

In praise of *Slow Inclusion*

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By 1986, an Italian called Carlos Petrini had finally had enough fast food. He was tired of watching lonely Joe walking down the street wolfing a burger that looked exactly the same whether it was Paris and Pisa, January or July. He was bored with millimetre-exact but tasteless tomatoes. He was troubled by the clearance of rainforests to raise beef for appetites on the other side of the world. He was saddened by obesity and ill-health driven by just too much food processing. Carlos invented the Slow Food movement and so began a quiet revolution.

Slow is not lazy, as slow foodies might spend a whole Saturday afternoon preparing a meal. Such a meal involves three hours around the table with company and conversation instead of five minutes alone in front of the TV. Slow means sometimes putting your knife and fork down in the middle of your meal. Slow means fresh, local, seasonal produce from the farmers market.

There are now 80,000 members in the Slow Food movement spread across 100 countries. There's also a Slow Cities movement where people talk in quiet pubs, walk to



work, recycle, get to know their neighbours and support local artists.

Slow can be faster in the long run. Slow thinkers dig beneath the surface to find out what is really going on before jumping to conclusions. Slow businesses waste less time and money on transport. Slow health professionals listen better and so waste less time treating the wrong thing. Slow neighbourhoods build relationships that stifle crime and nurture children. Slow organisations have more fun and so waste less energy on poor morale.

I would like to introduce you to Slow Inclusion.

Slow means choosing the right priorities

I was speaking recently to some mental health social workers who admitted that they always pitched for the most expensive care package for people and always resisted a reduction. This is because it is so hard to get support for your client that if you give some away and then the person needs it again, you can never get it back. People living in staffed houses, secure settings and out-of-county placements are unable to move out unless someone spends enough time and courage inventing and implementing really creative and flexible arrangements.

Sadly, we are all so busy that people get stuck in the system and stunted by too much support. Like Aesop's fable of the hare and the tortoise, speed is not always the best way of winning. Instead of overloading the diary and then rushing about, slow means choosing the right priorities. A wholesome meal does not necessarily cost more and supporting service users to get the life they want might not always be more expensive than what we do now.

If we are slow we really listen. We find out what being included means to each person rather than forcing everyone into the nearest job, college course and lonely flat. We provide enough information for people to make their own decisions and then we honour that choice. Instead of excusing everything as part of the illness, we acknowledge the dignity of recovery journeys by letting people manage their own risks and holding them properly to account for their actions and decisions. Sometimes that decision will be to pause for a while.

Vegetables grown in the garden are not uniform in size and so slow food feels natural rather than standardised. It's less like making a plan and more like having a life. Mental health and community organisations are not machines either and cannot be controlled by pulling levers, setting targets and harnessing drivers. Instead, they are complex, adaptive, spiritual, living organisms. This means that they need slow policies that focus on what really matters. Slow policies on risk management, performance management, outcomes, and confidentiality give space for people, for friendships and for the unexpected, joyous moment of success.

From time to time slow managers spend a day out of the office keeping company with a service user. This helps them understand what inclusion actually means for people on the ground, what the pressures are like and what barriers prevent progress.

Slow means relationships

Slow inclusion focuses on relationships and gives them time. It's just like the hours that family and friends will spend over a slow meal together, talking, discussing, disagreeing.

Service users committed to slow inclusion build patient relationships with frontline staff and managers both inside and beyond the mental health system. Like my old friend Colin was always doing, they unearth and nurture the hope that brought staff into the service. They quietly insist that there is a

way to make things better, despite cuts in budget, decaying buildings and demoralised people. They believe in recovery for service users, for mental health organisations and for communities. And this hope takes them out to train people in jobcentres, police stations and schools.

Over in the social work offices, instead of a preoccupation with filling in forms, slow inclusion workers listen carefully to service users. They recognise that assessments are always emerging and never finished, so they remain curious about the people they support. They do not expect the service user to necessarily trust them or confide during their first meeting, or perhaps ever. They are no longer addicted to purposeful activity or advice-giving and have slowed down inside so that they can be still with people, to listen, to waste time with them, to do nothing much apart from make a real connection.

Slow inclusion means that people are given time to change. The scars inflicted by a lifetime of exclusion restrict flexion and movement, so slow inclusion workers will provide for those people who have come to rely on current services and want to hold on to them. Sometimes people almost fuse together in the crucible of a shared crisis and then services sustain these bonds for half a lifetime. Slow workers know that these valued connections are precious. They let people know it is fine to pause sometimes or make slow progress.

Equality of respect is needed so that everyone is genuinely listened to, irrespective of their expertise or status. Slow workers invite the cleaner to the staff awayday, ensure that the person using services is at the heart of care planning meeting and listen hardest to the person who knows them best rather than the person who earns the biggest salary. Such trust means we feel no need to duplicate each other's assessments.

Slow inclusion workers are not isolated by tribalism. They might sit on the edge of their discipline or organisation, or even in the unoccupied territories between organisations, but they are actively connected to a support network. They invest in building relationships with others doing similar work, with academics studying the field and with a host of unlikely bedfellows who sustain their passion and enhance their professionalism.

People committed to slow inclusion recognise that good mealtime conversation needs a wide variety of people to come to the table. You can't get inclusion if everyone at the table is the same, if they all work for the same two or three organisations. As well as local authority and health colleagues, slow inclusion workers talk to the shopkeeper on the street corner. These diverse community partners are sustained by relationships too. Slow workers invest time in building connections with key people in the mosque and the quiz team.

Slow means simple and complex

Just like the discussion over the meal table, slow inclusion is a place where human-scale stories are told. The narrative highlights the uniqueness of each person's inclusion journey and the subtlety and complexity of the issues

involved. Difficult issues are not glossed over or blamed on someone else - service users, managers, the government, or the media.

People are given time to express their own uncertainty and sample other people's ideas. Policies and procedures in the slow organisation are like old recipes that say 'add just enough, season to taste' – recipes that make sure the food doesn't kill but leave lots of room for creative experimentation. This means that they are rich in values, thin on detailed instructions and always draft.

People committed to slow inclusion know that there are problems to overcome and arrange time, skills, finances and risks to get the best for everyone. We aim for flexibility with stability. Since the task is complex, our understanding is poor and our theoretical models are weak we need to keep on learning. This means that we have to accept chaos sometimes and abandon the myth of control – a particular challenge for care and service managers.

People within and beyond mental health services are also on a journey in which attitudes gradually change through accepting relationships, whilst legal duties are upheld by combining patience with impatience. They simultaneously demand immediate compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act and recognise that attitude change is a journey that is rarely made alone. They discern the goodwill that lies behind the unreconstructed language or unattractive stereotypes and patiently but persistently encourage progress.

We delight in simple achievements and the simplicity of acceptance. Slow foodies reject the false simplicity of freezer and microwave, preferring instead the slow simplicity of planting, harvesting and chopping. Their time and effort seems somehow more purposeful, less harmful and perhaps even less wearisome. Like the Biblical proverb, 'Better a sandwich with friends than a feast with your enemies' we encourage each other and celebrate simple achievements together.

Slow means individual

Slow pays attention to each person's likes and dislikes, history and ambitions. The focus is on getting a life, rather than just getting a service, and so there is room for dreams and spontaneity. Workers abandon the doomed attempt to help everyone and instead heavily invest in a few individuals, leading to real change. They know that, despite the appearance of unfairness, this is the only way to break free from the trap of providing maintenance for all and opportunity for no-one. They focus less on planning activities and more on planning support.

Mealtime manners are not ignored, so people learn the social and practical skills that they need to participate. Sometimes they learn beforehand, so that they can succeed in the activity rather than be embarrassed or fail. The goal is interdependence and mutual accountability, so that people expand their sense of others, the consequences of their choices and their generosity of spirit.

People work and learn in fits and starts, rather than in a regimented way, and so it is acceptable to withdraw or step back sometimes before moving forward again. Staff and people using the service can do nothing sometimes – so sometimes residents get dressed late in the morning, miss a session at the day centre, ignore their plan and watch rather than join in. There is time and affirmation for people's stories – in staff meetings, reports and supervision.

We introduce people to each other and explain about inclusion before trying to get them to taste it. They are offered good information and tasters, more choices and time to make decisions.

Slow inclusion never writes people off as unsuitable for an included life, so would never describe anyone as unemployable. Nor do we inhibit people's progress by assuming that they need to spend years waiting for a chance, years in rehabilitation, years in training, years in work preparation before they are deemed eligible for a life.

Slow means a long view

Achieving equal opportunities and respect for all may take 50 or 500 years and so we go quickly sometimes, relentlessly determined to reach toward the dream. However, we make haste slowly, so that choices are not narrowed in the race for speed. Both big and small goals are divided up into small steps so that when we fall back we don't fall far. We know that the best hosts prepare meals and guest lists to incorporate spontaneous choices and serendipitous opportunities. Few of us have a written life plan, and rigid obedience to a recipe can be dull and may not always give the best results.

The prize is creative people with revitalised values rather than obedience to rules. So we seek to change perceptions about social inclusion within and beyond services and help people move through their fear that their traditional skills will be inadequate, devalued or dismissed. A large dose of humility informs our approach to the attitudes and difficulties of others and so we offer alternative perspectives rather than impose them and then allow time for the ideas to percolate.

We allow people to think slowly by giving them time to listen to people's stories, to mull things over, to let ideas marinade and stew. Where people depend upon services, radical changes are made in a way that acknowledges both our fear of the unknown and our need to get on with it, so that there is neither haste nor sluggishness.

Slow means local

Slow food enthusiasts like local dishes made with local ingredients. Because most of what we need is already available round here, we link with the people and facilities that already form the local community, rather than building duplicates or getting by without. This means that we spend time establishing contact with employers and community organisations before we need them.

These sometimes unexpected connections are based on how we can support them and what we can do together, rather than just how they can help us.

They are also robust connections that challenge discrimination and build a richer community for everyone who lives round here. It takes time to build this kind of rapport, so short term funding won't do unless we can combine enough funding sources to reach the calm water beyond the turbulence. The projects and services that result do not come in a uniform, standard shape and cannot easily be replicated.

Whether discussions take place in the Local Strategic Partnership or at person-centred planning meetings, everyone brings something to the table, everyone's gifts are valued and nobody is 'done to' or arrogantly expects to do everything. Specialists work on the difficult tasks like supporting someone to get a job but often the decision is to choose ways that increase participation rather than selecting expertise that ignores ordinary contributions.

Slow means pleasure

Sitting over a meal gives us something to talk about and an opportunity to open up, and similarly living an included life forms the basis for new friendships, new topics of conversation and a solution to the crushing feeling of being bored and boring. We talk about our job, our tutor, the goings on in our friendship group and so life becomes more interesting.

Life in the fast lane is so hectic that people get out of the habit of really tasting their food. In contrast, slow food enthusiasts relish the wholesome taste of healthy food and the almost spiritual bonding that comes as people share a slow meal together. So true inclusion feeds the deeper things of life – identity, relationships, joy, belonging and lifelong friendship.

In listening to individuals who use services, staff focus on what gives people pleasure, what makes life taste good. Their recording, monitoring systems and success criteria also pay attention to the things that build real satisfaction into people's lives. What people say is considered trustworthy rather than the system demanding independent verification of everything.

Staff like parties too and have found a balance between work and the other parts of their life. Senior management, team meetings and newsletters brim with stories of what has worked well. When staff realise that their work here is done, they move on.

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- With thanks to all the people who have attended workshops with me in the past month where we thought together about this subject. The ideas in this paper continue to emerge and this version is dated 2 December 2005. The title for this paper was borrowed from the thought-provoking book by Carl Honore called *In praise of Slow*.
 - A version of this paper will be published by the end of December 2005 within the NDT's *Emerging Themes* series, available for download from www.ndt.org.uk