

Mediating pedagogy: Third sector governance and expertise in education policy

Ben Williamson, University of Stirling, UK

Paper prepared for the British Sociological Association conference, London, 3-5 April 2013

Abstract

This paper provides an initial sketch of the emergence of the “public policy lab” in educational governance, a new hybrid kind of organisation that traverses public, private and third sectors and blurs political, academic and digital media fields. These new kinds of policy actors include the Public Services Innovations Lab at the national Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts, as well as the think tank Demos and the social enterprise the Innovation Unit. Their activities represent an attempt to shift to a new mode of educational governance through the cross-sectoral expertise of “policy networks.” Their current preoccupation is with “computation power” in public services, especially the “democratic” digital methods of user-centredness, open access, P2P technologies, crowdsourcing, and data analytics. The central argument is that computation power provides a “diagram” on which future policies and pedagogies alike are being proposed by such public policy labs. These developments may be leading to the automatic production of pedagogy by learning analytics technologies acting autonomously of human input.

Keywords: *education policy, governance, learning analytics, public policy, policy networks, third sector*

Introduction

In January 2013, the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts produced its annual predictions for the year ahead. This year, NESTA staff predict, we can expect to see:

- the growth of citizen-oriented “digital public services” and “civic apps” as “user-centred design” methods, social media, open data and access to “open research databases” are combined and brought into public services;

Williamson, B. 2013. Mediating pedagogy: Third sector governance and expertise in education policy. Draft paper of March 2013 prepared for British Sociological Association conference, London, 2013

- the institutionalisation of “crowdsourcing” and “collaborative consumption” as “democratic” methods for solving social problems, facilitated by “computation power,” peer-to-peer technology services, and “big data”; and
- the creation of “social science parks” and the “public policy lab”: “not so much a think tank but an experimental workshop that prototypes new forms of public service delivery” and produces “socially useful and usable ideas” by working across “the public, private and social enterprise sectors.” (NESTA 2013a)

In this paper, I want to explore two particular features of the future of public services articulated by NESTA, with a specific focus on education. The first is the formation of what NESTA terms the “public policy lab,” a new organisational hybrid that traverses public, private and third sectors and blurs the expertise of political, academic and digital R&D fields. These new kinds of policy actors include NESTA’s own Public Services Innovations Lab, as well as the think tank Demos and the social enterprise the Innovation Unit. Their activities represent, I argue, a significant attempt to shift to a new mode of educational governance through “policy networks.” The second feature is the combination of “computation power” with public services, especially the “democratic” digital methods of user-centredness, open access, P2P technologies, crowdsourcing, and data analytics. My central argument is that computation power provides a “diagram” on which future policies and pedagogies alike are being proposed by such public policy labs.

The research is part of my ongoing attempt to examine the participation of “third sector” organisations in public education, and specifically to study the ideas organisations, think tanks, policy labs and innovations intermediaries that make new kinds of cross-sectoral educational governance seemingly legitimate. The paper identifies the emergence of a particular third sector style of expertise and a policy discourse through an analysis of key texts—pamphlets, reports and websites—produced by these organisations. The analysis treats these texts as material techniques of thinking which act as relays and mediators of contemporary political ideas.

Specifically, in the paper, I focus on how texts produced by Demos, the Innovation Unit and NESTA act as relays for ideas about “computation power” that are intended to change ways of thinking about education. I have previously expanded upon their contribution to new governance and to their expert discourses of “soft skills” (Williamson 2012; 2013). These organisations criss-cross the public sector and the private sector, bringing about new ways of working within public education. A few years ago Stephen Ball and Sonia Exley (2010) termed these new kinds of “policy

Williamson, B. 2013. Mediating pedagogy: Third sector governance and expertise in education policy. Draft paper of March 2013 prepared for British Sociological Association conference, London, 2013

actors” the “ideas intellectuals of New Labour.” Yet despite a change in government, and the official replacement within the Cabinet Office of New Labour’s Office of the Third Sector with the Coalition’s Office of the Civil Society and its associated “Big Society” brand, these ideas intellectuals remain with us. This suggests a more politically polymorphous role than the interpretation offered by Ball and Exley will permit. My own research seeks to understand third sector participation in education through a reconceptualisation offered by the Third Sector Research Centre of the third sector as historically, culturally and politically contingent and emergent, with elastic boundaries, mobile “borderlands,” and “post-ideological” policy frontiers (Alcock & Kendall 2011; MacMillan 2013; Teasdale 2012). Rather than a distinct cross-sectoral space, the third sector exists as a primarily ideational arena and a fusion of ideas with traction beyond party political interests. Of course this is not to presume that the third sector embodies some kind of natural and ideology-free alternative to the synthetic state. As Nikolas Rose (1999) states, the “community of the third sector” has been actively “made up” and brought into existence as a space that encourages particular kinds of ways of thinking, seeing and acting, and “for those who advocate an anti-politics of ... civil society or the third sector, part of the political attraction of these zones lies in their apparent naturalness: their non-political or pre-political status” (Rose 1999: 188).

Within education policy the third sector is only just being recognised as a significant actor. Stephen Ball (2012; Ball & Junemann 2012), for example, has documented the shift from state-based policy-making to more complex cross-sectoral “policy networks.” Policy networks “constitute a new form of governance” which allows new voices, sources of authority and discourses into policy thinking and blurs the “boundaries between state, economy and civil society” (Ball 2012: 9). These shifts to new forms of governance have ushered into the education policy process new participants from think-tanks, multilateral agencies, NGOs, not-for-profits, consultancies, social enterprises, and “philanthrocapitalists” (Ball 2012). In the rest of this paper, I focus on the emergence of what NESTA has called “public policy labs” as distinctive cross-sectoral actors within such policy networks, looking firstly at their organisational and intellectual style and their contribution to new educational governance, and then secondly examining their construction of “computational power” as the solution to contemporary educational problems.

Public Policy Labs

What are Demos, NESTA and the Innovation Unit? This section seeks to conceptualise these organisations as particular kinds of expert policy actors with a unique approach to educational governance.

Reflecting on the role of Demos, co-founder Geoff Mulgan (2006: 151-52) suggests that since its launch in the early 1990s, it has been engaging in a form of “guerilla warfare” to expand the political space: it adopts an intellectually promiscuous approach to ideas, a practical “do tank” mentality, and self-consciously iconoclastic, irreverent and insurgent “shock tactics” which aim to “change the way people think.” Practically, Demos carries out its own research and produces a huge number of reports (“pamphlets”) and edited collections which it self-publishes and makes available for free under a Creative Commons open access license. In this sense, Demos falls somewhere between the traditional “independent” think tank, a political campaign group, and a media producer.

The Innovation Unit describes itself as a “social enterprise” that is “committed to using the power of innovation to solve social challenges.” Originating within the New Labour government’s department for education and skills in 2002, the Innovation Unit was made into an independent social enterprise in 2006 to focus on innovative public services. Amongst its key ideas is that public services including education can best be reformed through the participation of “innovation intermediaries” who act as catalysts and brokers of ideas and relationships (Horne 2008). The Innovation Unit has self-published reports focusing on high-tech “innovation ecosystems for education,” “D&R” processes of open innovation, on interactive and networked technologies for education, and on co-production in the design and delivery of services, often in collaboration with Demos and NESTA.

NESTA was established as a public body in 1998, to promote talent, creativity and innovation in science, technology and the arts, with an £80m endowment from the National Lottery. In 2012 NESTA formally became a charity rather than a public body. Among its various roles, NESTA supports “innovation systems” in all sectors, and acts as a source of both original research and policy work in the field of innovation. It runs panel discussions, seminars, lectures and networking events bringing together academics, financiers, inventors, public service providers and corporates. Its priorities include supporting innovation in the voluntary and public sectors and “digital R&D”. Indicatively, its “public services innovation lab” focuses on “investigating how public services could meet the major social challenges in a

Williamson, B. 2013. Mediating pedagogy: Third sector governance and expertise in education policy. Draft paper of March 2013 prepared for British Sociological Association conference, London, 2013

time of falling budgets, looking at how techniques such as co-production and digital platforms could help generate new approaches" (NESTA 2012). In recent years, NESTA has been exploring the role of new adaptive educational technologies such as "learning analytics" and strongly promoting the learning of computer programming.

These three organisations are emblematic of what NESTA has termed the emerging "public policy lab" which is made up of aspects of the political think tank, social scientific expertise, and digital R&D. This hybridity requires a little elaborating and situating. In *Think Tanks In America*, Thomas Medvetz (2012: 213-14) has analysed political think tanks as a hybrid and semi-structured organisational network "situated at the nexus of the political, academic, economic and media fields." By combining and balancing elements and institutional resources from each of these fields, including political know-how, the language of social science, media access, journalistic writing, and the techniques of activism, public relations and marketing, think tanks occupy a flexible, structurally blurry, and interstitial space that is unconstrained by the clearly defined roles of their parent fields. The structural and organisational hybridity and blurriness of the think tank enables its "policy experts" to gather and pull together "various institutionalised resources and assemble those resources into unique packages" (Medvetz 2012: 137). The power of think tanks in general "lies in their ability to claim for themselves a kind of mediating role," their "indistinction," and their "mixture of resources captured from other fields" (Medvetz 2012: 178).

Likewise, in the UK, prominent think tanks such as Demos, Gregor McLennan (2004: 494) argues, work in a state of constant political innovation through new "modes of intellectual work. Acting as catalysts, brokers, and fixers of new ideas, as Thomas Osborne (2004: 431) elaborates from the same study, think tanks like Demos deploy a "certain kind of intellectual attitude," that of the "mediator," who is always "in the middle of things" and acting as a propellant of new "vehicular ideas" that can "get things moving." The mediator seizes or appropriates big abstract ideas generated in one place and moves them on through new combinations and interactions in order to make them practical, usable, "buzzy," and marketable; "mediatizing" them for the mass media and making them capable of arousing attention and "making a difference" in a "constantly mobile, creative culture where ideas matter but not dogmatically or ideologically so" (Osborne 2004: 441).

Jakob Arnoldi (2007) further describes the ideas associated with the mediator as discrete "informational ideas," rather than grand prescriptive ideology. Mediators

Williamson, B. 2013. Mediating pedagogy: Third sector governance and expertise in education policy. Draft paper of March 2013 prepared for British Sociological Association conference, London, 2013

must be able to produce, brand and market these informational ideas in order to appear innovative and to mobilise political, public and media support simultaneously. What matters is being a “link tank” as well as a think tank, with sufficient connections to create interactive synergies and capacities to access the media (Arnoldi 2007: 62). These think and link tanks act as “enunciative agents” whose ideas do not *represent* political reality but constantly *produce* and mobilise new political possibilities through the message-intensive informational culture of contemporary media networks (Arnoldi, 2007: 69).

The public policy labs and “innovation intermediaries” of Demos, NESTA and the Innovation Unit can be understood as occupying a new institutional niche in British political life, although their actual influence is debatable, like that of think tanks in general (Pautz 2012). Rather than trying to define, classify or typologise them, or to locate them in a definite political or sectoral position or field, it is preferable to view them as a flexible and hybrid policy network and as cohabitantes of a new kind of interstitial space that is in-between the think tank, the social enterprise, the digital R&D lab, the public body and the not-for-profit sector. The interstitial organisations and mediators who embody these activities constantly interact among intellectual, bureaucratic, economic and media networks, resources, products and practices, re-assembling them into unique packages that can be branded, marketed, promoted and reinserted anew into educational policy debate.

Having begun to identify them organisationally as a cross-sectoral policy network of mediators which criss-cross political, intellectual and digital fields, what is it, then, that these organisations actually say about education?

Computation Power

In this section I want to say something about the deployment of a range of concepts and ideas related to digital technologies and social media. In particular, I want to begin to trace how emerging technological issues such as data analytics and adaptive software are increasingly being interwoven by Demos, NESTA and Innovation Unit into new visions for the production of pedagogy.

Their Space: Education for a digital generation (Green & Hannon 2007) articulates the findings from a Demos project exploring the idea of a “digital curriculum.” The project set out to understand young people’s informal learning with digital media outside of school, particularly through videogames, the internet and mobile phones, and to offer recommendations for how schools might respond. The findings from the research suggest that more and more young people are acting as “digital pioneers”

Williamson, B. 2013. Mediating pedagogy: Third sector governance and expertise in education policy. Draft paper of March 2013 prepared for British Sociological Association conference, London, 2013

and “creative producers” who are blogging, building websites, sharing web media, and “cutting and pasting as a way of life” (Green & Hannon 2007: 11) They argue:

The current generation of young people will reinvent the workplace, and the society they live in. They will do it along the progressive lines that are built into the technology they use every day—of networks, collaboration, co-production and participation. The change in behaviour has already happened. (16)

In the report, the technological form of the network, and its potential for personalisation, co-production and participation, is offered as a template for the design of public services—in this case, the design of the school curriculum. Another Demos publication similarly argues that:

The failure to ensure integrated innovation of pedagogy, curriculum and institutions will see increasing numbers of children and families leave the state system to explore home, personal and online learning approaches, and will see other children receiving a ‘basic’ education, which will provide little compensation for lack of material, cultural and financial resources outside the school. (Facer & Green 2007: 55)

In order to mitigate against the potential inequalities of this “post-school” scenario, they recommend giving learners control of a “creative portfolio” in order to capture and share achievements from different spheres of their lives, introducing “peer-to-peer technology tuition” for technologically able children to tutor others, and establishing “class wikis to develop skills around collaboration and teamwork” (56).

The Innovation Unit runs a number of programmes under its theme “21st Century Education.” The rationale for this programme is that “Changing global conditions demand that we rethink what, but even more important, how and where we learn.” The main elements of 21st century education are that students learn through designing, planning and carrying out projects that allow them to “develop the diverse portfolio of skills that are increasingly in demand from employers”; school is seen as a “base camp for enquiry” that is supported beyond school by the internet, mobile technologies, and a “vastly increased number of education providers”; and that it takes advantage of digital technologies to help students become “digitally literate and digitally adept.” In this vision, “schools no longer have a monopoly on ‘academic’ learning, and if they do not adapt, the world may simply leave them behind” (Innovation Unit 2012).

A recent pair of publications, *10 Schools for the 21st Century* (Hampson, Patton & Shanks 2012a) and *10 Ideas for 21st Century Education* (Hampson, Patton & Shanks 2012b) illustrate what an innovation ecosystem for curriculum and pedagogic

reforms might look like. One “idea” is “opening up lessons” with “the help of technology and radical reimagining of time and space,” so that, instead of the traditional “one-size fits all” approach, the curriculum is made up of more “personalised lessons” and “greater control” among students over their own learning, while teachers are enabled to take on different roles, including “mentor, coach and designer of projects” (Hampson, Patton & Shanks 2012b : 7). New technologies also figure in a spatial reorganisation of the classroom, since the “wireless internet means we are literally surrounded by information,” and thus “we no longer need them to be knowledge-delivery centres” (8-9). The use of social networking sites to encourage peer-to-peer learning and collaborative research, online chat, instant messaging and email to help to strengthen the student-teacher relationship, digital portfolios as a continuous performative record of assessment, and the use of Twitter hashtags to collate research sources are all cited as ways of “integrating technology into learning experiences” in order to “better integrate school into students’ lives” (13). A final idea is of personalised learning driven by automated digital performance assessment technologies. In one example, such performance technologies generate “playlists” of lessons for students based on prior assessments.

As part of its Digital Education programme, NESTA is promoting the importance of children learning to programme computer code and of equipping them with the “right skills to succeed and innovate in a digital world” (NESTA 2013b). NESTA has predicted that 2013 will see the emergence of “adaptive learning technologies” which use student data, algorithmic “learning analytics” and feedback mechanisms to adapt and personalise learning:

Adaptive learning technologies use student data to adapt the way information is delivered to a student on an individual level. This data can range from online test scores to session time (how long users spend on a single exercise) to records of where a user has clicked or touched while figuring out a problem. Based on this feedback, the programme will understand which content to point the user at next—planning a personalised learning journey. (NESTA 2013a)

Some of the key symmetries and “structural similarities” between adaptive technologies and education cited by NESTA include:

- the means to shift away from a one-to-many model of teaching, so that every child has a 'digital tutor' that is responsive to their interests, their prior-conceptions and achievement, and any misconceptions that they have;

Williamson, B. 2013. Mediating pedagogy: Third sector governance and expertise in education policy. Draft paper of March 2013 prepared for British Sociological Association conference, London, 2013

- intelligent online platforms that can use data gathered from learners to become smart enough to predict, and then appropriately assist and assess, that learner's progression to mastering the concept being taught. (NESTA 2013b)

These developments appear to auger the automatic production of pedagogy autonomous of human intervention. Data analytics are mobilised as a diagram for new forms of pedagogic innovation. As Demos researchers Wind-Cowie & Lekhi (2012) argue in their pamphlet *The Data Dividend*, the platforms that citizens already use to access public services should be equipped with the most up to date analytics software in order to generate the kind of everyday data about citizens that companies such as Amazon, Google and Facebook produce about customers and users. Translated into education in the form of learning analytics, the result is the automatic production of personalised pedagogies that require little or no teacher involvement.

As these brief examples indicate, Demos, NESTA and the Innovation Unit share what Andrew Barry (2001: 2) has termed a contemporary “political preoccupation with the problems technology poses, with the potential it promises, and with the models of social and political order it seems to make available”; they take “technical change to be the model for political invention.” The particular technical template they adopt here is one of computation power and adaptive learning analytics, facilitating more personalised forms of pedagogy. This preoccupation with computation power does not so much reflect social, political and technological reality but provides a diagram on the basis of which education might be refashioned and reimaged.

Such pedagogies, collected under the banner of “learning analytics,” are structurally symmetrical with the web analytics systems of commercial internet organisations. Ruppert and Savage (2012) refer to the political mobilisation of the “transactional data” generated as a by-product of our everyday experiences with data-based technologies. Computation power, I argue, is a component of their wider concern with the emergence of “transactional politics,” “a politics that mobilizes new informational gatekeepers and organizers in the making and analysis of transactional data and challenges dominant or expert forms of analysis and representation” (Ruppert & Savage 2012: 73). In putting transactional data and analytics at the centre of the personalisation of pedagogy, Demos, NESTA and Innovation Unit are making such technologies into significant pedagogic actors that can interact with learners and make decisions about pedagogic provision on behalf of educators.

Mediating pedagogy

In summary, the cross-sectoral public policy labs of Demos, NESTA and the Innovation Unit, and the policy network they constitute, act to mediate new ways of thinking about computation power into the policies and pedagogies of public education. These networks are peopled by new kinds of intellectual workers who act as mediators of educational policy and pedagogic innovation, moving fluidly and flexibly in cross-sectoral policy networks to connect up ideas across different institutions, fields and competing ideologies. Their ideas are created from a constant juxtaposition and recombination of ideas from the public, private and third sectors and from the fields of politics, academia and digital R&D into innovative, creative, buzzy and marketable brands. As such, their style of thinking about education is increasingly concerned with “computation power” and with emerging algorithmic processes through which the automatic production of pedagogy may be facilitated.

In the paper I have begun to sketch how these public policy labs are contributing to new forms of educational governance through interstitial, cross-sectoral policy networks whose interest is in informational ideas rather than ideology. These labs are politically mobile across third sector and “Big Society” policy agendas and discourses. And I have indicated how these policy intermediaries have begun to interweave a concern with data analytics with education, leading to the possibility of the automatic production of pedagogy facilitated by the computational power of commercial technologies. These initial sketches suggest the need for further inquiry into the participation of the third sector in public education. One line of inquiry should focus on governance, with an emphasis on following new cross-sectoral policy actors as they work interstitially to produce new ideas for policy and pedagogy. A second line of inquiry should focus on their preoccupation with technological forms such as computation power and data analytics as diagrams for the production of new pedagogies.

References

- Alcock, P. & Kendall, J. 2011. Constituting the Third Sector: Processes of Decontestation and Contention under the UK Labour Governments in England. *Voluntas* 22: 450–469
- Arnoldi, J. 2007. Informational Ideas. *Thesis Eleven* 89: 58-73
- Barry, A. 2001. *Political Machines: Governing a technological society*. London: Athlone Press.
- Facer, K. & Green, H. 2007. Curriculum 2.0: Educating the digital generation. In S. Parker and S. Parker (eds). *Unlocking innovation: Why citizens hold the key to public service reform*: 47–58. London: Demos.
- Green, H. & Hannon, C. 2007. *Their space: Education for a digital generation*. London: Demos

- Williamson, B. 2013. Mediating pedagogy: Third sector governance and expertise in education policy. Draft paper of March 2013 prepared for British Sociological Association conference, London, 2013
- Hampson, M., Patton, A. & Shanks, L. 2012a. *10 schools for 21st century education*. London: Innovation Unit.
- Hampson, M., Patton, A. & Shanks, L. 2012b. *10 ideas for 21st century education*. London: Innovation Unit.
- Horne, M. 2008. *Honest brokers: Brokering innovation in public services* London: Innovation Unit.
- Innovation Unit. 2012. 21st century education. *Innovation Unit website*. Available online: <http://www.innovationunit.org/knowledge/our-ideas/21st-century-education> (accessed 28 January 2013)
- MacMillan, J. 2012. *Making sense of the Big Society: perspectives from the third sector*. Birmingham: Third Sector Research Centre.
- McLennan, G. 2004. Travelling with vehicular ideas: The case of the third way. *Economy and Society* 33, no. 4: 484–99.
- Medvetz, T. 2012. *Think Tanks in America*. London: University of Chicago Press.
- Mulgan, G. 2006. Thinking in tanks: The changing ecology of political ideas. *The Political Quarterly* 77, no. 2: 147–55.
- NESTA. 2012. *A brief history of NESTA*. London: NESTA.
- NESTA. 2013a. 13 predictions for 2013. NESTA website. Online: http://www.NESTA.org.uk/news_and_features/13for2013 (accessed 7th February 2013).
- NESTA. 2013b. Digital Education. NESTA website. Online: http://www.nesta.org.uk/areas_of_work/public_services_lab/digital_education (accessed 15 March 2013)
- Osborne, T.S.D. 2004. On mediators: Intellectuals and the ideas trade in the knowledge society. *Economy and Society* 33, no. 4: 430–47.
- Pautz, H. 2011. Revisiting the think tank phenomenon. *Public Policy and Administration* 26: 419-435.
- Rose, N. 1999. *Powers of Freedom: Reframing political thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ruppert, E. & Savage, M. 2012. Transactional Politics. *The Sociological Review*. Special Issue: Sociological Review Monograph Series: *Measure and Value*, edited by L. Adkins & C. Lury. 59, supplement s2: 73–92
- Teasdale, S. 2012. What's in a name? Making sense of social enterprise discourse. *Public Policy & Administration* 27, no. 2: 99-119.
- Williamson, B. 2012. Centrifugal schooling: Third sector policy networks and the reassembling of curriculum policy in England. *Journal of Education Policy* 27, no. 6: 775-794.
- Williamson, B. 2013. Soft openings: The psycho-technological expertise of third sector curriculum reform. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, iFirst: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14681366.2012.759133>
- Wind-Cowie, M. & Lekhi, R. 2012. *The Data Dividend*. London: Demos.

Appendix: Key websites

Williamson, B. 2013. Mediating pedagogy: Third sector governance and expertise in education policy. Draft paper of March 2013 prepared for British Sociological Association conference, London, 2013

Demos: www.demos.co.uk

Innovation Unit: www.innovationunit.org

NESTA: www.nesta.org.uk