

Discourse, Theatrical Performance, Agency: The Analytic Force of “Performativity” in Education

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“I PERFORM”

In educational theory, as in other domains of theory, the popularity of a particular concept can wax and wane, and every so often, a (seemingly) new concept emerges that captures imaginations. The concept of “performativity” is a case in point.¹ In discussions with students and other colleagues I have noticed a growing interest in, but also confusion about, what feminist philosopher and queer theorist Judith Butler means by “performative” and “performativity.” People say things such as, “Performativity means that identity is not an essence, but that *I perform my identity*.” They understand correctly that Butler’s conception of identity is nonessentialist, but misinterpret identity as *performed by the subject*. That is, they understand correctly that performativity is related to the fluidity of identity, but they interpret that relation in a theatrical sense: “Identity is fluid because *I can perform* different identities in different contexts.” Although there are connections between theatrical performance and the concept of performativity as used by Butler, the reading of performativity as performance *by the subject* glosses over the way Butler’s work reconceptualizes agency.² It is this reconceptualization, I will argue, that has important implications for education. In this essay I will retrieve and analyze the differences and points of connection between the theatrical and discursive conceptions of performativity. This analysis will illuminate what Butler’s discursive conception of performativity and the attendant conception of agency have to offer educational theorists. I will close by analyzing the educational issue of bullying through this lens of discursive performativity.

Before I get underway, I should note that I am not setting out on a course of conceptual analysis in the Anglo analytic tradition. I acknowledge and accept the arguments Jacques Derrida has provided about the necessary impurity of conceptual boundaries, about slippage and excess of meaning. Although there may be a desire to “oppose rigorously two concepts or the concepts of two essences, and to purify such a demarcating opposition of all contamination, of all participatory sharing, of all parasitism, and of all infection,” such pure conceptual demarcations are impossible.³ This means that Butler’s concept of “performativity” cannot be unequivocally distinguished and separated off from other related concepts, whether they go under the name “performativity” or not. The signifier “performative” has no single meaning that could be called “true” or “original” and is always open to (intentional or unintentional) reinscription with new meaning. As Derrida explains, the origin and context of a sign, whether written or spoken, are never fully determinable.⁴ This does not mean, however, that there is no point to inquiring into the genealogy of a concept. Derrida’s own frequent use of etymological analysis and his exploration of concepts through synonyms, homonyms, and homophones suggest otherwise.

In this essay I aim to unravel the “lines of force” or “knotted trajectories” that “semantically traverse” the word performativity,⁵ especially as understood by those who subscribe to the interpretation summarized above, that “performativity means that *I perform my identity*.” The first conceptual trajectory runs through performance as theater; the second runs through the work of John Austin and Derrida. These trajectories come together in Butler’s work on performativity, but before I explore their connections I will consider them separately.

PERFORMATIVITY IN THE THEATRICAL SENSE

Drama scholar Janelle Reinelt has undertaken an inquiry into the points of connection and departure between performativity and theatricality. She speaks of “three separate but related scenes of development” of the concept of performativity, similar to the “lines of force” or “knotted trajectories” that Derrida speaks of. Two of the “scenes of development” are related to theatrical and cultural performance, from “performance art” as a subset of theatrical performance, to performances in sports and politics;⁶ the third scene of development is the philosophical scene of speech act theory, which I will discuss in the next section. The sense of performativity as related to theatrical or cultural performance is not irrelevant to educational settings. One might coherently claim, for instance, that “teaching is performative” in the sense that teaching is a type of performance and being a teacher is not unlike being an actor. Even if one does not conceive of teaching simply as standing in front of an audience and performing one’s proverbial song and dance, one might agree that teaching requires the enactment of a variety of roles. One might in fact say that the performative qualities of teaching, in this sense, have become more important as students increasingly expect to be entertained in class.

Some scholars use the concept of performativity in this cultural-theatrical sense to think about teaching. Lynn Fels, for example, is interested in “the learning that becomes possible through the creative critical interplay that is performance.”⁷ She provides examples of drama education to stress that all teaching unfolds as embodied and enacted responses, in the moment and often not according to the tidiness of a lesson plan. Fels also uses “performative inquiry” in education more generally, as “a mode of inquiry in which the researcher or educator engages in performative explorations with participants as a means of investigation and learning.”⁸ “Performative explorations” here refer to explorations that make use of dramatic enactments and improvisations.

Although the concept of performativity as Butler uses it is not entirely disconnected from this theatrical “line of force,” it is not, in my opinion, the line of force that gives Butler’s work its analytic sharpness. By associating “performativity” solely with cultural-theatrical performance, educational scholars are not tapping into the analytic potential of the discursive line of force that informs Butler’s conception of performativity most powerfully. It is to this discursive heritage that I now turn.

PERFORMATIVITY IN THE DISCURSIVE SENSE

In order to understand performativity in the discursive sense, it is important to trace the concept back to the work of English philosopher Austin. Austin introduced

the term “performative” to refer to a particular kind of speech: the kind that does not report or describe an action, but rather commits the action. In the case of a performative utterance, “in saying what I do, I actually perform that action.”⁹ In saying “I invite you for dinner tomorrow,” I actually issue the invitation; in saying “I promise I will be there by eight,” I actually make the promise. During the course of his inquiry into performatives, Austin discovered that many performatives do not take this obvious form of the first person singular; they are disguised. For instance, when a waiter says to a guest, “This plate is very hot,” this implies the explicit performative “I warn you that this plate is very hot.”

Austin concludes that more utterances have performative qualities than might appear at first glance, but adds that a distinction can and should be made between the ways in which utterances have effects.¹⁰ The utterance “Hands up!” for example, can have a range of effects, depending on the context. If a police officer has been chasing me, and yells “Hands up!” this will have the effect of making me nervous, perhaps even afraid. If a dance teacher has been giving me instructions for the positioning of various body parts, “Hands up!” is not going to make me nervous or afraid at all. Austin referred to such effects as “perlocutionary”: *by saying* “Hands up!” the police officer made me feel nervous, whereas the dance teacher just made me concentrate harder on the position of my hands. Both the police officer and the dance teacher, however, *in saying* “Hands up!” issued an order. This second type of effect Austin called “illocutionary.” Illocutionary acts rely on the force of *convention*, which dictates that in certain circumstances, the issuing of a particular utterance is itself the performance of an act.

Butler explains that “the illocutionary speech act is itself the deed that it effects; the perlocutionary merely leads to certain effects that are not the same as the speech act itself.”¹¹ Butler’s work focuses especially on illocutionary effects, but her work differs from Austin’s in two ways. First, where Austin consistently discusses “utterances,” Butler considers speech among other forms of discourse that all have performative force; in this, she follows Derrida’s critique of Austin’s privileging of speech over writing (phonocentrism).¹² Second, where Austin discussed single utterances, Butler focuses on performativity as cumulative power. Single discursive acts with illocutionary force are relatively rare, as they rely on the particular authority of the speaker or writer: the priest who can effectively “declare” a man and woman husband and wife, the queen who can effectively “name” a ship, and so on. The prime example of performative force of an utterance by a speaker with “special authority” comes from Louis Althusser, who discusses the interpellation of the subject by divine address.¹³ Butler points out that in Althusser’s argument, “power is understood *on the model* of the divine power of naming, where to utter is to create the effect uttered. Human speech rarely mimes that divine effect” (*ES*, 32). Most illocutionary force does not stem from such single acts that are easily recognizable as performatives, but rather from ordinary discourse that conforms to convention that has been built up, over time, by repetition and the sedimentation of layer upon layer of discourse.

Derrida introduces the terms “citationality” and “iterability” to explain the processes of repetition and sedimentation that produce and maintain convention:

Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a “coded” or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as conforming with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a “citation”?¹⁴

If, in my discursive act, I am not, at least implicitly, citing, referring to an earlier instance in which this discourse was used, if there is no convention making that discourse recognizable, my speech or writing (or whatever form of discourse I am using) will have no performative effect. Discourse works because it is recognizable as a *citation*, a repetition in a new context of an earlier instance. The citations, however, are not exact copies or replicas of earlier instances, but *iterations*, repetitions that alter. Each time discourse is repeated, it is taken from one context and used in another. Over time, shifts occur in the meaning and effects of discourse. Although it generally takes many repetitions for a significant change to sediment, change is possible and does occur, and this iterability, this possibility for change in the repetitions of discourse, can be used strategically.

Butler’s crucial insight into discursive performativity is that “performativity is...not a singular ‘act,’ for it is always a reiteration of a norm or a set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition.”¹⁵ In other words, rather than as the creative power of a single utterance by a sovereign speaker, performativity is better understood as the *cumulative* power of repeated speech, writing, and other discourse. The way in which particular groups are portrayed in (or remain absent from) advertising, school texts, sitcoms, legal discourse, and so on is performative: it cumulatively *produces* the identity categories it seems merely to describe. Discursive performativity means not that I, as autonomous subject, “perform” my identity the way an actor performs a role, but rather that I, as subject, *am performatively produced* by the discourse in which I participate. This perspective changes the ways in which the development of students’ agency is regarded. Before I discuss this in more detail, however, let me gather together the theatrical and discursive lines of force informing the concept of performativity.

THE INTERSECTION OF “KNOTTED TRAJECTORIES”

I have distinguished the theatrical and discursive “knotted trajectories” leading to the concept “performativity,” but these trajectories intersect at several points. Performativity in the theatrical sense and performativity in the discursive sense are not mutually exclusive. Reinelt also notes,

Although seeming to be separate sites of struggle within the rubrics of performance and performativity, these three sites are often interwoven. The poststructural critique of the sign, of representation, and of the subject is the philosophical backdrop to performance theory’s concern with performance processes and its deliberate rejection of totalized/completed meanings.¹⁶

When theorists such as Derrida and Butler insist that a discursive act has effects because it repeats, more or less faithfully, previous discursive acts that have had

effects in certain contexts, they articulate a mechanism that helps explain the effects of theatrical performance as well. Theatrical performance itself is a discursive practice, and both senses of performativity are pertinent to the analysis of theatrical discourse.

In this context it is more than a little ironic, as Reinelt notes, that “Austin wanted to exclude theatrical utterances from his conception of performatives.”¹⁷ Austin had suggested, “a performative utterance will...be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy.”¹⁸ In such circumstances the utterance would be merely secondary or “parasitic,” derived from ordinary speech, and its effects hindered by this secondary nature. In response to this, Derrida suggests that “what Austin excludes as anomaly, exception, ‘non-serious,’ citation (on stage, in a poem, or a soliloquy) is the determined modification of a general citationality — or rather, a general iterability — without which there would not even be a ‘successful’ performative.”¹⁹ In other words, the secondary or citational nature of theatrical discourse is not an exception but rather a structural feature of all discourse.

Perhaps the most obvious — and for some, also, the most confusing — intersection of the theatrical and discursive lines of force informing the concept of performativity is Butler’s writing on drag. Nikki Sullivan observes that Butler’s account of drag was the aspect of her work on performativity that “was so quickly and eagerly taken up by cultural critics and performers” that it eclipsed the discursive heritage of the concept.²⁰ The emphasis on drag as the exemplary instance of performativity led to misinterpretations similar to the one I cited at the beginning of this paper, that “performativity means that *I perform my identity*.” Sullivan calls this “a voluntarist model of identity because it assumes that it is possible to freely and consciously create one’s own identity.”²¹ Although some claim that Butler herself is to blame for creating this ambiguity,²² Butler has in various places explicitly distanced performativity from performance. In *Bodies that Matter*, for instance, she writes that “performativity is neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation; nor can it be simply equated with performance.”²³ So how do the theatrical and discursive lines of force traverse drag?

Drag performance can be considered a type of discourse, like speech, writing, photography, and so on. Drag is a performance (in the theatrical sense) that highlights the fact that gender is performatively produced (in the discursive sense) through citation and iteration. In Butler’s words, “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself — as well as its contingency.”²⁴ Some have argued that drag typically reinforces the heterosexual binary and, when it does, is not subversive. I would emphasize that all iteration is both repetition (imitation) and alteration (change), and that all alteration also reinforces that which it seeks to displace. I agree with Butler that what makes drag particularly interesting is that it is a theatrical performance that illustrates how “hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations.”²⁵ Drag thus uses theatrical performance as a form of strategic resignification, a possibility that theatrical performance has in common with other forms of discourse that are always

both cited and iterable. One might say that drag, and theatrical performance in general, is “performative performance” in the same way that Derrida referred to his own lectures and books as “performative performances.”²⁶ His texts are performances in the theatrical sense, but these performances are performative in the sense that they not only *mean* something, but also *do* something.

I have noted that the statement “teaching is performative” can mean that teaching is a performance, an enactment of a role or a series of roles. Alternatively, drawing on the discursive sense, “teaching is performative” can express the idea that teaching is a discursive practice, and that the discourse used in teaching has performative force in the sense that it contributes to the repetition and alteration of meanings and effects that the discourse brings forth. But there is a third way in which “teaching is performative” can be intended and interpreted, which draws on both the theatrical and the discursive senses: the act of teaching is an embodied performance, and this embodied performance is itself a discursive act that has performative effects through its “unfaithful” citation and openness to further iteration. In this sense, the possibilities of “drag” performances of teaching, contesting the imitative discursive structures of teacher identity or of the curriculum, are worth exploring.

PERFORMATIVITY AND THE RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF AGENCY

The critical and underused contribution of Butler’s conception of performativity to education is its reconceptualization of agency. As I wrote earlier, discursive performativity means that a subject is *performatively produced* by the discourse in which he or she participates. Some believe that in Butler’s account of this performatively produced subject, the subject loses all agency. However, discursive constitution is not discursive determinism, and the subject derives agency from the very discursive processes in and through which it is cast.

Whereas some critics mistake the critique of sovereignty [of the subject] for the demolition of agency, I propose that agency begins where sovereignty wanes. The one who acts (who is not the same as the sovereign subject) acts precisely to the extent that he or she is constituted as an actor and, hence, operating within a linguistic field of enabling constraints from the outset. (*ES*, 16)

The subject becomes subject only through being subjected to discourses not of its own making or choosing, but derives agency from the appropriation and unfaithful repetition of the discourse by which it is subjected. Precisely because discourse is not a stable monolith but rather a constellation of discursive events that always contain the possibility of failure and subversive reappropriation (iterability), can Butler claim, “Agency exceeds the power by which it is enabled” (*ES*, 15).

If the subject is both constrained and enabled by the discourses in which it emerges as subject, then in order to understand the possibilities for agency, the subject has to understand the genealogy and functioning of these discourses. Since the development of agency is at the heart of education, I would argue that education generally ought to be more attentive to the inherited nature of subjectivity. Educators must conceive of students, and students of themselves, not as autonomous agents, nor as passive recipients of tradition, but rather as subjects whose actions and identities both depend on, and can make changes to, discourses that precede and

exceed them. This reconceptualization of agency has implications throughout education, but the example of bullying and hate speech in educational contexts may illustrate these implications more clearly.

USING PERFORMATIVITY TO UNDERSTAND BULLYING DIFFERENTLY

Much of the attention given to bullying in the media, teacher education curriculum, and professional development sessions demonstrates the individualizing tendencies recognizable elsewhere (for example, in character education). Rather than considering bullying as a social system in which schools and school discourse as a whole participate, the attention goes to the diagnosis and rehabilitative treatment of the individual bully. Through the analytic lens of discursive performativity, the bully can be seen not as singular agent but as agent who uses discourse already in circulation. Butler's insights about the performativity of hate speech are instructive. About racist speech, she writes,

This phantasmatic production of the culpable speaking subject...casts subjects as the only agents of power. The racial slur is always cited from elsewhere, and in the speaking of it, one chimes in with a chorus of racists, producing at that moment the linguistic occasion for an imagined relation to an historically transmitted community of racists. In this sense, racist speech does not originate with the subject, even if it requires the subject for its efficacy, as it surely does. (*ES*, 80)

Society is so eager to find an individual it can hold accountable for what must surely be an exceptional breakdown of an otherwise healthy racial system, that it does not acknowledge that the racial slur is cited, repeated from elsewhere where it was already available. The individual who reiterates the racial slur shares the responsibility for keeping this discourse in circulation, but does not carry it alone.

Bullying in North American schools today frequently involves homophobic slurs. Although the bully is undeniably responsible, it is important not to take the bully as isolated agent or as source; the particular discourse was already available, as was the context in which the particular discourse constitutes harm. It is relatively easy for schools to put the blame for the proliferation of homophobic discourse entirely on the shoulders of individual bullies; it is much more uncomfortable for schools to address the way in which the discourses that it circulates help maintain this homophobic context. The absence of same-sex families from its curriculum materials, the off-hand sexist comment of a teacher to a male student ("If you don't smarten up, I'm going to put you on the girls' team!"), and the unquestioned assumption about the composition of couples on prom night all help keep homophobic discourse in circulation, available for the next bully to cite.

One of the ways in which teachers respond to homophobic slurs is by banning the offending terms in question. Based on Butler's account of performativity as cumulative, it might seem reasonable to take certain language out of circulation and prevent further accumulation of harmful performative force. Such bans, however, are bound to fail: teachers and administrators do not have full control over the discourse their students use in hallway speech, bathroom graffiti, internet chat rooms, and so on, nor can the school seal itself off from the proliferation of the condemned words elsewhere in society. Moreover, although she recognizes the

harm slurs can do, Butler warns of the negative effects of banning harmful discourse, the most notable of which is that it impedes the agency of the victim to add subversive iterations to the homophobic discourse (*ES*, 93). An illustrative example of this was provided by the young man who, when told by a classmate that his sweater was “so gay,” responded in an incredulous tone, “Really? This is a boy sweater that has sex with other boy sweaters?” Although I presume this recent high school graduate was not an expert in speech act theory, he understood that by making use of the layered history of the word “gay,” and humorously doubling back to an earlier, more literal iteration, he could deny his interlocutor the pleasure of seeing the intended harm take effect.

The voluntarist misinterpretation of performativity plays into the interpretation of bullying as an individual rather than a systemic problem and focuses attention on the victim. Especially gay male youth are commonly accused of theatricality, of ostentatiously “acting out” their identity. “If we perform our identities, why don’t you tone your performance down a little?” Or a variation: “I don’t care that you’re gay, but why do you have to flaunt it?” The discursive conception of performativity provides an answer to such ways of thinking and speaking, as it can focus on the repeated and ritualized nature of verbal and visual discourses of masculinity. It can explain how single acts that seem “normal” today — acts that, typically, don’t “seem” at all, because they escape our attention — conceal or dissimulate the conventions of which they are repetitions.²⁷ Heterosexual men commonly “flaunt” their heterosexuality, but this behavior is not read as “flaunting” because it is camouflaged by the gender conventions to which it conforms. Butler’s work on discursive performativity gives educators a way of understanding that not all students have access to discursive conventions that will make their discursive acts — in the form of speech, writing, fashion, body language, or otherwise — socially intelligible and read as “normal.” It also gives educators a way of understanding that all discourse inevitably contributes to either the reinforcement or change of discursive conventions. Much attention has gone to individual racist, homophobic, and other slurs, and much less to the discursive condition that makes such slurs effective: the fact that they conform to recognizable conventions. Instead of focusing on individual discursive acts that stand out, educators would do better to expose and interrupt the ways in which these recognizable conventions are reinforced by the discourses that circulate in educational contexts.

1. I will not discuss Jean François Lyotard’s use of “performativity” as economic productivity. His use of the term as criterion or prescription does not seem to be misinterpreted as commonly as Judith Butler’s use of the term as discursive feature.

2. Peggy Phelan and other “performance studies” theorists also bring together the discursive and theatrical strands of the concept of performativity. Although Phelan’s work is used by some educational scholars (for example, Elizabeth Ellsworth), I will not discuss it in this essay.

3. Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 41.

4. Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” in *Limited Inc.*, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 1–23.

5. Jacques Derrida, "Demeure: Fiction and Testimony," trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg, in *The Instant of My Death / Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, eds. Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 25.
6. Janelle Reinelt, "The Politics of Discourse: Performativity Meets Theatricality," *SubStance* 31, no. 2–3 (2002), 201–2.
7. Lynn Fels, "Complexity, Teacher Education and the Restless Jury: Pedagogical Moments of Performance," *Complicity: An International Journal of Complexity and Education* 1, no. 1 (2004), 78.
8. *Ibid.*, 79.
9. John L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 222.
10. John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).
11. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 3. This work will be cited as *ES* in the text for all subsequent references.
12. Derrida, "Signature Event Context."
13. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 1994).
14. Derrida, "Signature Event Context," 18.
15. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 12.
16. Reinelt, "Politics of Discourse," 205.
17. *Ibid.*, 203.
18. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 20–21.
19. Derrida, "Signature Event Context," 17.
20. Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 86.
21. *Ibid.*, 87.
22. For instance, Moya Lloyd, "Performativity, Parody, Politics," *Theory, Culture and Society* 16, no. 2 (1999), 199.
23. Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 95.
24. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 75.
25. Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 125.
26. Jacques Derrida, "'I Have a Taste for the Secret,'" trans. Giacomo Donis, in Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 65.
27. Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 12.