I'm fast, I'm slow

By Mark Gatenby

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I am sat at my desk trying to write. The word processor is signalling me to hurry up and write something, the rhythmic flickering of the I-beam counting the seconds of procrastination. My desk faces a large window and it is bright sun outside. There is perfect blue sky and a light breeze. I wish I could go outside and relax with a cold beer. The beach is only five minutes away – I could go and watch the Kite surfers flying over the waves.

I look down at my desk and the coffee cup catches my eye, reminding me of the need for caffeine. Our three year-old daughter was up all night and I can feel the aching in my head from not having enough sleep. Then a scrap of paper next to the coffee cup catches my eye – it is the to-do list I scribbled earlier, including urgent emails in demand of a reply, forms to fill out, and meetings to book. I am sat at my desk trying to write about the experience of being fast and slow.

One of the questions to have occupied my working life in recent years is: what is a business school? This question has led me to inquire into the past and the future of formal education, the idea of *higher* education, and the nature of business. It has proved extremely difficult to find a satisfying answer to the question. As I reflected last year (Gatenby, 2015), business schools have grown so fast to become the largest departments in most universities. But they also have an uneasy existence within contemporary higher education, like capitalism in recent years, they appear in be in constant crisis. One thing that has lingered with me is the idea of *business*. What does it actually mean?

When a word loses its meaning the obvious thing to do is look it up in a dictionary, so that is what I did. The answer was quite enlightening. According to the etymological dictionary (i.e. the study of the origin of words and how they have changed) the word *business* derives from the Old English word *bisignes* meaning “care, anxiety, occupation”, or more simply the experience of being busy, "*busy-ness"* (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2016). Since the fourteenth century, people have been using the word to describe the things occupying them in the moment, and how they feel about the occupation – a bit like I did at the start of this essay.

So business is closely related to the way we go about things, whether we are fast or slow, and how this makes us feel. In his book *Faster*, James Gleick (1999) suggests: "our modern economic life depends increasingly on the scarcity of time, the competition for time, the revaluing of time, and the redistribution of time" (p. 242). An inner anxiety from being busy and not having enough time is one of the most familiar feelings in contemporary society. "I am too busy for that" is perhaps one of the most popular lines we all use at work; "that" includes taking a lunch break, reading a book, looking up, going for a walk, talking to people, thinking, going to the toilet, and so on. When we greet each other in social life, the friendly question "how are you?" is often simply answered with "busy". The term has become a brand for corporate self-worth. In a world than never sleeps anyone who is worth a dollar should have no time to relax and take things slow.

Understanding the origins of the word *business* does not provide an answer to the question of what a business school is but it helps us to appreciate how the connotations of business impacts on our lives in different ways. The rush, excitement, adventure, and rewards are attractive. But the stress, anxiety, selfishness, and inner loneliness are unattractive. The emotions churn in our daily experience giving the feeling of dizziness, boredom or mania. Business is very much a part of our way of live.

But if we combine this idea of busy-ness with school what do we create? Are we creating a place to teach people how to speed up - and keep up - in a hectic world? Are we teaching people how to emotionally cope in a busy world? Is a business school like a medical school which exists to diagnose and solve problems? (Is busy-ness a disease?). Or is a business school like a school of engineering which exists to design and build social systems which can solve problems of human comfort and material possibility? (getting what we want. Now!).

The idea of business as busy-ness certainly lends a new way of thinking which goes beyond the idea of business as a legal and financial institution, as in limited liability companies. It takes us beyond the banal and monotonous call from students to simply "teach us how business works, and how to make money", as if this is a straightforward or even meaningful task.

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Fundamental to any discussion of being fast and slow is the concept of speed. Do I need to speed up or slow down? Speed, as motion, is a measure of the distance travelled over a period of time. It can tell us how long it will take to reach our destination (if we have a destination in mind). What if we replace 'distance' over time with 'possibility' over time?

Maybe the thrill of the ride is our need to experience as much as we can, for as long as we exist. To see, hear, taste and touch as much as possible in our life. This is the 'more is better' mantra of commercial advertising. Yet we all know that when we feel lost or anxious we crave familiarity and the comfort of home. And sitting around, relaxing with friends and family, can be one of the most enjoyable things we do.

While many of us feel somewhat ambivalent to busy-ness in our life, there are those who think they have worked it out. In *Rush* (2011) economist Todd Buchholz is confident that living life in the fast lane is by far the best way to live:

> 'Sitting around a metaphoric campfire, holding hands and singing communal songs does not make human beings happy. ... It is the race itself – sloppy, risky, and tense – that can bring us happiness.'

Buchholz points to human psychology, suggesting that the pursuit of love, wealth or status gives us a natural high in the release of dopamine. Not surprisingly, for Buchholz, market competition is the root of our success and it should be lauded above everything else. Without the competitive urge to do things faster most people reading this would be dead!, he claims. Buchholz exemplifies a kind of striving spirit that many of us can appreciate on some level. Without the motivation to get out of bed in the morning and achieve something over the day it is difficult to maintain much hope and purpose. However, competition can clearly go too far when it becomes a contest of winner takes all. Competition may be one motivation for striving, but cooperation is surely another – to share, to experience together, and to help those we care about.

If Buchholz is firmly on the side of fast, Carl Honoré (2005) takes the opposing view in his book *In Praise of Slow*. Honoré is concerned about the human costs of rushing around and its deleterious effects on a simple and pure quality of life. Taking inspiration from the Slow Food Movement:

> 'we are enslaved by speed and have all succumbed to the same insidious virus: Fast Life, which disrupts our habits, pervades the privacy of our homes and forces us to eat Fast Foods... May suitable doses of guaranteed sensual pleasure and slow, long-lasting enjoyment preserve us from the contagion of the multitude who mistake frenzy for efficiency.' (quoted in Gleick, p. 246)

Honoré zooms in on our experience of time, the denominator in the speed equation, and in particular the clock. *What is the first thing you do in the morning?,* Honoré asks. The

answer, he suggests, is that we check the time. Almost everyone has an alarm clock or mobile phone near their bed so they can be within an arm's reach of the time.

It is not an exaggeration to say that clock time rules our urban-industrial lives. We use the clock to measure and control our work and our home. Every activity has time allocated to it. According to the dentist it takes two minutes to clean your teeth; it takes six minutes to boil an egg, according to Delia Smith. But how long does it take to care for those you love?

A work meeting is booked for 15, 30 or 60 minutes; the aim is to get them finished quicker but they usually take longer. Most performance measures in organisations involve measuring time because time is seen as a resource and, as Benjamin Franklin told us, time is money. The two most common performance words - 'efficiency' and 'productivity' - say something about the speed and transformation of input to outputs, and they often require time for their calculation (Chew, 1988). For example, labour productivity is the value of goods and services produced in a period of time, divided by the hours of labour used to produce them (OECD, 2008).

Our experience of time and speed depends on how we calibrate our experience. We can divide our time in different ways. Into two = day and night; into three = morning, afternoon, evening; or most often in capitalist societies, into hours = 24. Increasingly we even describe the minutes = 1,440. But to think of the day in 1,440 parts is a lot of tasks to complete and a lot of boxes to fill. It is also a lot of time to waste in the time-money arithmetic. When time is seen as money there is nothing to cause more alarm than inefficiently. Queuing is a sin and it should be avoided at all costs. It is better to pay someone else to stand in the queue for you if you can afford it. But the drive for efficiency and optimisation of every minute of every day can lead to perverse outcomes.

Let's take the Taylorist machine of managerial efficiency and the creator of 'fast food', McDonalds, as an example. I remember recently sitting in a queue at a McDonald's drive-through (I want to ensure you know this is a rare occasion – the kids were asleep and my wife and I needed something to eat). I made the mistake of ordering a veggie burger (I think this will convince you I'm not a regular!). This confused the staff who did not have one waiting to go in 10 seconds, so they told me I would have to park up in the car park and wait for someone to drop it off at my car window. We parked up and sat there. We waited in the car for 10 minutes but nothing arrived. I tried to get out of the car and speak to someone in the drive-through service window but I couldn't get there, too many cars racing around; I would have got run over. I was trapped in a strange no-man's land like a peculiar JG Ballard novel. I managed to cross the car park and went inside the McDonalds store which was

adjacent to the drive-through. They looked confused and then returned five minutes later to say they had thrown my burger away because they couldn't find my car and the burger had gone cold. They told me to get back in my car and wait while they made another one. The perverse fast food customer experience started all over again. I could have grown a carrot and turned it into a vegetable patty myself in this time.

So our experience of fast and slow is as much to do with how we measure our experience and our state of mind as much as how the world actually is. But who is right about the best way to live, Buchholz or Honoré? Are you at your best and your most fulfilled when you are fast or slow?

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I have to admit it has been a while since I started writing this piece. The trauma of the McDonald's drive-through is long forgotten. The summer has now past and we are into the comforting calm of autumn. It has been difficult to write recently, just been far too... well you know.

When I pick this piece up again I am actually sitting in an art gallery, perched on a comfortable leather sofa. My location is the National Portrait Gallery overlooking Trafalgar Square in London. I have just been to a talk at the Royal Society of Arts by the FT columnist Tim Harford, on the importance of messiness in business and life. It was a great talk. Now I have found a bit of time to do some writing away from the office and home. I rarely visit this Gallery, often choosing one of the South Kensington museums or the more contemporary Tate Modern, if I have a few hours in London to explore. But this feels good today in a room displaying 17th century art.

I am facing a large Rubens oil landscape. The painting shows Rubens' home in the 1630s. There is a large stone house in the left top corner, a cluster of trees partly camouflaging the building, a horse and carriage in the bottom left corner, and a hunter with his dog in the foreground. Most of the image shows a sweeping landscape – fields of grazing cows, a meandering stream, and rows of trees creating soft boundaries. It is clearly a pre-industrial rural world. The scene is relaxing in its picturesque greenery, but its simplicity belies something more dynamic: it also speaks of agricultural labour, dirty hard work, and rural isolation.

Have you ever found the time to really look at a painting (or anything) before? Not just for a few minutes, but for much longer. Hours, say?

I have been here for around 30 minutes, looking at the Rubens, thinking, and writing. Lots of tourists have hurried past, clearly trying to take in as much of London as their eyes can cope with on their busy vacation. No-one has stopped to look at the painting for more than perhaps 5 seconds. Saying that, I think my presence facing the Rubens has made some people stop and look at it for longer than they might have otherwise, making sure they have not missed something important (meaning 'famous' in tourist museum-land). Some come charging in - snap snap snap - taking shots of the paintings before even looking at them. One tourist even strangely worked his way around the painting taking snaps from various angles, as if he was conducting a photoshoot with a glamorous model.

I attempted to find a coffee just now for a little caffeine pick-me-up. I wandered through the 13th, 14th and 15th century rooms and then I learnt there is an espresso bar downstairs (does espresso mean fast? No, apparently it means pressed with force). I wander back into the room where I was sat earlier with the comfy leather sofa. Fascinatingly, there is now a large group huddled around the Rubens landscape. An art critic sporting a bow tie is talking enthusiastically about the piece "this is one of Rubens best, and in a different style to his earlier work because he painted it just after he had retired, he was in a particularly relaxed state of mind and carefree way of working". The critic tour guide is very affable and excitable. He scurries off leading his group to the next painting on the itinerary.

I have decided I don't have time for a coffee so I had better make my way home so I can help put the kids to bed and have some dinner.

I am now at the London Victoria mainland rail station. I managed to get across on the tube before rush hour but am now a bit stuck due to the infrequent and unreliable train service down to the south coast. I walked around the station a few times trying to find a place to sit, have a coffee, and write. Everywhere is either small, full, or uninviting – the feel you get from so much of commuter-land. I settled on Starbuck as a last resort. I have managed to find a spot where work is possible, and I am getting into the flow. I managed to concentrate for 30 minutes and now I have missed my train. The next one is not for another 30 minutes so I will continue to write and nurse the dregs of the coffee I just downed in a desperate bid to catch the train. I hope I manage to look up next time. I will be sharing the train with hundreds of busy commuters desperate to get home in time for dinner.

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All this talk of fast and slow is starting to get a bit boring. Some love to live in the fast lane and others prefer to stay in the slow lane, but isn't it obvious that most of us like to

frequently switch gears and lanes in the rhythm of a busy life? Being fast is great when you have energy – to go to the gym, start a new project, buy and sell in the market. And being slow is just what you need when you have been working hard and you deserve some rest and relaxation. The two work together in Capitalist yin and yang. It is the 20th century Trade Unionist settlement: 8 hours of work, 8 hours of leisure and 8 hours of sleep. The answer to this thing about fast and slow is that we need both, it is simple as that. We find our own rhythm. Some like it fast, slow, fast, slow. Some like fast, fast, slow. Others like to be slow, slow, fast.

John Maynard Keynes, the most celebrated economist of the 20th century, famously tackled this issue in his 1930 essay *On The economic prospects of our grandchildren*. For Keynes, citizens of the 21st century – benefitting from another century of technological progress and economic growth – would rationally decide to work less and enjoy life more. So a bit more slow, slow and less fast, fast. A 15 hour working week was deemed sufficient to provide the material wants in the techno-utopia of 21st century Britain. Bertrand Russell, the analytical philosopher and another heavy-weight thinker of the 20th century, wrote a complementary essay in 1932 *In praise of idleness*, where he argues for a 4 hour working day, leaving 12 hours for civilized leisure (if we keep 8 hours of sleep, that is). Russell wrote:

> 'I think that there is far too much work done in the world, that immense harm is caused by the belief that work is virtuous, and that what needs to be preached in modern industrial countries is quite different from what always has been preached. ... There was formerly a capacity for light-heartedness and play which has been to some extent inhibited by the cult of efficiency. The modern man thinks that everything ought to be done for the sake of something else, and never for its own sake.'

Most of the major industrialists and business people of the 20th century were occupied with the experience of busy-ness in one way or another. Frederick Windslow Taylor, the efficiency engineer and father of 'scientific management', pioneered time-and-motion studies as a way to monitor the busy-ness of this staff. Henry Ford, the archetypal factory owner, argued "the idea is that man must not be hurried in his work", instead "he must have every second necessary but not a single unnecessary second". But this still sounds like hard and fast work, rather than slow and enjoyable play. Both Keynes and Russell were actually quite worried about the capacity of industrial urban people to relax well and make the most of leisure time. As Russell put it,

‘The wise use of leisure, it must be conceded, is a product of civilization and education. A man who has worked long hours all his life will become bored if he becomes suddenly idle. But without a considerable amount of leisure a man is cut off from many of the best things.’

This is where you should ask yourself, if you had the freedom to choose, how hard would you really work? And what would you do with the time you chose not to work? This has always been an interesting thought experiment and the topic of centuries of Utopian writing. But with the relentless advance of industrial technology the almost total automation of the workplace becomes an ever more likely prospect in our lifetime. If the machine does our jobs do we have something better to do instead? And would this thing be fast or slow? This kind of question can lead to a lot of soul searching for inner meaning and purpose. What is this thing called a human *being*, and how does it relate to a human *doing?*

As I sit here, still wondering, what this thing is called a business school, I am aware of the world rushing by. Everything seems to be speeding up and connecting in all kinds of ways making the work ever more complex. There is more to do today than ever before because we are aware of more and we have so much more information – the fuel for ideas, knowledge, and emotions. We check the news to find out what is happening across the globe, not just (or perhaps not even) in our own street or town. But as James Gleick observed, “the more novelty the economy offers its consumers, the more quickly they seem to grow jaded” (Gleick, 2011, p. 243).

Gleick ask us to picture a familiar scene. You are bored doing nothing, so you go for a drive. You are bored just driving, so you turn on the radio. You are bored just driving and listening to the radio, so you make a call on the cellular phone. You realize that you are now driving, listening to the radio, and talking on the phone, and you are still bored. Then you reflect that it would be nice if you had time, occasionally, just to do nothing. (Gleick, 2011, p. 268) As journalist Oliver Burkeman observed in a recent BBC Radio 4 series of the topic of being busy, it is like we are allow everything to speed up and go faster, but by doing so we appear only to be running away from ourselves. Boredom is the clearest sign of this in contemporary life. This essay is boring: too many words. All of the books and ideas it refers to are also boring: too many difficult questions and not enough simple answers. Thinking is boring. In fact, anything that does not satisfy me this second is boring. And this second is also quite boring.

Gleick (2011) argues boredom is a modernist word, and it is a symptom of human beings trying to make sense of industrialisation. The flipside of boredom is *mania*, and both are symptoms of, yes, speed. Both are forms of sickness resulting from busy-ness (so perhaps

busy-ness is a disease after all?) In business school, and universities more generally, I often feel our social media addict students are in a regular state of mania, and they have indeed reflected themselves that they feel this way. Gleick (2011, p. 269) again:

> 'As nature abhors a vacuum, so we abhor the blankness, the lack of stimulation that comes with *doing nothing*. Activities rush in to fill the void – and never have so many interesting activities been available. ... Must we feel guilty if we cannot be satisfied doing nothing – if we don't like to do nothing?'

Gleick (2011) quotes from Sebastian de Grazia, 'Perhaps you can judge the inner health of a land by the capacity of its people to do nothing – to lie abed musing, to amble about aimlessly, to sit having a coffee – because whoever can do nothing, letting his thoughts go where they may, must be at peace with himself.'

This idea is alien to us and is certainly alien to those working and studying in business schools. Capitalist culture appropriates and commodifies objects through the price mechanism. It attaches market values to everything to bring it into the ever growing productivity machine which is the market economy. Since the Industrial Revolution capitalism has appropriated and accumulated more and more, making connections between everything. The outcome is more, and faster. The choice and the bargain is Faustian – either sell your soul to the productivity machine and enjoy its riches today, but suffer for eternity, or do not take the bargain and suffer today.

But, just perhaps, there are cultural alternatives to this way of life. Perhaps we don't have to attach prices and emotions to time and speed in the same way. Gleick wants to argue that the capitalist approach to *buying*, *selling*, and *wasting* time is not the only relationship we can have with it. Gleick (2011) discusses how in some cultures people are happy to "wait" for time, or "produce" time. As Gleick says,

> 'all we have to do is think differently, and then, as we sit idle, watching the clouds, we might become little factories, manufacturing time for ourselves. All the time we need, all the time there is.' (p. 272)

This is difficult for us to imagine in our busy lives. But that is the point, we are too busy to imagine. If we sit back and open up spaces for possibility there is no way that capitalist prices can keep up with what is possible.

What is a business school? You decide for yourself, but please do so quickly, or slowly, or in whatever fashion you choose. This task will keep you busy. Just make sure that time is on your side.

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