Exploring Slow Teaching with an Interdisciplinary Community of Practice

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Abstract:

This paper presents the results of a year-long intentional community of practice grounded in the principles of Slow Teaching. The overarching focus on how to occupy time in the classroom more attentively to foster deep learning guided the group's reflective examination of their instructional choices. Group members, all from different disciplines and at different stages of their careers, met bi-monthly to share the effects of implementing new pedagogical practices and to offer insight and supportive feedback to one another. Members experienced more flexibility and responsiveness to students in the classroom, and increased freedom and trust to make deliberate decisions about their teaching based on the needs of learners.

Key Words:

community of practice, slow teaching, interdisciplinary, pedagogy

Introduction

Many faculty members in higher education today face an on-going challenge in their teaching: how to balance best practices in learner-centered pedagogy with the simultaneous pressures posed by information-dense curricula. At my own institution, a coeducational, private, Jesuit university, these concerns surfaced when I sent out a survey to faculty in December of 2014 to solicit ideas for workshops in the following

year. When I asked faculty to "describe the teaching issue or practice you would most like to see addressed," one answer stood out: "How to teach less." As the faculty developer on our campus, I invited colleagues to join an intentional community of practice that would reflectively examine what teaching less might look like (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

We know that "bulimic learning" is far too common for our students: "It is often clear that many of our own students...memorize the material, 'regurgitate' it on the exams, and forget it so promptly and completely that no mental nourishment remains" (Nelson, 2001). Both figuratively and literally, what better way to address this problem than adopting a "slow" approach, based on the work of Carlos Petrini and the Slow Food Movement? "Slow" means being "calm, careful, receptive, still, intuitive, unhurried, patient, reflective, quality-over-quantity. It is about making real and meaningful connections—with people, culture, work, food, everything" (Honoré, 2004, pp.14-15). In an educational context, "Slow" represents an antidote to covering more and more information. In fact, the tenets of the Slow Food Movement had already been gaining traction in the academy, and this, we decided, would be the organizing principle of our community of practice.

At the interest meeting in May of 2015, a week before commencement, we began by watching a video on the [craft of bicycle making](#) that helped us think about our topic from an analogous perspective (Watson, 2013). Featured bike builder, Stephen Bilenky, views frame-building as an art, but he does not romanticize it. Instead he emphasizes the hard work that is inherent in the process: "making things takes work and concentration…it only comes through the hard work of just doing it." Bilenky's craft involves an intentional gesture to *slow down*, a reminder that came to characterize all of our subsequent meetings. It also complemented our first set of shared readings which included "Speed Kills" (Taylor, 2014) and "The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy" published here in *Transformative Dialogues* (Berg & Seeber, 2013).

Of the 10 faculty members who expressed interest, three colleagues and I made the commitment to meet on a bi-monthly basis for the entire 2015-2016 academic year. We were a multi-disciplinary group from nursing, psychology, nutrition, and literature, representing tenured professors, those on the tenure track, and professional staff at a Carnegie Class master's-large university in the northeastern United States. Teaching loads ranged from 1 to 4 classes per semester with class sizes between 10 and 38 students. We all agreed on two common goals: to become more intentional in our teaching and to adopt pedagogical practices that would foster deep learning.

We decided on the following process: we would each implement new instructional strategies that met our needs, share the results with one another in meetings, and offer supportive feedback. Our community of practice was a safe place for discussion, for trial and error, and for exploring new ideas. In the following sections, each member uses retrospective narrative to reflect on her experiences in a specific course or courses, and on how this community of practice enhanced her teaching identity.

The focus in Slow Teaching on "balance, reflection, and deliberation" in order to "occupy time more attentively" (Shaw, Cole, & Russell, 2013, p. 327) also corresponds

in important ways with how the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning seeks to make "the private work of the classroom visible, talked about, studied, built upon, and valued" (Huber & Hutchings, 2005, p. ix). We wanted to bring our classroom experiences into a public space of examination precisely so that we could be in dialogue with peers about how to be more intentional about student learning. In other words, we used a slow approach in our community of practice as much as we did in our classrooms, and as a result engaged in "slow" teaching and learning simultaneously as teachers **and** as adaptive expert learners ourselves.

Teaching Thinking in a Nursing Course

I have been a nurse educator for nearly 23 years. The announcement of the Slow Teaching group intrigued me because my discipline, like many in the health sciences, struggles with "content saturation" (Giddens & Brady, 2007, p. 65) and the "additive curriculum" (Ironside, 2004). A leading thinker in nursing education once quipped that the nursing curriculum for the 21st century looked more like the 21 year curriculum (Tanner, 1998), and her observation continues to be on point nearly twenty years later.

I came to the experience thinking particularly of the course I teach for juniors at the undergraduate level. Having had formal role preparation in nursing education in my master's program, I wrestle with the tension between wanting to give the students opportunities for active, deep learning while satisfying my own need to address the learning outcomes, thus exposing students to all of the material necessary for them to pass the nurse licensing examination. In nursing, the literature addressing content overload and saturation often calls for curriculum reform (Giddens & Brady, 2007), but I came to the group hoping to learn strategies I could employ in my own classroom to teach thinking (Ironside, 2004). Also, because I am visibly involved in our university's assessment efforts, I wanted to re-engage with my own teaching.

Being at mid-career, I enjoyed membership in a group comprised of both experienced and younger colleagues. Despite our different academic disciplines, we share similar struggles to make our classes meaningful. I jokingly referred to our meetings as "group" (group therapy) because, for me, there was a cathartic quality of being able to share frustrations and triumphs in a safe space. I can sum up my experience in two concepts, awareness and trust.

As a result of participation in the group, I did not introduce any major innovations into my course but, rather, more intentionally embraced strategies I had already incorporated. I strove to maintain an awareness of the speed of my classes and the nonverbal behaviors of my students. I had already instituted short frequent breaks, instead of one long break, during the nearly three-hour class period. I recommitted to this practice but gave breaks as soon as I could see and feel waning attention or information overload. In the past, I would often try to fit in "one more thing" or insist upon completing a topic before breaking, even though I was cognizant that the students probably were not absorbing the information.

I also approached students' questions in a more deliberate manner. I used to worry that questions would get us "off track" and would answer them or help the students to answer them and move on. During my participation in the Slow Teaching group, I

started asking myself and, sometimes, the students, if a question was simply the need for clarification or diagnostic of a more fundamental misunderstanding. Also, I more frequently asked students to share relevant stories and examples from their clinical experiences, and this is where trust came in. I had to listen attentively for concepts or points I could weave into that day's material, with the conviction of my own expertise. I attended to what was most important in a student's narrative so I could highlight those points for the rest of the group. This sometimes meant having to ask questions of the student who was relating the story or incident. To do this well, I had to be fully present without watching the clock from the corner of my eye.

Benner and colleagues (2009) discussed nursing's tendency to teach using classifications and taxonomies, which are linear. We do this primarily to manage the vast amount of material the students must know. As a result, departing from the taxonomies often creates anxiety for the nursing professor. I have always liked to incorporate the drawing of conceptual maps and diagrams, because some of the concepts are not linear and represent processes that are happening simultaneously. So this year, I spent more time drawing with the students and gave them colored paper and pens to use at their places while I drew on the document camera. Because of the time-consuming nature of this activity, I had to trust that the students could independently review some of the more straightforward aspects of the topics, using their deeper knowledge of the conceptual material. Three students specifically mentioned this activity in my teaching evaluation. One wrote, "The diagrams about diabetes and heart failure really helped me to get a better understanding of the material."

Finally, with encouragement from my Slow Teaching colleagues, I reinstituted the practice of "cold calling" on students (Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2006). I have always used questioning as a strategy but found myself calling on the same volunteers because I worried about whether or not cold calling is stressful for students, particularly those who are less outgoing. So I told the students I would be calling on them but that they had the opportunity to "pass" if they did not know or want to answer. Much to my delight, I received positive feedback on this practice both in my mid-semester formative teaching evaluation, which I administer voluntarily, and on the final teaching evaluation administered by the university. One student wrote that the cold calling created the necessity to pay attention. I admit that "paying attention" does not necessarily imply a sustaining learning experience and might simply reflect a desire not to be caught unaware. I will need continued experience with this technique to know for certain.

In summary, the readings we shared, particularly at the beginning of the Slow Teaching group, validated my own instinct to slow down and even simplify in my course were grounded in evidence from the cognitive sciences. I learned to trust my intuition, informed by many years in the classroom and clinical setting, and was able to create a classroom conducive to situated learning. I found evidence of success in students' evaluation of my teaching, particularly the following comment: "she really made an effort to keep the class engaged and break down the heavy course work into a manageable presentation of information."

"Uncoverage" in an Introduction to Poetry Course

The formation of the Slow Teaching group coincided with a change in the course I would be teaching in the English department that forced me to confront "coverage" issues. In the previous two years, I had been teaching a writing-intensive Introduction to Literature course that addressed three genres (poetry, drama, and fiction), where "coverage" was less of a concern than the focus on writing. Starting in the 2015-2016 academic year, however, I would be teaching Introduction to Poetry, where I felt greater pressure to cover *as much* poetry as possible. Poetry is also my favorite genre to teach, and thus some of my design choices sprang from my own love of the material and excitement about teaching it.

Implementing a Slow Teaching approach in this course did not radically affect my instructional methods (outlined below) which are well-honed and have proven highly effective in over more than 25 years of teaching experience. Rather, for me the biggest change was about pace and focus, or what has been called "uncoverage" (Shaw, Cole, & Russell, 2013, p. 324).

In this Introduction to Poetry course, the first few weeks are spent reading carefully selected poems which help students gain familiarity with a single formal element (such as speaker, tone, imagery, metaphor, etc.). I do not use a textbook; instead, I choose and post the poems in our Learning Management System. After this introductory section of the course, we read from thematic anthologies, using a more holistic approach to explore how all of the formal elements work together to convey meaning. As I explain to my students, poetry lovers rarely pick up textbooks produced for teaching college courses; rather, people interested in poetry read anthologies on issues they are passionate about, or volumes of poetry by poets who they have come to admire. This year, I chose *Holocaust Poetry* (Schiff, 1995) and Li-Young Lee's award-winning first volume of poetry, *Rose* (1986).

More important than what we read is **how** we read. I ask students to interact with a poem prior to class, and then as a group we use these initial impressions, responses, and questions to work toward a better understanding of what might be going on in the text. From the very first class, students discover that they are essential contributors, and that it is our interaction together with the text in class that will result in learning. The written assignments students complete are not full-blown essays requiring a full understanding of the poem, but targeted questions that give them practice with a specific formal element or a particular kind of observation, all designed to help them become more adept readers. This "low stakes" writing then becomes the springboard for discussing the poem in small groups where they are asked to solve some larger interpretive question.

My teaching journal from the fall semester points to two pivotal moments: by week four, I realized that I had assigned too many poems per class, and by week ten I realized that I had included too many projects. In the first case, it became clear that there was not enough time for students to discern important details in the text or to process and wrestle with differing perspectives. Starting in week five, I therefore cut the number of poems per class so that there was more time for "conscious, deep, and deliberate processing" (Shaw, Cole, & Russell, 2013, p. 327). I remember the feeling of

relief when I shared my decision with the Slow Teaching group, and I especially appreciated the support I felt when my colleagues affirmed my plan. As much as this small change helped, however, it did not solve the larger issue of too many class periods being devoted to the team project.

It was not until I re-designed the spring version of the course that I was able to fully apply both Slow Teaching insights I had gained in the fall. I eliminated a poetry anthology project, worth 30% of the final grade, which required students to work in designated teams for the entire semester to create their own poetry anthology: deciding on a theme, researching and selecting poems, writing an introduction, etc. Despite the project's value and alignment with the course goals, doing it well required more time than we had. Deleting this project in the spring increased the number of days we were able to spend on both the *Holocaust Poetry* anthology and Li-Young Lee's *Rose*, resulting in deeper attention to each poem we read. We never had to rush through our discussion and analysis, and I was able to spend more time with each group to listen to their shared ideas, pose additional questions, and complicate some of their conclusions.

My students' work and their reflection papers reveal a sense of appreciation for both books that was not apparent in the fall. First, students in the spring semester did significantly better on the mid-term exam which required them to analyze a theme across multiple poems in *Holocaust Poetry*. In the spring, a much higher percentage of students scored in the A range (63%) than in the fall (47%), and far fewer students (3%) scored in the C range or below than did in the fall (21%). In addition, as we approached the final few weeks of the semester, students had to reflect on their achievement of their personal learning goals, and it was here that I could fully see the benefits of having more time. One student noted that "the Holocaust poetry wasn't enjoyable in the strictest sense because of its subject matter but it was nonetheless beautiful. It is *Rose* though that has my full attention. The way he describes things and paints pictures is nothing short of brilliant. I really care about the material, understanding it, and pouring myself into the assignments." Another student pointed to how our attention to the formal elements in poetry was supporting the development of analytical skills more generally: "Learning metaphors, similes, and symbols also is lending itself to my new analysis skills. I never really learned how to pick out these literary components in the meticulous way that we do in class. Our practice with analyzing these has made me come to understand and appreciate the way the poet sets up the poem. The exercise we did in class on April 19…showed me that listening to my group member's perspectives on the different metaphors brought an entire new meaning to what I thought were useless lines in the poem." Across these reflections, students described how they no longer felt "intimidated" by poetry, and almost all could point to concrete examples of their ability to understand a poem's complexity.

Although the decision to reduce the number of poems assigned per class meeting and to cut an entire project from the course in the spring would not seem to represent a monumental change in my teaching, it had profound effects on the learning experience for students, and an equally significant one for me: I was making intentional decisions not based on perceived external pressure to appear "rigorous," but on what I knew would be the best decisions for learners. This was the essence of my uncoverage.

Intentional Teaching in Psychology Courses

The call for faculty interested in a community of practice focused on Slow Teaching greatly appealed to me as I finished yet another semester with syllabi that were too ambitious. Many of the courses I teach, introductory 100- and 200-level psychology courses, are survey courses that are easily overloaded with content. I aim to create an interactive classroom in these courses to engage students more in the material. As a result, I feel pressure (mostly self-induced) to do more and include more every class period. I often end the semester rushing to cover all of the originally planned material while at the same time trying to incorporate innovative active learning techniques. This information overload often results in students not having time to fully process the information or to get the most out of the active learning activities. I realized that this was not what I wanted students to experience in my classroom nor was it what I wanted to experience in my teaching. Adopting a Slow Teaching approach allowed me to slow down, be reflective, and find areas to make small changes that would improve my courses.

My initial goal in joining this group was to become more intentional in my teaching. I decided to concentrate on two concrete ways to do this in the six classes I taught in 2015-2016. The first was to reduce the amount of material I covered in class and focus on depth rather than breadth. I turned a critical eye to my previous syllabi and thought about which material was most essential to cover in one semester. I decided that this was the material I would devote more time to and cover in more depth. I also became more willing to make mid-course corrections as I developed a greater awareness of how much time it took to cover a topic with a particular group of students. The second was to make out-of-class assignments and in-class activities more intentional by grounding the work more clearly in the course content and by making more time in the classroom to link the in-class and out-of-class work to one another and to the content. I typically supplement textbook readings with empirical articles. Students read the articles before class and answer questions about them. In previous semesters, I would bring these articles into the classroom but never felt that we adequately addressed the readings or that students understood why a particular reading was assigned. This past year, I made a concerted effort to devote more class time to these articles. I would pose several questions about the article in class, ask students to form small discussion groups to respond to the questions, and then we would discuss their responses as a whole. At least one of the questions forced students to focus on how the topics discussed in the article fit into the larger picture about what we were learning. Informal student feedback suggested that students more clearly understood the take-home point of each reading and why it was chosen.

One of the most valuable aspects of this community was interacting with my fellow colleagues and engaging in dialogues about our teaching practices. Learning about instructional strategies that members from different disciplines used had a positive impact on my teaching. As a result of our discussions, I implemented two additional strategies into my classes. One strategy was to make sure there were at least two breaks in each class period in which students were required to make use of information we had just covered in class. These breaks primarily served as a comprehension check but they also gave students a chance to refocus their attention. For example, I use a

classroom response system in my Fundamentals of Psychology course. I began using clicker questions at strategic points throughout the class period instead of mostly at the beginning or end of class as a review. I also altered the types of questions I asked and included more application questions and opinion polls mid-class to get students more involved in discussion. These changes led to students being more alert and participating more.

A second successful strategy I implemented was giving students time to think about their responses before responding to questions in class. After discussing student participation with the Slow Teaching group, I realized that I did not give students enough time to process what the question was asking and to compose their response before requiring them to volunteer that information aloud. I found that when I gave students time to generate their own responses they became more likely to contribute and were more confident when they did so. I also began using variations of think-pair-share where students develop a response to a question on their own, then turn to a neighbor in the class and compare their responses before sharing with the entire classroom (Nilson, 2010). Students were more willing to talk to their partners and discuss their ideas in private before sharing with the group. When it was time to share their responses with the whole class, the resulting discussions were livelier and involved a greater proportion of students.

The Slow Teaching practices I adopted changed both my approach to covering material and, I believe, the classroom experience. I felt less burdened to cram as much material into the class as I could. As a result, I gained more flexibility in my teaching and became more responsive to my students' needs and interests. If there were topics that students needed more time to comprehend or that students wanted to explore more, I was able to take time to delve deeper into those areas. From the student perspective, students had more time and more opportunities to process the material, make connections between topics, ask questions, and contribute to the class in a deeper, more meaningful way.

Improving Lifelong Health in a Nutrition Course

As a dietitian I was familiar with the growing Slow Food movement. The Slow Food movement focuses on slowing down our convenience-based, fast food environment (where what most people eat can hardly even be considered food). It encourages consuming good quality, healthy food produced through sustainable agricultural practices that support locally grown and raised agriculture (Slow Food Manifesto, 1989). When I received the call for an interest meeting on Slow Teaching at the end of a busy semester where I had barely covered all of the material I tried to squeeze into my courses, I could not sign up fast enough. Similar to the Slow Food movement, the Slow Teaching movement focuses on the quality not the quantity of learning. Even the thought of integrating the concept of "teaching less" into my classroom produced a feeling of relief.

The Slow Teaching approach aligned nicely with the transitions that I had already been making in my courses but offered an opportunity to make these changes more meaningful for improving student learning. During the previous year, I had been attempting to move from a passive lecture-based classroom to an active learning

environment that included more student engagement and interaction (Bonwell, 1996). I had some success with adding active learning strategies. Student comments on evaluations confirmed that my courses were more interactive than in previous semesters. However "adding" these techniques became both my primary focus and primary problem. I fought to cover the same amount of material in each class while also adding new self-reflective and group activities. This resulted in an even greater stress on time that was clearly felt by both the students and myself. I felt that I had to rush through my lectures and put strict time limits on discussions which neither improved student learning nor reduced the "bulimic" classroom environment (Nelson, 2001). Adopting Slow Teaching principles has been the answer to some of the biggest problems in my classroom. It has given me permission to reduce the amount of information covered in a single class and has increased the amount of real student learning that is occurring. The Slow Teaching approach also shifted responsibility for learning in my classroom: rather than being the sole provider of information, students now actively participate in their own learning by becoming teachers themselves (Barr & Tagg, 1995).

I decided to begin introducing the Slow Teaching approach in a single course, Nutrition and Exercise in Women's Health, during the Fall 2015 semester. In my current position, I teach nutrition courses to non-nutrition majors. A benefit of this situation is that I have flexibility in what information is covered each semester to achieve my course objectives. Thus, the feeling of rushing to cover an enormous amount of material in a short period of time was my own choice. When deciding what topic areas to include in a semester, I select information that I think will help students beyond the classroom to improve their own and their families' health for many years to come. In the fall, I decided to reduce the number of topics that I covered as well as to update the way in which each individual class was structured.

In planning my semester schedule, I took time to review my previous syllabi. Based on my own personal feelings and student feedback I was able to remove entire sections of material. I did not feel like these topics were not important, but I had to develop a more realistic expectation about how much information could actually be covered (and covered well!) within a single semester. At the individual class level, I also decided to structure each class into mini-lectures where I spent no more than 10-15 minutes lecturing at a time. After each "mini-lecture" I introduced a variety of active learning techniques that allowed students time to reflect on what they just learned and apply the information in some meaningful way (Nilson, 2013). With these changes, we covered "less" information within the classroom but the students learned much more.

Our Slow Teaching community of practice served as an invaluable resource for me as a new, tenure-track faculty member. Change can be scary and perhaps even more so when you are being evaluated on a regular basis by your colleagues and their assessment weighs heavily upon your employment. Our group gave me the confidence to apply the Slow Teaching techniques and reaffirmed my pedagogical decisions. Additionally, what I probably most enjoyed about our community of practice was the ability to take time twice a month to think about, reflect on, and discuss teaching. Days are packed with an ever-growing number of responsibilities and deadlines and the increased pressure on faculty regarding scholarship and publications makes it

challenging to find the time to prioritize teaching. Knowing that I was going to be meeting with our group on a regular basis made me more aware of my own teaching and held me accountable for implementing the changes that I knew would improve student learning. As a result of being a member of this community of practice, I am a more confident instructor. Additionally, my classroom environment encourages deeper, more meaningful student learning.

Conclusion

Our learning as teachers, like all learning, is situated and ongoing, even when we do not explicitly turn these experiences into "analytic objects" (Lave, 2009, p. 201). By forming an intentional community of practice, however, we did just that: we examined our pedagogical development as we engaged in the very practice of teaching (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Our year-long commitment reflects the desire to continue cultivating the "adaptive expertise" so necessary for effective teaching (Rudnitsky, Ellis, DiBartolo & Shae, 2013, p. 127). As we engaged in the work of teaching more reflectively and purposefully, we all gained more confidence in ourselves as teachers, as well as more trust in our students' ability to rise to the challenge of well-designed active learning strategies. The more we slowed down to design learner-centered instructional practices, and the more we slowed down the pace of "coverage" to attend more mindfully to our students' ideas and questions, the more successful our teaching became.

Our experience together in this community of practice enabled us to focus on the importance in teaching of "having to solve complex problems of design and making ongoing adjustments as teaching unfolds" (Rudnitsky, Ellis, DiBartolo & Shae, 2013, p. 129). Not surprisingly, solving the design problems inherent in "cutting" content was the most time-consuming and challenging element of our work. The concerns we had about covering less material—either by disadvantaging our students or decreasing the rigor of the course—were quickly erased, however, as we discovered that striving for meaningful connections and deep understanding required even greater rigor from our students and ourselves.

That we came from different disciplines made this intentional community of practice particularly useful because it affirmed the value of certain instructional techniques regardless of content and context. The benefits we experienced suggest the potential for an on-going community of practice focused on Slow Teaching as well as program-based discussions of how to address the ever-present challenge of information density. In addition to the efforts of individual faculty members, programs can do more to promote the adoption of practices that enhance student learning and improve the transfer of knowledge as students move through a curriculum toward their roles as professionals. It requires a willingness to make the private work of our classrooms visible in order to collaboratively investigate our pedagogies, and intentional communities of practice are one rewarding way to support this kind of commitment.

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