Performative Knowledge

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Definition

The term *performative knowledge* implies two different types of discourse; one relates to performativity, while the other concerns epistemology. John Langshaw Austin differentiated the performative function of language from its propositional one: those who say "Yes" during a marriage ceremony *do* marry but they do not *report* on the marriage (Austin 1962, 12). And he remarked that a performative speech act can never be false or true. While Austin used *performative* only for language, by the end of the 1980s, Judith Butler connected it to bodily actions. For Butler, gender is not founded biologically or even ontologically but results from specific social actions (Butler 1988). Performative acts constitute social practice. As Andreas Reckwitz noted, practices are not only bodily behavior but, at the same time, "sets of mental activities" (Reckwitz 2002, 251) – routinized ways of understanding the world. Practices imply "implicit knowledge" (Polanyi 2009). In contrast to propositional knowledge, "performative knowledge" is always embedded in actions. Therefore Donald Schön (1983) also called it "reflection-in-action", highlighting the fact that the seemingly spontaneous acts embody rules but do not refer to a level of reflection anticipating the action. Schön spoke of it also as an "art" (1983, 130). Due to the importance of contingency and the impact of medium and material, performative knowledge is closely related to aesthetic practices.

Background

Alfred Julius Ayer (1952), Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953), and Gilbert Ryle (1959) have contributed significantly to the understanding of knowledge as an activity. Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens have focused on knowledge inherent in everyday practices (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984). In science, the "pragmatic turn" (Bernstein 2010) redefined "truth". The proposition, when seen as action, was qualified in terms of its potential and possible impact. Knowledge claims were regarded as

a product of practice in a community of inquirers, also as fallible, to be improved through continuous testing in action (Hacking 1983; Rheinberger 2010). The laboratory studies of Karin Knorr-Cetina, Bruno Latour, and Hans-Jörg Rheinberger have proven the pragmatic basis of scientific knowledge (Knorr-Cetina 1984; Latour 1988; Rheinberger 2010). As a result, the development from a propositional to a performative concept of knowledge has replaced homogeneity with heterogeneity, absoluteness with contingency, and "academic" with "transdisciplinary" (Gibbons et al. 1994; Schatzky et al. 2001).

The "pragmatic turn" in the sciences also aroused interest in artistic concepts, processes, and forms of production at a time when process-based and ephemeral art forms such as performance and video were becoming paradigmatic within the visual arts. The "dematerialization of the artwork" (Lippard 1973) had already led to a developing rapprochement of aesthetic practice with philosophy and the sciences from the 1960s. Practice-based artistic research – the methodological basis of the new artistic PhDs – soon became part of the repertoire of disciplines such as anthropology or sociology. Scholars confronted the performativity of the humanities and science and encountered the arts as a model. Initially, the "self-commissioning" of modern artists inspired management theory (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007). Peculiarities of aesthetic practice, such as the spontaneous emergence of results and the distinctive nature of materials in the creative process, deepened the understanding of a pragmatic approach to knowledge (Fischer-Lichte 2008).

Performative knowledge presupposes a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991), as part of which the learners can observe, compare, act, repeat, and correct themselves. However, a performative understanding of knowledge and knowledge production poses a specific pedagogical problem: while propositional knowledge combines with a teaching concept of explanatory mediation, in which – as Rancière puts it – one intelligence is subordinated to another, performative knowledge does not emerge in this way (Rancière 1991). Here mediation needs demonstration and showing; an already practiced behavior in everyday social life that the "apprentice" observes and that the teacher displays and stages. If performative knowledge is taught, it requires teaching formats that enable active participation in the respective practice. Here, *criticality* might be considered differently: the practice does not imply a reflection in terms of an abstract propositional examination of habitual frames. Transformation does not result from a specific failure that retroacts to a set of mental dispositions. On the contrary, *change* is understood as a central component of practice in general so that learning – without interrupting practice – becomes a continuous element of everyday life.

Debate and criticism

Despite the epistemic change towards a performative understanding of science and its intense theoretical debate, there were few attempts by universities to adopt curricula or to develop a specific pedagogy. The Center for Advanced Visual Studies at the Massachusetts Institute for Technology in Cambridge (US), founded by the artist and designer György Kepes in 1967, invited artists to inspire scientists early on in its existence (Shulman 2017). Faced with a growing demand for creativity and entrepreneurship through the growing importance of immaterial labor, business schools, such as Copenhagen Business School, were expanding their academic curricula in the mid-1990s (Copenhagen Business School 2021). Like many other business schools during this period, Copenhagen Business School imagined the artist as an entrepreneur, a role model for the future businessperson (Guillet de Monthoux 2004). To learn more about artistic practice, artists were invited for dialogue. The encounter with performative knowledge was organized through dialogue and architectural conditioning of experiences (Guillet de Monthoux and Wikberg 2021). Critics argued repeatedly that such an instrumentalization of artistic experience comes at the expense of the very nature of the artistic practice and its autonomy (Holert 2020; Osborne 2014). The interest of Copenhagen Business School in learning from artists, promoted especially by professors like Pierre Guillet de Monthoux, was inspired by Witten/Herdecke University in Germany, founded in 1982 (Guillet de Monthoux 2004, 251). When Witten/Herdecke introduced a *Studium fundamentale*, it also offered practical courses in theater, creative writing, photography, film making, and choral, orchestral, piano, and chamber music, in addition to rhetoric, philosophy, etc. as part of a business studies and a medical studies program to allow students to pursue other interests and place their major discipline in new contexts (van den Berg and Landkammer 2002). Similar to Mezirow's (1978) concept of transformative learning this program promoted active participation of students in a practice instead of "explaining" it – as a more traditional understanding of university training would have it.

These early examples were developed primarily in the context of alternative management training programs, and with no elaborate debate on the didactics of higher education developing from their implementation. It was not until the turn of the millennium, however, that programs merging theory and practice began to professionalize and develop specific methods. In this, two major trends can be observed: On the one hand "design thinking" was inspired by the design practices. It spread rapidly from *d.school* at Stanford University and the management programs developed there (Lawson 2005). On the other hand, there were approaches that emerged from an experimental philosophy, aesthetics, and art practice, such as the *SenseLab* at Concordia University in Canada established in 2004 (Manning 2020; Manning and Massumi 2014).

However, these approaches remain rather marginal for the time being. The promise of a performative concept of knowledge was its innovative dimension (Razzouk and Shute 2012). Although design thinking became a fashion in the fields of management and leadership around the turn of the millennium, its training of performative competencies and creativity techniques was repeatedly criticized as difficult to objectify and offering limited measurability in its effects (Rotherham and Willingham 2009). On the other hand, artists and designers critiqued that the transfer of designerly and artistic practices to further education management runs the risk of its vulgarization or even standardization (van den Berg and Schmidt-Wulffen 2015).

A major problem arising from the transmission of performative knowledge to other practices was in its processes of critical reflection. The kind of meta-reflection called for within the university context poses a specific pedagogical problem: how can one experience the performativity of knowledge without losing its performative character? And without arriving back in the field of propositional knowledge?

Current forms of implementation in higher education

A new dimension of the implementation of performative knowledge can be observed only at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century. In a wide-ranging reform of studies, Stanford University, for instance, created the *Ways of Thinking/Ways of Doing* program in 2013. It emerged from a document commissioned by the university directorate that recommended a non-disciplinary study model and pursued a more generalist educational concept for undergraduates (Sheehan 2012). "Ways" was developed for undergraduates of all faculties to learn about different disciplines and acquire respective skills. The compulsory bundle of modules "Ways" consists of a total of seven areas of competence: (1) aesthetic and interpretive inquiry; (2) social inquiry; (3) scientific analysis; (4) formal and quantitative reasoning; (5) engaging difference; (6) moral and ethical reasoning; and (7) creative expression. This last competence field comprises performative knowledge (Stanford Undergrad 2023). The program's website states: "Through a combination of instruction and mentoring, Creative Expression (CE) courses offer students significant opportunities to study the creative process and at the same time acquire the requisite skills to 'practice' creative expression themselves" (Stanford Undergrad 2023). The concept allows non-art students to visit the courses of their fellow students studying arts. In this way, law or management students can participate in pottery courses, attend theater classes, or start a film production. However, they will also find courses such as Introduction to Computer Graphics and Imaging, Queered Tech and Speculative Design, Stanford Laptop Orchestra: Composition, Coding, and Performance, or Wild Writing.

The attention to non-propositional epistemologies at Stanford University echoes ideas of the Hasso-Plattner Institute for Design Thinking and also highlights keywords such as "co-creation" and "network thinking". It is remarkable that after the launch of the Creative Expression program in 2015, and with no investment spared, large workshop and studio buildings were built on campus with a stage for theater and performance, sculpture and printmaking workshops, film and media studios, and spaces for music instruction. In terms of didactic development, however, it can be noted that Creative Expression courses primarily opened up existing teaching formats, such as those designed for traditional arts majors, to all undergraduate students.

A different approach in this respect was taken by the Aalto University in Helsinki with its University-Wide Art Studies (Tervo 2020). Aalto University, the result of a 2010 merger between a business school, a design school, and a technical university, initially saw this program as a link between the faculties. Here, too, the idea was to develop a program based neither on classical artistic disciplines nor on a simplified and functionalized concept of creativity but to make available a complex, non-propositional form of knowledge. Within the framework of the university, around 30 courses were offered at the bachelor's and master's levels as of 2014. This course program included more conventional crafts such as painting, pottery, and design techniques, e.g. 3D prototyping, but also equine husbandry, brewing beer, or sausage-making (Tervo 2020). This was not just about classical artistic disciplines, but an "emergent learning" of trying things out and exploring, where the sharing of students' experiences is essential. However, as it was neither an independent administrative unit nor a compulsory part of the teaching program, it fell victim to austerity measures and was discontinued in 2022 (Aalto University 2022).

A program that emerged in exchange with the programs mentioned is the Creative Performance Program of the private Zeppelin University in Germany, developed in 2012, later renamed Creativity and Performance (Schmidt-Wulffen 2022). Teachers and participating artists developed specific didactics based on a post-disciplinary, conceptual notion of art. Artistic practice rather than artworks were at the center, where "practice" was to be experienced as a collection of bodily and mental activities informed by the specific materials and media used. Like Stanford, this program implies the handing down of the experience of artistic production, such as drawing, creative writing, musical improvisation, performance, photography, or film. However, a significant difference between this and the programs discussed earlier is that the university invited internationally known artists, designers, architects, and art-related yoga practitioners to work together in co-teaching formats (Grosser and Kleinmichel 2022; van den Berg and Buck 2017). To strengthen an experience beyond art objects and techniques, students had to combine two disciplines to experience similarity and difference – the characteristics of aesthetic practice and performative knowledge. An accompa-

nying theory course would deliver the conceptual premises of the program and allow for discussion. Alternating annual themes helped to retain the vitality of the program over several years (Zeppelin University 2022).

The development of the course falsified some of the assumptions derived from relevant theories. While they, for example, treat the non-intentionality of aesthetic practice and its foundation in the responsiveness of materials as crucial, the students were concerned with more elementary experiences. It emerged that it was especially important to foster the students' underdeveloped observation skills (van den Berg and Schmidt-Wulffen 2015). They experienced narration in film, photography, or drawing as an essential alternative to their scientific production. The cooperation with fellow students, reinforced even by choreography or other collective practices, became a crucial course experience, hinting at something like swarm intelligence. Improvisation strengthened the feeling of doing it in the right way. Space gained a central role, experienced as a hidden guiding principle connected to the order of an academic institution. Several exercises forced the students to transgress these rules and to invent diverting behavior: participants exercised yoga in a law seminar – with the consent of the lecturer; students had to undergo the painful experience of an outsider in what was later called "affirmative embarrassment" (Schmidt-Wulffen 2022, 207).

Undoubtedly the program hinted at principles of performative knowledge. The economy of time, however, proved to be a problem which also occurred in the aforementioned programs. Embodied knowledge needs exercise and corrections as part of a community of practice. While the program established a community, even addressing its specific collective swarm intelligence, it did not invest enough time for the bodily knowledge to develop (Schmidt-Wulffen 2022). The structuralist method of combining two significant but diverse experiences through participation in two different disciplinary courses tried to "abbreviate" a process that – at an art school, for example – would take years. The limitations of economic and epistemic rules of a university, however, did not allow for a more considerable "investment" to support this process. The evaluation of outcomes in the final presentation at Zeppelin University also demonstrated that students were much better in media familiar from everyday digital communication – like photography or film with mobile phones – than with traditional artistic crafts like drawing, indicating that in a postmedia world, aesthetic practice is not a matter of art alone, but is already generalized into daily practices.

One is more likely today to find performative knowledge in ordinary behavior, which is increasingly aestheticized, than specifically in the arts. The focus on art also raises the question of its role in a globalized culture; but just as there has not yet been a stand-alone debate on integrating performative knowledge into non-arts or sports science courses, it proved impossible to find similar efforts in universities outside Europe and the US. The reason for this might be authors' limited

experience. However, it can also be understood as a consequence of the Western tradition, of enlightenment and its division of emotion and intellect, of arts, science, and the everyday. Non-European cultures allow for a much more generalizing approach to embodied knowledge, even in their universities.

It is worth noting that the European programs mentioned above – which include Copenhagen Business School, Witten/Herdecke University, but also Stockholm School of Economics, the University of St. Gallen, and occasionally Leuphana University and Milan's Bocconi University with their art programs – have been in close contact at times to exchange ideas about the integration of artistic practices into university teaching. It became obvious within these meetings, in which the authors of this chapter also participated, that such programs not only pose infrastructural demands and require careful curatorial work, they are also difficult to reconcile with established curricula and spatial conditions. At various network meetings, moreover, it became apparent that it remains controversial whether there is a benefit in offering such programs on a mandatory basis. What speaks in favor of mandatory participation is that these programs should not remain ultimately a destination for those whose sensibilities would always gravitate towards them, but should retain something resistant that is methodically valuable for making systems of thought tangible.

Furthermore, it became evident in the network meetings that aesthetic practice should be organized at universities as neither an alibi for personality development nor as an excursion into an exotic episteme. It makes more sense to recognize the aesthetic practice as an aspect of academic research and to take it into account in the curricula. This presupposes a changed understanding of scientific activity in the sense of a "practice turn" (Schatzky et al. 2001), in which the aesthetic–artistic aspects of the scientific activity itself are recognized. At the center of this changed understanding of scientific productivity is the "unfolding, dispersed, and signifying (meaning-producing) character of epistemic objects" (Knorr-Cetina 1999, 184) that stands in process-based relation to its researching subjects. A new epistemology is emerging here that reaches beyond the sciences into the arts and even everyday practice. Universities should begin to adapt their organization to this epistemology to accommodate a changing society. There is a direct interrelation between pedagogy and the conceptual structure of universities.

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