Thinking out-of-the-box: Slow as a panacea for creating democratic education in Australian schools

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The uptake of digital technologies in education is a significant issue for governments and organisations across the world as concerns are expressed about students' lack of progress in these areas. As a result, the inclusion of digital technologies is often unquestioned and caught up in a largely aspirational discourse of inevitability, where the belief is that using digital technologies will lead to curriculum reform. The case study of Slow, presented here, aims to enlighten the conversation with examples from research in different education jurisdictions in Australia. Slow is a national vision for digitally rich education through a different lens. This new theoretical framework of *Slow* comprises four convergent themes: state of mind, time, process and connectedness. These themes are offered through interdisciplinary, technology-rich secondary school examples that highlight the potential of *Slow* to re-imagine the way we think about education. Important critique offered throughout the concise paper signposts diverse interpretations of the digital technologies agenda that is often missing from 'click-bait' media snapshots and in recent government reports. Examinations of understandings and practices in some Australian education contexts offer universal and readily transferable treasures that suggest powerful options and ripostes for policy, education leaders, teachers and young people.

Keywords: digital technologies, education, schools, Slow

Introduction

Australia's prosperity as a global competitor and its economic future has permeated education in the last decade, through the national vision for Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) education. Policies and reports such as *The National STEM Strategy* (Office of the Chief Scientist, 2013), *National STEM School Strategy* (Office of the Chief Scientist, 2013), the *Digital Education Revolution* (Rudd, Swan & Conroy, 2007), *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) and the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (Barr, Gillard, Firth, Scrymgour, Welford, Lomax-Smith & Constable, 2008) are set against the backdrop of the effects of the heightened issues of international competitiveness, productivity and economic demands, that the *economic* role of schools has been elevated to levels of pre-eminence in education.

The increased emphasis on the economy, technology and the pressure on educators to serve the needs of what has now been deemed 'the knowledge society' have significant implications for technology enhanced learning. In Australia, for example, the *National STEM School Strategy* (Office of the Chief Scientist, 2013) and the *Digital Education Revolution* (Rudd, Swan & Conroy, 2007) plus recent reports such as *Challenges in STEM learning in Australian Schools* (Timms, Moyle, Weldon & Mitchell, 2018) saw the rapid increase in access to technological resources, which required students and teachers immediately use them. Adopting technological resources without sufficient pedagogical dialogue, critique and reflection limits the effect an "educational revolution" can have on learning. Each student must be equipped to seize learning opportunities throughout life, to broaden his or her knowledge, skills and attitudes and to adapt to the changing, complex and interdependent world.

This is education reform focused heavily on the 'here and now'; hastily equipping students with hardware and software, installing broadband connections, the technological up-skilling of students and teachers, focusing on raising the performance levels in the National Assessment Program, Record of School Achievement (RoSA) and Higher School Certificate (HSC), and releasing school league tables based on quantitative student results. These are all reflective of short-term measures that are unlikely to adequately prepare students for a twenty-first century world of uncertainty, complexity and technological innovation. In the government's attempt to reposition education - underpinned by an economically driven vocational rationale - they have altered the conventional educational paradigm. In the name of educational reform, the policy makers have confused "structure with

purpose, measurement with accomplishment, means with ends, compliance with commitment" reform is cultivating a culture of Fast knowledge.

Fast knowledge

Fast knowledge (Orr, 2002) a treasure from some time ago rests on the following seven assumptions: 1) only that which can be measured is true knowledge; 2) the more knowledge we have, the better; 3) knowledge that lends itself to use is superior to that which is merely contemplative; 4) there is little distinction between information and knowledge; 5) we will not forget old knowledge, but if we do, the new will undoubtedly be better than the old; 6) whatever mistakes we make along the way can be rectified by yet more knowledge; and 7) we will always be able to retrieve the right bit of knowledge at the right time and fit it into its proper social, ecological, ethical, and economic context. Fast knowledge has come to represent the essence of human progress because it appears effective and powerful in the reshaping of education, communities, cultures, lifestyles and the economy (Orr, 2002).

Fast knowledge is a result of education's short-sightedness, buoyed by "the acceleration of technology, the short-horizon perspectives of market-driven economies or the distractions of personal multi-tasking" (Brand, n.d.). Policy makers, bureaucrats and educators who ascribe to this rationale - consciously or otherwise - assume that knowledge is simply information that can be acquired via a laptop and accessed through a high-speed broadband connection, at any time and in any place. Teaching students how to use technology can take only a few moments, which implies Fast knowledge. Teaching students how to realise the deeper potentials of the technology through emphasising the importance of digital and critical literacy, creativity, innovation and evaluation is a task that requires time and reflection. It assumes a body of knowledge about society, ecology, ethics and culture that students may not have, but need to acquire. This type of learning does not yield the immediate and visible economic benefits of the technology and is often under-emphasised or overlooked during policy development. I refer to this type of knowledge as Slow.

Towards Slow

The exploration of Slow is best approached through Slow Food, which was the Slow Movement's founding organisation. Slow Food was a response to the increasing popularity of fast food over food that was 'good, clean and fair'; food connected to people, culture and place – Slow.

Slow in education is embryonic, as most debate has occurred only in the last 10 years. There have been a few advocates for Slow in education, for example: Holt (2002), who called for the commencement of the Slow school movement; Payne & Wattchow (2008) who applied a Slow pedagogy of place to an outdoor education program; Hartman & Darab (2012) and Berg & Seeber (2016), who challenged the culture of speed through exploration of Slow scholarship in the academy.

Methodology

The larger research study, from which this concise paper is drawn, was conducted in three phases. Each phase utilised phenomenology to study lived experiences of Slow and of digital technologies, in education. In the first phase, a range of advocates of Slow and educators, were interviewed in order to find out more than can be found in their writings alone about what Slow means to them, and to tease out some connections in their thinking about Slow and their thinking about Education and/or digital technologies (only one of these people was formally involved in Education). Four common themes began to appear in the analysis of these interviews: Slow as a state of mind; reconceptualising time; valuing process and the connectedness of self, people and place. In Phase Two, in-depth interviews were conducted with people who have recent experience of working with digital technologies in Education. Analysis of these interviews was coupled with philosophical reflections on aspects of Slow to illuminate an ontology of Slow in the educational context. An artefact was designed and produced to capture what was emerging as the essence of Slow – in relation to Education. This artefact – a simple but carefully designed document – was used as a focal point and stimulus for a small group discussion: the centrepiece of Phase Three of the research. This focus group consisted of experienced educators and their reflections on the Slow ideas, practical aims and their own professional experiences produced some further insights into the challenges of applying Slow ideas in rethinking digital technologies in education.

Having briefly outlined the methodology the next section of this concise paper will present a summary of the exploration of Slow in thinking about education, and life more broadly. It uncovers and interprets the four main

themes to emerge from the research: Slow as a state of mind; reconceptualising time; valuing process and the connectedness of self, people and place.

Results

Issues surrounding Slow and Fast and the long term were explored through participant lived experiences and stories. Analysis of interviews, presentations, publications and television appearances revealed characteristics, contexts, practices and effects of Slow, generating themes - some of which are shared between all of the research participants and some of which appear to be unique to the individual. However, four convergent themes emerged to illuminate characteristics and principles of Slow, as revealed in Figure 1.

The themes to emerge from the study were:
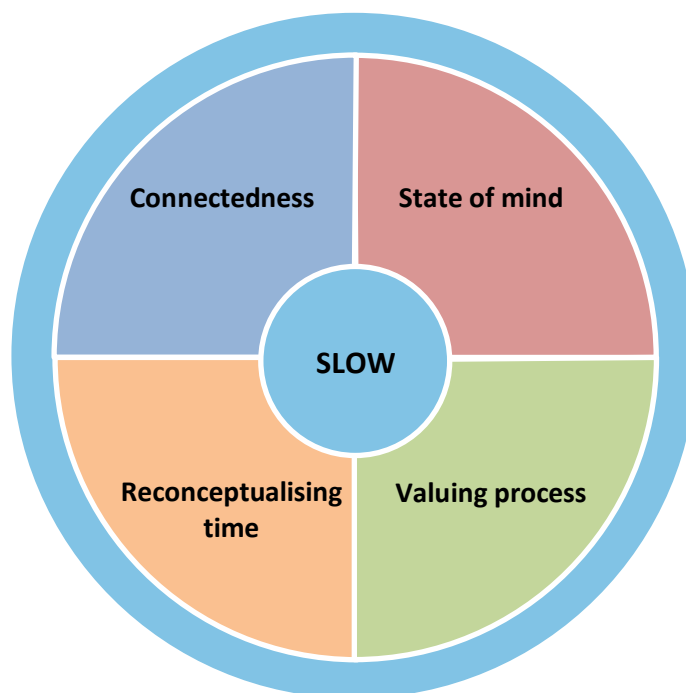
Figure 1. Slow conceptual framework

1. State of mind

An important finding that emerged concerned the way in which Slow comes into and out of the foreground of the technological experience. For the participants, this may involve the phenomena of mindful awareness. The Slow state of mind implies that moving into a Slow, open and responsive relationship with technology, is not a state which is gained simply by being who we are, or where we are. Nor is it gifted by knowing what we know. Instead it is crucially brought about by becoming more aware. A Slow state of mind in technology rich contexts requires continual examination, and reflection on one's experiences with technology and education. It was evident across the data from all three phases that in both personal and educational contexts it was easy for technology use and the characteristics of Fast to become unconscious or forgotten. As this theme (state of mind) identified, Slow is negotiated repeatedly and the tensions between Fast and Slow are evaluated on an ongoing basis – they are not frozen.

A heightened sense of consciousness was a theme in the phenomenology of Slow developed in this inquiry. There was potential for participants to be physically disconnected from all technology, yet Slow remains elusive. In response to this, it might be argued that a person is predisposed to experiences of Fast, but might not realise they are. Hence a Slow state of mind encourages us to engage with the moments of our everyday lives in a more considered and meaningful way, more than simply noticing the influence of technology on the world, but as a way of engaging with technology that reveals and entices potential forms and functions.

2. Time

Slow requires time - time to think deeply, talk more, explore, reflect, engage and rejoice in each moment. The advocates of Slow exercised choice and control of what felt like the right number of tasks to undertake; reflecting tempo, rhythm and pace in tune with, and unique to, each individual. This is in contrast to descriptions of school time as organisational, monochromic, compartmentalised and calendar based – characteristics inimical to learning and working *with* rather than *in* time (Lafleur, 1999; Giddens, 1987). Through technology, time and work no longer need to be competing for status. In fact, participants demonstrated that work could be reorganised enabling alteration of the perceptions and experience of time in order to accommodate, transform and enhance time.

Such a view of time, one that is more subjective, personal, dynamic and supportive of the connection and engagement with learning and learners, resonates with the ideas of Dewey (1933/1986). According to Dewey, such a view of time connects education with meaning and authenticity, which is important for understanding the question of being. Such a view of time can be achieved through the integration of technology. Technology offers students an opportunity to make significant connections to their own place and time and in their own way. Technology use can transform time, providing an opportunity for learning to resonate with students as the learning activities flow naturally and in tune with each student's world, tempo and rhythm.

3. Appreciating process

Each participant who engaged in the study expressed dissatisfaction with the current educational system. They saw it as focused on content, assessment and teacher accountability – a focus on ends, rather than on processes that encourage thinking, and that develop empathetic, caring and compassionate people who value learning. Dewey (1916 & 2004) warned of education with a focus on the end rather than on experience and action. He identified the importance of the student as an active participant, not passive recipient, with a call for each student to be engaged in continual thought, inquiry, discovery and action. Dewey was an advocate for learning through projects and problems: as a way of piquing student interest, offering intrinsic motivation, and awakening curiosity and demand for information over extended but flexible periods of time, with which the research participants broadly concurred.

The role of technology within the process of learning is to enhance and strengthen the process. Students utilise technology, not as the focus but as a tool to empower them to problem-solve, present data, share information, communicate and collaborate with their peers and the wider community. The continuity of this learning process moves a learner from one experience into the next with a deeper understanding and appreciation of its relationships with, and connections to, other experiences, people and ideas. A focus on technology in this way shifts the emphasis of education to encompass humanistic qualities.

4. Connectedness

Furthermore, participants in the study communicated the importance of connectedness, a theme that features prominently and which is interwoven with many other themes. Whilst community and connection to others were discussed extensively during the focus group and interviews, connection to self and place also emerged from the conversations.

Connectedness to self has similarities with the Slow state of mind. Connectedness is a way of thinking described as looking inward to the internal rhythms of the self. It involves asking life's bigger questions to gain clarity, insight and wisdom. In Dewey's writing, we can see potential for connectedness to self - not just in the cognitive sense - but as a way of being. Understanding ourselves is to be able to give sense and purpose to life and can be recognised via learners questioning, trying, challenging, testing and experimenting (Dewey, 1916/1985). For example, two participants use of Twitter became a searching activity; inquiry into their own beliefs progressed through questioning, giving further meaning to their world and existence, rather than merely validating knowledge.

In addition, connectedness to others and culture was a core element of Slow, as revealed by the participants. Emphasis was placed on the importance of the community to generate new ideas and initiatives as a way to broaden one's perspective, and help increase empathy and awareness for the consequences personal decisions and actions can have on others. Participants shared ways with which technology can be used to strengthen communities via online connections with peers, parents and members of the wider community. Connecting through Skype™, Facebook™, and blogs revealed excellent potential to foster what Heidegger (1966) identifies as existential authenticity. In this way, technology presents a unique perspective from which to view the world, and others, and the unique possibilities that flow from such perspectives are the basis, Heidegger claims, for authenticity.

Conclusion

Slow, in technology–rich environments in education, as understood through this research, is not something that will naturally occur: it needs to be made explicit. Making Slow experiences a part of education requires systems, school leaders and teachers to be conscious of the value and role of Slow. The implication is that educators need to open up these areas of inquiry. It is also through awareness that Slow can cause educators to question personal epistemologies, so that Slow might be adopted in their own lives too. Educators need to re-conceptualise technology in their personal and professional lives in order to foster an alternate, slower, reality in the future. This is thinking that would take us into the depth of our experiences: ourselves, others and nature. The implication is that such thinking and understanding could see the personal experience and technological education effectively pursued through the experience of Slow.

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