

Learning as a norm

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I. Introduction

This presentation will focus on the rise of learning as a norm. Certainly, this will seem a rather self-evident title to most. Of course, we are expected to learn and we all know that failing to do so, might result in dramatically less attractive career perspectives or imply other sanctions. As such, learning demonstrates all the basic traits that sociological literature usually attributes to norms: it has a binary character (learning vs not learning), it prescribes a preference for one side of the distinction (learning) and expresses this preference by the possibility of sanctions for the other, the negative side (not learning). Learning is a norm: it's simple sociological a-b-c -or so it seems.

In what follows, I would like to show how the banality of the title is after all maybe not so banal, even paradoxical and theoretically useful for re-framing the relation between education, education policy and knowledge. In order to do so, I will first present in a very basic *and very opportunistic* manner the distinction between knowledge and power, central within the writings of Michel Foucault. Without hoping to do full justice to the depth and richness of his philosophy, I will use this distinction to arrive at the formulation of a critique that takes issue with the *often largely unquestioned ability to govern in educational research*. In the light of this critique, I will propose a new distinction, stemming from the systems theory of the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann. This distinction makes a difference between knowledge and norms and casts a different light on the relation between knowledge, education and education policy. I will use this distinction between knowledge and norms to formulate a global hypothesis about their shifting relationship and sketch out the impact of this shift briefly in the area of education. In conclusion, I will try to draft how this evolution matters for education policy.

II. Knowledge and power

As already indicated, I wish to mention Foucault for two reasons: first, to point to a problem which is present in his writing and -more importantly here- seems ubiquitous in educational research. In the second place, it serves me to give context and a point of comparison to what will follow, Luhmann's distinction between norms and knowledge. As a consequence, I will not offer encyclopaedic overview of Foucault's writings, but rather a brief synopsis of both categories.

Foucault described his endeavour as the attempt to develop an economy of power, which would be able to study relations of power, in a fashion similar to what semiotics offer for signification or political economy for production relations (Foucault, 1982). Doing so he ends up with two distinct, but closely intertwined categories. Knowledge and power. Power "reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives" (Foucault, 1980: 39). Power forces its imprints on subjects and society. As a generative force, it is considered highly efficient and virtually everywhere (cf Stehr and Adolf, forthcoming). Knowledge shapes and emerges from discourse. Knowledge does not reflect what is out there (Foucault, 1980: 131). Rather what is and comes into being, is constituted by unifying discourse. As such, knowledge gives *stable contours* -not to pre-discursive reality- but to what it names and states to be the fact. Both knowledge and power are defined in terms of their capacity, their ability to produce effects, their generative potential. Their bound, however, finally rests on the productivity that power acquires through knowledge. Truth is merely a tool for power and the human sciences a means for modern power to circulate in very sophisticated ways.

I believe there are some problems with the Foucaultian distinction between power and knowledge. One deeply moral, theoretical *and* practical problem was well known to Foucault. It emerges when the distinction is applied to itself. How is the difference between knowledge and power to be understood? As knowledge, as power? How is it possible to produce and transmit knowledge, if the defining of truth always implies power? The question then becomes how to use power, *knowing that power can not be absent*, in an emancipatory, resisting way.¹ I leave that problem gladly to the Foucaultians.

My problem is another, although it is clearly related. As announced in my introduction, my problem is with the ubiquitous presence of power in Foucault's framework and its overly efficient character. I take issue with the impossibility to think the absence of power -or power that fails, that is not powerful. This might seem an idiosyncratic, even a bit strange critique. But should an economy of power not be able to deal with the insolvency of power?

Especially when dealing with educational policy, it is remarkable how a lots of its notions -even those far removed from Foucault's vocabulary- all imply the possibility to steer and govern education. Government, governance, education policy itself ... they all assume the presence of power and its capacity to govern. But why do we so easily assume that education is governable? Why do we insist that this is the case, even when no policy reform ever seems to live up to its ambitions? Lack of reform success is then usually attributed to errors in the policy measures, wrong implementations, differences in context or different enactments. But with Luhmann I would like to propose a more radical hypothesis: that the world is simply not governable anymore; that the assumption that the world can be structured by one single logic needs to be abandoned -be it political or economic, as the critics of neoliberalism would have it.

In order to so, I first have to introduce a new distinction, that is not based on power, but on the contrary allows to start from its absence.

II. Knowledge and norms

Just as I did for the Foucaultian distinction between power and knowledge, I will try to sketch the main differences between norms and knowledge by summing up some key characteristics, without delving very deeply into the theoretical underpinnings that informs this distinction. These theoretical fundamentals are usually filed under Niklas Luhmann's 'radical constructivism' and his sociology of law. An elaboration of the themes I will touch upon here can be found under these headings.

Luhmann considers knowledge as *highly temporal*, almost ephemeral. Knowledge is inevitably "always current knowledge, and ever only a given in the observing of observers" (Luhmann, 1990: 106, my translation). It is not an essential quality, nor a constant, so claims Luhmann. Resistance against time is *not* a condition to indicate something as knowledge, well on the contrary. Knowledge is not based on permanence, but on repetition.

In this continuous process of repetition, identical observations register new references to meanings. They are confirmed by the repetition and thus able to be enacted in different situations. Even if this chair is not exactly the chair I already know, I can sit on it and identify it as a chair and reorganise my knowledge about chairs. In this process of repetition and confirmation, knowledge creates "[...] a kind of practical *familiarity with the world* [...], that eschews itself from a precisely defined understanding" (Luhmann, 1990: 109, my translation).

¹ Speaking specifically about education, Foucault notes in general terms: "I don't see where evil is in the practice of someone who, in a given game of truth, knowing more than another, tells him what he must do, teaches him, transmits knowledge to him, communicates skills to him. The problem is rather to know how you are to avoid in these practices – where power cannot not play and where it is not evil in itself – the effects of domination" (Fornet-Betancourt et al., 1987: 129).

Familiarity does not imply truthfulness. Just as Foucault, Luhmann does not consider knowledge as an adequate reflection of reality. Knowledge can be highly trivial, implausible or even manifestly untrue. The function of knowledge is not situated in its truthfulness. Rather, it is situated in its capacity to structure the world of possibilities by formulating expectations about them. Knowledge consists of *expectations that project a future course of events*: they indicate what the future might hold and so render some further courses of action more probable than others. If you know it may burn your fingers, you don't touch the fire.

Norms function differently. One could of course say that when a certain value -say: not stealing- is upheld as a norm, the probability of theft diminishes. As such, norms permit to project a future as well. There is however a crucial difference. The specific trait that distinguishes norms from knowledge, is that when stealing does occur, the norm is still maintained. *Norms have the function to cement improbable configurations*: they project a stable future, that allows for the coordination of action. We all pass the green light, because we count on the fact that others will stop for the red light. Even when we know that some don't. Norms formulate expectations that aim to increase the probability of less probable outcomes. They try to render less probable that stealing happens -even when stealing happens. Norms bind time, in other words, by not learning. They stubbornly maintain a certain value and offer so invariant, fixed points that allow for social coordination. Or as Luhmann -paraphrasing- states: "to learn or not to learn - that is the distinction" (Luhmann, 1975: 55).

III. Learning as a norm?

Luhmann's interest in norms and knowledge is mainly fuelled by the structural preferences that different realms of society display for one or the other. Law, religion and politics traditionally display a strong orientation towards norms. They traditionally uphold norms counter-factually. Sinners do not change religion; criminals do not change the law.

In the early seventies already, Luhmann made a curious statement about those structural preferences. He predicted that *an increased preference for cognitive, rather than normative expectations would emerge from the crystallisation of world society* (Luhmann, 1975: 57).² This Luhmannian twist on what others have called the knowledge society and globalisation, is not so much based on shifting economic production relations or technological innovation. Although one could draw lines to such evolutions, the trend that Luhmann observes goes deeper. It observes how normative, counter-factual expectation structures gradually lose their grip. As Helmut Willke states, "the factual power of norms shrinks and the normative power of the factual assumes control" (Willke, 2016: 71, my translation).

This evolution is observable in a number of fields, both in past and current events. There is, for example, the strongly diminished capacity of religious norms to limit the findings of scientific research. Similarly, natural law -that attributed invariable rights as granted by nature- has been gradually replaced by positive, man-made and variable law. In the realm of the economy, one can see almost daily how the limitation of market logic by normative, policy goals is hardly efficient (Luhmann, 1975). As this short list of examples shows, in all these domains the tendency to normatively uphold expectations is gradually eroded. Instead, there is a growing reliance on cognitive expectations.³ What this means, is that instead of maintaining the norm when confronted with change, each of these realms re-organise internally their proper structures and do that autonomously. As these examples *also* show, when norms lose their grip, a gradual expansion

² For a critical discussion of Luhmann's assertion (and its follow-up) in the ambit of law, cf Kjaer (2013: 289-292). An outline of how religion relates to this development appears in Mangez & Vanden Broeck (2016: 124-125).

seems to follow. More scientific research, more market, more laws. It is as if with the erosion of those norms, any limitation to the activity they attempted to cement has been stripped away as well.

A similar development can be observed in education. Most of the normative certainties that shaped schools until half a century ago have lost their self-evident character. It is not longer clear what to expect from a 'good' pupil or a 'good' teacher. Neither is it clear what role each of them should play. Or what values a teacher should transmit or even personally embody, as was the case in the past. Ultimately, it is even not longer clear, nor self-evident what education should teach. Pedagogical ideals and national curricula that normatively appreciated and canonised a specific body of knowledge, have lost their legitimacy and their capability to put a limit on what is to be learned and what education is. Instead, learning became the dominant formula that organises education in a different, autonomous way: it is not longer limited by a clear-defined set of fundamental, normative ideals, but allowed to expand in all directions. In the temporal dimension, as lifelong learning. In the social dimension, as mass schooling. In the material dimension, as the 'educationalisation' of all aspects of life.

IV. Governing in an ungovernable world

To recapitulate, knowledge and norms can be distinguished by their willingness to learn. Knowledge presumes learning from change, whilst norms do not learn. The main interest of this distinction is that it allows to observe a shift in the organisation of most, if not all major societal domains. In all of these domains, one can observe a gradual decline in the structural preference for normative expectations, accompanied by an increasing tendency to prefer and ultimately even 'normalise' learning.⁴ That is: organise and re-organise itself internally autonomously when confronted with change in the environment.

What so finally emerges, is a society that is not *monocontextural*. It is not based upon the logic of one context, but its *polycontextural* and results from autonomous, different and even opposing logics. In a simple metaphor, society looks much like a wicked puzzle, that refuses to fit because every piece projects a different image (Fuchs, 1997: 102). The society of politics is not the society of education, which is at its time different from the society of economy or the society of law. What it means for these realms to behave cognitively, is that *they all observe and construct society in different and incompatible ways* and as such continuously cause problems and opportunities for each other. (Sociology of education, in that light, can often be observed as the scientific opportunity to deal with the political problem of education reforms).

The hypothesis is that educational policy needs to be re-considered from this perspective. It is not so much about power, but the lack thereof. It is not so much about steering the world, as it is about self-steering (cf Luhmann, 1997). The famous switch from governing to governance is an answer precisely to this problem: it's a manoeuvre of the political system to address its own inability. It's less about governing education, as it is about re-organising politics. *It's a way to organise politics in a world that is not containable within a political logic* and that therefor tries *to re-organise itself by observing and adopting politically other logics* in the hope to provoke change in its environment. One way to re-organise itself, has been the adoption of learning as policy means. Especially at the European level and mainly since the development of the Lisbon strategy, the semantics of learning have become central as a means wherein policy tries to express its ambitions.

⁴ The observation of learning as a norm resumes and roughly echoes Luhmann's characterisation of contingency as the defining attribute of modern society, where "necessities and impossibilities no longer represent the orderly framework of the world" (1998: 62) and paradoxically this absence provides society with a new stability.

Learning appears twice then. Once as the *dissolution of educational norms*, as the demise of its normative, prescribing canons. In education policy, learning re-appears as the necessity to deal with a world that does not longer correspond to the normative cementation by a hierarchical top (cf Willke, 1986). It amounts to *a strategy to deal with a centre-less, or rather poly-centric world* of conflicting realms, that no longer answer to a single logic. Learning in educational policy means then as much as the *political* observation and reconstruction of learning as the new *educational* norm. It is an attempt to address a domain that started to speak its own language. It is an attempt to matter in a world that appears ungovernable.

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