

Transparency, Accountability, and the Public Role of Higher Education

Paul Standish, Institute of Education, University of London

E-mail: p.standish@ioe.ac.uk.

Telephone : 44+207-612-6545.

Abstract

This paper examines the pressures imposed by a certain culture of accountability on the ways of thinking that constitute the university. It does so by, first, acknowledging but gaining some distance on complaints against performativity and, second, by examining in finer detail the notion of the performative, recalling Bourdieu's helpful phrase: "the performative magic of institutions". In the light of this it seeks to expose the nature of the responsibility that attaches to teaching and research in higher education, especially as these are brought together in the role of the professor. On the strength of this it identifies two "drives" that can characterise the university as a heuristic to providing a richer account of what the university might be about.

Keywords: university, performative/performativity, J.L. Austin, Derrida, transparency, accountability

Regretting performativity

In 1979, in a report to the Government of Quebec about the nature of its higher education provision, Jean-François Lyotard coined the term "performativity" in order to capture what he diagnosed to be the character of universities, and so much else, in the postmodern condition, the phrase that famously gave his report its title. What Lyotard meant by that phrase is expressed most succinctly in the Report in the following terms: "The true goal of the system, the reason it programs itself like a computer, is the optimization of the global relationship between input and output – in other words, performativity" (Lyotard, 1984: p. 11). Since then the term has become a handy catch-all for the many ways in which measures of efficient performance have come to dominate higher education institutions around the world, measures that play a key part in what we have come to call the culture of accountability. A quick look at the research literature on higher education will make it apparent how widespread complaints against performativity have become, and there is nothing in what I want to say that wishes to take issue with such complaints: I am quite sure that higher education has been impoverished by performativity. But the complaints have now become tediously familiar, and somehow or other it is time to move on. To

be fair to Lyotard, it is also important to recognise that “performativity” was not the last word he had to say about education, and his position is subtle in many respects. What needs to be noted here, however, is the way that performativity puts priority on a particular kind of evidence. The question of evidence is one we shall return to.

Not long after the time when Lyotard was developing these thoughts, and responding to increasingly frequent demands that the university justify itself in public terms, Alasdair MacIntyre made the following remark:

The beginning of any worthwhile answers to such questions, posed by some external critic, as “What are universities for?” or “What peculiar goods do universities serve?” should be, “They are, when they are true to their own vocation, institutions within which the form ‘What are x’s for?’ and ‘What peculiar goods do y’s serve?’ are formulated and answered in the best rationally defensible way.” That is to say, when it is demanded of a university community that it justify itself by specifying what its peculiar or essential function is, that function which, were it not to exist, no other institution could discharge, the response of the community ought to be that universities are places where conceptions of and standards of rational justification are elaborated, put to work in the detailed practices of enquiry, and themselves rationally evaluated, so that only from the university can the wider society learn how to conduct its own debates, practical or theoretical, in a rationally defensible way (MacIntyre, 1990: p. 222).

I have some sympathy with the spirit of this remark but doubts about the weight that is placed on the contrast between the “university community” and “some external critic”, and misgivings about its tone. In what follows I hope to broach questions of the public role of the university, of accountancy and transparency, in a way that both moves beyond the complaints against performativity and avoids MacIntyre’s characteristic hauteur.

What exactly is the problem? If we are concerned that the university account for itself, as in some sense I am sure we should be, then why cannot it simply describe what it is about, by assembling evidence of how things are? The accounting systems that have become an increasingly familiar feature of university practice – in some countries more than others, to be sure - attempt to do precisely this. The parenthesis here is an acknowledgement of the variation that exists between countries not only in the structures of higher education but also in the role that is played by accountants, the English-speaking countries typically employing very many more. But what is it to give an account?

Verifying accounts

The idea of giving an account harbours complexities that I can only gesture towards at this stage. Suffice it to say for present purposes that accounting as understood thus far is typically a matter of book-keeping, and as such it reiterates a particular conception of meaning. Meaning is to be found in the matching of statements to what is the case, according to procedures of evidence-gathering that are clearly established. The philosophical home of this conception of meaning can be found in the doctrine of *verificationism* developed by the logical positivists in the 1920s and 30s. Verificationism states that the meaning of a statement is to be understood in terms of its method of verification. Thus, meaning in the physical sciences, which of course constitutes the paradigm case, depends upon there being agreed ways of testing the truth of statements – that is, in highly regularised and universally accepted experimental method. A notorious by-product of this claim is that where there is no clearly established method of testing for a statement, that statement is literally meaningless. Statements relating to questions of value, in ethics and aesthetics, lack such tests for truth and so in the end are nothing more than expressions of subjective preference. This conception of ethics was formulated most fully in the doctrine of emotivism associated with the work of C.L. Stevenson – a doctrine sometimes referred to as the “boo-hurrah” theory.

In philosophy, verificationism was discredited long ago, but this has not prevented its influence from continuing to filter through the popular consciousness. For example, its hardening of the fact-value divide reverberates today through the familiar reproach: “Aren’t you bringing values into it?” And its similar hardening of the subject-object dichotomy generates crude accounts of objectivity, where objectivity is thought to be synonymous with numerical measurement. This helps to explain why the questions that MacIntyre identifies, such as “What are universities for?”, tend to be framed within assumptions of economic productivity as the ultimate, perhaps the sole means of justification. In the end this reductivism suggests a shying away from questions of value, a lack of confidence tantamount to a kind of nihilism. It conditions the now familiar pedagogical belief that if something is not tested it cannot be learned.

These ways of thinking accentuate the importance of a kind of transparency, and certainly, other things being equal, transparency is valued for good reason. But they reinforce also a particular conception of what is real, with the accent on what can be made present as evidence - here, to me, now. This, it seems, is the ultimate

authentication of the real, sometimes referred to as the metaphysics of presence: all else is derivative from what is present – present temporally and present spatially. This is valued both at the personal level (I should be prepared to look openly and honestly at what I am really like) and on a larger social scale (we want the institutions of our society to be transparent). This is the bedrock of personal and institutional identity: it secures what these things are.

While in some respects all this may seem plausible enough. After all, what could be plainer, more basic, than the idea that meaning depends upon the correlation of a statement with what is the case (“The bottle is on the table”)? And yet we know, don’t we, that the dominant form of statements in our contemporary accounting, in our databases and spreadsheets, has a surface precision and rigour that correlates badly with the more complex, more messy reality of institutional practice that it purports to describe? To understand this better it is worth turning back to the idea of performativity. When Lyotard adopted the term, it was in large part because he wanted to draw attention to the ways in which such postmodern book-keeping runs away with itself. And one might add that the more we have seen it run away with itself, the more it has been complemented – in mission statements, manifestos, marketing - by that plainly emotive aspect of modern institutional life, political “spin”; and further one might wonder whether the databases and spreadsheets do not themselves become rhetorical forms within this spin.

But these problems can be approached better if we look beyond Lyotard’s usage to the deeper implications of what Pierre Bourdieu (1991) calls the “performative magic of institutions”. What exactly is meant by this, and how does it relate to the verificationist account of meaning that we have been considering? Where does the idea of the performative come from?

The magic of the performative

To speak of performative magic is to suggest, at least, that there may be something about the life of institutions that is not amenable to transparency. In order to gain some sense of what is meant here, we need to turn to the 1950s Oxford philosopher J.L. Austin’s original introduction of the idea of the performative. Austin is struck by the way that philosophical accounts of meaning and language are dominated by a preoccupation with statements and the way they correlate descriptively with states of affairs (*constative* utterances). He contrasts these with utterances of a similar propositional form but where the statement does not so much describe an action as *perform* one. He has in mind such statements as: “I promise to call you later this evening,” “I name this ship ‘Marybel’,” and “I do” (in the marriage service). He refers to such expressions as *performative* utterances. All this then helps to show that significant parts of our language have meaning not in virtue of their correlation with a

state of affairs (“the bottle is on the table”), but rather because of what they do: it shows what we *do* with words.

This is surely a telling point, and it is one that already cuts to the heart of the central doctrines of logical positivism, which remained enormously influential in Anglophone philosophy at the time when Austin was developing these ideas. But what is also very interesting is that the more Austin pursues the distinction he has drawn, the less confident he is about how clear it is – because a performative element seems to seep into the constative. A simple example of this might be the small-talk about the weather that is quite common amongst people living in changeable climates. The meaning of “It’s a lovely day” may need to be understood not only in terms of a correlation between the statement and the sun shining, etc., but also in the light of a certain, good-humoured spirit that the expression enacts. More of our language is like this than we are inclined to admit. Surprisingly perhaps, Austin expresses a certain glee at the way his distinction breaks down.

The idea of the performative has been taken up by many subsequent thinkers (in ways much richer than Lyotard’s). For example, Judith Butler (1997) has effectively demonstrated the performative nature of gender, such that it is appropriate to think of gender as a matter not so much of biology but of social institution. What is true of broad social institutions (gender, the family, religion) is true also of more specific ones such as the institution of higher education, as well as of particular instances of that institution (e.g., Hull University). Thus, they are constructed most obviously through such performative acts as opening ceremonies, the awarding of degrees, and inaugural lectures; and less obviously through the complex codes through which they sustain their academic work, extending through pedagogical practices and structuring the disciplines themselves. To speak of “complex codes” is not intended in any way to imply that these are merely arbitrary or that they have a primarily exclusionary function, etc.; these are simply the ways in which such practices must come into being and sustain themselves, and this is part of their performative magic.

Now, in trying to account further for the character of the linguistic difference he has identified, Austin speaks of constative and performative *force*. To understand the significance of this, we need to look further at how the dynamism of language works.

Transparency and transformation

Jacques Derrida has provided an account of language and meaning, in stark contrast to that developed by logical positivism, and consideration of this in the present context is highly edifying. This can be explained in two stages. First, and following Saussure, Derrida draws attention to the way that words have meaning not simply through their correlation with an object (“red” with a red colour patch) but

through systems of difference (red, as opposed to green, yellow, pink . . .). In fact (a stronger point), such differences emerge for us through the distinctions that language makes. Second, however, Derrida departs from Saussure's structuralism in that he draws attention to the way that such systems of difference – in other words, the words we use – are themselves in movement. In fact our words (and what we mean, what we think!) always operate in a way that is beyond our full control. This is so in two respects: in the first place our words come to us with histories of usage that extend beyond anything we can know; and, in the second, whatever words we use are necessarily available to interpretation and reiteration in ways that we cannot possibly foresee. This negativity, this hiddenness and openness to possibility, is at the heart of meaning and of ourselves, and it is dynamic and transformative. At the least it should modify our expectations of transparency, both at the personal level and on the larger social scale. It should modify and deepen our idea of what knowledge, learning, the pursuit of truth entail.

It follows from the above that the present moment – me, here, now – does not exist as what I think of as the present moment without those systems that differentiate *me* from *you/them/it/etc.*, and *here* from *there*, and *now* from *later/earlier, etc.* Rather than isolating and identifying the present as a kind of secure point, it turns out that presence depends on what is not (not here, not now). Hence, verificationism's account of meaning cannot be right.

In an essay entitled "The Principle of Reason: the University in the Eyes of its Pupils" (2004), and borrowing from Aristotle, Derrida reveals the operation of this negativity at another more suggestive level in connection with the nature of vision (our sight being the sense that is associated most directly with understanding – "I see what you mean" – but also more surreptitiously with surveillance). He points to the contrast between animals with "hard eyes" (sclerophthalmic), such as crocodiles, and those with "soft eyes", such as human beings. For soft eyes vision is possible only if it is interrupted frequently, by the closing of the eyelids: without this the eyes will dry and cease to function. An unremitting transparency is not possible. Derrida writes: "Man can lower the sheath, adjust the diaphragm, narrow his sight, the better to hear, remember, and learn. What might the university's diaphragm be? The university must not be a sclerophthalmic animal" (Derrida, 2004: p. 132).

But is this, we might wonder, anything more than a fancy analogy, a rhetorical ploy to support a claim that remains still to be argued for? What needs to be said in response to this doubt is not only that Derrida elaborates on the claim and substantiates it extensively in his writings, extending the point downwards, as it were, to the fundamental account of language and meaning that he offers, with the emphasis on negativity, hiddenness, and openness to possibility noted above, but

also that the demand on the part of the positivists for *evidence* itself depended upon a certain metaphorisation of vision, reptilian as this now plainly appears.

It also follows from this account of language that what the world is is not separable from language. Language itself is part of the world, and it is partly constitutive of the world. (Heidegger speaks of a mutual appropriation of the human being and the world through language.) Given that language is dynamic, always opening onto new possibility, the world itself is always becoming, in virtue of the ways we word it. In the beginning was the word. All this makes abundantly clear the fact that meaning cannot be understood simply on the model of the correlation of a statement with a state of affairs; such correlations exist only within a larger work of wording the world.

We saw above that our language operates in ways that are beyond our full control, and it is important that in Derrida's work this recognition is not an expression of regret. The dynamic unknown, the waywardness, of language (in speech, but especially in writing) has sometimes, however, been viewed as a danger - in Plato's *Phaedrus*, for example, as a drug, a *pharmakon*, something that may work for good or ill - and there have been various attempts to suppress it. Socrates suspects writing of being like an orphaned child, without the care and protection, the direct control, of its parents. A similar, modern anxious desire for control is to be found in the reduction of language - and, *a fortiori* of academic enquiry - to a technical function, subservient to what are imagined to be the needs of society. This hard-eyed expectation is tantamount to depriving the university of the capacity to think, and to the extent that this model of thought is allowed to prevail, society is deprived of its capacity to think. Its reptilian retrogression is sufficient to arrest the university's and society's evolution.

In order to draw out the significance of what is at stake here, I shall shortly identify two "drives" that operate through higher education, relating these to the guiding concerns of this paper. But first let's recapitulate and sharpen the key points that have been made so far:

- Language does not just describe the world; it is also the arena of action, of world-making.
- Language is not simply a tool of communication, fully under our control; it necessarily exceeds our full control, opening possibilities of becoming.
- The way the world is, the way it becomes, depends in part on the way we word it.
- Our institutions are performatively constructed and sustained, and they depend upon the language we use.
- To imagine that language is just a tool of communication connected transparently to ends that we can clearly specify in advance is to foreclose the

possibilities of becoming upon which the good society (as opposed to the stagnant society) depends.

- Higher education is an arena *par excellence* in which these possibilities of language must be allowed to flourish.

The functional and the transformative

In the light of the above, then, I want to venture a distinction between two *drives* that run through various conceptions of the nature and purposes of higher education, a distinction that will reverberate through our practices of teaching and learning. Both are necessary, and both are liable to distortion. The *functional drive* takes the university to be an institution that serves the needs of society. Hence, the university is accountable to the public, its role being to bring benefits that are transparent to the public – such as a strengthened economy, greater national competitiveness, enhanced opportunity, and class mobility. It is an arena for negotiation and *cooperation* over the realisation of our shared and individual projects. The *transformative drive*, by contrast, takes the university to be one way in which new possibilities for society and for human life are pursued. It is an arena for *conversation* in which we may come to discover what our shared and individual projects may be and may become.

The force of these drives can be seen to run through practice at the most basic level – through the content of learning, teaching, assessment. Where the functional drive predominates, it is supposed that transparency and objectivity are achieved by the specification of precise learning outcomes, with clear criteria for their assessment. Teaching and the facilitation of learning are contrived in such a way as to maximise efficiency in achieving those outcomes. Content (subject-matter) is selected in the light of what is amenable to testing in this way. Where the transformational drive predominates, the focus of attention and effort may be located in partially contrasting ways: it may be student-centred, in a manner inspired by, say, Carl Rogers or Malcolm Knowles; it may be subject-centred, in a manner associated more with, say, Michael Oakeshott, Allan Bloom, Lyotard, Derrida or Readings, this being thought in the end to provide the best possibility of growth for the student. Whatever the various ideals here, they will be other than the subservience to the status quo, the replication of society, that the functional drive presupposes. They will be open, somehow or other, to new possibility.

Corrupted drives

But both these drives can become corrupt. Overemphasis on the *functional drive*, is likely to defeat its own purposes. Attempts in the UK to widen participation in higher education as a means of social inclusion, for example, have been curiously counter-

productive, the increased university places available being taken up by young people from middle class backgrounds, with a consequent reduction in social mobility (see Toynbee and Walker, 2008: pp. 119-120). But at a deeper level there is the paradox that if one aims only to serve society's needs, what is likely to happen is that those needs come to be phrased in fixed terms, foreclosing the possibilities of growth upon which that society depends. This stultifies or truncates that inevitable growth and change that are written into our language, our making of the world. Or, to put this another way, if the account of language and meaning that has been offered is correct, the *transformational drive* can never be simply suppressed, for there is a libidinal energy, here within language, that will find its way out, one way or another. Here are four current manifestations of this energy in "corrupted" form. First, it is there in performativity, as we saw, where our postmodern bookkeeping runs away with itself. Second, it is there in what we might think of as the compensatory-therapeutic – in stress-management courses, in the development of assertiveness skills, in notions of work-life balance, and in be-all-you-can-be management training. Third, it is there in various values-supplements to curricula, as if any deficit could be compensated for (and nihilism held at bay) by a kind of bolt-on ethics. And finally it is there in those new enthusiasms for "active learning" – for learning-how-to-learn, for understanding your own learning-style, for study skills, transferrable skills, enterprise skills, communication skills. (For a fuller account of some of these "corruptions", see Smeyers, Smith, and Standish, 2006.)

Elsewhere I have considered more fully a distinction along these lines in relation to teaching and learning in higher education (Standish, 2005). Let me conclude here, however, by considering what these ideas might imply for the role of the professor.

The priestly caste

What is it to be a professor? How should we account for the professor's role? My question is fundamentally what it is to teach in higher education. Perhaps we should begin by taking serious the idea of professing. In "The future of the profession or the unconditional university (thanks to 'the humanities,' what *could take place* tomorrow)", Derrida sets out what he claims is "less a thesis, or even a hypothesis, than a declarative engagement, an appeal in the form of a profession of faith: faith in the university and, within the university, faith in the Humanities of tomorrow" (Derrida, nd: p. 1). How far does profession (as of faith) characterise the work in which the professor should rightfully be engaged? Derrida explores ways in which the idea of profession requires something tantamount to a pledge, to the freely accepted responsibility to profess the truth. The professor enacts this performative continually in her work: what she says is testimony to the truth; as *work* it is necessarily an orientation to a to-come (*avenir*, which resounds with religious connotations of advent that are hidden in the English word "future"). The academic

work of professing must then be something more than the (purely constative) statement of how things are. (For a fuller account, see Standish, 2001).

This role of the professor, in the humanities especially (but let's generalise this at least to certain aspects of social science), cannot be properly played if it is restricted to the description of what is. The emphasis on the performative entails a change of modality, in a direction that might be thought of as subjunctivity: if the description of the world relates to the way *it is*, the work of profession involves always some attempt to see it *as if*. . . Concretely, let us say, the work of a professor of higher education might then not be just to provide an accurate description of the way things are but to offer something that adds somehow to the world, an invocation of new thoughts. This extends beyond a criticism that is fully in possession of its faculties to a readiness for risk, an openness to the event. Openness to the event requires something beyond the range of predetermined categories or of a purely autonomous control (effective performance), and this is essential to the exercise and growth of the imagination that this professing requires.

In terms of the *functional drive*, we can imagine the successful professor to be someone who publishes in the best journals, wins the research grants, manages her commitments efficiently, sits on the appropriate committees, etc., and who is sufficiently established in these respects to be a star in any quality assurance system. In terms of the *transformative drive*, the kind of professor we might look for would be committed to profession in the ways Derrida ventures to suggest – to risking a point of view, to setting an idea spinning, to a profession of faith, to offering an account. This, if we can for a moment recall Bourdieu's phrase, would be tantamount to a priestly function – a kind of wizardry, if you like - in the performative magic on which the institution depends. This in the end is a public responsibility, and it cannot be undertaken in the sclerotic conditions of full transparency.

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