

Questioning the wisdom: students and staff looking backstage (0167)

Sinclair Christine ¹, **Smith** Jan¹, ¹*University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, United Kingdom*

The idea for this paper emerged from a fortunate juxtaposition of presentations at an earlier conference. The first author's own work on "showing the workings" (relating to student writing) was immediately followed by a paper that highlighted the function of a "backstage" space for student writing, based on e-logs (Eik-Nes, 2010). The connections between what we were saying – further reinforced by a third paper in the set – created the framework used for the current study. While this may seem like serendipity, it is not; the convergence of these papers was itself dependent on backstage work from organisers of the conference. The tricky work of bringing together compatible papers is possibly unrecognised by attendees at conferences unless they have organised one themselves. This paper is about not just recognising backstage effort but also exploiting it to support students and staff at times of transition.

By "backstage", we are referring to the spaces where aspects of activity, such as academic writing or teaching, are kept separate from the final "performance" of that activity. These spaces are usually physical, for example a student's bedroom or a lecturer's office (either of which may be shared with someone else). Increasingly, the spaces are virtual – social networking sites, blogs, emails where some preparatory work is done or people let off steam. Arguably, they may also be intellectual spaces – carried around with the person while preparing for the performance. The distinction between performance and what is going on in such spaces was highlighted by Goffman:

...when one's activity occurs in the presence of other persons, some aspects of the activity are expressively accentuated and other aspects, which might discredit the fostered impression, are suppressed. ... there may be another region – a 'back region' or 'backstage' – where the suppressed facts make an appearance.

(Goffman, 1959, p. 114)

With the current emphasis in higher education on outcomes and impact, there is more focus on performances than on backstage work. Students are expected to demonstrate that they have achieved learning outcomes; academics need to demonstrate impact of publications and grants. Staff beginning their academic careers may have several performances associated with probation, though these are not the same for everyone. Anecdotally, it seems that no-one has time to look at what is going on behind these performances, unless there is a problem – for example, the suppressed facts come to light revealing plagiarism or poor academic practice.

If the acquisition of expertise behind a polished performance is not obvious – containing as it does facts that might discredit that performance – then novices may find themselves at a loss. Backstage from an expert performance there may have been trial and error, drafting, discussions with peers, rehearsal – and many other actions, undertaken in a relaxed manner and well out of the vision of those making judgments on the performance. A novice who only knows about the performance – or even the “indicators” for that performance – may be unaware of what should happen in these stages.

What goes on backstage is not ignored by academic literature. As well as being influenced by Goffman (1959), we feel particular affinity with Polanyi’s (1966) tacit knowing especially as taken up by Eraut (2000), Perkin’s (2008) notion of the “underlying game”, the emphasis on action and contradiction in both Giddens (1979) and Leont’ev (1981), among others. However, the drive to performance we see in daily life in universities has led us to consider whether we are at risk of losing some of the wisdom explained by such literature.

Both authors have data relating to backstage activity at transitional phases. One of us became a student again to discover new students’ responses to discourse in college and university, exploring actions associated with these responses. These responses were recorded in a set of journals and notes taken during classes. The other has made a longitudinal study of responses to their probation of early-career academic staff at various different higher education institutions. In both cases, we have been interested in the discrepancy between what is actually happening at the

time and the performance of the person's identity as a student or a member of academic staff and **how the person copes with this discrepancy**.

Our data have been produced in different ways, but each set relates closely to backstage conditions, removed from the performance itself. We have noticed that much data in studies on higher education either relate to outcomes (such as grades or retention) or to respondents' impressions based on memory of how they achieved the outcomes. While the latter might potentially refer to backstage work, the researchers' clear interest in the performance could well affect what is said, especially if the researchers are regarded as being in a position of power – potential audience to a performance.

Examples of what we mean by the distinction between the performance and the suppressed aspects can be readily highlighted through the issue of plagiarism. Our data indicate that there is much going on backstage for both students and staff in relation to plagiarism that they would not want to show in their performance as students or teachers. There are other examples too, where either a student or staff member has had to make a judgement about how their performance should be. We can demonstrate that they may need some role models to “show the workings” or at least another mind to engage with before they are in a position actually to perform as required.

The expression “perform as required” should anyway raise questions from participants in any institution that purports to be concerned with intellect and education. Bringing our two studies together has brought out questions about their intersection. What is going on backstage with both of these groups may, taken together, throw some light on loss of wisdom in the academy as well as loss of agency for the individuals involved. We need supportive backstage environments where what has to be suppressed for the performance can be allowed to do its work. And we need opportunities to question some of our performance requirements.

Eik-Nes, N. L. (2010). *The function of a 'back stage' space in developing disciplinary identity*. Paper presented at the 13th Writing Development in Higher Education Conference.

- Eraut, M. (2000). Non-formal learning and tacit knowledge in professional work. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 70, 113-136.
- Giddens, A. (1979). *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis*. London: Macmillan.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. London: Penguin Books.
- Leont'ev, A. N. (1981). The Problem of Activity in Psychology. In J. V. Wertsch (Ed.), *The Concept of Activity in Soviet Psychology*. Armonk, NY: M.E.Sharpe.
- Perkins, D. (2008). Beyond Understanding. In R. Land, J. Meyer & J. Smith (Eds.), *Threshold Concepts within the Disciplines*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Polanyi, M. (1966). *The Tacit Dimension*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.