Making of Mystery* which led me to delve more deeply into the learning processes that writers go through in developing their craft. Preparing for the classes and answering questions raised by participants frequently challenged me to look at my research in new ways. But one of the most memorable learning experiences of that class was a sad encounter that I had with a former graduate student who came out one day because she saw I was teaching that course. She told me that she was suffering from a terminal illness. Talking with her was a sharp reminder of one of the most important lessons any of us can learn – we only have so much time in this life, so we need to use it wisely.

In her thought-provoking book, *Composing a Life*, Bateson (1989, p. 169) notes that we all 'live in two different economies, one an economy of finite resources, the other an economy of flexible and expanding resources'. Some activities both absorb and generate energy, such as raising children. The same might be said of the work of a scholar. Sometimes it is exhausting and draining, whilst other times it is stimulating and energizing. This suggests that as adult educators we need to consider the types of work that we find meaningful and invest our time and energies into these activities, even if it seems to slow us down. It may be the only way we can keep moving forward.

References

- Appleby, Y. & Bathmaker, AM. (2006). 'The new skills agenda: increased lifelong learning or sites of inequality'. *British Educational Research Journal*. 32, 5, pp. 703-717.
- Bateson MC (1989) *Composing a Life*, New York, The Atlantic Monthly Press.
- Brookfield SD (2003) 'A Critical Theory Perspective on Accelerated Learning', *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*. 97, 73-82.
- Biesta G *et al.* (2011) *Improving Learning through the Lifecourse: Learning Lives*, Abingdon, Routledge.
- Collins M (1995) *Adult Education as a Vocation: A Critical Role for Adult Educators*, London, Routledge.
- Cynical Geographers Collective: The Editors. (2011). 'Measuring Impact Beyond Academic Fame: An Alternative Social Impact Factor'. *Antipode*, 43, 2, pp. 190-194.
- Evans K, Schoon I, & Weale H (2013). Can Lifelong Learning Reshape Life Chances? *British Journal of Educational Studies*. 61(1) 25-47.
- Faure E, Herrera F, Kaddoura AR, Lopes H, Petrovsky AV, Rahnema M & Ward FC (1972) *Learning to be: The world of education today and tomorrow*. Paris, France, UNESCO.
- Glastra FJ, Hake BJ & Schedler PE (2004) 'Lifelong Learning as Transitional Learning', *Adult Education Quarterly*, 54, 4, 291-307.
- Gouthro PA (2004) 'Assessing power issues in Canadian and Jamaican women's experiences in learning via distance in higher education', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 9,4, pp. 449-461.
- Grace AP (2007). 'Envisioning a critical social pedagogy of learning and work in a contemporary culture of cyclical lifelong learning', *Studies in Continuing Education*, 29, 1, 85-103.
- Holloway SM & Gouthro PA (2011) 'Teaching resistant novice educators to be critically reflective' *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*. 32, 1, 29-41.
- Holt M (2002) 'It's Time to Start the Slow School Movement', *Phi Delta Kappan*, 84, 4, 254-272.
- onore C (2004) *In Praise of Slow: How a worldwide movement is challenging the cult of speed*, Toronto, ON, Vintage Canada, Random House.
- Hosseini K (2007). *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Toronto, Ontario, Penguin.
- Nesbit T, Taylor EW, Plumb D, Holford J, Gouthro P, Roche S, Osborne M, Crowther J, Dirx J (2013) 'Adult Education Journals in Metric Times: Editors' Perspectives' *Proceedings of the 32nd Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education Conference*, Victoria, BC.
- Newman M (2006). *Teaching Defiance: Stories and Strategies for Activist Educators*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.
- Plumb D (1999) 'Adult Education in a World "On Speed"', *Studies in Continuing Education*, 21,2, 141-161.
- Robertson SL & Keeling R (2008) 'Stirring the lions: Strategy and tactics in global higher education', *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 6,3, pp. 221-240.
- Rathunder K (2009). *Experiential Wisdom and Optimal Experience*. *Journal of Adult Development*.
- Shelley M (2002; c. 1818). *Frankenstein*. London, England, Penguin.

Smeyers P & Burbules, NC (2011) 'How to Improve Your Impact Factor: Questioning the Quantification of Academic Quality', *Journal of Philosophy and Education*. 45,1, pp. 1-17.

Willmott, R. (2010). Lifelong learning at the heart of all we do. *Adults Learning*. 21(6), 24-26.

Zhao K & Biesta G (2012) 'The Moral Dimension of Lifelong Learning: Giddens, Taylor, and the 'Reflexive Project of the Self'', *Adult Education Quarterly*, 62, 4, pp. 332-350.

*This paper builds on a previous editorial that I wrote which was published in the *International Journal of Lifelong Education* (2012),