

Slowing the Academic Treadmill: Writing, Reflection, and Resistance in the Neoliberal University

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1 INTRODUCTION

To work or study in a university today is to feel the strain of acceleration. Students move through shortened terms, larger class sizes, and tightly packaged degree programs; staff navigate precarious contracts, funding pressure, rising workloads and the relentless tick of audits and metrics. Beneath the glossy rhetoric of “excellence” and “student experience”, universities have become places where alienation and exhaustion from the rhythms of everyday life are the norm.

These conditions reflect a deeper transformation. Reshaped by neoliberalism, universities in the United Kingdom, as in many parts of the world, are now governed by logics of efficiency, competition and commodification. Universities have shifted away from the ethos of education as a public good. There are more students and graduates than ever before, yet the value of that education is under increasing scrutiny. Universities are often perceived as focused on simply “getting students over the line” in their degree, rather than fostering an authentic learning.¹ Some have described it as “the great university con,” with first-class degrees awarded at record levels, while graduates increasingly question whether their studies were worth the cost.²

This paper argues that neoliberal reforms have transformed the university into a treadmill of accelerated, metrics-driven performance, eroding its core values of learning, reflection, and critical inquiry. Yet, by experimenting with the “slow pedagogy” of writing-to-learn practices it may be possible to carve out small, yet significant, spaces of resistance that prefigure more humane and democratic forms of higher education. To develop this argument, I reflect on my own classroom practice of using writing-to-learn across seven postgraduate environmental law modules,* draw on literature, interviews with students in my classes,† written student feedback received, and personal reflections in my analysis.

* These classes were all taught in the academic year, 2024–2025, and had anywhere between 8 to 50 students in each classroom.

† Six students were interviewed for 30–40 minutes, in a semi-structured interview, at the end of their teaching year. All names used in this essay have been changed for their confidentiality.

This essay is structured in three substantive sections. Section 2 examines the rise of the “neoliberal academic treadmill,” tracing how market logics have restructured universities in the UK and altered the rhythms of academic life. Section 3 then turns to the “slow movement” as a frame of resisting the treadmill, situating writing-to-learn practices as a form of slow pedagogy. Within this section, I analyze and reflect on my own use of these practices within the classroom, drawing heavily on the feedback and interviews from students in the classroom. Section 4 reflects on the political significance of these practices, considering their limits, risks of co-optation, and their potential when viewed through the lens of prefigurative politics – that is, as small-scale, everyday practices that model alternative futures for the university. Overall, the paper asks whether slowing down, even in modest everyday ways, can open cracks in the current pace of neoliberal university, and how such practices might help us reimagine what teaching in higher education is really for.

2 THE NEOLIBERAL ACADEMIC TREADMILL

Since the 1980s, neoliberalism has become a dominant force shaping much of public and private life. It is at once an ideology, a mode of governance, and a form of capitalism.³ As a political project, neoliberalism advances the idea that human well-being is best secured through entrepreneurial freedoms, within an institutional framework defined by private property, individual liberty, deregulated markets, and free trade.⁴ The role of the state is thus reoriented: less about direct provision, and more about creating and managing the conditions under which markets – and private actors – can flourish.

The effects have been profound. Neoliberalism has reshaped nearly every aspect of life, fundamentally altering the way institutions operate. Whether state-run or formally independent but serving a public function, organizations from universities and libraries to energy and water utilities have adopted increasingly corporate models. Even education, once regarded as a sacred public good, is now structured around the logics of cost recovery, profit, and efficiency. A central feature of this shift has been the erosion of the very notion of “the public” in favor of the language of “individual responsibility.”⁵

In the UK, neoliberalism consolidated as a policy orthodoxy with the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979.⁶ Higher education was among the first sectors to feel the impact: her government’s inaugural budget included deep cuts. Spending that had previously been seen as ‘public investment’ into education was reframed as a “threat” to economic competitiveness in the sector.⁷ Through the 1980s and 1990s, universities expanded rapidly in what became known as the “massification”

of higher education.⁸ Student numbers rose due to many reasons, including higher attainment, the conversion of polytechnics into universities, and new degree programs, but also it was logical that universities increase student numbers for their tuition, to make up for the government funding reductions.⁹ At the same time, academic labor conditions shifted: tenure was abolished, casualized contracts proliferated, vice-chancellors' salaries escalated, and managerialism took hold.

Over subsequent decades, the very purpose of the university was reframed. No longer primarily a site of learning and research, it was increasingly tasked with serving as an engine of economic growth. As Maisuria and Cole¹⁰ observe, policy agendas explicitly demanded universities to cultivate entrepreneurialism and competitiveness in the “next generation of workers.” This instrumentalization is particularly visible in the recent emphasis on “employability” as a central focus of higher education, displacing older – through imperfect – understandings of the university as a space for intellectual and civic development.¹¹

Austerity measures since 2010 accelerated these trends. Funding cuts, tuition fee hikes, and the removal of student number caps intensified competition between institutions. Universities now vie for students and resources through league tables, metrics, and benchmarks in teaching and research. Instruments such as the National Student Survey – measuring student satisfaction at the end of undergraduate study – rank universities and tie directly to government funding, entrenching their role as instruments of governance.¹² Today, universities face chronic underfunding by the state and rely heavily on tuition fees, especially from international students, as their main source of income.

The cumulative effect is a profound transformation. The university has become an “edufactory”: a site where education is commodified and sold as a product.¹³ In the UK, this shift is underscored by the application of consumer law to higher education, bringing litigation from “student-consumers” and the emergence of lawyers specializing in educational consumer rights.¹⁴ There was no “golden age” for the university; older models of the university were also marked by privilege and exclusion. Yet today, the public mission and core values of the institution have been hollowed out. As Cribb and Gewirtz¹⁵ argue, the university is increasingly less a community of learners and more a social site that can be engineered to serve any social function demanded of it. Research, teaching, and learning – the very essence of the university – are all at stake in the neoliberal era.

2.1. ACCELERATING AND BENDING TIME: HOW THE UNIVERSITY SPEEDS UP

Time in the neoliberal university has not only accelerated; it has contorted. Under reforms, time has become compressed, fragmented, and relentlessly disoriented.

Staff and students alike are pressed into new rhythms of urgency and performance that undermine the deeper purpose of the university: a space for critical inquiry, reflection, and learning.

The institutionalization of efficiency, outcomes, and competition has narrowed the scope of academic life. Workloads have expanded, yet much of this labor is no longer in pursuit of teaching and learning. Berg and Seeber¹⁶ note, staff and students alike are expected to do more in less time, while the tasks that fill their days are increasingly metrics-driven and performative in nature. Students move through tightly packaged degree programs, caught in short-term cycles of deadlines, while institutions oscillate between long-term research assessment and short-term recruitment targets. For staff, the result is a cascade of intensified and unpredictable demands across teaching, research, and administration – often under conditions of precarious employment. These mismatched rhythms make it nearly impossible for the university to act coherently, let alone nurture deep academic work.¹⁷ The slow reflective work of reading, writing, and thinking are displaced by the machinery of performance and accountability.

Shaw and Blazek¹⁸ describe the sector as caught in “arrhythmia: a jarring misalignment between the temporalities of institutions, staff, and students. Within this discord, crisis becomes routine. Universities lurch from one disruption to the next: a shift in government policy, a departmental restructure, looming redundancies, a fall in league table ranking, or the strain of covering gaps in teaching or administration. These are not anomalies but recurring features of the system. Crisis has become the rhythm itself.

This is less a single emergency than an ongoing breakdown, what Shaw and Blazek¹⁹ have called the “slow death” of the university under neoliberalism. Pressures of marketization, precarity, mental health crisis, and inequality converge into a low, constant hum of unresolved tension. In such a cadence, the university stumbles forward in a reactive, polyrhythmic tempo that drains energy, erodes purpose, and exhausts people within it. Renewal feels almost impossible.

The fast-paced treadmill also reshapes how students and staff understand their own roles. Rising tuition fees and the marketization of higher education frame the degree as a purchased product, rather than an educational journey. As Silverio, Wilkinson and Wilkinson²⁰ note, “student-consumers” increasingly seek to “have a degree” rather than to become learners. The university experience itself is a commodified, bundled part of the product alongside the credential.

Although more young people attend university than ever before, doubts about the value of the degree are growing. Martin Andrew²¹ argues that the neoliberal university has largely abandoned the pursuit of genuine academic excellence, despite continuing to claim it as a central goal. Structural pressures push institutions to prioritize outputs – ensuring students graduate on time – over fostering deep, authentic learning. True excellence, Andrew²² suggests, is not a product that can be delivered quickly or uniformly. It is a slow, complex, socially situated process that cannot be reconciled with the accelerated temporality of neoliberal governance.

Public skepticism mirrors this critique, albeit in a different way. The New Statesman, a popular British political and cultural magazine published an article on “the great university con,” raising concerns about great inflation and the monetization of higher education through rising student fees.²³ Surveys show that since the 2012 tuition fee increase, a majority of graduates report their degree was not worth the financial cost.²⁴ All this falls into the hands of rising right-wing political groups, who wish to dismantle subjects in the arts and humanities, for encouraging political critique.

According to Andrew,²⁵ the contemporary university has come to accept a form of institutionalised mediocrity: producing unremarkable educational outcomes while cloaking them in “bullshit-lingo” of marketized discourses of “excellence.”✱ At the root lies the question of time. Excellence cannot be engineered in compressed cycles of accountability; it requires duration, care and reflection. If the university has been bent to the pace of the neoliberal treadmill, then the question must be asked: how might we begin to slow it down?

* See also: Tomlinson et al., 2020

3 SLOWING THE TREADMILL: USING WRITING TO SLOW THE CLASSROOM

In 1986, Carlo Petrini and a group of activists gathered in protest at Piazza di Spagna in Rome, to protest the opening of the city's first McDonald's, the symbol of American fast food's global spread. Their protest was about the resistance to pace and attending to the sovereignty of food and culture. The arrival of homogenized Big Macs and the famous golden arches of the McDonald's M, in a city steeped with centuries of food tradition and regional richness, sparked something deeper: the birth of the Slow Food movement.²⁶

Rooted in the celebration of local ingredients, sustainable agricultural, culinary heritage, and attention to how we both produce and consume food, Slow Food

emerged as a quiet, yet powerful, counterforce to the pace and uniformity of globalized fast food. Over the past three decades, the principles have rippled outward, giving rise to a broader cultural shift known as the slow movement. The movement has grown across various domains of life and work, from slow journalism and slow science to slow parenting and slow travel.²⁷ *Slow* offers a quiet rebellion against neoliberal obsession with speed, efficiency and perpetual growth. In its place, it centers values of care, quality, and a call for rhythm over rush.

Slow has found its way to the university and higher education. Slow academia, slow scholarship, or slow pedagogy, all emerge with a shared concern of reclaiming higher education as a space for learning, care, and community rather than relentless output.²⁸ Mountz and others²⁹ lament neoliberal universities' quest for "high productivity in compressed time," positioning slow academia as a way of reclaiming time itself, to think, to reflect, to breathe.

In this spirit, slow pedagogy has been described as "urgent and profoundly countercultural."³⁰ It resists the logic of the neoliberal classroom by focusing on cultivating knowledge slowly, embracing uncertainty, creating community, and nurturing creativity. It also decenters the teacher as the figure of the sole expert, and the classroom becomes a more dialogical space – one that values open-ended inquiry and the time ideas take to unfold.³¹ Slowness in higher education should be less about individual retreat than about collective reorientation: organizing to share strategies, supporting one another, and carving out alternative rhythms of learning and teaching within the university.³²

3.1 WRITING TO LEARN: THE GENERATIVE POWER OF WRITING

How might such commitments to slow take shape in the everyday life of the classroom? One answer, and the focus of this essay, is through writing. Writing-to-learn, or teaching through writing, can be a quietly subversive way to resist the pace of the neoliberal university. Broadly speaking, writing-to-learn activities are short, impromptu, or otherwise informal and low-stakes writing tasks that help students think through ideas, problems, concepts, or reflections.³³ Writing to learn forms part of the large Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, encouraging more writing during university degrees.³⁴

At its core is a simple premise: that writing does not simply convey thought – it generates it. Peter Elbow, one of the pioneers of this approach, describes writing as an "organic developmental process" where meaning is not given at the outset but emerges through the act itself: "You should expect yourself to end up somewhere different from where you started...Writing is a way to end up thinking something you couldn't have started out thinking."³⁵ Placed at the center of learning, writing

ceases to be a product and becomes part of an ongoing dialogue. Everyone in the classroom is engaged in writing together.

Within the output-driven culture of the neoliberal university, putting this philosophy into practice is not straightforward.³⁶ It requires more than adding new exercises; it calls for a rethinking of how time is structured and how classrooms operate as spaces of dialogue and exploration. One way to imagine such a classroom is through deliberate experiments in slowing the pace of the university, opening up spaces where students must sit in classrooms, write, and contemplate in a deeper and more intentional way than otherwise.

3.2 EXPERIMENTS IN PRACTICE: SLOWING THE CLASSROOM

To ground this in practice, I turn to my own teaching. In my classes, Freewriting became the quiet axis around which much else revolved. In its simplest form, Freewriting is an invitation: pick up your pen, place it on a page, and keep writing. Don't pause, don't stop, keep writing for a set amount of time. I adopted these practices after being introduced to them through the Bard College Institute for Writing and Thinking Center for Liberal Arts and Sciences Pedagogy (IWT CLASP) Fellows Program between 2023-2025.

Two forms of Freewriting, Private Freewriting and Focused Freewriting, dominated my classrooms. First, *Private Freewriting* is just that: writing entirely for oneself, never to be shared. IWT suggests starting a class or re-centering a group midway through with the use of this practice, giving space to “clear their heads before embarking upon a shared learning experience.”³⁷ The practice is deceptively simple. We stop. We sit. We write. About *anything*, or about nothing at all. Sometimes the words arrive as a stream of thought, sometimes as a list of tasks, sometimes as scattered fragments that refuse to arrange themselves. While simple, as Sharon Marshall³⁸ observes, Private Freewriting is also radical. It is a break from the structures of conventional schooling, which so often dictates both what and how students write.³⁹ My first experience of Private Freewriting was through the IWT CLASP Fellows Program, where sessions often began or resumed with Freewriting. I found that even when my pen moved without purpose, the act itself carved out a moment of pause, a recalibration before the next turn of the wheel.

To start with, I brought Private Freewriting into my smallest classes. First, a Law and Biodiversity seminar, a small master's level-course with only eight students at the time. I suspected a small group could be more open to experimenting with the practice. Later, I extended it to a module on Alternatives to Sustainable Development, also a postgraduate module, this time with sixteen students. Both met at

busy times of the day – 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. – and my aim was simply to slow students down before we began learning together.

At the center of my classroom, in all my classes, was Focused Freewriting. In Focused Freewriting, you continue writing with your pen moving, resisting the urge to think and then write, but unlike Private Freewriting here you are given a prompt. Wallack⁴⁰ describes focused Free Writing as the “stem-cell practice” of writing-to-learn. The prompts purposefully shape the content, and frequently the form, of writers’ responses.⁴¹ In most of my classes I would have several consecutive writing prompts that “looped” back and linked to one another. Sometimes, I would introduce audio/visual cues, asking students to respond to something they heard or watched. We would then engage in dialogue, reading and sharing what we’ve written.

These practices would take time. We would sometimes spend the first thirty to forty minutes of a two-hour seminar, just writing in silence. We would often end with Process Writing – where I asked students to reflect and write, perhaps about how they found the activities, what surprised them, what questions they still had, what they found difficult or easy and why, how today’s seminars connected to other seminars in the module, or outside the module. In some classes, I would have other activities that are part of writing-to-learn practices, such as: Dialectical Notebooks, Writing in the Zones, group activities, and so on. I don’t want to focus in this essay on the different practices, as such, but rather the cumulative effects of introducing writing practices into the classroom.

Redesigning my teaching with writing required a radical revision of how my classes were structured. I had previously taught with a mix of lecturing and opening up spaces for verbal dialogue and discussion. But building in writing forced me to significantly reduce the amount of time I spent explaining things “to” students, and more time where students were quietly writing, or reading what they’ve written. The process of introducing these practices into my classrooms has been gradual, as I had doubts. In a two-hour seminar, already dense with material, where every minute feels rationed, how does one *make time* for such unhurried exercises? In a context where students pay up to £25,000 a year for a master’s degree, I too have, almost without noticing, internalized a neoliberal calculus of “value for money” and “bang for their buck”. Introducing an activity, such as Private Freewriting for example, with no immediate output, no direct tie to the week’s content – would students see it as a meaningful use of class time, or as a curious indulgence? Through experimenting with these practices, a series of themes emerged. In what follows, I reflect on them, drawing on insights from student interviews from being in the classroom.

3.2.1 *Rediscovering Intellectual Agency: Writing to Think*

Central to writing-to-learn practices is the generative quality of writing, the practice of putting pen to paper to reveal thoughts that students may not have realized they possessed. Linda Li⁴² notes that Freewriting is a “writing-thinking-discovery” tool, and Focused Freewriting in particular cultivates thinking about thinking. It is less about capturing what is already known than about opening the door to what might be known. Students too have articulated this generative quality in our classroom.

Andre, a master’s student who has come back to study after a few years of practicing law, for example, describes becoming “the type of person that thinks while I’m writing” and the introduction of writing into the classroom has become “really, really useful.” Sophia, another student in the class, tells me how, “sometimes once I start writing, I start thinking of like ten more things that maybe did not come up in the reading, but that do relate to other readings.” She laughed that the only drawback was that too many thoughts came at once: “I don’t always have enough time to finish them all...but if you’d let me, I could sit there for an hour and keep writing.”

For some, this generative quality has become an “aha” moment, a recognition of writing not as transcription but as a form of inquiry. The insight travelled beyond the classroom. Florence, who has been doing her degree part-time alongside work, for example, says she now begins her study sessions by creating her own prompts – sometimes as simple as “how am I feeling today,” sometimes the “aims of what I want to achieve.” She keeps a log of where her thoughts are at the start and where they have arrived by the end. These personal rituals echo Process writing prompts we used in class, embedding reflexivity into her broader learning practices.

In the context of contemporary, massified universities, this is more than just a cognitive game in classrooms. Students often feel alienated in the current university environment. Driven by metrics and outputs, their engagement with knowledge can become transactional and focused on “getting the degree”. It is not surprising, then, that such alienation leads to the use of Artificial Intelligence and other digital (and non-digital) shortcuts, where students outsource the generative work of thinking itself, because they doubt their capacity to produce original ideas.

Writing-to-learn practices can be a strategy to push back against this alienation. By creating structured, unhurried spaces for students to engage in the act of thinking itself, these practices reaffirm the value of their own ideas and writing. They offer a subtle, but significant, resistance to the instrumental logic of the neoliberal university. Students are reminded, in the classes, that their intellectual agency is not only possible, but vital, and that meaningful knowledge can be produced by them, from scratch, through the act of writing.

3.2.2 *Building Connection: Writing as Community*

Though done in silence, Focused Freewriting is “full, purposeful, and intensely sociable.”⁴³ This sociability matters in the neoliberal university, where building connection can become rare. Research has shown that neoliberalism is harmful to wellbeing because it creates a sense of being disconnected from others, as well as being in competition with them.⁴⁴ A deadly mix of competition, alienation, and loneliness is fostered because of the structural conditions we operate under. In universities, this manifests in subtle but visible ways. Faculty are less present, class attendance is often low at different points of the year, students compete for grades and vie for graduate jobs in a very competitive environment.

The sharing of Focused Freewriting is integral to the practice. Reading aloud what you have written, rather than summarizing, keeps attention on the words themselves. The language matters. The act of listening to each other’s words matters. Over time, these small moments accumulate into trust. As Li⁴⁵ observes, trust in the classroom has no magic formula; it is built patiently through time. Peer feedback, genuine listening, and the willingness to share one’s work, all nourish community. The educator’s role is to protect that space: to listen without judgement, to facilitate dialogue, to ensure every student feels heard and encouraged.

Others have found similar effects. Giovany Alsaint,⁴⁶ a former CLASP fellow, writes that the Dialectical Notebook, where students write several Focused Freewrites in conversation with each other, but in silence, was critical in creating community in his Haitian classrooms. In the context he taught in, students were often faced with challenging circumstances of violence and political instability outside the class. These practices brought students together and cultivated an “intellectual empathy” between students, ingraining the capacity to meet another’s idea without the need to immediately defend or dismiss it.⁴⁷

In my own classes, students often spoke of this shift. Andre, for example, reflected that he valued both the space to make mistakes and the practice of reading exactly what he had written:

I really enjoyed how we could, you know, not feel ashamed of what we wrote at first, because you would always insist, just read what you wrote... it’s okay... it gave us a space to commit mistakes, or be superficial, or to be really deep... but it meant we had a space of authentic curiosity.

For Andre, group activities paired with freewriting, such as the Dialectical Notebook, “allow you to connect to your classmates... those connections and encounters are really rich and fruitful,” This sense of connection was nurtured by the per-

sonal, reflective nature of many writing prompts, which invited students to write about how they felt, to draw on their own experiences, and to mine their own memories. Such exercises sit far outside the conventions of legal education, which so often present the law as a neutral, scientific object to be analyzed at arm's length. Madison, who came directly from an undergraduate law degree to the master's program, described the effect as unexpectedly affirming:

I don't know how to explain it without kind of sounding a bit soppy... but, yeah, it felt more than the classroom. Like you were here. And it felt like I was important as well, it was nice.

Writing can also act as a leveler between students who enter the classroom from very different backgrounds. A large proportion of my students are international. The neoliberal university actively courts them, not least because of their tuition fees which are several times higher than domestic students and essential to filling the gap left by dwindling state funding.⁴⁸ The UK is now the second most popular destination for international students after the United States. They make up around twenty-three percent of the total higher education population in the UK, but at postgraduate level in my institution – the focus of my teaching – the proportion is around seventy percent.⁴⁹

Despite their economic and symbolic value, universities often struggle to provide meaningful support for international students. The category itself is far from uniform: experiences differ sharply according to country of origin, class background, funding arrangements, and personal circumstances. Yet, certain pressure recurs with unsettling regularity. High tuition fees are compounded by the rising cost of living, precarious housing, and the strictures of visa regimes. Beyond these material constraints lies the affective weight of intensifying anti-migrant sentiment across Europe. Inside the classroom, these conditions translate into more subtle hesitations: the difficulty of adjusting to unfamiliar academic cultures, of the reluctance to speak when language, accent, or cultural reference points risk casting one as an outsider.

Research has consistently shown how these intersecting pressures can make it harder for international students to adapt quickly to the expectations of critical analysis and classroom participation in UK higher education.⁵⁰ While universities frequently provide individualized forms of support, such as visa guidance, language courses, and pastoral care, far less attention is given to transforming their own pedagogical and institutional structures in ways that would meet the realities of a more diverse classroom.⁵¹ International students I taught expressed a lot of “shock” in their first term, adapting to the rhythms and pressures of the master's degree.

Within the classroom, the pressures of language surfaced with particular clarity. Mei, a Japanese international student, spoke candidly about her reluctance to join discussions. Both her schooling in Japan and her lack of confidence in English made her hesitant: “I think we know what’s going on in the class. What we cannot do is to be confident enough to speak up...it was a real struggle for me.” She often kept a dictionary at hand, translating quietly while others debated aloud. Such hesitation cannot be read simply as a matter of individual capacity. It reflects what scholars have described as the ideology of “native speakerism,” a hierarchy that privileges fluency in English as a marker of authority, while casting non-native speakers into positions of doubt.⁵² Under neoliberal conditions, Tavares⁵³ observes, this hierarchy is intensified by competition, individualism, and isolation, accelerating processes of “othering” and feeding cycles of self-doubt, anxiety, and inferiority. For Mei, it was only after reflecting on the wider pattern of silence among Japanese classmates that she realized her challenge lay less in linguistic skill than in confidence with the subject matter itself.

Here, writing unsettles the usual hierarchy. It does not reward the student who can think and speak most quickly “off the cuff.” Instead, it slows the room. Everyone must pause. Everyone must write. I encourage my students to do so in any language they wish, without concern for polished prose or grammar. This simple act of pausing reconfigures the rhythm of participation. For Mei, the writing tasks become a way to organize her thoughts before speaking, even giving her time to consult a dictionary if needed. Because all students were required to stop and write, the tempo of the conversation no longer belonged solely to the most fluent or confident voices. Writing equalized the terms of engagement, creating a shared interval in which non-native speakers could catch up, gather their thoughts, and join discussion on more equal footings.

3.2.3 *Fostering Focus: Writing Against Distraction*

Writing exercises in class reflect a commitment to what Newport⁵⁴ calls “deep work,” which he defines as “distraction-free concentration that pushes your cognitive capabilities to their limit.” Deep work is indispensable to academic work, allowing students to reach states of ‘flow’ that stretch their thinking. The experience of flow is a “timeless intensity of the present moment,” the ground from which creative and critical insight emerges.⁵⁵ While flow cannot be summoned at will, we can shape the environments that make it possible.⁵⁶

Such environments are increasingly rare. Digital media saturates the classroom: students sit on laptops with multiple tabs open, phones sit face-up on the desk, notifications pulse. Studies confirm what is already visible to any observer –

students, like the rest of us, are not simply taking notes. They are checking email, sliding into chat, scrolling through social media, and moving restlessly between tasks at dizzying speed.⁵⁷

It is against this backdrop that writing in class takes on its force. Nicole Wallack⁵⁸ argues that such exercises are increasingly crucial in a distracted world. Part of their strength lies in centering handwriting. Though its use is in steep decline, handwriting carries distinctive benefits. Alonso⁵⁹ notes that writing by hand, which relies on the slower movement of a single hand, naturally reduces the pace of composition compared to keyboarding. This slower process has cognitive effects, it creates more time for reflection and allows memory a better chance to retain the information being written. In my seminars, I strongly encouraged the use of pen and paper, often carrying supplies with me to class so that no one was excluded. This was unfamiliar to many. Madison, who had come directly from an undergraduate law degree, admitted she had not used pen and paper since secondary school. “Typing is...impersonal,” she reflected, “writing feels a bit more careful and slower.” Sophie, in contrast, had used notebooks before and noticed the difference: “for me, I actually remembered what I said and I wasn’t just writing down everything when I used pen and paper.” Similarly, Florence reflected that “It’s nice to just remember that I can write...I feel like I absorb it a bit more.”

The role of reflection was equally critical. In content-driven classrooms, space for reflection is often the first to disappear. Given the pressures of time, students rush through the year and before they know it, the semester is over. Mei reflected this saying for the most part; it was only once the module was done and there was an exam, that she reflected on the connections within her learning: “there’s actually no time for me to review back, unless it’s related to an assignment.” Florence, who was doing her degree part-time, said that having done the degree part-time helped her find space: “I had those couple of extra days to fully digest what I had just learnt...it helped me form the links between my classes.”

Building such exercises meant covering less “material,” but the gains were immense. Process writing prompts gave students opportunities to pause, notice how they were approaching a task, and consider their relation to the material. As Wallack⁶⁰ argues, Focused Freewriting helps students distinguish “meaningful work” from “busywork.” Madison, a master’s student who had moved directly from undergraduate study at another UK university, told me that the practice helped “clear your head for a bit to be able to focus now on the lesson,” to “just breathe and write” after she describes often coming into class in a “frenzy.” For her, those minutes of writing became a way of “making time for ourselves before we put our best foot forward in the lesson.”

These practices extended beyond the classroom. Sophia described how she continues to draft essay outlines by hand as a way of shaping her arguments. Madison, who had never used a pen or paper during her undergraduate degree, bought her first notebook and pen in years to begin personal writing. For Mei, handwriting was inseparable from her well-being: “Personally when I have like panic in my head, I always write down and connect to what I’m thinking.” Despite the ubiquity of screens, she continued to scatter handwritten notes across her desk, explaining that it was “the only way” she could absorb things.

At the end of Term 1, an anonymous comment in the student evaluation form I received for my teaching said: “His ability to create space for us to pause, write, and gather our own thoughts before engaging in discussion has been refreshing too amidst the demanding, high-speed rhythm of MA life. His style fosters deeper reflection and encourages meaningful engagement with the subject matter.” Indeed, it was this comment that became the inspiration for this write-up. In the compressed, metrics-driven space of the modern university, such unhurried practices are not merely novel; they are acts of resistance, small refusals to let learning be swallowed by speed.

4 THE PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS OF WRITING TO LEARN

So far, this essay has argued that writing-to-learn techniques can serve as a way of *slowing* the academic treadmill, aligning with principles of slow pedagogy, and offering a subtle means of resisting the pace of the neoliberal university. In this context, the classroom emerges as a space for “everyday resistance.”⁶¹ Resistance in the neoliberal university cannot be understood solely through large-scale mobilizations; it must also be traced to smaller, routine, and informal acts that quietly unsettle and confront the operations of power.⁶² However, are these practices enough to really slow things down? How far can they go? What do we have to be attentive to, in order to avoid the capture of such practices by neoliberalism itself? In this final section, I sketch out some reflections to these questions.

First, and to be clear, I do not wish to exaggerate what such practices can achieve. To bring writing practices into a seminar is not to perform a brave political act, nor to cast myself – or others who do likewise – as radicals dismantling neoliberalism one class at a time. The claim is more modest: to consider how embedding these practices might unsettle the routines of the neoliberal university, whether such interruptions extend beyond temporary pauses, and what more would be required for them to become more radical gestures, capable of not only slowing the treadmill but also reimagining the conditions of the university itself.

To broaden the possibilities, I want to situate the slow pedagogy of writing-to-learn practices through the lens of prefigurative politics. Prefigurative politics is, at its core, about “being the change you want to see.”⁶³ It is a form of activism which groups enact, through their everyday practices, the world they wish to bring into being. This can be seen in how they organize themselves, the hierarchies they dismantle, the principles and discourses they foreground, and the care and attention with which they relate to one another. It is a way of modeling an alternative, “better” reality in the present, as a means of confronting and resisting the world as it currently exists.⁶⁴ The key message from groups practicing prefigurative politics is: the way you live, work, and organize now is inseparable from the world you hope to bring about.

Before reflecting on the question of how to prefigure slow pedagogy and writing-to-learn practices, it is important to point out the critiques of the slow movement as it pertains to academia. The slow movement, for all its advances, has been criticized for often being individualistic and privileged. Not everyone can afford to slow down: early-career researchers under contract, migrant scholars navigating visa and financial precarity, or those with care responsibilities who juggle unpaid labor alongside academic workloads.⁶⁵ In many situations, simply staying employed requires compliance with that very system’s slow scholarship critiques. Structural imperatives to publish, teach, manage metrics, and perform institutional outputs leave little breathing space for experimenting with slow learning. Indeed, it was easy for me, as a permanent academic teaching with a lot of autonomy in my classes, to redesign my classes as I wished with very little outside scrutiny. This would have been different a few years ago: when I was on insecure employment contracts, so less willing to take risks, or when I tutored on modules led by more senior academics who were more prescriptive about how we should teach.

Without attending to these structural inequities, slow pedagogy risks remaining a practice of privilege rather than a collective, justice-oriented form of resistance (if it is even one). Indeed, a big issue is that “slow” can become an individualized practice; a form of personal self-care that one can take. Slow scholars are indeed aware of these critiques. As Mountz and Others⁶⁶ argue, “slow scholarship cannot just be about making individual lives better, but also must be about remaking the university.” In this context, they argue that slowness must be “at once individual *and* collective” outlining strategies that require action in such a way.

Drawing on these perspectives, I offer three suggestions to further these writing-based practices, in the context of slowing down the pace of the neoliberal university. First, writing-based techniques – or any form of slow pedagogy – can begin as an individual practice within a single classroom. Yet, to be truly transformational, these approaches must extend across departments and programs, so

that students encounter slow, reflective practices consistently rather than as isolated novelties. In this sense, the work of the Bard College Institute for Writing and Thinking, in training faculty from around the world, is a step forward toward institutionalizing such practices. At a more immediate, day-to-day level, conversations with colleagues and students about the pace of the university can help identify opportunities to carve out space for reflection and slowness. Berg and Seeber⁶⁷ note how “networking culture” and the instrumentalization of workplace interactions have infected academic spaces. Creating informal, unstructured spaces – outside rigid meetings and workshops – can allow staff and students to discuss pace, and ideas at experimenting with ways to subvert it through classroom practice. To put it plainly, this means reclaiming the everyday spaces in academic life: conversations over tea or coffee, over shared meals, impromptu chats in the corridors, walks in the park. These may seem trivial, but they are precisely the moments where such ideas circulate more freely, where genuine connection takes places, and where the seeds of slower, more imaginative practices can take root.

Second, there is a risk that writing-to-learn practices could be co-opted into the discourses of neoliberal teaching and practice, used to signal “innovation” or purely to accrue credentials. This is a delicate balance; using such practices to gain recognition – for example, in the UK context pursuing a Fellowship of the UK Higher Education Academy – is a legitimate action in the context of promotion and career progression. But these institutional benefits must always remain secondary. The primary focus needs to be the intrinsic value of the work: slowing the rush, fostering reflection, cultivating critical thinking, encouraging writing, and building community within the classroom. When the practices are subordinated to metrics or institutional validation, they lose the subversive potential that makes slow pedagogy meaningful.

Finally, for slow pedagogy to meaningfully resist facets of the neoliberal university, it must engage with critical perspectives and situate learning within broader struggles inside and outside the university. Matthew Evans,⁶⁸ for example, describes incorporating discussions of ongoing higher education industrial action into his teaching, bringing into focus the plurality of identities one carries – for him as a lecturer, but also worker and trade unionist – into the classroom. In doing so, he argued that it helped reshape students’ frames of reference, introduced them to intersections of politics, education, and work, and demystified trade unionism and workplace relations. While the strikes themselves would probably have meant university metrics around teaching, often measured through student satisfaction, would have been negatively impacted, Evans⁶⁹ argues that linking his teaching with such action opened up ways to provide an authentic learning experience for students, and a smaller, targeted act of disruption embedded within everyday teaching.

In my own teaching on environmental law and justice, I am experimenting with similar connections. Writing-based practices have provided a way for me to tap into students engaging with their fears and emotions around the climate and ecological crisis. The content of what I teach situates these concerns within a critique of capitalism and the law, and reflective writing practices I'm now designing aim to try to connect and channel their emotions and analysis into actions. In this way, slow pedagogy becomes both a reflective practice and a mode of critical engagement, offering a small but tangible means to prefigure alternative ways of learning, thinking, and acting within and beyond the university.

5 CONCLUSION

This essay has argued that the neoliberal university is best understood as an accelerated treadmill: a relentless system that reorients higher education around metrics, outputs, and capitalist logics. In such an environment, both staff and students experience alienation and exhaustion, as the deeper purposes of learning such as reflection, curiosity, and critical inquiry, are displaced by performance. Against this backdrop, I explored the slow pedagogy of writing-to-learn, focusing on classroom practices that create deliberate moments of pause from the tempo of academic life. From Private Freewriting to sharing exercises, these practices not only generated intellectual agency for the students but also cultivated community and focus. They acted as modest, yet meaningful, refusals to rush through the rhythms of the neoliberal university.

I have suggested that these practices should be understood and expanded on through the lens of prefigurative politics, as small-scale acts of resistance and rehearsals of alternative possibilities within the university. Writing-to-learn carves out temporary spaces where different values of care, attentiveness, and collective critical inquiry are enacted in the present. Yet structural and individual obstacles can limit the reach of these practices. Expanding them requires more than classroom techniques: it means embedding slowness more consistently, creating spaces to speak and deliberate about the pace of the university, and connecting writing-to-think practices with broader struggles within and outside of the university.

The challenge is also balancing the nuances and complexities of the university. To slow the treadmill is to take risks, to experiment intentionally with alternative rhythms of teaching and learning, while also having to continue in other parts, through obligation, to meet the demands of acceleration that structure the contemporary university.⁷⁰ Writing-to-learn practices cannot resolve all the tensions. But, when practiced consistently, they do remind us that even in constrained condi-

tions, it is possible to create cracks in the treadmills, to reclaim moments of pause, reflection, and care, and to prefigure a different university.

NOTES

- 1 Andrew, 2024; Silverio et al., 2021
- 2 Lambert, 2019
- 3 Steger & Roy, 2021, p. 11
- 4 Harvey, 2005, p. 22
- 5 Maisuria & Cole, 2017, p. 604
- 6 Harvey, 2005, p. 22
- 7 Cribb & Gewirtz, 2013, p. 339
- 8 Cribb & Gewirtz, 2013, p. 341
- 9 Cribb & Gewirtz, 2013, p. 341
- 10 2017, p. 605
- 11 McCowan, 2015
- 12 Thiel, 2019
- 13 Fleming, 2021, pp. 35–49; Troiani & Dutson, 2021
- 14 Maisuria & Cole, 2017, p. 610
- 15 2013
- 16 2017
- 17 Shaw & Blazek, 2024
- 18 2024
- 19 2024
- 20 2021, p. 151
- 21 2024
- 22 2024, p. 183
- 23 Lambert, 2019
- 24 Adams, 2022
- 25 2024
- 26 Andrews, 2008
- 27 Honoré, 2005
- 28 Berg & Seeber, 2017; Mountz et al., 2015
- 29 2015, p. 1236
- 30 Schick & Timperley, 2024, p. 222
- 31 Bosanquet & Sturm, 2025; Mountz et al., 2015
- 32 Mountz et al., 2015, pp. 1250–1251
- 33 WAC Clearing House, n.d.-b
- 34 WAC Clearing House, n.d.-a
- 35 Elbow, 1998, p. 15
- 36 Suresh, 2024
- 37 Bard College Institute for Writing & Thinking, 2019

38 2009
 39 Marshall, 2009, pp. 18–19
 40 2009, p. 29
 41 Wallack, 2009, p. 29
 42 2007, p. 49
 43 Wallack, 2009, p. 45
 44 Becker et al., 2021; Baum et al., 2025
 45 2007
 46 2025
 47 Alsaint, 2025, p. 15
 48 Lewis & Bolton, 2024
 49 Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2024
 50 Akanwa, 2015; Shaheen, 2012
 51 Shaheen, 2012
 52 Holliday, 2015; Tavares, 2024
 53 2024
 54 2016, p. 3
 55 Mainemelis, 2001, p. 548
 56 Berg & Seeber, 2017, p. 27
 57 Mueller & Oppenheimer, 2014
 58 2009, p. 45
 59 2015, pp. 265–266
 60 2009, p. 45
 61 Hamilton, 2019
 62 Anderson et al., 2023; Evans, 2020; Hamilton, 2019
 63 Forno & Wahlen, 2024; Heath & Burdon, 2013; Mountz et al., 2015
 64 Jeffrey & Dyson, 2021, p. 642
 65 Fung, 2025
 66 2015
 67 2017, p. 80
 68 2020, p. 581
 69 2020, p. 583
 70 Bosanquet & Sturm, 2025, p. 12

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