

Bruce Macfarlane

University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Student Performativity: How Presenteeism, Learnerism and Globalism are Eroding the Freedom to Learn (0074)

Programme number: K8.2

Research Domain: Higher Education Policy

The term ‘teacher performativity’ is well known and the subject of a growing literature (e.g. Ball, 2012). This refers, *inter alia*, to targets, evaluations and performance indicators connected with the measurement of teaching quality. In a university context, individual academics encounter research quality assessments, student evaluation questionnaires, and sometimes income generation targets for professors. In this paper I will argue that student performativity is the mirror image of teacher performativity. It is just that the targets and the performance indicators that differ. These typically include attending classes punctually; assessment-related proxies for attendance such as in-class tests, presentations and class contribution grading; participation in group work and peer evaluation exercises, posting comments to online learning forums; and displaying or espousing values associated with globalism. Student performativity amounts to a hidden curriculum in higher education and marks a significant shift from learning at university as a private space to a public performance.

Presenteeism, Learnerism and Globalism

Universities are increasingly creating a culture of *presenteeism* that reflects a phenomenon previously associated with the workplace (Cooper, 1998). Under the euphemistic banner of ‘student engagement’, students are subject to a range of measures that monitor and punish them on the basis of their attendance record. Measures include attendance registers, swipe cards, and assessments that are effectively attendance proxies, such as online tracking of student contributions and in-class tests timed at the beginning of classes. Presenteeism is the result of a crisis of confidence about the value of a higher education and a concern to demonstrate its ‘value’ to governments and parents as part of a performative culture (Macfarlane, 2013).

Learnerism (Holmes, 2004) has become an ideological discourse which is performative in nature by seeking to empirically analyse results of educational achievement in terms of learning outcomes and the behavioural evaluation of students. Students are expected to actively ‘engage’ and ‘manage’ their own learning as ‘invested participants’ (Conrad and Haworth, 1997: 553). These demands are justified on the basis of social constructivist learning theory (eg Biggs 1996). The authoritative role of the teacher is undermined as the importance of students constructing understanding of knowledge *for themselves* is confused with them entering this process *by themselves* (Mascolo 2009:7). The censorious nature of the phrase ‘teacher-centred’ means that it is unfashionable to question the assumptions of learnerism.

Steger (2004) defines *globalism* as ‘a market ideology that endows current globalization processes with neoliberal norms, values and meanings’ (2004:4). In a higher education context, students are being inculcated with a normative political discourse centred on the values associated with globalism. This refers to the privileging of the interests of a worldview over national, regional and local interests. The mantras closely associated with globalism include global citizenship, sustainability and multi-culturalism. Interdisciplinarity is seen as essential in getting students to connect this agenda with ‘action’ and ‘democratic citizenship’ (Schneider, 2003). The mantras of globalism present a benign view of the effects of globalisation and are found commonly within general education and elective programmes in particular. Moreover, many universities in the UK and Australia have developed sets of graduate attributes which contain explicit expectations that students will become advocates of global mantras, notably global citizenship (Barrie, 2004).

The inauthenticity of performativity

In complying with the demands of performativity, academics and students need to do so in word as well as deed. It requires a casting aside or suppression of personal views and demands a ‘playing of the game’ (Ball, 2003). For academics this might imply, among other things, publishing early and often in the research cycle even when this might be at the expense of longer term goals and teaching responsibilities. Working in

a performative environment leads to inauthentic attitudes and behaviour as individuals endeavour to conform to such expectations.

Students learn to conform, or at least simulate agreement with presenteeism, learnerism and globalism. This is an integral part of what it now means to be a university student now and involves students (and their professors, to some extent) in a ritual of inauthenticity. Lip service is paid to certain elements of the teaching regime, such as the espousal of learning ‘outcomes’, but, in practice, there is limited belief in their veracity. There is also considerable evidence that student concerns about fairness (eg group work assessment) and privacy (eg loss of anonymity through forced participation in large classes, Machemer & Crawford, 2007; sharing opinions in class, Graham et al, 2007) are routinely overridden by learnerist dogma. Those who try to resist by refusing to ‘play the game’ by adjusting their behaviour toward the goals and targets set are more subtly disadvantaged. Academics fail to gain promotion or are punished in other ways, such as being excluded from research quality assessment. Students who attend seminars but remain silent or fail to participate in online learning communities are derided as ‘lurkers’ (Nonnecke and Preece, 2000).

Conclusion

There are striking parallels between the emotional, dispositional and bodily performance of reality television show contestants (Skeggs, 2010) and student performativity in higher education. Students must demonstrate bodily performance: through attendance at class or virtually in online forums, dispositional performance in terms of a willingness to comply with learnerism, and emotional performance through espousing compliance with values central to globalism. Learning at university has been converted from a private space into a public performance. It is, to use the words of Lasch (1979), about the ‘performing self’.

Presenteeism, learnerism and globalism pose a threat to student academic freedom understood in terms of both positive and negative rights. Presenteeism infantilises students and in the process retards their capacity to exercise choice as adults undermining a student’s right to be treated as an adult engaged in a voluntary activity. Learnerism largely ignores the rights of students to learn in different ways as

individuals, in silence (Jin, 2012) and with a 'right to reticence' (Chanock, 2010) in class. Globalism domesticates rather than empowers students as critical thinkers through general education, elective and common core programmes that sanctify a normative discourse reifying the mantras of globalism.

References

- Ball, S. (2003) The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity, *Journal of Education Policy*, 18 (2), 215-228.
- Ball, S. (2012) The making of a neoliberal academic, *Research in Secondary Education*, 2(1), 29-31.
- Barrie, S.C. (2004) A research-based approach to generic graduate attributes policy, *Higher Education Research and Development*, 23(3), 261-275.
- Biggs, J. (1996) Enhancing teaching through constructive alignment, *Higher Education*, 32(2), 347-64.
- Chanock, K. (2010) The right to reticence, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 15(5), 543-552.
- Conrad C.F. and Haworth J.G. (1997) *Emblems of Quality in Higher Education: Developing and Sustaining High-quality Programs*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Cooper, C.L. (1998) The changing nature of work, *Community, Work and Family*, 1 (3), 313-317.
- Graham, C .R ., Tripp, T .R ., Seawright, L . and Joeckel, G .L . (2007) Empowering or Compelling Reluctant Participators Using Audience Response Systems . *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 8 (3), 233-258
- Holmes, L. (2004) Challenging the learning turn in education and training, *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 28(8/9), 625-638.

Jin, J. (2012) Sounds of silence: Examining silence in problem-based learning (PBL) in Asia. In S. Bridges, C. McGrath & T. Whitehill (Eds.), *Problem-based learning in clinical education: The next generation*. Springer.

Macfarlane, B. (2013) The surveillance of learning: a critical analysis of university attendance policies, *Higher Education Quarterly*, forthcoming.

Machemer, P.L. & Crawford, P. (2007) Student perceptions of active learning in a large cross-disciplinary classroom, *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 8(1), 9-30.

Mascolo, M F. (2009) Beyond teacher- and learner-centered pedagogy: Learning as guided participation, *Pedagogy and the Human Sciences*, 1, 4-27.

Lasch, C. (1979), *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in the Age of Diminishing Expectations*, London/New York, Norton Press.

Nonnecke, B., & Preece, J. (2000). Lurker demographics: Counting the silent. *Proceedings of CHI 2000*. The Hague: ACM.

Schneider, C.G. (2003) Liberal Education and Integrative Learning, *Issues in Integrative Studies*, 21, 1-8.

Skeggs, B. (2010) The Moral Economy of Person Production: the Class Relations of Self-Performance on “Reality” Television, *Sociologia: Revista do Departamento de Sociologia da FLUP*, 20, 67-84.

Steger, M.B. (ed.) (2004) *Rethinking Globalism*. Lanham, MD & Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc.

