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Saving the teacher's soul: exorcising the terrors of performativity

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In this paper I frame the totalizing dominance of performativity in educational arenas in terms of its effects on professional thinking and attitudes. The problem is that the education professional's cognition ends up artificially obsessed with defined performance indicators and closed by default to the fluidity that should accompany reflective design practice. To mitigate this state of affairs, I propose that educators be encouraged to playfully consider non-performative goals, and that institutions can even welcome insincere or experimental consideration of non-performative educational goals. Such solutions may also correct excessively performative cultures outside educational contexts.

Keywords: performativity; design cognition; psychology of design; decision-making; professionalism; foolishness

Educational professionals, especially teachers, are designers. In spite of political will to turn education and teaching into a (social-)scientifically guided affair – useful though this may be for purposes of rhetorical accountability – the fact remains that good teaching has just as much of an affinity with art. If it is to be scientific then it is a science of the artificial (Simon 1996). It is (good) *design,* by which I mean, following Herbert Simon's (1996) definition, the activity which aims to alter a state of affairs into a preferred one – and that better characterized as a discipline (Cross 2001, 2007) than a science. Teaching aims to transform a situation into a preferred one, centrally, it might appear, in the form of a preferred student who is more knowledgeable, more skilled, more enlightened, etc. Teachers, in turn, are therefore designers. The terrors of performativity, which plays up the importance of measurable performance goals, can affect teachers' design cognition in ways that are undesirable.

This paper explores the ways this might occur and proposes policy technologies of foolishness to mitigate these effects. In this paper, my references to designing and designers are to designing and designers in the educational profession. Yet these remarks will apply just as well to professionals in other fields, such as in business or in government, where measurable outcomes are performative indicators of professional achievement.

Performativity: policy technologies of reason

In several related and highly influential papers, Stephen J. Ball has identified what he calls the 'terrors performativity' (2003, 216) in educational institutions across the UK. Scholars point out that the trend towards performativity is also true of educational systems beyond the UK (Tan 2008; Ng 2008; Tan 2005). Such terrors of performativity result from related policy technologies of performativity, together with the market and managerialism – all clearly exploitative policy technologies of reason (March 2006). Ball describes the policy technology of performativity as follows:

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> Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgments, comparisons and displays as a means of incentive, control, attrition and change – based on regards 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 judgment. (Ball 2003, 216)

In essence, policy technologies of performativity define performance indicators and evaluate members of the organization based on their capacity to fulfill these indicators; they 'engender the terrors of performativity' (ibid.). This paper is less concerned with the contexts in which the terrors of performativity exist than it is with the terrors of performativity in itself, and exploring ways to address it, wherever it exists. Addressing it, however, begins with the specification of the problem.

The frames of terror

Ball laments the totalizing and terroristic dominance of performativity, which he argues is displacing the values of teachers (Ball 2003, 216). He also criticizes the performative in the service of markets and global economic competition (Ball 2003, 226; see also 2004). Instead of analyzing the totalizing and terroristic dominance of performativity from a socio-economic point of view, I will reframe the problem of the terrors of performativity in a way that is of interest to designers and design studies. There are two problems, both the sides of the same coin, and both undesirable for design as a whole. Firstly, from the point of view of epistemology, the terrors of performativity irrationally restrict 'designerly cognition', which is the deliberative logic that guides any activity aiming to transform a situation into a preferred one. Secondly, from the ontological point of view, the terrors of performativity irrationally restrict the constitution of designer identities. It fatalistically determines cognitive processes and identity constructs which otherwise could be fluid and emergent. In sum, the terrors of performativity imprison the designer's mind and soul.

Unscientific designerly ways of knowing

The terrors of performativity privileges measurable outcome goals, often in the service of the economy. In this way it refocuses the designer's cognition away from other kinds of goals that educational designerly ways of knowing can otherwise aim at (March 2006, 206). The result is that the designer's cognitive trajectory is guided to aim merely at what one might call the horizontal, transitive dimensions, geared towards the production of these visible, measurable outcomes (Ball 2003, 216).

This lowers the professional standards of educators just as it cultivates unscientific designerly ways of knowing, diminishing the scientific competence of educational professionals as designers. By the 'science' of the design discipline I mean to include only the best, most rigorous and most defensible accounts of design thinking (Cross 2007; Simon 1996) and that science reminds us that designerly ways of knowing, fluid and constructive as it is (Chua 2009), includes the possibility of aiming for a variety of *other* goals besides outcome oriented measurable goals promoted by the performance indicators under the culture of performativity. Some of such *other* goals are intransitive (meaning that the benefits are not external to the agent), and can include the construction of one's ontological self through autonomous and authentic activity (Chua and Sison 2008), educational knowledge and insight considered valuable in itself (see Simon 1996) or some form of spiritual insight into the life of an educator and the pursuit of that same spirituality through one's professional activity (see Chua 2008a). Some of these other goals include intended ends that are transitive (meaning benefits that are in objects outside the agent) but are

not well captured by the measurement criteria endorsed by the official performance indicators, for example, our authentic concern and promotion of student mental well-being; the sincere assistance, support and care we offer to our colleagues without any other agendas, further culminating in a mutually caring fraternity; or the better world we hope for and occasionally realize through the education of the next generation which human rights education, for instance, pursues (Chua 2006).

One needs to grasp precisely in what sense and why such linear design thinking fails to be scientific. Readers should note that I am using the words 'science' and 'scientific' in an unconventional way. A current notion of what is 'science' or 'scientific' refers exclusively to what is backed up in corroboration by empirical evidence. This is not what I mean by science; rather I employ the word as it has been conceptualized by Nigel Cross (2001) in the design studies literature, drawing on Herbert Simon's (1996) writings. By 'science' Simon referred to a subject matter that was critically developed and defended with rigor. In the case of design then, a *science* of design would be a carefully worked out and defensible account of what is involved in designing: 'a body of intellectually tough, analytic, partly formalizable, partly empirical, teachable doctrine about the design process' (Simon 1996, 113). For Simon particularly, this translates into the logic that should guide the designing activity.

If so, then what we have before us, under the terrors of performativity, is the constriction of deliberative logic that falls short of these best ways of designing, or of the 'scientific' versions of design thinking. It is design thinking that is bridled: merely linear and technical. This narrows how the designer's epistemology might proceed. It shrinks what is possible in design thinking. Good professional/design thinking, on the other hand, contrasts with such an exclusive concern with measurable transitive outcomes. It does not despise these goals, but acknowledges that the design trajectory can be aimed at *other* goals besides these, particularly intransitive ones relating to the authentic and free construction of one's identity, some of which emerge during design practice (Simon 1996).

Now the science of design does not say that one necessarily needs to aim at non-performative goals. But what it does reject is the *default* obsession with those particular goals measured by the performance indicators to the complete disregard for other goals, to the point that the latter does not feature even as a possibility, even if it is not always aimed at intentionally (Chua and Juurikkala 2008; Chua and Sison 2008; Simon 1996). The failure is not that our educational designers fail to aim for these other goals. Were such focus on measurable goals under the performance indicators *by choice* it would have been a less contentious form of design cognition – after all, the fact that design *can* aim at these *other* goals does not necessarily imply it *must* aim at such goals. The failure is that they are not even open to the possibility of these other goals besides the ones captured by the performance indicators, but are by thoughtless and unreflective default aimed exclusively at the these goals captured by the performance indicators.

This kind of design thinking is dwarfed and deformed. It is likened to a boy bred by wolves who for all his life never thought he could stand straight and walk on his feet, and had to crawl around on all fours. Some form of educational correction is required to alert him to the possibility of walking upright – for his crawling on all fours is not the result of informed choice but of epistemic failures.

The struggle over the professional's soul

There is another way of characterizing the harmfulness of the terrors of performativity. Borrowing from Stephen Ball (2003) we can describe what is at stake here as the struggle over the teaching professional's soul. By the 'soul' I do not mean the ontic or metaphysical soul, but the

phenomenological self, experienced as one's own cognitive consciousness. The soul here refers to everything that one collects together as an answer in response to the self-reflexive question, 'Who am I?' and is signified by what we ordinarily speak of as 'I'. It is constituted, amongst other things, by the cognitions one has – what I experience in my consciousness. As such, the 'I' or the soul can be constituted richly, or narrowly, depending on the kinds of cognitions that are available. One struggles over the soul, just as one struggles over the kinds of cognitions made available or cultivated in the professional.

As the culture of performativity fully dominates the cognitive structures of the professional, the professional soul is accordingly constituted by thinking that is by default narrowly focused on these performance goals: 'I am someone who should fulfill these performances, period'. As Usher (2006) puts it, 'the very identity of the [professional] is colonized… They internalize this identity into their own subjectivity' (286). Contrariwise, then, the professional soul might be constituted in much richer, broader, fluid ways: 'Besides someone interested in fulfilling the performance indicators, I also see myself achieving these *other* goals, including these other ways of being, such as my own authentic self-constitution (as a…)…etc'; or else: 'I am someone focused on achieving the performance indicators, having chosen to focus on these recognizing that there are other goals besides these worth achieving'.

Exorcising the terrors of performativity

Addressing the terroristic dominance of performativity will require an exorcism, to draw a metaphor from the Roman Catholic ritual. The metaphor is apt for several reasons.

Firstly, it is probably a long drawn and difficult process. For the dominance of performativity is very difficult to expel; the premises that problematize it need to be derived from a different discourse – one that the participants in the terrors of performativity have little access to. Therefore participants find their actions constantly reinforced by the dominant discourse. So long as the discourse is internally consistent, there is little else that one might appeal to in order to justify deviation (compare Chua 2008b) Hence the *status quo* of the terrors of performativity reinforces its presence, and is generally immune to challenges (see Lyotard 1988).

Therefore, and secondly, the teacher's cognitive soul has been taken possession of by the performative discourse, which invalidates differing forms of cognitive patterns, such as those aimed at intransitive goals. The teacher has no mind or voice of her own apart from the discourse (including warrants and vocabularies) of performativity; the terrors of performativity speaks on her behalf. Ball calls this a form of 'ventriloquism' (Ball 2003, 218). Exorcising the terrors of performativity is 'saving the teacher's professional soul'. Less poetically, it is raising academic and professional standards by broadening irrationally muted design cognition and developing the professional's designerly ways of knowing so that it is scientific.

Thirdly, like a real exorcism, it is likely to be met with resistance *by those to whom the solution is applied*, unlike say the case of medical consultation, where the patient yearns for the aid of the physician. Ironically, it is not those who are frustrated that need to be saved; rather those who unreflectively thrive in the terror performativity are those that need rescuing. Those who suffer under that system or eventually leave it are, ironically, those who are healthy: they recognize that the dominant performative discourse does not exhaust all the design possibilities and design cognitions that are rationally available and valid. Therefore, those who dwell unreflectively in the terrors of performativity are likely to find any solution – directed specifically at them – pointless intrusions. Further, because the terrors of performativity warrants their deliberative cognition and, through the related system, reinforces these deliberations, there is a strong sense of haughty self-righteousness, making their resistance bold and contemptuous.

The exorcism: policy technologies of foolishness

Exorcising the terrors of performativity is itself an act of design. We are hoping to engineer behavior: to generate the capacity to arrive at design thinking that is more fluid than that which exists in the terrors of performativity. The culture of performativity is driven by *exploitation,* meaning, the application and use of strategies in order to get things done; during exploitation what is to be done – one's goals – has been determined. In order to mitigate its dominance, our task is to introduce some measure of *exploration* of new possible design goals, including those relating to the constitution of the professionals' own soul (March 2006).

My proposal draws on James G. March's work in decision engineering. He writes:

> Suppose decision-making is treated as a way of creating preferences and identities at the same time as preferences and identities are treated as a basis for decisions and their justification. In order to use decision making as a conscious basis for constructing the self, decision-makers have to combine logics of consequence and appropriateness with a technology of foolishness. They need to think about action now as being taken in terms of a set of unknown future preferences or identities. They need ways to do things for which they currently have no good reason. In that sense, at least, they need sometimes to act before they think. (March 1994, 262)

Under the spell of the terrors of performativity, the designer's cognition is obsessively focused on fixed goals. But the spell may be broken by what March calls policy technologies of foolishness, i.e., a series of techniques for getting the agent to act before he thinks – a seeming act of folly – to open his mind to new goals not previously considered under the dominant discourse of performativity (see March 1972, 1978, 1982, 1994, 2006). Here one develops such policy directives not with a view to having teachers achieve the performance targets, but to have them experience or grasp consequences as new desirable goals which could not be articulated and validated under the performative discourse. Drawing from March, I will suggest a cluster of such policy technologies.

Firstly, a policy technology of foolishness might be the promotion, welcome and acceptance of (transitional) *hypocrisy* (cf. March 1978, 1994). In spite of the terrors of performativity, educational institutions and its participants (esp. leaders) will inevitably represent themselves in ways that feature valued educational outcomes other than those highlighted in the performance indicators. Were it otherwise there would be public outcry: politically correct rhetoric demands that one acknowledges, as public citizens not possessed by the terrors of performativity do, intrinsic educational goals such as building of student character and cultivation of the love of learning in schools, besides the achievement of measurable examination grades. It is also politically correct to represent the teaching profession as attractive, as a place where one is able to find professional fulfillment, if anything at least to draw new teacher-applications to feed into the educational system, which continues to lose good teachers year by year, escaping amongst other things the terrors of performativity.

There is an inconsistency between what is fronted in the media, and what discourse and design cognitions are available, valued and accepted in the operational life-world. Here the terrors of performativity drive culture and behavior but is disguised by and hides behind politically correct rhetoric that points towards the value of non-performative design goals: here, there is *pretense*. One might be tempted to expose and insult these pretences, and to shame the hypocrisy. However, this might have the effect of driving up defensive mechanisms and intensifying the pretensions, thus inhibiting change – particularly since professionals under the terrors of performativity are not generally inclined towards goals other than performative ones; the former are merely given lip service. Another solution is, paradoxically, to encourage the hypocrisy:

> Decision-makers can discover values, aspirations, and self-conceptions in the process of making decisions and experiencing their consequences… *Treat hypocrisy as a transition.* Hypocrisy is an inconsistency between behavior and asserted preferences or identities. It incurs opprobrium both

> because it reflects inconsistency and because it appears to combine the pleasures of vice with the rewards of virtue. The onus on hypocrisy, however, inhibits foolishness. A decision maker with good-sounding talk may be a person experimenting with being good in other ways. It may be more sensible to encourage the experimentation than to condemn it. (March 1994, 261, 263, emphasis in the original)

The policy of foolishness would aim to welcome and even promote such hypocritical experimentation. The point of these hypocritical moments is to broaden the professionals' cognitive grasp of valuable goals: as he exposes himself to these new goals and rationales whilst preparing for or during these pretentions, he may perchance come to see the reason of and for such non-performative goals, and their attractiveness (March 1978; also see Simon 1996) Such experimentation could be encouraged in various ways. Educational stakeholders might draw congratulatory attention to such hypocritical experimentations, such as recognizing and highlighting 'good sounding speech' (*oratio*) in the broadest sense, such as the publication of relevant reflective pieces, presentations of papers at design related conferences highlighting the multifarious nature of designerly ways of thinking, or development of teaching material that obeys these designerly ways of thinking, or membership of and active service in professional societies which promote these other-than-performance goals.

It is not inconceivable that such rewards criteria are integrated with the current indicators of the performative regime, in order that the promotion of such hypocritical experimentation leverage on the terrors of performativity. (It may be necessary, for best effect, to dismantle some of the old performative indicators where possible, in order to loosen the focus of attention on the old goals.) It is true that the regime of the terrors of performativity generates what Ball (2003) calls 'fabrications' – inauthentic facades which are 'investment[s] in plasticity' (225):

> … presentation, 'front' impressions 'given' and 'given off' must be carefully crafted and managed. They are part of the currency and substance of performance. As individuals and organizational actors the performances must be constructed or fabricated with artifice and with an eye to competition… [Fabrications] conceal as much as they reveal. They are ways of presenting oneself within particular registers of meaning, within a particular economy of meaning in which only certain possibilities of being have value. (Ball 2003, 224–5)

This might constitute an objection, since what we might end up with are 'fabrications' of fluid designerly ways of knowing; hypocritical orations function as inert, empty rituals that do not alter belief, but are nonetheless performed with every pomp and ceremonial glory to service other ends. Indeed, not all professionals might grasp these other designerly cognitions and value them for their own intrinsic validity; many of these might simply end up persisting in these pretensions: just as they now instrumentalize the demonstration of these cognitions to satisfy the performance indicators. However, under policy technologies of foolishness, such 'fabrications' in non-performative directions are welcomed, even if they may be very inauthentic or insincere. Such committed fabrications are themselves occasions for ongoing and further cognitive conversion; the pressure to be consistent might even force change in the direction of behavior. There is hence no need to reject the sinner simply because he is not a saint; the policy openly welcomes the imperfect as a stage on the path to perfection (March 1978, 603–4).

What, however, might be some signs of success, if there be success? According to popular accounts of exorcism, at some stage the pretense is broken and the exorcist gets the diabolical spirit to reveal its name. A name (*nomine*) is a signifier for what it truly is, and what it is is wicked (*malo*). Here, analogously, if there is progress, professionals should grasp that the terrors of performativity is 'wicked' (Rittel and Webber 1973), although in an equivocal sense. Under the cognitive compulsions of the terrors of performativity, professionals had only one way to frame the terrors of performativity. Because their only goals are the performative goals by default, the terrors of performativity is not an issue in any sense of the word: it is framed as typically

unproblematic. Were the policy technology of foolishness promoting experimental hypocrisy to effect the hoped for cognitive conversions and consciousness raisings, then professionals would grasp that there are other possible goals at stake besides the achievement of performance indicators – goals which are valuable to the professional but not acknowledged by the terrors of performativity. Along with that comes the appreciation that the terrors of performativity is not so straightforwardly unproblematic; instead there are now 'issues'. I have argued above that the terrors of performativity harms designerly cognition and selves in ways indicated further above, and so can be framed as a (design related) problem. Even if our professional does not get this far, at the very least, there should still be a capacity to recognize that the terrors of performativity is controversial, because it can be problematized in different ways or perhaps not at all, depending on what goals one considers valuable. The terror is not 'benign' (cf. Rittel and Webber 1973). Such an uncovering of the wickedness of the terrors of performativity is an important achievement in the exorcism, and would constitute a *breakpoint*.

Experimental hypocrisy is aimed at occasioning the appreciation of non-performative design goals and scientific design cognitions. This policy technology of foolishness can be supported, if its effects are to be sustained, by a certain organizational ethos or culture of playfulness, in order to reform or balance habits cultivated under the terrors of performativity. Under the latter regime, cognition is very much linear; because goals are clearly defined and not constructed, technical–rationalist modes of thought habitually dominate. Old habits continue to influence behavior, even after cognitive conversion (March 1994, 263). To overcome the habit of unreflective boorishness, some Dionysian drunkenness is welcome: *bibite fraters ne diabolus vos otioso inveniat* (drink brothers, lest the devil find you idle). Promoting a playful organizational culture is therefore another policy technology of foolishness.

> Playfulness is a natural outgrowth of our standard view of reason. A strict insistence on purpose, consistency, and rationality limits our ability to find new purposes. Play relaxes that insistence to allow us to act 'unintelligently', or 'irrationally', or 'foolishly' to explore alternative ideas of possible purposes and alternative concepts of behavioral consistency. And it does this while maintaining our basic commitment to the necessity of intelligence. (March 1972, 425)

By 'organizational playfulness' is not meant irresponsible whim. Paradoxically, organizational playfulness follows from rigorous design thinking, considered with all seriousness. Specifically, such playfulness includes what Herbert Simon (1996) expresses with labels as 'goal-less design', 'satisficing' and 'style'. Having taken into account that there may be a plurality of known or emerging design solutions (each constituted by a means to achieve one goal or some combination of goals), many of which are, under conditions of bounded rationality, incommensurable vis-à-vis each other, one realizes that setting a design course to achieve any (combination) of these design goals by way of one design solution/means amongst a selection of incommensurable options cannot be settled through rational computation, which presupposes the possible commensuration of these optional design solutions. Rather, any design solution is ultimately *freely chosen,* by a will impartially open to each possible design solution (Chua and Sison 2008). Because such free choosing is not (in principle) determinable by rational computation, they resemble free spirited play (Chua 2008a). Yet this playfulness is serious: played out within the perimeters of moral limits (if morality is articulated) and informed by fully considered – therefore, rigorous and scientific – design thinking.

One might say that such serious-playfulness (*eutrapelia)* (Aristotle and Plato, see Ardley 1967; Finnis 1980, 409; Chua 2008a) is a kind of virtuous mean between the extremes of reckless whim on the one end and stupid boorishness on the other, both indefensible under the science of design. Leaders and participants of organizations instantiate this virtue when at the very least they sit uncomfortably in tension with any default obsession with the performative goals. One may imagine that where there is an ethos of serious-playfulness in an organization, then words

and actions playing up the supreme and all consuming importance of performative goals would be greeted with an uneasiness, and be held suspect of unscientific irrationality, until it has been made clear that such single-minded commitments were freely chosen against a back-drop of the prior acknowledgment of other possible options. (That said, an obsession with non-performative goals, indicating a failure to acknowledge that performative goals can themselves be legitimate design goals, is itself a failure in the other direction!)

Concluding summary

Exploitative policy technologies of reason generate a culture of performativity. This in turn stifles the otherwise potentially fluid thinking that is a signature of healthy design thinking in educators. This paper blames no one; a focus on important goals often has unintended side effects. But all is not lost; this can be corrected, as I have argued, by promoting behaviours that could introduce alternative goals and ideals other than those highlighted under the performance indicators. Most radical of my suggestions is that we could even encourage and reward teachers who speak and act *as if* they believe in non-performative goals. Even if this seems to be pretense, there is at the least a welcome exposure to alternative ways of thinking about issues in the education profession. This may even help recover in some teachers the vocational values once cherished but now displaced by performativity. While defined performance targets remain important, educational institutions should nevertheless remain playfully open to different ideals and aspirations and professional identities that may emerge as they evolve. In the end, my paper is an appeal to not let educators be, even if they eventually grow accustomed to their own afflictions.

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