

# Don't let the Curriculum become a Stranger! Embracing Slow Pedagogy to Engender a Curriculum as Lived

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has put educational institutions to the test. Traditional conceptions of education have had to be challenged to make room for teaching-learning during times of no human physical contact and interaction. Nestled within habits of classroom teaching, teachers and lecturers now find themselves behind screens as e-educators of e-learning. For many educators this transformation came too swiftly, creating uncertainties and challenges like no other, due to the copious cycles of curricularisations and re-curricularisations and the demands that they place on those educators who must design and implement the curriculum. This chapter considers the possible repercussion of educators encountering the curriculum as a stranger. It proposes, instead, that the challenges emanating from this pandemic could open our eyes to the beauty and power of disruption so that we can think anew about curriculum. To start such a complicated conversation, this chapter embraces slow pedagogy theory as a possibility to engendering a curriculum as lived.

**Keywords:** curriculum as stranger, curriculum as lived, slow pedagogy

## **1 Introduction**

For the past two years I have been teaching my B.Ed. Hons students a Curriculum Studies module about how to be critical about the 21st century. What should this curriculum look like? What sort of questions should we be asking? I taught this in light of what were then (and continue to be) heated debates, such as decolonising the curriculum. In light of COVID-19, I find myself raising these questions once more. I am reminded of how I try to instill in my students the importance of thinking about curriculum in times that are VUCA (viz. volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) (Schwab 2016). The Four Cs of critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity (Harari 2018) are widely understood to be the core 21st century skills for living and learning in VUCA times. This has led me to complicate the realities of what we are currently facing in this pandemic, where what I teach in theory is starting to be a lived reality. How should we be approaching a curriculum in these times, where curriculum and re-curriculation is a daily or weekly affair? Curriculum lies at the centre, not the margin of Education. The consequence of constant change is that we need to think differently about the curriculum (Aoki 1999; Pinar 2015).

This chapter attests to the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has put education institutions to the test. With no traditional human physical contact and interaction, lecturers now find themselves in front of screens as e-educators of e-learning. For many, this transformation came too swiftly, creating uncertainties and challenges like no other, due to the copious cycles of curriculumations and re-curriculumations and the resulting demands. This chapter argues that for some lecturers, the curriculum has become a stranger, and this has sparked complicated conversations. This chapter aims to unlock the potentials within a slow pedagogy towards a lived curriculum.

## **2 Higher Education Curriculum: An Institutional Response**

The current state of the higher education curriculum is directly affected by the pandemic. Lecturers can no longer rely on their planned curriculum and templates of standardisation. They cannot sit comfortably within the semester plans that were so meticulously designed and communicated at the start of the teaching semester. As lecturers, we need to become uncomfortable and even frustrated within our own curricula, where how we teach, learn, and assess is

forced to change. Communiques provided by top management to lecturers at North-West University have given rise to different waves of curriculum expectation for both the lecturer and the student. I reflect on the communique spanning the short period from 17 March to 25 April 2020 (NWU 2020), just to illustrate some of the curriculum discourses that are unfolding in the COVID-19 pandemic. At first, the discourse was centred on measuring learning and how students would be assessed to meet module outcomes. This ***assessment as learning*** response could be seen in light of Management's expectations for curriculum to continue, with a change of mode from in-contact to online. Assessment is being emphasised more than learning, in a need to meet end of semester outcomes that are looming, potentially representing the need to re-curriculate as a way of retroactively designing from assessment outwards, so as to ensure qualification (Biesta 2009). The second discourse exposed the difficulties around student involvement in their online assessment and learning due to technology-related and other challenges inhibiting ***access to learning***. This put an end to the infatuation with designing online learning and assessment to focus on meeting the needs of student's contextual circumstances (Jacobs, Vakalisa & Gawe 2016) in terms of aspects such as learning devices, network coverage, and other online learning necessities needed in order to again access to the curriculum.

Next was the discourse driving online learning, with a focus on continued teaching-learning, but without assessment. ***Learning without assessment*** was chosen due to various reasons that draw on the previous two discourses, as well as the idea for no student to be left behind. The lockdown period made it difficult for students to meet assessment expectations due to the inabilities (on various levels) to access learning, where lecturers were instructed that no assessment due dates may fall within the lockdown period. Again, a speculation could be that management's vision is to minimise student disadvantage, in this way trying to avoid any learning inequalities or discrimination (Walker 2018). Lastly, yet another curriculum mandate was communicated that raised concern on the part of student representatives. This mandate included the need for lecturers to disseminate their curricula in such a way that allows for ***learning with heightened support and apprehension***. Support, in terms of being cognisant of the expectations that students must meet in the short semester period that still remained, and apprehension in terms of approaching this expectation with care and understanding (Noddings 2013). Student representatives raised matters that directly impact the curriculum in

their outcry for lecturers to provide: guidance to students in terms of time management and other self-study skills; more explicit guidelines and advice on how to approach the curriculum at hand; a revised number of assessments that students are expected to complete within a module to make room for assessments within the different modules; and apprehension of language limitations as well as resource restraints that could inhibit learners in their learning and assessment. Although these discourses reveal the urgency for deep curriculum engagements in all their complexity, these are only interpretations of written communicate requiring greater clarity through deliberations with top management so as to more meaningfully extrapolate their curriculum decisions.

The point to be made is that in such a short time, various curriculum discourses have unfolded. Each discourse also gives rise to other nuances, and this divulges the nature of curriculum as cyclical, fluid, and without stringent borders. Although its plasticity is one of its greatest attributes, it can create theoretical ambiguities, as different role players design, interpret, and implement the curriculum in varying ways. As Breault and Marshall (2010: 179) rightly emphasise, curriculum discourses do not arise from curriculum scholars alone, where ...

... every pedagogue, parent, pundit, policy maker and politician has one too. Today's conflicting definitions reflect different vantage points from which curriculum is engaged with as well as different philosophies and foci regarding the relationship between schools and society ... the multiplication of curriculum definitions is not an urgent problem to be solved, but rather a state of affairs to be acknowledged as inevitable.

Where does this leave me as lecturer and curriculum leader? When we approach the curriculum as lived (Aoki 1993 & 1999; Pinar 2012 & 2015) then pandemics such as COVID-19 disrupt the planned curriculum and put a lived curriculum to its most ultimate test. Although on different scales and to intensities, we are reminded of re-curriculations in response to, for example, the HIV/Aids outbreaks, and student outcries to decolonise the curriculum. I am also reminded of the numerous re-curriculations at school level (Simmonds 2014), where we learnt that although necessary, constant change leaves the designers and implementers of the curriculum (such as teachers) dissolute, anxious, and frustrated (Cross, Mungadi & Rouhani 2002; Jansen 2002).

Amongst the now normative pattern of constant change, curriculum becomes messy and confusing, and leaves, for the context of this chapter, lecturers to become either lost or rebellious, which could lead to an encounter with curriculum as a stranger.

### **3 Encountering the Curriculum as a Stranger**

Julia Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves* (Kristeva 1991) positions the 'stranger' as the foreigner or outsider in a country or society that is not their own. She also refers to the idea of 'strangeness' experienced within oneself and through the other. It is insightful to contemplate Kristeva's (1991) idea of the foreigner as stranger within the context of the curriculum as stranger. As with Kristeva's depiction of foreigner, the curriculum as stranger can become 'a black angel clouding transparency, opaque, [an] unfathomable spur' (Kristeva 1991: 1). Labelled with hatred or as the 'other', the curriculum's aloofness results in it not belonging to any one place, any time, or any love and is therefore lost at origin. Kristeva (1991: 7) describes this by comparing it to a moving train or flying plane, as there is no stopping; it is nomadic. Melancholia also surfaces through its strangeness when a sense of nostalgia can be experienced due to a part that is lost or unrecoverable (Kristeva 1991: 9). For Kristeva (1991: 10), two possible scenarios can emanate from this. On one continuum is a 'stranger as ironist', which are advocates of emptiness who waste away between the agony of what no longer is and what will never be. On the end of the other continuum are the 'strangers as believers', who transcend, neither living in the past or the present, but beyond, they are tenacious and will forever remain unsatisfied, because they have a passion for change (*ibid.*). Whether ironist or believer, it is the strangeness of this other that 'leaves us separate, incoherent; even more so, [...] make[s] us feel that we are not in touch with our own feelings, that we reject them or, on the contrary, that we refuse to judge them – we feel 'stupid' we have 'been had'' (Kristeva 1991: 187). Kristeva (1991:187) further postulates possible repercussions of this stranger that we tend to simultaneously reject and identify with, where she elaborates:

I lose my boundaries, I no longer have a container, the memory of experiences when I had been abandoned overwhelm me, I lose my composure. I feel 'lost', 'indistinct', 'hazy'. The uncanny strangeness

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allows for many variations: they all repeat difficulty I have in situating myself with respect to the other and keep going over the course of identification-projection that lies at the foundation of my reaching autonomy.

When management instils curriculum pathways that demand rapid re-circulation within short timespans, and where lecturers are expected to continuously communicate re-designed curricula to management through uniform templates, curricula become a structural means of control. The curriculum is made no more than an artefact, a form of political symbolism (Jansen 2002) that represents adherence and assimilation. When management projects top-down decisions onto lecturers, the curriculum we once knew is taken away from us, becoming unbeknown to its creator, as if a stranger.

The tendency to connote strangeness in this way should not be perceived as a longing for uniformity, standardisation or predictability of the curriculum (Tyler 2013: 61). Nor should it be perceived as what scholars such as Aoki (1999) term the curriculum-as-planned. This hegemonic representation of curriculum reduces teaching to instruction, learning to acquisition and assessment to the measurement of what has been acquired or not (Aoki 1999: 180). Pinar (2015) shares in this sentiment, but expresses the over-emphasis on a planned curriculum as a means to market ideologies such as to develop students merely for a workforce. Pinar (2015: 115) posits:

Subjects seem absent in cram schools, where so-called skills replace academic knowledge, decontextualized [sic] puzzles preparing for employment in jobs without meaning, itself a causality of capitalism's compulsion to profit no matter what it takes... human subjects become numbers, e.g. test scores.

Experiencing the state of curriculum at university as a stranger during these early COVID-19 times is possibly inevitable. The point I want to make is that amongst the confusion and the disruption must lie some introspection, a type of resilience to the way lecturers encounter the curriculum. As the curriculum leader, lecturers cannot escape management's curriculum expectations, but can be curriculum agents who breathe life into the curriculum.

When we regard the curriculum as lived (Aoki 1999; Pinar 2015), it transcends being an artefact (noun) to being an action (verb). Curriculum

ceases to be a policy artefact, or what is known as the official or planned curriculum, or a mere noun, when it is engaged with as an inquiry and ‘becomes a verb, an action, a social practice, a private meaning, and a public hope’ (Pinar 2010: 178). It explores and theorises social, economic and political assumptions and underpinning ideologies (Chisholm 2005; Reed *et al.* 2012) and how these disrupt curriculum spaces (Cary 2007), making it a normative endeavour more than a descriptive one. This form of theorising accentuates the political motives, ethical dilemmas and social concerns that lie at the heart of lived experience. Pinar (2015) has conceptualised this as complicated conversations. As a complicated conversation, the curriculum becomes a platform not only for us to learn *from* and *with* the particularities of each other, but *through* these. For Pinar (2015: 111) this means that complicated conversations create ‘an educational opportunity to understand difference within resemblance, and not only across our species but life on earth, as well as within our own individuality, as subjectivity itself is an ongoing conversation’. This dovetails eloquently with Aoki’s (1999: 181) emphasis on the tensions created between a curriculum-as-planned and curriculum-as-lived. He refers to this tension as ‘a site that beckons pedagogic struggle, for such a human site of becoming, where newness can come into being. The space moves and is alive!’ For Pinar (2015: 112) this is a ‘creative tensionality’ that can enable ‘constant transformation’ because the curriculum acknowledges and embraces life in all its complexity, informed by ‘intellectual, psychological, and physical structures as allegorical’ and imagined as a world ‘simultaneously empirical and poetical, phenomenological and historical’.

In these times of curriculum strangeness, we need to face any possible curriculum fears and uncertainties with the hope of disrupting entrenched perception. As curriculum agents, lecturers should not be intimidated by top management’s communique and attendant threats that non-compliance will lead to dismissal, but rather, focus on the possibilities of creative tension, by being curriculum leaders who are proactive and not reactive. When lecturers are reactive they resort to curriculum management and become consumed by curriculum instructions and prescriptions. The chief concern, business efficiency and positional authority, rather than collaborative engagements with various stakeholders to inform curriculum decisions (Henderson 2010: 221). To be proactive, another approach is needed. Next, I look to the ideals of a slow pedagogy for inspiration.

#### **4 Unlocking the Potentials within a Slow Pedagogy so that a Curriculum as Lived can be Engendered**

In the 1980s, what is now known as the Slow Food movement was partly initiated through what has been explained as ‘gatherings of an inner circle of dreamers’ of food and wine connoisseurs in Italy’s vineyards during the summer of 1986 (Petrini 2013: 11). At the core was a drive toward sustainable foods and promotion of local small businesses to challenge political agenda of the globalisation of agricultural products. As expressed in the Slow Food Manifesto (Petrini 2001: xxiii - xxiv), this movement is a response to neoliberalism and marketisation as it strives for a move way from Fast Life subsumed in efficiency and output at the detriment of the environment and sustainability. It is critical of our enslavement to a lifestyle namely, ‘Fast Life, which disrupts our habits, pervades the privacy of our homes and forces us to eat Fast Foods’ (Petrini 2001: xxiii). Instead, it wants to make reclaiming cultural heritage, material pleasure, sensory experience, societal contexts and lived histories, the first prize. Although its symbol is a little snail, it does not represent lack of speed. ‘Slow’ instead emphasises the thought and attentiveness required to bring about new meaning through depth of engagement. It is envisaged that through slowing down, ‘we are able to reconnect with ourselves and others and nurture relationships to improve the quality of life and work’ (Collett *et al.* 2018:120). In academia, we have come to see the imprint of this philosophy expressed through the conceptions of Slow Science, Slow Pedagogy, Slow Ontology, Slow Philosophy and the Slow Professor (Berg & Seeber 2016; Boulous Walker 2016; Collett *et al.* 2018; Leibowitz & Bozalek 2018; Stengers 2011; Ulmer 2017). Whilst this ‘slowness’ is often perceived as unproductive in academic circles, its urgency proves valuable and might rather be professed as ‘differently productive’ rather than unproductive (Ulmer 2017: 201).

In her foreword to Carlo Petrini’s book *Slow Food: The Case for Taste* (2001), Alice Waters (well-known American chef, restaurateur, activist and author) highlights five key aspects that Slow Food endorses. Each of these aspects are now drawn on with particular interest for conceptualising a curriculum as lived underpinned by a philosophy of a slow pedagogy.

*First*, Waters (2001: ix) opines that ‘Slow Food reminds us that our natural resources are limited, and that we must resist the ethic of disposability that is reflected everywhere in our culture’. This introspection echoes



environmentalists' advocacy of sustainability and the outcry for urgent action to avoid or minimise extinction and other forms of permanent damage to all forms of species and things. For a curriculum as lived, this necessitates a posthuman discourse. Although posthumanists vary enormously, 'they share in turning toward the legacies of humanism and using posthumanist reconceptualisations of human/animal/machine/thing relations to diagnose how humanism ignores, obscures, and disavows the real relations among beings and things that make up the stuff of the world' (Snaza & Weaver 2015: 1). Braidotti (2013) argues for decentring humans as the measure of all things through a qualitative shift in terms of how humans position themselves in relation to other inhabitants and things of the planet. For Braidotti (2019: 28), this creates a condition that evokes an expectation of the scholar to challenge the curriculum's classical model of the humanistic 'Man of Reason', and move towards,

an intensive form of trans-disciplinarity and boundary-crossings among a range of discourses. This movement enacts a transversal embrace of conceptual diversity in scholarship. It favours hybrid mixtures of practical and applied knowledge, and relies on the defamiliarization [sic] of our institutional habits of thought.

As a lecturer this necessitates cultivating a curriculum that is consciousness raising and critical. A starting point could be to use this pandemic in one's lecturing to (re)configure what we teach and how we teach. COVID-19 is not the first of its kind, our curricula will encounter potentially many more such pandemics, so asking these questions remains crucial for current and future times.

*Second*, 'Slow Food reminds us that food is more than fuel to be consumed as quickly as possible and that, like anything worth doing, eating takes time' (Waters 2001: ix - x). A critique of the neoliberal culture, coupled with the marketisation of education, resonates closely with this aspect of slow food. The discourses on theory fatigue and data-mining prove noteworthy in this regard. Theory fatigue extrapolates Western democracies continued faith in critical reason to apprehend and transform society (Braidotti 2019: 20). A post-theoretical malaise post-Cold War initiated post-theory shifts under the gaze of free market economies and anti-intellectualism, causing theory to lose status and be dismissed as fantasy or narcissistic self-indulgence and amount

to nothing more than data-mining (Braidotti 2013:4). The obsession with theory generation for its own sake of production for neoliberalist consumption, leads to mere data-mining if it has no vision for an alternative way of being or to create the spaces needed for authentic and deep levels of engagement. It is within this context of theory fatigue that pleas have been made for the curriculum to return to a materialism informed by ethico-political and aesthetic considerations (Leibowitz & Bozalek 2018:983). Slow pedagogy provides an avenue to disengage from instrumentalist approaches such as these (Collett *et al.* 2018:121). For curriculum leaders, this could manifest when lecturers prioritise what matters and what is meaningful, rather than what management determines as economically expedient and efficient (Leibowitz & Bozalek 2018: 983). I have witnessed this at my institution when management is obsessed with saving the academic year and operating with a ‘business as usual’ mentality, even at the cost of quality.

*Third*, ‘Slow Food reminds us of the importance of knowing where our food comes from. When we understand the connection between the food on our table and the field where it grows, our everyday meals can anchor us to nature and the place where we live’ (Waters 2001: x). For a curriculum as lived, this couples eloquently with Pinar’s (2007) conception of disciplinarity. Disciplinarity is underpinned by the intellectual labour of reaching understanding through ‘comprehension, critique, and reconceptualization [sic]’ of what constitutes a discipline (Pinar 2007: xii). The intellectual dispositions of disciplinarity are enabled through disciplinary conversations conveyed by Pinar (2007) as ‘verticality’ and ‘horizontality’. Verticality constitutes the ‘intellectual history of the discipline’ through which its disciplinarity resonates (Pinar 2007: xiii). In effect, what constitutes verticality are the trends and nuances that are at the core of curriculum and how these have evolved and are still evolving. Horizontality approaches curriculum from the periphery instead of the centre. Its focus is on analysing ‘present circumstances’ in conjunction with ‘the social and political milieu, which influence, and all too often, structure this set’ (Pinar 2007: xiv). For curriculum to be anchored and connected, a synergetic disciplinarity as a tributary of verticality-horizontality (intertwined and inseparable) is paramount, and has as one of its offspring projects decolonisation. For lecturers and students to make connections between the curriculum and the place in which it is lived, the curriculum needs to, amongst other aspects, explore ways of developing and designing locally and regionally relevant content where Western

epistemologies continue to dominate, and unequal power relations still remain (Le Grange 2016). When knowledge is performative, it can decentre (not destroy) dominant knowledge and produce third spaces (as spaces in-between) so that seemingly disparate knowledges can be equitably compared, and can function together (Le Grange 2016: 10). So lecturers could use their curricula as social organisations of trust (ibid.) so that intellectual histories foster knowledges that are embedded and situated rather than focussed on verification or falsification. Curriculum spaces can then be proactive, rather than reactive. In their understanding of a slow scholarship, Leibowitz and Bozalek (2018: 984) speak directly to this point when they emphasise the necessity of curriculum as ‘situated, affective and embodied, troubling conventionality of both what counts as knowledge and how knowledge is acquired and produced’.

*Fourth*, ‘Slow Food reminds us that cooking a meal at home can feed our imaginations and educate our senses. For the ritual of cooking and eating together constitutes the basic element of family and community life’ (Waters 2001: x). A curriculum as lived accentuates the novelty of relational ontology and supersedes the binaries such as individual/society toward a holistic monist view of the world as entangled and vital (Braidotti 2013). Leibowitz and Bozalek (2018:984) place a relational ontology as central to slow scholarship, where ‘individual people and entities do not pre-exist relationships, but come into being through relationships’, as is often the case in many Southern and indigenous ways of engendering all aspect of live including pedagogy. Furthermore, it necessitates ‘producing socially relevant knowledge that is attuned to basic principles of social justice, the respect for human decency and diversity, the rejection of false universalisms; the affirmation of positivity of difference; the principles of academic freedom, anti-racism, openness to others and conviviality’ (Braidotti 2019: 11). Through a slow pedagogy, our curriculum as lived can be ‘materially embedded and embodied, differential, affective and relational’ (ibid.). This entails taking distance from abstract universalism, decentring transcendental consciousnesses and contemplating alternatives to individualist autonomy to foster situated knowledge that ‘enhances the singular and collective capacity for both ethical responsibility and alternative ways of producing knowledge’ (Braidotti 2019: 12).

*Lastly*, Water (2001: x) avers that ‘Slow Food can teach us the things that really matter – compassion, beauty, commitment and sensuality – all the best that humans are capable of’. This speaks closely to the four points already

raised and could perhaps be the key actions and harvests of a slow pedagogy. As Leibowitz and Bozalek (2018: 983) put it, ‘the emphasis is quality rather than quantity, depth of engagement and a willingness to engage across differences of discipline and ideas’. When the curriculum is engendered in this way, it opens up pathways for ‘attentiveness, deliberation thoughtfulness, open-enquiry, a receptive attitude, creativity, intensity, discernment, cultivating pleasure and creating dialogues between natural and social sciences’ (ibid.). This proves valuable as it forces us to dwell with, stop and steep ourselves in the revision and reimagining of life as we know it so that it can be contemplated anew (ibid.). A pandemic such as COVID-19 is exactly the time for lecturers to use their curricula to captivate the deep learning required to transgress to the unknown, so that the new can be imagined.

The profusion of these five aspects and how they enable a different conceptualisation of a curriculum as lived through a slow pedagogy could provide us with perspective on how to navigate these uncertain times of constant re-curriculation and the stranger that it might create. A COVID-19 pandemic creates curriculum expectations like no other. These are changing as we learn of the implications of the pandemic, and as we push the boundaries of education. I am certain that this is only the beginning of the many possibilities and challenges that curriculum will encounter during this pandemic.

## **5 Conclusion**

This chapter has necessitated the need to think differently about the curriculum. The curriculum is a central aspect of Education and it displays the direct and deep-seated effects of COVID-19 in the teaching-learning practices of education institutions. Amongst the most prominent has been the demands for online learning, which poses many challenges, and can be insightful to peruse in further research that deciphers online learning and the curriculum as lived. To start the conversation, this paper argues for the need to instil philosophies such as a slow pedagogy so as to ensure that we do not become consumed by the curriculum as a stranger within neoliberalist effects of life lived at a fast pace. This is paramount in higher education institutions, where top management dictates and does not consult curriculum decisions with lecturers. For lecturers to be curriculum leaders, this pandemic ought to create avenues that reveal the beauty and power of disruption, even when this is

daunting and uncertain, and through its strangeness it can reveal our vulnerabilities and tensions, paradoxes, pain, and anxiety. We are reminded now more than ever that engendering a curriculum as lived through a slow pedagogy will enable us to experience and apply what really matters, such that it might become sustainable.

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