

Slow Teaching with Dr. Louis-Etienne Dubois

Podagogies: A Learning and Teaching Podcast

Listen to the [full podcast episode of](#) Slow Teaching with Dr. Louis-Etienne Dubois

[Music]

Chelsea Jones:

Welcome to Podagogies, a learning and teaching podcast. I'm Chelsea Jones.

Curtis Maloley:

And I'm Curtis Maloley. And today we are speaking with Dr. Louis-Etienne Dubois, who is an Assistant Professor of Creative Industries, and Director of the Future of Entertainment Lab at Ryerson University. In shifting his courses remotely this past fall, Louis adopted what he refers to as a slow teaching approach. But to be fair, he didn't necessarily plan to be a slow teacher from the start.

Chelsea Jones:

So Louis, welcome to the podcast, I want to begin by asking, what is slow teaching?

Louis-Etienne Dubois:

Well, thanks for having me. Slow teaching is really, really simple. It's just about kind of slowing things down in terms of both the pace of the delivery in terms of scaling back on the content that you want to deliver. And just trying to take a little bit more of a low tech and high human approach to teaching. That's been my approach for the last few weeks.

Curtis Maloley:

It's interesting when you say low tech and high human, you know, we've heard in many different contexts people trying to figure out what is the right amount of tech? And how do I create connection with my students? So when you're thinking about how you did that, and what the kind of practices were, that you did, what are some things you tried to do?

Louis-Etienne Dubois:

You know, one of the things that definitely worked well, with the students, and I'm not even talking about teaching, and you can go with office hours this semester is, I've rediscovered the joy of a phone call, I used to make the joke that I have a smartphone. And the last thing I actually do with that phone is to make calls. And that's kind of, you know, weird when you think about it, you know, I've had a lot of students just calling me and, having a chat, and I guess giving our eyes a little bit of a rest and just listening to each other, hearing each other, and just not having to worry about screens and another Zoom link. So when I think about slow teaching, it's really about kind of rediscovering kind of the smallest, beautiful, slowest, beautiful, and all of these things that have kind of taken a backseat to technologies that we have, and this idea that

being engaged or having an engaging classroom is necessarily over stimulation, and you know, and laser beams and hyperactive chat rooms, it doesn't have to be. And there's a lot of values and again, just seeing each other talking to one another. In terms of specific examples. I mean, I have just been, you know, obviously just Zoom video calls, not additional tools. And that's a choice that I made, in part, as you mentioned out of necessity, because I didn't quite have the internet connection to support very elaborate tools. But also because I, you know, I kind of wanted to look at it from the student's perspective. And it might seem trivial, or it might seem small for you as an instructor to be using one or two, or three, you know, tools that you think are cool. But for a student who's doing this across six to seven courses, that's a whole lot of tools, that's a massive toolbox. And we can't assume that they're, you know, that, again, they have the capacity, or that they're comfortable to be using all of those. So I chose to be very, very low tech, and I went back to just, you know, kind of creating a nice environment in which people would want to be, and just be really just, you know, we don't know how or where or when even they're connecting with us, when they're showing up for class. Some of those students are connecting, you know, they're joining the class, and it's, it's 1 am, or 2 am. And you don't want to start screaming at them and asking them to be, you know, bouncing around tools. So I made it very, very relaxing. So you would show up, say for one of my classes, and there would be music, there would be a nice background to look at, I'd be outside and you'd be staring at nature. I even did one of my classes, I was helping out the neighbour with his chickens. So there was you know, kind of chickens running around, it was kind of cool. So something that you would want to be in and just relax, just chill for a bit. Turns out, you're also you know, in a class and there's going to be talking coming your way. But it's nice and enjoyable. And you just want to again, you just want to spend some time in there.

Chelsea Jones:

Thanks for telling us a bit about what it looks like. And I also get a sense of maybe what it feels like to be with you in this class. Maybe at one in the morning where you're sitting back and sort of watching these chickens or listening to you talk. You said earlier you know that this is about the rediscovery that slow is beautiful and slow is also very critical. If you think about slow scholarship, you know it demands a very careful reassessment of the conditions of knowledge and knowledge production. And I think what I'm hearing here is another type of reassessment of pedagogy, or of teaching production, especially when teaching is, as you say, quite a production. There's lots of frills, lots of gadgets and tools to use, and you're really scaling back and trying to relax the classroom. Is there a critical side to this? I mean, in what ways does all of this sort of resist our usual teaching conventions?

Louis-Etienne Dubois:

Yeah, I mean, if there is, it was not a conscious one, for sure, I didn't start from a place of necessarily wanting to reflect on, you know, how I was teaching or the amount of content that I was delivering, you get in this place where it feels like the pressure to give a lot of content and provide this very, very stimulating experience is really strong. And all of this kind of leads you to feeling that you again, that you have to deliver more than perhaps what you should be doing. And it really, really doesn't stop. Now, I have to say that, you know, calls for slow teaching, were there before the pandemic, you know, there's a body of literature on that, that talks about the

benefits in terms of knowledge and information retention. Alright, so we do know that attention spans are maybe not what they used to be, or at the very least attention tends to be very, very selective. And so you want to make sure that what you're providing, or what you're preparing for the students for any given week, is going to hit that mark, as opposed to just throwing a bunch of things and hoping that something sticks, maybe want to just focus on something that has value and then just work on that specific thing for that class. So that's something that I've had to do. And I took a hard long look at my content. And I have to say, I probably cut back, and that's just in terms of slides, I probably cut back about 25% of the slides. And even then, it's a good amount. And even then you know, as I was delivering that content that 75% left, I don't think I even made it to the end on most weeks. At the same time, you know, I dropped some of that content, I don't feel that I've delivered something of lesser value or quality. In fact, I feel that you know, the big idea, you know, those key learning outcomes, when you go back to your syllabus, and you look at those learning outcomes, there's just a handful on there, right, I think I probably hit those learning outcomes a lot better than I would have in previous years because I've perhaps dropped everything that was around it that didn't bring as much value. And that was kind of taking some of that precious attention away from those core ideas.

Curtis Maloley:

Yeah, it's really interesting to hear you say that, because I know, that is something I've heard from, from quite a few professors at Ryerson, that once they had a chance to go back and look at their outcomes and kind of assess what was really necessary, there became this extra area to be able to, you know, to really kind of shift the way they were thinking about their courses, which it sounds like you've done. It's interesting to me that you teach in Creative Industries, and in my mind, maybe somewhat stereotypically, but I assume, you know, creative industries, I'm thinking about, you know, lots of technology, lots of media, social media, all these kinds of things. I wonder when you were thinking about taking this slow pedagogy approach is this in some way actually grounded in your disciplinary background? Can you speak about how your discipline influenced the way you thought about teaching this term?

Louis-Etienne Dubois:

Yeah, I mean, when you go back to any kind of, you know, cultural or artistic goods, I mean, it's about meaning. It's about kind of, you know, stimulating the senses. And even then, even more than that, kind of creating this harmony with your senses, it's about contemplation, again, just this opportunity to look at something, to listen to something, to touch something, and to reflect on it, and to get lost in your thoughts because of what you're being presented with. That's the power of culture. That's the power of art that definitely resonates with the kind of ambiance and vibe that I was trying to create in my courses. One of the courses that I taught this semester is called Experience Innovation. And we look at experience design, and we look at the principles of the so-called experience economy. One of the core ideas of the experience economy is this notion of time well spent right? Time well spent is really something that you know, it is this very simple idea that I don't say keeps me up at night, but I think I go back to it often and often because you're preparing for your class and you're like, is this time well spent? Right? Is this something thing in which the students will be joining with whatever devices they have, in

whatever environment that they're in right now is this time well spent? And I think this is a core idea that comes from the experience economy that kind of informs your design when you're preparing for your class. It's also interesting to look at, again from that kind of background or literature to explore the different types of experiences. And specifically, there are these two authors, Vline and Gilmore, who wrote in their experience economy book, they say, you know, there are four types of experiences, there's, obviously the entertainment one, which is the one we know, the most common one, you know, you go to a play, you go to music, you go to a music concert, it's entertaining, it comes at you from a distance, you don't really have much to say on what's happening on the stage. But it's nice and pleasant. And it's very, very stimulating. There's the experience that is just merely educational, comes at you from somewhat of a distance as well, you're supposed to be a little bit more active, right in terms of not necessarily physically active, but at the very least engage with what you're being presented with, there's a third type of experience, it's called escapism or escapist. And that one is about being active, right. So if you go to an escape room, that's an obvious one, you go to a laser tag, that's a very obvious one, if you go to kind of these kinds of rec room environments, you're kind of moving around. And that's also very, very engaging. And there's that fourth one. And that fourth one, to me, at the very least, in terms of higher education, I couldn't find a version of this. And it's called aesthetic experience. And aesthetic experiences is just I'm going to create an environment in which you can just come in and be and contemplate and have again, this harmony of senses, I'm not going to tell you again, in which way you need to go, I'm going to leave that to you. And I'm hoping that you will draw value from that space. Think of a museum. I mean, that's a great example of it to me of this type of experience, right? You go to a museum, you just walk around, sometimes you'll sit in front of a painting, you'll sit on that bench, and you'll get lost, right, you'll get lost in your thoughts. You'll stare at it, and then you'll move on to the next one, perhaps you'll have a little side discussion with somebody about what that means to you. So what about creating that in a classroom environment, as opposed to, you know, trying to be some sort of an influencer or YouTuber, you know, and being very entertaining? What about just creating something that is an aesthetic experience instead.

Chelsea Jones:

I really appreciate you're describing to us what you mean by an aesthetic experience. And I love the sound of it. You know, as you're talking, I'm thinking about how I might adjust my own classes next semester, what might that look like? However, you know, my classes are in Child and Youth Studies. And they're the type of classes that I think, could connect to this sort of slowing down. And this museum-style, pausing, thinking, reflecting, connecting, if there are listeners out there who are thinking to themselves, okay, you know, this might be really good for Louis and some other people on this podcast, but there's no way I could do this in my discipline, our learning goals are very defined, they're very concrete, and the students have to have particular outcomes. And I'm thinking of, you know, the hard sciences and other disciplines like that, where people might say, you know, there's, there's no time for this, and there's no way that I can cut 25% of my slides. And would you have any advice for them about how they might be able to sort of dip into this kind of aesthetic experience you're describing, in ways that don't sort of compromise, what they think are their teaching values or their learning goals?

Louis-Etienne Dubois:

I guess part of me would want to challenge that idea to begin with, I could think of a few instances, I think you're right, in which it's actually quite hard to be cutting back on content, thinking specifically, whenever there's some sort of professional certification that's attached to it, and you need to hit those things. One of the courses that I taught using this approach is HR, and it is a professional occupation with a professional body of literature and you know, accreditation bodies and all that, you know, you could say that even in that sense, HR wasn't the most suitable course for this approach. So I would nevertheless, kind of go back and see, okay, so what's that big idea? What's that one thing that I want the students to take away from that week? Right? How do I kind of maybe double down on that and perhaps strip what's around that so that we maybe spend a little bit more time on it. Given that where you know, again, the students may not be in the best learning environment to be absorbing that content to begin with, we can't assume that it's the same as being in a regular classroom. So that's the first thing I would do, just go back to that one core idea, what do I want to use, the time that we have together for, and if there's a way to send some of that content, maybe it's some of the content that you are not going to be teaching as that core idea, maybe some of the content that you're dropping from the synchronous part of the course, maybe some of that can be sent to the student in different ways, prior or after class. So that you can really, really use that precious time that you have them with you to engage in and more meaningful activities to engage in more discussions, it could be about kind of, you know, discussing practical implications of these things or how these things are being used in real life, just so that you can kind of anchor them in some sort of reality in some sort of normalcy, that we're all kind of longing for, you know, right now. So I would really want to think about, again, if I'm going to have a couple of hours a week in which we're there in the same virtual space, what do I want to be using that time for? Kind of going back to that notion of time well spent? If the answer is, you know, I could have just sent out those PowerPoint slides, or those notes ahead of time or after, and that's not time well spent. And there's no kind of incentive for the students to be connecting, or to be even looking forward to connecting to that class. It and just in terms of how you choose to deliver that content, or how you choose to send it outside of the classroom. I've used podcasts, and I mean, let's be honest, I hate my voice, I don't have the Curtis voice at all.

Curtis Maloley:

No no you've got the great pace, I gotta say your pace is on point.

Louis-Etienne Dubois:

I slowed down, you know, I've actually slowed down. But I ended up kind of, you know, Googling how to do a podcast or podcast for dummies. And, and I did this very, very simple, one, you know, kind of DIY, it's ugly, it doesn't sound professional at all, I did put in a little jingle, that's good. And you can use some of your TA hours to get some help with that. So that's great. But you know, what I was able to achieve by doing this is to again be sending some of that content to the students outside of the classroom in a way that was a non-visual way. And right now our eyeballs are just overstimulated, we're on our screens the entire time. So not only are you kind of engaging another sense, and boy is audio, that's so powerful, look at just as the rise in podcasts and how people are consuming these things. So you're relaxing your eyes, you're

engaging another sense. And you're also giving a lot more flexibility in terms of when and how they can choose to consume that content. So that's also another nice thing about podcasts.

Curtis Maloley:

Yeah, I'm really getting a sense of your pedagogy here. And I love this distinction between, you know, when you talk about time well spent, and using the synchronous space, and it sounds like the real priority for you is building connection, which you know, in a pandemic moment through remote teaching, you know, is maybe the most important thing that we're missing, and that we need, both instructors and students, and then using that kind of asynchronous time or asynchronous, the tools to be able to deliver some of the extras that you know, might have been in the three-hour lecture before. So the delivery to me makes so much sense. And I love your approach to it that kind of slow delivery. I wonder on the other side with assessments has this notion of slow teaching and your priorities around connecting with students, all these things, has that changed how you've done assessment in your course?

Louis-Etienne Dubois:

So I've used the podcast episodes, this was a new addition to the course. So I've used the podcast as a way to just create assessments as well. So students were asked to write up a couple reflective essays, kind of listening on those episodes on those conversations and connecting back to their lived experience. Or at the very least, explaining how this may change their approach to something or make them reconsider something. And I'm talking to kind of upper-year students. So there's a lot of at that point, very pragmatic concerns about, you know, the life after school and entering the workforce at a pretty weird time, let's be honest. And I think it really helps to do a little bit more of sensemaking And trying to see how we feel about what's happening around us right now. And so about those podcasts, I mean, they're tying this to assignments was easy because I had the opportunity to speak to so many interesting people. One thing that I found right now is people are, you know, I found people to be extremely generous of their time, and especially in the creative industries where things have slowed down a lot. People have spare time. I mean, they wish they didn't, but they do. And so I spoke to so many fantastic people that gave their time and open up for these discussions. I even mentioned that book on the experience economy, I actually spoke to the author of that book for my class. So that was great. So students are asked to do, these assessments, which are reflective essays. And I actually dropped any sort of, you know, marking rubric or overly specific guidelines. If you want to be consistent here, you're asking them to reflect on something and I'm not going to guide their reflection. It's also in a way kind of this extension of this contemplation that you're you're trying to create in your classroom. So I dropped the marking rubric or any sort of, you know, overly specific guidelines. And I think that that worked quite well. I have to be honest, I was a little bit worried about exams, in part because, you know, I do a little bit of service for the academic integrity office. And so I, you know, it's impossible not to see or hear about the stories around final exams and plagiarism or cheating. So not that this was the kind of the guiding principle to me redesigning my assignments, but I really wanted to make sure that what I was going to be reading was the students', you know, original work. And that also would provide them with an opportunity to do something meaningful. I said this before, and remember, Curtis, you were a little bit worried about the workload, or what it means for the instructor. So

yes, I mean, I have been spending a little bit more time marking some of those assignments. And, and I've even mentioned, the fact that some of them didn't count for a mark, it was merely an opportunity to give some feedback, or to react on what the students were saying. So a little bit more time, although, I mean, it's hard to make really, really make the comparison. Like there's nothing scientific about it, it feels like it was more time. But I remember marking, you know, 180 final exams in December each year. And that's a whole lot of work as well.

Curtis Maloley:

It's a good point. And it's not fun work, right? I mean, some of those exams, you're marking the same question 100 times, and it sounds like you're really doing some authentic assessment.

Louis-Etienne Dubois:

And that's the thing, you hit it right on their head. Instead of reading the same answer multiple times, I get very rich, and always different lived experiences, and how people kind of relate to those things. And, I mean, some of those things are really, really interesting. Some of those things are really, really personal. And people, I believe, have a need to speak about what they're going through right now. And if that assignment gives you this opportunity, and again, mind you, it may not be as feasible in other disciplines. But I guess there's always a way that you can create a space for those kinds of discussions or sense-making exercises as part of your courses.

Chelsea Jones:

Speaking of the strange times that we're in, or the weird times, as you mentioned earlier, we are all sort of going through something new or maybe different, as we're teaching in these pandemic times. And I know that in the past, you've been able to talk about some of the gifts of teaching in an era of Coronavirus. And as we wind down I wonder if you could tell us, you know, what are these gifts that you're discovering?

Louis-Etienne Dubois:

Yeah, I mean, there are some things that I was able to do this semester that I could never do before. I mean, I'm somebody who's quite kind of, I don't want to say kind of an open book, but who I am as an instructor is also who I am as an individual. And so kind of sharing parts and bits and stories about my life has never been an issue. And I think it just makes you know, the person who's in front of a class comes across as a lot more genuine and relatable. And so I've actually embraced that opportunity to welcome the students in my space to see you know, to see where I live, how I live, you know, for them to see my one-year-old kind of running around and crying at the back, she's napping now. So this is a great window to be doing this chat. But that's just part of, you know who we are as instructors and I think it's important for the students to be able to connect with that and to see that, we also have had our struggles, different, but nevertheless, it was also a little bit of an adjustment for us. And that, you know, again, that kind of builds that connection. And this is also true for me being able to see them and to see them in their space. Every week, I try to have just this moment, either at the beginning or at the end or, at some point during the course where I ask, you know, let's look at each other, right, let's see each other a little bit. And a lot of people that's the only time where they will turn on their

camera, because they want to be seen, but also because they also want to take part in that moment and see what the others are up to. And I've had this opportunity to see artwork that students are doing. I mean, Chelsea, there's a painting on your wall now, I would probably ask you about it, I don't know if you did it or if this is something you bought?

Chelsea Jones:

I didn't do it, I assure you

[Laughter]

Louis-Etienne Dubois:

Well, you see you in our program, in Creative Industries a lot of our students self identify as artists, right. And you see really, really fun things at the back. And, you know, in a normal situation, I mean, they wouldn't come to class, with this massive sculpture or painting at the back or that thing that they were working on. And I get to see it now. Right. And I asked about them. And I mean, it's unique. That is one of the gifts to get them to know a little bit more. And to see what would their life is like also.

Curtis Maloley:

What I really like about that though. I like the idea because you know, we've heard it's this problem of cameras or, you know, cameras being off, how do we lecture in this context. But I like that you create these little intentional moments, where it's like, okay, if you're comfortable, right, now, let's put on our camera. And let's have a couple of minutes of connection. And then if you want to turn off your camera while I do the rest of my lecturing, no problem. But I love that, that's a great idea. Right? Like that way, you're not kind of forcing some much bigger, you know, or let me put it differently. I think what I love about it is that it gives the students agency to have a kind of defined moment that you share together,

Louis-Etienne Dubois:

You know, I try to go from, you know, face to face or kind of window to window saying something about what I'm seeing, and it's a lot of fun, I can see them maybe perhaps it's a new look that week, that's possible, or, you know, there's still, I could see it's pitch black, outside, and it's 9 am here. So, you know, where are you at what's happening? Oh, okay, you're connecting from Bangkok. That's great. So how's that going? You know, so you can have these nice little discussions that you would never have in a typical classroom. I've also, one of the things I did. And again, this would apply even though if you're doing you know, nuclear physics, that sounds very complicated when you're a creative industries person. So say you're doing nuclear physics, you can still open up your Zoom room, 15 minutes ahead of time, and to close it 15 minutes after, you don't have to stick to whatever your calendar says, and you open it up, and you allow for the people to come in early. And to hang back. And you can play some music, iPad. Kind of spontaneous dance parties, depending on the playlist I put on that day. And that's great. You know, so we start the class with a little bit of dancing and why not? Right? You know, we'll still cover the material we'll cover or whatever we chose to focus on. But we can have these

moments that are a little bit more, again, a little bit less tack and a little bit more human as part of our courses.

Curtis Maloley:

Yeah, that's so interesting, because we at the Center, we've been working with Student Affairs to solicit some feedback from students and across the university. And one of the things that they highlighted sort of universally was that they really valued professors who provided time sort of 10 minutes ahead of class 10 minutes after class or even as part of class but at the beginning of the end, just to connect.

Louis-Etienne Dubois:

Absolutely, and have a little chat, right. Just say, okay, well, I'm done with the content for today, but I'm going to hang back for another 15 minutes, right? If you want to chat if you want to show me something if you want to, I can put some more music if you want to dance for a little bit more like, you know, whatever feels right for you at this time and that's the idea behind an aesthetic experience is that you come in and you be yourself. You know, that's the power of it. I put the camera in front of the fire pit outside. I lit a nice fire and I played some Michael Buble "Let Me Go Home". You know, there's the fire and Michael Buble playing and it's just a great moment. Like, you know, if you're just connecting, and you're like, man, like I have to connect to this other, you know, it might be the third class of the day and then you just trickle in and there's that right, there's a fire, there's Michael Buble playing. That just sets the tone. It puts you in a better mood, and probably a lot more positive one for you to learn afterwards.

Chelsea Jones:

Well, that does sound very dreamy, Louis.

[Laughter]

Chelsea Jones:

It really does. It really does. I mean that sincerely. It sounds wonderful. And thank you so much for being with us today. It's been a sincere pleasure speaking with you.

Louis-Etienne Dubois:

Well, thanks for having me. And congratulations on the work that you're doing. I think as instructors, we're all kind of winging it right now and doing the best we can. But there's a lot of value in sharing those practices. And just knowing that, you know, we're not alone. And that there's an appetite for practices and learning from our peers in order to just get better. And, you know, somehow just make it through like everybody else.

Curtis Maloley:

For sure, for sure, well you've shared tons today. So thank you for that. And I also want to thank just while we're doing thanks. You know, our episode here is being produced by a Production Support Specialist Chloe Hazard, and an Instructional Technologist Sally Goldberg, Powell, thank you both so much for your work, and everything you do to make the podcast happen.

Chelsea Jones:

And another big thanks to the Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching for funding this podcast and we want to let everyone know that we're recording today from our homes in Toronto on Treaty Thirteen Territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, also the Dish with One Spoon Territory, and we have more episodes coming up in a month or so. So please stay tuned.