Lyotard's performance

Robin Usher

Abstract Starting with Lyotard's characterisation of postmodernity as incredulity, this is related to another of his key concepts—that of 'performativity'. Lyotard appears to deploy performativity to characterise those technologies that bring about the optimisation of efficient performance. However, there is another sense of performativity where it is linked to *performance*. Performance conditions the possibility of any and all performatives, or to put it another way, as performance is itself enabled by performativity, so too performativity is realised through its performance. Both senses of performativity and the linkage between them are clearly manifested in the space of knowledge production that is the contemporary university. This linkage is itself a feature of the semiotic process within which contemporary knowledge and knowledge production is located and which Lyotard himself recognised, albeit implicitly. The implication of this therefore is that Lyotard himself performs his text and in so doing both manifests and contributes to realising both senses of performativity.

Keywords Lyotard · Performativity · Knowledge · Research assessment

Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodernism as incredulity toward metanarratives (Lyotard 1984, xxiv)

Of his now classic text, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (first published in French, 1979; first published in English 1984), Lyotard is reported to have said that it was for him merely a "passage". Passage or not, it nonetheless found an audience and the rest as they say is history. Undoubtedly what messages that audience(s) "consumed" have been many and varied. One thing, however, is clear and that is that looking back from the vantage point of today, these have been influential messages whose potency cannot be underestimated. Even 25 years after

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first publication they provide insights that still have significant resonances, and perhaps none more so than his discourse concerning ''incredulity''. As Burbules (1995) points out of this, it is perhaps the most often quoted characterization of postmodernity:

> Nearly everyone focuses here on the idea of metanarratives, our attempts to offer general and encompassing accounts of truth, value, and reality. Postmodernism seems to be about denying the possibility of these, and rejecting as monolithic and hegemonic the ones that Western traditions have embraced. But the key term in this phrase (in translation, at least) is ''incredulity'' – a fascinating and unexpected word. Incredulity is not denial or rejection or refutation; *it is an inability to believe*. In this difference I think we see what is most distinctive and penetrating in the postmodern insight.... We who are creatures of modernity must confront a crisis of faith in its notions of progress and universal social betterment.

What is being argued here is that Lyotard's ''incredulity'' refers not to a rejection but to a loss of faith in the grand or meta-narratives that have provided a teleologically framed legitimation of social bonding and the role of science or ''knowledge'' in providing that bond. It is these grand narratives that have justified this particular kind of knowledge and in the process legitimated rationality, disciplinarity and the canons of scientific investigation. The point here is that whilst even now we do not, and indeed cannot, reject these grand narratives of knowledge, we no longer see them in the same way we used to, as being all that there is. Looked at another way, the incredulity of the postmodern marks the passing of an innocent engagement with the totalising discourse of the grand narratives. And when we no longer have the same faith in grand narratives, even if we cannot entirely do without them, then the way is open both culturally and psychologically for an awareness and articulation of what Lyotard calls *petits recits* or little narratives. Lyotard's own narrative about narratives then can be understood as telling the story of the incredulity that has shaken both grand narratives and modernity in general—an incredulity which he himself undoubtedly felt.

In this paper, I start with incredulity and from this go on to examine its relationship with another key concept of Lyotard's, that of ''performativity''. Right away I have to emphasise that performativity since it can take different forms with different significations is no one single thing. My intention here is to look at the role of performativity specifically in relation to knowledge production (or research), taking as my particular focus the place of research in the contemporary university. My argument has a number of strands. First, that Lyotard on the face of it deployed performativity to characterise those technologies (particularly information technologies) that bring about systemic efficiency or the optimisation of efficient performance. The dominant meaning conveyed (to an audience receptive to this meaning, it must be said), is that performativity is exclusively a cost-benefit calculus. Second, I contend, however, that another sense of performativity, perhaps a submerged sense, is discernible where performativity is intimately and substantively linked to *performance*. My question therefore is—how does performativity *perform*? I will argue in general terms that it is performance that conditions, from the start, the possibility of any and all performatives or to put it another way, as performance is itself enabled by performativity, so too performativity is realised through performance. Both senses of performativity and the linkage between them are clearly

manifested in the space of knowledge production in the contemporary university. I will attempt to show how this linkage is itself a feature of the semiotic process within which contemporary knowledge and knowledge production is located and which Lyotard himself recognised, albeit implicitly. The implication of this therefore is that Lyotard himself in performing his text manifests, and contributes to realising, both senses of performativity.

Performativity

In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (hereinafter referred to as PMC), Lyotard poses the question of how the production of knowledge is likely to be transformed by the demands of performativity. He argues that these demands have reconstructed modernist accounts of how knowledge is acquired, what it consists of, and what its purpose might be. With performativity, the role of knowledge becomes that of contributing to the best efficiency and effectiveness of a system, whatever the nature of that system may be, and the worthwhileness or value of the knowledge is evaluated on that basis. Performativity is a critical feature of incredulity where the questions asked of knowledge become not just – is it true? – or does it contribute to human progress? – but what use is it? – and how will it enhance the performance of people and organisations? For Lyotard, performativity means that truth is most likely to be found as the outcome of the best funded research because knowledge production requires big money and lots of technology. Stronach and MacLure (1997), follow Lyotard in highlighting the impact of performativity as compressing the space to do research, with a decline of traditional research cultures, and a corresponding demand for ''relevance'', immediate pay offs and a direct instrumental contribution to systemic efficiency and national productivity. One consequence of this is that ''success'' in research is now no longer predominantly defined by knowledge-producing academic communities functioning as the guardians of the grand narratives.

To put it in a contemporary discourse, performative knowledge now takes its place in the knowledge economy—a pride of place one might say, given that knowledge is now both input and output, a factor of production far more significant than any other. As such, knowledge becomes commodified and with this commodification, the nature of what constitutes knowledge, what is ''worthwhile'' knowledge and how and where it is to be produced is reconceptualised and articulated differently.

I want to argue, however, that this now well-argued position is perhaps too simplistic and does not do justice to the complexities of the contemporary situation. Looking at the matter differently, it is more productive to understand knowledge production as currently subject to dual trends, both of which have a common basis in performativity but which also have differently paradoxical effects. What I have in mind here is that knowledge production can said to be on the one hand, pulled towards closure and locked in to an economy of the same yet this situation co-exists with a seemingly opposing trend marked by an economy of difference, a greater diversity and complexity in contemporary knowledge production.

This paradoxical situation exists because alongside the performative commodification of knowledge, incredulity also contributes to an environment where epistemological and methodological boundary marking and policing is no longer quite so

potent. There is a proliferation and diversity of what is researchable, of ways of producing knowledge, of conceptions of what constitutes knowledge, and a multiplicity of sites of knowledge production. All of this can be seen as both concrete enactments of, and contributors to, what could be termed the *decentring* of knowledge. With this development there arises a complex relationship between decentring and performativity.

In universities there is a marked trend for knowledge production to be pulled towards closure and pushed towards a locking-in to an economy of the same—'less and less is it curiosity driven and funded out of general budgets which higher education is free to spend as it likes; more and more it is in the form of specific programs funded by external agencies for defined purposes' (Gibbons et al. 1994: 78). The emphasis switches from enquiry to application, from ideas to outcomes, and away from the traditional academic virtues of ''truth'' seeking and the ''disinterested'' pursuit of knowledge. As I have noted, research has become more and more geared towards ''pay-offs'', towards intellectual property which can be commercialised—these payoffs perceived as contributing to both national and institutional efficiency and competitiveness. As Lyotard foresaw, research, increasingly technology dependent, becomes costly and reliant on external funding where the winning of this type of funding, whether from public or private sources, is now considered the hall-mark of good research.

At the same time, universities are becoming more performative in another related sense, in that they conceive of themselves as needing to be more managerial and corporatist, and correspondingly less consensual and collegial. They see themselves as providing for ''consumers'', with a managerial discourse and an operating logic of accountability and ''excellence'' This particular emphasis on performativity has contributed to a trend where researchers are increasingly held accountable for what they do through various forms of research performance regimes. All this tends to strengthen an economy of the same.

Simultaneously, however, there is also at work an economy of difference where anything becomes potentially researchable and where knowledge is no longer limited or bounded by epistemological policing and disciplinary gate-keeping. For example, a great deal of research now goes on outside disciplinary communities and in sites other than the university. Noticeably, there is:

> an increased corporatization of the research and patent divisions of the university, including even closer ties to private companies across a range of collaborations, including endowed chairs, research and development grants, new campus buildings and laboratories, and the growth of hybrid ''alliances,'' spanning university, business, and public sector concerns (Burbules & Callister 2000: 274).

I mentioned earlier the significance of external funding. One aspect of this relates to the multiplicity of sources of external funding. As the state becomes more unable and unwilling to finance research out of block grants, funding from non-state sources becomes more significant. As Gibbons et al. (1994: 79) point out whilst the targeting of research through the use of market mechanisms leads to more ''mission-oriented research'' the ''greater pluralism of research funds [contributes] to intellectual diversity, *counteracting perhaps other prevailing trends*''. As universities gradually lose their status as primary producers of a particular kind of knowledge, they become part of a wider and globalised knowledge market, forced to compete with

RandD companies, consultants and think-tanks. Thus, research is no longer an activity reserved for a select group of academics. With the parallel growth of ''knowledge'' industries many now work in ways which incorporate a research dimension but where the worksite is no longer the university. Thus different kinds of knowledge are now being produced both within and outside universities. More and more research partnerships with government, industry, and other organisations are being forged. Even academics themselves are questioning conventional disciplines-sanctioned ways of doing research.

The connection between performativity and decentredness now starts to become discernible. Performativity plays a significant although complex and ambiguous role in subverting the very notion of knowledge as something that has to be validated through a disciplinary community and by a ''scientific'' epistemology and methodology. As Gibbons et al. (1994: 81) point out:

> Knowledge can no longer be regarded as discrete and coherent, its production defined by clear rules and governed by settled routines. Instead it has become a mixture of theory and practice, abstraction and aggregation, ideas and data. The boundaries between the intellectual world and its environment have become blurred...

To put it simply, with performativity knowledge both is and is not science as traditionally understood. There is an economy of the same and an economy of difference, with the co-existence of these intersecting economies having its basis in a performativity that is both closed and open. Furthermore, neither of these economies any longer finds legitimacy solely in grand narratives. Knowledge is increasingly ''legitimated'' by little narratives—interesting although not legitimating, albeit still powerful, stories.

Lyotard was prescient in pointing out that once knowledge is no longer an end in itself, its production ceases to be the exclusive responsibility of researchers in the academy and becomes as it were ''up for grabs'' epistemologically and within contexts of practice. Undoubtedly he did regard performativity as the villain of the contemporary moment and feared that its power, which he seemed to see in terms of a business dominated technological determinism, would produce a future of clearly dystopic dimensions—as Poster (1995: 92) argues he saw information technology and computer mediated communication as ''complicit with new tendencies towards totalitarian control, not toward a decentralised, multiple 'little narrativity' of postmodern culture''. As a consequence Lyotard did not anticipate and conceptualise the complex decentring which performativity has facilitated.

He did recognise that performativity *accompanies* a world of decentred knowledge but he failed to recognise that performativity is a *feature* of such a world. The point here is that rather than simply an accompaniment, it is precisely in conditions of decentredness that performativity flourishes. Thus, Lyotard misjudged the nature of the relationship between performativity and decentredness. Rather than binary opposites as he understood them they are more readily and usefully seen as interactive, with each the condition of possibility of the other.

A linkage therefore exists between incredulity, decentring and performativity. It is this linkage which has cleared the way for the foregrounding and articulation of different kinds of knowledge and knowledge production. One concrete manifestation

of this can be found in the distinctions between Mode 1 and Mode 2[1] knowledge regimes articulated by Gibbons et al. (1994) in another seminal text *The New Production of Knowledge* (hereinafter referred to as NPOK). They argue that Mode 2 is a new way of producing knowledge that is taking its place in importance alongside Mode 1—what would conventionally be considered ''scientific'' research and mainly found in universities and public research institutions. Mode 2, on the other hand, is produced and consumed outside of traditional university settings. It is articulated as the kind of knowledge needed to keep ahead in a competitive environment, an applied, specific and commodifiable knowledge—one oriented to the identification and solution of problems, specific to the context of application (the next problem will be different because the context will be different) and therefore transient. Mode 2 type knowledge is not answerable to ''truth'' in the sense that disciplines define truth nor is it answerable to traditional research paradigms and methodologies in terms of the processes by which knowledge is produced and hence ''validated''. The focus is on application rather than contemplation. As presented in NPOK, Mode 2 type knowledge has all the characteristics of decentred knowledge. Furthermore, it is articulated in terms of an opposition between an economy of the same and an economy of difference—even though it could be plausibly argued that Mode 1 and Mode 2 are co-existing and intersecting rather than separate and oppositional.

As I have noted, through the spread of incredulity, knowledge is more readily recognised as decentred. A space is opened for different kinds of knowledge such as Mode 2, knowledges which more resemble Lyotard's *petits recits*. The point I want to make then is that Mode 2 is itself a little narrative of this kind, narrated through NPOK, which is itself a little narrative, both a celebration as well as an instance of such knowledge. So the model of new modes of knowledge production that is presented is in effect *performative*. In arguing for the reality of a new mode of knowledge production, there is also a participation in its realization. To put it simply, NPOK constructs that which it situates itself as identifying or describing, a doing by saying. NPOK realises this ''new'' organization of knowledge with its clear distinction between Mode 1 and Mode 2. The ''message'' or meaning being communicated is that there is now an environment where knowledge is decentred, with NPOK an instance of that decentring—or to put it another way, NPOK is a *performance* of performativity that is both a contributor and a consequence of decentring. It performs the decentring of knowledge and by so doing foregrounds the distinction between Mode 1 and Mode 2, making it appear that they are really different and oppositional knowledge regimes. But perhaps more significantly, it is Mode 2 knowledge production that is especially foregrounded. NPOK is communicating certain meanings about Mode 2—that it is new, fresh, relevant and generally ''sexy''—and by communicating those meanings to an audience receptive to, and eager to consume these signifiers, it is bringing about the embedding of Mode 2 in contexts other than those from which it originally emerged and thereby giving it a potency which it hitherto has never had.

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[1] Mode 1 and Mode 2 refer to different ways of producing knowledge. Mode 1 is discipline based culturally concentrated knowledge produced mainly in universities. Mode 2 is socially distributed knowledge produced in the context of its application and thus in diverse sites.

Performance

Earlier, I argued that with performativity, knowledge production in universities is located in seemingly opposed yet also intersecting economies. These economies, of the same and of difference, do however have a common feature in that both are *sign* economies. Located within these sign economies, knowledge acquires a sign value alongside its substantive value. It assumes the characteristics of a commodity tradable in the knowledge market. It could be said for instance that universities produce and sell knowledge whilst at the same time "consuming" the signs with which knowledge is now endowed. This process is possible because commodities signify, they communicate meanings and these meanings function as markers of difference, communicating messages about relative position and worth. By consuming the signs with which the knowledge they produce is endowed, universities communicate or 'show' something about themselves and thus position themselves (and equally are themselves positioned) in relation to other universities, government, business and communities.

On the face of it, one would imagine that this "something" was to do with absolute amounts of money, for example from research grants or revenue streams from commercialisation or number of patents gained. It could also be argued, however, that there are other more significant things being communicated. I spoke earlier of the significance for universities of external funding where winning this funding is now considered the hall-mark of good research. Through this process messages are communicated about the standing or competitive position and hence prestige of the university. The amount won is of course important but its importance lies more in how it positions the university in the "league table" of "excellence". What is happening here is that the university is consuming the sign values which come with the winning of external funding and it is through this consumption that its status is projected. The amount of prestige accumulated through positioning is therefore more significant that the absolute amounts won—the latter is in a sense simply the means to the former. Funding, which used to be the means of doing research has therefore now become the end itself of research and most significantly the measure and sign of its value.

In this process, different sign values carry different kinds of prestige. Research council grants are important in positioning as a prestigious research university. Linkage and industry funded grants convey different messages. They position the university as no longer confined within its own walls but as now more "flexible", reaching out to the world outside and "value-adding" to that world—or to put it another way, making a significant contribution to the knowledge economy. The signs with which this kind of knowledge production is endowed act as a signifier of excellence in terms of relevance where this defines success in an environment fashioned through a competition that provides the mechanism for allocating both public and private resources.

I mentioned also that researchers in universities are increasingly held accountable for what they do through various forms of research performance assessment regimes. What is happening here is that researchers are making themselves "count" in relation to the measures of "excellence" defined in these regimes and are at the same time and by the same means, themselves held to account. Universities are being forced to make their research activities transparent or to put it another way,

they have to *demonstrate* the value of their research activities. Simply doing research is now no longer enough, it is also necessary to *enact* or perform accountability and relevance. Research performance assessment regimes can be seen therefore as a technology that responds to performativity's demand to "tell and show" to various audiences, the so-called "stakeholders" outside as well as within disciplines. Once again we can see a semiotic process at work since *showing* or *demonstrating* involves performance where signs are produced and consumed. Within a research performance assessment regime, signs project a public and "transparent" demonstration of accountability and in knowledge production there are now different "consuming" communities, including government and business, participating in the hitherto legitimating role of disciplinary (disciplining) communities.

At the same time, these "show and tell" regimes are also a means of fashioning that ambiguous contemporary figure, the "active researcher". As Ball (2000: 2–3) puts it in relation to researchers having to make themselves "count":

> it is the uncertainty and instability of being judged in different ways, by different means, through different agents; the bringing-off of performances—the flow of changing demands, expectations and indicators that make us continually accountable and constantly recorded... Are we doing enough? Are we doing the right thing? How will we measure up?

Ball goes on to point out that despite this anxiety, an anxiety rooted in the need to continually *perform*, there is nonetheless something very seductive about being ascribed excellence, being relevant, performing well, and having that *recognized*. For many, it is an opportunity to forge new and productive identities and subjectivities framed by the discourse of relevance and excellence. Researchers by performing therefore produce these signs as signifiers of their own positioning. A consequence of this is that through this semiotic process of performing, the very identity of the researcher is colonised (Edwards et al. 2004). Through performance, researchers are not only ascribed the status of "active researchers" they internalise this identity into their own subjectivity and by so doing realise the very assessment regimes to which they are subject.

Performance and performativity

In the contemporary university scene there are two forces at work. One is the demand for the full and transparent communication of performance by the university to the world outside; the other is the reconfiguration of knowledge as a commodity. Performativity is the intersection of communication and commodification, an intersection that has opened up a semiotic space wherein knowledge production takes place. As I have argued, it is a space of performance where signs are transmitted (produced) and received (consumed). Thus performativity implies and indeed requires performance for its realization. The performativity of knowledge production is demonstrated or enacted through *performance* and the performance is itself enabled by performativity (Edwards and Usher 2000: 93).

Looking at what I have written so far, I am conscious that my text has come a long way from Lyotard's sense of performativity as a cost-benefit calculus. I seem to have redefined performativity from a pragmatics of hard-headed calculation to a seemingly abstract semiotic process. Would Lyotard recognise such a redefinition or is it simply

a wild interpretation which has no grounding in the text of PMC? A number of points can be made about this. First, performativity as cost-benefit calculus has not been eliminated. The hard-headed calculation and the sign economy are not binary opposites but rather different sides of the same coin. This is certainly the case for knowledge production in the contemporary university. I have tried also to demonstrate this linkage through the example of NPOK where I argued that it not simply described the reality of a new mode of knowledge production, but also narrativised it into being, thus participating in its realization.

Second, I hinted earlier that Lyotard conveys a doubled sense of performativity. There is a sense of the performative as performance and as such located within the semiotic but it is a submerged sense. I want now to try and explicate this sense a bit further, to bring it to the surface as it were, by looking again at Lyotard's own narrative. Significantly, the full title of PMC includes the sub-title ''A *Report* on Knowledge''. I emphasise the word ''report'' because it conveys the strong message that PMC is a description of what is and what is likely to be what is. However, I pose the question—is PMC simply descriptive? One answer to this is that even though PMC reads descriptively there is nonetheless a prescriptive element to it—or to put it perhaps more accurately, it reads as a metaprescriptive for the language game of technology in an all-inclusive connected world of computer networks and databases. I have no doubt that PMC does convey this sense and it could be argued that it is *itself* a grand narrative where postmodernity's performativity replaces modernity's grand narratives of truth and progress.

This is obviously a paradoxical outcome and one which it is highly doubtful that Lyotard intended. However, meanings are not exhausted by intentions. My argument would be that he wanted to tell a *petit recit* about petits recits but the dominant sense of performativity which is conveyed in PMC produces the opposite outcome, contrary perhaps to his intention. An example therefore of a text deconstructing itself. The petits recits (or language games) themselves become subject to performativity but as I have already argued, performativity is realised through performance. Here is where Lyotard's different (although related) senses of performativity come into play because language games must be performative—they realise that of which they speak—and are themselves realised through their performance. So borrowing from speech-act theory (Austin 1962), we can perhaps resolve the apparent paradox by saying that PMC is both constative—it states propositions and conveys information—*and* performative—it does things or performs actions.

In effect I am saying that PMC is itself a performance and as such conveys powerful performative meanings to an audience not unresponsive to those messages, either then or now. Comes the moment, comes the man (sic)—or is it rather, in this case, comes the man (sic), comes the moment? By suggesting this I am not putting forward a heroic figure theory of history but rather highlighting the significance of Lyotard's performativity in realising as well as describing the postmodern moment. His concept of performativity is realised through the ''performance'' of *The Postmodern Condition*. The latter not only describes that condition—incredulity, little narratives, and of course performativity—but *enacts* it and by so doing participates in its realisation—a realisation that is itself ongoing in its actuality and its effects. It is a realisation that has enabled the production and consumption of NPOK, itself a performance conveying further powerful performative meanings and which has had a profound impact upon the development of a semiotic knowledge production

regime in universities. Perhaps therefore it is Lyotard's performance which could be seen as his most significant legacy.

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Biography

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