# Issues surrounding performativity in education education essay

When attempting to comprehend the multifarious nature of performativity, it may be at first useful to view it in a historical and philosophical context. According to Munday (2010), performativity

"…has come to denote the systemic relations within the social order of postmodernity. Through technological progress, the grand narratives of the enlightenment which adhered to either the emancipation of the individual subject or to the speculative approach to knowledge have been superseded by an economy that privileges utility over truth, success over justice and information over knowledge." (Munday, 2010: 1)

The spirit of this assertion, the final reference to ' information over knowledge' is especially pertinent to issues in contemporary education reform and is echoed in the works of education scholars- including the authors discussed in this essay: Ball (2003), Tan (2008), Chua (2009), **** – and sets the tone for the discourse that follows.

In Ball's paper, The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity (2003) the debate of performativity is brought to the foreground through his development of an encompassing and influential definition of performativity:

" Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change – based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual subjects or organizations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of ' quality', or ' moments' of promotion or inspection. As such they stand for,

encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization within a field of judgement." (Ball, 2003: 216)

This important statement also serves as a starting point to which Tan's Globalisation, the Singaporean state and educational reforms: towards performativity (2008) and Chua's Saving the teacher's soul: exorcising the terrors of performativity (2009) both allude to in the process of developing their own arguments. In establishing a position on the qualities of technologies of performativity, Chua interprets Ball's definition by surmising that: "[P]olicy technologies of performativity define performance indicators and evaluate members of the organization based on their capacity to fulfil these indicators." (Chua, 2009: 160). Tan uses Ball's idea to derive a more pragmatic interpretation, making a direct link to neo-liberal reforms in education:

" Performativity contributes to a ' devolved environment' where … [s]chools are to take responsibility for transforming themselves by making themselves different from one another, improving themselves and competing with one another … The state employs monitoring systems for the school leaders and teachers through the mechanics of performativity such as league tables, the appraisal meeting, the annual review, report writing, site visits, inspections and peer reviews … In other words, they are expected to organise themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations under state regulation." (Tan, 2008: 113)

To arrive at such conclusions as to the interpretation and definition of performativity in their respective studies, the above authors had to at first

adopt an analytical design research approach with concept analysis and explore issues of globalisation and performativity and the implications for educational reform. construct their theories using research methodologies that involved the surveying of primary sources, including statistical and historical data and secondary sources such as work by other researchers (which include each other). For example, Tan (2008) argues that the rise of the culture of performativity is an inevitable by-product of Singapore's strategic embrace of neo-liberal policies through globalisation and Chua (2009) cites Tan's work in support of this view. Ball, more interestingly, elucidates on this theme in more epidemic terms:

" Education reform is spreading across the globe … An unstable, but apparently unstoppable flood of closely inter-related reform ideas is permeating and re-orienting education systems in diverse social and political locations which have very different histories." (Ball, 2003: 215)

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As both Tan (2008) and Ball (2003) point out, given the current global context where regional economic and social interconnectivity is increasing, it is not surprising that high-performing counties in the Far East, such a Singapore and Japan have experienced a reform agenda that shares many commonalities to that experienced in Western settings. Hence, similar to nations such as the UK, the United States and Australia, contemporary educational reform in Singapore and Japan are increasingly positioned as sites where broader political and economic reforms cross and at times clash with a range of political, economic and socio-ideological positions (Tan, 2008:

114). Having worked within the Japanese local government sector, at a board of education as an Assistant (English) Language Teacher on the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme from 2005-2010, I was in a unique position to observe such patterns of transformation that were occurring within the education system from an impartial and objective, if ineffectual standpoint.

When discussing contemporary educational change in Japan, a link must be acknowledged with a national corporatist reform agenda. Prevailing critique within Japan centres on the three general areas: falling enrolments, legislated curriculum reform and fiscal constraint. Contemporary educational reform in Japan could be placed within a unique historical context that is characterised by long periods of stability followed by radical structural reforms over condensed periods of time. (Hood, 2001) The reforms can also be weighed against the fact that schools and institutions have historically been constrained in their ability to react quickly to change due to the fact they have long been administered by a centralised state educational system. This, however, is changing in the current climate of contemporary neoliberal reforms and appears to have permeated right down through to the grass roots of the education, creating a transient system increasingly reliant on ' outcomes' and the establishment of new ways of auditing and verifying such outcomes (Ball, 2003). Possibly one of the clearest examples of this was during the course of my work at a Japanese senior high school:

I was asked by the head of the English department to assist in the implementation of an online ' e-learning' computer system for the English curriculum. It was to function something like a TOEIC preparation course,

with a test at the beginning and at the end to measure the students' progress. It was promoted to teaching staff as learning aid that would " make life easier for all" as the tests and study materials were already written. When I challenged senior teacher as to what exactly was the purpose and goal of this new system (which tested non-contextualised, discreet items of English language), the response was " We finally have an objective way of measuring their achievement. We can show this to universities, or the education ministry, so they can see objectively through statistics that our students are improving… we [teachers] do not really test the students; their grades are based upon our [teachers'] subjective feelings. We need results to be more accurate, and that is why we've bought these well-packaged materials made by professionals. We have already finalised the contract with the company, so we ask for your cooperation."

When looking back reflectively, how could this deliberated and justified scheme not be anything but of benefit to both the students and staff alike? Even after only the briefest of considerations, could any genuine educator articulate the simplest of critiques: how could this standardised test be considered ' objective'? Simply because a score is produced, what does that number actually represent? As the students were not required to do the same test at the end of the course that they took at the beginning, how could this be considered any measure of achievement? These may be only discreet factors in the larger scheme of the pedagogy of assessment, but they are all too often the first casualties following the implementation of performative policies in education. Fortunately, however, even changes such as these in the name of ' convenience' and ' efficiency' cannot be readily

imposed without some form of backlash from the rank-and-file teachers, as I observed my other Japanese colleagues voice in their opinions, frustrated with the system they had been forced to subscribe to:

" This is a [computerised testing] scheme developed by a commercial interest from outside our school that does not know, or even care about, our students' learning goals." …. " To be perfectly frank I don't feel good about people from outside telling me what the content of the courses should be and what it takes to improve students or how success or achievement can be measured"…. " Why are outsiders determining our educational policy- my classroom policy?"

This, increasingly legitimate, question from teachers is recognised by Ball (2003), when he aptly observes:

" One key aspect of the current educational reform movement may be seen as struggles over the control of the field of judgement and its values …Who is it that determines what is to count as a valuable, effective or satisfactory performance and what measures or indicators are considered valid? (Ball, 2003: 216)

What must not be forgotten here is the condition of the ' teacher' who is promoting the new ' tools' and ' systems' of reform. In the above scenario, it was apparent that the ' terrors of performativity' (Ball, 2003: 216) had already taken a victim, in this case, the head of the English department who, with the best of intentions, believed he was still functioning in the capacity of a traditional school teacher. He may have even agreed with Chua (2009) who contends, the aim of teaching is to transform a situation into a preferred

one, i. e. students that are more knowledgeable, more skilled etc. and that teachers are therefore ' designers', who employ ' designerly cognition', "… the deliberative logic that guides any activity aiming to transform a situation into a preferred one." (Chua, 2009: 159, 160). However, he may not have agreed, or even been aware that the introduction of such policy technologies of performativity could have quietly begun reconfiguring his designerly cognitive abilities, resulting in his: "… cognitive trajectory [being] guided to aim merely at what one might call the horizontal, transitive dimensions, geared towards the production of … visible, measurable outcomes". (Ball, 2003: 216; Chua, 2009: 160) In short, similar to their UK counterparts, Japanese educators are becoming increasingly measured, audited and assessed within the context of their research, their teaching and their day-to-day administration all in the name " devolved freedom" (Ball, 2003: 217).

The latter portion of the essay will focus on the performativity- related reforms in the UK education system, including personal anecdotal experience whilst continuing to reference the studies of Ball (2003) Chua (2009).

Ball (2003) describes the mechanics of performativity as: "… the data-base, the appraisal meeting, the annual review, report writing, the regular publication of results and promotion applications, inspections and peer reviews…"

The teacher, researcher, academic are subject to a myriad of judgements, measures, comparisons and targets. Information is collected continuously, recorded and published ^ often in the form of League

Tables, and performance is also monitored eventfully by peer reviews, site visits and

inspections.

The nature and characteristics of the modern teacher are defined by the many in which they partake;

Within all this, there is a high degree of uncertainty and instability. A sense of being constantly judged in different ways, by different means, according to

different criteria, through different agents and agencies. There is a flow of changing

demands, expectations and indicators that makes one continually accountable and

constantly recorded. We become ontologically insecure: unsure whether we are

doing enough, doing the right thing, doing as much as others, or as well as others,

constantly looking to improve, to be better, to be excellent.

The election of the coalition government in 2010 prompted changes to the framework that Ofsted

(Office for Standards in Education) uses to inspect schools. The framework was piloted in 145

schools during May and June 2011 to inform its development for use from 2012.

Ofsted fosters a culture of compliance and performativity within a managerialist discourse. Its

inspection framework operationalises this compliance; schools which do not achieve its standards risk

closure. Its influence extends beyond inspection periods; many leaders subject themselves and staff

to intense surveillance to ensure that practice corresponds as closely as possible to the Ofsted-

sanctioned ideal: This inspection framework is therefore of great significance to the English education system as both a product of a discourse and a mechanism for its reproduction.

Netherhall School has just been inspected under the latest OFSTED framework which came into effect earlier this term.

The new style Grade 3 rating awarded to the school replaced the previous ' Satisfactory' grade. The school had hoped to achieve a grade 2 ' Good' rating with greater recognition of its strengths and outstanding features.

Chair of Governors, ' The new OFSTED framework seems more subjective and narrower in its focus. It seems to lack the more rounded and balanced view of previous models used. Nevertheless, we are committed to working within the new framework and to learning lessons from this new process'.

The school highlighted that the bulk of the data evidence used was based on exams taken some eighteen months ago. The most recent 2012 exams for Netherhall showed many impressive exam outcomes including GCSE English and Maths being well above the national average . The school did significantly better than the national average in the new English Baccalaureate which prioritises GCSE Grade C and above in English, Maths, Science, History/ Geography, and a Language. More than a quarter of the 2012 cohort achieved 5A/A* grades. The 5A*-C GCSE with English and Maths has continued to be above average.

Caroline McKenney, Principal commented ' As ever, and in common with other ambitious schools, Netherhall is very aware of its priorities and recognises the need for ongoing improvement in all aspects of its work.'