

DRAFT

Slower writing and reading for an age of distraction?

Bob MacKenzie, The AMED Writers' Group, 19 June 2015

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Context

For some time, I've been wondering what we'd discover if we were to trace our personal reading and writing histories in the form of a personal timeline. What would we notice? What has changed? What has endured? What's been happening to our writing and reading brains? What place, if any, might slower writing and reading have in a digital age? At the same time, I've become aware of the frequently negative and disparaging responses to 'slow' practices in an era when 'fast' and 'high speed' are widely privileged terms.

These notes draw upon my work on an extended, slower writing project. I've already had the benefit of sharing some more recent ideas during our Annual Writing Workshop ('Time to Think ... About Writing', with Christina Breene) in Brighton in May. Today's co-inquiry continues that process, and I hope to share my continually emerging writing at a future ODiN session before publishing a more considered piece.

So I'm not proposing here anything definitive or prescriptive. Rather, I'm inviting us all to be curious about the nature, practice and potential of slower writing and reading.

Some propositions

1. Writing has different purposes, phases, forms, formats and contexts.
2. Writing, reading and conversations are intertwined and interact in a potentially constantly reflexive interrelationship.
3. Digital technologies enable both new and old writing and reading to be accessible, just a click away. Wisely practised, slow and fast writing can co-exist profitably, and can enrich each other.
4. Even in an age of distraction, it *is* possible to 'slow down'.
5. There's 'good slow' and 'bad slow'.
6. Manuscript writing technologies continue to have a role in helpfully slowing things down counter-culturally and counter-intuitively.

Some questions (to discuss or write about with a critical friend):

- How did you begin your writing and reading journey? (Parental influence? Bedtime stories? Letter-writing? Other? – all lost arts?)
- Why and how do we each now read and write? Is this different from before? When do we skim, and when do we pay close attention?
- What distractions can keep us from engaging in the writing and reading that – ideally – we yearn for?
- What can slower writing and reading offer in a digital age? How do we address them?

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The Slow Movement

The genesis of The Slow Movement is often said to lie in Carlo Petrini's 1986 protest against the opening of a McDonald's in the Piazza di Spagna, Rome. It seems that Carl Honoré first coined the term 'Slow Movement' in his 2004 book 'In Praise of Slowness'. Here, he argued that this 'philosophy' can be applied to 'every field of human endeavour'. (However, his somewhat manic TED Talk* perhaps exemplifies the inherent tensions between espousing slowness and struggling with the demands of a distracted, digitally-conditioned audience). The slow industry now embraces Food, Cities, Living, Travel, Design, and – why not? - Writing and Reading.

The Slow Movement is said to have burgeoned in an attempt to 'recover slowness, reflection and togetherness' in the teeth of a universal urge to change (everything) at breakneck speed. [Professor Guttorm Floistad, Wikipedia/Slow Movement]. No single body appears to monopolise, coordinate or control this initiative (though there are a number of websites and networks promoting slowness), and part of its attraction may be its seemingly spontaneous, democratic nature. As I understand it, its general aim is to do everything *at the right speed* – not necessarily at snail's pace - and to privilege quality over quantity.

How might these principles translate into slower writing and reading?

For me, features might include:

- *Discretionary practice* (taking *your* time, not working to someone else's time; voluntarism. (If involuntary or enforced, this could create resistance. If you encounter natural resistance, this could indicate an innate learning difficulty).
- *Local ingredients* (food/authors/readers etc)
- *Re-writings and re-readings* (discussing, testing, re-drafting, being open to feedback, reflecting upon, annotating etc)
- *Provisional ideas* (awareness that the text is never settled or definitive)
- *Interchanging* manuscript and digital writing and text

Some characteristics of slower writers and readers

Pace Jacobs (2011) it might help to imagine four classes of readers and writers:

1. A small elite of extreme readers and writers – what Jacobs calls a 'long form reading class',
2. Distracted readers and writers – people who have 'known the joys of reading (and writing) but who can be distracted from them' (ibid),
3. People who are almost entirely internet-dependent, and
4. People who are unwilling or unable to read or write.

As facilitators and authors, how can we cater for each of these groups? And to which do we each belong?

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Some slower writing and reading strategies

We can't write – or read – everything. So how can we develop forms of 'discernment', to enable us to make 'wise decisions' about how best to invest our time? Possibilities include:

1. Creating 'a cone of silence' around ourselves (Jacobs, citing, Dennis Marsden), as I often do with my laptop in my favourite coffee shop, or at my PC in my study.
2. Creating dedicated physical and temporal writing/reading spaces in organisations. (Note the increasing erosion of silence in public libraries, such as that being proposed in Southampton, where mobile 'phones and talking may soon be officially allowed).
3. Remaining alert to, and finding ways to counter or minimise, the negative effects of, 'interruption technologies'; temporary isolation from ICT during writing and reading 'holidays' etc.
4. Learning to write and read wisely; shifting readily from concentrating to skimming to summarising to elaborating, switching appropriately between slower and faster modes of attention.
5. Remaining open to chance and serendipity – browsing (e.g. how I came across Jacobs in the LRB Bookshop whilst waiting for the start of the 'After Sebald Symposium').

Envoi: What do you think about the potential of slower writing and reading for an age of distraction? Does this potential suggest or confirm anything you might do in your own practice?

Some references

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TO BE CONTINUED