

Decelerating Education: Four Pedagogical Exercises

Morgan Deumier, Faculty of Education and Society, Malmö University, Sweden
Email: morgan.deumier@mau.se

Tone Sævi, VID specialized University, Norway
Email: tone.saevi@vid.no

Morten Timmermann Korsgaard, Faculty of Education and Society, Malmö University, Sweden Email: morten.korsgaard@mau.se

Abstract

Current educative practices have given rise to the predominant pressure to increase production and speed in academic work and education in general. Educators need to ask whether conceiving of education in such terms is what we really want our children and youth to experience. In this paper, we aim to interrogate the question of how a deceleration of education is possible, and why this would be desirable for students and teachers. We do this in a circuitous way, by exploring four exercises in pedagogical deceleration. These exercises are inspired by philological, didactical, pedagogical, and phenomenological practices.

Keywords: deceleration, education, pedagogical exercises, slow.

Introduction

Odysseus' journey has often been used as an image relevant to how education consists of a continuous cycle of *home and away* and of moving from one challenge to the next. Rarely has the homecoming and the stretching of time offered by Athena to Odysseus and Penelope been offered as an account of what is truly pedagogical. The myth goes like this: when Odysseus is finally recognized by Penelope, he has not really returned home yet, and moreover, Odysseus can stay only for a moment before he has to continue his journey, as another trial awaits him (Cassin, 2013, p. 53). Then Athena, the Goddess, makes a divine intervention to make the reunion between Odysseus and Penelope last longer. Athena prolongs the night while holding back the sunlight of Dawn, to give time to Odysseus and Penelope for embracing each other, as well as for telling each other stories. Athena stretches the night, as one would stretch a wrinkled piece of fabric. It is as if Odysseus and Penelope were out of time for a moment. But how can we, poor mortals, decelerate time the way Athena, an immortal Goddess, stretches the night?

The way in which Athena stretches time speaks to the way in which certain pedagogical tasks and experiences require and call for a deceleration and a stretching of time. In fact, we wish to argue, truly pedagogical moments are not ones that rush us off to new and exciting experiences and journeys. These are moments when we stay with the object of study. Taking the necessary time to truly come to know it. To

recognise it again, yet somehow also anew. In a time when the pressure to increase academically the production and speed is predominant in student work and education in general, we need to ask ourselves whether conceiving of education in terms of a race – at speed from place to place – is what we really want our children and youth to experience. In this paper, we aim to interrogate the question of how a deceleration of education is possible, and why this would be desirable albeit in a circuitous way, by exploring four different exercises in pedagogical deceleration. The first exercise – the exercise of slow reading – explores how the practice of not understanding and of reading between languages may encourage us “to become slow” (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 5). The second exercise is taken from the didactical tradition of exemplarism, and an element of what Martin Wagenschein (2010) has called “the exemplary way”. In this approach, which Wagenschein (2010) juxtaposes to the systematic approach, staying with the example can lend an entryway [*Einstieg*] into the subject, rather than simply falling off somewhere on the systematic learning ladder. The third exercise expands on a description of a pedagogical moment offered by Klaus Mollenhauer in *Forgotten Connections* (1983) and points to the required attentive and patient care that might bring forth the specific pedagogical meaning of the moment. The fourth exercise turns to phenomenology as a reflective, and even passive way of thinking, reading, and writing, that requires recognition and will from the phenomenologist to adjust to the pace of the phenomenon.

Central to our four exercises in pedagogical deceleration is the assumption that education is in some way concerned with processes of trying to understand. Understanding has often been connected with an ability to “stop and think” (Arendt, 1981, p. 4), where we give ample time to the issue or dilemma we are facing to manifest itself in a form that is comprehensible to us. Hence, if scholarly and educational work is in some way, as we presume it to be, connected with the aim of understanding phenomena in/of the world, the issue of taking time, and of making and stretching time must be at the heart of pedagogical practice and theory. Before embarking on the four exercises a small clarification on the use of certain concepts might be in order. Throughout the paper we will be using pedagogy and pedagogical in their Germanic meaning. Hence, pedagogy refers not to the art of instruction, but to *Pädagogik* as a discipline and pedagogical refers to practices of *Bildung* and *Erziehung*, in the broadest sense. This entails also an understanding of education as a process that always involves the three constitutive elements of pedagogical practice, namely educator, educand, and content/subject matter. Hence, education can never be student-centred, teacher-centred, or even content-centred since all three constitutive elements must be held in tension and in view¹.

Exercise I

A course description in higher education introduces its topic like this:

Are you completely overwhelmed by the reading that you have to do? Would you like to be able to scan long documents for the important points? This online course can help you to make the most of the time available to you by ensuring that your reading isn't slowing you down. (University of Cambridge, 2023)

¹ For the full argument, see Korsgaard & Kloeg (2024).

However, are we still reading when our reading is not slowing us down? Can speed foster scholarly behavior, whatever that means, and is productivity a proper term for the results of scholarly work? We might need to ask ourselves whether speed and productiveness are, in fact, pedagogically relevant. Turning to the first exercise – to slow reading – we ask the opposite question to that of the course description. We wonder how the practice of lingering with a text can be taught to students (and teachers)?

One might need to unlearn how to read in order to learn anew how to read slowly. That is to say, one might need to unlearn the kind of efficient, instrumental, and outcome-oriented reading that incites the reader to go through the pages as quickly as possible, to scan through a text, to *get in-get out*. To start this unlearning process, we propose to return to Nietzsche (1997), as “a teacher of slow reading.” The exercise of slow reading begins in “non-understanding” what we read (Schleiermacher, 1998), and from there to then go between languages while reading a bilingual text, while lingering on what does not translate (the “untranslatables;” Cassin, 2016a). Hopefully, both the practice of *not understanding* and of *going between* can force a slowing down upon us.

Nietzsche (1997), who was first a philologist, then became a philosopher in the late nineteenth century, has often praised a kind of slow and inefficient reading. The sort of reading that requires the reader “to become slow:”

It is not for nothing that I have been a philologist, perhaps I am a philologist still, that is to say, a teacher of slow reading [...] For philology is that venerable art which demands of its votaries one thing above all: to go aside, to take time, to become still, to become slow — it is a goldsmith's art and connoisseurship of the *word*. (Nietzsche, 1997, *Daybreak, Foreword*, p. 5)

Instead of the scribes' sometimes hasty copying pace, Nietzsche clearly favours the philologists' *lectio difficilior*: a *more difficult reading* that demands attention and inefficiency. This *lectio difficilior* requires the reader to resist the desire of understanding everything at once – “to get ‘everything done’ at once” (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 5). What is more, slow reading invites us to waste time while reading, to waste *chronos*, i.e. measurable time. In other words, to take a break from reading, to stretch one's legs, to take a nap, is a part of slow reading too. The reader needs to read closely and in an indirect manner; to gather letters, words, and to pause. Nietzsche's ideal reader was to be “inefficient enough to *think* about what he has read, sometimes long after he has put down his book... just like that to think! It's criminal, to be so wasteful” (2016, p. 94). This statement may still sound provocative today, as it goes against the grain, against the demands that motivate the practice of speed-reading, of the fast extraction of data. Nietzsche's praise of slow reading echoes what Virginia Woolf once wrote on the art of reading: “Wait for the dust of reading to settle; for the conflict and questioning to die down; walk, talk, pull the dead petals from a rose, or fall asleep” (1925, p. 266). To exercise slow reading, we propose to take two steps that can encourage us to decelerate when reading: not understanding before trying to understand, then going between languages.

Reading bilingual texts is a very concrete exercise in slow reading. This way of reading slowly is inspired by Barbara Cassin's way of studying the “untranslatables” – a way of doing research “with” words and “between” languages (2016a). Let us start by not-understanding; with what Schleiermacher calls the fact of “non-understanding”

(in his lectures on hermeneutics, 1998). This is an important yet difficult step: not-understanding what one reads at first. Then, one may try to understand a little, by going back and forth between languages, and focusing on the most difficult passages, focusing on the “knot[s] of untranslatability” (Cassin, 2004, p. xviii). This practice of translation requires spending enough time in this turbulent zone between languages: “If we dwell for as long as possible in the in-between, only then do we become good go-betweens” (Cassin, 2016b, p. 257). Cassin’s way of studying knots of untranslatability can be exercised as a sort of slow reading.

Take the quote written by our “teacher of slow reading” for example, both with the original text in German (Nietzsche, 1881) and R. J. Hollingdale’s translation to English (1997). Let us read it once again, let us read it slowly:

Man ist nicht umsonst Philologe
gewesen, man ist es vielleicht noch das
will sagen, ein Lehrer des langsamen
Lesens [...] Philologie nämlich ist jene
ehrwürdige Kunst, welche von ihrem
Verehrer vor Allem Eins heischt, bei
Seite gehn, sich Zeit lassen, still
werden, langsam werden —, als eine
Goldschmiedekunst und -kennerschaft
des *Wortes*. (1881, p. v–vi)

It is not for nothing that I have been a
philologist, perhaps I am a philologist
still, that is to say, a teacher of slow
reading [...] For philology is that
venerable art which demands of its
votaries one thing above all: to go
aside, to take time, to become still, to
become slow — it is a goldsmith’s art
and connoisseurship of the *word*.
(1997, p. 5)

To take but one case of untranslatability from this passage, there are important differences in meaning between *Lesen* and reading. While in Middle English, reading (*reden*) also used to mean counselling and giving advice and is related to riddle (*redels*); in German, the meaning of *Lesen* is closer to the Latin verb *legere* (among others). Let us linger a bit with *legere*, in Latin, which may shed new light on what our “teacher of slow reading [*ein Lehrer des langsamen Lesens*]” is trying to teach us. *Legere*, to read, also means to collect, to choose, to gather, as if reading was a way of gathering letters with our eyes. Surprisingly enough, the opposite of *legere* is *neglegere* (to neglect). Neglecting, in the literal sense not-reading, *nec-legere*, means to disregard, to overlook, to not pay attention to, to not trouble oneself with, to not care about (Benveniste, 2016, p. 531). This exercise of reading slowly between languages can be done in classrooms and in research, for example by allowing students to go between languages, even languages unfamiliar to them in exercises of translation and of dwelling with short passages.

The difference between *legere* and *neglegere* can help us shed light on the differences between slow reading and speed-reading, between being attentive to text and being inattentive. Teachers in speed-reading initiate their students in extracting information in an effective manner, *to get in and get out* of the text, to scan it at once without taking the time to be troubled by the text. Our teachers of slowness (Friedrich Nietzsche, Barbara Cassin, among many others) can initiate us in a different kind of reading that has unfolded in three steps in this exercise. It started with Nietzsche’s insights on slow reading, a sort of reading, that demands to read inefficiently and attentively enough. Then, the next step was to practice not-understanding what we read before trying to understand a little, which forced us to decelerate. The last step of this exercise in slowness was to read a bilingual text, to go between languages, to linger on what does not translate (the “untranslatables”), which also encourages us, not to neglect a text but rather to take the time to read it slowly.

Exercise II

If the previous example presents itself as a practice of *not understanding*, and of *going between* that forces a deceleration upon us, the following example is one that urges us to focus attention on the first moment of interruption, or rather, of having one's attention gripped. The German didactical thinker Martin Wagenschein proposed in the 1950s that we acquire the courage to leave the so-called systematic approach of linear and chronological knowledge acquisition and pursue instead what he called *the exemplary way*. Instead of planning our lessons in accordance with the systematics and the chronology of our subject, often structured so as to move from the simple to the complex, Wagenschein encouraged teachers to identify examples and experiments that could capture the attention and curiosity of the children. This for him should be the primary pedagogical moment, since the risk with the systematic approach is that we simply lose the children along the way, or at best they acquire an imposing amount of knowledge that means nothing to them and has no real impact upon their lives. Or as he put it himself, "Thus an imposing pile of rubbish is built up" (Wagenschein, 2010, p. 163). Instead of focusing on creating a curriculum that carefully and with structure takes you through what you need to know to become a physics scholar, and losing 99% of the students along the way, Wagenschein urges us to establish *entryways*:

As a preliminary stage to physics it is as important as the root is to the tree. We usually tend to forget this stage in our teaching. We must pass through this entryway and experience it both silently and as a preliminary form of thinking. Only then will we be able to understand the pressed and dried forms that comprise the herbarium of a textbook. (2006, p. 1)

Only if we have the courage to dig deep and to stay with the phenomena of physics, and other subjects, can we hope to truly capture the interest of children. "[I]n a few, rare cases, an object that has come into our view in this way suddenly begins to shine by itself...and in the light it radiates fills an ever-increasing part of our thought, enlightens other objects, and at last becomes an important part of our own life" (Wagenschein, 2010, p. 171). Not all of them and all at once of course, but hopefully some will step through the entryway, and let the subject become a part of them.

The example we wish to present here, is only one of many examples and experiments described by Wagenschein in the development of his didactical position. The example we have chosen is taken from his 1977 text *Save the phenomena [Rettet die phänomene]*. In this text, Wagenschein argues for the primacy of experience and the encounter with concrete phenomenon in science teaching. The experiment concerns the experience of sound. We quote at length:

Let's listen to a group of nine-year-old boys in the laboratory school of the University of Tübingen. They have a teacher who tells them little (he doesn't talk them into anything) and has taught them to talk with one another and to stick to the point, to say everything they think, but also to think about what they say. *For hours* they discuss why the sound of a distant jack hammer or of a drum lags so much behind the sighting of the movement. They check the skin of the drum with their eyes, fingers and tongues, they make their observations and say (according to the tape), "it hops and trembles, it trembles and tickles, it

almost burns” (on the tongue). At last they conclude: arriving later is due to the air. Air “carries” the sound to us, and that takes time. And how does it “carry”? Their conclusion after a long conversation and experiments: when I beat against the drum skin, it wobbles, and the air is pushed away. The air wobbles back and forth, and *that* air pushes the other air, and the air next to it, and so on. That way it wobbles through the air until it reaches my ear.

At a later point, these children will learn to record the wobbling at a place between drum and ear by means of a mechanical sound receiver. The results, then, will be something like the “air pressure curve.” What have they, and we, gained through such a curve? The answer may be obvious, but strangely enough I have not found it in any textbook, namely: we have gained exactly what remains of the sound for someone who cannot hear. (2008, pp. 1–2, our italics).

The pedagogical movement from the experience of hearing a drum, to studying it with eyes, ears, and mouth, to the resulting understanding of sound waves and the air pressure curve, must by necessity be a slow one if the teacher is not simply to provide the pupils with abstract explanations. They must listen, touch and taste first, this is the only way to follow the primacy of the phenomenon. To allow the phenomena and the experience to speak to the students, one must give them the time to get acquainted with the phenomena first before we start naming and abstracting. This exercise can be transposed to other disciplines. Poetry, music, geography, and languages can all be presented as phenomena to be touched, heard, tasted, and smelled before we begin to name and systematise. In engaging with a poem or a complex theoretical proposition, we could try to stay with the words themselves first, before beginning to categorise and label. To give primacy to the phenomenon, was of course the first call of phenomenology. A call that gave Sartre such pleasure in being allowed to truly and slowly experience his apricot cocktail.²

Exercise III

The third exercise provides an example of how slower tempo expressed by a thoughtful and unconventional attention to reality and to the experienced moment, might give rise to pedagogical insight. The description is found in Klaus Mollenhauer’s book *Forgotten Connections* (2014), and is an episode from Bonneuil, a children’s psychiatric hospital in Paris, described by Maud Mannoni (1978) in her book *Ein Ort zum Leben*.

Teacher: “How many fingers do you have?”
 Didier: “Just a sec. Hmmm...one, two, three, four. Four.”
 “And how many do I have?”
 (Didier counts) “Five”
 “Does everyone have the same number of fingers?”
 “Yup.”
 “So how many fingers does Charles have?”
 “Five.”
 “And you?”
 “I just told you.”
 “But how many was that?”
 “Oh, come on, four!”

² For the full anecdote, see Bakewell (2017 p. 1-2).

“But I have five, right?”

Yeah, but I have still got fewer.” (Mollenhauer 2014, p. 90)

The event when Didier and his teacher are counting fingers addresses the pedagogical and phenomenological point that taking time to tell thoroughly what happened is the origin of insight. The described moment might be understood in several ways depending on the circumstances and intentions of the teacher (or of the reader of the text). Our intent is to linger by the experiential moment, to understand something pedagogically significant without intending to gain an immediate interpretation of it. Taking time to see and consider again, and again might offer the required openness to see different meanings and to try to consider the moment anew without falling into conventional understandings. The tendency today is to understand events like the one above psychologically or sociologically by pointing to underlying assumptions of Didier’s lack of self-confidence or comparing his ability or lack thereof with same-age pupils and average skills of pupils his age. Or one might think in neuro-biological terms and explain his problems as related to a disability. Our point is not to say that these understandings are untrue or not relevant, but to recognize that to pedagogy there might be other understandings as well. Practice offers several understandings and solutions as to how to encounter a child’s educational problems. A pedagogical response to the event, similarly, offers numerous possibilities, all of which would claim to have the best interest of the child in mind.

We can even think of the episode above in terms of not directly trying to influence the outcome of the situation or aim at immediate learning results. By staying *with* and *in* the moment, letting the moment be (as it is) for a moment, taking the time to look at it, stretching it out in time, possibilities might occur that we did not think of in the first place. In education we often tend to act directly on what we see or assume, and thus easily fall into conventions and habitual responses. A deceleration of the moment allows for a closer look and bridles our propensity for immediate action. By looking closer we might open to consideration of another kind and perhaps see meanings we did not see initially. When time is slowed down, we as authors and readers, might open for a *pathic* insight into the situation or realize an insufficiency or deficiency *of our own* for example. There is also a possibility that as a teacher or reader, I spontaneously might understand something and relate the meaning of a described and thus decelerated episode to my own experience or practice, or to what might have been my own practice. When reading about Didier and his teacher we are urged to reflect on who Didier is, and who his teacher is. How is their relation? What did they in fact do in this situation, and what would I have done? Was nothing or something done here, and how was this episode experienced by each of the two? The described experience takes place in the midst of the complexity and paradoxes of our moral-relational world, and we might ask whether pedagogical situations as first premise should not be kept open to experiential insight on behalf of the child, rather than being educationally effectuated, explained or resolved.

Pedagogical moments, or moments that have the potential to be distinctively pedagogical, are under the same common coercion of action, typical in classrooms and educational situations. But by translating (some of the) educational moments into experiential descriptions we “can talk coherently and relevantly about [children’s] *Bildsamkeit* [...]” and “deal with *Bildsamkeit* as an empirical reality” Mollenhauer writes, (2014, p. 74). A description of an educational moment, as the one with Didier and his teacher, is by Mollenhauer understood as a description that brings us as close to reality as we can come without partaking in the moment. Dealing with the

Bildsamkeit of pupils and students is an ever-present task in education, and a task that we as educators must attend to. Hence, this exercise in slowness (that is, in slowing down our pace enough to study—pedagogically—an episode or a description) helps us foster in ourselves and our students the ability to stay with the pedagogical reality where we most vibrantly and directly encounter the educational dilemmas of the old with the new generation. Regardless of whether this is a new group of pupils in school, or a new batch of university students, they confront us with their Bildsamkeit, that is with their plasticity, willingness and ability to change and to be taught something by others and to form themselves. We owe it to them to slow down enough to allow ourselves to take the time to really stay with experience.

Exercise IV

In this fourth exercise we describe the process of doing phenomenology as the practice of a symphonic alternation between reading, thinking, and writing, and the experiential disclosure that might come out of such practices. This exercise could be practiced as a trying out of experiential writing in the classroom or auditorium. How would children or students respond to a phenomenon, like to something they were gripped of in the lessons, or to a poem or a painting presented to them, as were presented in exercise II. Because a phenomenological exploration starts and ends in the lived experience – life as we live it, the moments of pre-reflective sensual presence—rather than orienting to theoretical explanations and step-by-step methodological explanations, phenomenology is a constant attempt to see and understand aspects of the phenomenon under investigation. This process inevitably takes time, as phenomenology, in this case, is a way of doing pedagogy. Phenomenology understands education as an existential project of human life and orients to how children and young people inherit, transform and live institutional, social, and cultural qualities of life. For this a language that involves and evokes us and opens space for reflection and self-reflection is required. Thus, if a text is to come forth as phenomenological, as a text that goes to the core of the phenomenon, its creation is necessarily a slow and distinctive process. In the classroom or auditorium the pace of experiential writing could be a slow movement, like adagio, but not too slow, perhaps at times, more like walking, andante. These temporal terms indicate a rhythm of graceful, leisurely motion, now and then replaced by slow and gentle walk, and describe well the best tempo of phenomenological writing. Janicaud (1996) sees the phenomenon as an always gliding and flowing entity that demands “an unceasingly renewed access” (p. 60), which hints at the point that sometimes slowness is required, and at other times one writes quickly.

Phenomenological writing and thinking with children or students (as well as teachers) require the ability to adjust one’s pace to the process and to the object, and always to negotiate the appropriate tempo. Phenomenology as well includes a tension between content and form that is not so easily overcome, and the writer must keep up this tension by orienting strongly to the phenomenon under investigation. This demands slow thinking and a back and forth between qualities that might belong to the phenomenon, and constant consideration on just that. The tension between content and form indicates the difference between *what* a text speaks of and *how* it speaks about it. If this tension does not keep the text in check, the echo of the experiential meaning of the text does not break through our taken-for-granted assumptions of daily life (Saevi, 2013, p. 3). This means that the text depends on the tension between content and form to speak to the reader (student or teacher) in a phenomenological

manner, (e.g. speak to the reader's own experience as a human being). The fundamental tightness between method and subject matter and the equal weight on both, are paramount to phenomenological methodology. Hence, Heidegger (1962, p. 58) considers phenomenological methodology the only way to "let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way it shows itself from itself"—that is, to do phenomenology. The personal and existential encounter with phenomenology for the student or teacher then, is a way of seeing that lets things show themselves in themselves. A potential encounter requires attentiveness to methodology and time. The method, however, is minimal and its unfixed manifestations in writing distinguishes a good text from a not so good text. Janicaud (1996) plays on the distinction between the French and the English interpretations of 'intelligence' and introduces the idea that a phenomenologist must have 'en intelligence avec'. The *avec*, he says, has to do with a "close understanding of, and empathy towards, or a collusion with a set of phenomena, a person or a group of people" (p. 52–53). For teaching and pedagogical practice to decelerate so that students and teachers could sense the speaking of the world, a certain inaction or passivity might help. These illusive qualifications of openness, even passivity, require a sense of interconnectedness between self and world that lets the phenomenologist hear the speaking of the world and attend to its language. The term 'passivity' refers to the capability of feeling or suffering, as the prefix *pass* stems from *pati*, to suffer, as in passion. Thus, 'passive' and 'pathic' share the same origin that allude to the ability to be attuned to and without haste, stay with, the phenomenon in a way of dwelling that remains open to the suffering and shortcomings of the other.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we have attempted to outline a few ways of doing slow pedagogy. We suggest this, not because slowness is a virtue in and of itself, but quite simply because certain moments, certain subjects, certain practices, certain experiments, and certain experiences require us to slow down our being in the world if we are to truly perceive and understand them. There are certain pedagogical moments and pedagogical tasks that cannot come into being without a slowing down, a coming into the present moment, and the courage to stay there. In the present culture of speed and acceleration, teachers, scholars and students are under constant pressure to produce and achieve, we need more than ever to recapture an ability to slow down, to focus attention.

"The most important, the most useful rule of all education", Rousseau once claimed, "is not to gain time but to lose it" (1979, p. 93). Philippe Meirieu rephrased this provocative claim in a more nuanced way, by arguing that education might not be a matter of losing time but rather a matter of "decelerating" (2014, p. 10). Meirieu emphasizes that school must be a "place to decelerate:" to impose "a delay" and "to give time for thought" (2014, p. 10; our translation). The four exercises presented in this paper, are not meant as blueprints, or methodology, to be implemented in the classroom or the seminar. Rather they are intended to spark reflection on our pedagogical practices, to slow down by considering them and how they connect to or differ from our everyday practices in teaching.

By arguing for decelerating education, we do not intend a return to better times or a harking back to the old ways. We simply want to offer a possibility to the reader of reconsidering, in view of the exercises we have offered, whether there are moments

and practices in their own teaching that require a slowing down, or a hesitation. Decelerating practice might give students and teachers just enough time to become attentive, or to come to their own conclusions that can then be tested against those of others and the knowledge accumulated in the subject by others before us. As Pestalozzi reminded us long ago schools tend to “bring judgments before people see and get to know things for themselves” (Pestalozzi, 1949, p. 147, as quoted in Wagenschein, 2008, p. 1). The urge to categorize and to assemble knowledge formations in order to quickly move ahead is all the more tempting in an age that is constantly calling for development and growth, personal as well as social, leaving little space for pausing and observing with patience and time. As teachers and scholars, we may not be able, like Athena, to prolong time, but we may be able, through certain practices and experiments, to offer time to pupils and students. Time that is just slow enough for them to truly experience something that could potentially become a meaningful part of their existence in the world.

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