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Slow Higher Education

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SLOW HIGHER EDUCATION

Slow education appears in the printed media at regular intervals as a metaphor to counter the constraints of target and assessment driven education, and this article explores whether the notion could travel to Higher Education

Over the last two decades, building on the slow movement, slow education has been put forward as an alternative to conventional 'standards-driven' education and its one-size fits all approach, offered through 'packages of test-shaped knowledge' that are 'swallowed, but never properly digested' (Barker, 2012, npn). Instead slow education aims to put the student at the centre of their learning. It considers that education is fundamentally a social experience and that the relationships between peers, teachers, the institution and the community are at the 'core of the learning experience' (Harrison-Greaves, 2016, npn). As such, slow education might hold some tantalising arguments, providing a standpoint to critique contemporary Higher Education.

One of the prominent names associated with the idea of slow education is Professor Maurice Holt, a British-born progressive educationist who moved to America. Holt introduced the notion with reference to the slow food movement. The slow food movement was established as a reaction to the introduction of fast food restaurants in Italy in the late 1980s where the prominent journalist and culinary writer Carlo Petrini took part in a campaign against the aggressive introduction of a common fast food chain. Petrini and his colleagues developed the slow food movement, which signed its Manifesto in 1989 (Honoré, 2005; Petrini, 2003). The Slow Food Manifesto was not the only reaction that took place that year. The drawing back of the Iron Curtain, which led to the reunification of East and West Germany, was a watershed point in a time of rapid economic and political change, and provides the background against which the interest in slow education might be understood.

Slow food

The slow food movement was founded on the principles of ecological sustainability and social ethics – promoting sustainable, local and health products over globalised mass, and industrial processed fast food. The principles of slow food have been adopted globally, resulting in a slow movement, and have been applied to other aspects of social life including leisure, health, wellbeing, education, finance, parenting, and sex (Honoré, 2005). The movement might be understood as an ontological reflection on our high-paced, economically-driven, post-industrial world. It expresses a way of being and engaging with the world around us, away from the adagio that sameness, efficiency and 'fast is always better', and is paralleled by an anti-globalisation political agenda (Honoré, 2005, p.14). As such the slow movement might be understood as a nostalgic reaction against the neoliberalism that came to dominate national and international politics from the late 1980s. Neoliberalism has driven governments to stimulate marketisation, privatisation and deregulation, maintaining oversight through standards, target setting and outcome funding (Steger & Roy, 2010). Instead of this 'free market' agenda, the slow movement puts forward an alternative social, political and economic model that favours local communities and values diversity, heterogeneity and cooperation, in alignment with local, cultural and historic traditions and the natural world.

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SLOW EDUCATION

LEARNING TO
SLOW DOWN



Slow education

Smith (2017) locates the writing of Holt (2002) with the emergence of slow education in England in the late 1980s – where slow education was a reaction to the constraints of the National Curriculum introduced in 1988, which emphasised standards and outcome-driven programmes. Holt felt that such neoliberal curricula were underpinned by supply-side economics in order to develop individuals for the labour market and narrowed students' future opportunities by focusing on their performance in reading, writing and maths. The slow education metaphor, according to Holt (2002, p.267), offers an opportunity to put forward an alternative that respects our 'cultural inheritance and the variety of ways of interpreting'. Instead of an education that results in short-term rewards, Holt emphasised the long-term implications for individuals' lives and social engagement in society: 'we remember from our school days not the results of tests but those moments when a teacher's remark suddenly created a new perception'. In this way, slow education offers a philosophy of education that respects traditions and stimulates the development of a moral individual. For Holt (2002, p.268) the aim of slow education is the formation of a civically-engaged moral agent – a characteristic that is not easily measured and requires careful nurturing. The focus of education should not be on the memorisation of facts and figures 'to deliver the knowledge and skills that businesses needs' but should include the shaping

of personal attributes, such as critical thinking, self-awareness, discipline, resilience, leadership, empathy and compassion.

The principles of Holt's slow education have not found much uptake among mainstream educational approaches except for a few partnerships and initiatives (Barker, 2012). It might come as a surprise, considering the progressive roots of the slow movement, that instead it has become associated with private education in an elite environment. Slow education has been further popularised by Mike Grenier of Eton College, who has shared his view that education is over-regulated and too focused on exams and assessments (Hodgkinson, 2012). Slow education, according to Grenier, values the 'old-fashioned idea that a teacher has some knowledge and skills which he or she can pass on to the child' (Hodgkinson, 2012, npn). It focusses on teaching 'proper' grammar, handwriting, and instilling basic rules, attitudes and values. Slow learning is about offering children 'the things they need to live in society' (Barker, 2012, npn), and producing 'self-reliant children and adults' (Hodgkinson, 2012, npn). Slow education is well-resourced and tailored around the developmental needs of individual students. It is provided in small groups with dedicated tutors, with the purpose of cultivating self-confident individuals in the light of classical idealism. For Grenier, slow education is concerned with the training of character and the shaping of impressive minds, through amassing knowledge and mastering reason for its own sake (Smith, 2017).





Slow Higher Education might offer a metaphor to question the 'fast' educational provision, which focuses on attainable facts, vocational skills and competencies, offered in large cost-effective classes, with little attention being paid to students' individual context, questions and aspirations



To some extent slow education seems to have become linked to the notion of social-constructivism, which considers that knowledge, understanding and meaning are developed through interaction with others. Different social relationships, including those with peers, teachers, parents and the wider community, 'provide support and challenge', and 'present the learner with opportunities to explore different experiences or world-views' (Harrison-Greaves, 2016, npn).

A case for a slow Higher Education?

Building on the above, it might be possible to see how the principles of the slow movement might apply to Higher Education. The Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) might be taken as a tipping point, as it was the first in a string of policies that have led to increased political oversight of Higher Education, and introduced various instruments and policies that we are familiar with today. Dearing facilitated, for instance, the increased expansion of, and access to Higher Education. The report introduced the idea of student fees to share the growing cost of Higher Education, and the framework for qualifications with credits, programmes specifications, learning outcomes and the governing body, the Quality Assurance Agency.

It is probably fair to say that Higher Education has been transformed under the policies that followed Dearing. Higher Education has become governed by marketisation and competition in terms of funding, students and research. Influential

methodologies such as the Research Excellence Framework and the Teaching Excellence Framework, and metrics such as the National Student Survey and Destinations of Leavers data have come to determine institutional reputations in the league tables.

The marketisation and competition among universities may have adversely driven policies and processes to protect institutional reputations, and provide fee-paying students with the services and experiences that have a positive effect on the National Student Survey. To enable undergraduate student progression and attainment, subject specific curricular, instead of being intellectually emancipatory and transformative, have become standardised and formulated in terms of minimal levels of skills, competencies and knowledge through the use of learning outcomes (Magnússon and Rytzler, 2019). The content of modules is offered in easy and bite-size blocks, which barely lift or distinguish themselves from the accompanying textbook, and are assessed in a way that does not fundamentally challenge students' ways of understanding and seeing the world.

The increased emphasis on the 'delivery' of services and attainable curricula might compromise what is central to the value of Higher Education. It might undermine academics' expertise, guidance and passion for their subject, and diminish students' interest and commitment to the advancement of their subject or profession. Instead, Holford and Michie (2019) argue we need an educational system that is capable of addressing contemporary issues, such as climate change, inequality and social participation. This requires a model of Higher Education that enables vocational participation, but more importantly develops well informed civic agents that understand the wider issues in society, and are capable of electing integral leaders, as well as taking lead, to 'combat and deal' with environmental and social threats (Holford & Michie, 2019, p.6). Students need to become 'aware of themselves and their potential in a world that is open, fluid, contested and in need of courageous actions' (Zepke, 2017, p.145).

Slow Higher Education, building on the principles of the slow movement by Honoré (2005) and Petrini (2003), might offer a metaphor for critique, first in terms of provision and delivery, and secondly in regard to the objectives of the current Higher Education system. Slow Higher Education could create a space to put forward an alternative to the current, vocationally-orientated Higher Education (in which value is measured through league table positions and graduates' future earnings). Slow Higher Education might offer a metaphor to question the 'fast' educational provision, which focuses on attainable facts,



vocational skills and competencies, offered in large cost-effective classes, with little attention being paid to students' individual context, questions and aspirations.

Higher Education under the current neoliberal value system leaves a development-shadow over our graduates. The premises of slow Higher Education are about the question: who do we want our students to be? A slow Higher Education would aim to develop graduates that understand the relevance of their profession and vocation within its ecological, social and cultural context. In terms of character, slow Higher Education would stimulate future graduates to develop their self-efficacy and self-confidence. But unlike Holt's and Grenier's interpretations, from the perspectives of conservative liberalism and classical idealism respectively, slow Higher Education would encourage the development of individuals that are courageous, mindful and well informed. Individuals who value diversity, heterogeneity and cooperation. As an educational movement, slow Higher Education would aim to offer accessible lifelong learning opportunities; stimulate individuals to become and remain inquisitive, and to inspire students be open to different views and perspectives; civically engaged, and sustainable problem solvers to address the pertinent issues in our contemporary societies.

The limits of (Higher) Education as a metaphor?

Metaphors are figurative expressions in our language that are applied to actions and/or social settings. They are powerful as they provide a symbolic representation and convey an interpretation in an elegant simplicity. However, the simplicity might also mask the more inherent complexities behind a metaphor. For instance, Pertini's (2003) slow food relates to a diet based on local and sustainably produced products in Mediterranean countries and allows for a varied, rich and tasty diet. Slow food based on locally sourced products in northern parts of Europe sounds a lot less attractive. In northern parts of Europe slow food has a different connotation, and becomes associated with affluent individuals, who have the time and money to demonstrate refined culinary tastes, enjoying exclusive products and less sustainable imports. As such, metaphors depend on interpretation, and are malleable and adaptable during the process of reinterpretation.

Slow food and the slow movement pose an alternative to the influence of neoliberalism, whose principles of marketisation, competition, privatisation, free trade and individualism have found their way into almost all aspects of our society, including education (Steger & Roy, 2010). Higher Education in the UK is not a homogeneous



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environment, and institutions differ considerably in terms of the historic context of their foundations; their orientation toward research, teaching, enterprise and knowledge transfer; their global and/or local outlook, and the student body they attract. This article has tried to highlight concerns about teaching and learning at institutions that focus on technical and professional training. These institutions might feel the strain of marketisation and competition more than others, and need to go to great lengths to enhance their place in the league tables. Yet the focus on employability and vocational skills might not provide the graduates with the understanding and outlook they need to address contemporary environmental and social issues.

Slow (Higher) Education, loosely building on the principles of the slow movement, provides an attractive metaphor, but might not carry sufficient substance to fundamentally critique the influence of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, besides affecting institutions' financial and managerial situation, has redefined academic identity and collegiality, and the very purpose of Higher Education. Considering the substantial legacy that neoliberalism has left on Higher Education, it is tempting to become inward looking and nostalgic – referring to idyllic times, or become utopian about education's purpose and provision. Slow (Higher) Education as a metaphor might connect to this sentiment, highlighting what is wrong currently, but it might not provide a coherent and constructive way forward.

Nonetheless, Higher Education has become a high paced changing environment in which institutional leaders, academics and students are trying to keep up. If we can avoid a nostalgic or utopian gaze then slow Higher Education might offer us an interpretive space to consider what we mean by Higher Education and reflect on its purpose for individuals and society at large.

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