

Rethinking what it means to write: A contribution from Judith Butler

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Judith Butler's performativity work is perhaps more comfortably situated within the areas of philosophy, feminist post structuralism and queer theory than it is within the more influential theoretical framings that inform Academic Language and Learning (ALL) practice and research in Australia. In this paper, I discuss the ways in which particular aspects of Judith Butler's performativity might be brought into play to offer a theorised explanation of the complex and the fleeting aspects of student writing and drafting. To do this, I draw on data from a study of research student writing. Butler's performativity work, that is, her work on the role that language plays in the processes of subject formation provokes a reconsideration of some of the possible unanticipated effects of academic language and learning practices, specifically text analysis. It goes some way towards theorising why it might appear that some students 'just don't get it!'

Key words: Performativity, subjectivity, Judith Butler, writing, research Student Writing

1. Introduction

The written drafts that students produce along the way towards submission of their written assignment constitute some of the more mundane, frequently private, and consequently little researched artifacts of learning. Yet these scraps of writing, if taken seriously, are a source of evidence about the decisions that a student makes about what to write on the page, what to erase, or rewrite in sometimes unexpected ways. These data, along with students' talk about their writing, provide rich accounts of student writing that might defy a simple developmental framing of the student writer's orderly progression towards the production of an ideal text. These data, moreover, provide insights into the sort of negotiations that are involved in *becoming* the ideal *writing subject* that produces the ideal written text.

This paper draws from a larger study of research student writing (James, 2011) where none of the participants were international students, and none were identifiably culturally and linguistically diverse – the usual signifiers of difference and deficit. Put simply, the students who contributed their writing to this larger study cannot easily be dismissed as students with problems. On the contrary, these students were high achievers, drafting sections and chapters of their theses – an intensely 'normal' part of the life of any research student; normal and complex, normal and fleeting, normal and relatively under-researched.

Part of what I was interested in doing in that study was tracing the changes that students made to their writing over a series of drafts and talking with them about what was influencing those changes. The theoretical framing and consequent methodology that I employed involved an interweaving of the text analytic technologies of Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1994) alongside Judith Butler's performativity work (for an extended account of this methodology see James, 2013).

My motivation for this research was the work that I had done with students over the years – the sort of work that academic language and learning (ALL) educators are all familiar with – sometimes deconstructing a model student text to identify the genre moves and the language resources that the student had drawn on to construct the text, or working with students on a section of their writing and demonstrating the language resources of cohesion, theme and rheme development, nominalisation and so on, that they could use to improve their writing. Many of the students got it – or seemed to. Sometimes, however, they would come back with a redrafted version that looked quite different from their previous attempt. The writing was often good but things had changed in ways that we had not discussed. I wanted to know why students made the changes to their writing that they did and in working with this question, I looked outside sociolinguistics to theorists such as Butler who were working with ideas of subject formation.

Butler's work was particularly attractive because language is central to her theorisation of how one becomes a social subject and, from some of the conversations that I had with students about their writing, it seemed that some of what was happening when the redrafted text came back looking somewhat different from what I had imagined it might be, was about negotiating a subject position on the page – who they wanted to be on the page – how they wanted to be or thought they should be recognised as a *writing subject*. What continues to appeal to me about Butler's work is the ways in which she theorises subject formation as an ongoing, contingent, fragile and at times contradictory process – tied up with language and with 'doing' over time, with regulatory discourses, and with agency within discursive constraint. And, drafting is certainly 'doing' and 'redoing' over time.

Butler's work led me to notions of subjectivity that cut across the relatively more or less stable identity markers of race, gender and class; or the diversity markers of cultural and linguistic diversity, socio-economic status and language proficiency that have framed much of the academic writing and identity literature to date. Since Roz Ivanič's (1998) seminal theorisation of the relationship between academic writing and identity, this relationship and its central yet contested concepts of identity, voice, discourse, and subjectivity have been further explored, using a range of theoretical framings (see, for example, Harwood, 2005; Hawkins, 2005; Hyland, 2002, 2010; James, 2011; Kamler, 2008; Kamler & Thomson, 2006). Ken Hyland (2010, p. 162), for example, has suggested that "identity research is an area largely characterised by autobiographical methods, where discourse helps construct an identity through the ways that people explain and understand their lives (e.g. de Fina, Schiffrin, & Bamberg, 2006)." He argues that a narrative approach such as this is only part of the story – "a one-sided self-construction" (Hyland, 2010, p. 162). Further to this, he adds that if "identity is really a *performance* and not simply an *interpretive recounting* then we need to find ways of capturing what people routinely do with language that is similar or different from what others do with it" (emphasis in original; Hyland, 2010, p. 162). Hyland's choice for capturing this type of evidence is a corpus approach which he uses to demonstrate how individual authors "construct an identity through consistent patterns of rhetorical choices" (Hyland, 2010, p. 162).

The work that I do in this paper, however, using Judith Butler's performativity work attends to the central role of language in the formation of a *social subject* and as such, Butler's social subject is multiply positioned and positioning, contingent, relational, and consequently fragile. Butler's work provokes a different set of questions from those that interest Hyland. Butler's interest is in understanding how one becomes a social subject in and through the operations of language and discourse, rather than in identifying patterns of language that construct an identity which has a relative stability once established.

A fully theorised account of subject formation such as Butler's is notably and, perhaps not surprisingly, absent from solely linguistic accounts of identity. Nevertheless, Butler's focus on the role of language in subject formation is, as I have argued elsewhere (James, 2013), one which can be usefully employed alongside 'evidence' in the form of students' written drafts to capture what people do with language to construct a subject position/positions for themselves and for others. These subject positions are dynamic rather than stable and open to ongoing revision and contestation.

In the following sections, I work with three interconnected concepts that are key aspects of Butler's theory of performativity. Each concept is briefly explained and then further articulated within the context of student writing, using data from the larger research study. The argument that underpins this paper throughout is: that writing and subject formation are co-constitutive but not identical, and that some of what is going on in writing involves the student who writes, and does a lot of other things besides (James, 2012), in complex negotiations with an excess of multiply positioned and positioning 'selves'.

2. Performativity: Butler's fragile social subject

Butler's performativity work, that is, her theorisations of the power of language to name a social subject in ways that render that subject intelligible (or not) within a particular discursive framework, is central to the process of becoming a social subject. This is not a process that is dependent on some internal feature of oneself. It is a *fragile* language-infused process of *becoming* which can also be undone, rather than a state of *being* which has permanence. Before moving into a further explanation of the key conceptual underpinnings of this theory, I want to make a brief digression to exemplify this more general notion of the *fragile social subject* within a context that is most familiar to ALL educators, that is, the current higher education context within which ALL work occurs.

This is a context within which regulatory activities are in focus; deficit discourses about ALL work are re-emerging; students' literacy levels and English language proficiency are under scrutiny; and universities are keen to establish and implement policies to demonstrate compliance and to fix student language and learning 'problems'. The Tertiary Education Quality Assessment Agency's (2013) thematic review of English Language Proficiency is one manifestation of this regulatory environment. This is a time of fragility and change: for the ALL field, its practices, and its social subjects.

Butler's work, extrapolated to this context, provides a tool for analysing the ways in which ALL work is positioned or named, and continuously re-positioned and re-named in the university contexts within which we work. As ALL educators, we may be momentarily named as academic staff, only to be renamed and repositioned as professional staff. We may be positioned with a Centre and then repositioned within a faculty grouping or vice versa. We may be positioned as partners in the academic enterprise only to be repositioned at some later point as service providers. Such are examples of the frequent renaming and re-categorisation of roles that ALL educators are experiencing in their local contexts. We are *fragilely* constituted social subjects, vulnerable to ongoing naming, renaming and re-categorisation.

More salient for the purpose of this paper, is the naming, categorisation and 'carving up' of the student body into often exclusively binary categories (international/domestic, proficient/not proficient in English language, low socio-economic/high socio-economic). The student becomes through this process of naming and categorisation a *subject of* and *subjected to* the university. The student, as social subject, is similarly a *fragilely* constituted subject, vulnerable to ongoing categorisations.

In the remainder of this paper, I focus on the ways in which Butler's performativity work invites a reconsideration of the ways in which language both constrains and enables a particular social subjectivity within the context of writing and drafting. Understood from within a performativity framing, writing and drafting in particular, are activities through which a student negotiates more than the linguistic resources available within a particular genre and disciplinary framework. In addition to this linguistic work, and intersecting with it, the student as subject, of and to, the university also negotiates a subject position for her/himself on the page that is open to ongoing contestation and revision. It is precisely at these moments, most visible in and through the actions of writing, that the student risks becoming unintelligible; becoming instead a writer who is lacking in some way, one who is 'not quite getting it'. Paradoxically, it is also at these moments that the student has agency; becoming a subject who writes in ways which either adhere to, side-step, negate or exceed the directives given by lecturers, supervisors, or ALL educators. This agency is not a radical agency in the sense that, for Butler, agency always

occurs within discursive constraints. Within this framing, writing is implicated with, but not reducible to, subject formation. In other words, writing and subject formation are co-constitutive but not identical.

3. Butler's performativity – three concepts

Butler's theory of performativity, as a theory of subject formation, has undergone several changes as she has worked with it over time. Drawing from a number of her publications, the three interrelated concepts of subject formation that I work with in this paper are that it involves:

- *A stylised repetition/iteration* of bodily acts which themselves are effects of discourse.
- An *anticipation or internalisation* of what it means to be a particular sort of social subject.
- *Language* playing an integral role in the discursive formation of the social subject.

Implicated with and permeating across each of these is the idea of *agency within discursive constraint*.

3.1. Stylised repetition

In *What is Critique*, Butler's (2004b) essay on Foucault, she explains that what appears to be a natural epistemic order has a governmentalising effect on ontology. In other words, what we might understand to be a natural way of ordering or understanding social arrangements has a regulatory effect on which social subjects, ways of knowing, being and doing 'make sense' within a particular knowledge framework or epistemic order. This, says Butler, becomes salient to the question of who can be a subject and what will count as knowledge. Moreover, becoming a particular social subject is not a single act; rather, it is a *stylised* response to the governmentalising demands placed upon the subject.

To place this concept of stylised repetition within a more familiar context – it is, following Butler, not enough, for example, for me as social subject within the university wishing to justify and maintain my academic status to demonstrate on one occasion only that I can write a publishable research paper. I must go on being publishable, and being publishable within the University's terms of what counts as a legitimate academic publication within a legitimate field of knowledge.

Stylisation transposed into the context of academic writing and drafting, provokes a reconsideration of the iterative activities of drafting, reading, reviewing, and critiquing student texts. These are the everyday activities that mark the life of a research student who, for example, as a normal part of his/her candidature, provides drafts for a supervisor to read and make comment. These are also the everyday activities of the supervisor or the ALL educator who reviews a student's drafts and offers comments on ways in which to improve the text, or the researcher who analyses student texts to provide models to assist other students to write in particular ways.

The following interview excerpts and segments of written drafts provide examples of the complex process of stylisation in the context of writing and drafting. The excerpts are from a number of interviews conducted with 'Clara', a doctoral student in an Education faculty in a regional Australian university, and from numerous drafts of her writing. The examples I provide relate to the second and third drafts of a segment of the methodology section of Clara's thesis which she produced over a period of months. In part, the changes evident in these drafts are, as Clara describes, responses to feedback provided to her by her supervisors as well as by participants in a faculty-organised methodology workshop.

The changes that I discuss here focus on Clara's use of the phrase "simple observation" to describe one of a number of data collection techniques she has used in her study. She included this phrase as the last point in a numbered list under the bolded heading **Data Collection techniques**. The phrase, as it appears in the numbered point in draft 2 and draft 3, is reproduced

in text excerpt 1 and text excerpt 2 below. For an extended account of the changes across the three drafts see James (2011).

Text excerpt 1 (Draft 2)

5. simple observation by the researcher as a participant in the arts learning provider programs under investigation.

Text excerpt 2 (Draft 3)

5. Simple observation by the researcher as a participant in the arts learning provider programs under investigation.

Following is a detailed discussion of each of the data techniques used in this research.

The only changes across these two drafts are the punctuation (capitalised ‘S’ in ‘Simple’), and the new sentence that has been added after point 5 in draft 3.

The written comments that Clara received as feedback from two reviewers in the methodology workshop relate to draft 2. Written next to point 5 were the following annotations (Table 1)

Table 1. Reviewers’ annotations on draft 2.

| Annotation | Reviewer |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| ‘participant observer?’ (question written in the margin of Clara’s text next to point 5) | A fellow doctoral student. |
| ‘simple’ (crossed out on Clara’s text) | A lecturer in the Education faculty. |

In the following interview (excerpt 1), Clara reports and reflects on her supervisors’ later directive to ignore the feedback from her fellow student.

Interview excerpt 1

...my supervisors said: ‘look, you know the academics didn’t write lot of comments on them [copies of draft 2], they’re probably in good shape and don’t worry about this person [the student reviewer] because they’re a student, alright’!

...so it actually didn’t impact initially and I thought ‘oh it’s in good shape’... but you know I think there is a bit of an impact of someone [the student reviewer] who reads the whole thing and goes ‘I don’t know what this is about’ [Clara’s gloss of the question by the student reviewer].

Despite her supervisors’ reported directive to “not worry about this person because they’re a student, alright”, Clara’s response (interview excerpt 2) indicates that she intends to act against their directive. In fact, the rewritten text that Clara produces next incorporates an extended section. This is introduced by the new sentence after point 5 in draft 3 where Clara writes: “Following is a detailed discussion of each of the data techniques used in this research”, so that, as Clara says in interview excerpt 2, “that’s one less question [the marker might ask]”.

Interview Excerpt 2

So for example, they [my supervisors] are trying to give me feedback about going ‘you sound like you’re going into the study and just taking all the dregs because it hasn’t gone to plan’.

So I get it. You know I totally agree with it and that, but then I have to make some decisions to make it like, ‘no I can’t let the marker ask that question’. I’ve got to have that there so that’s one less question.

The student represents the potential thesis examiner for Clara, thereby occupying a much more powerful place in Clara's imagination than in her supervisors' estimation. Clara has also ignored the crossed out 'simple' indicated by the lecturer who reviewed her work. Her explanation for this is provided in interview excerpt 3.

Interview Excerpt 3

Yeah, and I think – yeah it's sort of like that's the thing that they've [the supervisors] tried to drum in was like 'you've chosen this and you've chosen that' and that's how it is. It's not why I've really chosen it (laughing). I had whole bits of study in my head, and it was so much better, (laughing) so much more developed than this (laughing).

...I can't pretend that it was participant observation and I think – I think the word 'participant observation' is tricky, now that it is also a research method. Like with just words as a participant I observed when I was – when I did the program, this is what happened and that actually helped when I was interviewing the people because I knew the different areas they were talking about. But if you put 'participant observation' down that means I was there on the learning program with them...

...It's a – it's a research methodology bit...

And they [the lecturer reviewer] crossed 'simple' out but that was in the context of it was – it wasn't just me going 'oh simple observation' which was ...how she – that reviewer read it, whereas it was in the literature.

...they hadn't read – they hadn't read that literature on simple observation (laughing)...I knew, because if they had they may have crossed it out and said 'this actually isn't simple observation what you've done either' but I think they were just like, you know 'simple'!

On first viewing, there is nothing remarkable about the processes of review and critique that have occurred in the methodology workshop and via Clara's supervisors' reported comments. What appears to be happening is the shaping of Clara's text into a more acceptable text for final submission. At the same time though, if we take the text changes seriously, take notice, for example, of the textual 'evidence' concerning what Clara does and does not change, and her accounts of why, then a more complex negotiation becomes visible – one that can be theorised – not just recounted nor easily explained through a solely linguistically focused textual analysis.

Beginning, nevertheless, with the available linguistic evidence, it is clear that Clara's final draft contains the word 'simple' against the advice of the lecturer in the methodology workshop. When lined up alongside interview excerpt 3, Clara provides her reasoning for discounting the lecturer's direction to leave out the word 'simple'. As Clara describes: "[the lecturer] hadn't read the literature". Furthermore, Clara's account in interview excerpt 2 provides evidence that Clara has taken notice of the student's question mark placed against 'simple observation' and provided an extended explanation of her data techniques in an attempt to make sure that there is "one less question".

This linguistic evidence, together with Clara's accounts of her actions, provokes the question of how we might interpret what is going on in Clara's drafts. Perhaps Clara's responses might be understood as Clara 'not quite getting it', 'needing further instruction' or 'lacking in some way'. Perhaps though, following Butler, Clara's responses might be understood as complex negotiations involving both the written text and her desire to be recognised as an appropriate doctoral writer – one who writes an intelligible text in the face of conflicting demands made by Clara's supervisors and the student and lecturer reviewers in the methodology workshop.

3.2. Anticipating/internalising subjectivity

In this section, I take up Butler's concept of *anticipation* or *internalisation* of the norms that govern 'intelligible' actions and social subjects and contextualise this again in Clara's texts and accounts of her writing. I employ this concept to demonstrate the ways in which agency operates for Clara; providing a theorised explanation of the negotiations that Clara makes through and within her writing. This explanation further underscores the co-constitutive relationship between the written text and subjectivity.

In *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1999), Butler's focus is on the ways in which "particular gestures, individual habits, concrete bodies, and social rituals serve the performance of gender" (Magnus, 2006, p. 82). Butler also makes the argument in this work that there are possibilities for agency within the discursive constraints of what counts as male/female. In other words, there are ways of 'doing' gender that makes sense within, or transgress, the regulatory and normative discourses of gender. For Butler, (and this is a crucial difference between her work and Foucault's) it is the psyche that both exceeds and allows for agency and resistance to the normalising effects of discourse. This is a complex argument and one that Butler (1997b) develops in particular in the *Psychic Life of Power*. I work with these concepts, in a necessarily brief way, in the following section.

Subject formation, following Butler, involves not just a relationship to an external norm or "to a norm that is imposed by someone or to a relationship to an Other [Clara's supervisors, for example, or the student who reviews Clara's draft] who comes to stand for normativity in some way" (Butler, 2004a, pp. 341-342). Subject formation also involves the subject in a reflexive movement whereby the subject, in some way, internalises the norm but "not always in consultation with the external exemplification of the norm" (Butler, 2004a, p. 342). This internalisation, as Butler describes, is not necessarily a mechanical process which mimetically relates to norms outside of the subject. In this self-reflexive process of internalisation:

The relation to myself that takes place is psychic and is complicated and does not necessarily replicate my relation to the Other; the I who takes myself to task is not the same as the Other who takes me to task. I may do it more severely; I may do it in ways the other never would. And that incommensurability is crucial, but there is no subject yet without the specificity of that reflexivity. (Butler, 2004a, p. 342)

I want to suggest that what Clara is recounting in the interview excerpts are examples of the operation of what Butler would call the *psychic life* of power "which is not the same as the social life of power, but the two are radically implicated in one another" (Butler, 2004b, p. 342). A theory of conscience, that is, the ways in which an individual internalises certain norms, *psychically*, is essential for Butler's understanding of the ways in which a subject is formed. This internalisation is a subject's capacity for reflexivity, and reflexivity does not exist without the internalisation of norms. For Butler, the internalisation of a norm has a specific meaning:

A lot of behavioural psychology assumes that norms are more or less mechanically internalised, but I think that they can in fact take all kinds of forms, that they enter into the fantasy life of an individual and, as part of the fantasy, take on shapes and forms and meanings and intensities that are in no sense mimetically related to how they're existing in the outside world. (Butler, 2004a, p. 342)

Clara, following Butler, is potentially inaugurated as a particular *writing subject*; a subject that is constrained "in[to a] good shape" (interview excerpt 1):

...at the moment when the social power [of norms concerning what will and will not count as an appropriate written text that are articulated by her supervisors and reviewers, but in no single nor homogeneous message] that acts on it [Clara, as *the subject who writes*], that interpolates it, that brings it into being [as the more constrained *writing subject*] through these norms is successfully implanted within the subject itself and when the subject becomes the site of reiteration of those norms, even through its own psychic

apparatus. I suppose that this would be why conscience is essential to the inception of the subject. (Butler, 2004b, pp. 342-343)

In the example provided in interview excerpt 2, the student reviewer is Clara's 'imagined' and 'internalised' more powerful Other, representing as she does the thesis examiner who has the potential to judge Clara through her writing more harshly than either the lecturer who reviewed her work or her supervisors. Further complicating Clara's responses to this reviewer, to the lecturer and her supervisors' directives are a set of contested norms regarding what counts as a weighty qualitative research design and methodology. In interview excerpt 4, Clara describes a "struggle" between what she understands as a qualitative research methodology that will **not** be seen as "lightweight" and, on the other hand, her own research design that had not gone according to plan, but was "so much better, so much more developed" (interview excerpt 3).

Interview excerpt 4

...but I think I've told you – I struggle with because it's a qualitative research thing, most of the data stuff that I've got is coming out of those interviews hasn't got – I mean I don't know even – even know that it needs triangulation, you know so I'm a bit conscious that it might be a bit lightweight in the other things.

Clara's comments in this interview excerpt reference a "struggle" that for her is personal and localised to her immediate concerns about her own research. These comments, however, index a much wider struggle in the field of educational research where, as Patti Lather (2006, p. 35) argues, "there has been a return to the kind of imperial science that some 40 years of paradigm contestation, had, almost, displaced".

What this account of Clara suggests is that the process of becoming a *writing subject* in the university, embodied in the experiences of Clara and in her writing, involves Clara's recognition and internalisation of a set of rules and precepts which are already in existence regarding what counts as 'appropriate' research paradigms, what counts as 'appropriate' ways of knowing, 'appropriate' ways of doing and writing about research, and of whose recognition 'matters'. But Clara does not simply take on these rules. At times, as the interview excerpts indicate and her written drafts demonstrate, she resists the directions given to her. Clara's adherence and resistance to these directions might be understood as:

a particular exchange between a set or rules or precepts (which are already there) and a *stylisation* of acts which extends and reformulates that prior set of rules and precepts. This *stylisation* of the self in relation to the rules comes to count as "practice". (Butler, 2004b, p. 313)

3.3. The role of language

Butler's work on the role of language in the formation of the subject is perhaps most well known in *Excitable Speech* (Butler, 1997a). She has, however, been criticised for limiting the possibility for subject's agency to "the discursive effects of interpellation and naming" (Magnus, 2006, p. 82). This is also a criticism that was raised earlier by Seyla Benhabib (see, for example, Benhabib, 1995, p. 21) and is one which Butler (1999) addresses and responds to in the preface to *Gender Trouble* and elsewhere, for example, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Butler, 2001) and *Changing the Subject* (Butler, 2004b).

Perhaps one of Butler's most straightforward responses to this criticism appears in *Changing the Subject*. Here Butler speaks of the role of language in forming the subject, that is, through 'the received grammar' and 'ordinary' language which limits what and who is *intelligible*. It is through calling into question the ordinariness of that language, and the ways in which that language structures the social world and its *intelligible* subjects, that the subject creates possibilities for being and doing otherwise.

Language, either in the form of Clara's drafts, the written feedback on Clara's drafts, the verbal feedback she receives from her supervisors and others, and her own anticipation/internalisation and vocalisation of what she understands will be acceptable to an as yet unknown but imagined Other –

the thesis examiner – is central to the account I have provided in this paper. The small slice of text that has been the focus of this paper, for example, appears to be a very ordinary text, hardly worthy of any real consideration. What I have done here, following Butler, is call into question that text and the comments made by Clara, her reviewers and her supervisors. Clara has also, in her own way, called into question the language of her texts and the language used to describe her texts. In doing so, she is forming a ‘self’ as a doctoral writer over a series of drafts not in any straightforward or submissive way as we might expect, for example, through taking on the advice of her supervisors, but via a more complex, conscious, and agentic navigation of the competing discursive demands placed upon her.

4. Conclusion

Rethinking what it means to write, following Butler, and drawing on Clara’s texts and talk about her texts as exemplars of the seemingly mundane texts and social practices that make up a research student’s life involves rethinking the relationship between writing and subjectivity. Using Butler’s theory of performativity, I have argued in this paper that writing and subject formation are co-constitutive but not identical. Textual analysis of writing on its own does not take us in this direction. A theory of subject formation on its own would not necessarily take us in this direction. But Butler’s theory of performativity, because of its insistence on the role of language in subject formation, seems to me to be a useful, if unusual addition to the text analytic work with which most ALL educators are more familiar. In combination, they go some way to describing, questioning and theorising why it seems that some students ‘just don’t get it’.

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