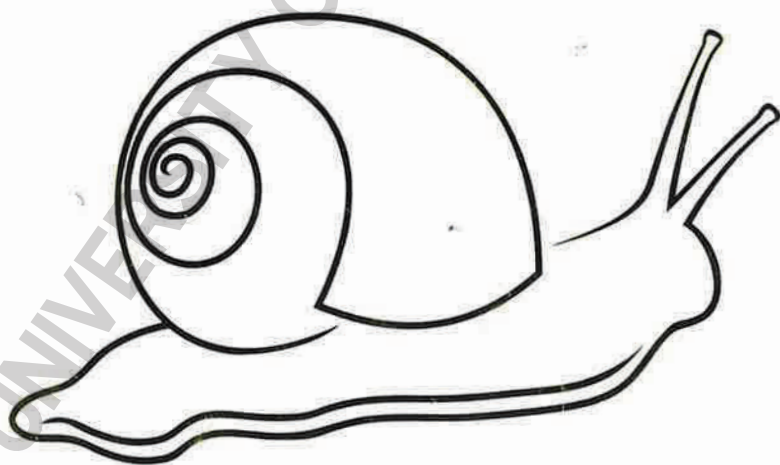


TENTH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

The
Slow
Professor

*Challenging the Culture of Speed
in the Academy*

A Collaborative Work by
Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber



With a New Introduction
and Sixteen Reflections on Slow Practice

UTP

Slow *Is* More: Teaching and Learning Collaboratively

LYNN YAU

Absolutely Fabulous Theatre Connection, Hong Kong

Since 2012, the Absolutely Fabulous Theatre Connection (AFTEC), an award-winning learning organization in Hong Kong that straddles the arts and education, has been exploring creative approaches to teaching and learning in local schools that are government subsidized. Many of our schools nurture students of lower socio-economic status who lack the opportunity to imagine their futures as they shuffle daily between their cramped accommodations – nano flats of 100 square feet for families – and school, with little stimulation beyond prescribed curriculum.

The university training of teachers emphasizes theory rather than practice; epistemological subject knowledge is privileged over hands-on, interactive learning. We have found minimal evidence of teaching for creativity both in education and arts degrees, including the performing arts. Technical, skills-based learning is at the forefront. By 2017, we realized that although we are unable to change the system, we could shift some of the thinking within that system. That year, we launched a professional development project with artists and social workers. The objective was to invite members from the two sectors to share their experiences and expertise to enhance the well-being of youth and children; one mindset was creative, the other education-based. It did not go too well. The professionals spoke in totally different languages; one practised a qualitative habit of being, while the other plodded to fulfil quantitative targets as

the key goal. In 2020, COVID-19 overwhelmed us, and that was the last straw.

The Slow Professor opened doors. We realized what was missing: “good conversation” and “meaningful exchange” (85). We were zipping past targets and goals because we had promises to keep and miles to go before we could sleep. Ultimately, we understood that although cooperation was happening among stakeholders, from adult professionals to young beneficiaries, collaboration was not. This eureka moment precipitated a series of research readings. By 2021, collaboration became cardinal to the creative teaching framework now successfully completed in a three-year pilot project, the Jockey Club Arts-Based Cross Curriculum Creative Learning Project (JCABC), implemented in Hong Kong elementary schools.

With collaboration as the fundamental premise, teachers and creative practitioners have developed relationships that allow them to co-design and co-create activities that realize the “holding environment” discussed by Berg and Seeber (82). Here are some strategies from the JCABC model that support slowing down for collaboration:

1. Learning environment is key: Before anything else happens, engender a safe space for students and adults alike.
 - a. Physical change: Use group settings where professionals can listen to students at close quarters and avoid the row seating format where the central authority is the person at the front.
 - b. Mental change: Encourage perspectives beyond the limited textbook answers that teachers in structured education systems are assigned to deliver. As part of our research, we drew on Bill Lucas and Ellen Spencer’s “five habits of mind,” in which collaboration is “sharing the product” (66) and “giving and receiving formative feedback” (68) among children and adults. Gradually, children become less inhibited and more motivated.
 - c. Emotional change: Create a trusting environment. It is fine to make mistakes, and many answers are possible. It is also acceptable to discuss how you feel; it’s part of being human. With adult role models, students realize, in time,

that their teachers are also fallible. This encourages them to open up, gaining confidence as their comfort in learning increases. Some students who are more empathetic than others even take on the role of peer mentors on their own initiative.

2. Less is more: Getting it done does not mean it is done well. In our professional enthusiasm to do more and more for children, we build a habit of unthinkingly ticking boxes. Reducing content is hard for teachers, as they fear lagging behind others in teaching the curriculum, while parents might fear their children are not learning as much. With JCABC, although seemingly less is introduced, learning is much deeper and good habits of mind are formed, enabling students to transfer their skills to other classes.
3. Training together for togetherness: Wherever possible and appropriate, hold workshops that embrace cross-disciplinary exchange. Our workshops build in regular pauses for reflection and exchange among pairs and groups with different subject expertise to ensure diversity.
4. The power of companion schools: Pair schools, enabling teachers to observe each other's application of creative teaching strategies in the classroom. This is not simply to borrow ideas but to review strategies, ask for clarification, and share insights. This practice builds trust and lowers the fear of judgment.
5. Collaboration and cooperation: Define the difference between them. In schools, cooperation means division of labour; teachers distribute tasks among groups with little consideration for individual abilities or interests. Collaboration means more time spent attending to preferences around the table. This entails listening to each other and not simply taking turns to speak. Contrary to expectations that learning will suffer, once the students settle into their roles, they are more willing to voluntarily focus on their tasks, contributing to the group as a whole.
6. Process matters (a lot): Instead of rushing towards end goals and products, tend to the journey at every turn. The learning opportunities will take care of themselves.

The changes in the JCABC classrooms are real; the collaboration is authentic. The interim project evaluation results have been very encouraging. We have seen dramatic increases in students' collaboration, perseverance, resilience, communication, imagination, and curiosity. Creative teaching and learning are a never-ending expedition. We take heart from Donna (a pseudonym), a teacher who had this to say at AFTEC's culminating 2023 Knowledge Exchange forum:

The pace was so fast in the first year as we needed to teach students various woodwork skills ... Everything was in a hurry and things continued like that because we were goal-based. In Year 2, slow down. Stop. But you know? You walk faster, you walk further – beyond your expectations – because you walk together, like you are connected.

Work Cited

- Lucas, Bill, and Ellen Spencer. *Teaching Creative Thinking: Developing Learners Who Generate Ideas and Can Think Critically*. Bancyfelin, UK: Crown House Publishing, 2017.