# Currents

## In Teaching and Learning

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# TEACHING REPORT

# Slow Writing: Student Perspectives on Time and Writing in First-Year Composition Courses
## —Jennifer Pooler Gray

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## Abstract

Time pressures and heavy workloads place faculty in a state of "time poverty," as described by Berg and Seeber (2017) in *The Slow Professor*. While the authors focus on faculty at the university level, writing students also face time poverty. Writing students are time impoverished as they rush through papers, and overworked students are praised for their control over time. Being "slow" is not a good thing. This qualitative study listens to students (N = 82) experiencing time poverty within writing classrooms. Results indicate students feel constrained by time pressures, and external issues contribute to lack of participation in the writing process. Based on the survey data, students need more time for feedback and thinking. Applying slow writing approaches to courses can potentially alleviate time poverty. Creating a themed professional development opportunity using the slow movement's principles can extend this approach outside of the writing classroom and into Writing-Across-the-Curriculum and Writing-in-the-Disciplines (WAC/WID) courses and/or programs.

## Keywords

slow, writing, professional development, writing-across-the-curriculum, qualitative

### Slow Writing: Encouraging Creative and Original Thinking in the First-Year Writing Course

The Slow Food movement originated in 1989 as a reaction to the elements of the fast food culture. According to the Slow Food (2018) group's manifesto, this movement was created because "[w]e are enslaved by speed and have all succumbed to the same insidious virus: Fast Life, which disrupts our habits, pervades the privacy of our homes and forces us to eat Fast Foods." In response to the negativities associated with fast food, Slow Food encourages conversation, hands-on involvement in the creation of a product, and recognition of the uniqueness in the creation process. Instead of choosing unhealthy products produced in a flash, like a hamburger, Slow Foodies emphasize the creation process and enjoyment that comes from taking time to create, consume, and reflect. The movement uses the snail as its mascot and symbol.

This movement has migrated out of the food arena and into other fields, such as business. Pfeffer (2018) builds on this critique of speed by focusing on the corporate workplace. The author explains how unhealthy choices stemming from economic uncertainty and demanding workplace schedules impact performance, job satisfaction, and quality of life. Faster and more uniform is not necessarily better in the corporate world either, and workplaces are "getting worse" (p. 5).

Honore (2004) does not restrict comments to just the workplace; instead, he expands outside of work to explain that life in general has become an "exercise in hurry," requiring people to live and move at a rapid pace (p. 3). Honore describes the concept of "time sickness" and explains that the "whole world is time-sick" with increasing pressures to "go faster" (p. 3). People are increasingly hyper focused on going fast and cramming in as much as possible in the least amount of time. We are praised for squeezing in more. The consequences for not keeping up can be disastrous: the fast can "eat the slow" (p. 4). Honore calls for a slower pace, as our survival is about the "fittest" and not necessarily the "fastest" (p. 4).

Moving into the university environment, CNN even jumped on the movement, running an opinion piece about applying slow principles to college. Zeppos (2018) advances the idea that the emphasis on "breakneck speed" for college completion is hurting students. He

## The Remix Pairing *continued*

explains that education should not be a drive-thru service. Instead, educators should "help shape young people as the citizens, leaders, parents and neighbors they are going to become," which "takes time." He applies the health focus of the slow food movement to education, saying that since the slow food movement works to create healthier eaters, a slow education movement could work to create stronger students. Zeppos calls this approach, "slow college."

Berg and Seeber (2017) build further on the Slow Food concepts at the corporatized university. They explain how higher education trends toward a standardized churning out of satisfied customers, made by faculty members who are overworked and underpaid. Instead of unhealthy hamburgers, Berg and Seeber warn that the culture of speed squashed the time and space needed for deep and creative thinking faculty need to excel in their fields and create new knowledge. They even introduce a manifesto, modeled after the slow food movement's manifesto, which suggests that the slow professor can act with purpose, "cultivating emotional and intellectual resilience" by taking time "for reflection and dialogue," and they can regain the "intellectual life of the university" (pp. ix-x). Because faculty exist in a state of "time poverty," according to Berg and Seeber, the "major obstacle to creative and original thinking...is the stress of having too much to do" (p. 28).

I wondered, what does this state of "time poverty" look like for college students, especially those in writing classes? Writing students are impoverished as they blast through tasks, papers, and life. The hurrying and overscheduling is sometimes even praised, as it appears that students have great control over time management. Students rush between work schedules, commuting, errands, and childcare to find time to write in one sitting. Being "slow" is not often considered a good thing in this environment because there is just no time.

However, professional writers know that a slow approach is often critical for creation and creativity, as the writing process is difficult to rush. DeSalvo (2014) identifies the biggest challenge of writing as "our need to slow down to understand the writing process so we can do our best work" (p. xxiv). Her entire text slows the writing process down for writers, so they can take a "slow writing path" to think deeply about their products and

purposes (p. xxiv). DeSalvo claims this slow approach is essential to improve self-empathy and to resists "the dehumanization inherent in a world that values speed" (p. xxv). The slow approach, or path, is her suggestion for not only finding a writing process that works but for becoming an engaged and successful writer.

Many writing instructors are not surprised to find that students are stressed about time. The writing classroom is a "miniature, temporary society" that is a microcosm of higher education (Rose, 2012, p. 165). The frantic pace of the university can be seen in the frantic pace of the writing classroom. We hear plenty of feedback from students about time pressures, procrastination, and requests for extensions (Gray, 2019). The time pressures to produce a final product and the typical slower, process-oriented philosophies guiding a first-year writing class are two ideas in opposition. According to the Conference on College Composition and Communication's Position Statement on Principles for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing (2015), "Writing, like thinking, takes shape over time. Writers need time...writing is not produced in one sitting." First-year writing classes focus on exploring and implementing the writing process, which is a circular process ranging from invention and thinking to drafting, revising, and publishing. Often, writers abandon ideas and start back at invention. They need to re-think their ideas and re-present them in a different approach. Speed is the enemy for this writing process (DeSalvo, 2014). How do student writers work within the constraints of their fast-paced, time-impoverished life and the slower circular time-intensive writing process? Oftentimes the students simply skip over these processes, such as peer-review and re-vision, because they have no time to write a draft, and there is little time in life outside of the classroom for such luxuries as invention and thinking. Students are not experiencing their own recursive writing processes and instead are just producing writing like robots in one shot. I wondered if students would benefit from a slow-food pace in a writing class, so I asked them. My research questions include:

- What would students think of a slower paced writing class?

- What are students' perspectives on time pressures in their current writing class?

## The Remix Pairing *continued*

### Methods

After receiving IRB approval, I surveyed 98 students across several sections of first-year writing at a small college in the Southeast granting four-year baccalaureate degrees. Out of the 98 students, several were under the age of 17, so their results were not used as participants under the age of 18 are considered vulnerable population members according to IRB regulations. This adjustment in participants brought the final surveyed number down to 82 (N=82). I developed and administered a 13-question survey incorporating yes/no questions, as well as several open-ended questions, such as "If you were asked to bring a draft for peer review and you didn't bring one, what might be some reasons why you wouldn't have a draft?" and "What do you need in order to be creative?" The open-ended questions were crafted to provide students with space to speak freely about their perspectives regarding speed, pacing, past writing experiences, and current classroom activities. For example regarding the draft question, I didn't want to assume that the reason a student didn't have a draft was because the student was lazy or unmotivated. I wanted to create a space to be open to other possible reasons why someone might not have a draft. Because qualitative-based research seeks to "listen well to others' stories" and experiences (Glesne, 2006, p. 1), I chose to include the open-ended questions to learn more about the students' lived experiences and to listen well to these students.

The participating students were enrolled in the first semester of a two-course sequence in first-year writing at the study site. This course is part of the General Education curriculum required by all students. Lecturers (5/5 course load) and tenure-line faculty (4/4 course load) primarily teach this course, housed in the Arts and Humanities department. Some instructors have been trained in composition studies and some have a literature background. The typical class size is 25, and most instructors use a variety of assignments ranging from traditional essays, such as personal narratives and poetry explications, to multimodal projects, such as podcasts or infographics, to short-answer or essay tests. Some instructors use process-based instruction, teaching about the writing process and including revision opportunity. Other instructors use more of a current-traditional approach to writing instruction that focuses on a product-driven experience with no revision and little to no process instruction. While there are common course learning outcomes, such as an awareness of audience or proper citation conventions, instructors have the freedom to create assignments that meet the demands of the course learning outcomes. Instructors can select their own textbooks and course materials, and there are no standardized assignments or pedagogical approaches.

After collection the survey data from the participants, I compiled the results by hand and inputted the material from the yes/no questions into an Excel spreadsheet. In terms of the open-ended questions, I made sure to use a reflective journal to jot down emerging patterns or remarkable commentary, as I was first passing over the responses. For example, if I noticed a theme that was common, such as "more time," I made note of that point in the journal and wrote down any initial thoughts, such as surprise or a comparison with current pedagogical practices. I then formally grouped the open-ended questions and answers into thematic categories, such as silence or work influences, and I placed the specific language from the students under each category. For example, if the thematic category was, "Silence," I would place this theme at the top of a page and then copy in the exact language from students who mentioned this theme. This organizational choice helped me show the specific language the students used in reference to the themes. I let a few days pass, and then I rechecked the responses after recording them to double check for accuracy. The results from ten of the applicable questions will be displayed below, some with graphics. Results will be reported first prior to discussion.

### Results

Questions one through three asked about age and housing. The age question was necessary, as many students on campus are dual-enrollment students (attending high school and college at the same time) and vulnerable populations must be protected. The housing question was used to determine if there was a connection between those participants who lived off campus with a long commute and attitudes about slow writing classes. There was no observed connection, as commuters and on-campus students exhibited a similar response throughout the survey. Questions four through six were yes/no questions:

## The Remix Pairing *continued*

Q4: Do you feel like you need more free time in your life?

Responses: 66 Yes and 16 No

Q5: Do you receive praise if you are able to cram a lot of activities into a short time period?

Responses: 26 Yes and 56 No

Q6: Would you work on your writing more if you had more free time?

Responses: 52 Yes and 26 No (4 participants added a third category, "Maybe," by hand on the survey instrument)

Questions 7 through 12 were all open ended, and the thematic results are grouped below in a graphic form of Figures:

Q7: What activities get in the way of you working on your writing (check all that apply)? Thematic responses were work, other classes, children/parent care, and games. The category of "work" had the highest frequency of response, at nearly 50%, as shown in Figure 1:

**Figure 1**

*Activities Impacting Working on Writing*
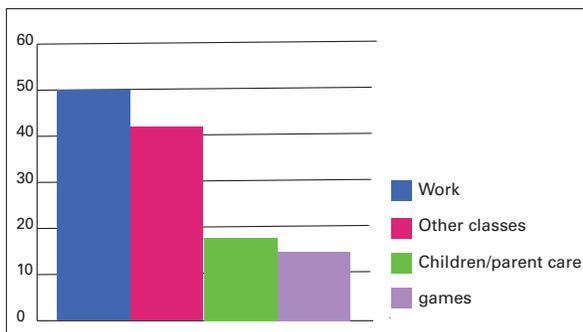


Q8: What specific activities in your writing class have been helpful for you? Thematic responses included talking with group members, work during class, and shorter papers at the start of the term, as shown in Figure 2:

**Figure 2**

*Helpful Classroom Activities*
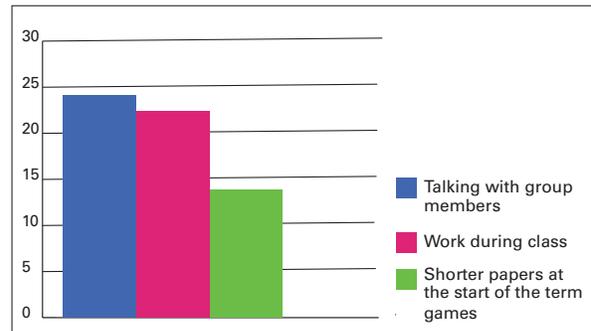


Q9: What specific activities in your writing class have NOT been helpful for you? Figure 3 shows the thematic responses included lectures, everything is helpful, and short deadlines. Several students left this response blank.

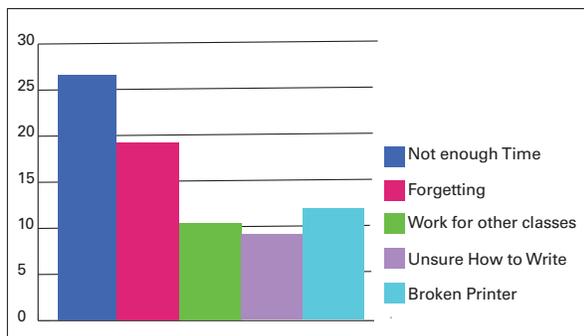**Figure 3**

*Unhelpful Activities*
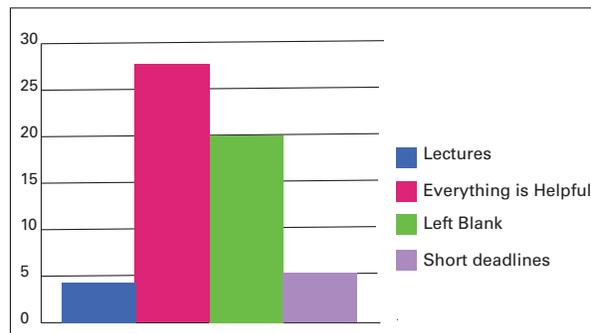


Q10: If you were asked to bring a draft for peer review and you didn't bring one, what

## The Remix Pairing *continued*

might be some reasons why you wouldn't have a draft? Thematic responses are shown in Figure 4 and included not enough time, forgetting, work for other classes, unsure how to write, and broken printer:

**Figure 4:**

*Reasons for a Missing Draft*

Q11: What do you need in order to be creative? Thematic responses included time, silence, music, an idea, and interesting topic are highlighted in Figure 5:

**Figure 5**

*Needed for Creativity*
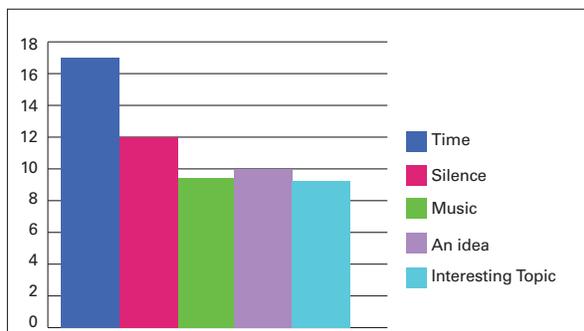
Q12: Do you think a slow pace in a writing class could be a good idea? Why or why not?

Good idea: 61        Not a good idea: 13

In terms of the "why or why not" section of the question, responses addressing why this pace was a good idea included points regarding more time for thinking, writing, working, and receiving feedback. Students claimed that "more time equals more work," and they indicated that they needed time not only to "gather thoughts" but also to "practice" and get "more feedback to develop my thoughts." One student wanted more time "...so I could actually learn and think about what I'm doing."

In terms of those who thought a slower pace would not be good, the themes revolved around delay and procrastination. Students said a slower pace could make them "be bored" and could make them "procrastinate." A student mentioned that "life isn't slow." One student said that more time would mean "more time to forget."

Finally, Question 13 asked students for anything else they wanted to add: "Is there anything else you'd like to say about time pressures and your writing class?" Students talked about being engulfed in time constraints: "time pressure affects everything because you don't really care what it [the paper] sounds like—you have other things to do." A student explained that "[t]ime pressures constrict my ability to perform in my writing classes" and another student said that more time would equal less stress: "If I were given more time, I wouldn't be as stressed, and I think my paper would turn out better." Finally, one student explained her connection between creativity and time: "I love writing, I would love to be able to get creative, but time pressure is generally limiting."

In these responses for the final question, "time pressure," is given great power, resulting in feeling unable to perform or being limited in the production of the writing and the writing experiences. However, there is a way to help students find the time and experience less stress due to time pressures: the slow writing course.

## The Remix Pairing *continued*

### Discussion

While some of the results may not come as a surprise (how many broken printers have we heard about as writing instructors?), there are several elements worth exploring further. The results from question nine were particularly enlightening, as about 34% of responders remarked that there were no activities during class that were not considered helpful. For the same question, 24% of responders left this question blank, which hints at a lack of unhelpful activities during class time or possibly just an unfamiliarity with the names of the types of activities completed during class. The typical in-class activities for the courses that were surveyed might include a range of the following types of actions done during class or for homework: invention activities, such as freewriting or talking with group members about potential topics; drafting activities, such as handwriting initial drafts or visiting the computer-based classrooms to create drafts during class time; revision activities, such as peer-reviews or re-writing attempts at introductory paragraphs; and editing activities, such as proofreading techniques or specific error hunting.

Applying the slow food philosophies to a writing class could involve even more of these hands-on activities during class time, which would allow students to enact the concepts, such as invention, that are discussed in class. These concepts connect back to the slow movement's concepts of collaboration, hands-on creation and experiences, and uniqueness. For example, instead of just spending a few minutes talking about invention, the slow writing class could spend time discussing the concept and then applying different types of invention activities during class on an actual assignment that would be coming due soon. More of this hands-on approach allows students to slowly delve deeper into their unique writing processes, asking questions as they appear and sharing work mid-process. Since nearly 32% of responders in question ten mentioned that they didn't have a draft for a peer-review session because they didn't have time to complete it, using class time to start the draft may directly benefit these students. In this case, the class time could be used for the expressed purpose of creating the draft for the upcoming peer-review session.

Using this in-class time to produce writing (at any stage) would address other concerns shown in the results, such as with question eight. Here, responders noted that talking with their peer group members (29%) and working on the writing during class time (28%) were two major activities during class that helped them. Dedicating class time to these two activities are easy ways to apply the slow movement's spirit to the writing class. As highlighted earlier, one of the main elements of the Slow Food movement is to experience food and creation together, collaboratively, and this element also applies to writing. A slow writing class can allow students to experience writing and creation together during dedicated in-class time to the craft.

One of the many positive outcomes from the survey data included specific suggestions from students that can be applied in a writing class or in a professional development opportunity for writing faculty in English departments or WAC/WID faculty. Many suggestions from a variety of the questions included adding in more graded stages in the writing process, such as a proposal, first draft, peer-review draft, and a final version. Question 12 highlighted student voices who said, "more time" equals more chances for "work" and "feedback," so students could experience more drafts, or versions, of their paper on the journey to a final product. Students explained in question 12 that they "will procrastinate" if they have too much time passing without a grade, so more frequent low-stakes graded activities could motivate them more to participate in the writing. Ambrose et al. (2010) support this suggestion. The authors highlight how frequent opportunities for feedback, such as multiple due dates for sections of a paper, can provide students with more chances to "refine their understanding" and "stay on track" in their writing (pp. 150, 142). Students make progress in their written products, and they receive targeted feedback focused on that particular section of the work. This approach must be taken with care, however, as too much testing can produce a negative effect. One way through this concern is a completion grade. For example, an early draft activity could be evaluated based only on completion, which could decrease any major test anxiety or assessment pressures. All the student would need to do in this case is bring an attempt at their work, and a completion grade could be used to decrease any assessment pressures. After all, applying a slow approach to writing will not work well if the students are not producing any sort of writing.

## The Remix Pairing *continued*

In addition to using the student data from the survey to sculpt in-class writing activities, another application could be to use the slow-class approach for professional development opportunities within writing departments as well as WAC/WID courses. Student responses from the survey can be integrated into these professional development workshops, so participants can "hear" student perspectives as the reasons behind some of the slow-class pedagogical approaches. For example, an interdisciplinary-themed professional development session could begin by introducing the slow movement principles, as well as the slow professor manifesto from Berg and Seeber (2017). Student data could be shared regarding the requests for more time for writing during classes and how more time can assist with creative thinking. Creativity is one of the principles from the slow movement, and as Berg and Seeber remind us, we have to avoid being rushed if we want to be creative in our thinking and our work. After this review of the study data and the slow movement principles, leaders could then ask for some reflection on the parts of participants with questions that focus on the slow movement and the slow professor manifesto. Some possible questions could include,

> How can I adopt the principles of the "Slow" into my course?

> How can I advocate deliberation over acceleration?

> How will I make time for reflection and dialogue?

> How can I act purposefully, cultivating emotional and intellectual resilience?

> How can I create space for deliberate thinking during class?

> What do my students say about the writing we are doing during class?

> How can I integrate the student feedback into my class?

After this discussion, participants can use the time in the professional development workshop to develop a slow writing sequence for an assignment, and then time can be dedicated to sharing this sequence for feedback from participants. Here, the participants would be enacting a peer-review activity as they shared their slow writing sequence with their peers (other workshop participants). A final activity for the workshop could involve participants crafting a slow writing course manifesto, which can be shared across departments and perhaps even displayed on office doors. Outside of the professional development workshop option, other activities, such as faculty book clubs using *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy,* could be helpful and slow-themed.

Another potential campus-wide professional development workshop option would focus on effective writing assignment design, which could be relevant for any discipline that assigns writing in the course. In the study, recall that students mentioned their experiences with feeling pressured and rushed to find ways to fit their writing tasks in to their lives. We can consider restructuring the writing assignments to take on a slower approach: fewer but more in-depth assignments. Here, students can experience the writing process within the classroom setting, spending time during class to go deeper into their written products. Since many WAC/WID instructors unfortunately lack specific writing instruction training, more discussion in a workshop conducted by experienced writing instructors about process-based writing instruction can be beneficial. Using the slow writing course tactic of using writing assignment design that encourage classtime to produce the writing can help WAC/WID instructors craft helpful learning experiences. As Anderson et al. (2015) indicates, "...effective writing practices are associated much more strongly than the amount of writing with greater student learning and development" (Anderson et al., p. 229). A successful writing course does not have to be full of numerous writing assignments. The research stresses that quality of assignment design does matter, and attention must be placed on "the design and use of the assignments" rather than simply on the specific number of papers or tasks assigned (p. 229). This study's conclusions highlight that a slower and more in-depth approach can improve a learner's experience in a course.

Further study on this subject could include larger studies across multiple institutions, multiple disciplines, and/or different types of writing courses, such as professional or

## The Remix Pairing *continued*

technical writing. Since the sample size for this current study is under 100 and restricted to one location, a larger study could provide more data for the discussion points, such as which activities in class are most helpful. More demographic data or assessment data could be included in these studies to better understand the commonalities behind the responses. Studies involving writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC/WID) courses would also be ideal here, as many courses such as history and sociology use writing assignments extensively. Examining student perceptions about slow writing tactics used in upper-level writing intensive courses could provide insight about writing skill development across time enrolled in coursework at an institution.

Interdisciplinary studies between composition and psychology could be quite helpful, as personality traits, such as grit, can be a factor relating to workload and time management (Duckworth, 2016; Gray & Mannahan, 2017). In addition, mindfulness and contemplative studies could offer more insight for larger WAC/WID studies, such as different options for grading and designing assignments. For example, Consilio and Kennedy's (2019) research was inspired by mindfulness and they applied "the lens of mindfulness to inform contract grading for evaluating writing..." (p. 29). This research study would be a great addition for a WAC/WID brown bag session centered around showcasing non-traditional ideas of writing assessment. Finally, several questions explored issues of creativity and what students needed relating to creativity, such as a nearly equal amount of silence and music, and more study there could be enlightening for writing instructors.

### Conclusion

With the increased emphasis on austerity campus-wide, the need for a slower approach is critical. The writing classroom can be a model for this slower approach in the classroom. The writing classroom is a powerful place, as composition "has served as canary in the coalmine for a wide-scale restructuring of higher education as a whole" (Welch & Scott, 2016, p. 5). As evidenced by Position Statements from the Conference on College Composition and Communication (2018), writing departments commonly fight against these restructuring initiatives, working to instead keep writing course enrollments low, so faculty have time and space to

respond to student writing. The fight for time and space must continue. Berg and Seeber (2017) warn about the perils of valuing and being so very "busy": "Academic culture celebrates overwork, but it is imperative that we question the value of busyness. We need to interrogate what we are modeling" (p. 21).

Based on my students' data, my writing classes will work to create a slower environment that apply our own versions of the Slow Food movement's major principles: cultivating joyful connections through sharing our writing, being present in the moment of instruction, depending on each others' perspectives for developing our writing, and advocating for diversity of writing projects and voices. Writing is not simply about robotically rushing through to a product. Instead, slowing down our writing experiences can help students pace themselves as they work to cultivate their writing abilities. As DeSalvo (2014) reminds us, "[j]ust imagine how we might grow as writers if we work in a slow writing way rather than rushing through our work trying to accumulate a pile of pages" (p. xxv).

The Slow Food movement honors the snail by pleading for a slower pace, so in closing, I share a reminder about moving through life at a slower snail-like pace as well as the value that comes from honoring our slower pace: "A last look at the stars and then to sleep. Lots to do at whatever pace I can go. I must remember the snail. Always remember the snail" (Bailey, 2016, p. 161).

## The Remix Pairing *continued*

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