

**WHAT
WOULD
BE
THE
SLOWEST
THING**

Nicola Naismith *What would be the slowest thing* Hand Cut Vinyl on Paper 2018

Slow: Ideas for Recruitment, Participation, Partnership and Leadership

Nicola Naismith

The Clore Leadership Programme is a not-for-profit initiative, aimed at developing and strengthening leadership potential across the cultural and creative sectors in the UK.

The Programme awards its flagship Clore Fellowships on an annual basis to exceptional individuals drawn from across the UK and beyond, and runs a choice of programmes tailored to leadership needs of arts professionals at different stages of their career. This provocation paper has been produced under the aegis of Clore Leadership Programme. For more information, visit www.cloreleadership.org.

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Nicola is a visual artist and lives in Norwich. She works with socially engaged practice and self-initiated cross discipline collaboration, on residencies and research. She works with specialists and professionals from other sectors to identify and communicate common ground across a range of industries, including engineering, architecture, museums, archives and ergonomics. Working in a process-orientated way, Nicola creates visual artworks for exhibition, gives talks, contributes to panel discussions and writes in addition to coaching, mentoring and lecturing. Nicola's work has been exhibited internationally, including Australia and Russia, and closer to home in London, Cambridge and Norwich. During her fellowship, she focused on how people can develop their learning and reflective practice through coaching and action learning sets, researched wellbeing at work through employee engagement, explored arts for health and wellbeing, and developed a greater understanding of the working conditions of contemporary artists.

This paper introduces the ideas of “slow” to recruitment, participation, partnership and leadership with suggestions for practical implementation.

When was your last busy day? Was it a day packed with more activity than usual? Or a day or a set of days when there was much to be done, that left you feeling shattered, worn out, stressed? A continual stream of busy days can become problematic, as judgement is clouded, loud voices and fast thinkers are favoured; people can feel overlooked or under-appreciated, and new ideas can be in danger of being under-explored.

There is a lot to do in the arts and culture sector: activity strands evolve and expand, and increasing inclusion and engagement are priorities. It is now necessary for cultural leaders to maintain or increase quality and delivery with less public funding, whilst developing other sources of revenue from partnerships and earned income. Cultural teams simultaneously work to mission statements and values, aims and objectives, whilst also upholding service standards.

The word “slow” has been used as a derogatory term, describing someone’s lack of skill or aptitude, someone sluggish or plodding. Slow can be considered to be lethargic, half-hearted, dull, perhaps unspectacular, the very opposite of what leadership is projected to be. I would like to reclaim slow as a positive term that facilitates greater inclusion, reflection and considered action in cultural leadership – in fact leadership in any sector. Slow means to be unhurried, measured and moderate. Working with slow could be more deliberate, steady and sedate. What is wrong with being slow-moving? What if slow, being slow, facilitating slow, accepting of slow, were considered a strong facet of leadership? What if slowing down was considered to be a leadership approach and a skill to be

admired?

Unconscious bias and slow

The 2018 report *Panic! Social Class, Taste and Inequalities in the Creative Industries* details how the cultural and creative industries are marked by significant inequalities. The workforce often comes from a narrow social class, and the report examines how this intersects with other issues, including attitudes and values, experiences of working for free, social networks and cultural tastes.¹ What is alarming is the ways in which the arts and cultural sector doesn't currently reflect the demographic and diversity of the populations it serves. In seeking to understand this, exploring the issue of unconscious bias may offer insights into what may be a contributing factor to this lack of diversity.

"Unconscious bias occurs when people favour others who look like them and/or share their values. For example a person may be drawn to someone with a similar educational background, from the same area, or who is the same colour or ethnicity as them".²

Equal opportunities monitoring forms are a familiar sight in recruitment processes. Dates and times are set and candidates are asked questions pertaining to access needs and any reasonable adjustments. The interview day comes around, the panel starts fresh and on time. It's not long before the lunch hour is looking considerably shorter or nonexistent due to the process overrunning. So often the pace of interview days are misjudged, much needed breaks are used by overrunning candidates who haven't been kept in check by the chair of the

¹ *Panic! Social Class, Taste and Inequalities in the Creative Industries*
<https://www.barbican.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/2018-04/Panic-Paper-2018.pdf>
p.1

² Acas, *Unconscious bias* <http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=5433>

interview panel, or when unexpected things arise. Not only is this situation less than ideal, it can be positively damaging to a recruitment process, as this is when unconscious biases can come into play. They “may be more prevalent when we are stressed, tired or under pressure”.³

Running over time on interview days isn't just an issue for recruitment in the cultural sector, but as a sector with a problem with low diversity statistics it demands serious attention:

“Good recruitment is vital for every organisation – finding the right people for the right roles at the right time. It ensures that the workforce has the relevant skills and abilities for the organisation's current and future needs. Effective recruitment is not just about filling an immediate vacancy but about having an impact on longer-term issues, such as future skills development, organisational performance and employer brand.”⁴

Recruitment is an area that could significantly benefit from a slow approach, which may include: a much more detailed shortlisting process and sufficient time in which to complete this process; inviting fewer candidates for interview over an extended period of time, with contingency time programmed between candidates; and strict time keeping. What is interesting here is that a slow approach doesn't necessarily mean a slow interview (although this could be an interesting option); it simply focuses on keeping the panel safe from missed breaks for refreshments and lunch, which ensures

³ The Law Society, *5 steps to reduce unconscious bias in your workplace* 9th April 2018

<https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/news/blog/5-steps-to-reduce-unconscious-bias-in-your-workplace/>

⁴ Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development *Recruitment: an introduction* 20th February 2018

<https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/people/recruitment/factsheet>

candidates are given the best possible chance of success. Regular breaks help panels to stay alert, focused and aware of their immediate response, important in noticing and acting to counteract unconscious bias as it arises.

Participation and slow

Participation and engagement are at the top of the agenda for organisations and institutions in receipt of public funds. Learning, engagement and participation officers, and artist practitioners delivering on the front line, are tasked with ensuring not only that the number of people engaging in the arts increases, but also that the diversity of these people increases. Arts Council England is clear about what it wants:

“Engaging people everywhere: We encourage our funded organisations to be more focused on audiences – to reach more people, broaden the groups they come from and improve the quality of their experience”.⁵

It is a given that the arts needs to move beyond (but not forget) its existing audiences and reach more people – people who have never engaged in the arts. The reach often happens through organisations commissioning practitioners to devise and deliver opportunities for engagement and participation. Often these practitioners use Socially Engaged Practice, a method of working which “describes art that is collaborative, often participatory, and involves people as the medium or material of the work”⁶. In keeping with this is a process-led way of working; the process of working with a group will inform what comes next: event, exhibition, discussion, production. If it

⁵ Arts Council England, *Engaging People Everywhere* <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/how-we-make-impact/engaging-audiences-everywhere>

⁶ Tate, *Art terms Socially Engaged Practice* <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/s/socially-engaged-practice>

is the quality of their experience⁷ which is important, then the method of participation needs careful selection in terms of engagement process. In his book, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, Pablo Helguera writes of different forms of participation (abbreviated here):

Nominal participation: visitor/viewer

Directed participation: completes simple task to contribute to an artwork

Creative participation: visitor provided content within an artist-devised structure

Collaborative participation: visitor shares responsibility for developing both structure and content.⁸

If quality of experience for participants is to be truly supported, then creative and collaborative participation methods offer a greater chance of delivering or co-creating projects and experiences relevant to the people it is seeking to engage.

“Participation in the arts should not be dependent on where people live or their social, educational or financial circumstances. To encourage more people to take part, we will support artists, organisations and the public to help shape local arts provision in order to increase choice and opportunities for people to experience and be inspired by the arts.”⁹

In supporting artists, commissioners need to move beyond asking routinely asking ‘what will we get?’ and towards seeking to understand what support needs to be in place and what an

⁷ Arts Council England, *Engaging People Everywhere* <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/how-we-make-impact/engaging-audiences-everywhere>

⁸ Abbreviated from Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, Jorge Pinto Books, New York 2011 p.14-15

⁹ Arts Council England, *Areas of Low Engagement* <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/areas-low-engagement>

appropriate timescale may be. The nature of the approach defines the interaction: if the approach or intention is to increase choice and opportunities then the interaction must support this.

Slow has a great deal to teach us here: slow interactions with people from the community or site, slow conversations about what they already know and want, slow introductions of new ideas and ways of working which build upon existing frameworks of connection. A slow process approach to finding partners with whom to work will ensure it is the most appropriate partner that buys into the project, not simply the first one who said yes. The benefits of this slow approach reach beyond the project itself; they lay a foundation for further projects. When people feel listened to and have a say in how a project is designed or delivered, the buy-in is so much deeper and the appetite for success is greater.

Partnerships and slow

As the arts combine building-based activities with outreach programmes in communities, partnership working is both desirable and necessary in order to effectively build new relationships with audiences and participants. Making partnership connections in an area targeted for engagement facilitates an inroad in areas where there is no existing connection with the arts organisation. These partnerships may be existing cultural structures, for example community music nights or craft clubs. Equally, they may be physical spaces where people come together, such as food banks or voluntary groups. The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in its *Partnership Working in the Arts and Humanities: A Guide to Good Practice* writes about how partnership working can stimulate, generate and reward all parties; although the AHRC agenda is research development and delivery, these benefits

can be played out across a range of sectors, including the arts.¹⁰ The AHRC goes on to say:

“Partnerships range from one-off collaborations formed specifically to undertake a particular project, to multi-faceted strategic relationships with shared longer term aims. Whatever its scale the goals of any partnership need to be clearly framed and understood by all parties with each partner making an active contribution to the activity”.¹¹

In seeking partnerships with commerce, research institutions and state-run provision such as health, the arts sector needs some careful thinking, planning and communication skills. Investing time in researching who the potential partners may be, if there is a shared agenda and what the mutual benefits of working together might be will bring a stronger case for working in partnership. In Culture Mile’s *Building a Collaborative Culture* it suggests:

“Take the time to develop the foundations of the partnership including investing time with the people and places involved – you will reap the rewards. It can often take at least a year, but taking the time to meet with individuals is hugely valuable for building understanding and relationships. Remember, partnerships are only ever as successful as the way partners work together”.¹²

¹⁰ AHRC, *Partnership Working in the Arts and Humanities: A Good Practice Guide*
<https://ahrc.ukri.org/documents/guides/partnership-working-in-the-arts-and-humanities/> p.2

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² Culture Mile, *Building a Collaborative Future: Barbican / Guildhall School of Music & Drama Partnership Toolkit*
<https://www.culturemile.london/content/uploads/2017/11/Building-a-Collaborative-Culture-A4-report-FINAL-low-res-spreads.pdf>

Appropriate expectations about the speed at which partnerships develop are relative to the type and duration of project being developed or delivered. Even the shortest of projects benefits from thorough partnership groundwork, which can include observation of what the partner is already doing or delivering in its community, asking questions and being curious. Who undertakes this observation will depend on the type of partnership sought; perhaps a learning or engagement manager will make the first approach, or a member of the organisation's board of trustees. At some point, close to the start of the dialogue, the practitioner or artist who will be working in the partnership area will need to be involved in visits, discussions and plans. The more people involved in the development of partnerships, the more lengthy the process. In the longer term, this slower, more labour intensive method is more effective, as people get to know one another and develop a shared understanding of the ambition being put forward.

Leadership and slow

Leadership is multi-faceted: to be a leader means to draw on a myriad of skills to address multiple and complex objectives, integrating policy, external requirements and internally set strategy. To be a leader involves holding diverse priorities simultaneously; there is no doubt there is a lot to do, and time to stop and take stock can be difficult to prioritise.

"What barriers are preventing you from being a great #leader? "Most managers only spend 5% of their time on personal development and personal #growth. Even a small shift in time away from the day-to-day to personal development can make a huge difference" - #Leadership¹³

¹³ Tweet from Professor Randall S Peterson, Director Leadership Institute, London Business School 10th May 2018 <https://twitter.com/DrRSPeterson/status/994558947586662401>

The image of leadership can be projected as a dynamic fast decision maker, but this has the potential to be very detrimental. It's important to ask: who am I when I am not busy? What do I stand for? What is my approach? How have my values evolved?

"Inevitably, a life of hurry can become superficial. When we rush, we skim the surface, and fail to make real connections with the world or other people".¹⁴

In the drive to get things done, meet targets and fulfil funding requirements or self-set goals, leaders need the support of their teams and trustees: making a change from hurry to slow takes commitment and support. It feels like a big ask, but if we describe a leader who uses slow in their tool kit, we see someone who consults, listens, supports, advises and takes time for their own development. A leader who can see the benefit of investing in process to produce better outcomes in the long term. Someone who understands that thorough reflection, alongside timely action and evaluation, are the cornerstones of good leadership.

Investing time in the slow is to invest resources, but in taking the long view leaders can strengthen their organisations and bring quieter voices to the fore, developing staff to reach their full potential, build team moral and engagement.

So how could slow work? As Carl Honore writes in his book *In Praise of Slow*:

"The slow movement is not about doing everything at a snail's pace. Nor is it a luddite attempt to drag the planet back to some pre-industrial utopia. On the contrary the movement is made up of people like you and me, people who want to live better in a fast paced modern world. That is why the Slow philosophy can be summed up in a single

¹⁴ Carl Honore, *In praise of Slow*, Orion Books, London 2005 p.9

word: balance. Be fast when it makes sense to be fast, and slow when slowness is called for.”¹⁵

Slow is about planning slow times: a slow meeting, a slow hour once a week, a slow day or team activity where the agenda is short and the time is unhurried. Simple ideas such as promoting a listening culture in team meetings, where each person has uninterrupted time to talk and everyone takes their turn, sounds simple but is so often overlooked. A slow away day communicates an investment in process; dialogue, exchange and relationship building, and sets the leadership culture for an organisation. Reinventing the staff one-to-ones that usually take place in meeting rooms or offices as walk and talk/wheel and talk, allow the pace of conversation to be led by the act of moving, encouraging people to think differently outside the context of the office – new ideas and reflections can be accessed. In short, it can take longer but be far more productive.

Conclusion

What can slow offer us in a busy world? Slow offers a series of benefits to practitioners, participants, partners, teams, leaders, organisations and the arts sector as a whole. Slow recruitment helps to address unconscious bias, moving towards a greater diversity in arts teams and being more fully representative of the society they serve, in turn informing what the organisation does and how it does it. In building opportunities for participation and engagement, slow helps to move beyond normal and directed participation towards creative and collaborative participation, increasing opportunities to gain more from experiences of the arts, including greater buy-in and agency. Consider how the slow investment in developing a partnership will influence how it plays out, inviting practitioners in early on in project development will help to cement a project

¹⁵ Carl Honore, *In praise of Slow*, p.15

team and a clear understanding of ambition and focus. Leaders taking time for slow activities for themselves and their teams, whilst holding long-term strategic thinking in mind, can exchange immediate results for investment in process and long-term thinking.

This paper doesn't suggest that everything needs to be slow, rather remembering slow in a leadership toolkit is important in a sector which is only set to become more stretched and busy. People need time to do their best work, be they practitioner, participant, arts worker or leader. In essence, slow offers more space for different kinds of people to contribute, which can only be positive.

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