Performativity and Education

Ian Munday

Introduction

‘Performativity’ is a term coined by the French Philosopher Jean-François Lyotard in his most famous work *The Postmodern Condition* (1984). It is an unusual concept in philosophy of education for several reasons. Firstly, given that *The Postmodern Condition* looks at the role and status of knowledge in the university, ‘performativity’, its most famous concept, arises from a work in philosophy of education rather than a work of ‘straight’ philosophy. Lyotard would never have thought of himself as a philosopher of education, but that is beside the point. Second, the term is as popular with sociologists of education as it is with philosophers (see Ball 1998; 2003). Indeed it is arguably the work of the former that has led to the third unusual feature of a term deriving from philosophy of education, namely, that it has become ubiquitous within the study of education per se – it is just as likely to feature in discussions of schooling as meditations on the state of the university.1 Given performativity’s status within the study of education, it is worth beginning with what, over the last several decades, it has commonly come to mean in that domain.

On the whole, performativity is associated with the measurement of students’ progress through formal testing, which is seen as “the key arbiter of educational quality” (Craft 2011, p. 25). A good ‘performance’ becomes synonymous with a good set of results or ‘outputs’. Stephen Ball, the sociologist most closely associated with the critique of performativity, argues that the activities of the ‘new technical intelligentsia’ ultimately:

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1 It should be noted that the discussion of performativity in sociological work by Ball and others is much more nuanced and sophisticated than the common understanding that has followed from it.

I. Munday (✉)
University of Stirling, Stirling, UK
e-mail: ian.munday@stir.ac.uk

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…drive performativity into the day-to-day practices of teachers. They make management, ubiquitous, invisible, inescapable—part of and embedded in everything we do. Increasingly, we choose and judge our actions and they are judged by others on the basis of their contribution to organisational performance, rendered in terms of measurable outputs. (Ball 2006, p. 151)

As a consequence of this process, schooling has become dedicated to fixing the individual student in regards to her ‘value’. This has led to teach to the test pedagogies that are synonymous with behaviourist control involving rewards and punishments (see Craft and Jeffrey 2008, p. 578). Performativity is also seen as being synonymous with setting measurable targets in regard to the development of skills and knowledge that will lead to economic gains. These developments have taken place at an international level through the activities of organisations such as the OECD.

Though what has just been described deals with part of the picture, in this chapter I argue that it presents an overly simplistic (or vulgar?) understanding of performativity when read against Lyotard’s original account in *The Postmodern Condition* (1984). It is Lyotard’s rendering of performativity that tends to be the focus for philosophers of education. Consequently, it is important to show the ways in which performativity covers concerns that extend beyond a focus on improving exam results and ensuring accountability. This will involve looking more closely at what Lyotard had to say about performativity and putting his work in a philosophical context. The discussion will then move on to some of the ways in which philosophers of education have taken up the concept to try and analyse and understand educational practices and discourses. Given the vast array of work on performativity, providing a literature review of everything that has been published since *The Postmodern Condition* would lead to incredibly thin fare. I have selected five relatively distinct positions into play so as to illustrate what is at stake in regard to thinking about, and in some cases beyond, performativity.

**Lyotard’s Performativity**

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard examines the processes of delegitimation undergone by the grand narratives of modernity, arguing that the postmodern world largely behaves in accordance with a system that has exiled them. The narratives in question relate to the place and role of knowledge in the university. They include the self-legitimating speculative narrative present in the work of Hegel (among others) and the narrative of emancipation: the notion that scientific progress will benefit mankind and improve the lives of individual subjects. Lyotard argues that these narratives have been replaced by the logic of performativity, which has taken hold of knowledge:

The production of proof, which is in principle only part of an argumentation process designed to win agreement from the addressees of scientific messages, thus falls under the
control of another language game, in which the goal is no longer truth but performativity—that is the best possible input/output equation. The State and/or company must abandon the idealist and humanist narratives of legitimation in order to justify the new goal: in the discourse of today’s financial backers of research, the only credible goal is power. Scientists, technicians, and instruments are purchased not to find truth, but to augment power. (Lyotard 1984, p. 46)

For Lyotard truth and justice have been replaced by effectiveness and efficiency. The narratives of legitimation that provided frameworks for the former concerns are no longer credible and we have moved from a ‘modern’ to a ‘postmodern’ condition. This is what leads Lyotard to issue the pronouncement for which he is most famous: “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives” (p. xxiv). It should be noted that the first phrase in the sentence ‘Simplifying to the extreme’ is usually left out of the citation in the form that has achieved such popularity. This perhaps partly explains why Lyotard is often taken to be the arch exponent or celebrant of the relativism and performativity that the Enlightenment makes room for (or alternatively gives birth to).

This would be a misreading. Lyotard, despite giving his assent to the plurality that accompanies the demise of all-encompassing theories, does not celebrate what has appeared in their place. Bearn presents Lyotard’s philosophy in ‘aesthetic’ terms maintaining that “it is not painted in the slack polychromatic colours of eclecticism” and neither is it “painted the reassuring black of a glorious tragedy”. Ultimately, we are told: “Lyotard’s philosophy is painted a melancholic grey” (Bearn 2000, p. 232).

Bearn does not say as much, but Lyotard’s philosophy cannot embrace ‘tragedy’. ‘Tragedy’ would imply a nostalgia for something substantial that has now been lost. When Lyotard notes the postmodern incredulity to grand narratives he is not suggesting that all-encompassing systems were ever fit for purpose—they simply appeared credible. Consequently nostalgia gets us nowhere in either a philosophical or practical sense. Why then, can we not celebrate the current state of society and education? The problem can perhaps be stated in this way—performativity is a grand narrative of sorts, just a hollowed out one. Performativity ‘functions’ like a grand narrative: “If a form of knowledge could not be translated into bits of information, it was bound to become more and more invisible to the system. . .” (231). Performativity provides just as overwhelming and brutal a systematic horizon as any grand narrative that preceded it. ‘Openness’ and ‘diversity’ are the order of the day but are only deemed acceptable when read against this horizon.

During The Postmodern Condition, Lyotard makes a series of predictions regarding the intensification of performativity in the university sphere that may be seen as indicative of quite extraordinary prescience. Michael Peters (2004, p.36) describes it as a ‘prophetic prognosis’. In regard to research, Lyotard imagines that a fixation with effectiveness will be accompanied by a vulgar positivism in which large cash investments are required to justify scientific claims: “No money, no proof – and that means no verification of statements and no truth” (Lyotard 1984, p. 45). Consequently, an ‘equation between wealth, efficiency and truth’ will be established. In this climate, research will become ever more oriented towards producing “technological
Lyotard predicts that universities will become more closely aligned with private companies who will also have their own research teams (ibid). This state of affairs is coterminous with the development of digital technologies. These technologies, which started out as instruments for human use, have come to reshape how we view knowledge, namely, as data that can maximise efficiency (44). Technological logic privileges efficiency (conceived of as less expenditure of energy) over concerns with “the true, the just or the beautiful” (ibid). On this account, research that is not ‘efficient’ will gradually disappear from the university scene.

For Lyotard, just as research in the university will increasingly feel the impact of technological and market logics, so will teaching. He argues that the acquisition of knowledge, through its conversion into data, has become exteriorised from the knower and the focus of education turns to ‘skills’ and ‘no longer ideals’ (48). Therefore: “The old principle that the acquisition of knowledge is indissociable from the training (Bildung) of minds, is becoming obsolete and will become ever more so” (ibid.). The university will become dedicated to producing technicians who can operate and develop machines (51). What it means to be a student will therefore be transformed. The student population will be divided into a ‘professional intelligentsia’ a ‘technical intelligentsia’ and a large community of adults seeking retraining (48). Lyotard’s most radical prediction in regard to teaching relates to the medium in which it will take place: “To the extent that learning is translatable into computer language and the traditional teacher is replaceable by memory banks, didactics can be entrusted to machines linking traditional memory banks (libraries, etc) and computer data banks to intelligent terminals placed at the students’ disposal” (50). Lyotard sounds the “knell of the age of the Professor” (53) and anticipates the emergence of learning analytics.

We will come back to these predictions at the end of the chapter. In the meantime it is perhaps obvious that performativity, as Lyotard imagines it, does not directly focus on behaviourist approaches to boosting assessment in schools. Indeed, Lyotard had nothing to say about schooling at all, though his points about performativity apply to society at large and this includes school education. It is therefore fair to say that the fixation with maximising the quality of outputs in schooling belongs to the same social condition. This sometimes seems to be missed by educationalists who take performativity in its narrower sense. For example, creativity experts can give the impression that performativity is part of a professional malaise rather than a social arrangement. They look at how performative educational practices in schools are at odds with a creative economy (Robinson 2001; Craft 2011); as though the economy did not behave in consonance with the logic of performativity (see Munday 2014, for a fuller discussion). Lyotard’s understanding of performativity partakes in a philosophical tradition whose members examine something deeper at the heart of culture that is not restricted to professional life. It is therefore, in some ways, aligned with significant philosophical precursors, which will be the focus of the next sections of the chapter.
Philosophical Influences

Lyotard’s performativity diagnosis is not wholly original. What he describes is, in certain respects, analogous to Nietzsche’s account of nihilism, Heidegger’s discussion of the ‘technological understanding of Being’ and various distressed discussions of the state of modernity written by the founding members of the Frankfurt School. Let us briefly consider each of these.

Nietzsche writes: “the highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking, and ‘Why’ finds no answer” (Nietzsche 1967, p. 9). The collapse of relevance, meaning and truth will bring about a destructive force that will sweep through Europe. The account of nihilism is in part predictive: “What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism…. For some time now our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end…” (ibid.). The lack of real goals and purposes lets nihilism in. This is due to: “the formulation of value as the opposite of its opposite that Nietzsche—again—saw as the core of nihilism. What do we stand for? We are no longer sure: only that it is not what others represent. We are the reds, which means that we are definitely not the blues” (Blake et al., xii). If there is no overriding aim intrinsic to what we do, success and failure, efficiency or inefficiency are the only imaginable outcomes. This is nihilism. A successful school or university is not a failing one and vice versa.

Following Nietzsche (to some extent) Heidegger sees nihilism as intrinsic to what he calls the technological understanding of Being. In an interview with Brian Magee on the subject of Heidegger’s philosophy, Hubert Dreyfus nicely expresses what is at stake here:

We don’t seek truth any more but simply efficiency. For us everything is to be made as flexible as possible so as to be used as efficiently as possible. If I had a Styrofoam cup here, it would be a very good example. A styrofoam cup is a perfect sort of object, given our understanding of being, namely it keeps hot things hot and cold things cold, and you can dispose of it when you are done with it. It efficiently and flexibly satisfies our desires. It’s utterly different from, say, a Japanese tea-cup, which is delicate, traditional, and socialises people. It doesn’t keep the tea hot for long, and probably doesn’t satisfy anybody’s desires, but that’s not important. (Dreyfus 1987, p. 267)

So knowledge has become efficient and disposable like a Styrofoam cup. What does not conform to these criteria and is ‘inefficient’ (though it may indicate a richer mode of existence) is relegated to the past and becomes somehow quaint. Knowledge as such, and this is a view replicated in The Postmodern Condition, has become ‘information’. Language as “an instrument of information increasingly gains the upper hand” (Heidegger 1991, p. 124). People become ‘thinking machines’ that contribute to the ‘building of frameworks for large calculations’. However, information is not innocent for whilst it ‘informs, that is appraises, it at the same time forms, that means arranges and sets straight’. Information therefore takes on a colonising force that brings everything under control, shaping it in its own image: “As an
appraisal, information is also the arrangement that places all objects and stuffs in a form for humans that suffices to securely establish human domination over the whole earth and even beyond this planet” (ibid.).

Members of the Frankfurt School such as Adorno give a similar account to Heidegger’s. Reason in Western civilisation has succumbed to a fusion of domination and technical rationality. During this process no social subject (proletarian or not) can become the agent of emancipation. In Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life (the title says it all!), Adorno writes:

For since the overwhelming objectivity of historical movement in its present phase consists so far only in the dissolution of the subject, without yet giving rise to a new one, individual experience necessarily bases itself on the old subject, now historically condemned, which is still for-itself, but no longer in-itself. The subject still feels sure of its autonomy, but the nullity demonstrated to subjects by the concentration camp is already overtaking the form of subjectivity itself. (Adorno 2006, pp. 15–16)

The image of the concentration camps as the horrific progeny of modernity is also present in Lyotard’s writing on ‘Auschwitz’ (see Heidegger and the Jews 1990), which captures a condition (rather than simply denoting the place). Auschwitz (the place) was, of course, extremely ‘efficient’.

Though Lyotard’s discussion of performativity is not without its influences, its force and originality comes in part from the discussion of the state of the university and the predictions pertaining to what will eventually happen to that institution. Moreover, his position notably differs from those adopted by the aforementioned writers. Both Nietzsche and Heidegger take a backward look to elements of (an imagined?) pre-Socratic culture, so as to reimagine the future. In the case of Heidegger, this can seem nostalgic, whereas Nietzsche’s turn to ‘Tragedy’ is less so. Adorno seems rather cowed by instrumental rationality, whilst Lyotard (certainly in his earlier work) is not quite so gloomy. What fuels hope in The Postmodern Condition derives from a surprising approach to the pragmatics2 of knowledge (the application of linguistic rules that accompany competing accounts of what constitutes knowledge). This involves rather original and, indeed, contentious readings of Austin’s and Wittgenstein’s philosophies of language.

Why ‘Performativity’?

In the notes to The Postmodern Condition, Lyotard acknowledges his debt to the philosopher J.L. Austin, who coined the term—‘performative utterance’. Lyotard writes:

The term performative has taken on a precise meaning in language theory since Austin. Later in this book, the concept will reappear in association with the term performativity (in

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2Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics concerned with language in use.
particular, of a system) in the new current sense of efficiency measured according to an input/output ratio. The two meanings are not far apart. Austin’s performative realises the optimal performance. (Lyotard 1984, p. 88)

Lyotard’s reference to Austin can be partly explained by the structure and findings of the series of lectures that makes up the latter’s *How to do things with Words*. Austin attempts to categorise performative utterances that ‘do’ things, as distinct from constative utterances that state things. Examples of the former include ‘I christen this ship the…’, ‘I now declare you man and wife’ and ‘I promise’. Austin notes that to utter such sentences is:

…not to describe my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it. None of the utterances cited is either true or false: I assert this as obvious and do not argue it. It needs argument no more than ‘damn’ is not true or false: it may be that the utterance ‘serves to inform you’ – but that is quite different…When I say, before the registrar or altar, etc., ‘I do’, I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it. (Austin 1976, p. 6)

By focusing on the kind of utterance that ‘does’ something, Austin brings attention to an area of language that had been previously ignored by philosophers. When stating that performative utterances do not describe anything, he is trying to show the limitations of the descriptive theory of language. Implied in the notion of the description or statement is the implication of a distance between language and world, between words and actions, whereas the example of ‘I do’ (said at a wedding) allows no such division – to speak *is* to act, to indulge. In making this point, Austin introduces the binary distinction between performatives and constatives (which can be true or false). Having made this distinction, Austin focuses on performative utterances and is obliged to consider the “constraints or conditions that they operate under which ensure that they communicate or do their work as perfectly as they do, as perfectly as the most unobjectionable true-or-false statements do theirs” (Cavell 2005, 158). Austin argues that the success of performative utterances, though not divorced from questions of truth or falsity, is subject to conditions of infelicity or unhappiness. Infelicity occurs when the performative utterance fails to achieve its intended effect. Failure results from some lack or inadequacy within the ‘total speech situation’. An example might be a wedding in which the figure presiding over the ceremony does not have the legal authority to marry the participants. The conditions do not allow for the words to have their intended effect, and the performative utterance is therefore unhappy.

When Lyotard notes the similarity between Austin’s performative and his own concept of performativity, the reasons for this seem fairly clear. Neither Austin’s performative nor the systematic performativity described by Lyotard are straightforwardly dealing with truth claims. Rather, what is at stake is success measured by internal cohesion; that what actors perform adheres to certain normative procedures that can be measured in terms of success. The effectiveness of a speech act is the measure of Lyotard’s performativity.
Lyotard, Austin and Habermas

So far, I have provided a rather brief and sketchy explanation of why Lyotard draws on Austin’s theory of the performative. This account misses something of what is going on, or what is being performed, in Lyotard’s allusion to Austin. A deeper explanation is alluded to by Jameson in his foreword to *The Postmodern Condition*. Jameson argues that Lyotard provides “a thinly veiled polemic against Habermas’s concept of a ‘legitimation crisis’ and vision of a ‘noisefree’, transparent, fully communicational society” (Jameson 1984, p. vii). The significance of Austin’s performative to this scenario is that his theory of speech acts and treatment of the performative utterance plays an integral role in the development of Habermas’s theory of communicative action.3

For Habermas, Enlightenment concerns with reason and justice should not be met with incredulity, but can be reconstructed communicatively (Steuerman 1992, p. 103). If the necessary linguistic conditions are in place then this will revive the possibility for ‘critique’ that the Enlightenment project engendered. This involves an attempt to reconstruct universals via pragmatics. Habermas therefore “proposes an analysis of the conditions of possibility of communication as the starting point for a critical theory” (ibid.). He believes that the development of ‘communicative competence’ will lead to mastery of the ‘ideal speech situation’, a concept he borrows from Austin (Habermas 1970, p. 363). Here there is potential to develop felicitous conditions that can bring about rational consensus in regards to issues around truth and freedom.

Lyotard is troubled by Habermas’s project because he believes that ‘consensus’ is what performativity feeds on. The last thing that is needed is the “regularization of the ‘moves’ permitted in all language games” (Lyotard 1984, p. 66). To slip (however briefly) out of performativity’s grip, we must divert our attention to small micro-narratives or: ‘different language games’—a heterogeneity of elements’ as: “They only give rise to institutions in patches” (Lyotard 1984, p. xxiv). The response must be a more ‘active’ form of action than Habermas allows for: “‘Traditional’ theory is always in danger of being incorporated into the programming of the social whole as a simple tool for the optimization of its performance; this is because its desire for a unitary and totalizing truth lends itself to the totalizing and unitary system of the system’s managers” (Lyotard, p. 12). This is why Lyotard petitions for an ‘agonistics’ to trump Habermas’s consensus which will, if you like, work against

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3 This is not fully developed until the publication of *A Theory of Communicative Action* in 1981 and postdates the initial publication in French of *The Postmodern Condition*.

4 ‘Language game’ is a term drawn from Wittgenstein’s philosophy, and it is used to refer to forms of language that are smaller and simpler than the whole of language. The word ‘games’ refers to the active, lived dimension of language in use and to play a language game is to partake in ‘a form of life’. Lyotard’s treatment of this issue is rather controversial as his language games are ‘islands’ partitioned off from the colonising force of performativity Wittgenstein’s vision of language is less pure when he talks of “a complicated network of similarities, overlapping and criss-crossing” (Wittgenstein, para. 66).
the spirit of performativity that itself relies on consensus. Here: “to speak is to fight” (Lyotard 1984, p. 10). Strategic pragmatic dissonance at a local level might, briefly, fend off the otherwise overwhelming consensual force of performativity.

**Performativity and Philosophy of Education**

Having taken something of a detour from issues that are more obviously educational it is necessary to make a case for why seeing performativity in its rich philosophical context is important for educationalists. By presenting performativity as a dominant colonising language game, Lyotard shows us how difficult it is to slip from its clutches. Performativity so often creeps into and dominates educational discourse in spite of academics’ expressed distaste for it. I have often sat through meetings in which talk of effectiveness and outputs has dominated discussions, whilst, at the same time, the participants who spoke this language so fluently would express distaste for target culture and performativity. Moreover, in the performative language games the current predilection with efficiency and effectiveness is presented in stridently positive terms. Think of ‘excellence’, ‘quality’ or the current favourite ‘what works’.

As mentioned above, work emerging from the ‘creativity movement’ (see, for example, Craft 2011) purports to offer a challenge to performativity culture. Ironically, writers in this area seem more concerned with showing how ineffective school cultures are, in both economic and pedagogical ways, than with querying the very notion of effectiveness (see Munday 2014). The version of creativity they advance is entirely in keeping with what Lyotard describes as ‘imagination’, which will be drawn upon to constantly renew and update the system (Lyotard 1984, pp. 51–52). It can sometimes feel as though the educational scene is occupied by Nietzchian doubles who promise a brighter future that transcends performativity, when they are, perhaps unwittingly, its agents. This is beautifully captured by Blake et al.:

> But beware the numerous false dancers here … enthusiastic facilitators and earnest enablers, transferrers of skills and critical thinkers, motivators and school improvers, progressives in various guises, beware find-the-learning-style-that-suits-you-best, the onanism of learning-to-learn,… Beware: as-a-teacher-you-must-plan-your-lessons, you must state clearly the aims of the lesson, specify the learning outcomes, list the resources you will use, describe the method you will use, you must keep the class moving so that the children’s attention doesn’t wander, you must not stray from your plan, and so, with this careful planning, and with the inspection that ensures you are fully accountable, what is taught and what is learned become channelled to predetermined ends. These are highly realistic counterfeits of education. (Blake et al. p. 117)

Seeking better or truer accounts of education has been one of the goals of philosophers of education, and we shall come to these shortly. However, tracing the history of the concept ‘performativity’ within philosophy of education presents a number of difficulties. The fact that it is embedded in a rich philosophical history is a case in point. Philosophers of education who draw on Heidegger’s work on technology (see Standish 1997) or Nietzsche’s discussion of nihilism (see Blake et al. 2000) may
only passingly allude to it, yet they write about very similar, though not always identical, concerns to those discussed by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*. In addition to this, Lyotard’s position on performativity evolved in work that followed *The Postmodern Condition*, a point I shall come back to.

Another complicating factor is that a myriad of things have happened in education since the publication of *The Postmodern condition* that can be associated with performativity. Taking a deep breath, these include (a) a fixation with exam grades as the measure of quality/success; (b) the emergence of ‘audit cultures’ in education and the policing of academics and teachers outputs; (c) league tables for schools and universities; (d) statistical comparison of countries’ education systems based on PISA scores, what Gorur (2016) refers to as ‘performative statistics’; (e) the growing importance attributed to the ‘impact’ of research; (f) the fixation with learners and learning (what Biesta (2009) calls the ‘learnification’ of society) as opposed to a focus on ‘children’ or ‘students’ or ‘pupils’ and the content of what is being learnt; (g) lifelong learning; (h) attributing a higher value to publication linked to large funded projects; (i) the notion that volume of outputs trumps judgement of quality; (j) the emergence of the entrepreneurial academic who hones and monitors their career by devoting considerable time to strategically placing themselves in the public eye via contributions to twitter or blogs so as to maximise personal effectiveness; (k) seeing conferences as networking opportunities in a manner that mimics the commercial sphere; (l) increasingly coming to see knowledge as ‘information’ or ‘data’; (m) the emergence of ‘parenting’ as a verb and its subsequent establishment within ordinary usage – the word ‘effective’ can be put before it without blinking; (n) the ubiquity of student satisfaction surveys as a means of ‘rating’ and quantifying good teaching; (o) the idea that the principal function of universities is to help students become employable; (p) an emphasis on ‘methodology’ in the humanities and social sciences and its detachment from content; (q) a concern with ‘outreach’, in which academics go out into the community to effectively influence it in some way or other; (r) an ever growing managerialism; (s) performance related pay in which outputs are measured and teachers and academics are rewarded accordingly; (t) the emergence of ‘What Works’ centres in universities; (u) the transplanting of methodologies drawn from medical research (such as randomised controlled field trials) across social science domains so as to assess ‘what works’; (v) attempts to find algorithms which could ultimately replace teachers due to their better receptiveness to learning needs; (w) predictions regarding the emergence of SMART schools in which teachers become mere technicians ensuring the smooth running of the system; (x) a focus on ‘skills’ as opposed to knowledge; (y) the playing down of the role of judgement in favour of measurability; and (z) the effect of neoliberal economics on education.

Philosophers of Education have produced critical work that examines these matters and it is pretty much impossible to touch on everything they have covered in the space of one chapter. The way in which these ideas and practices are discussed differs in sophistication and degree of nuance. It encompasses passionate denunciations of the educational system (see Fielding 1999), nuanced discussions of technology, which consider its affordances alongside its more malign aspects (see Burbules and
Callister 2000), and accounts which dispense with a focus on value-laden issues, to ways in which ideas such as ‘quality’ are mobilised (see Simons and Masschelein 2006). These approaches are not part of an evolving dialectic on performativity (no such thing exists) and are radically discontinuous. Given the limitations of space, I believe a more fruitful approach is to bring together five distinctive approaches to performativity by philosophers of education as this will bring out some significant tensions.

Playing New Games

It is hard to imagine a philosopher of education coming out in favour of performativity. This is perhaps because the wrongness or badness of ‘performativity’ has come to accompany the word through its various iterations; one might as well try and make a case for murder as champion performativity. Though plenty of academics, policy-makers, politicians and practitioners will sing the praises of all manner of things that have come to be associated with performativity (see the above list), they will not employ that term or give voice to the connotations it conjures. Rightly or wrongly, not every killing will be seen as a murder.

As discussed earlier, though Lyotard is no celebrant of performativity, he does not present the state of education as a glorious tragedy. This is because the grand narratives that have been usurped by performativity culture exercised a form of hegemony over the ways which we understand the world and therefore took on a repressive and delimiting power. Though their erosion (Lyotard does not maintain they have been fully eradicated) gives birth to the hollow narrative of performativity, it also makes room for smaller narratives and alternative understandings of the world. The extent to which such narratives are, or will come to be, colonised by performativity is a concern for Lyotard, and has become a focus for work in philosophy of education. Two of the more well known figures in this regard are Richard Edwards and Robin Usher. These authors explore adult education by identifying doubleness in a postmodern condition which, they argue, both constrains and promises freedom. They explore this through an investigation of lifelong learning.

As mentioned above, Lyotard more or less predicts the emergence of ‘lifelong learning’ (he does not use the term), and sees it as part of an educational future characterised by performativity. Once education is no longer seen as an end in itself, higher education institutions will become centres of retraining for adults trying to keep pace with the demand for new skills required by a post-industrial economy. In their discussion of lifelong learning, Edwards and Usher do not want to deny Lyotard’s prescience in this matter: “There is an emphasis on learning oriented to what Lyotard termed performativity: learning that seeks to optimize the efficiency of the economic and social system” (Edwards and Usher 2001, p. 279). Moreover, in this spirit educational institutions will “seek to commodify and manage learning by becoming more business-like, corporatist, and consumer oriented”. Edwards and Usher are not looking to celebrate this, but believe that simultaneously (and para-
doxically) it is accompanied by something that we might see in positive terms, namely, the “decentering of knowledge” and “a valuing of different sources of knowledge (including knowledge that would not have been considered worthwhile)” (ibid.). This challenge to a discipline based liberal form of education is presented as a mark of epistemological experimentation in which the “contested and constructed nature” of knowledge is “constantly brought to the fore” (280). Moreover, such experimentation leads to the overturning of traditional knowledge hierarchies in which “experiential, informal, and community based learning” (ibid) become legitimate sources of knowledge. Therefore:

...performativity has the paradoxical result of simultaneously closing and opening possibilities. Performativity therefore, like lifelong learning and the postmodern of which it is an aspect, has multiple significations and significances. It contributes to both the strengthening and loosening of boundaries and to both an economy of the same and to an economy of difference. It is within these interlocking and interrelated economies that the lifelong learner is now (dis)located. (p. 281)

Edwards and Usher see what has happened to the undermining of disciplinary knowledge as a sort of emancipation from the grip (manceps) of a gendered paternalistic ‘liberal’ education. If we have become incredulous to the idea that knowledge can be mastered (they play on the notion of a ‘Masters’ degree), then this is something to be celebrated.

The University of Excellence

Though Edwards and Usher’s argument is not without nuance, there are reasons for being distrustful of what they have to say. For a start, they seem to believe that the new knowledges they allude to (no examples are provided) are in keeping with Lyotard’s discussion of micro-narratives and language games (282). The idea that they represent the sort of alternative comportment to language that Lyotard has in mind is a little hard to swallow. For a start, the authors acknowledge that such knowledges are bound to performativity. If so, then they are presumably ‘mastered’ by that language game. Moreover, the celebration of the ‘new’ is surely caught up in the nihilistic dialectic diagnosed by Nietzsche – whatever is ‘new’ is not ‘old’, nothing of substance is affirmed.

Whereas Edwards and Usher can seem celebratory about the current state of education, there are interesting contributions which are more in keeping with the greyness that accompanies Lyotard’s understanding of performativity. A rather well-known example of this is Bill Readings’ The University in Ruins (1996). Readings describes what he calls ‘The University of Excellence’. ‘Excellence’ here is just the sort of empty signifier that Blake et al. (2000) associate with contemporary nihilism. Despite the inevitable positive connotations that accompany ‘excellence’, nothing of any obvious substance is affirmed. However, Readings does not hark back to some notion of a golden age in which the university was once whole or complete. The idea of the enlightened universal subject, who once embodied the
institution, can no longer appear credible in the light of good work on feminism and on race (Readings 1996, p. 10). However, the gap in this regard, generated by genuine progress, is filled by another subject who does not ‘represent’ anything, namely, the university administrator. She/he will oversee the performativity targets (p. 8) and keep everyone on track.

Readings has no grand ambitions to resuscitate an older idea of the university, or resurrect it from the ruins. Any such goals are naïve and misguided. However, he is unwilling to give up on the possibility for thought which once, every now and again, may make its self known. Readings imagines the conditions under which this might happen and argues for an ‘institutional pragmatism’ (18) in which accountability may, however briefly, take precedence over accounting. Transgressive possibilities lie with teaching and obligations that call on the educators to do justice to unexpected utterances that emerge from it: “The transgressive force of teaching does not lie so much in matters of content as in the way pedagogy can hold open the temporality of questioning so as to resist being characterised as a transaction that can be concluded” (19). Teaching therefore becomes committed to justice not truth.

As Bearn notes, Readings’ rather desperate vision is perhaps more in keeping with work by Lyotard which followed The Postmodern Condition (see Lyotard 1988, 1990, 1991 and 1993). Lyotard ceased to have faith in the possibility for little narratives to upset the apple cart. They are too easily be consumed by the performative ‘genre of discourse’. Think here of his essay ‘Marie Goes to Japan’ in which the protagonist feels victimised by the constant empty imperative to reinvent everything (a good performance must be ‘new’) and dreams that she is “an underground cavity full of black cold, still water” (Lyotard 1999, p. 5). Lyotard’s last bastion of hope comes through an ascetic withdrawal whereby we question/negate everything including thought in the hope that something new to thought will come out of it. That way, we accept the occurrence of what is not yet determined. Lyotard describes such philosophical work in terms of “Peregrinations in the desert” (Lyotard 1991, p. 74).

An Intense Education

As we have seen, Lyotard’s later work and Readings’ University in Ruins privilege dissonance or negation. In ‘Pointlessness and the University of Beauty’ (an essay that has been cited several times already), Gordon Bearn offers a way of thinking beyond performativity which exceeds negative terms and discursive boundaries. To do this, he draws upon an affirmative Deleuzian ontology which contrasts with Lyotard’s philosophy of absence. For Lyotard, we have meaning on the one hand, which quickly gets incorporated into the performative genre of discourse and, in contrast, “a universal lack of difference, an indifferent blank nothingness” that sits on the other side of language (Deleuze quoted in Bearn 2000, p. 242). Bearn, following Deleuze, argues that the other side of representation should not be thought of as an immense blank, but a swarm of intensities or “non-conceptual differences”
(Deleuze 2004, p. 15). Our experiences of such differences is sensual not rational. Such intensities infuse and make possible our language and thought, yet linguistic differences never fully capture them. Think of the difference between a close up camera shot of a kingfisher and the flash of red and blue that whooshes and whizzes across the water. We may call this the ‘same’ kingfisher, but we do so from this side of representation.

Performativity is blind to the ‘swarm of intense differences’ because it, like any genre of discourse, can only ‘regiment’ intensity and ‘tie it in a knot’. However, though such blindness may stifle us, it can never fully control intensities, which are always threatening to break through. The goal of Bearn’s vision is to release intensities. This release should characterise ‘The University of Beauty’. In keeping with the affirmative thrust of his argument, this will not simply involve a departure from certain activities that are often associated with the culture of effectiveness such as various forms of vocational training. It is not the training that is the problem but the genre of discourse that has tied it in a knot and made our understanding of training anaemic and technical (Bearn, p. 254). All sorts of activities, whether they take place in the humanities or sciences or indeed whether or not they involve training for a vocation, can be diffused through intense particles. What matters is that the fires of the imagination are ignited and burn “with a fire that does not consume” (p. 247). Moreover, the university should be an intensity machine breaking through disciplinary boundaries. This approach should be playful, as this will help us break free of received representational frameworks for thinking.

Bearn does not naively predict the demise of performativity. Rather, he imagines a future in which performativity is more porous than we might think to new and rich ways of experiencing things. For Bearn, to be freed from the constraints of goal-directed thinking requires no subtraction, but must be thought of in terms of what happens in the middle, where we get lost in a swarm of different thoughts, ideas, feelings, worries and enjoyments. Goals (the point of things) do not exactly disappear, but their determining quality is hijacked by the multiplicity of experience: there are an indeterminate number of goals/points. Moreover, there is a general goal that defies teleological boundaries—the goal of becoming intense.

The Other Performativity

Bearn’s Deleuzian discussion of the possibilities for education is powerful, but it is not the only candidate for a more affirmative approach to performativity. As discussed above, Lyotard acknowledges his debt (as regards the concept of performativity) to the philosopher J.L. Austin. Other writers such as Derrida (1988), Butler (1997, 1999) and Cavell (2005) follow Austin to explore the ways in which the ‘performative’ (in a rather different sense) dimension of language can be affirmed (see Munday 2009, 2010, 2011a and 2011b). Indeed, it is worth noting that readers new to the concept of performativity may quickly find themselves confused if they type it into a search engine. This is because performativity is also a term used in
Gender Studies in which gender is seen as a performance as opposed to something constituted by our biological make-up (see Butler 1997). This understanding bears little resemblance to Lyotard’s meaning, though it shares the same influence, namely, Austin’s philosophy of language. Anyway, the work of these authors on performativity provides a stimulus for ways of thinking about education that moves beyond a focus on effectiveness and measurable outputs, but does not succumb to nostalgia for authenticity (see Munday 2011a). Given the limitations of space, I will only consider how Derrida’s philosophy can be taken up for this purpose (Cavell’s discussion is very technical, whereas Butler’s work on gender takes its cue from Derrida).

Derrida’s most famous treatment of Austin appears in his essay ‘Signature event context’. The former finds much to admire in Austin’s philosophising. When Austin shows how issuing a performative utterance is not to report on language, but to indulge in it, he appears to recognise the impossibility of adopting a stance that is external to language. This is why Derrida notes that:

As opposed to the classical assertion, to the constative utterance, the performative does not have its referent (but here the word is certainly no longer appropriate, and this precisely is the interest of the discovery) outside of itself or, in any event, before and in front of itself. It does not describe something that exists outside language and prior to it. (Derrida 1988, p. 13)

Derrida argues that Austin has shattered the concept of communication as a purely semiotic, linguistic or symbolic concept. Communication is no longer considered in terms of ‘transference of semantic content’ or fixed in its orientation towards truth. Rather, we perform the world into being through language. All meaning is textual—there is no outside text. However, Derrida is close to Lyotard when he argues that Austin takes a step backwards by fixating on external contextual factors that must be in place for the performative utterance to be happy—for it to ‘succeed’. This ignores the ‘iterability’ of language (18) and the ways in which words are not bound by context. It is not the case (as Austin might have it) that the context determines the force of words. Rather, words carry their old contexts with them prior to their entry into a potentially unlimited number of possible new contexts. In this sense, words are not at one with themselves and there are countless ways in which they can come to mean and do things differently.

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5 See Munday (2009) for a detailed reading of this.
6 It should be noted that Derrida has been heavily criticised for his reading of Austin. Searle’s damning rejoinder ‘Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida’ (1977) is perhaps the most well-known critique. These disagreements are deserving of their own chapter and there is no space to rehearse them here.
7 This is a literal translation of Derrida’s famous formulation “Il n’y a pas de hors-texte”. As Attridge notes, “this phrase does not mean ‘the things we normally consider to be outside the text do not exist’ but ‘there is nothing that completely escapes the general properties of textuality, différence etc.’”—that is, as Derrida goes on to explain, no ‘natural presence’ that can be known ‘in itself’. But it is also true that here is no inside the text, since this would again imply an inside/outside boundary” (Attridge in Derrida 1992, p. 102). The more famous (though less exact) translation is “there is nothing beyond the text”.
So much of what constitutes performativity (in Lyotard’s sense) is about controlling context so as to assure effectiveness and the measurement of it. We find this in the ‘well-made lesson’ (Standish 2005) as much as in rigorous adherence to success criteria, whether this applies to marking exam scripts or assessing the ‘quality’ of publications. The iterability of language thwarts these processes, as something unexpected will arrive to disrupt things. Here is Standish:

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. The academic work of professing must then be something more than the (purely constative) statement of how things are. (Standish 2001, p. 18)

Derrida’s argument is subtle; professing the truth is about orientating students towards something that neither professor nor student can necessarily predict in which the constative (truth) will always be performed as the to-come (an aspect of the future) rather than a statement of that which is secure, of the past, somehow originary. The professor’s role here is to show “hospitality” (Derrida 1999, p. 51) to what arrives in language, rather than turning away from whatever fails to meet the performance criteria. It is in this that the promise of education in an age of performativity resides.

At a superficial level, Derrida’s approach may sound rather like Lyotard’s ‘per-egrinations’. Though both thinkers advocate a philosophy of absence (there is no talk of intensities that precede and infuse language), for Lyotard if anything comes out of the abyss it will be “incomprehensible: as terrifying as dread or as wonderful as grace” (Bearn 2000, p. 242). In contrast, Derrida’s iterability, which implies the ongoing reconstitution of the world, is an ordinary dimension of how words are used. Context cannot control meaning as language is always already out of joint. This is something to be affirmed and a prerequisite for educational experiences infused with hospitality to what arrives.

**Does ‘what works’ work?**

Having considered some largely divergent approaches to performativity by philosophers of education, perhaps we should come up to speed and look at how the focus on effectiveness and efficiency diagnosed by Lyotard is currently staged in the wider educational domain. This is arguably captured in the fashionable ‘what works’ slogan. In the last 20–30 years, there have been many calls for educational research to move away from ‘insular’ academic concerns and hone in more directly on practical outcomes (see, for example, Berliner et al. 1997). This has often led to analogies with medicine which is presented as an exemplary instance of an area

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8 This account of professing is radically at odds with what tends to count as ‘professionalism’ today.
which has a strong culture of research-led practice (see Hargreaves 1996). The favoured instrument in medical research is the randomised controlled field trial, an experimental form of quantitative research, where control groups are subject to ‘interventions’ that respond to perceived ‘problems’. In the USA, RCTs have become the dominant method for conducting educational research (see Slavin 2002). In the UK context, RCTs are the favoured approach in the ‘What Works’ Network. This network is made up of 7 independent What Works Centres and 2 affiliate members which together cover policy areas that receive public spending of more than 200 million pounds.

The growing popularity of RCTs raises some fundamental questions for educationalists. According to the rhetoric, RCTs are value neutral and politically innocent. They will provide sure evidence of ‘what works’. Are such claims justified? There have been a number of responses within philosophy of Education to this view. Gert Biesta has written two much cited articles on this topic called ‘Why “What Works” won’t work’ (2007) and its follow-up ‘Why “what works” still won’t work’ (2010). The Educational Research network based in Leuven has also published a book with the title *What Works Doesn’t Work* (2006) containing chapters by prominent philosophers and historians of education. As is perhaps clear, the focus here is not ‘just’ on the wrongness of seeing education in terms of effectiveness. Rather, the authors consider the various ways in which research that is conducted to demonstrate effectiveness fails on its own terms.

A good place to begin considerations of why ‘what works’ may not work is Paul Smeyers’ chapter ‘The Relevance of Irrelevant research: the irrelevance of Relevant Research’ (2006) in which he looks at research on class size in education. Smeyers notes the interesting irony that even advocates of experimental research in this area seem to acknowledge the myriad problems with establishing whether larger classes lead to more effective educational outcomes. For example, he notes the extensive number of obstacles that Goldstein and Blatchford, staunch advocates of this form of research, identify as obstacles to establishing a causal relationship between class size and attainment (Smeyers 2006, p. 101). These include such things as how “the sample population may differ from the target population” and “in the case of randomized controlled trials the expectations about the effects of class size may be partly responsible for observed effects” (ibid). Smeyers attributes the irony at work here to a kind of repression within a research community that has turned in on its self. Finding out ‘what works’ is perhaps not really what is at stake, but “the demand for a particular kind of research within a particular societal climate” (97). The climate in question is the “demand for performativity, which so strongly characterizes present-day society” (106). For Smeyers, this climate is repressive because it invalidates certain lines of enquiry and types of concern that are essential for conducting good research. For example, experimental research cannot, according to Smeyers, really deal adequately with issues such as “the workload of teachers” or “the feelings of happiness of the students” (102), yet case studies are ruled out as they cannot be generalized (103). For Smeyers issues pertaining to value and judgement are swept away, yet both are integral features of good research. When these matters are ignored, the only people who ‘what works’ research works for are the people who conduct it.
In his discussion, Smeyers draws upon Richard Smith’s discussion of judgement (see Smith 2017) to support his argument. Smith looks at what has happened to ‘judgement’ in our contemporary culture. He maintains that professional life is now so “governed by the application of norms and criteria as a matter of routine” that it is “closed to opportunities for the use of judgement” (Smith 2017, p. 101). For Smith judgement is now taken to be subjective and elitist (102) and has become associated with deviant connoisseurship. This is partly on display through the sort of language that helps to perform the dominant sensibility into being. Here, Smith calls out the popular expression ‘judgement call’ in the context of “situations where, remarkably it seems, the right course of action cannot in any straightforward way be read off a set of data and applied algorithmically” (105). Two ideas are central to Smith’s attempt to resurrect judgement. Firstly, he invokes Aristotle’s familiar distinction between techne and phronesis (106). Phronesis, or practical wisdom, has a clear moral dimension which is missing from technical reasoning:

In our judgements we ought to be flexible, attentive, alert: the doctor ought not to jump to the conclusion that this patient is to be treated exactly like other patients who have the same problem. These oughts do not rest simply on the thought that flexibility and so on will lead to more successful outcomes: this is not a disguised form of instrumental reasoning. Rather the demand is to be properly responsive to, or do justice to, the case or person under consideration. In this lies its ethical nature (108)

Alongside, phronesis, Smith draws our attention to the importance of the “minor premise or practical syllogism” (ibid.) and points to the ways in which the ordinary, everyday aspects of our lives are spent in a struggle in which we try and fend off self-delusion in the pursuit of seeing things in the right way. He cites Iris Murdoch’s project to achieve “a refinement of desire in daily living” (Murdoch in Smith, p. 109) and notes that this cannot be reduced to a skill or technique: “as Plato observed, the skilled doctor makes a skilled poisoner” (ibid).

The sort of practical/moral experimentation that Smith has in mind is occluded from research (of a different ‘experimental’ hue), which overleaps judgement and the moral dimension inherent to it in favour of a wrongheaded notion of efficiency. A not wholly dissimilar sensibility is at the heart of Gert Biesta’s article ‘Why “What Works” Won’t Work’. Biesta offers a critique of the epistemological foundations of RCTs and looks for an epistemology that “might be appropriate for an adequate understanding of the role of knowledge in professional action” (Biesta 2007, p. 11) He argues that RCTs are in the grip of a traditional ‘representational’ epistemology in which the world is presented to consciousness. Here the researcher identifies a problem, at a distance, and then seeks a solution.

Biesta finds an alternative ‘practical’ epistemology in the work of Dewey and argues that the latter’s theory of knowing is not premised on the clear separation of knower and known, researcher and researched (p.12). Rather knowing (as opposed to a static ‘knowledge’) is something dynamic that emerges through acting in the world and is concerned with “the relation between our actions and their consequences” (ibid.). This notion of ‘knowing’ is not just about trial and error but ‘intelligent action’ (14). Knowledge and reflection come into play when the smooth running of our habits breaks down and we do not know what to do – when we
‘encounter a problem’. However, the problem (rather than the solution) only becomes clear when we act (p.15). On this account, we do not know what the problem is until we have found the solution.

On Biesta’s account, we cannot discover knowledge of “reality; but only the relationship between actions and consequences here and now. We do not learn truths about the world but about what has been possible”. ‘Inquiry’ (Dewey’s term) can tell us what worked, but not what works. If we experiment with different lines of action, then this can help us to address future problems. However, this is not about following recipes but addressing unique problems in a changing world. Whilst old knowledge can guide us, the effectiveness of what we do must be constantly reappraised. This, however, does not mean that we should embrace and begin with a recipe on the proviso that it may not work next times as the means and ends of our activities are connected in ways that researchers are sometimes blind to. We can only evaluate ‘means’ by ends that are attained and the “upshot of this is that neither in our role as researcher nor in our role as professional educator should we accept given problem definitions and predetermined ends” (17). Moreover, we should look beyond whether or not something is achievable and consider whether or not we should achieve it, for action “in the social domain can only become intelligent action when its intrinsic relation with human purposes and consequences – that is when the political nature of inquiry in the social domain – is fully taken into account” (ibid.).

For Biesta, then, RCTs are epistemologically weak because problems are taken for granted as real problems prior to seeking solutions. Researchers simply put an intervention into motion and are not responsive to the ways in which problems themselves might be reframed through ‘intelligent action’. Moreover, as means are separated from ends, researchers make the mistake of thinking that there are simply more or less effective ways of getting to a predetermined ‘positive’ result. Claims about neutrality repress the value-laden aspects of the research leading to potentially damaging consequences.

**Conclusion**

During the course of this chapter, I have tried to draw a distinction between a narrow shallow understanding of performativity and a broader deeper one. The latter account, which is in keeping with Lyotard’s discussion, points to a deep-rooted effectiveness culture, which cannot adequately be captured by talk of league tables or teach to the test pedagogies. These things may be manifestations of a particular condition but too much focus on them misses the extent of performativity’s reach. Indeed, the alternatives to performativity in its shallowest sense (provided by the likes of creativity experts) marks either a philosophical deficit or a cynical attempt to present an intensification of performativity as the antithesis to it.

But, let us for a moment, and at the risk of undermining what has just been said, introduce a note of mild scepticism, particularly in regards to Lyotard’s predictions
about university education. Readers may feel that they are too exaggerated or all-encompassing. For a start, talk about ‘the’ university is a problematic move due to the rather inevitable fact that there will be radical differences between institutions within countries never mind across them. Moreover, there is no ‘robust’ comparative research looking at the global manifestation of performativity.

One could argue that there are all sorts of aspects of education, which may appear to jar with performativity. However, it can be easily shown how they have been infected, or, at best, significantly marginalised by it. Though universities will tolerate time spent on academic ‘outputs’ such as this one, work deriving from large scale funded projects is thought to represent the ‘gold standard’ of research. Academics within Humanities departments still write books on Jane Austen and the French Revolution. However, this kind of work may be dismissed as ‘hobby research’ and these individuals may well be required to seek large funding grants and establish links with departments engaged in more ‘useful’ activities that may generate ‘impact’. In the UK context, the REF9 currently, and ironically given it is obviously bound to performativity culture, still values scholastic achievement. Yet who would feel confident that the growing emphasis on the ‘impact’ of research will not eventually overwhelm the research culture. Partnerships with commercial companies and professional bodies may not be compulsory, but it ‘is’ the sort of thing that is likely to make the average university manager salivate. Though Professors are still being employed, it is worth noting the growing popularity of online MOOCS and universities across the planet are committed to developing students’ digital literacies. Whilst students in the Social Sciences will continue to study theory, entire courses are dedicated to the more pressing priority of developing research ‘skills’ and handling data. The retraining of mature adults has become commonplace within universities, and this sits alongside the notion that universities are becoming ever more concerned with employability. Last, but not least, the logic of effectiveness and efficiency has come to permeate university life to such an extent that almost everything academics do is monitored, measured (how many outputs have you produced this year?) and judged to make sure that they are maximising their time and potential.

In a similar vein, schooling, one may argue, has not been fully colonised by performativity. Yet, whilst students will study subjects like literature, their ‘learning’ in this area will be conceived of in terms of developing literacy skills (potentially useful for economic development) rather than becoming literate. Whilst there has been ever-growing emphasis on inclusion in schools, how often is this conceived of in technical, instrumental terms? The emergence of such things as dyslexia toolkits (Reid et al. 2013)) is revealing here. Whilst teachers are still being employed, as we speak, tech wizards are trying to create algorithms that will eventually replace them or augment them anyway (Williamson 2015).

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9 The REF stands for Research Excellence Framework. It was first carried out in the UK in 2014 and is undertaken by the four UK higher education funding bodies The REF is a review process carried out by selected senior academics who review institutions in accordance with judgements regarding the quality of “outputs”, “impact” (the ways in which research influences the world beyond academia) and the research “environment” present in each centre.
In spite of all this, the most interesting work on performativity does not express defeat and gives reason for limited hope. It does this whilst being neither naively optimistic nor anachronistic in its ambitions. Authors such as Readings, Bearn and Standish push against the borders of the performative language game and find it porous. By showing how ‘what works’ does not work, Smeyers, Smith and Biesta give us reason to wonder if performativity may one day be devoured by irony.

References


