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## Turning differently toward learning design, and finding the real gift of slow

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### ABSTRACT

Orthodox understandings of learning design cast it as something that we 'do' to instrument the future. In this paper I turn differently toward learning design, seeing it instead as something that we are already existentially 'in', grounded through our stances and our very 'being'. I offer for reflection the central notion of 'slow' with which we might re-orient to and re-value the places and spaces that we are already in as inherently generative. Practising a philosophy of slow invites us to encounter ourselves in our designing. It begins with the quietly radical act of *seeing goodness in slowness*. Slow takes the long-scale view that accepts into itself the many tempos and time scales of university teaching – including at times, the need for fast work. This paper invites you to pause and ponder notions of untangling, opening, loosening, listening, seeing, belonging and trusting as ways that we might come to know slow and benefit from the presence of slow in our design work. But perhaps the deepest gift that slow offers is *choice*: it opens a space for considered thought and action, and checks the habits and expectations of speed that we have grown so accustomed to.

**Keywords:** learning design, long-scale view, belonging, existential stances, slow

### Turning differently towards learning design

In this paper I turn toward learning design not as role, method, skill or even style of thinking, but as something that we are, at the very level of our being, already 'in'. I speak out as a professional learning designer and a part-time academic researcher working in an Australian university. My work, like those of my academic colleagues, is bordered on all sides by the (sometimes contradictory, always increasing) imperatives of innovation, efficiency, and effectiveness.

Of central concern is *time*. It seems to me that – in our professional lives at least – our collective faces are ever turned towards a time which is always yet-to-come. Our work is not, in the temporal sense, *of itself*; but always on the way to being something *other* than itself. As we strive to transcend our current situation towards a greater measure of fulfilment, we are reaching always *away* from ourselves. To stay as we are, to maintain the current situation, to return to an earlier way, or to be moderate in our ambitions is not 'enough'. Restlessly we overthrow the present as if we no longer love it (Hodgson, Vlieghe, & Zamojski, 2018) and cannot 'abide' where we are. We deny and discard the home we have made for ourselves here-now. As sustainability design scholar Cameron Tonkinwise says:

*It is not coming to us naturally anymore to abide with what we make, sustaining its changing ways of being. Rather than respond to the changes-in-things-over-time, we react, with increasing violence. We replace or displace the offending item (2003, p. 9).*

The university, too, is caught up in the wheel-spokes of its own forward and upward momentum. Universities, once considered pillars of stability and keepers of the past, now find themselves – with some regret, perhaps – to be in the business of discarding what they have made. Increasingly interpenetrated by-and-with society (Barnett, 2011), the university has adopted the prevailing neoliberal values of speed and moreness (Connell, 2013) that paint the future as a market 'space' to stake out with goals and visions spoken in "the language of opportunity, innovation and challenge" (Clegg, 2010, p. 349), an 'empty' place to be filled (Clegg, 2010; Mazé, 2014). The new progressive, entrepreneurial university (Barnett, 2011; Ramsden, 1998) survives by carving itself always anew out of the emptiness it races towards: it is surely *already* the university of the future.

Learning design, whether we like it or not, is entangled in the future-work of education – both driving it and being driven along by it. When the university assumes the techno-rationalism and managerialism of the corporate world (Connell, 2013; Oberski & McNally, 2007) and speaks of learning design from that place, learning design becomes a regulatory instrument of the future, a tool producing educational 'products' for 'customers'. By this account, the 'purpose' of learning design is to judiciously and strategically service the ideal future by solving problems and managing matters of efficiency, quality and accountability (Bird, Morgan, & O'Reilly, 2007; Rowland, 1993; Smith & Ragan, 2005). Typically, such design work is supported through institutional services, processes advocating (or prescribing) 'good practice' models and guidelines. Yet it seems that university teachers are not drawing on these to inform their work (Bennett, Agostinho, & Lockyer, 2016); neither

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are they drawn *to* them. Indeed they may actively resist goal-directed and prescriptive models, preferring to approach the task from the perspective of their teaching views (Magliaro & Shambaugh, 2005), even actively choosing the 'ad-hocism' of their work over structured approaches (O'Toole, 2015). It is not, by-and-large, the target-driven, systematic, evidence-based kind of designing that the university might want it to be.

But where, then, 'is' learning design, if not in these models and ways of doing, and how might we approach it? In this reflective text, I offer a view of learning design from the perspective of being 'in' design. It is offered in the dual register of the philosophical and the concrete. Bear with me while I ramble around the unruly edges of my thoughts.

To help bring abstract notions to ground and evoke a tangible sense of place, I draw on the notion of 'pond'. I like ponds: they are a body of water of somewhat 'human' proportion whose dimensions can be taken into view all at once. Pond water soaks the earth with its weight and reflects the sky in its stillness; it is water that has found a place to stay awhile. Temporally, the pond is a place that does not reach away from itself but *gathers itself in place*. The pond I have in mind is a real pond in my local area that I visit most weekends, simply called 'Duck Pond'. I am drawn to linger there and soak up its slow world, its enveloping stillness, yet intimately alive to its life. It is the residence of ducks, but also home to turtles, wading birds and an enigmatic single giant carp. As I stop to gaze at its gentle-brutal life-death entanglements of growth, stillness, and decay – all quietly occurring at the same time – I am suspended there in a peculiar pond-time where all is continuous, yet all is temporary. Pond time does not flow towards and then away from me like a river or a stream; here, time and I are in step.

### Being 'in' design

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University teachers are always and already *in the place of design*. Designing is simply a routine part of university teaching work (Bennett et al., 2011; Goodyear, Salmon, Spector, Steeples, & Tickner, 2001; Mor & Craft, 2012; O'Toole, 2015). Course delivery schedules roll around with regularity, each time a chance for tinkering and updating, and there is always something new coming into play that needs to be considered. Changes in local conditions, shifts in policy, technologies, administration or priority, all compel university teachers to constantly rethink what they are doing. But university teachers are not just responding to expectations and demands, they are also restlessly probing as curious and engaged human beings for whom the classroom is a playground and a lab, a place to try something else. Recently, a large Australian study on the practice of university teachers in design found that indeed, university teachers are continuously designing, and their designing *is not linear or systematic* (Bennett, Agostinho, & Lockyer, 2016) but always in a state of flux. Interestingly, the authors found that sometimes university teachers deliberately left their designs 'open', unfinished:

*Leaving a design incomplete is a strategy that allows adaptation in response to students as the teaching session unfolds. The iterative refinement of a unit over a period of time suggests it is continuously evolving and possibly never truly complete (Bennett et al., 2016, p. 28)*

This is as it should be. The design keeps changing because everything that it is concerned with keeps changing; the situation is always in flux. Added to which, the 'learner' is by definition a person 'on the move', learning and developing and emerging, as is the teacher. Learning design is concerned with life and its experiences, and learning designs are *lived*: lived and experienced by students *and* by the teachers who are designing those experiences. 'Completeness' from this perspective is a redundant concept, for designs in human learning contexts are not teleologically changing *towards* anything in the future, they are just *in motion* by and for and as with people and situations. Like the goings-on of the pond, the goings-on of our everyday designing is 'in' and comes 'out' of the place of our present being. We find ourselves not stretching toward, but 'here': lingering with an idea, staring at a paradox, rambling around in a design conversation, stalling for time until things settle down, or turning to gaze in another direction.

In turning differently towards design as something that we are 'in', we are actually *turning towards ourselves* in our designing: our *being-in-design*. Actually, we are already there, but in turning towards design, we *open ourselves* to our being 'in' it. And by turning and opening, we find we 'see' differently – surely deeply part of the work of designing. What do we see? In the first place, we might open to the situation we are in and 'see' it *as a design situation*, rich with the entanglements of human-and-world, and the many threads of be-comings-and-goings that make up that situation – including our own. We are always entangled: the richness and complexity of the design situation is also a richness and complexity of 'me'.

Since the situation is always in motion, and since we ourselves are always changing, our turning is always a turning anew and we are in effect *always turning, always starting*.

### Loosening

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How might our designing take root and unfold, then, if we-and-it are always starting? A clue lies in an early ecological design credo, which holds that *solutions emerge from place* (Ryn & Cowan, 1996). Another way of saying this (and sidestepping the outdated 'problem-solution' paradigm) is that *it is the situation itself that authentically gives rise to action*. This makes sense when you consider that everything is in flux. The learning situation that we are designing into will already have its contradictions, and gnarly, knotty dilemmas. In fact the root meaning of the word 'solution' is entirely apposite for our tangly in-situ designing, for etymologically, 'solution' means *to loosen apart, to untie*. With this original understanding of solution

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back in place we can let go of its pairing with 'problem', and understand solution-as-loosening as an opening *to* or opening *up* of a situation rather than a *solving* or *closing down* of a situation. Loosening lets air back in to what is clogged and stuck: oxygen for possibility. In the educational learning design context then, solutions have a chance to arise from place when one does the loosening work of opening *to* and opening *up* the politics, histories, cultures, resources, constraints, personalities and priorities of the educational situation one finds oneself 'in'.

One way to bring the work of loosening into tangible practice is to open up the situation to the scrutiny of colleagues and students - *with whom we already share the situation*, thus introducing the element of unexpected perspectives. What might have been confounding practice is thus *turned into* practice. But this deceptively simple twist requires discipline, for essentially this is a practice of withholding oneself and resisting the impulse to resolve the situation; instead the situation is laid bare by all who are in it, without dressing or judgement. What presents, what emerges, are little satoris of insight, clear ways forward, unexplored spaces, not just for one's own becoming, but for those that we are working with. For students, there is the opportunity to genuinely participate in the messiness of real situations and safely experience its fullness by themselves being 'in' it. I wonder if sometimes, designing involves making less of our own expertise and ideas, in order to give more to others. Loosening my own authority on the design, I make room for others to author their own experiences.

The pond serves to remind us: poking about curiously with others makes the ordinary an adventure. One just needs to be open to being 'in the open' together, sharing the delight of discovery.

## Caring and listening

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Designing from place requires *care*: we care to turn towards our situations and open them up to scrutiny. But the solutions do not always emerge when we want them to. If we rush the work, we risk irrelevance, superficiality, contrivance, and game-playing: more knots. Existentially, when we are out of step with life's own tempos, we are tumbling out of place and time. And in our caretaker roles concerned with human learning our designs unfold through time, for learning is a process that happens over time. For these reasons, and because we stand at two minutes to midnight, I turn to an ethic of 'slow' to help check habits of speed and as a reminder to *stay with it* instead of reaching always away. Slow, of course, is not always possible, but it can be a *commitment of care* that we can make in our professional lives to our scholarship, service and teaching (Mountz, Bonds, Mansfield, Loyd, Hyndman, Walton-Roberts ... Hamilton, 2015).

Slow understands that what arises does so *in its own time*. There is a lovely German word for this: *Eigenzeit*, translated as 'one's own' plus 'time', and meaning intrinsic, inherent, or 'proper' time, although there is no direct equivalent in English. 'Eigenzeit' serves as a reminder that "everything, everything has its own kind of time" (Needleman, 2003, p. 30). There are times to be fast and times to be slow (Honoré, 2004). We might rail against the rationalisation of time, of temporal ordering and regulation (Adam, 2003), yet slow, when *imposed* on a situation, is just another form of temporal control. Ironically, if we force slow, we bring ourselves back into a relation with time that is more about again *imposing* a way than *releasing to* another way. Instead, we can allow ourselves to pause at the pond. In the pause, we are receptive: we stop constructing the situation and give ourselves time to *listen* to the situation as it presents. As Jeffrey Ochsner writes of his advice to architecture students: "forget the idea of imposing a solution, and instead seek to 'listen' to wishes that appear to emanate from the design itself" (2000, p. 198). 'Listening' is lovely because it evokes the continuous dialogic nature of designing, the ongoing exchange between human-and-situation. We can listen into the spaces our loosening opens up... and in listening, we open up further.

We loosen, we listen. *What is the design saying?* We listen with "a willingness to experience whatever is met with on the path of designing with an anticipation, and an acknowledgment, that what it manifests is true and relevant to the task at hand" (Gregory, 1966, p. 7). We allow the design to speak back to us (Schön, 1992; Snodgrass & Coyne, 1996). And, if we let ourselves trust what we hear, we allow design to lead the way. We listen *care-fully*, because we are listening to ourselves 'being' in design. Through its work of loosening and opening, slow 'uncovers' human qualities and "reminds us of what it means to be fully human" (Carp, 2012, p. 111); it patiently *calls us back to ourselves*.

Slow also cares by *resisting*. In a world dominated by distractions and speed an articulate 'philosophy' of slow can be a gentle protest inspiring quiet reform - slow fashion, slow scholarship, and slow management are but a few expressions (for an excellent synopsis, see Carp, 2012). In 2008 Alistair Fuad-Luke and Carolyn Strauss captured the gist of the so-called slow 'movement' in their manifesto *Slow Design Principles* which values shifting awareness and perceptions, re-positioning the unfamiliar or forgotten, and playing with time. The Manifesto's six principles - reveal, expand, reflect, engage, participate and evolve - invite the designer to attend to *themselves* in their designing, "to reach for the core of design and her/his role as a designer" (Strauss & Fuad-Luke, 2008, p. 3). In Slow Design process, product and person - the how, what and who - are brought into closer relation with one another. We edge toward an understanding of design that seems to 'uncover' human being-and-design in a strange ontological parallel: in opening ourselves to the design, we open up the design.

We can manifest an ethic of care in our daily practices by simply noticing and checking our habits of speed. Where in our day are we already inclined to be slow? What do we rush through? I have begun to notice my habit of filling up silences with chatter, so this is my current 'slow' practice. We might not always be able to slow down what is timetabled and in motion, but we can look for opportunities to actively resist and trouble *assumptions* of speed - including our own. We can do this by

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finding opportunities, in the comings and goings of our daily dealings, to speak up for a longer timeframe or for a stepped or chained or expanded process, or to gently argue for time to come together to share ideas and stories of troubles and success. Slow tends to get overlooked if we don't speak up for it.

### Pond-ering: ground and edges

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Design work asks us to pay attention to the ways we *dispose* ourselves towards our work - our stances, perspectives and ways of seeing. *Slow* supplies a space for our attention, for it 'uncovers' our stances (Carp, 2012). Educationalist philosopher Ron Barnett calls us as educators to thoughtfulness, stillness, carefulness, receptiveness, courage and humility (2012). Australian design scholar Yoko Akama also stresses the importance of these stances in design practice, and adds to the list "reverence, acceptance and a sense of belonging with others and to our being in the world" (Akama, 2012, p. 7). Transition Design proponent Terry Irwin stresses the long-term commitment we need to make in our designing, to live the change slowly and carefully by working with 'postures' of humility, willingness, sharing, watchful anticipation, openness, and patience (2015). Postures, stances, ways of being: our stances of 'being' are part of 'doing' design work. Paradoxically, in revealing to ourselves our own stances we are actually tapping into design's 'deeper structure' which is "built on an understanding of the repertoire of human approaches to the world" (Dorst, 2015, p. 189). When we design from *that* place, that deeper structure, we are listening carefully for what really matters, "the profound and existential issues" (Löwgren & Stolterman, 2004, p. 11). We are drawn to pond-er.

What might we do to bring thoughtfulness into the fabric of our work? In a word: philosophy, knitted deeply into our doings. Pondering philosophically is a way of 'sinking in' and 'sitting with' the world; it is a slow and patient practice (Boulous Walker, 2016), and a care-ful professional stance towards our work which responsibly *grounds* the choices we make as well as *opening up new ground* (Konstantinou & Müller, 2016; Segal & Jankelson, 2016). I can illustrate with a Master of Laws programme I have been supporting for four years, through inception to its gradual settling down and which I am now walking alongside as it transitions through curriculum, leadership and teaching team changes. Steadfast through all the changes is the philosophy of the programme based on student self-directedness. The philosophy acts as both *stable ground* and *common ground*, the reference-point for all design decisions; unmoving, but infinitely interpretable and generative, it gives substance to and backgrounds the choices we make.

Here is the care and the wakefulness of being in design, where nothing is knowable beforehand and nothing is certain. At the edges of my senses, pond-ering comes as questions about what is *not* apparent, what is hidden in the weeds and the silt that is not mine to know. I become conscious of the partiality of my perceiving and 'the enticing and unending incompleteness' (Greene, 1992, p. 8) of my situatedness. Edging along in this way, so to speak, I am simultaneously 'in' and 'out' of my practice (Segal & Jankelson, 2016), always in the zone of the unknown no matter how familiar the terrain. But the notion of ground makes possible 'stands' and 'stances': taking a stand on philosophical grounds, and paying attention to my stances keeps connected to the quality of the experience I am in, rather than clinging to a phantom past or future.

### The long-scale view

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We can see that design work is continuous, but it is not a single line of thought-in-action that we follow; rather, the temporalities of learning design are multiple and nested. Because of the cyclical nature of the institutional rhythms, when we design in educational contexts we are necessarily paying attention to timescales ranging from the immediate to the enduring: from improvised moments, discrete once-off activities, to patterns of activity within nested week, semester and year cycles. Arching over them all are the longer cycles of course completion, and greater still, programme reviews, and indeed, our own careers and scholarly interests. We see a student come and go; a project form around an idea, carrying it forward; the slow exchange between research and teaching. We are always working across these scales at any one time, but rather than become bewildered, such an awareness of the temporalities can supply perspective. The 'long-scale' view of learning design does this by expanding the timeframe in which we conceive our designs occurring, thus *slowing down design* and engendering a sense of the temporal connectedness of our work in and through these times. In our work we can do this by attending to the way that our designing *carries through*, rather than seeing the beginnings and endings. The fruits that are lessons, wins and accidents in one time and place fall to ground and seed the next concern.

But designing is not *cumulative*. The idea of *Eigenzeit* reminds us that each thing - idea, connection, way - not only comes in its own time, but leaves in its own time too. There is death too, at the pond; part of life. Some ideas wither before they have a chance to take root, or exhaust their usefulness. Slow loves the spaces left behind: emptiness as possibility, rare moments which have their own kind of fertility. These spaces seem to act as wormholes, making possible a *movement through* the scaled temporalities - for instance pausing to take in the big picture, or zooming in macroscopically to examine the moment in greater detail. Long-scale also seems to 'expand' the situation *in all temporal directions at once*, stretching out into (not toward) the future, but also into the past, and into its sideways quantum possibilities, its multiple alternatives and variations of 'now', and gathers them all to ground here, in the moment. The teacher anchored "in the here and now of continuing

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design activities” (Saad-Sulonen, Eriksson, Halskov, Karasti & Vines, 2018, p. 9) sees what comes and goes, but is philosophical, grounded, the point upon which the axis of their design turns.

More radically, the long-scale view can be seen as not just a temporal scale but also a *qualitative* scale. Instead of understanding long-scale as seeing quantitatively ‘more’ of time, it is possible to understand it as *taking a qualitatively richer* view, seeing ‘more’ of the fullness of now - more of what is happening in and around the pond, but more of ‘the pond itself’ in its existential pond-ness, including more of its history, its nature, its possibility, perhaps even more of what it is *not*. These moments of existential penetration are the jewels of being in design.

In the example of the Master of Laws, the long-scale view plays out in every design conversation by providing a nested perspective of the decisions that we are taking: the immediate, short and longer-term contexts are all present *simultaneously*. We are working at the moment on activity pattern changes which allow for staff to exercise a more nuanced alignment between activity and syllabus. In the sphere of the immediate, there is concern about the extra responsibility and the time needed to think through the activity choices. This anxiety is tolerated, however, because teaching programme staff understand that it affords a greater measure of freedom, and indeed applies the philosophy of self-directedness to the *process* of designing as well as the design. In its most expansive sense, it begins a process of transferring the ‘ownership’ of the programme into the hands of the teaching staff where it rightfully belongs; this is the long-game.

### Letting go and belonging

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Designing, in the educative realm, cannot be about control – it is more alive than that. For a start, the ripples of our designs pulse into situations we cannot ever know and survive us in ways that we cannot ever predict. Besides, our designs are *already* more entangled than we can imagine: as our degrees of separation in the world shrink, so too do the ripples of our actions *which are already in motion* more energetically interconnect. And whatever we conscientiously dis-entangle with our designing is, over time, ultimately and inevitably re-entangled in-and-with the world. So we cannot control – but we can *trust*; trust that when we take a slow stance in good faith, with our ethic of care intact and awake, when we are grounded philosophically and responsibly in the moment with the long-view in mind, then we manifest ourselves lovingly through our teaching decisions. Our being ‘in’ design ripples in all directions without our ‘push’ intervention. We might as well stop grasping, and stop overturning - and instead, *go-with*.

To ‘go with’ is the etymological root of the word ‘belong’, reminding us that belonging is not just relational, but temporal. Belonging takes time to happen and persists over time: it is *long*. The ‘with’ is important too: rather than belonging *to*, in slow we have a chance to abide *with* the world, loving the world as it is; and through our designing we have the chance to bring that love into tangible play in the world. By giving ourselves over to the process, what is at first new and strange becomes our home (Snodgrass, 2001). Befriending slow is like this, a process to trust and give oneself over to: if at first it feels strange, abide with it a little longer and you will start to feel at home in this mode.

### In sum, and the real gift of slow

By rambling through notions of untying, opening, loosening, listening, seeing, sitting with, pondering, accepting, allowing, expanding, and trusting, I have turned differently toward learning design. Instead of seeing learning design as an instrument of the future I locate it *here*, in this place and *now*, in this moment, as a lived-and-living practice that I am already and continuously ‘in’. I have invited you to sit at the pond with me to expand your seeing, observing design’s myriad tempos and signatures, to ponder philosophically, and to become aware of the edges of what you can see and know. Perhaps in the process, you have already begun the quietly radical act of seeing goodness in slowness.

Taking a long-scale view helps, as it accepts that at times we need to go fast. And it is here, I think, that the real gift of slow lies: the gift of *choice*. Slow gives us pause to open up to question the habits and expectations of speed. Seeing the situation in its fullest temporal context understands that “OK, at this time, I need to move fast. But there is a bigger moment in play here, and I will stay with it” and so actively *choosing* the temporal quality of our engagement in design work. But slow is not easy and must be taken up in the same spirit that it offers itself: slowly, not all at once (Honoré, 2004). If speed is part of the ‘problem’, then slow, as part of the answer, cannot be rushed.

But slow is not ‘out there’ to be adopted any more than the future is ‘out there’ to be filled. Rather, slow is a stance already available to us, which gives us back a space in which to encounter ourselves and stay with ourselves in our practice, concretely and philosophically grounded in situation, time and place. It is a stance of turning differently or newly towards ourselves in our design work so that the ‘way’ of our work and our being in it are the same.

### Biography

*Nicola Parkin* is a full-time professional learning designer and a part-time academic. She is also finishing her Doctor of Education dissertation entitled *Intimacies of Being in Learning Design: A Hermeneutic Phenomenology*. Her research interests revolve around existential and philosophic methodologies and approaches in higher education.

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