
Slow Thinking Lab in a Society of Fast Broadband Connections

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Abstract

This paper has focus on a question how fast broadband connections enable user friendly solutions in communication and can function as a mean of creating silent places and space for what I call Slow Thinking Lab. My main research interest is to inquire how to promote socially sustainable creative life and what do we understand by good life. How to develop equal possibilities for participation in social development and carefully chosen networks, when home is in so called periphery or isolated location? How can we apply artistic thinking in society in general and especially in innovative development processes?

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Artistic thinking, slow thinking, communication, site-specific, mind-specific

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous

Introduction

English and French explorers who traveled in Lapland 1800's called us savages. Our culture and nature of people are often described as being silent and hard to communicate with. We can happily be silent in a company, if there is nothing to be said or shared. Speaking for just to keep noise going on is looked upon

as stupid and useless. We are not especially interested in small talk. There is a proverb saying "Hiljaa hyvä tulee" and you can understand it in two ways: making slowly makes it good – or making silently makes it good. The word *hiljaa* can be understood both as silently and slowly. You could interpret the meaning also that concentrating on what you do contributes the outcome. To have a focus results in quality.

Silence and slowness have something in common in Finnish culture and I find it rather amusing that while being silent and slow we have managed to develop one of the world's largest network of broadband connections only less than 150 years after the first novel, *Seven Brothers* by Aleksis Kivi, was published in our language [3]. In January 2015 Jaakko Nousiainen was defending his doctoral thesis in University of Lapland on Expanding opera into mobile media. If you have to become civilized, why not to do it properly and for all at the same time?

Environments for thinking

When I walk to work in winter mornings I listen to the sounds of snow under my shoes, wind rattling in trees. I can see the sky behind the hills faraway, a silhouette of a forest in the distance. There is very little traffic anywhere and I don't meet many people on my way. Sometimes snow is crispy, sometimes like powder, soft, humid, heavy or light and it sounds different in different temperatures. What does it matter how snow sounds or what the wind says about the world?

As soon as I step inside the university building my mind stops paying attention to messages from my senses and combining them with my wandering thoughts and

the brain starts scheduling the day, going through imaginary arguments, making strategies how to get everything that is on the agenda done. If I (or any of my colleagues) want to get some creative brain work (outside lecturing) done, we do not come to university, but stay at home or somewhere else.

Daniel Kahneman [2] writes about fast and slow thinking, but before going more into that I want to point out what he tells about the environments where his main creative thinking has happened. He is not writing deliberately about environments, but the importance of outer circumstances come through his writing all the time. He tells about joy of working together with Amos Tversky and how they developed a routine to spend most of their working days walking and discussing together. Kahneman claims that he has done his best intellectual thinking work while gently walking.

In his book "A Philosophy of Walking" Frédéric Gros [1] refers among others to Nietzsche, who has written "*We do not belong to those who have ideas only among books, when stimulated by books. It is our habit to think outdoors – walking, leaping, climbing, dancing, preferably on lonely mountains or near sea where even the trails become thoughtful.*"

Peaceful walking makes you thinking better. The possibility to move while you work makes it easier. When I work at home I sit for a while in front of my computer, write or do some visual work, then I stand up, walk around and might do some washing up while still thinking about the work in process, I take my dog for a walk. I am not bound to a single chair and desk, not even to a single room, but there is a sense of

freedom and I know that there is the possibility to work without other intellectual challenges interrupting my thinking. What is most important, I do not feel being in a hurry.

Working environments are changing rapidly all over the world and they are becoming alike regardless cultural differences. Interior designers for public spaces are fond of big open offices and also in many universities there are so called research markets, open office style working spaces, where you just have a desk and a chair. There is an idea that we use the spaces 24/7 and there will be a dynamic and creative atmosphere. Working in such spaces is supposed to increase communication and exchange of ideas. It might work beautifully in many countries. But I have some reservations how well it works in Finland.

Do you really want to do hard intellectual thinking in a market place, if your natural environment is a forest, a lonely spot by a lake or a huge open space in the hills?

From site-specific towards mind-specific

In spite of a new kind of global nomadism we tend to be very site-specific what it comes to our favorite working and living environments. There is a strange need to return home and the home can be in many places and for many purposes at the same time. There are certain landscapes, places and sites we want to visit over and over again perhaps just for getting a glimpse of something that puts our thoughts and/or emotions in the right place. We want to see in order to remember. We want to have our view whether it is an open field, a forest or a busy heart of a metropolitan

area. We want to take our walks in the manner of Nietzsche, Thoreau, Emerson and Kant.

Digital technology is sold to Finns by using images where you are alone with your laptop, iPad or mobile phone in the middle of nowhere. You are connected, but far away from civilization, roads, houses and people. Broadband connections enable you to withdraw from the society, to flee like the seven brothers did hundred and fifty years ago.

The digital memory and presence is not bound to a certain geographic site. I can carry my digital data with me and open it up in my hiding place up in the North or in the heart of a big city anywhere in the world. I don't even have to have any external hard drive or usb-stick with me, if I have stuffed my data in a cloud floating in virtual world and it will be available wherever I find myself – if there is a functional broadband connection and I have a device that can be connected. I am able to go for a walk in Lapland and have a talk with my husband who is walking in Devon. We can see each other through skype and share our thoughts and reflections. Through the broadband connection we have an access to environments where we are not physically present and we can reach imaginative places that we believe have an essential meaning for our thinking, for our well-being.

Perhaps moving from a site-specific agenda of observation and perception towards a mind-specific way of working through action in physical world and in one's own mind can open new possibilities for working in depth without hurry and without a feeling of longing to a specific place. Mindfulness has become a big international industry which I would describe as site-

specific approach in a sense that it emphasizes on being where you are, focusing on what you do and withdrawing from temptations of a wandering mind. Mindfulness is about paying attention to anything from doing your laundry and washing up dishes to listening a bird singing in a tree.

Slow thinking/processing way is mind-specific and its focus is on answering a question through action and thinking. The question might be an academic one, a question about playing a piece of music, it might be a practical question or plainly abstract. The key in slow thinking or slow processing is in breadth and depth of inquiry and a principle that there is all the time in the world for answering the question. You use all the time that is needed to get a satisfactory answer. You work like an artist combining a skill, intuition and a long and slow process of working on something that you do not yet know about.

Let's look at an artist's way of working as a method. It looks like making a patch work or quilting. You have an idea in your mind, but it is still unclear and does not have a definite form. You look from here and there and everywhere and approach the idea from different directions. Sometimes you work directly on the question (painting, words, music, etc) and sometimes you are dancing around it. Sometimes you have to wait patiently like you were taming a wild animal. You just are present without much interaction. Often you do something completely different, like domestic work, or perhaps constructing a lego house or knitting a piece without any aim of producing an artefact or any kind of useful product. While you keep your hands and perhaps even your feet in slow action, your mind works on the question that is your real focus. I have been processing

my visual art work by playing recorder, when all images have run away from me. I have carved words in blocks of wood and printed them on different materials, when I needed to get my thoughts organized and I needed to think about a text on education. So I made images of words such as school, discipline, home, to learn, unlearn, educate. I carved proverbs and quotations from the literature that I thought might be useful for my text to be. It took a long time, an entire summer to let my hands to do the thinking work, but I found out something new and interesting. The most rewarding thing was to get surprised by my own work, to look at wonder and think, did I do this? How did I come to this kind of world?

My first pilot for a slow thinking/processing lab was an aquarium like gallery space in the University of Lapland. The meaning was that it would slowly develop into something that was unknown also to me when opening the Lab. In art you are looking for unknown, searching for a miraculous and something that is hidden. If you find something that is new, you could not have had any idea of it when starting your search, because if you knew what you were after, it would not have been anything new, but already known. The gallery space offered a site for a continuous dialogue both in visual and verbal form. There was paper, drawing materials, books, couple of chairs, some construction blocks. You could go in and do nothing, just to have a pause during the day, but you were visible to others all the time. It had a calming effect to see people just sitting and perhaps reading, writing in a notebook, discussing, doing basically nothing productive. The space was not for functioning as a coffee room. It was not a waiting room. The lab was a

thinking room and it was open to everybody: the staff, the students, anybody walking in from the street.

A curious thing was that although there was nothing mentioned about silence in my introduction text that was put outside the lab, the space was mainly used in silence. As mentioned earlier in Finnish language you can use the word "hiljaa" both for slow and for silent. The lab was clearly used as a space for reflection and the feedback from the students was that it allowed you to stop and think. Laptops were rarely in use in the lab, although nothing was said about their use.

A Slow Thinking/Processing Lab can be either a physical place or a virtual place. The essential aspect is that you find a variety of tools and materials that enable you to think and approach your Question through different mediums. It is also a place where you leave your thoughts to be used or continued by others who visit the lab. It is not a place to possess ideas or to guard

your territory and put a stamp of copyright on your work. The idea of a Slow Thinking/Processing Lab is that The Author is Another One. Slow Thinking Lab is not about owning, but rather about sharing and accepting one's role as being a channel for something to come out.

In digital reality we can share our experiences in and from Slow Lab with strangers, we can create new communities based on diverse concepts of silence, speed and slowness.

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