

## Enjoying the Wood Paths

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It is a real pleasure to response to Kathy Hytten’s essay, but not easy to do so critically. I find myself in almost complete agreement. Kathy Hytten makes a strong case for why we, as philosophers of education, should take time to slow down.

Ours is an age of information overload. Pressured to produce more, and more quickly, we try to stay afloat in this treacherous information glut, and we weed through it quickly so that we can produce and hastily add to the very thing that overwhelms us. What a double bind, Hytten shows, when she suggests that “it is unethical to continue to add, indiscriminately, to information overload” and that it “adds to our ontological insecurities.”<sup>1</sup>

By heeding to the expectation to publish more and more quickly, we overlook our own needs and values (by “we” she means philosophers of education who are employed, or in search of employment in, academia). Hytten asks, “What does it mean to contribute to academic conversations meaningfully and authentically?”<sup>2</sup> Her concern regards both the outward public aspect of scholarship and the inward or private aspect of it. She asks about our responsibilities to others when we produce hasty, shallow pieces of scholarship. Her concerns extend to the future as well, as she wonders, “How is excessive publication complicating critical thinking for future generations”? Moreover, she points out that hasty publishing impacts personal research practices and ultimately one’s own sense of oneself as a scholar.

A neoliberal audit culture obsessed with performance and use-

fulness creates “troubling epistemological and ontological realities”: the pressure to publish, being judged on the quantity of outputs, the pressure to weed through endless materials and resources, and finally the pressure to be read. This feeds into what Hytten labels “ontological insecurity,” which “occurs when we lose sight of meaning in our activities.”<sup>3</sup> In response, we adopt “unethical practices in terms of knowledge production.”<sup>4</sup> Instead, Hytten encourages us as scholars to consider “slowing down as a deliberate response” to such state of things.<sup>5</sup>

By slowing down, one can address, and hopefully counter, the devastating impact of the neoliberal takeover of the university, which is actualized in three main ways: ontologically, epistemologically, and ethically. Resisting ontologically will imply dealing with one type of insecurity and asking, what is the meaning of what I am doing? Resisting epistemologically will imply revising one’s own research habits against information overload and superficiality of outputs. Resisting ethically will consist in honoring one’s responsibility towards oneself and others.

Slowing down, Hytten reiterates, is an ethical choice. Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber’s timely small book, *The Slow Professor* (2016) seconds this thesis. Against the culture of overwork, speed, and instrumentalism, they propose we need to “protect a time and a place for timeless time and to remind ourselves continually that this is not self-indulgent but rather crucial to intellectual work.”<sup>6</sup> Timeless time is achieved by measures such as doing less and getting off line, doing away with time management, silencing the “inner bully”, and lastly, turning off the voices of the mythical tax payer.<sup>7</sup>

Why is “slow” a “good” in the life of a scholar? The major critical point seems to be about our relationship to time. It is a matter of establishing a relationship of ownership over time, of cultivating mindfulness and presence as ways to suspend and own our time against

demands and expectations from without. Moreover, there seems to be a specific political value in opposing neoliberal audit culture: for scholars, slowing down is itself a form of resistance.

Kathy Hytten implies that this project of resistance is owed to both oneself and the larger scholarly community, because personal sanity and the intellectual vitality of our field are deeply interconnected. She concludes that, particularly as philosophers, we should take slow very seriously, because philosophy is about slowing down. This last point is indeed central to the argument, because there is something in the practice of philosophy of education that catalyzes the value of slow.

There are two points I want to highlight in response to Hytten's deeply felt call for us to slow down and examine our priorities and practices. These are not points of disagreement but points of tension in which I will try to extend her thesis further, perhaps towards a paradox. The force with which Hytten suggests that, as philosophers of education, we ought to slow down could be motivated by some kind of square dimension specific to our discipline: education requires time and philosophy requires time. So, it could be said, therefore, that philosophy of education requires *all the time!* (time squared?) I agree.

It is painfully true that education requires a different type of time than the one allowed for in our institutions. Educator and author Chip Wood has written an important and convincing book in which he advocates for "changing the pace of school."<sup>8</sup> Learning implies change. But change needs time to take root,<sup>9</sup> therefore we need to transform the structure and the use of time in classrooms.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in the dialogue, *Phaedrus*, Plato compares education to tending plants.<sup>11</sup> It is a constant, slow, intentional work of cultivation. Consider instead the compressed time of learning, with its fast-paced transitions, the taking away five minutes of recess as punishment, the "think-pair-share" activity: education

in schools happens through punitive, not nurturing, uses of time.

Philosophy, too, requires time. Is there a way in which philosophy requires time not only because it is work and work needs time, but also because there is something unique to the discipline that demands us to relate to time differently when we philosophize? Slowing down has been understood in Hytten's paper as a matter of regaining mastery over one's time. In this sense, releasing the grip of production and consumption will allow one to own her time more and determine the pace of activity. Philosophizing, though, is not a matter of mastery. The way I experience it, philosophical thinking wants me to stop trying to control time, and instead follow it through its meandering: here, I leap with surprise, there, I slow down and lose my track, here, I stop for what feels like eternity because I cannot figure out this puzzle, and then, look! I run through the next three ideas, get lost in a connection, and forget where I am. More than a highway in which I get to choose my speed, and eventually slow down, philosophical thinking is akin to wood paths, the small paths in the forest that are created when loggers repeat a route and that may either end abruptly, lead to nothing, or lead to a beautiful view. Which is just fine, because finding new directions might well be one of the most valuable experiences in philosophical thinking.

How is such purposeless meandering ever going to lead to a written piece of philosophy, and a publishable one? This happens constantly, and many works display, more or less obviously, this quality. Perhaps, though, we should stop thinking that philosophy happens in written form. Perhaps the writing of philosophy is like a crystallization; it preserves it but also stops it. I wonder what it would be like if we tried to recover philosophy's orality. Philosophy happens in dialogue, which, for the young people reading, is a bit like snapchat but without smart phones. For this reason, Plato was so deeply skeptical of the written form. In his words:

“Writing, Phaedrus, has this strange quality, and is very like painting; for the creatures of painting stand like living beings, but if one asks them a question, they preserve a solemn silence. And so it is with written words . . . .<sup>12</sup> For him, the words which are “living and breathing” are ones spoken in dialogue between friends because only those yield fruits.<sup>13</sup>

If we bring philosophy back to its spoken form, however, what will we have to show for it? How can we be held accountable for it? How are we going to produce the “outputs” to contribute to this churning production system that is modern academia? (Still the very system that feeds me). I am probably, like most, going to keep playing the game, hoping for some small spaces of resistance. And as I play, and try to balance writing with teaching, thinking, and serving my community, I will want to keep in mind Kathy Hytten’s advice: slow down! Stop being owned. I will find joy in the extemporary moments in which I am surprised by philosophy happening in the present, with my students, with a friend, with colleagues in a conference hall or in a public space. I will also remind myself of the fact that the work of philosophy is a work of life, opening, meandering, and resisting externally imposed outcomes and rhythms. I will find joy in small moments of response like this one.

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1 Hytten, this volume.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 28.

7 Ibid., 30-31.

8 Chip Wood, *Time to Learn, Time to Teach: Changing the Pace of School*, Greenfield, MA: North East Center for Children, 1999).

9 Ibid., 81.

10 Ibid., 220.

11 Plato, *Phaedrus*, 276b-277a, available at: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0174:text=Phaedrus>

12 Ibid., 275d.

13 Ibid., 276a.