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Multiple narratives in a performative further education context, with reference to Lyotard's 'The Postmodern Condition'

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Abstract

This assignment seeks to explore ideas from Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* and relate them to a specific educational context. It looks firstly at the concepts of metanarrative, *'petit recit'* and performativity and discusses how these can provide insight into educational institutions. Secondly, the assignment explores narratives of legitimation and performativity in a particular context: a further education college in the Gulf. The assignment argues that performativity is in danger of becoming the dominant narrative in this further education context, and is evidenced through language used in texts produced by administrators, managers and faculty.

Introduction

In this assignment I will examine the multiple narratives of legitimation at play in a particular higher education setting, within what I will argue is a context of 'performativity'. My aim is to explore closely some of the ideas presented by Lyotard in '*The Postmodern Condition'* (1984) in relation a further education setting in the Gulf. Lyotard's book declares itself to be a 'report on knowledge' and concerns itself, in part, with the legitimation of knowledge and therefore must be seen as particularly relevant to the field of education. He refers particularly to higher education, which is the context which I explore. As Lyotard places emphasis on the importance of language in framing his ideas, it seemed a highly relevant text to explore within the context of this assignment. Some aspects of this writing, such as the impact of the percieved failure of the Marxist ideal, may seem somewhat dated or to have already been worked through. Nevertheless, the questions of legitimation raised by his text remain. Although Lyotard was writing in the late 1970's certain aspects of his thinking, particularly performativity, seem very relevant to what is currently happening in education in my chosen context. In this assignment I will argue that whilst there are many narratives at play in an educational setting, 'performativity' is in danger of becoming the dominant one and is extending into higher education whereas it has previously been perceived primarily as affecting school education (Blake *et al*. 1998). In the first part of the assignment I will discuss aspects of Lyotard's ideas as presented in the *Postmodern Condition*. Secondly, I will show how these are relevant to an educational setting, specifically further education, and finally I will discuss a specific context, a higher education college in the Gulf, in the light of Lyotard's ideas.

Metanarratives and '*petits recits'*

In this part of the assignment I would like to explore the notions of metanarrative and '*petits* recits' as discussed by Lyotard in '*The Postmodern Condition'*. Lyotard divides the (past) legitimation of knowledge into two possible metanarratives: that of emancipation – 'Humanity as the hero of liberty… a narrative of freedom' (Lyotard 1984, p. 31) and the speculative - a project of the totalization of knowledge (Lyotard 1984, p. 34), in other words what could be called scientific knowledge or the search for truth, belief in progress and modernism. He argues that both metanarratives are no longer valid or universally believed in in 'developed societies'. He suggests that in these societies 'most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative' (Lyotard 1984, p. 41) and that this is what characterizes the postmodern world. Lyotard sees the project of emancipation as discredited and indeed undesirable as its search for universality suppresses difference and ends up reproducing the existing social order:

> *There is no question here of proposing a "pure" alternative to the system: we all now know, as the 1970's come to a close, that an attempt at an alternative of that kind would end up resembling the system it was meant to replace* (Lyotard 1984, p. 66)

However, despite this, at the time he was writing, he saw the metanarrative of emancipation as gaining ground over science: 'Today with the status of knowledge unbalanced and its speculative unity broken the first version of legitimacy is gaining new vigour' (Lyotard 1984, p. 35). Perhaps at the time of Lyotard's writing this referred to a response to a break down in complete trust in science or development combined with a questioning of the role of professional authority. Now, however the emancipatory narrative could be seen as promoting the possibility of the autonomy and freedom of the individual as the true purpose of humans within society. It is no longer a grand narrative but an effect of 'the unconstrained workings of the marked to secure liberty…a play of individual choices which may have to do with idiosyncratic narratives or with none' (Blake *et al.* 1998, p. 104).

Instead of monolithic foundations, he places what he calls the '*petit recit*' or mini narratives, which he characterizes as language games that allow 'a multiplicity of finite meta-arguments, by which I mean argumentation that concerns metaprescriptives and is limited in space and time' (Lyotard 1984, p. 66). This means that values and what should be done (metaprescriptives) are contextual and contingent. They are limited in time and space and therefore cannot be generalized or made permanent criteria to refer to. He argues that we no longer have one bigger picture to hold on to in deciding what is legitimate but need to accept a pluralistic world which avoids generalizing and closure. What therefore could constitute legitimation is locally determined and situation specific – it is particular and not generalized. He has been critiqued for his 'method' of 'emphasizing facts of language and in particular their pragmatic aspect' (Lyotard 1984, p. 9) which could be seen as asserting 'the sovereignty of language games' (Haber 1995, p. 146). Haber critiques Lyotard here for not being 'able and also not willing, to give up the urge for grand legitimation (prescription)' (Haber 1995, p. 146). Thus he could be seen as proposing pluralism of language games as the new grand narrative.

<u>Narratives and language</u>

In the absence of a grand narrative, Lyotard has taken up the concept of language games as described by Wittgenstein, as a means to conceptualize plurality in society. Language as it is used, our 'own linguistic practice and communicational interaction,' (Lyotard 1984, p. 41) not metaphysics or absolutes, is what forms the social bond and saves us in his view from barbarity.

Language games are described by Wittgenstein in the *Blue Book* as 'the forms of language with which a child begins to make use of words. The study of language games is the study of primitive forms of language or primitive languages' (Wittgenstein 1958 p. 17). He sees other more 'complicated forms' (Wittgenstein 1958, p. 17) as being added to the primitive base. It seems that he would like to strip away all confusing ' complicated processes of thought' (Wittgenstein 1958 p.17) and see thinking as 'operating with signs' (Wittgenstein 1958 p.16) or 'the use of words' rather than seeing language as a logical calculus (Wittgenstein 1958 p.25), as a series of rules and definitions. In his view ' a word hasn't got a meaning given to it, as it were,

by a power independent of us, so that there could be a kind of scientific investigation into what the word *really* means. A word has the meaning someone has given it' (Wittgenstein 1958, p.28).

The discussion of language games as a rule bound series of language activities is elaborated in *Philosophical Investigations* where Wittgenstein enumerates various examples (see (Wittgenstein 2009 (1e 1953), p. 15). Wittgenstein favors explanations through example:

> *"One gives examples and intends them to be taken in a particular way – I do not mean by this expression, however, that he is supposed to see in those examples that common feature which I – for some reason – was unable to formulate, but that he is now to employ those examples in a particular way. Here giving examples is not an indirect way of explaining – in default of a better one. For any general explanation may be misunderstood too'* (Wittgenstein 2009 (1e 1953), p. 38)*.*

The example is not seen as an inferior mode of explaining or understanding but as the means by which one can understand. The enumeration of examples may be aimed at avoiding metaphysical explanations or philosophical 'nonsense' and could be seen as a form of anti-theory. This refusal to succumb to seeing overarching, fixed generalizations could be seen as one of the commonalities between Lyotard and Wittgenstein. This is an important aspect of their understanding of the world: although language is conceived as being rule bound through language games which could be seen as being subsumed into forms of life there is no sense of determinism or totality in this. We can see in the *Blue Book* and in *Philosophical Investigations* how Wittgenstein's discussion of language relates to Lyotard's insistence on plurality and rejection of metanarratives. Wittgenstein discusses this plurality as being a description of the nature of language which is problematic for us because we crave generality: 'the tendency to look for something in common to all the entities which we commonly subsume under a general term' (Wittgenstein 1958, p.17). The craving for generality is seen as coming from a primitive understanding of the structure of language. At the same time it is seen as coming from 'our preoccupation with the method of science' (Wittgenstein 1958, p. 8) which leads to the desire to reduce reality to its common denominators. This is in Wittgenstein's view also reveals 'the contemptuous attitude towards the particular case' which comes (in logic for example) 'from the idea that is incomplete'. The use of examples can be interpreted as a form of refusal to succumb to human nature's 'craving for generality': '"Doesn't our understanding reach beyond all examples?" – A very curious expression, and quite a natural one!' (Wittgenstein, 2009 (1e 1953), p. 89).

Thus craving for generality is seen as a quality of a primitive construction of language, whilst at the same time is seen as feature of the scientific method. This could be said to parallel legitimation through scientific narrative as discussed in Lyotard. The grand narrative of science

as Lyotard sees it, reveals a similar need for simplification, and a desire for closure. What is evident in both writers' discussion on language in the works I mentioned, is a dislike for the search for totality and the importance of recognizing the particular. This means there are multiplicities of differences. 'There are countless different kinds of use of all the things we call 'signs', 'words', 'sentences'. And this is not fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten." (Wittgenstein 2009 (1e 1953), p. 14). In Lyotard, differences in language games can lead to them being what he called 'incommensurate', in conflict with each other. Where there is an irresolvable difference we find what Lyotard terms *'un differend'* (Lyotard 1983). Where difference occurs and power comes into play, one language game may dominate another and cause suppression of communication or silence, itself another language game.

Performativity

The decline of grand narratives and their replacement in Lyotard's view by mini narratives, manifested in language games, should mean that there is no dominant narrative; however Lyotard saw the gap left by the decline of metanarratives as being filled by what he nominates 'performativity'. Lyotard saw the decline of narratives as an effect of the rise of capitalism and technology 'which has shifted emphasis from the ends of action to its means' (Lyotard 1984, p. 38). The atomization of society, its conceptualization in advanced capitalism as being constructed of individuals, and the lack of unity caused by the perceived decline of metanarratives may lead to a feeling of insecurity over values and purpose which is particularly problematic within the public arena. If there is insecurity and uncertainty over purpose and values it is easier to focus on the process or 'means'. In Lyotard's view the state uses performativity to satisfy the need for a sense of unity left by the disintegration of the grand narratives: '…the ideology of the "system" with its pretensions to totality tries to compensate ….in the cynicism of its criterion of performance. (Lyotard 1984, p. 65). Performativity can be conceived as processes aimed at improving performance for the sake of improving performance. There is 'no metalanguage or metanarrative in which to formulate the final goal and correct use of that machinery. But they do have brainstorming to improve its performance' (Lyotard 1984, p.52). Debate over purpose is replaced by continued attempts at increasing efficiency and performance.

 Lyotard's conception of performativity makes efficiency a crucial part of the 'system'. Lyotard sees performativity as predicated upon stability for only in that way can one predict outcomes and improve the functioning of the system: 'since performativity is defined by an input/output ratio, there is a presupposition that the system into which the input is entered is stable: that system must follow a regular "path"' (Lyotard 1984, p. 54). He then cites examples from 'postmodern science' to demonstrate why the presumption of stability is unsound in his view.

Although he is discussing scientific method here these issues can also be related to systems in organizations such as educational institutes:

> *These problems do not prevent the establishment of continuous functions exact enough to form the basis of probabilistic predictions for the evolution of a given system…this is the reasoning systems theorists - who are also the theorists of legitimation by performance – use to regain their rights.* (Lyotard 1984, p. 57)

The presumption of stability is a prerequisite for the gathering of information which will enable the improved functioning of the system. It is important first to define in order then to improve, also to gather information in order to demonstrate performance and thus accountability. We are lead to a 'preoccupation with specification' or 'the audit state' (Ranson 2003, p. 466). However this requirement to report is seen as a thankless task:

> *'A complete definition of the initial state of the system (or all the independent variables) would require an expenditure of energy at least equivalent to that consumed by the system to be defined* (Lyotard 1984, p. 53).

It is quite impossible obtain a total account and indeed the very act of attempting to do so creates inefficiency or entropy. However the human desire for totality or closure when subsumed into performativity leads to renewed attempts to obtain ever more efficient reporting systems.

> *Perfect control over a system, which is supposed to improve its performance, is inconsistent with respect to the law of contradiction: it in fact lowers the performance level it aims to raise. This inconsistency explains the weakness of state and socio-economic bureaucracies* (Lyotard 1984, p. 55)

The search for totality, which Lyotard argues was once pursued through emancipatory or scientific paths, has now become the search for total control over a system. The desire for total control manifests itself in a desire for perfect information storage and retrieval.

The quest for efficiency is given support and perhaps partly engendered by the use of technology. Lyotard's conception performativity needs technology and technology reinforces performativity. One reason for this is that technology is the means for producing and managing the information flows required by performativity:

> *The performativity of an utterance ….. increases proportionally to the amount of information about its referent one has at one's disposal. Thus the growth of power, and its self-legitimation are now taking the route of data storage and accessibility, and the operativity of the information* (Lyotard 1984, p. 47)

Although Lyotard was writing in the 1970's, he was incredibly prescient in his comments on the possible effects of the computerization of society. Usher argues that Lyotard viewed technology as a means to achieve total control 'a business dominated technological determinism….not a decentralized, multiple little narrativity' of postmodern culture' (Usher 2006, p. 283) and that 'as a consequence Lyotard did not anticipate and conceptualise the complex decentering which performativity has facilitated.' (Usher 2006, p. 283). Despite this comment, it seems in his final remarks in *The Postmodern Condition* Lyotard views technology as having a double potential:

> *'It could become the "dream" instrument for controlling and regulating the market system…But it could also aid groups discussing metaprescriptives by supplying them with the information they usually lack for making knowledgeable decisions. The line to follow for computerization to take the second of these two paths is, in principle, quite simple: give the public free access to the memory and data banks'* (Lyotard 1984, p. 67).

Technology/computerization is seen by Lyotard as having the potential role of 'panopticon' and controller of information, and also as making information 'even more mobile and subject to piracy ' (Lyotard 1984, p. 6). A key aspect of technology is that it speeds things up and this becomes a measure of successful performance, although Lyotard argues this is at the expense of complexity: 'Reduction in complexity is required to maintain they system's power capability. Speed, in effect, is a power component of the system ' (Lyotard 1984, p. 61).

Recording information in a stable system cannot accommodate anything that does not correspond to pre-decided categories. At the same time, however, it requires innovation in the 'quest of its most performative unity possible' (Lyotard 1984, p. 63). Performativity intensifies a desire for innovation as a means to find 'the answer' that will guarantee effectiveness be it in more effective recording mechanisms or changes in teaching: 'Innovation...is used by the system to increase its efficiency (Lyotard 1984, p. 61).

Is performativity a powerful narrative among many or is it becoming dominant? It could be suggested that performativity itself is positioned as a replacement grand narrative. This is discussed in Usher and Edwards, (1994): 'it appears, therefore, that Lyotard is introducing a fresh grand narrative into the postmodern condition, one which is deployed by decision-makers as criterion for judging our language games.' (Usher and Edwards 1994, p. 166). However they reject this notion because in their view: 'the grand narrative function involves legitimising knowledge on the basis of a teleology, which is lacking where conditions are based on optimising the efficiency of the system' (Usher and Edwards, 1994, p. 166). They seem to argue that because performativity is seen as having no ultimate purpose it cannot be viewed as a grand narrative. One could argue that performativity does have a purpose although one might not agree with it: 'determinism is the hypothesis upon which legitimation by performativity is based' (Lyotard 1984, p. 53). Performativity in this view legitimates itself through the never ending attempt to ensure the continuation of an efficient and stable system

<u>Relevance to educational systems</u>

Thus far I have discussed metanarratives and legitimation of knowledge, '*petits recits*' language games and performativity: all threads in Lyotard's conception of a postmodern society. These themes are important ones for educationalists in forming our understanding of what education should be about.

Firstly, the above discussion of narratives involves us in examining the purpose of education itself, as it leads us to ask what overarching purpose guides practice. What legitimates learning and knowledge in current circumstances if purpose is problematic? *The Postmodern Condition* concerns itself with higher education and as my particular context is further education, I will focus on this. Blake *et al.* (1998) see higher education organizations as being able to 'transcend the arbitrary and …offer institutionalized justifications of themselves' (Blake *et al.* 1998, p. 92). They see them as divorced from the 'popular, demotic and even populist interests, values and commitments in play' (Blake *et al.* 1998, p. 92) in the school environment. I would argue however, that changes in the nature of education in both western and non-western countries have meant that aspects of higher education may no longer be outside these concerns. Higher education has been characterized in recent years by an expansion of numbers and an increased expectation from parts of society that one should have a degree. This notion is becoming globalized and access to higher education is no longer perceived as the preserve of an elite, (Brown *et al.* 2011 discuss this), although there is perhaps a perception that access to quality is. The expansion of higher education means that its contribution to the formation of the social bond is perhaps becoming more significant than in the past. Blake *et al.* 1998 comment that the 'first question for higher education is how to sustain science (and other disciplines), and the second how to sustain the social bonds that subtend science (and other disciplines). But for school education the latter is the truly important question' (Blake *et al.* 1998, p. 107). As higher education has extended, any retreat from provision could also be seen as a retreat from the 'social institute' (Gumport, 2000) aspect of education which may have been more evident in the past in school education. Thus although purpose and value may be uncertain for some, societal demand for provision is not in doubt. It is possible that the 'social narrative' (Blake *et al.* 1998, p. 101) of what higher education means is changing from an elite 'project of totalization' to a more 'functional' one, as Lyotard described the purpose of schools (Lyotard 1984, p. 33).

An increasingly functional higher education system may mean an increasingly performative one. The expansion of higher education has implications for what is studied and what kind of knowledge is valued. Cowan suggested in 1996 that a 'major renegotiation of the purposes and functions of 'the university is occurring rapidly in several countries' (Cowen 1996, p. 246). He writes that the university reform movement of the 1980's and 1990's was a reponse to a

percieved need to make universities efficient and relevant. By relevant he is referring to what is 'useful to the national economy'. Thus universities were to focus more on applied activities and this was seen as a change from what had existed previously. Usefulness, application and impact are increasingly emphasized in higher education (the importance, for example, of 'impact' in research as discussed in Roberts 2007). The effect of this may be to focus more heavily on provision for the labour market and possibly, where the student is a consumer making choices: 'the lightening of the burden of content in favour of skills…the student is a customer who follows her desires, who can easily avoid content that is difficult or challenging. Where what is learned is subordinated to outcomes and usefulness, intrinsic worth will be surreptitiously eclipsed' (Blake *et al.* 1998, p. 82). The above changes have taken place in parallel with changes in the way universities and colleges manage themselves. They are subject to greater control and restrictions, in moves to increase and ensure quality: the impact of what has been termed New Public Management (see for example Flynn 2007, Ranson 2003), perhaps now even more in evidence following the financial crisis of 2008:

> *In this process the values of disinterested inquiry and respect for the integrity of the subject matter compete with a new set of pressures to 'dumb' courses down, as well as to demonstrate their relevance to labour market conditions and prospects* (Olssen and Peters 2007, p. 15)

The combination of focus on applied knowledge, 'managerialism', and societal expectations of what a degree is and who should have one, has implications for education. The above factors may come together to create an increasingly performative environment in higher education.

If it is the case that institutes of higher education are becoming increasingly legitimated through performativity in Lyotard's sense, how does his view of heterogeneous language games fit in with this? An important effect of performativity on education is its inability to deal with difference. In any educational system acknowledging difference is a difficult principle to hold onto as organized education requires systems which by their very nature cannot recognize all differences. In a performative environment this challenge is exacerbated. Both Lyotard and Wittgenstein acknowledge the human inclination for generalization and classification via language as a means to make sense of the world, although neither would agree with the search for a totalizing account of the state of things. For Lyotard it is vital that the 'heteromorphous nature of language games' (Lyotard 1984, p. 66) be recognized as a first step to justice (or a just society). Failure to do this leads to terror which assumes language games are isomorphic. (Ball 2003). The failure of grand narratives and insecurity over values as discussed above has important implications for the way we talk about education: 'educational debate starved of a recognition of cultural difference and debate over aims and values, becomes constrained into a delivery model, where students and teachers are merely components in a grand social machine

designed to produce results in relation to prespecified criteria' (Stables 2012). Different accounts may be silenced if they are not part of a performative narrative. Olssen and Peters (2007) discuss the connection between *'the increased emphasis on performance and accountability assessment'* and *'a concern with corporate loyalty and the use of discipline against employees who criticize their universities'* and the use of *'advertising and public relations agencies to ensure that only positive statements appear about the university and its products'* (Olssen and Peters 2007, p. 327).

It may even be that educational institutes will begin to forget that things have ever been or could ever be different. Thus organizational and faculty language may begin to institutionalize concepts from business and technology. The narratives of usefulness, effectiveness and quality control is perhaps in danger of becoming part of how we talk in 'ordinary language' about higher education. At the same time there may be a need to maintain rhetoric from 'dead' metanarratives to provide a kind of surface legitimation or palatability to performative aspects that are not yet institutionalized.

Lyotard's conception of a postmodern society has a lot to tell us about educational systems therefore, as it captures many unresolved, difficult and very relevant issues manifested in the narratives we tell and are told. In the following sections I will discuss a specific context in relation to this and highlight specific examples.

Background information on my educational setting

In this section I will briefly outline the specific educational setting which I investigated. This is a system in the Gulf made up of multiple state funded tertiary education colleges, whose stated mission is to promote national as opposed to expat employment in the work place. The aim, according to the Institutional Development Plan 2009-2010 is to 'offer career-oriented academic and training programs to meet the specific needs of the local industry and community' and according to the Chancellor: ' to give our students the skills and attributes they need to succeed in a global work environment'. The system was founded 23 years ago with this aim in mind (see Davidson C. and Mackenzie Smith P., 2008 for a history of this). This includes study in English rather than the first language, Arabic. Students have been able to leave college with a number of different credentials according to their ability. Thus there was a certificate diploma, a diploma, a higher diploma and a Bachelor's degree.

There have been two key changes to this educational setting that I would like to highlight. Firstly, recent reforms of the college system have been aimed at getting rid of all credentials except the degree. Thus a vocational college now sees degrees as the only credential option. Alongside changes to the nature of the programmes and credentials there has also been an

increase in demand for places at the colleges (MOHE 2007). The increase in the demand for places, combined with the abolition of the diploma programmes, means that, in order to satisfy government commitment to providing its people with higher education, students with a lower level of English are being given the opportunity to study on an extended Foundation programme. However, in order to maintain degree-like standards the level of English required to enter a major has been raised. Thus the college is currently dealing with a number of students with a lower level of English being required to achieve in a far more demanding academic English test (IELTS academic). This has led to a form of identity crisis for the institution and a questioning of the nature of knowledge required by students as well as the purpose of education at the institute. Another important aspect of the educational setting is changes to management of the college. Changes to the institution as a result of educational reform mean that students are now funded per capita instead of colleges receiving a flat rate budget. This has led to a requirement for increased central monitoring of individual colleges and students from the ministry of finance.

These are two changes to the context that I would argue have led to an increasingly performative environment in the college. In the next section I will discuss what educational narratives are at play in this current situation that are part of legitimating these changes and how these can be seen in the language used. Secondly, I will look at what I consider to be performative aspects of the educational setting.

Legitimation narratives

In the context I examined the purpose of higher education has always been explicitly that of 'nationalization'; that is encouraging national students to obtain jobs and form an elite workforce to participate in developing the nation. Nationals can be viewed as elite in the sense that they are a minority in their own country and wield control. An elite is being trained to assist not only in managing the country's public sector but also to take leadership roles in the private sector. This can be seen in much institutional documentation: the aim is 'to prepare our citizens for social and economic leadership' and to 'prepare them to meet the demands of the labour market and participate actively in national development' (MOHE 2007, p. 4). Another text (Chancellor's address 2011) mentions the need to 'promote the practical application of knowledge in our society.' Thus applied (useful) knowledge and a direct link to work is the aim of education at an institutional level. This can be viewed as a process of nation building. It could be viewed as a government concerned with the development of its people. (There have been recent comments in press, following the so called 'Arab Spring' on the necessity of leaders to serve their people). Lyotard comments on the use by the state of this appeal as a means to maintain the stability of the state:

The state resorts to the narrative of freedom every time it assumes direct control over the training of the "people" under the name of the "nation", in order to point them down the path of progress. (Lyotard 1984, p. 32)

At organizational level this appeal is directly aimed at students and faculty, through rhetoric from the director, through dissemination of speeches from leaders and through use of media such as videos, where images of heritage and tradition combine with modernization and progress. One could view this appeal, manifested as a 'call to work' and it is one which is attractive to many students who are proud of their national identity.

The function of nation building and the creation of an elite workforce is not the only aspect mentioned in documentation, however. There is a second purpose which is for nationals to lead 'informed and intelligent personal lives', also described as 'satisfying' (MOHE 2007, p.4). The 'colleges will be wellsprings of culture and ideas that enrich… lives' (MOHE 2007, p. 25). This almost seems to be akin to *Bildung*, the German conception of education as the development of the self within society (see Koller 2003). This is discussed in Lyotard but he sees this as something outmoded in developed societies (which he states are the subject of his focus):

The old principle that the acquisition of knowledge is indissociable from the training (Bildung) of minds, or even of individuals, is becoming obsolete and will become ever more so. (Lyotard 1984, p. 4)

A final aspect to the legitimation of knowledge in my context could also be that of emancipation. In this context, education for women could be seen as a process of emancipation from a male dominated culture. Women are part of the project of nationalization and for a number of reasons are more successful than men in higher education: 'currently over 70% of students in tertiary education are women' (Abdulla and Ridge 2011). The need to 'improve the participation and persistence of males in higher education' (MOHE 2007, p. 20) is acknowledged. The success of women is also acknowledged, although certain implications may cause tensions. The effect of rapid changes in society caused by development and globalization (for example the use of social media see Dubai School of Government, 2011), combined with 'raising the bar' educationally (the theme of the 2011 system wide conference) has changed the expectations and attitudes of some female students. Financial independence through work is viewed by some as a step towards freedom. There are contradictions and tensions in educating women that could relate to a critical pedagogy of emancipation.

In narrative language games around emancipation, students are encouraged to think critically at the college about a range of controversial topics. An example of this is the magazine produced by media students where topics have included female circumcision and incest. This 'language game' of critical thinking does not extend to discussion of the economy which appears to be the only topic off the agenda. This has been silenced explicitly and one

understands that criticizing the state of the economy has been made illegal. They are encouraged to take challenging jobs (such as film directing or consulate work) and yet cannot leave the college during the day without their parents' or husband's permission and have to pass through an e-gate operated by biometric data which has been named 'Al Salaam' (meaning to pass safely). There is an interplay between strict control and what could be called critical pedagogy that feels almost schizophrenic to some faculty. Perhaps this would be easier to understand in terms of incommensurate '*petits recits*', in which no solution or conclusion can be achieved. Unfortunately, it also means that some voices are silenced (the *differend*) in the process. As Olssen and Peters (2007) commented the relationship with the outside world and the college needs to be managed in order to ensure a positive message.

Narratives of elitism, work readiness, nation building, personal development and female emancipation can be viewed as some of the '*petits recits*' that are at play in the educational context examined. At times they can be in contradiction and one narrative alone cannot legitimate the whole system.

A Context of Performativity

As I mentioned previously, expansion of higher education combined with high levels of accountability (New Public Management) can be said to encourage a performative educational environment. I would like to give examples from my chosen context in support of this.

The concept of system efficiency can be viewed from different 'levels'. 'Nationalization' could be seen as a function of performativity, where the system that needs to be maintained is now globalized. In order to perform in and flow through a global system, it seems that young people need to graduate with degrees. The recent move to abolish all credentials apart from degrees is partly a result of globalization pressures, as higher education now needs to be of 'a quality that will equip graduates with the knowledge and skills needed to participate in the emerging global economy.' (MOHE 2007, p. 10) and 'the major factor constraining global competitiveness is education' (MOHE 2007, p. 14). However, it is recognized that maintaining a broad access policy (the social bond) means that some students will not be able to complete degrees, thus a recent Chancellor's speech referred to a new credential called an associate degree for those students. It also mentioned the need for a foundation programme as for 'a high proportion of our students ... this pre-baccalaureate program is a key step to their educational, career, and personal success'. The use of a 'pre-baccalaureate program' and an 'associate degree' enables the colleges 'to raise the bar' and at the same time keep students who would otherwise be excluded. In this way it seems the system will not be destabilized.

At organizational level the presumption of stability in the national policy is problematic. Students are now required to gain an IELTS band 5 in order to *enter* their bachelor program

(5.5 used to be the *exit* requirement after 4 years of study). This is unrealistic for many students who are not 'academic' or do not have the language required for this. In order to maintain the flow of students to majors the band requirements have been finessed (overall band rather than no band below in every skill as was originally decided).

The effect at individual faculty level, was that, for some faculty, language teaching became focused on 'efficiency', on strategies to get through IELTS: for example, ' I don't teach them reading only writing and speaking as this can raise their band more quickly', or students not reading texts but only answering multiple choice with one letter. The problem has now been passed on to year one of the majors, where it was found that students did not have the necessary reading skills. Again, this will need to be finessed in some way in order to maintain student flow and system stability. The performative language game of internationally benchmarked excellence is incommensurate with what is happening locally – the social bond aspect. There is no apparent solution and as one cannot dominate the other they are forced to co-exist.

Another example of performativity can be seen in the effects caused by changes in funding - a consequence of the spread of new public management on a global level. As I mentioned previously, the ministry of finance now funds students per capita and requires accountability from the colleges for such funding. This has produced an intensification of the need to report attendance assisted by the use of technology. Previously the college attendance policy was aimed at improving performance in academic work and also focused on developing an expectation of punctuality (more than 5 minutes late means students should be marked absent) and attendance that was perceived as being required in a private sector work environment. Thus it was supporting the nationalization policy (already itself performative?). Because of per capita funding, attendance is also now used to audit whether students are still attending their courses. If a student is absent for more than 10% and enrolled this is questioned by state auditors. If a teacher fails to take attendance within a certain period of time warning emails are sent which escalate through management levels. Below is an example:

> *This is to advise you that, despite two previous written reminders, your Student Attendance records are once again incomplete, for week ending 15.12.11.*

> *Please ensure that all missing records are entered by 5.00 p.m. on the 6th working day after attendance should have been taken, to comply with Policy & Procedure regarding the maintenance of accurate Student Attendance Records.*

As the provost oversees multiple colleges and hundreds of teachers, the effect of this is surely to produce the entropy and inefficiency as described above. In fact it has improved impossible to maintain this system efficiently. It can lead teachers to falsify their attendance reports if they are late inputting data. Thus the system is wrongly predicated upon accuracy of data and

technology working efficiently and cannot reflect reality. In implementing systems there can be either an assumption of perfect information (Olssen and Peters 2007, p. 331) or a lack of interest in identifying whether the information is accurate so long as it is there.

Performativity in this context is also extended to changing the behaviour of both faculty and students and in pushing the limits of this in order to appear distinctive and at the 'cutting edge'. Language produced by managers around this, at times, appears to be portraying an opposite tendency to that created by teachers (who tend to emphasize efficiency and performance improvement see below). There seems to be a language game or rhetoric around caring and nurturing which belies the totalizing intention. The Al Salaam gate I mentioned previously, for example, was so named in order to mitigate resentment at its controlling mechanism by using a word suggestive of protection. Another example is healthy living, where a new campaign:

> *will be focused on healthy eating habits and regular exercise, encouraging smokers to quit, helping with stress management, and emphasizing the need to be role models for our students. They will be linked to the House Competition and will provide incentives to participants who have demonstrated long term commitment and embraced the healthy habits as a new life style.*

However, this is also linked to contract renewal for faculty as 'line managers' were asked to 'advise on the healthy living status, including smoking, of the faculty and staff in your department due for renewal in August 2012.' The putatively positive promotion of becoming healthier is expressed as a form of 'tough love', a form of caring, but is directly linked to one's chances of keeping one's job which can only be viewed as terroristic in effect.

Examples of language manifesting performativity are particularly evident when connecting learning to technology and innovation, both aspects of Lyotard's conception of performativity as discussed previously. There is perhaps a tendency for teachers to assimilate the language of managerialism in producing 'textual accounts' (Ball 2003) of their work. Accountability requires one to give an account, to reproduce usually in written form, and using the language of performance could be seen either as a protective measure or sometimes to have become institutionalized as the language game used to talk about educational innovation. Examples of this kind of language from faculty members include: a 'new initiative' to assist students with writing problems where 'online, interactive tutorials.. address the most common problems', the use of a software programme 'which leverages the learning benefits of both spaced repetition and the testing effect' - and The Learning Zone 'whose 'primary focus is to increase student performance using a combination of sound teaching methods, cutting edge technology and current research.' The effect of this can be seen as a form of neomania where the aim becomes the creation of written reports of 'new initiatives' (a form of novelty product?) or fabrications as discussed in Ball (2003), where institutions create 'textual accounts of

themselves' these fabrications 'become embedded in and are reproduced by systems of recording and reporting on practice' (Ball 2003, p. 225). Thus the reporting of initiatives conflates with their implementation. Performative language games are created that some teachers, not just managers are using about their practice.

Discussion

In this last section I would like to consider examples of possible areas for further enquiry and some implications for research.

One area of possible enquiry at organizational level could be the effects of performativity on the language of students and teachers, not as the preserve of management as it might once have been seen. Although documents written by teachers are for public consumption the performative language may begin to become the norm about how education is talked about, and so may also become internalized as new metaphors and subsequently as dead metaphors that become a natural part of our language. How, not why, becomes the norm. One could also look at responses to the performative systems which involve a form of 'disruption of the exercise of power' (Usher and Edwards 1994, p. 224). This is the notion of game playing or a ludic response to performativity as discussed for example by Usher and Edwards, (1994) and in Meng, (2009). This is certainly evident in the setting I discuss, both in a playful sense and in the sense of playing the system. The issue of ethics arises in these areas as organizational and individual permission could be difficult to obtain and anonymity difficult to preserve.

Another area for investigation could be the nature of vocational and academic courses and the distinction between training and education. In the context I discussed it seems that vocational and academic distinctions may become blurred with vocational courses awarding degrees and degree courses becoming more connected to industry and practical applications. As higher education seems to be becoming an extension of schooling its being more tightly linked to performance criteria may increase its functional aspect. The performative effects of supplying a globalized job market, marked by a perception of increasing competition, lead us to question the purpose of education. Who would argue over the usefulness of a degree enabling its holder to obtain a job? Would we take issue with a father saying that he is not going to allow his daughter to study literature as it is not useful? Do we have a problem with doctoral students being given fee discounts for encouraging new students to enroll? In the particular context I investigated, a consideration of the nature and purpose of credentials would certainly be relevant to the organization's current challenges. Ethical issues here would be less problematic.

It is beyond the remit of this assignment to discuss methodology in depth, however I will briefly mention that with the previous argument in mind, consideration in any research would need to be given to a methodology and form that would support a view of knowledge as being

'"legitimated" by little narratives' (Usher 2006, p. 283). This seems challenging. Poster (1992) discusses the difficulty for a postmodernist view that uses the *method* of universalism: elaborating theory from an 'ontologically secure position' (Poster 1992, p. 577) and also may use the *form* of academic critical discourse. He argues for example, that the discourse postmodernists such as Lyotard use could be said to originate from a universalist rationality: 'the difficulty concerns their repetition in denial of the Enlightenment *posture* of critique, their replication of Enlightenment *forms* of critique.' In Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* however, the form of his writing seems to mirror his thinking on language: he does not follow a conventional critical mode and in this sense could perhaps be seen as the more radical *writer*. The 'methodological challenges' of a postmodern ethic in education and research are discussed by Stables (2012) who considers that one possible focus could be not to try 'to improve education or learning for all; rather it should be firstly on clarifying concepts within language games and practices within forms of life and secondly on developing, paralogically radical perspectives that serve to disrupt and problematize those games and forms of life'. The challenge is to resist the temptation to provide 'the answer' whilst at the same time having something constructive to contribute. Also to find ethical approaches that would allow disruption and problematizing.

Conclusion

Lyotard's discussion revolves around a conception of society as a mass of mini narratives at risk of suppression from performative systems imposed upon it. This parallels Wittgenstein's conception of language as multiple language games that have form but where any single (meta) underlying form is not innately within language but imposed on it by us. The relevance of this is that the nature of our understanding of language parallels what we create in society. We 'crave generality' in language, classifying and ordering, in the same way we wish to classify and order our society. However, we also desire the freedom to be creative and play with language and we understand things through examples; we may reject suppression of the *differend* and believe in the unique individual. These apparent contradictions may explain why performative systems are attractive to some elements in society and painful for others.

Lyotard suggests, perhaps provocatively, that 'control and domination are inherently better than their absence. The performativity criterion has its "advantages"' (Lyotard 1984, p. 62). It may be a part of human nature to equate closure with values and 'radical plurality' (Koller 2003) with either cynicism or relativity. Perhaps performativity could be most compassionately interpreted as a perverted response to the human need for order and certainty – an answer to the 'craving for generality'. In the context I explored it certainly feels as though performativity *has* become a new metanarrative. It is self- legitimating and circular and extending into more areas of the life of the educational institute (academic, administrative and personal).

Globalization of educational aspirations and credentials will only increase this. There is a fear of being left behind at individual, organizational and national levels. A performative system is not about what education should be about. However acceptance of this situation would be a failure to face up to real questions about what education should be about and a failure also of the imagination.

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