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Performative enactments of pedagogy in the classroom: strategies and tactics of relationality

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ABSTRACT

Within neoliberal regimes of educational performativity, expectations of teachers' work have become increasingly prescriptive, standardised and formulaic. To counter the reductive effects of this 'exteriority' of influence over teachers' work, we draw on three conceptual prompts—*relational pedagogy*, *informality*, and de Certeau's theorisation of *strategies and tactics*—to examine empirical accounts of teachers who challenge the normative expectations of their work. We contend that teachers who seek to work beyond the restrictions of neoliberal educational managerialism engage in deliberate acts of tactical intervention, which involve the deployment of relational and informal modes of engagement with students and other educators. In doing so, teachers can more fully assert their professionalism and nurture important relational bonds with students in ways that respond to the contingent nature of classrooms in rich and contextually meaningful ways.

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Introduction

It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. (de Certeau 1984, 37)

One of the more insidious effects of the neoliberal turn in education has been the imbrication of narrowly conceived 'performative truths' (Ball 2003, 2016) that define the work and conduct of teachers. Ball (2003) notes that under these conditions, 'a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation' imposes a logic of rationality, which rewards selectively mediated 'measures of productivity or output or displays of "quality"' (216) as the only way to perform and function as a teacher. Within the current educational policy context – one that Fuller and Stevenson (2019) define in terms of 'a new global orthodoxy in education policy' (1) – a raft of accountability measures 'in line with standardised expectations' (Frostenson and Englund 2020, 695) have combined to reshape and normalise the practice of teaching. Invariably, these ways of doing the work of teaching reify singular visions of what counts as education, limiting how far any individual teacher might deviate from prescribed ways of engaging curricula and working with students. Under

these conditions, teachers' work is reduced to 'doing the right thing, doing as much as others, or as well as others, [and] constantly looking to improve' (Ball 2003, 220). Pedagogy becomes performative (Ball 2003) under these conditions, in ways that seek to reduce the complex relational work of teaching to prescriptive, formulaic, standardised and metricised enactments.

We take up these concerns in this paper to consider the prescriptive conditions of teachers' work (Ball 2003, 2016; Perryman 2006, 2009; Fuller and Stevenson 2019; Singh 2018). To illustrate this focus, we draw on recent empirical encounters, with teachers working within selected Australian secondary schools to consider the practices and techniques they utilised to challenge normative ways of doing the work of teaching. Our encounters with these teachers were broached within larger ethnographies conducted to explore the function of 'relational pedagogy' (Sidorkin 2000; Bingham and Sidorkin 2004) and the ways in which relationality is activated as a pedagogical modality in different teaching and learning contexts (Hickey and Riddle 2021). These projects incorporated field visits to each school, and within which the authors were positioned as 'embedded researchers'. Data were generated during observations of classroom sessions, and more predominantly, during interviews with teaching staff and members' of the schools' respective executive teams. This 'idiographic' material provided a basis for a thematic analysis that sought to uncover how teachers in each school conceived-of and enacted relational ways of teaching.

The deliberations outlined in this paper draw from three conceptual prompts. The first builds on the conceptual deployment of 'relational pedagogy' (e.g., Sidorkin 2000; Bingham and Sidorkin 2004; Aspelin 2021; Ljungblad 2021; Hickey and Riddle 2021) to give attention to the ways in which teachers and students come into relation as part of the pedagogical encounter. It is specifically with how encounters between students and teachers are provoked by certain formulations of inter-relationality that our interest is focused, with such enactments drawing attention to the ordinary multiplicity of everyday encounters between students and teachers. We have previously noted that learning proceeds through the act of 'coming *into* relation and setting about the task of negotiating how learning should proceed' and where 'teachers and students give credence to the immediacy of the moment – to the immediacy of the pedagogical *encounter*' (Hickey et al. 2021, 201). Neglecting this important aspect of the educational dynamic risks opportunities for meaningful learning. In this paper, we expand on this sense of relational learning by considering the possibilities that relational pedagogies open for moving beyond restrictive, decontextualised and standardised prescriptions of teaching and learning.

Our second conceptual prompt extends from this concern to emphasise that 'informality' within the pedagogical dynamic provides a valuable means for provoking unexpected learning encounters (Hickey and Riddle 2021). As a feature of the student - teacher interactions that we witnessed, informality emerged as an observable modality of practice that manifested in the form of an 'irreverence' towards the structures and modes of conduct that otherwise defined the experience of schooling (Hickey, Pauli-Myler, and Smith 2020). This informality provoked a certain 'looseness' around the rules and normative practices enacted in the schools we observed, but notably, remained focussed on brokering meaningful learning through imaginative inquiry. Teachers and students used these encounters to explore topics that responded *in-the-moment* of the pedagogical encounter (Hickey, Pauli-Myler, and Smith 2020). Informality pervaded the interactions

that we observed, and it was through these encounters that a range of inter-relationships different to those typically experienced within the more 'structured' contexts of each school emerged.

It is notable that in the Australian context, schooling is predominantly mediated by a national curriculum that defines content areas and concomitant ways of teaching that are in turn administered by State-based departmental authorities (variously as Departments of Education). While some capacity is available to schools and their teachers to determine the most effective ways of engaging with curriculum, it remains that schools and teachers are bound by the broad tenets of these authorities. It is under this formulation that the restrictions inherent to classroom practice – and the possibility for informality – hits home. Such a structure represents an inherent 'constraint' in what is pedagogically possible at the moment of encounter with students (Danaher et al. 2007; Hickey and Pauli-Myler 2019).

Our third conceptual prompt derives from de Certeau's (1984) theorisation of the *strategies* and *tactics* that define the relations of power evident within a social milieu. These concepts offer a useful means for conceptualising, and problematising, the normative expectations that mediate teacher practice. de Certeau (1984) defines a strategy in terms of the manoeuvres enacted by institutions capable of making 'knowledge possible and at the same time [determining] its characteristics' (36), with Saltmarsh's (2015) expansion of this conceptualisation highlighting that institutional strategies 'structure, conceal and maintain the operations of power ... used to keep those without a "proper place" within the institution at a distance' (41).

It is, however, important to note that these 'operations of power' are never *total*. In response, individuals prone to the vicissitudes of these strategic operations hold the capacity to assert 'temporary moments of agency and resistance' (Saltmarsh 2015, 41). The challenge is to identify 'interruptions and fissures which put into question strategies of control and reproduction' (Ahearne 1995, 191). While we argue that systemic education constitutes a predominant 'strategy' and that current formulations of centralised and standardised education represent a '*place* that can be delimited as its *own* and serve as the base from which relations with an *exteriority*' are constituted (de Certeau 1984, 36; emphasis in original), the *possibility* for activating 'irruptions and fissures' remains ever present. School systems assert the pretence of rationality as a basis from which narrowly defined prescriptions of pedagogical activity gain form, but within which alternatives are always possible.

Tactical 'irruptions', then, constitute actions deployed by those situated within 'a terrain imposed' (de Certeau 1984, 37). We suggest that teachers who seek to work beyond the restrictions of mandated curricula and prescribed ways of working function as individuals capable of tactical intervention. As de Certeau (1984) notes, those who deploy tactics 'must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open' (37) in order to make space for alternative possibilities and enactments. To seek to assert one's professional judgement as an educator, to engage students on the terms defined by the classroom context – and not those of decontextualised systems – and to enact modalities of teaching that work beyond narrowly conceived performative *truths* are tactical manoeuvres.

We take up these three conceptualisations – *relational pedagogy*, *informality*, and *strategies and tactics* – to assert that what is most decisively at risk in current formulations

of schooling is the capacity of teachers to responsively teach to the emergent needs of the classroom. We argue that most at risk in 'standardised' approaches to education, mandated as these are by the *exteriority* of authority, is recognition of the 'contextual contingencies' that define the classroom setting. The exteriority of authority can be observed in how measures of teachers' performance are defined externally to the classroom and imposed as performative truths (Ball 2016). Additionally, the exteriority of teacher performativity works to

Regulate teachers' professional conduct by introducing invisible means of social control through data generating monitoring systems. While teachers are positioned as autonomous professionals their work is increasingly measured against students' performance on national and international tests. These tests, in turn, regulate what is taught (curriculum) and how it is taught (pedagogy). (Singh 2018, 491)

In the current climate of standardisation and accountability, maintaining the capacity to assert professional judgement in the mediation of pedagogical encounters represents a challenge. Yet, cultivating the sorts of encounters that a relational approach to teaching necessitates remains vital to meeting the needs of learners. Comber and Nixon (2009) characterise the situation in terms of the relegation of teacher professionalism by 'dominant discourses [that] overwhelm the professional knowledge and ways of speaking of teachers' (336). The distinct challenge for teaching in this present moment is in reclaiming the capability that teachers might assert as 'professionals' to name and enact approaches to teaching that best meet the needs of students and that respond *in-the-moment* to the idiosyncrasies of the pedagogical encounter.

Relational pedagogical enactments

The analysis offered in this paper is informed by the findings from two substantive projects. Project 1 was conducted in a secondary school in Queensland as part of a larger survey of alternative learning programmes operating within mainstream school settings (University of Southern Queensland Ethics Clearance H16REA253; see Hickey, Pauli-Myler, and Smith 2020). Project 2 examined the enactment of relational pedagogies within Australian secondary schools, with emphasis given to the ways in which relationality is applied in school policy documentation and subsequently translated into practice (University of Southern Queensland Ethics Clearance H20REA221). All names attributed to interview participants are pseudonyms.

A theme apparent across these projects included the ways in which students and teachers came to engage with each other beyond otherwise formalised prescriptions of teaching and learning. We have become interested in how teachers and students negotiate more meaningful encounters within school settings to nurture relationships that value personal development, mutuality, and trust. Indeed, we go so far as to suggest that effective education requires the nurturance of such relationships and that teaching and learning encounters that recognise the mutuality of positionality provide a crucial impetus towards effective learning (Thrupp and Lupton 2006; van Manen 2015). An interview discussion drawn from Project 2 illustrates this point. One of the participating teachers relayed the significance of trusting relationships in the following terms:

Teacher: I think it's [about] keeping the doors open ... just keep trying. We'll just try different things until we find what works. I think before you can even teach any student you need to have a relationship with them. So, in my classrooms, the first thing ... at the start of the year, the first two weeks are about building relationships. So, while my lessons are all about classroom expectations, and things like that, I also team build and encourage the students to get to know me. I'm not just a teacher; I'm actually a human being. I have my own children, I have my own life outside of school, and I open that up to them (Dana: 23 March 2021).

We witnessed enactments of this sentiment in observations of this teacher's classroom practice and noted that a sense of 'mutuality' defined the encounters that this teacher had with her students. Mutuality corresponded as the awareness of the students' positionality and conviction towards understanding the prerogatives that drove the students' motivation towards their learning. This conviction towards mutuality equally opened space for the teacher to relay a sense of her own positionality and the motivations that drove her convictions towards teaching and engaging her students. By creating opportunities for mutual recognition in her classroom, this teacher opened space for meaningful encounters that prefaced the commonality of the pedagogical exchange and the shared inter-relationality of the classroom context (Hickey 2020). This, we suggest, represents a tactical enactment in the current context, a way of 'doing' education that responds 'in-the-moment' to the classroom context and the encounter between teacher and student.

Similar concerns were identified in a discussion with a teacher encountered in Project 1. This teacher was responsible for the design and implementation of the alternative learning programme observed in this project. In this discussion, the experiences of one of the programme's students was explained:

Teacher: So [his] behaviour record [during primary school] was pretty clean ... a great relationship with his teacher and all that. He makes a move into high school, and he's been suspended three or four times ... the nature of high school, going from one class to the other, it's not about relationships anymore. ... That's when I stood back and thought 'that's weird; what's going on here? Are we letting him down as a person?' So, to see that, it is interesting. The school system is like a factory ... one size fits all. So, for the kids who are a bit more creative or geared in different ways ... school can be difficult. (Phil: 25 October 2017)

The transition to secondary school had been traumatic for this student. Although this student had succeeded in primary school, the transition to high school and the associated disruption to the continuity that defined his primary school experience had resulted in his disconnection from learning, which in turn led to problematic behaviour and a subsequent suspension. He came to the alternative learning programme after being 'identified' because of this record. Although we note that processes for 'datafying' student performance generate problematic accounts of students' identities and capabilities as learners (Thompson and Cook 2017), we note that participation in the alternative programme had been predominantly positive for this student. Nonetheless, the processes by which this student was 'identified' were disconcerting and speak to the underpinning logic of the current 'audit explosion' (Daliri-Ngametua, Hardy, and Creagh 2022) in schools

and 'the mechanisms through which accountability is . . . accepted as a [normalised] part of the education system' (Perryman 2006, 149).

Another teacher who had worked closely with this student during his time in the alternative programme relayed the following assessment of the student's prospects:

Authors: [Without the alternative programme] what do you think would have happened to [this student]?

Teacher: Excluded. . . [he] would have been excluded this year (Juan: 20 October 2017).

Schooling for the students who came to the alternative learning programme had been *alienating*, with marginalisation and disengagement indicative of their experiences. The alternative learning programme sought to effect a more engaged experience, with this achieved by 'slowing' the pace of day-to-day encounters and establishing more meaningful bonds between students and the programme's teachers. We contend that approaches to teaching that seek to invoke recognition of student positionality and understand the idiosyncratic experiences that students encounter in their schooling produce more meaningful pedagogical exchanges, with such ways of engaging students emphasising the importance of the relational dynamic to the pedagogical encounter. Another teacher involved in the alternative learning programme relayed his views on the possibilities for developing relationships within mainstream school settings:

Coordinator: [Our program] is important because [students] can stay focused on a task, know they're not going to get in trouble and be supported by people and build relationships . . . in a classroom setting that just doesn't happen. The teacher doesn't have the time to build relationships and help them stay focused. The teacher might tell them, 'You need to listen, you need to pay attention', and not actually give them the skills to do that or teach them how to pay attention.
(Alison: 20 October 2017)

That the alternative learning programme represented – at least in this teacher's conceptualisation – such a markedly different environment for learning is itself remarkable. In a useful summary of relational pedagogy, Edwards-Groves et al. (2010) suggest that 'education occurs through lived and *living practices* that relate different people to one another' (52). The relation represents the 'the basic unit of education' (Aspelin 2011, 10), where the inter-relational dynamic becomes central to the educational endeavour. It is with how the process of teaching and learning proceeds *as* a relationship, situated at the interface of the encounter between teacher and student and set within the classroom context, that the basis of a pedagogy that takes stock of student and teacher positionality is found. This stands in stark contrast to predominant approaches to teaching that emphasise 'individualisation of achievement and competition rather than collaboration among practitioners and among students' (Tett 2020, n.p.).

Notably, the students engaged in the alternative learning programme also recognised the limitations of the regular classrooms (the same classrooms from which they had disengaged). One student relayed the following account:

Author: So, is that what happens in the classroom? You just get frustrated?

Student: Yeah . . . People just yell out stuff and I just get annoyed and then just walk out of class.

Author: Including the teacher?

Student: Yeah, sometimes.

Author: That's not so good at all. You seem to get along pretty well with [the alternative programme convenor]?

Student: Yeah, [he] is good.

Author: So, what is it about [the alternative learning coordinator] that makes him a good teacher?

Student: He's nice . . . Just stops and listens. Yeah, real calm! (Duane: 10 October 2017)

On recalling this discussion, we are reminded of Anderson et al. (2004) observation that 'relationships with school staff are among the most salient and influential relationships in students' lives' (96). The challenge represented by 'high stakes' (Lipman 2004) education emerges most forcefully in terms of how space – a *tactical* space – is made for the nurturance and maintenance of these approaches to teaching. We suggest that any intervention that seeks to open up the possibilities for student learning (and by extension, engagement) must 'make explicit the relationships teachers and students enact in the 'ordinary', day-to-day practice of schooling and seek to make time for the nurturance of the relationship 'with an ethics of mutuality' in view (Hickey et al. 2021). However, achieving this in the context of normative concepts of schooling represents a complex undertaking.

Relationality and compliance

While we accept that 'relational' approaches to education represent a diverse set of pedagogical enactments and that these remain contextually contingent and bound to the moment of the pedagogical encounter, we nonetheless draw a broad distinction between these and prevailing approaches to schooling currently enacted in Australia and elsewhere (Lingard 2007; Sahlberg 2016). We note that existing approaches to schooling are identifiable in terms of the mandates they assert over centralised and standardised curricula and prescriptive approaches to teaching and learning that emphasise teacher compliance and accountability (Biesta 2015; Lingard 2007; Sahlberg 2016). We also agree with Sellar's (2012) caution: 'talk about relationships . . . trips easily off the tongue'; the challenge remains in recognising that 'pedagogy is complex' (66). As such, we argue that any investigation of relationality inherent to a pedagogical activation requires the consideration of how it is enacted in-the-moment and 'during encounters between complex bodies' (Sellar 2012, 67). In existing models of schooling, teachers exert decreasing control over what is taught and how this should proceed.

In Project 2, we discussed with teachers the possibilities evident in relational approaches to teaching and how these might confront the impulses of compliance and standardisation. We were especially interested in understanding how our teacher

participants 'make' time within the day-to-day conduct of teaching to engage their students in meaningful ways. We became attuned to hearing our participants speak about relationality from varying perspectives; from those who viewed relationality as a useful means for meeting an important inter-personal remit and mechanism for understanding student positionality, to more philosophical articulations that emphasised progressive orientations towards amplifying student 'voice' and enacting pedagogical justice. By and large, our participants noted that enacting practices that actively engaged students in the negotiation of curricula and the procession of learning represented an important pedagogical responsibility; one that was underpinned by productive relationships between teachers and students. A relational pedagogy, in this sense 'recognises, acknowledges and taps into [students'] rich backgrounds' (Comber and Kamler 2004, 1) to effect learning.

However, it was striking that the discussions revealed that these teachers did not feel that adequate time was available to attend to nurturing these relationships. A teacher encountered in Project 2, and who additionally held Head of Department administrative responsibilities, reported the following:

Teacher: I am very much...here's your lesson plan but if we go off on a tangent because a student has asked a question, and they're all engaged and wanting to know...and participating in the discussion, we're going with that.

Authors: Sure. I was just about to ask – what does that look like in your classroom? I imagine the tension would be felt in terms of what the curriculum requires of you and where the students want to go – how do you negotiate that?

Teacher: Just make it up in the next lesson... or you assign it for homework. You go you know what? We've had a great discussion, but we needed to get through this today, so you guys need to do that at home. (Charma: 22 September 2021)

The tensions felt by this teacher manifested in terms of the available time to explore the 'tangents' that were of interest to her students. Following these tangents meant deviating from existing lesson plans and curricula, which in turn required time to be made up elsewhere – typically, via student homework. It was notable that this teacher worked within a school that actively professed a conviction towards the nurturance of 'learning relationships'. As a way of nurturing pedagogical relationships with her students, this teacher felt it important to follow the tangents, only to be confounded with the challenge of also attending to established curricula milestones. Although 'relationships' were reified in this school, it quickly emerged from our conversations that specific (and limited) renderings of what constituted the 'relation' were formally in operation, while other formulations of relationality were foreclosed.

Discussions with the school's Deputy Principal – Head of Pedagogy provided insights into how the 'relationships' concept gained definition in the school. The school's pedagogical framework had positioned 'relationships' as a foundational pillar of the school's approach to teaching and learning. This translated into a concern for ensuring that students were engaged *in* learning, that they had a *relationship* to learning and remained engaged as learners. Here, 'relationships' corresponded with students performing specific relations-to-learning that were subsequently evident in certain forms of behaviour and attendant forms of engagement. These forms of

engagement were, however, largely prefaced on compliance with school rules and established ways of 'being' a student. We draw from this document a sense of obedient compliance, where imagery of students quietly working away on directed tasks provided a sense of this inflection of relationality. This rendering of the concept stood in contrast with the definition prompted by the exploration of the 'tangents' mentioned in our earlier interview with Charma, and it was with this divergence that notable tensions became evident.

Working under a conviction to ensure that students remained engaged in appropriate demonstrations of learning, the Deputy Principal – Head of Pedagogy inaugurated an initiative designed to monitor how teachers were affecting student engagement, and in turn, student performance. The initiative, referred to under the guise of 'collegial conversations', involved senior members of the school's staff (including the Deputy Principal – Head of Pedagogy, alongside Heads of Discipline, and sometimes the Principal) 'dropping in' on classes to observe class sessions. In an interview that discussed the school's pedagogical plan and the rationale underpinning the enactment of the collegial conversations, the following background was provided:

Deputy Principal–Head of Pedagogy: So, essentially, we have a four-year school strategic plan, which we are currently in the process of enacting. . . . From there we set up an Annual Implementation Plan as a school and then each of the 'sub' areas [defined in the Implementation Plan] have their own person responsible for managing them. So, mine is 'pedagogy'; I develop a 'Pedagogy Action Plan' for each year, and have responsibility for developing my key targets, but that is negotiated with my line manager, the Principal. [The Principal] and I meet regularly to look at my Action Plan. We do a 'traffic light audit', once per term, to look at where I am at, what is going well, what needs to change. That filters down through every level of the school. So, I then meet with. . . my staff, that I directly supervise, I ask them for their action plan for their departments, and we regularly check-in around those. At the teacher level, there is an Annual Performance Development Panel planning process, and that is so you can see a clear line of sight from the School Performance Plan, that is a four-year document, right through to the teacher level in the classroom, and that their annual performance plan [has] measures and processes, and that they enact [this plan] with their line managers who are the Heads of Department.

Authors: Structures are fundamental in schools, but we're fascinated in how those translate into the day-to-day conduct of individual teachers. So, the conversations that you have with your staff, and the conversations that you have with [The Principal]; does this provide the collation of 'evidence' that informs the wider process? For instance, tangible evidence of things like student performance [as found in student performance data and assessment reporting] would feed into this? But are the 'hunches' that teachers have; are these captured? When you're working one-to-one with students and indeed, with colleagues. . . do you feed that material into your reporting, that more 'informal' evidence?

Deputy Principal–Head of Pedagogy: So, there’s a couple of different ways that that happens. So, we have a whole school ‘data plan’, and within that we have a ‘data placemat process’ where teachers capture key evidence around the students in their class and look at the data ‘inputs’. That can be their reporting outcomes for previous years, their [student performance] data, their behavioural data, their attendance data; they look at their class on a ‘placemat’. That then feeds into the Annual Performance Development Panel conversations about the teacher’s professional growth, and we also have . . . a process called ‘collegial conversations’. So that’s where teachers have set goals for themselves in their Annual Performance Development Panel for what they want to achieve. (Rebecca: 15 December 2021)

This process was defined by the Deputy Principal – Head of Pedagogy as being ‘deeply relational’. We did, however, query how such a formalised, and indeed, ‘datafied’ process could help nurture the sorts of relationships that might, for instance, encourage teachers to critically reflect on their practice in a genuinely reflexive way (and feel comfortable declaring where improvements might be made in their teaching). While we note that schooling systems have normalised processes such as this – and the accumulation of attendant accounts of data as evidence – we were nonetheless intrigued by the ‘selective precision’ of this approach. It was with how relationality came to be mobilised as the foundation of this process that was especially significant.

For the Deputy Principal – Head of Pedagogy, the pedagogical framework was ‘relational’ in that it broached encounters between the school’s executive team and teaching staff. These encounters were then intended to encourage compliance with approved ways of teaching, which in turn were intended to ensure that students remained engaged and in-relation with their learning. The school’s pedagogical plan rested on an impetus for staff to engage each other in peer appraisal to improve student performance and progression, with the subsequent ‘collegial conversation’ process providing the mechanism to broach this inter-relational dynamic:

Deputy Principal–Head of Pedagogy: [The teachers’] supervisor comes into their classroom at a negotiated time, observes the particular skill or goal that the teacher has requested through that process – it is all negotiated – and they have a post-observation conversation about that, so that you can see that it’s happening. We also then have artefacts like Curriculum Year Level Plans, Curriculum Unit Plans, Assessment tasks that can be audited to check that tangible pedagogical goals around success criteria appears there, that’s then checked through the observation process and it’s also checked through our informal ‘walk through’ . . . So we as a leadership team, we often just walk into the classroom – we have an open door policy – we go into the classroom and we can see, on the whiteboard, that there is a learning goal and a success criterion set for that lesson. Can I see that these students are engaged in their learning, what phase of the ‘Gradual Release of Responsibility Model’ are they operating; is this focused instruction? The next time I come back to see that teacher, are we still engaged in focused instruction? Have we moved to a different phase? (Rebecca: 15 December 2021)

Two aspects of this are worth expanding. First, the ‘structure’ of the process is significant. It was through the *codified* enactment of this process that the peer review

and assessment of teacher performance was determined. Although the intention was for teachers to be afforded opportunities to deliberate as part of a collegiate, with classroom observation and professional dialogue intended as prompts towards these reflections, it remained that the strictures of the process – demarcated by the pedagogical framework and accompanying implementation and action plans – established the measures by which teacher performance was gauged.

Second, the contextualisation of this process is important. The ‘walk through’ and ‘collegial conversations’ corresponded with the observation of in-class pedagogical enactments. This emphasis on enactments of practice ostensibly asserted the pre-eminence of observable instances of teaching in the assessment of teacher/teaching effectiveness. It was under the conditions of the classroom context that the effectiveness of adherence to the school’s pedagogical plan was determined. But the fact that these plans and strategies needed to be enacted and subsequently translated *into* practice represented a notable aspect of this process.

While we accept that teaching is a contextually contingent undertaking and that ‘structures’ including frameworks and pedagogical plans are virtually ubiquitous in contemporary schooling, it remains that prescriptive determinations of teacher effectiveness were framed by these strategic documents. As such, it was the adherence to the pedagogical framework and not the possibilities inherent to the enactment of teacher judgement and professionalism at the time of the observation that was at stake. This generated a perverse situation where teacher performance and effectiveness were determined by a plan that itself required empirical demonstrations of concordant teacher performance to corroborate its value.

We argue that trusting, dialogic, and generative formulations of relationality become a casualty under these conditions. We posed the following scenario to the Deputy Principal – Head of Pedagogy:

Author: Let’s just say, as you do the walk around, that you observe practice that may not be up to standard – practice that requires attention. How do those conversations then happen?

Deputy Principal–Head of Pedagogy: It can happen in a number of ways, depending on the context. If it is a question of performance, it is very much a direct conversation with the teacher at an appropriate time. I may choose to send an email to the teacher saying ‘hey, I would like to have a conversation, can we make time?’, come in close my door and have a private conversation about what I observed and what needs to change. It could be that it is not necessary for a Deputy Principal to be involved, and then I pass on this information to a Head of Department, who is a direct line manager, because it needs to be dealt with at that level and they would have a conversation. But again ... it’s very much part of the fabric of the school ... that we are open and honest with one another. (Rebecca: 15 December 2021)

The approach outlined here could be read as an expression of surveillance. Indeed, we question whether it is possible to have open, deliberative conversations when staff are aware of the surveillance that they are placed under during such observations. Further, we

suggest that a risk is present in terms of teachers performatively ‘playing a role’ and committing to enactments of practice that meet (perceived) requirements *when the boss is watching*. Although we appreciate that an intent towards the formation of a relational atmosphere of collegial professional development was the intention of this school, it remains that an undertone of surveillance is apparent. Far from resulting in a more relational atmosphere of collegial engagement, the situation was one where a pedagogical framework established the parameters against which teacher practice was both measured *and* performatively enacted.

Surveillance and performativity

Perryman’s (2006, 2009) explorations of the ‘performative acts’ deployed by teachers provide a useful analogue for the accounts offered here. Perryman (2006) illustrates how formally designated school inspection practices in England were ‘designed to provide an external view of schools to assist local education authorities (LEAs) in effecting improvement’ (149). Further, Perryman (2009) notes how the teachers she observed ‘performed for inspection, through the fabrication of documentation, teaching to a strict recipe, rehearsing meetings and interviews with inspectors and preparing the school as one would prepare a stage for a performance’ (612). Perryman (2009) continues by highlighting that ‘in modern institutions such as schools, control of the institution is maintained through monitoring and supervision and the constant gathering of knowledge about its effectiveness’ (615). Any possible breach in the control of the institution and its performance represents a risk.

We extend Perryman’s (2006, 2009) accounts to draw attention to the multiple loci of surveillance that operate in schools and the purposes to which teacher performativity is put. In Perryman’s (2006) accounts, the surveillance was conducted by externally positioned inspectors; in the instances we note above, the surveillance was enacted internally via locally mandated policy mechanisms. Where Perryman’s (2009) examples use data artefacts, such as school reporting documentation as ‘evidence’ under the guise of ‘giving the best possible impression to the inspectors’ (Duffy 1999, 110), in the schools that we observed documentation *prompted* the surveillance and provided it its impetus. In other words, the documentation deployed in the schools we observed established a ‘specific type of knowledge, one sustained and determined by the power to provide [itself] with [its] own place’ (de Certeau 1984, 36).

Further variations in surveillance were also evident. As academics visiting this school, we became acutely aware that our presence, too, while welcomed and warmly received, had nonetheless exerted a surveilling effect. Perryman (2009) observes that scrutiny from ‘outsiders’ represents a threat to a school’s reputation and perceived status. We became aware that our presence represented such a threat and therefore had to be ‘managed’. We could not, for example, visit just any class. The interviews we requested proceeded through an approval process, and we sensed that the teachers with whom we had been issued access had been deliberately ‘selected’ for engagement with our project. We had been inculcated into a wider set of relations that required that our presence be choreographed to ensure that we did not witness problematic instances and situations.

This attempt to manage our presence became evident during one of our visits. All proceeded as it had during our previous visits; we signed-in at the administration desk, met with the Deputy Principal and participant teachers, and proceeded to the selected classroom to sit-in and observe the class session. This particular class – a Year 10 English class – proceeded well enough, but we did speculate as to whether the teacher was ‘playing it up’ for our purposes. The teacher appeared to be trying-on ways of teaching that appealed to themes emergent from our earlier conversations. This included utilising a narrow lectern that was equipped with wheels and that allowed the teacher to position himself at locations around the room. The students seemed perplexed at this movement, and we speculated as to whether this was typical of the teacher’s usual conduct.

A further suspicion was raised when the teacher attempted to utilise a specific application on the classroom’s interactive board, only to be confounded when the functions of this application – one we were told enabled a greater level of student engagement – resulted in unexpected results; we questioned how familiar the teacher was with this learning tool. He glanced our way at various points – especially when students volunteered responses to questions or engaged discussion – as if to signal when demonstrations of the relational pedagogy we had previously discussed were apparent. He also emphasised the use of (what we felt was) a significant amount of time asking the students how their week to date had progressed and what they had been doing beyond school. Again, this form of inter-personal inquiry has been a theme in our earlier discussions.

This all proceeded well until a disruption from an adjoining classroom broke the attention of the students. An audible conflict had erupted between students of this adjoining class and their teacher, at which point we noted several students running from this class across the small open space outside the classroom. This was not the form of relationality that we had been told about in prior conversations, and when we later asked the Deputy Principal – Head of Pedagogy what had occurred, we were met with a deflective response and a clear sense that we were not to ask. These expressions of relationality were not part of the pedagogical framework. Further, and following Perryman (2006, 2009), it was clear that the performative compliance that had been suspected in the classrooms we visited was not typical of the day-to-day encounters that teachers and students shared. We, as outsiders, were reminded of our own surveilling capacity (even if this intent was not intended).

Conclusion

The argument core to this paper identified that approaches to teaching and learning that respond to the moment of the pedagogical encounter and that attend to the contingencies of the learning context, hold capacity to engage students in meaningful learning. By working with students in-the-moment of the pedagogical encounter to frame how the teaching-learning dynamic might proceed opens the capacity to engage topics and themes that resonate with students. The observations discussed in this paper demonstrated how those teachers who followed the ‘tangents’ enacted approaches to teaching that meaningfully engaged their students. These approaches to teaching worked to extend pedagogical inquiry from prompts that emerged in the

classroom context and that worked to nurture pedagogical relationships that encouraged engagement. In other words, these enactments represented ‘tactical’ responses to the systemic ‘strategy’.

A vital element in these pedagogical enactments was the informality that stood at the core of the engagement. Informality functioned in terms of opening time to follow the ‘tangents’ and engage students in ways that were not planned or prescribed by existing curricula. Learning in these moments proceeded as a modality of encounter that emphasised the formulation of inquiry as an emergent and contextualised act of becoming, activated in the moment of the pedagogical encounter. In this sense informality functioned as a productive force, and if recognised as an opening for imaginative inquiry, worked to provide a generative basis for the shared production of knowledge.

Yet, we note that enacting such an approach to teaching and engaging with students represents a challenge. Within the systems of education that are increasingly defined by ‘hyper-rationalised policies, over-elaborated administrative systems, and highly regimented teaching programmes’ (Edwards-Groves et al. 2010, 46), seeking to establish the sorts of relationships that enable students to deliberate and engage in imaginative inquiry signifies a *tactical* incursion. Schooling systems are not geared to accommodate such enactments, but if a genuinely relational pedagogy is to proceed, it will require teachers to make space to build these relationships and enact concomitant approaches to teaching. A relational pedagogy of this type is a tactical undertaking, and one that ‘takes advantage of “opportunities” and depends on them’ (de Certeau 1984, 37). Despite the continued and reductive exteriorities of neoliberal educational policy directives over teachers’ work, it is important for teachers to thoughtfully engage in pedagogical moves that nurture relational bonds with students as part of a commitment to an authentic relational pedagogy that exceeds the limitations of prescriptive, standardised and formulaic educational practices and accountabilities.

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