

Structures in Tension

Navigating **Fast** and **Slow** in the Neoliberal University

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Thanks very much to the Symposium organizers for inviting me to deliver the closing reflection.

I'm also grateful to April Hathcock for introducing me to the idea of slow scholarship and the Mountz et al article you were invited to read in advance.

I gave a different version of this talk during an OpenCon librarians' call earlier this year. If you were on that call, you will recognize some elements and will, I hope still have a productive experience.

This afternoon I'm talking about Structures In Tension: Navigating Fast and Slow in the Neoliberal University. And if that title makes no sense now, I hope it will by the end.

Framing the argument

I want to spend a little time here defining some terms and laying out some ideas that are pivotal to what we're talking about this afternoon.

The Neoliberal University



...useful shorthand for the idea of the university as a **market-driven system**, which employs modes of governance based on a corporate model.

(Enright, Alfrey, & Rynne, 2017, p. 1)

The first big idea that frames our time together is the idea of the neoliberal university. What exactly IS the neoliberal university?

Read the quote

This quote is from the editorial article introducing a 2017 special issue about early career academics functioning in an academy heavily influenced by capitalism. The journal is from the discipline of sport and exercise science, which is pretty far afield from librarianship, but it makes the point well that those of us in the academy are functioning (or not functioning) in a market-driven environment, regardless of our discipline.

Academic Roles

”

are constructed and inhabited through
navigating the tensions between structures

(Fanghanel, 2012, p. 2)

The second big idea I want to bring in is about how we as academics assemble our working selves.

Read the quote

This concept of structures existing in tension and academics – specifically we data librarians - navigating among those structures and coping with those tensions is a foundation of this talk.

Structures in Tension 1

Personal

Focused on the individual

Systemic

Patterns and practices embedded in a culture

The first set of structures in tension that I want to highlight as part of our framework is the tension between the personal and the systemic.

We're going to talk about the personal and the systemic a lot, and I want to define the terms up front.

"Personal" is focused on the individual, acting for themselves.

"Systemic" indicates patterns and practices that are embedded in a culture, affecting everyone in that culture whether or not they recognize those effects.

Structures in Tension 2

Fast

“busy, controlling, aggressive, hurried, analytical, stressed, superficial, impatient, active, quantity-over-quality”

Slow

“calm, careful, receptive, still, intuitive, unhurried, patient, reflective, quality-over-quantity”

(Honoré, 2004, p. 14)

The second set of structures in tension that we will be talking about a lot here is the tension between Fast and Slow.

For our purposes, and in other writing about Fast and Slow, the terms Fast and Slow (capitalized) mean something slightly different than pace.

Carl Honoré, in his 2004 book *In Praise of Slowness*, does a good job of describing the historical contexts out of which arguments for Slow originate.

These are his definitions of Fast and Slow, and they are as good as any for grounding our conversation today.

Investigating Slow

We're not spending time investigating Fast, because we live in it. We know what it feels like, even if we don't always have the words for what's going on.

Let's look more closely at this concept of Slow.

Writing Prompt 1

Two Minutes

Think of a time when work was pleasurable for you.

What was pleasurable about the experience?

Let's start with a tiny bit of writing. All of the writing in this session is for yourself. Make a list or write in sentences; use a pen or a computer – it's up to you.

Take 2 minutes to respond to the prompt (read the prompt). I will keep time and give you a 30 second heads up.

I don't know what you wrote but I'm going to guess that many of you included words like – exploratory, taking time, deeply collaborating, experimenting with something new

You may have found my use of the words “pleasure” and “work” together somewhat jarring.

I used that word deliberately. I could have used “satisfying,” but this implies a reaction to the outcome, not necessarily to or with the process.

Slow is...

Pleasurable | Seasonal

Collaborative | Generous | Systematic

(Slow Food, 1989; Mountz et al, 2015; Savage, 2019)

What is Slow, riffing a bit on Honoré's definition?

We can look to Slow Food and to other writers, to add context to your responses to the prompt – why those experiences were pleasurable, even though they were “work.”

That recommended article, “For Slow Scholarship,” describes acts of scholarship as pleasurable when they take time, are deeply reflective, and involve generous collaboration – basically, giving and receiving care with our colleagues and community.

Adam Savage, who you may remember from the long-running television show *MythBusters*, devotes a chapter of his book about making to slowing down and embracing the process of making, not focusing solely on the final product.

He offers the example of the culinary practice of *mise en place* to remind us that a deliberative and systematic PROCESS is what makes the final PRODUCT possible.

So yeah, we're talking about food. We may as well go there.

Slow is pie

“To escape the tediousness of ‘fast-food,’ let us rediscover the rich varieties and aromas of local cuisines.”

(Slow Food, 1989)



Specifically, Slow is a pie that I made this past summer that has come to embody for me what it means to be Slow.

This strawberry rhubarb crumb-top pie made with local strawberries, rhubarb, and pecans and a from-scratch buttermilk pie crust.

It takes a lot of time and attention to prepare the ingredients, assemble the components, put it all together, and bake it.

This pie is extravagantly slow. And that is both worthwhile in itself and worthy of critique.

Image Copyright Jamene Brooks-Kieffer, 2019

Slow is...

Expensive | Privileged | Elitist

~~Pleasurable~~ | ~~Seasonal~~

~~Collaborative~~ | ~~Generous~~ | ~~Systematic~~

(Hartman & Darab, 2012; Honoré, 2004; Zuppello, 2018)

That pie is absolutely all the positive things that we said about Slow, and at the same time it embodies a whole bunch of criticism that has been leveled at Slow Food – that it is exclusionary, expensive, elitist, and only feasible for the privileged.

Let's look at the critique in the context of that pie.

Slow is pie

“...[Slow Food] overlooks [an] important social justice issue — which is that the food falling within its guidelines is not accessible to all.”

(Zuppello, 2018)



It is an expensive and privileged pie in that I am able to buy the local ingredients at my Farmer’s Market without worrying about how these purchases will impact my family’s food budget for the week or the month. Local, seasonal food is often more expensive and is sold in smaller outlets with limited hours – so those factors alone make this kind of food exclusionary.

It is also a privileged pie in that I was able to choose to spend time making it – I could rely on my partner to occupy my young child and I could take time elsewhere out of my weekend (and I do have a weekend) to do other things.

It is an elitist pie in that I’m of the opinion that this pie is worth the time it takes to make, but only when local strawberries and rhubarb coincide. I don’t make it at any other time of the year.

This pie is not accessible or equitable. For a pie, this may not be much of a problem. But it points us to the tension between the personal and the systemic - this pie represents my choice as an individual to be Slow rather than an opportunity for anyone who wants to to be Slow.

And this tension between the personal and the systemic applies to other ways of being

Slow – for our purposes, specifically, to bringing Slow into the academic workplace.

Image Copyright Jamene Brooks-Kieffer, 2019

Time

Taking | Making | Breaking

A lot of what I talked about in setting up that pie as a metaphor for the tensions between Fast / Slow and Personal / Systemic was time. Time to engage in the process of making the pie, not only in enjoying the product.

Personal strategies

- Make Slow the work of individuals
- Result in guilt or shame if (when) they fail
- Don't demand a more sustainable pace
- Don't shift the culture of Fast
- Don't examine a fundamental question:

Who has access to their own time?

(Berg & Seeber, 2016, p. 17; Mountz et al, 2015, p. 1242)

While there is nothing wrong with personal strategies for slowing down in any part of life, personal strategies aren't a systemic fix.

Time management strategies and the books they come from put the work of slowing down on the individual and assume that every individual has equitable access to practicing those strategies.

(this is also a major critique of the Berg & Seeber book, which you know if you listened to the Secret Feminist Agenda episode, "Slow Down!" (McGregor, 2018, Episode 2.27))

Personal strategies are like my Slow pie – expensive, privileged, and exclusive of all but those who have the resources to access them.

Most importantly, personal strategies for slowing down don't address a huge question that Mountz and her co-authors raise – who has unquestioned access to their own time for their own purposes?

As they point out, this access has been culturally reserved in gendered, classist, racist, and colonial ways.

To think about it slightly differently, if you aren't a white man, you are expected to spend

some degree of your time on other peoples' purposes – the amount of time depends on your privileges.

Writing Prompt 2

Five Minutes

In what ways do I manifest the feeling that I need to justify my time for my own purposes?

Time for some more writing.

We will use the technique of freewriting, which is timed writing in sentences, for yourself only, to a prompt, without stopping. If you get stuck, write “I have nothing to write. I have nothing to write.” until you can continue responding to the prompt.

Respond to the prompt, “In what ways do I manifest the feeling that I need to justify my time for my own purposes?”

You have five minutes. I will keep time and give you a one minute heads up before time.

I hope that this prompt brought your attention to some ways that the systemic percolates into the personal in ways we might not even be aware of.

Personal Systemic Time



We need to change the way we talk about time all the time.

(Berg & Seeber, 2016, p. 31)

In *The Slow Professor*, Berg & Seeber say (read the quote)

What they're primarily discussing here are the self-talk and internal beliefs that we have about time, such as, "I don't have time" and similar.

And yes, it's important to address, or at least be aware of, our own beliefs and thought patterns about time, but, again, these are personal strategies. They don't address systemic practices and beliefs about time.

This is a narrow suggestion that needs a broader scope. We need to change the way we talk AND BEHAVE TO OURSELVES AND OTHERS about time all the time. What we model for others is just as important as what we do to and for ourselves.

When we answer email late at night, or talk repeatedly about how busy we are, or show in other ways that we are obligated to use most or all of our time on our employer's purposes, we are creating and enforcing neoliberal norms within our organization.

So yes, "we need to change the way we talk about time all the time," and do it in ways that are intentionally for others as well as ourselves.

...what we are fighting for is the right to **determine our own tempos.**

(Carlo Petrini, quoted in Honoré, 2004, p. 16)

”

...slow living is not a simple matter of ‘slowing down’ but rather it is more fundamentally **an issue of agency.**

(Parkins & Craig, 2006, p. 67)

Ultimately, what we want is not a mandate to go Fast or Slow all the time. We want and need balance.

Petrini’s quote about Slow Food is the real essence of Slow – that the issue is not about absolute pace, but about the ability to choose one’s pace.

But that’s not the current reality of the neoliberal university – not everyone can choose.

In their 2006 book *Slow Living*, Parkins & Craig echo Petrini in a slightly different way, pointing to agency as the core of the issue. The word “agency” implies both ability and *power* to choose, without needing to seek permission.

Bringing power into our thinking begs the question -

Who?

can choose

has agency

can rebel

Who can choose?

Who has agency in navigating Fast and Slow?

Who can, in fact, rebel against the neoliberal university's expectation that we work all the time?

Privilege

Privilege, which just means 'private law.'
--Terry Pratchett, *Night Watch*

The privileged, that's who.

The greater your privilege, the more agency and choice you have in navigating the tensions between Fast and Slow.

As an example, I leaned heavily on my suite of privileges to disappear from my desk in order to work on this talk – in effect, rebelling against the convention that one is working only when one is visible to coworkers.

This talk was definitely an exercise in Slow that needed its own time and space to come together.

And I didn't really worry about disappearing because I have some agency to do so – agency that comes because I am a white cis person in a tenured faculty position.

A few slides ago, talking about Systemic Time, I touched on how our personal thoughts and actions around time have systemic impact on our colleagues. I'm going to expand on that here:

It's our job – those of us with more privileges – to direct the ways that we rebel at systemic levels just as much as, or more than, at personal levels.

...we see **individual practice** as a site of resistance.

(Berg & Seeber, 2016, p. 6)

”

Slowing down involves resisting neoliberal regimes of harried time by working with care while also **caring for ourselves and others.**

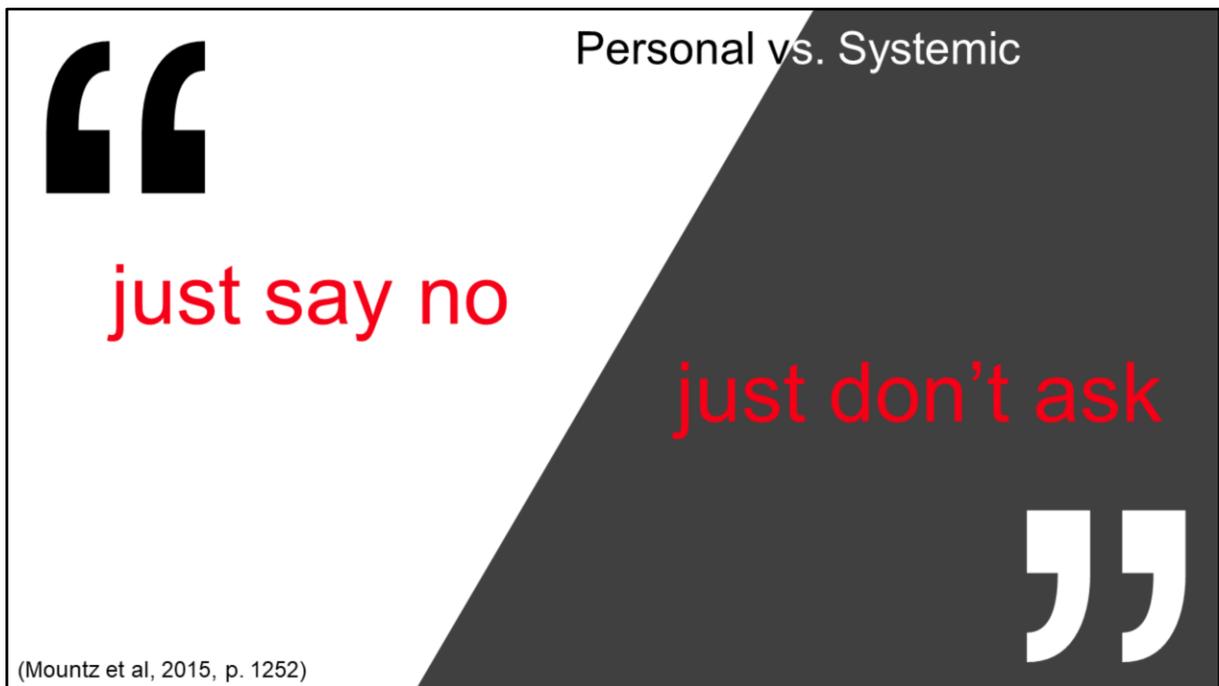
(Mountz et al, 2015, p. 1253)

How can we do that?

The difference between these two quotes points to a way.

Berg & Seeber talk about “individual practice as a site of resistance,” but it’s fair to critique this personal approach because it ignores the fact that not everyone in the academy has the choice or agency to rebel.

By contrast, Mountz and her co-authors incorporate the idea of care into their approach, advocating for caring for ourselves AND OTHERS – in effect, encouraging those of us with privileges to span the bridge between the personal and the systemic so that others also have opportunities to rebel.



It's okay to have trouble picturing what this might look like in practice.

Let's look at an example from the article, "For Slow Scholarship," in which the authors talk about the strategy of "just say no"

This strategy is all well and good if you have the privileges to deploy it without concern for consequences, AND if you have the agency to be heard when you do say it. Again, this is a personal strategy. Not everyone can do this.

Those of us with privileges can address this strategy at a systemic level through "just don't ask" – in effect, not requiring others to have to deploy a personal strategy of saying "no" to commitments that don't help them meet their goals.

Slow Librarianship | Slow Leadership

- What am I doing to / for **myself**?
- What am I doing to / for **others**?
- What am I modeling for my **organization** and **profession**?

Taken more broadly, the practice of caring for ourselves AND others becomes an act of leadership that shifts the workplace culture toward Slow.

But the lens of privilege points out that some of us have more agency than others in shifting the culture.

And therefore, those of us with more privilege have more responsibility for caring, for practicing and modeling Slow in our organizations.

The questions on the screen are for you in increasing order of privilege. (read the questions) You might be able to safely consider only the first one. You might be able to safely consider all three.

Wherever you are, I hope you'll take these questions with you to reflect on ways you can care for yourself and/or others.

Big questions like these deserve time. Since our time is limited, I want to zoom in on some specific considerations that I hope help you think about these questions in more concrete ways.

Everyday Rebellions

Bodies | Busyness | Boundaries

Let's talk about acts of everyday rebellion.

I kept using the word “rebel” earlier, in conjunction with “choice” and “agency” – now you'll see why.

The phrase “acts of everyday rebellion” comes from Berg & Seeber's book, *The Slow Professor*. They recount a story of seeing a university announcement about a senior faculty member's new book. In the interview included in the news item, the faculty member discussed that the book had taken ten years to write. That admission that the book had taken a significant amount of time to create was refreshing enough to prompt Berg & Seeber to dub it as “an act of everyday rebellion” because it publicly resisted the neoliberal concern that scholarship should be as efficient and productive as possible (2016, p. 56).

I'm going to lean on this phrase, “everyday rebellions,” as we explore rebellions at the personal and systemic levels.

We're going to look at three specific sites of rebellion. You will have a brief writing opportunity for each site.

In your writing, you will be able to focus on the personal - on yourself as an individual; or

on the systemic - on yourself as a person with privilege and influence in your organization.

You choose how to respond.

“

I have to stop pretending my body is this external thing I can conquer or ignore. It's me.

(Farkas, 2019/08/28, par. 20)

Bodies

...to talk about the body and emotion goes against the grain of an institution that privileges the mind and reason.

(Berg & Seeber, 2016, p. 2)

”

Our first site of rebellion is bodies.

Meredith Farkas has a multi-post series called “Thoughts at Mid-Career” on her blog, *Information Wants to be Free*. This quote is from part 4, called “The Cult of Productivity: You’re never doing enough.” (read the quote)

In this post she points out that part of the convention of “productivity” in our culture, not just in the academy, is ignoring our bodies. Working through chronic pain. Being reluctant to take sick days – even those of us privileged enough to have sick leave. Working through lunch, staying late, taking work home, and not getting enough sleep.

Berg and Seeber touch on this, too, in a way that points out the long-held notion of the academy as the place for the life of the mind. (read the quote)

Nevermind that the mind and the body are not and never can be separate entities. As Farkas says, “It’s me.” My body is me.

Rebelling against the exclusion of bodies from the academic workplace is a way of acknowledging our own and our colleagues’ humanity. It’s something that this conference has worked hard at doing – noting dietary requirements

and allergies, providing pumping space for nursing mothers, thoughtfully timed breaks – these are all ways to acknowledge that we don't leave our bodies at home or in the hotel room when we convene.

How can we bring our bodies to work every day, and create space for our colleagues to do so as well? That's our first writing topic.

It's okay not to know. This is not something we talk about often.

I'm going to give you the writing prompt in a second, but first, I'll offer an example to get you started:

I suspect most of us have experienced the problem of back to back to back meetings – we all have those days when we choose whether to go to the bathroom and be late(r) or be on time and uncomfortable. This is a personal choice. But a systemic approach to this problem could be starting most or all meetings at 5 or 10 past the hour.

Writing Prompt 3

Two Minutes

How can I...

...inhabit my body
while I'm at work?

...make space
for bodies in my
organization?

Make a list or freewrite, whatever works for you.

Respond to the personal prompt, "How can I inhabit my body while I'm at work?"

OR

Respond to the systemic prompt, "How can I make space for bodies in my organization?"

You have two minutes. I will keep time and give you a thirty second heads up.

Busyness



Academic culture celebrates overwork, but it is imperative that we **question the value of busyness**. We need to interrogate what we are modelling for each other....

(Berg & Seeber, 2016, p. 21)

We have all experienced the cult of busyness, at work, at home, and everywhere else. Most of us have likely participated at one time or another in a round of what in college I used to call “misery poker” – which you win by being the busiest and most miserable.

This is not a game we should be trying to win, and the performance of busyness is not something we should be rewarding with attention.

The effects on new employees, candidates for Promotion & Tenure, and colleagues in general is toxic, because it sends the message that the cultural norm is unsustainable and that the only acceptable career goal is burnout.

Instead, we need to question the value of busyness and be aware and intentional about how and when we participate – or don’t participate – in exchanges that contribute to the glorification of busyness in our lives.

Even this questioning and awareness are acts of rebellion, because these mean that we are not contributing to this culture by default.

Your second writing prompt invites you to be thoughtful about how you participate in busyness.

Writing Prompt 4

Two Minutes

When asked how I am at work, what words can I use besides “busy?”

Make a list or freewrite, whatever works for you.

Respond to the prompt, “When asked how I am at work, what words can I use besides “busy?””

Note that this is both a personal and a systemic prompt, because it applies both to what you do and what you model for others.

You have two minutes. I will keep time and give you a thirty second heads up.

Boundaries



... we advocate **developing and sharing strategies of refusal** in order to mitigate the pressure to say yes to tasks that further limit time to write and think.

(Mountz et al, 2015, p. 1252)

This third site of rebellion is about work without boundaries. Some of us – and many library employees generally – are technologically and physically able to pick up a laptop and work from anywhere we can get wifi.

This flexibility can be a huge help, but it can often come with real or imagined obligations to be available at all or most hours, weekdays and weekends.

Flexibility is nice, but always-on work shouldn't be the price we pay. We need boundaries around when and where we do and don't work, especially when the physical world doesn't create those boundaries for us.

This site of rebellion is also about boundaries around commitments at work and whether expectations – silent or spoken – allow one to do one's job. One more committee. Please chair this task force. The Dean is creating a working group and I really want you to be on it. We need to be able to set limits.

Mountz et al talk about “developing AND SHARING strategies of refusal” – note “and sharing” – this is systemic rebellion.

Specific personal boundaries might be email hours (the email charter gets a lot of attention

here) or choosing not to install work-related software on personal devices.

Specific systemic boundaries might be administrators and managers modeling use of email hours (e.g.: in email signature lines) or being up front about when it is and is not okay to be away from one's desk to write, think, or get tasks done.

The Boundaries writing prompt, though, focuses on something a bit more basic that recalls our example from Mountz et al:

Writing Prompt 5

Two Minutes

What stops me from ...

...saying no?

...accepting no?

Make a list or freewrite, whatever works for you.

Respond to the personal prompt, "What stops me from saying no?"

OR

Respond to the systemic prompt, "What stops me from accepting no?"

You have two minutes. I will keep time and give you a thirty second heads up.

All of these prompts, and the sites of rebellion that they address, are tiny windows into huge issues. As you get ready to travel home, make some space in your luggage for these thoughts to linger.

Let's close out this reflection by circling back around to where we started.

Data Librarians & Neoliberalism

More | Better | Faster

It's my contention, after preparing this talk, that we as data librarians and our specialty of data librarianship are tools and structures of neoliberalism.

I'll tell you why.

Value(s) in tension

FastU

- Productivity
- Efficiency

SlowU

- Creativity
- Insight

This slide is a huge simplification of a lot of sophisticated writing and thinking by scholars engaged in “navigating structures in tension” – those structures being Fast and Slow.

So the question for us as #datalibs is not, “Where does our organization place value?” because we already know this – we work, most of us, in the neoliberal university.

The value embedded in this culture is centered on FastU – productivity, efficiency, quantity, measurement, always more. Capitalism applied to the university.

And where do data librarians place value? Not individually, but collectively, as a specialty? As judged by our interactions with our employers and other employees of our organizations rather than by our words?

Let’s take a look.

We promise MORE!

- Productivity
- Efficiency
- Reliability
- Reproducibility
- Citations

Consider what we do when talking to (or trying to talk to) researchers at our institutions.

This is based on my experiences learning to be a data librarian and hearing conversations among data librarians over the past five years of my career – a time that coincides with data librarianship as a specialty taking hold and developing and differentiating itself.

The words that we use when we talk about how we do our work are all about capitalism – we SELL our expertise to our CLIENTS by promising MORE (more of the stuff on the screen) – often in conversations that are intended to GET OUR FOOT IN THE DOOR (which is the ultimate sales phrase).

And once in the door, we offer tools and skills to INCREASE researchers' productivity, efficiency, reliability, reproducibility, citations, and so forth.

To what end?

more

More

MORE

MORE

MOAR!!!!!!!

“
...the 'excellent' must become 'yet more excellent' on pain of being exposed as complacent or backward-looking or something equally scandalous.

(Collini, 2012, quoted in Berg & Seeber, 2016, p. 9)

In other words, we offer opportunities to meet the terms set by the neoliberal university – to count, to quantify, to produce, to streamline – primarily in order to justify the existence of one's work and be permitted to do more of it. And more. And more.

A Slow Process

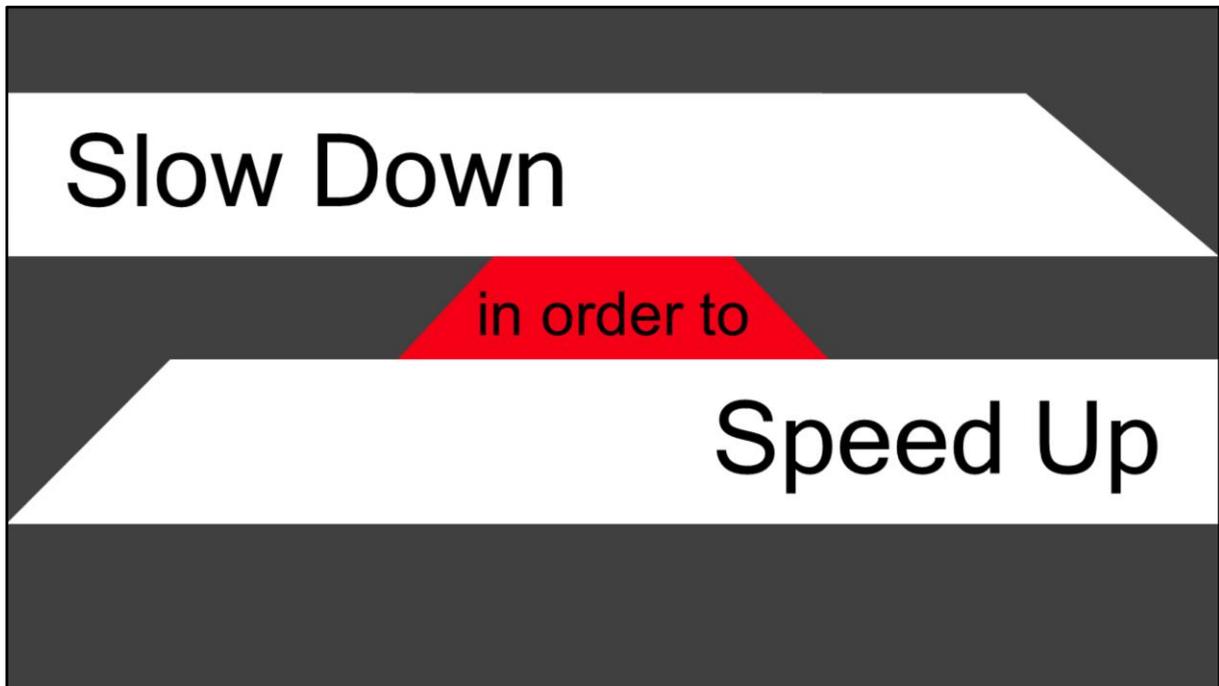
- Listen
- Learn
- Engage
- Practice

But MOAR isn't instant, is it?

In order to realize the results of what data librarians offer, researchers have to commit to a completely different process – a Slow process of listening, learning, practicing, engaging in order to apply key principles and tools in ways that fit their work.

And the principles, tools, and skills we teach ARE effective, with time and practice. Without these Slow processes, there are no Fast rewards.

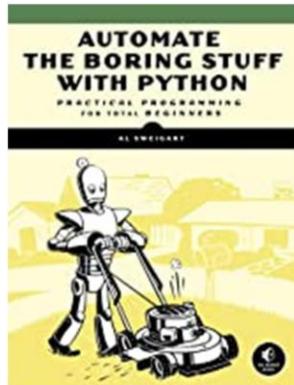
We've arrived at the tension residing in the very fabric of our work:



Navigating this tension in the structure of our work – being willing to slow down in order to speed up – is what we do every day.

But we can be more intentional about the Slow Down end of the equation.

When the boring stuff is automated



(Sweigart, <https://automatetheboringstuff.com/>)

Creativity
Generosity
Insight
Pleasure



The title of this slide is a riff on the popular book and course for learning Python, *Automate the Boring Stuff with Python: Practical programming for total beginners* by Al Sweigart - <https://automatetheboringstuff.com/>

It's also one way to sum up all the skills, tools, and principles that data librarians can offer when researchers are able to comprehend and practice them.

So when we get in the researcher's door; when they listen, learn, practice, and apply; when they automate their boring stuff – what then?

What do we advise researchers to do?

Do we talk about using that time for creativity, generosity, insight, and pleasure (hearkening back to our early definition of Slow)? Do we point out that letting machines do the repetitive stuff lets humans do the creative stuff?

I am guessing that mostly we do not. In many ways, data librarians are heavily loaded on the side of Fast, and we need some balance.

Work that makes a difference rather than work for audit

(Pain, 2014, quoted in Mountz et al, 2015, p. 1241)

Balance comes, for ourselves and our researchers, when we consider the purpose of our work. Is it work for audit – that is, work for the sake of performing busyness, meeting unmeetable quotas, and counting outputs?

Or is it work that makes a difference – work that supports ourselves and our colleagues, that shifts the culture of Fast, that “makes discoveries that change the world”? (to quote from KU’s previous strategic plan, Bold Aspirations, <https://boldaspirations.ku.edu/>).

...in slowing...down...you're looking into the future that you want to create, with the things you value at its center.

(Savage, 2019, p. 88)

We are making a specialty out of many different pieces of librarianship, including instruction, liaison work, continuing and electronic resources, cataloging, institutional repositories, information technology, assessment – we really are a mosaic specialty. And as we make our specialty – our mosaic – we could consider some practices from making in the physical world as analogous to making a piece of librarianship.

I mentioned Adam Savage a little while ago when we were talking about Slow in relation to food. In his recent book, *Every Tool's a Hammer*, he talks a lot about the habits he had to learn to cultivate in order to be a successful maker:

- Asking for help
- Giving and receiving feedback
- Care for bodies doing the making
- Respect for tools
- Valuing experience and practice
- Not wasting materials

Basically, slowing waaay down in order to focus with his whole attention. And he has this quote, which I think is really applicable to our own making. (Read the Quote)

I'd argue that care, collegiality, equity, and community within librarianship are things worth valuing now and in the future. In order to get and keep them, we need to slow down.

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