

e-Learning and Educational Technology with SOUL (Slow Online & Ubiquitous Learning)

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Paradoxically, the power and potential of e-Learning is also its problem or pitfall— 24/7 access and presence overburden and overwhelm systems of learning and teaching. The same can be said for global trade, wherein the capitalist must seemingly be present 24/7 for markets opening each morning as the world turns. The sun is always rising, yet this fallacy takes a toll. Machines and the environment overload and overheat as capitalists, consumers, and economies are fatigued, recessed, and depressed. For e-Learning, neither consumption or production is sustainable as students and teachers juggle or struggle with partial attention, just-in-time demands, and a proliferation of texts and messages. Like it or not, both so-called poor digital immigrants and rich digital natives are limited by phenomenological, technical, and temporal dimensions of life. Feelings of technostress and cyberfatigue set in as our devices generate deadlines or reminders; servers crash and fail; the digital clock ticks; the sun sets. Neither cyborgs nor posthumans rely on perpetual motion and need to recharge through electrical power grids and eventually update through signal towers. The pace of communication and learning accelerate while information and expectations proliferate in an endless cycle that is simultaneously exhilarating, dizzying, and exhausting. However much the “Futurist Manifesto” accounted for speed in a new pace of life and endorsed breaking out of “the horrible shell of wisdom,” it did not account for information in the expansion of life. To this end and moment, no one has achieved the status of ‘fast e-learner.’

Among our cultural inheritance’s most heartfelt stories, such as O. Henry’s “The Gift of the Magi,” are those that ask “how much is enough?” or when is enough, enough?” These are less questions of indulgence than of caution and care. Slow food was established on this premise inasmuch as in response to the increasing speed of life marked by fast food. As the story goes, in 1986 Italian reporter Carlo Petrini led a group in protest of a new McDonald’s franchise at the base of the Spanish Steps in Rome, brandishing “bowls of penne and other home-cooked Italian dishes, determined to demonstrate the social and culinary costs of homogenized eating.”¹ Yes, these are the famous Spanish Steps that Dylan describes in the opening lines of “When I Paint my Masterpiece,” where Rome resembles “the land of Coca-Cola.” In December 1989, the “Slow Food manifesto” was written, beginning with a cause and culprit:

Our century, which began and has developed under the insignia of industrial civilization, first invented the machine and then took it as its life model.

We are enslaved by speed and have all succumbed to the same insidious virus: *Fast Life*, which disrupts our habits, pervades the privacy of our homes and forces us to eat Fast Foods.²

Delegates from fifteen countries endorsed the manifesto and nowadays slow food inspires a global movement. As Petrini observed, enough of “McNuggets and Monsanto”— “it’s a union of education, politics, environment and sensual pleasure.”³

Slow online and ubiquitous learning (SOUL) was founded under similar conditions and circumstances, albeit on virtual not real Spanish Steps. Down-shifting to slow or steer the juggernaut to more organic and humane paces and volumes, e-Learning and educational technology (ET) with SOUL adds to the concerns of slow food with the health and well-being of individuals, the collective, and the planet, a concern for learners and teachers. What does it mean to be an e-learner or i-teacher in the 21st century?

Although the beginnings of e-Learning and ET date back much further, most histories of online learning and distance education begin with the early days of correspondence education. In British Columbia (BC), correspondence education dates to 1919 and a small island off the west coast, where a lighthouse keeper requested that the Provincial Department of Education use the postal service to forward curriculum materials to assist his wife in teaching their small children (Buck, 1951; Ruggles et al, 1982, p. 16; Toutant, 2003). In the first chapter of *Digital Diploma Mills*, Noble (2002) outlines the economic motive of this type of correspondence. Philosophies of correspondence education invariably acknowledge alternatives to conventional schooling and alternative demographics served, such as the lighthouse mothers and children. As Singh and Panda (1980) define it, correspondence or distance education is

that which is not carried out under the continuous and immediate supervision of the tutor and his [or her] personal contact with the taught inside the lectureroom or classroom; rather it is carried out through mail and the students, at a distance, can learn and be benefitted by well-prepared, planned transcripts of a tutorial organization. (p. 27)

Theorists quite readily point out the independence of the learner in correspondence or distance education (or online learning), but this type of distance is not merely geographic. As Moore (1983) notes, it is “educational and psychological as well. It is a distance in the *relationship* of the two partners. It is a ‘transactional distance’” (p. 155). This relational sense of distance highlights the etymology of correspondence education— to correspond means to be co-responsive or answerable to each other.

At unprecedented paces with volumes of messages it is impossible for participants in e-Learning or online education to co-respond or be answerable to each other. Discourse is possible but dialogue less so under fast-paced, communication-saturated conditions.

SOUL entails commitments and responsibilities that regulate the pace and volume of consumption and production in online spaces, including a learning management system (LMS) such as Vista, Moodle, and Desire2Learn. One mode of moderating messages is what we call a *pause*, or the virtual pause button. A pause in action within e-Learning spaces provides time for catching up, reading ahead, moderating the volume of discussion posts, and planning and designing interactivities. As Applebaum (1995) theorizes, “the stop is the time of awareness” (p. 16). The pause is a “betweenness” (p. 15), acknowledging that time is ordinarily understood as “insufficiency (‘Never enough time’)” (p. 85).

Pragmatically, for ETEC 511 with SOUL, we will stop or pause from Vista for two days each week— Tuesdays and Wednesdays (Vancouver PST as common time zone) (i.e., 0

posts except private posts for planning). In effect, the pause means a pause in access, including discussion posts (limit to sparse posts only for assignments) for working on the readings and thoughtful engagement with the assignments. For all participants throughout the term a second mode of moderation entails quantitatively fewer posts and qualitatively better posts. This means about one or two messages or posts per week for each student and teacher as co-respondents in conversation. This also means a thoughtful engagement with the readings and the discourse leadership groups (DLGs) each week.

The new ethic of e-Learning and ET means remembering its roots and acknowledging the promise of SOUL for the health and well-being of e-learners and i-teachers. We can thoughtfully bridge space and time by pausing to recall, given the always complicated, complex, crazy lives we lead, that bridges gridlocked with traffic are hard or frustrating to navigate. SOUL keeps open bridges for co-respondents.

References

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Endnotes

¹ For the history of slow food, see http://www.enebuilder.net/tusker/e_article001882138.cfm?x=b11,0,w.

² See http://www.slowfood.com/about_us/eng/manifesto.lasso.

³ Petrini is quoted at <http://www.foodreference.com/html/a-slow-food.html>.