

Spring 2017

The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy

Sandra D. Shattuck
Pima Community College

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Recommended Citation

Shattuck, Sandra D. "The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2021, pp. 80-83. doi:10.25148/clj.11.2.009137.

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The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy

by Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber

Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 2016. 128 pp.

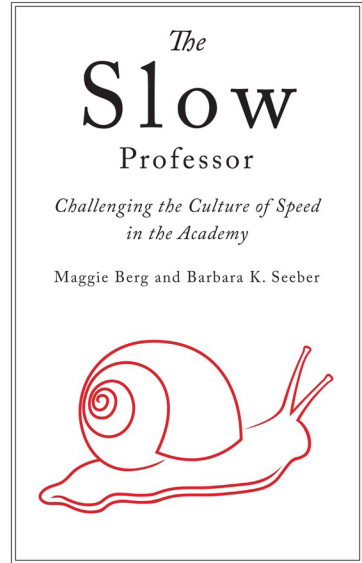
Reviewed by Sandra D. Shattuck
Pima Community College

As soon as I saw the title of Berg and Seeber's book, I breathed out, as if I were finishing a session of meditation. How wonderful would it be if I could slow my teaching life down? Not obsess over the pile of papers waiting to be responded to and graded. Not worry that my annual self-evaluation would ever get written. To actually read something for pleasure, something that caught my fancy and not something that had to be assessed, deadline attached. What kind of life would that be?

A balanced one. A sane one.

The truth is that many academics in the twenty-first century function on the edge of crazy. But our work-induced desperation is not a topic any of us broaches. Thus, in order to write this book, Berg and Seeber had to push beyond two boundaries: one was the complicit silence muffling the topic, and the other was disciplinary. As Berg and Seeber point out in their introduction, discussing mental health is taboo, even though a large body of research proves that faculty incur increasing stress and work-life imbalance as they take on more and more tasks to fulfill the mandates of the corporate university. Moreover, as Berg and Seeber state, the traditional profile of an academic, which includes "the ideals of mastery, self-sufficient individualism, and rationalism" (12), mitigates against speaking up or collective action. As they state,

What began simply as helping each other became a sustained investigation of academia. We see our book as uncovering the secret life of the academic, revealing not only her pains but also her pleasures. Writing this book provoked the anxiety of speaking what is habitually left unspoken, and we continually needed to remind ourselves that the oscillation between private shame and the political landscape would prove fruitful. (12)



The corporatization of one's workplace and craft; the loss of health, collegiality, and pleasure in one's work; the increasing isolation of a digitally managed life—these are all big concerns we can discuss in any profession, but Berg and Seeber invite us to focus these concerns on the university. The authors' significant innovation is to apply principles of the Slow movement to academia. In fact, the title of Berg and Seeber's book pays homage to Carl Honoré's seminal text, *In Praise of Slowness: Challenging the Cult of Speed*. But to effect this application, Berg and Seeber had to move beyond their disciplinary boundary as literary critics—they're both professors in departments of English language and literature in Canadian universities—and engage interdisciplinary research and thinking in fields such as psychology, sociology, and management, represented by academic journal titles in the Works Cited pages such as *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *Journal of Management Studies*, and *Administrative Science Quarterly*, among others. Offering a succinct assessment of their project and the research required, Berg and Seeber state that “our book is more optimistic than works on the corporate university, more political and historicized than self-help, and more academically focused than those on stress and the Slow movement” (vii).

Stepping out of one's disciplinary comfort zone is no little feat in a business that evaluates its employees on what they know rather on investigating what they don't know. And Berg and Seeber point to this shame and discomfort: “Ironically, our feelings of lack of productivity and not measuring up have not led us until now to ‘read’ the institution; our self-blame has played into corporate values” (12–13). Their project was not without pushback from colleagues, some of whom told Berg and Seeber “to wake up and get with the program” and that they were “simply too busy to slow down” (11).

Berg and Seeber's diagnosis of the problem in their introduction is well worth the read. “Corporatization” is the villain, and the authors summarize the current literature—a reading list that should be required for all of us who work in academia. Berg and Seeber discuss Benjamin Ginsberg's *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters*, and conclude that for universities' strategic plans, “It is the *appearance* of process that counts” (5), not whether or not the plan works. In discussing the increased stress faculty encounter as they collect data and fill in forms, Berg and Seeber cite a useful phrase from Stefan Collini's *What Are Universities For?* Collini's phrase, “fallacy of accountability” (qtd. in Berg and Seeber 5), refers to the idea that as faculty, we are accountable for demonstrating student and course learning outcomes, but that accountability does not ensure that meaningful pedagogical progress occurs.

I am reminded of my own end-of-the-semester housekeeping, when I enter the online halls of data recording by filling in numbers of students who successfully completed an assignment tied to a course learning objective. After I have recorded the number of students who passed or failed the list of assignments, the interface asks me, by pull-down menu, if I want to enter thoughts about how each objective could have been better attained. I decline the invitation. I have already fulfilled the minimum the interface requires of me and after reading and grading hundreds of pages of student

writing in the last few weeks of the semester. Moreover, I doubt that the interface will respond to any rushed pedagogical reflection I might offer. I save my thoughts for a private collaborative blog, for small meetings with colleagues, and for the rare professional development opportunity.

This is a small book with a big idea, ninety pages short with four chapters (all under twenty pages each), an introduction and conclusion. Because the book is short does not mean the reader can swallow it in an hour and a half. I found myself stopping often, wondering at epiphanies and further questions. The mostly alliterative chapter titles offer koan-like meditations all by themselves: “Time Management and Timelessness,” “Pedagogy and Pleasure,” “Research and Understanding,” and “Collegiality and Community.” The tone is more than collegial—it is friendly and conversational. The book is robustly researched and most sentences offer citations, a practice that initially threw me. I wanted more of the authors’ own observations, but I think the pages chock full of research are a reaction to critics who believe Berg and Seeber have stepped too far away from Jane Austen and the Brontës and too close to the self-help aisle. And although the tone is collegial and inviting, Berg and Seeber brook no fools, and that tone can shift into a delightful Austen-esque snarkiness, especially in the chapter on “Time Management and Timelessness,” in which texts such as *Graduate Study for the Twenty-First Century* outline twelve-hour days and “Eight Days a Week” (a subheading) as solutions (19). As Berg and Seeber tell academics, “If you are struggling to regain work-life balance, most academic time management literature will not leave you comforted. You may actually feel that you are not working hard enough” (19).

“Time and Timelessness” ends with practical advice: 1) Get off line. 2) Do less. 3) Practice chunks of timeless time. 4) Practice chunks of time doing nothing. 5) Stop talking about time incessantly. Most of us reading these suggestions would shake our heads at the impossibility of such practice, but Berg and Seeber offer enough detail and support that we gain the glimmer of a differently time-ordered working life.

This book is an eminently activist one: Berg and Seeber want us to change the way we work. They understand the Goliath-pressure of corporate education, yet they remain optimistic. So far, I’m with them. However, one area where I wanted more guidance had to do with online education. Berg and Seeber regard online education as anathema to Slow principles and privilege the face-to-face classroom as the only site where we can effectively and affectively resist the culture of speed. The reality of higher education means that courses and entire degree programs are delivered increasingly solely online because online delivery is profitable and fulfills the users’ needs to obtain education while working fifty hours a week, being a single parent, and caring for an elderly relative. Despite impossible schedules, students do learn in online environments and instructors do experience some pleasure in their pedagogy (chapter two, “Pedagogy and Pleasure,” focuses on this topic). I was disappointed by Berg and Seeber’s dismissal of online education and yearned for a robust discussion of Slow principles in this age of MOOCs and five-week accelerated online writing courses offered in the summer.

Another area I wanted Berg and Seeber to address concerns the inequity of faculty labor in universities, which sharply divides the mass of part-time and contingent faculty from full-time and tenure-eligible faculty. The audience for *The Slow Professor* is full-time professors at four-year research institutions (chapter three, “Research and Understanding,” focuses solely on that audience), and even though contingent and term-limited faculty and many others can still benefit from much of the advice, the endemic labor injustice of higher education nevertheless imposes a brutal cult of speed for part-timers, whose schedules are marked by rush-hour traffic as they drive from campus to campus.

Although Berg and Seeber do not address online education and labor inequity, their final chapter, “Collegiality and Community,” offers a starting place for analysis and action. Indeed, I found some of the most compelling discussion in the authors’ description of their collaboration. *The Slow Professor* began as conversation between two English professors about their frustration with ever-increasing administrative paper work in the classroom and diminishing pleasure in their jobs. As they continued to talk and then encountered a national survey on stress conducted by the Canadian Association of University Teachers, Berg and Seeber felt less alone, and their thinking changed: “We shifted our thinking from ‘what is wrong with us?’ to ‘what is wrong with the academic system?’” (2).

“Collegiality and Community” details an increasing “climate of isolation” in the academy, where departmental hallways are emptier and quieter. In their conclusion, Berg and Seeber argue for a simple solution: We need to talk (not text or email) with each other more. And we need to build supportive community through that talking.

Introspection, thinking with others, study, and collaboration all take time—significant and careful time. *The Slow Professor* continues to ask me to reflect on how I mindlessly speed up, as soon as I step into the classroom, and it offers me some guidance on resistance in the last sentence of “The Slow Professor Manifesto”: “By taking the time for reflection and dialogue, the Slow Professor takes back the intellectual life of the university” (x).