Academic citizenship: A radical practice perspective

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Abstract

This article presents how we might think about academic citizenship through a radical practice perspective. The assumption is that academics, alongside other actors, enact the university in their everyday practices. Everyday academic citizenship is not a choice, it is something we all partake in, whether we are aware of it or not, whether we wish to or not. Through analysing an un-remarkable statement by an academic, drawing on Austin's speech act theory, this article illustrates how we can understand such statements as a particular form of academic citizenship in which the present and future university are envisioned. The article concludes by inviting academics to become more deliberate in their citizenship.

Keywords: academic citizenship; academic practice; everyday life; performative politics

Received 22 December 2022; revised version received 07 June 2022; accepted 05 September 2023. *Corresponding author: Eva Bendix Petersen, Roskilde University, Denmark (evabp@ruc.dk).*

Act as if what you do matters. It does.
William James

Introduction

I will begin with the proposition that the university is enacted in everything academics do, say, and feel, and that these enactments outline the possibilities for further and future enactments. Academic citizenship is, in this sense, not a choice—not something only the heroic ones undertake deliberately and against the odds. The "city" of academia is created and recreated every day by those citizens who go about their business without giving much thought to the potential effects of their doings. Through all their everyday practices, their everyday citizenship, academics help to stabilise, normalise, and transform what counts as academic doing and being; even and also when they do not agree on what academic being and doing is or ought to be. Of course, academics are not the only ones enacting the university, and their

enactments may be enabled and constrained by structures not of their own making; yet I propose that their situated translations of structural and material constraints matter in the production of what the university is and could become. Borrowing freely from James (1912/2003), we might call this a *radical practice perspective*.

As an ethnographer of academic practices in the social sciences and humanities, I will take my point of departure in an observation from life in a Danish university. During a course on doctoral supervision, of which I was the convenor, a professor in the social sciences said something during a whole-group discussion on the differences between a PhD by article publication and by monograph. Specifically, we were discussing how to advise students when they ask us which of the two avenues they should pursue. The professor said, 'in my field this is a non-issue. In order to be employable afterwards, our students have to undertake PhDs by publication. I'm not happy about this, but I follow suit and advise my students accordingly.'

My interest in this speech act (Austin, 1962) was piqued partly because, in a radical sense, all actions-with-words are interesting and partly because of the reception of the statement by those in the room in which it was made. By the look of things, the cohort of 15 mid-career to senior academics found it to be entirely non-controversial, un-remarkable. The conversation continued as if nothing out of the ordinary had been said, and a good handful of those present nodded in what appeared to be convivial agreement. It is at those times ethnographers who have read Foucault sit up and pay particular attention. We have happened upon the familiar, and the familiar, as is well known, is particularly intriguing. In the following, I will not pursue the substantive issue at stake in the professor's statement—the PhD by monograph vs. PhD by publication question—nor will I discuss its veracity, although both are important matters. Rather, I will reflect on the performative politics of the un-remarkable statement and link it to a consideration of the implications for the practice of contemporary academic citizenship.

The un-remarkable statement

If we linger for a moment and decipher the statement, we observe the initial framing that this is a 'non-issue.' In other words, the question is of little importance, validity, or concern. It is not open for debate; it has been settled. The framing is substantiated with reference to students' employability in the field. A PhD by monograph will not lead to employment. Case closed. In framing the issue this way, there is really no choice for either the students or the supervisor himself. Of course, to agree with this framing, one has to accept the premise that obtaining a PhD is about obtaining

employment afterwards, which, by the by, was not contested in the group discussion.

In this initial framing, the supervisor portrays himself as pragmatic and responsible, considerate of the needs of his students (employment). Interestingly, he goes on to express regret. He is not happy about it. Thereby, he indicates that he himself values the monograph and perhaps that he believes students should also be able to procure employment on the basis of a monograph. The regret is attenuated by a 'but,' where he negates his own opinion and continues the positioning as pragmatic. He frames this as a question of 'following suit,' which has reference to card play but in the dictionary is defined as 'conforming to another's actions.' In this, he becomes a team player who plays along without questioning the rules or confronting the referee, without making a fuss, despite his personal reservations. The authority, the one whose actions are followed, is 'the field' and its employment practices, or rather, a particular construct hereof. In other words, the field and its practices are not only 'cited,' they are being produced as real and incontestable.

What is achieved in this statement is a positioning of being both unhappy with the status quo and compliant based on a sense of responsibility for students and as a team player in the field. However, in his statement, the pragmatic compliance overrules the unhappiness/critique and the critique voiced seems to have no consequence for his practice. He critiques the practices of the field yet contributes to a stabilisation and normalisation of the construct. By doing so, he furthers their legitimacy and furthers the marginalisation of the PhD by monograph. The PhD by monograph now faces a future where it may become all the more a rare and risky endeavour in his field if one wants to procure employment, despite said unhappiness. In addition, the supervisor in question furthers the legitimacy of speaking this way, of positioning oneself this way in relation to the constructed realities of the practices of the field. He legitimises the practice of overriding what he claims to really believe in as an academic in his field in order to serve other agendas, such as caring for students' career prospects. In a sense, he makes it OK to voice a critique but not act upon it. It indicates a particular relationship to 'the field' and its practices; one of ambiguous ownership. One might wonder what could happen if this way of positioning oneself became a habit.

The status of the statement and other practices

It is not the concern of this article to make claims about the prevalence of the particular statement and positioning practice under consideration. For example, whether the practice is more common in some corners of academia, whether it is more pervasive now than before, or whether it is more frequently taken up by some academics than by others, in some situations more than others, etc. These are

interesting and important considerations but may lead us not to take singular speech acts as seriously as I suggest that we do. Further, and following Foucault (1972), I do not take an interest in who made the statement, the speech-actor's biography, sociological category markers, psychological dispositions, and the like. Neither am I interested in his particular reasons for stating what he did in this particular context, nor how it was received beyond my initial impression. Again, such an approach may turn our attention to causes rather than effects. The important point in a radical practice perspective is that the statement happened. The conditions of possibility for the utterance of a statement are shifted from the fixed position of the subject to the highly transitive conditions of the possible discourse at a given time. The statement as a discursive practice became a bid for the construction of reality, for legitimising a position, and for legitimising a way of engaging in academic citizenship.

As a speech act, it became part of a cacophony of statements. Academics make all kinds of statements all the time. They might say 'this is the way it is' or 'this is the way it ought to be,' and continuously contribute to notions of which practices belong in academia and which do not, which practices are more legitimate, sensible, responsible, etc. (Petersen, 2007). Indeed, the particular statement was perlocutionary rather than illocutionary, and this is an important distinction. As Butler (1997) notes, 'perlocutionary acts proceed by way of consequences' (p. 17); that is, what it designates as true, real, possible, legitimate, valid, and so forth. However, any 'speech act can be an act without necessarily being efficacious' (Butler, 1997, p. 16). The future of any statement is, in that way, unknown; it may converge with other statements and form systems of practices and be taken up by other actors, and thereby become dominant or even hegemonic. Or it might be ignored, deemed irrelevant or in bad taste, and subsequently die out, perhaps to be revived at a later stage. For example, it is entirely possible to imagine that an academic in the room in which the statement was made could have challenged it and asserted a diverging statement. Other meaning-making and positioning practices are no doubt available and possible. Some statements have been restated over a long period of time and form a discursive continuity, although they may be expressed with some variation. Some statements exceed what is available and disrupt ways of speaking, feeling, and being. In any case, the academic made a statement that now enters into the cacophony and, as such, both constructs a reality and a present, e.g.'this is how it is' (vis-a-vis 'non-issue') and 'this is how to act if you wish to meet X conditions.' The statement says 'This is a legitimate way of making sense and of positioning oneself.' The practice then becomes a bid for legitimate speaking and doing, and available for others to take up both in the immediate and more distant future, when they construct realities and legitimise doings, sayings, and feelings.

The implications for academic citizenship

If we turn our attention to the perlocutionary speech acts of academics, their performative discursive practices, as part of the myriad of everyday practices that constitute academia, *deliberate* academic citizenship—in contrast to everyday citizenship—becomes a question of recognising that all practices are 'dangerous' in a Foucauldian sense. As he wrote

> My point is that not everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism. I think that the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger. (Foucault, 1983, pp. 231-232)

Here, Foucault points to the pressing question academics are faced with every day: what is the 'main danger' in relation to what the city of academia ought to entail? Relating it to the professor's statement, we could read his enactment as a response to, if not a consideration of, this question. It seems that the 'main danger' lodged in his statement is that his doctoral students would not gain employment afterwards if he advised them to undertake a PhD by monograph. The main danger does not seem to be construing the main objective of the PhD thus, or construing the choice as a non-issue, or prioritising field adherence over a personal-academic regret, or legitimising the practice of voicing a critique with no carry-through. He may, in other words, take up as his own constructs and practices of 'the main danger' that are naturalised and normalised in those contexts in which he partakes. If this notion of 'main danger' goes unchallenged, it will stabilise and become increasingly difficult to de-stabilise. Therefore, I suggest that we pay particular attention to how academics construct which issues to challenge and which issues to accept.

Deliberate academic citizenship in a radical practice perspective might, therefore, be conceived as a certain type of awareness or vigilance in regard to those practices that we take up as our own, knowingly or not. It is about keeping an eye on the university that everyday practices help to normalise, even when those practices are not directly and explicitly tied to that question. E.g., what does the question of PhD dissertation format have to do with the university as an idea, ideal and practice? Surely, the university happens regardless. Well, if we understand the university as something that is enacted by way of academics' doings and sayings, then proclaiming that a PhD by publication is the only way to go if you want to be appointed to an academic position constructs article production as the essential

qualification, over and above the ability, for example, to write a book-length monograph (Skov, 2021). What is constructed is a notion of what counts, what practices matter, what the purpose of academic work is, and what academics should be doing in this version of the university. The university, as a multiverse of practices, does not exist elsewhere, is not safeguarded elsewhere—it is produced in the practices that academics take up and make count, individually and as collectives, alongside other enactors, as mentioned at the outset. This is what is pointed to in the notion of 'radical': no practices are innocent. Therefore, deliberate academic citizenship is about remaining curious about those speech acts and practices that are on offer, readily or not, and asking what notions of the university they carry, what forms of academic being and doing they validate and legitimise.

As indicated, practices may become ritualised and habitual and, in that way, invisible in their everyday un-remarkableness. It might, therefore, be necessary to help each other not become overly complacent or blind to practices that may counteract notions of the university that we each otherwise might hold. To do so requires awareness and vigilance; it requires individual and collective reflection and explicit articulation of other or alternative practices. It requires both 'slow' and 'careful' deliberation—both popular tropes in the literature that seek to resist the neoliberalisation of university work and being (Berg & Seeber, 2018; Castelao-Huerta, 2022)—but configured with a deliberate aim to create, restore, or uphold the university in practice right here, right now.

In conclusion: While our practices might not matter in an illocutionary or immediate sense, they matter in the way of their possible effects; the field of possibilities for future enactments that they delineate. While we do not control the destiny of our practices and, therefore, could be led to believe that we are neither responsible nor accountable, it might be useful to distinguish between being accountable for the practices that one enacts rather than being accountable for their effects. As the opening quote by James indicates, we have to act 'as if' what we do makes a difference, because it does, regardless of whether or not we can pinpoint how in a final way.

Author biography

Eva Bendix Petersen is a post-structuralist psychologist and sociologist of education. She is currently Professor of Higher Education in the Department of People and Technology at Roskilde University, Denmark. She is known for her work on academic cultures and labour, her critique of the neoliberalisation of universities, and her experimentation with new scientific genres, for example, ethnographic dramas.

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