

— JAMIE THOM —

# SLOW TEACHING

ON FINDING CALM,  
CLARITY AND IMPACT IN  
THE CLASSROOM

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# FOREWORD

Now is the time to pause, now is the time to reflect and now is the time consider the notion that fast is better than slow. And *Slow Teaching* provides an important counterpoint and a prompt for doing so. At a time when the speed of events, overwhelming visual stimuli, expectations of work being completed in the quickest possible time threaten to overwhelm us, we need a coherent explanation and rationale for stepping back, taking stock and refreshing our thinking. And this is what ‘Slow Teaching’ does.

It is a meditation on the importance of slow. It is timely in that it addresses some of the issues highlighted daily in staffrooms, on social media and indeed from the DfE’s workload review. However, instead of locating the arguments at the strategic level, it provides a framework for personal reflection and action. It focuses on what each of us, as individuals, can do in order to slow down and paradoxically create better work.

Drawing on wide ranging research and ancient philosophy to back up his arguments, Jamie has translated his thesis on ‘slow’ into a meaningful commentary on the different aspects of our professional and personal lives. As such it will resonate with anyone involved in education. Furthermore, it will provide the insights, phrases and if needed, ammunition, when talking and debating with colleagues about what we are doing in our professional practice, and why. For too long we have taken the given, as given and now is the time to ask why, to strip back anything that is redundant and any process or practice which does not make a contribution to learning.

The book provides us with the prompts to ask: how much of what we do is really necessary, how much of it is ‘just the way things have always been done’ and what can we realistically abandon without compromising quality? *Slow Teaching* provides us with the tools to have robust conversations about what is really necessary and what can be shredded.

Jamie’s thesis is grounded in his own experiences. This makes it a joy to read, as there is something very powerful about a serious book, drawn on reflections of experience and located in wider research. There will be sighs and

exclamations from the reader as they recognise their own practice and similar contexts. This is what gives the book real power, because it is drawn from the well of experience, of overdoing things, of ‘going the extra mile’ at considerable personal and professional cost. Jamie isn’t the only one who has overdone things and whose body has reclaimed its balance by enforced inactivity.

‘Slow Teaching’ covers a broad spectrum including talk, classroom practice, relationships, classroom design, planning, feedback, wellbeing and surprisingly ‘sacred silence’. I am delighted to see silence covered as a topic: the power of silence, of thinking time, of concentration, of deep thought, to hold a response, to just wait to see what emerges, without the need for constant chatter: all these aspects of silence are neglected in our discussions about high quality provision. So, it is particularly welcome to see this opened up in the book and I am sure it will stimulate a great deal of debate.

*Slow Teaching* also tackles some of the sector’s own self-imposed stresses such as the curse of perfectionism, and ridiculous mantra such as ‘A good teacher is like a candle – it consumes itself to light the way for others’ (Theobald, 2017). It is healthy to open up this debate and we need more professionals stripping away at the myth of self-imposed martyrdom.

When the notion of ‘slow’ is unpacked and explained, it becomes clear that it has implications for every aspect of professional practice: and no more so that in the classroom. And what will result from this attention to ‘slow’, when we reconsider the essentials is focused, calmer and ultimately better learning. And that, after all, is the holy grail.

As with all the great insights in life, simplicity is easier said than done. However, in taking the elements of professional practice and considering them through the slow lens, these are made concrete and really helpful. The questions for self-reflection at the end of each chapter are astute and have the power to keep us on track. They would serve as useful additions to departmental and leadership meetings. Because ultimately, the pursuit of ‘slow’ is about doing things for the right reasons.

*Slow Teaching* is an important book, which will help all of us to pause, take a deep breathe and take stock. I wholeheartedly recommend educators to read it. Slowly.

*Mary Myatt, January 2018*

*For Fiona.*

*There is no one I admire more; thank you for everything.*



**PART I:**  
**SILENT SLOW**



# CHAPTER 1: THE SLOW TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

*There is more to life than increasing its speed.*  
Mahatma Gandhi

You have taken the first step: hesitantly opening the pages of this book. There may be elements of doubt in your mind as you recall the repertoire of more fashionable and effective teaching behaviours, a speed-induced cocktail with the ingredients of pace, energy and engagement.

You pause, questioning the connotations of the adjective 'slow' in the all-consuming, rapid-paced world of education.

A first memory arises of that exhausted feeling on a Friday evening after a week on the relentless conveyer belt of school life. A second memory recalls those huge piles of workbooks, each strewn with red pen as your aching hand scribbles yet another repetitive comment. A third is more emotional: how regularly you feel utterly overwhelmed by the endless demands on your time.

You then remember the hordes of eager, inspired faces that joined you on that nerve-racking, exciting first day of teacher training. Those motivated and passionate individuals, a significant number of whom now no longer teach. A flicker of recognition (or, dare I say, hope) briefly overcomes you as you reflect again on the title: *Slow Teaching*.

My work begins.

This book has an agenda. I will be very clear from the beginning. It will seek to highlight the value of slowing down in almost everything we do in education. It will challenge popular whirlwind teaching priorities: 'outstanding' single teaching episodes; obsessional data collection; endless marking; single lesson performance management; sporadic behaviour management systems and the priority on engagement over learning.

Instead, *Slow Teaching* will highlight the value of the considered, reflective and mindful teacher, whose ability to slow down both inside and outside of the

classroom energises them, and results in improved progress for the students in their care. It will explore teaching for real impact: teaching that focuses on retaining knowledge and that enables a lifelong love of learning. We will see how this requires patient development over time, with real attention to detail.

It will recognise that learning is messy and anything but linear, arguing that measured teaching for retention and memory is a skill that is still not given enough priority in our schools. Feedback strategies that move students forward in their learning and maximise the use of teachers' precious time will be explored, alongside assessments that are carefully considered and will equip teachers with the tools to plan for the success of all their students. The streamlined focus will be on what will have the most influence in moving learning forward, not on fulfilling an Ofsted agenda or a data imperative.

We will pause to reflect on the experience of education for young people, whose lives are overwhelmed by the relentless world of social media and technology addictions. *Slow Teaching* will argue that our classrooms should be sanctuaries of routine, patience and calm that teach vital 'slow' skills: listening, concentration and most importantly the capacity to reflect and think about learning. It will explore how this will allow us to build better relationships and appreciate the daily joys and nuances of teaching.

Continuing to improve this craft will also be a priority in the pages of this book: prioritising the deliberate, reflective and research-based practice that will allow you to continue to grow and become an expert in your field. In short, this book aims to help you to rediscover your passion for the wonderful world of teaching. It will also examine school management and reflect on how the slow leadership style – with its focus on attention to detail – can provide the framework to empower students and give them the very best opportunities in life.

This book arrives at a junction in education at which the use of 'crisis' is becoming more ubiquitous. Hardly a day goes by without a screaming headline: 'crisis' in teacher retention, 'crisis' in teachers sprinting to leave the profession, 'crisis' in confidence in school leadership, and 'crisis' in attracting teachers to work in more challenging environments. Political interference has arguably resulted in more reactive policies that fail to provide long-term solutions. There is a clear void, a lack of proactive and considered reflection in education, hindering our ability to move the profession forward – inch by inch, painstakingly slow, step by step.

We will consider what the reality of wellbeing really means in a school environment, evaluating how best we can develop a better understanding and relationship with stress. Sharing practical and sustainable strategies to equip

teachers with the ability to enjoy a long, positive and healthy career in teaching will be one of the residing aims of *Slow Teaching*.

This book is also the product of a personal odyssey of embracing a slower and more reflective professional life. The beginning of my own teaching career was particularly frenzied, with an early promotion to assistant headteacher in a large comprehensive school in central London. For years I literally ran three miles into school, dashed around manically for long hours on autopilot, then ran home laden with stacks of books to keep me company into the late evening.

I was utterly invincible: thriving on little sleep and the adrenaline of pace. Signs of exhaustion and the build-up of all-encompassing stress were arrogantly rejected. I coped by moving with more and more urgency – a self-defeating and relentless life of pace. Mistakes in my professional and private life gradually built up and I became more fractured and more irritable. Any ability to think strategically or consider how best to manage my time was lost in the wildfire of cortisone and adrenaline that comes with a life fuelled by stress.

I ignored the clear signals, driving myself further and further into the ground. It culminated in illness, professional burnout and an almost complete refutation of the teaching profession. I was close to joining the legions of teachers whose early experience in education left them demoralised and defeated by a relentless profession.

The transition to becoming a more tranquil individual has been one of tears, sweat and anxiety. The explosion of mindfulness literature and the growing cultural shift towards slowing down has been a guiding light in the darkness. Stumbling across texts such as *In Praise of Slow* by Carl Honore and *The Things You Can See Only When You Slow Down* by Haemin Sunim have helped me in developing a new philosophy that appreciates the calm, the contemplative and the merits of slowing down. This journey has included reflection on how the individuals who professed to slow tendencies – including Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi and the Stoic philosophers – achieved such success through a deliberate rejection of speed. As the chapters that follow demonstrate, it has also led me to invest much more time in reflecting on, and learning from, the writings of others on education.

There is no idealism or romanticism in *Slow Teaching*: teaching will always be a demanding profession and young people are challenging customers who, inevitably, are the complete contrast of slow. The criteria that opened this introduction will continue to be essential in securing their progress. Yet, pace can also be overrated: it needs to be coupled with essential slow skills, forgotten aspects of teaching and

learning that could ultimately prove transformative in securing positive futures for students.

It is time to control the mad theology of speed that is damaging the teaching profession; to press pause and reflect on an educational system that is being stretched to its limits. It is time to streamline teaching to focus on what can make a difference for young people, something that can only be achieved if we deliberately slow down and focus on what matters. Let the journey slowly begin...