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Teaching the sociology of time in a time of disruption (a strike and a pandemic)

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Abstract

This short article shares the innovative pedagogic practices I explored and developed to nurture temporal reflexivity in the classroom to engage students in the study of the sociology of time in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and a local strike. It takes the reader through the module as it was structured and delivered in two parts: from calendars to calibration and from memory to procrastination. This is interspersed with details of the learning exercises we undertook in the classroom and the module assignments.

Keywords

Calibration, clocks, future-imagining, procrastination, rhythm, sociology of time, speed, temporal inequalities, waiting

The idea for a new module on the sociology of time had actually been a long time coming. It took shape as temporality, rhythm and futures gradually took on more importance in my own research, perhaps as part of a rise in interest in the social life of time in the social sciences and humanities (Bastian et al., 2020; Hassard, 1990). In the office, I sketch out the structure and content, setting the process in motion for approval of a new module. The challenge of delineating topics is a big one. I always find this. But given the multi-disciplinary scope of the study of time

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(Sharma, 2022), it's more daunting than usual. The module will be optional and sit within an undergraduate social sciences programme. The students are sometimes ambivalent about their taken for granted assumptions being shaken up even as they relish the reconfiguring of their understanding of the social world. So, I need to devise a structure that includes recognisable topics and tasks as well as one which stretches their thinking and reshapes their experience of grappling with time and temporalities, something they may not have reconsidered since learning to 'tell the time' in childhood (Birth 2017: x-xi).

I start with the things I know I want to include – something on rhythm, acceleration (and slowness), waiting, future-imagining and temporal inequalities. I work back and forth between possible topics, the overall aims and the learning outcomes. What do I really want student to learn here? I formulate an opening statement: 'This module is about time and how we live, experience and make sense of it both in everyday life and through sociological concepts'. The scope is potentially vast. I go on: 'It explores the different temporalities that underpin the social world and matter for how it is enacted'. I embed discussion of contexts (industrial capitalism in particular) and contests over time (power and inequality) and shape the sessions around key temporal concepts for sociology. Or should I flip this? I try out different versions and settle on concepts as the building blocks of the module. The core aim emerges of seeking 'to cultivate a temporal sensitivity for students doing (and critiquing) research about time', including learning about specific temporal methods (such as time-diaries and rhythm-analysis). That helps. It means the module doesn't have to cover everything but work with specific areas of scholarship that connect to the overall programme to animate it in new ways as well as opening up different ideas for their dissertation and postgraduate work.

In this short article, I share the pedagogic practices I explored to nurture temporal reflexivity in what I hope are some innovative ways. The impact of COVID-19, organisational restructuring and other changes meant that I launched this module in 2020 but have not been in a position to deliver it again since. I tell this story in the 'historical present' cognisant that I am using a specific form of 'time-writing' here and how the temporal always infuses such accounts.

Part 1: From calendars to calibration

There are around 20 students signed up to the module which means I can run it in a workshop format, each two-hour session organised into slots of 20–30 min of 'lecturing' (the students say they want some formal input), individual and small group exercises, and discussion. This generally works well as a structure for learning. They are a diverse group, many from backgrounds where university education is not a taken for granted trajectory, including first generation migrants

and single parents. Empirical details and readings that resonate with their own experiences open the way to learning.

We start with the idea of the omnipresence of time in the everyday, seeking to surface how it structures our lives across different scales - from seconds to decades – and shapes how we make sense of them – in terms of speed, busyness, down time, quality time, screen time, me time and so on – making it ‘both intimately familiar and strangely elusive’ (Hassan and Purser, 2007: 4). Dutch designer, Maarten Baas’ *Real Time: Schiphol clock* is a hit, making the students laugh and helping them to sense the making and remaking of time in the everyday (Bastian et al., 2020).

We go straight into a short writing exercise about the journey to the classroom, including whether students felt ‘pressed for time’ or able to ‘take their time’, the instruments they used to measure time (alarms, watches, timetables), and the senses they deployed to tell the time. From here we discuss why time matters for sociology, thinking across scales from the climate emergency to the pace of everyday life; time as a symbolic structure and product of collective consciousness (Durkheim); time ‘poverty’, inequality and power over time; and memory, social change and imagination. There’s such rich literature to draw on including the vital contributions of Barbara Adam (1990, 1995, 1998) and the distinctions she makes between body time (birth, reproduction, ageing and death), clock time (abstract representations of time in modern societies), social time (expressed in habit, repetition, rhythm, pace, etc.) and her important concept of ‘timescapes’ in which different types of time combine, akin to the ‘complex interplay of waves’ (Snyder, 2016: 14).

Ahead of the second week of the module on calendars, clocks and schedules, the students were asked to think about their own use of devices to manage time and reflect on how measures of time relate to their lived experiences, including where they flow and collide. In the classroom, it really surprises them to learn that clocks themselves were and are not always steady and consistent measures of time; as the histories of the railway in the 19th century in the UK, with a newfound need for synchronisation, reveal. Images of station clocks which show both London and local times with two minute hands materialise the tension between standardisation and local variations of ‘solar time’ (dependent on the earth’s rotation relative to the sun). The jagged edges of ‘time zones’ on a world map further unsettle and intrigue the students as they grapple with the malleability of time, its ‘gaps and breaks’ rather than its ‘uninterrupted flow’ (Bastian, 2017: 7). We discuss what different conceptualisations of time imply for research design and have a go at completing a time-use diary, recognising the value of such survey data in illuminating patterns and differences, for instance, in the domestic division of labour by gender and across nation states; as well as the strictures it places on respondents as the survey instrument conceives of time in a linear stretch through specific units (minutes, hours, days, etc.).

We start the next class on speed and acceleration with Simon Armitage's wonderful poem, "*To-do List*". There's been wide discussion in sociology (and elsewhere) of the idea that social life is speeding up, associated with modernity in general but intensified in recent decades (Rosa, 2015; Wajcman and Dodd, 2017) and Armitage brilliantly captures a pervasive sense of everyday time pressure, or what Judy Wajcman (2016) calls the 'time-pressure paradox' where we feel busy but perhaps work less than in the past (Sullivan and Gershuny, 2018). We jump straight in and consider the case of care work as a site of temporal tensions between the logic of speed (to get more done more quickly) and the duration and attention of care (through presence). It allows us to think about the 'commodification of time' (Marx) where labour power is sold in units of time and appreciate how the pressure on care workers to be available over many hours and in fragmented episodes blurs any meaningful distinction between work time and 'free time'. The concept of 'temporal agency' (Bowes et al., 2020) helps the students understand commodification and contests over time. Similarly, considering the 'fragmented time' of care work (Rubery et al., 2015) illuminates the making of everyday time and how speed and acceleration are experienced.

We take a step back and consider broader debates and histories of speed and acceleration through objects and images as depicted by artists who grappled with the challenges of speed and sought to render the affective excess of its experience: JMW Turner's *The Great Western Railway* (1844), Umberto Boccioni's *Dynamism of a Cyclist* (1913), and Sybil Andrews' *Rush Hour* (1930) as well as the visual representations of factory work created by Charlie Chaplin, notably in *Modern Times* (1936). These all help us recognise speed as relative and how, following Simmel, acceleration in the modern metropolis produces a new form/experience of time (immediacy, simultaneity, presentism). We then explore more-than-human temporalities such as trading through algorithmic interactions at speeds beyond human capacity (Borch et al., 2015) and discuss 24/7 society and the end of sleep. It's an exhausting session!

It's impossible to talk about time without talking about work and the 'time discipline' that emerged with industrial society as articulated in the highly influential article by historian E P Thomson (1967). Industrialisation, the argument goes, led to a shift from task-orientation in work activity to clock-based work so instead of tasks being the basis of the experience of time, the apparent need for synchronisation associated with large-scale machine-powered industry meant that the clock came to shape working practices. For instance, the 'scientific management' of Frederick Taylor concerned with the rhythmic performance of body and machine in newly established factories had the explicit aim of prescribing and controlling movement – so-called 'time and motion studies' which were further developed by and Frank and Lilian Gilbreth. We have a good discussion of the imposition of temporal structures of work, making connections to the kinds of work the students do on zero-hours contracts in the fast-food, retail or care sector

sometimes accompanied by ‘a grim process of fighting the clock’ (Roy, 1959: 160). Donald Roy’s classic ‘banana time’ study of assembly line work resonates with the students’ experiences including the importance of informal social activities to which ‘not only marked off time; they gave it content and hurried it along’ (1959: 162).

We take up this sense of working or living in a temporal structure in two ways over the next couple of classes through waiting and inequalities. We start with the recognition that waiting as duration or endurance is not equally distributed nor experienced in the same way (Schwartz, 1975) and do a quick exercise to reflect on a recent experience of waiting and the different feelings that it gave rise to. We discuss the waiting associated with illness and bereavement including a sense ‘entrapment’ in the present – or a succession of presents where the future is ‘concentrated in a kind of immediacy’ (Mattingly, 2019: 21). The experience of time not passing (Baraitser, 2017) is potent in waiting for welfare (Auyero, 2012) or when ‘doing time’ in prison, mitigated by drugs and other practices which seek to readjust time (Matthews, 2009). We do a close reading of Melanie Griffiths (2014) research on asylum-seekers as being ‘out of time’. The temporal horizons she identifies of chronic uncertainty, repetition, bureaucratic time and the threat of ‘imminent change and endless waiting’ show how a recognition of the temporal offers insight into migration/mobility (Griffiths, 2014: 1992). It’s a topic that the students are familiar with and are open to thinking afresh about.

Temporal inequalities have been present in all the sessions to date and take centre-stage in the next class where we ask whose time counts or has value? First, we focus on Sarah Sharma’s (2014) book *In The Meantime* which sets out ‘to make visible the entangled and uneven politics of temporality’, for instance, in the case of taxi drivers and gig economy workers whose experience of time depends on their position in ‘larger economy of temporal worth’ (Sharma, 2014: p. 7). The reading for this week is her chapter on taxi drivers which brilliantly demonstrates the power relations between drivers and passengers across class, gender and ethnicity. Here, the concept of ‘calibration’ illuminates the multiple ways that ‘individuals and social groups synchronise their body clocks’ (Sharma, 2014, p. 18) and how ‘certain bodies recalibrate to the time of others as a significant condition of their labour’ (Sharma, 2014, p. 20). The notion of ‘power-chronography’ further emphasises differentiated lived experiences and relations to time. We view Ben Rogaly and Jay Gearing’s film, *Workers* (2018), which shows the temporal regimes that migrants labour under and how their bodies are calibrated to the needs of capital, along with their creative capacities to sidestep them (Lyon, 2019). We then use Sharma’s concepts to think through long-standing inequalities in the domestic division of labour and the taken for granted use of time by men and women, critically discussing ethnography and time-diaries as a means of researching time.

Assignment 1: The temporal structure and experience of a single day

We're over half way through the module and it's time to start work on the first assignment. It's part time diary, part reflective exercise, part analysis. I want the students to write about their experience of a single day in spring 2020 (the term the module is running). I offer some suggestions: 31 January 2020 (Brexit day), 29 February 2020 (leap day) or any other ordinary day that spring. (We didn't know what lay ahead at this point and all the changes the COVID-19 pandemic measures would entail.) The assignment is structured in three parts. The first asks them 'to write up the day hour by hour, or in another unit of time if you prefer, for example, every 30 min or in relation to key deadlines/activities/events of the day' incorporating other material such as photos, drawings, tweets or news announcements as they wished. I'd devised this whilst sitting in a traffic jam, noticing each start and stop as a marker and a measure of time coupled with the timeframe gleaned from Twitter for the traffic gathered behind the accident. I was thinking in linear time wanting to know when precisely I would be on the move, all the while knowing I'd be late, clock time and the scheduling of my commitments looming large. I was jittery, and would have paced if I could have left the car. Instead, I took a photo of the queue of vehicles and a screenshot of the red lines of traffic in google maps to distract me from the embodied frustration and apprehension of the wait.

The second element was 'to write a narrative account in the first person of your subjective experience of the day'. The aim here was to surface how time might be lived and felt in similar or different ways from the movement of the clock. It risked opposing clock time to process (subjective) time but the students actually handled this well, including reflections on their mood and the atmosphere of the places they spent time in showing the relevance of different temporal 'measures' in the everyday. The third part was to critically analyse their own accounts with reference to the temporal lenses or concepts encountered in the module, such as waiting, acceleration, slowness, calibration, rhythm, projectivity and so on. To finish off, they were tasked with writing a critical reflection on the value of working with time to make sense of everyday life through key questions such as: What does attention to temporality allow you to grasp well? In other words, if you bring time into the foreground, does it help you notice what's going on that you might otherwise miss? In what ways is it limited? Does thinking through temporal lenses get in the way of noticing other things?

Part 2: From memory to procrastination

It's February 2020 and there is a University and Colleges Union (UCU) strike at my University as some academic staff are threatened with redundancy in the wake of a financial crisis and restructuring. Multiple strike dates are announced which

significantly impact the module (the ironies of scheduling are not lost on the students). In the classroom time we have available, I rethink what we can cover. Instead of separate sessions on social and material memory – collective memory, memorialisation, ruins and haunting – and photography – as an effort to ‘freeze’ and play with time – we have a sort of workshop on ‘Time, memory and photography’. (It turns out to be my last in-person teaching event for more than two years.) We consider the ways the past makes itself felt in the present as the ‘imprint’ of different times resonates down the years (Mistzal, 2003). Thinking again about work, Sherry Linkon’s (2018) concept of the ‘half-life of deindustrialisation’ recognises the long-term effects of job losses for key industries and communities and how they ‘continue to ripple through working-class culture’. Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust, where for centuries a naval dockyard was a source of apprenticeships, employment and an occupational community, is within sight of the classroom. The students witness the haunting (Gordon, 2008) in their everyday experience of the Medway towns and in local representations (photographs, objects and paintings) which communicate loss (Strangleman, 2013). We discuss their own photographs and the personal stories and critical moments they capture and think about forms – collage, montage, sequence – for exploring time, taking inspiration from Eadweard Muybridge and David Hockney.

Into March 2020, the passing references I made to coronavirus in the introductory class and a discussion of the politics of speed and slowness where some things are encouraged to move (e.g. goods, consumers and capital) but others are not (e.g. illegal immigrants and diseases) come back to haunt us. Lockdown looms. Classes are still cancelled as a result of the strike. The rhythms of everyone’s everyday lives have been upended. The students are already aware of some of my research on rhythm (for instance, the rhythms of Billingsgate fish market (Lyon, 2016)) and I encourage them to think through rhythm and to practice ‘rhythmanalysis’ (Lefebvre, 2004; Lyon, 2021) with their own bodies as they observe everyday life to sense and make sense of these strange new times.

Classes have moved online but it’s good to see everyone all the same. There’s space before the end of term for a couple of final sessions. My colleague David Nettleingham does a guest lecture on utopia and I follow-up with a discussion on future-imagining. If there is a ‘modern’ impulse to imagine a better world, it’s an interesting moment to be reflecting on futures, processes and critiques of anticipation in the wake of COVID-19. We think through utopias as blueprints for the desirable and for revealing the undesirable about the present which sometimes threatens to descend into dystopias, something we explore through the example of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. We grapple with the ways that sociology has used utopias as a methodology for understanding social problems and mobilised hope for envisaging alternatives (Levitas, 2013).

There is now a growing literature on ‘anticipation’ in the face of an uncertain future (e.g. [Anderson, 2010](#)) and debates on the ‘colonisation’ of the future by the present, for instance by debt. This certainly speaks to the experience of the students at university at a time when fees are high and borne by individuals, and feelings about the future are charged – as in the ‘hopeful pessimism’ [Rebecca Coleman \(2016\)](#) discusses. We consider future-imagining – or ‘projectivity’ in [Ann Mische’s \(2009\)](#) terms – as an important aspect of agency, and consider the dimensions she disentangles: for instance, ‘reach’ captures the degree of extension that imagined futures have, ‘clarity’, the degree of detail with which the future is imagined and ‘expandability’, the degree to which future possibilities are seen as expanding or contracting. These all feel existentially meaningful and give us a set of analytical tools for describing the present-future unfolding moment. We also use them as a means to analyse imagined futures essays written by young people ([Lyon and Crow, 2012](#)).

How, I have been wondering, do I end a module well when it has been so disrupted, first by the UCU strike and now by the coronavirus pandemic? How do I leave students feeling equipped to undertake the rather solitary task of writing their assignments in the context of the challenges of social isolation and/or proximity in households we are all now facing under ‘lockdown’? We reflect that the pandemic has heightened our awareness of time and that different normative discourses about using time have quickly surfaced (see [Coleman and Lyon, 2023](#); [Lyon and Coleman, 2023](#)). But now perhaps we are better equipped to critically engage with them. In the context of pressure to manage time – and the self – [Tracey Potts \(2010\)](#) discusses the procrastinating body as a site of resistance and a form of restlessness that refuses through delay, deferral and suspension. This feels like a good place to pause, emphasising the multidimensionality of the temporal.

Assignment 2: Essay

The classroom teaching part of the module is over and the students have a second assignment to work on over the break. It’s a 2000-word essay worth 60% of their overall mark. I invite them to propose their own titles but most actually prefer to choose amongst the ones I’ve come up with (which I share below).

1. Discuss what a sociology of time contributes to understanding two of the following: a) migration; b) imprisonment; c) illness; d) drug use; e) welfare claimants.
2. How do calendars, schedules and clocks matter for the everyday life of: a) workplaces; or b) educational institutions? Discuss how they inhibit or enhance the rhythms of these places and how they are accepted and

- contested. Draw on examples of disruption which may reveal taken for granted temporal norms (e.g. industrial action and coronavirus).
3. Whose time matters in contemporary capitalism? Discuss time, power and inequality in two areas (e.g. the domestic division of labour, the gig economy, imprisonment and coronavirus).
 4. How can sociologists make sense of the current spread of coronavirus through different temporal lenses? (e.g. speed and slowness, waiting and anticipation, embodied time, disruption and delay)
 5. In what ways does the future matter in the present for sociology? Discuss with reference to two empirical examples (e.g. education, debt, imprisonment, work and coronavirus).
 6. In what ways is the past animated in the present? Discuss ideas from the sociology of memory (e.g. collective memory, nostalgia and haunting) with reference to narrative, photography (especially digital photography) and/or material culture.

The students produced some outstanding essays demonstrating an impressive grasp of literature and their capacity to make different concepts work in illuminating the social, especially in relation to calendars (Q2), inequalities (Q3), futures (Q4) and the pandemic (Q4). They made connections between biography (their own and that of participants in the research they read) and society, deftly moving across scale. They wrote perceptively about time both losing its hold and becoming more rigid through a calendar of lockdown regulations and sustained educational schedules as we collectively grappled with the early stages of the pandemic and its temporal politics in the university and in everyday life. There were some who faltered though, finding it hard to shake off their own assumptions about how the world is/should be, unable (at that time) to tolerate the ambivalent, heterogenous qualities of time which can't readily be contained. This kind of learning can be a slow burn.

It was a challenging time to teach about time but also one where the relevance of social science understandings of the temporal felt powerful and personal. Connections between the conceptual and the students' lived (or imagined) experience were crucial for them to gain some understanding of time and perhaps even resist the 'dominant temporal order' and time as 'singular', theirs 'to manage and control' (Sharma, 2022: 44–47). I would work even more from this starting point in a future iteration of the module and include a wider range of literature such as on Afrofuturism (Grue, 2020) and queer temporalities (Freeman, 2010) which might speak to their experiences and positionalities.

Whilst the intensification of academic labour has been well-documented (Gibbs et al., 2014), it is also recognised to be uneven (Sharma, 2022; Vostal, 2021), operating at different speeds, both fast and slow, which offer pleasure as well as pressure (Vostal, 2016). The module opened up a space to recognise

a multiplicity of temporalities and to tease out conceptually and empirically how they are experienced in different fields and lives, including in relation to the ongoing strike and emerging pandemic. Whilst there's a sort of relentlessness to teaching across the term (you just have to keep on going), I also enjoyed a rare feeling of 'timelessness' (Berg and Seeber, 2017) in the classroom despite the time constraints and contradictions of the academy. This sense of inhabiting a live present and finding a rhythm (Alhadeff-Jones, 2021) was echoed in the students' feedback too: we had taken our time to unravel how time matters.

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