

Research for policy as practice

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The conference theme directs attention the disjunctions of research and policy and practice, and their relationships. It rightly emphasises that issues of knowledge production and utilisation need to be discussed.

This paper will argue that educational research and policy are themselves domains of 'practice' which need to be opened up to theorisation and critique, since VET research often lacks any kind of reflexive analysis of its work either 'for policy' or 'as research'.

The notion of 'educational practice' can be uncritically equated to 'classroom practice' overlooking the case that there are many orders of 'practice', including management, research, guidance and counselling, and not least policy. Policy is often joined to 'practice' as one of the domains that 'research' is supposed to influence. The idea that research should 'inform practice' suggests the common belief that research is opposed to 'practice' because it is about to 'theory', a question that has been extensively debated in recent years.

'Policy' is also counterposed to research, as something to be informed by the knowledge research generates. In the same way as practice 'policy' can be treated as not-theory, and not educational practice proper. It is something less about knowledge than a certain kind of worldly and interested practice, compared to research, which of course is projected as disinterested and other-worldly in its purest academic form.

Perhaps we can think less rigidly about such categories. Developing more sophisticated understandings of research and policy can make a contribution to educational practice in all its forms. Policy is has come into its own and has received a great deal of theoretical attention in recent years (eg Halpin and Troyna 1995, Hargreaves 1996, Lingard, Knight and Porter 1993, Peters and Marshall 1996, Silver 1990, Smith and Wexler 1995, Stronach and MacClure 1997, Taylor, Rivzi., Lingard and Henry 1997). Policy is becoming the great qualifier – we have policy intervention, and experience 'policy turbulence' or 'policy ferment'. It is possible to talk not only about policy analysis and policy intellectuals (Trow) but also about the policy process, policy production, policy managers and policy activists (Yeatman), about policy cycles, policy texts and policy discourse (Ball). In our following discussion, however, it is *policy work* or *policy production* and *policy knowledges* that will receive most attention.

The paper draws on a recent book chapter with Rosie Wickert (McIntyre & Wickert forthcoming) exploring the nature of research for policy, and on our separate work in this area (McIntyre, 1998a, 1998b, 1999, Wickert 1997, 1998, 1999). We present a different conception of the *research in relation to practice* by examining the work of research commissioned by government, or policy-related research, exploring a number of questions:

- How can we understand research not in terms of idealised methodological prescriptions but rather in terms of the practices of ‘doing’ research in the work of policy production. In this way, there are important questions about how research based knowledge is employed in the work of policy.
- What are the relationships of policy and research? When research goes to work for policy, what does this do to research and to policy? What kinds of relationship are constructed? We explore, among other things, how policy co-production involves the negotiated management of research meanings.
- How is the work of research shaped by new kinds of policy work in the contemporary state? We critique older ideas of the way that research has been constructed by policy and policy by research, and offer an alternative view of research and policy relationships as co-production. We introduce the idea of policy knowledge, in part to point up how ‘policy’ has been conceived of as other than knowledge and in part to signal how contemporary policy is changing.
- Under these conditions, how might research influence policy, and how policy might influence research? We conclude that research-for-policy exemplifies how the academy is engaged in the production of policy knowledge formation.

Policy as complex

Our own experiences of engagement in research, policy and especially the work of doing research for policy, have been far more messy and undisciplined than much of the research utilisation literature would suggest. Nonetheless, the influence of traditional models remains strong. Rather than dismiss, then, supposedly discredited or inadequate models of policy production, they need to be understood as part of the field, carrying with them their own constitutive effects.

Our experience as researchers in policy contexts suggests that models of action with which contemporary policy researchers work are dominated by a rationalist model of policy analysis. The process of policy development almost inevitably requires the production of policy research, however there is a complex set of relationships working between researchers and policy makers. We are referring not only to of our interest in public policy and the ‘public sector ‘reform’ that has stimulated commissioned research, since there are many reasons to think that this complexity is also true of the ways that business policy is made, and indeed, the interactions between public and private sectors, particularly as economic reform impinges on both.

We emphasise the ‘reform’ of the public sector management as a context which makes research indispensable to government, though it is clearly also true that national projects

such as privatisation, industrial relations or taxation reform, generate complexities in the business policy environment that have to be managed. In this sense, uncertainty and changeability make 'perfect policymaking' difficult or impossible, so that both business and government emphasise the *management of policy* as never before. Research, we will suggest, has become increasingly important in managing policy in the sense that it can be deployed as a key means to manage the *meanings* in play in the policy environment.

A linear, top-down notion of policy production informs traditional models and this limits, the scope for understanding policy as a complex process and one intertwined with knowledge-production and research activity. The work of Ball offers a 'policy cycle' framework that presents as a set of interrelating and interactive loops, which, although they have a temporal dimension, are not simply linear. His notion differs from the usual cycle construct which is caught within a conventional and linear feedback-loop planning model (eg. Davis, Wanna, Warhurst and Weller 1993, Ball 1994). The importance of this model for our argument here is that it offers a framework for understanding how research activity gets to engage in policy in a number of different kinds of ways and for a range of purposes

This model implies a more emergent and contingent relationship between policy and research and yet the academic discipline of policy science remains as oriented to the perfection of the relationship between policy and research. The limitations of conventional models of policy production result in a lack of attention to other possibilities and other relationships between policy-makers and researchers. Underlying the positivist approach of many who use research in policy are a set of assumptions about what policy is and how it gets to be made.

Questions about the role of 'research' and 'policy' too often make such rationalist, or 'executive' (Yeatman 1998) models of policy production, which carry with them presumptions about the objective nature of knowledge and the quasi-scientific methodologies that promise to produce this outcome.

In this paper it is not possible here to develop further an analysis of the concept of policy and to demonstrate the theoretical possibilities for theorising the policy process (see McIntyre and Wickert forthcoming, Ball 1990, 1994, 1998, Marginson 1993, Taylor Rivzi Lingard & Henry 1997, Considine 1994, Peters & Marshall 1996, Yeatman 1993, 1995, Davis Sullivan & Yeatman 1997).

If policy is as contingent and provisional as we suggest, researchers in both the public and business arenas need to engage with a notion of policy that can accommodate differing relationships and practices and recognise opportunities for differing types of collaboration at differing moments. What is needed here is a conception of policy which not only recognises its multiple contexts of performance (Ball) but which also 'opens it up to the appropriate participation of all those involved in policy all the way through points of conception, operational formulation, implementation, delivery on the ground, consumption and evaluation' (Yeatman, 1998, p.43). Yeatman elaborates this notion in the following way:

Policy then is reconceived as the policy process... it is not just the democratisation of our social relationships which underlies this conception

of policy and a policy process. It is also the dynamics of increased complexity and uncertainty in our lives. When attention is paid to these two dynamics it becomes clear that rationalistic and intellectualistic models of policy that are predicated on some idea of rational mastery engage those who follow them in a rather dangerous kind of fantasy. We cannot predict or plan our futures in ways which enable us to subject our lives to rational direction and control. Rather, we have to learn to live in ways which enable us to adapt to ongoing change, complexity and uncertainty (p.31).

In other words, policy is a dynamic process that engages multiple participants in a range of contexts. Ball's work is useful in developing a model of these contexts and this helps us to develop our discussion about how policy-related researchers become involved in negotiating meanings in their work with decision-makers and others. What is also important is some elaboration of the types of policy-research relationships that might develop in various contexts and a broadening of the scope of criteria for judging their performance.

Research at work for policy

Policy provides contexts for research work. We are questioning those models of research and policy that define the work of research as a domain independent of policy, one that merely hopes to have impact on the policy process. An academic point of view may tend to assume a traditional model that positions the researcher as an agent acting from without the policy process. Research is something that the researcher needs to work hard to ensure is 'utilised'.

We are arguing, however, that the contemporary moment is settings new conditions for research and policy relationships through 'policy intervention' by the state, and projects of economic and public sector reform. The way 'policy processes' are now constituted change the way research is put to work by policy and policy makers.

Our work refers to several features of Yeatman's analysis of the contemporary state - her theorisation of corporate managerialism and its 'new contractualism' and the thesis of policy activism in spaces of the changed state. We agree with Yeatman (1998), that public sector reform has sets up new demands for research to work for policy production, creating a need and rationale for commissioned research which is governed by contractualism. These conditions redefine the domains of 'research' and 'policy' and their relationships, and generate new roles for agents in the policy process.

The corporatisation of public sector has brought into being the phenomenon of commissioned research and the consultant researcher. If, from the point of view of academy, research tended to be located outside the policy process, it is now brought into and managed as part of the process of policy production. Here, there are key questions about what capacity there is for researchers to influence the policy agenda that has, as it were, required their services. Are they mere agents of the new managers, or is there scope for 'policy activism' as it has been discussed in Yeatman's recent work (Yeatman 1998)? In what ways does *the work* of commissioned research give scope for shaping policy,

when researchers are positioned by policy as authoritative sources of knowledge for policy.

To answer these questions thus requires some analysis of the nature of the working relationships that are predicated by the new conditions of policy production. What is the nature of the research contract and how is this realised? What discretion does the contract give the researcher over both research and policy outcomes? More significant, perhaps, how is there a 'play' of possibilities in the working out and the 'managing' of research, that gives such scope? Yeatman's theorisation of the 'new contractualism' provides one basis for understanding how research and policy relationships are worked out and worked through in the contemporary state (Yeatman 1995, Davis Sullivan and Yeatman 1997).

Yeatman's analysis of the 'shift' in the nature of the contemporary state has been influential in Australasian accounts of public policy cited above, though it is rarely explored in the kind of depth it was given in her original discussion (Yeatman 1991, pp.13-32). Her argument, drew on the work of Melucci and others to theorise the emergence of a leaner and more efficient state which is pressed by intensifying global competition to create competitive conditions for private sector investment.

Leaving aside her account of the features of corporate managerialism in this paper, it is nevertheless important to reiterate her insight regarding that the contemporary state, which is often depicted as being 'rolled back'. Though the activities of the state are certainly shrinking in terms of public sector employment, is also more 'dispersed' 'complex' and 'interventionist' in function. The corporatisation of the public sector is thus to be understood as one feature of the 'complex interventionist state'. The question then is how the activities of the state are changing qualitatively, for example, from providing services to regulating them particularly through non-government agencies – Majone's 'regulatory state' (Majone 1997, Davis et al 1997).

Thus though the contemporary state shrinks its direct activities, its reach is extended, as boundaries between its activities and those of other agencies become permeable. This shift has made commissioned research an important resource for the new public sector managers who think of policy differently - as something that is strategic and 'managed' so that it has 'outcomes', particularly where funding is diminishing. This implies that the bureaucrat be open to whatever knowledge bases provide 'timely and relevant' information that will 'move the policy agenda forward'. Where good information is lacking, targeted research may be seen as necessary. The new bureaucrats are professional managers may have little accumulated experience of the portfolio, whereas the old public service bureaucrat was a 'portfolio advocate' (Yeatman 1993) with an expertise and a loyalty accumulated over a long career.

Thus the nature of the 'knowledge resource' for policy making has shifted from a closed knowledge-base captured within the portfolio to a relatively open system where relevant knowledge can be assembled or constructed around immediate policy requirements. By 'shifted' we mean that restructuring has in a deliberate way invalidated, or perhaps purged (if that is not too strong a term) the policy knowledges embodied in the old regime. Though some grieve the 'loss of corporate memory' restructuring brings, there is no 'loss' if that memory is regarded as an obstacle to public sector reform. Reform assumed that the problem with those older policy knowledges was their embodiment in

the old bureaucrats, while the new regime claims to look beyond portfolio expertise to whatever knowledge might support policy formation. It can certainly be argued (thinking of old education bureaucracies) that much of its in-house research was captive to policy and to the pragmatics of portfolio advocacy.

In such an account it is important not to gloss the difficulties of the adaptation demanded of those employed in policy work. It is exactly the point that a changed bureaucratic culture creates new spaces and opportunities for research to shape policy, as much as it also creates pressures for people to learn new ways of thinking and doing policy. It is for this reason that we emphasise not only that reform has brought about a huge increase in the amount of commissioned research. Rather, the nature of 'knowledge-for-policy' has changed, creating new policy knowledges and making spaces for new kinds of policy action. This is, of course, not only true of the public sector, but of many large organisations reinventing themselves as they demutualise, shed non-core businesses, are absorbed into global businesses or otherwise reinvent themselves for a more competitive business environment.

One consequence of these changes we wish to argue, is a new influence of research on policy. The nature of the new policy regime is at first negotiated in character - it has to be worked out. Public sector reform is a political project of economic rationalism. One way its goals of policy management have been realised is through research commissions which set a context in which bureaucrat and consultant come to negotiate common understandings about the role of research in policy. They do so because of the very contractualism of the new regime, which is above all else performative. The point is that the research performances have to be negotiated.

For this reason we argue that the changing nature of research-for-policy cannot be well understood by calling on typical dissemination models of research described in the literature (cf Weiss, 1977, Husen and Kogan 1984, Finch 1986, Anderson and Biddle 1991, Halpin and Troyna 1995). These usually presuppose a bureaucratic order that is relatively impermeable to the discourses of academic researchers, who then construct their problem with policy as one of the difficulty of achieving 'policy impact'. What happens, then, when the policy process constitutes itself as one open to research discourses, and invites researchers to provide perspectives on policy problems?

These claims about research and policy envisage the public sector as the site of changing relationships, yet they apply no less to the private sector and the corporate structures which are furnishing the models for public sector reform at every level. However, as other chapters in this volume attest, there is nothing static about the contemporary workplace, and hence, there are a host of questions about how its dynamics are predicating new relationships between business policy and management information. To the extent that the strategic character of corporate policymaking has intensified with increased global competition, to the extent that the workplace is humanised and employees more self-regulating, and so on, there are new demands for research to answer to strategic corporate policy. It is an open question therefore, how far the 'knowledge workers' of the new workplace are transforming 'management information' into strategic policy through their corporate research. Thus, it is the case that in both public and private

organisations, changed managerial structures are predicated new relationships of research and policy.

Commissioned research and the research contract

Having examined how corporate managerialism sets particular conditions for policy research, it will be useful to explore in more detail how research practices are shaped by these conditions. Here we will want to generalise about the experience of the research commission and the production of the policy research texts. In doing so we acknowledge that we are talking about wide variations in the circumstances of state-commissioned research. At the same time, the concept of a 'research commission' can extend to any circumstances where a researcher is given a brief, and what we say about may equally apply to the market researcher who has to negotiate the policy significance of research with supervisors, as well as manage the process. It is the negotiation of significances that are interesting.

The new bureaucratic culture, like the corporate world on which it is modelled, requires a negotiation of research and policy relationships just as it assumes a well-managed research contract adapted to policy production, and this implies considerable scope for variability. Commissioned research can involve highly specified research contracts or commissions which prove to have considerable latitude, if not in their contractual 'deliverables' then in the substance and implications of what was reported.

It is difficult to do so without idealising the features of this work. One approach is to focus on some recent research around selected key policy arguments and highlight tensions between research and policy in particular constructions of policy. Here we write about two examples of such research in order to suggest how research and policy practices interact in the co-production of policy knowledge. Of particular interest is how the 'research process' is understood within a policy context by policy workers and how research meanings are managed through the policy process.

Policy research in both process and product terms is often regarded as problematic from the position of orthodox academic research, in that it is seen as constrained rather than independent, interested rather than disinterested, narrow rather than broad in scope, atheoretical rather sophisticated and above all worldly rather than esoteric, which is to say that the one is regarded by the other as conforming to other and different (and often, inferior) norms of practice. At worst, policy research consultancy is perceived as expedient work that gives the policymakers the answers they want. As we have already suggested, this seriously misunderstands the process, especially in assuming the closed information environment of classical bureaucracy rather than the performative workplace.

Clearly, the negotiated character of research commissions can be represented and interrogated in a range of ways, and we recognise that it is impossible to convey its high contextuality without being very descriptive. The point is to highlight the dynamics of the work, and in the following discussion, we will give attention to two concerns:

- To the extent that there is a question or problem to be investigated, how is this understood by the parties to the process?

- What stated and unstated problematics are to be managed in pursuing the question, and to what extent is there a play of competing research questions?
- How important are questions of perspective and methodology, given that research can be discredited by alleging flaws in the researcher's glass?
- To what extent do policymakers specify methodology, and to what extent is this discretionary? How do the parties understand and manage issues of value orientation and research practice?

It is possible to give examples of research commissions to answer such questions, but suffice it to say that the policy environment provides enormous pressure for research to produce information strategically vital for the new 'managerialist' bureaucracies, in ways that are analogous to the pressure of the marketplace on business policy. In what ways, then, does this pressure lead bureaucrats to dictate the problem and method of the research? and from the standpoint of contractualism (Yeatman 1995), what discretion was there for the researchers to design and mould the research to their own interests, including their academic interests? In short, how much 'play' was there in the terms of the project?

Without glossing the complexity of the dynamics of such commissions, it could be shown that at many points they raise issues to be resolved as to scope, meaning, direction and implications. There is no question that the contractual framework means there are negotiable and non-negotiable features to the work, bearing particularly on the acceptability of the research text that is produced. The argument is, however, that the research is a negotiated accomplishment produced through *an interplay of research and policy understandings*. What is crucial in this negotiability is the extent to which the parties have understandings which are developed and modified through the research process, since neither bureaucrat nor researcher is in a state of perfect information, and both parties need to learn (as well as gain) from the process as they managed it, in different ways. Indeed, it is a hallmark of the new bureaucrat (and certainly the new consulting researcher) that their activity is open to 'learning' from the experience of policy production.

Thus, to assume that research contracts always mean what they say is to ignore that their intent to provide scope for work on a policy problematic that is not tractable to routine analysis. It is precisely the point that doing research, under the new conditions of public and private sector workplaces, can generate new thinking — policy assumes its own imperfectability. In turn, this opens up questions of the relative importance of the perspectives generated by research as distinct from the methodologies applied to pre-determined questions. The real usefulness of research may be that it provides not only new information, but a reconceptualisation of a problematic on the basis of new information. In short, the conceptual outcomes may be as significant as the empirical findings they organise.

Under such conditions, there is no simple research question to be 'answered' by routine methods, but rather, a set of problematics to be explored more or less creatively, with a range of interests to be acknowledged, since such research works always with its background of the context, the presumed policy audiences. The research process itself can be understood as a context where policy problematics can be worked on.

In this way, what was interesting about research commissions (granted that none are the same) is the kind of shift of understandings that can occur from one project to the next. The dilemma for the academic researcher is the degree to which their ideas and interests must bend to policy imperatives while yet yielding scope for producing respectable scholarly work. For the bureaucrat, the dilemma is that while the research text produced must be useable (be politically acceptable, readable, implementable or workable in a range of ways), there must be scope for the researcher to exercise their expertise on the problematic, to render it analysable and reportable in interesting ways. Yet, the parties may, at the same time, may have in common a dominant interest in producing a report that speaks to policy and ‘makes a difference’. This is particularly so when the researcher takes a position as advocate for the professional field.

In this context, the question of the relevance of methodology or perspective arises. We are representing the research commission as permitting a degree of play or discretion as to the nature of the research, though this can be more or less circumscribed. Clearly, bureaucrats (or their corporate counterparts) may determine the methodology or leave it open to proposal by researchers at the tender stage - at issue then will be the quality of their argument about what kind of research that is needed for the problem. It has to be borne in mind, that the researchers are bidding competitively for the contract. What kind of criteria then determine which researcher is commissioned? Clearly, these might include the adequacy of the methodology (and/or its creativity, cost-effectiveness and so on) given some understanding of the issues. However, the research commission heightens the *arguability of method* by bringing various criteria into play. Methodology is contingent on how the research is argued, to the point where it may be subordinated to the grasp of issues and the proposed conceptual approach. Thus, the decisive factors (in our experience) are the kind of research perspectives the research will make available, given some ‘reading’ of the policy issues - in short, just what research meanings are going to be brought into play.

Conclusion

Further work is needed to document the way research and policy relationships develop in research commissions. Accounts of this ‘research for policy’ could highlight the co-production of authoritative texts that do the work of representing policy realities, giving texts symbolic properties as well as providing policy knowledges.

The paper has treated as dubious the legitimacy claims of both research and policy that are often presented in idealised accounts of their relationship. We argued that contemporary conditions have opened up new possibilities for engaging in doing research for policy, supported by our experiences as researchers engaged in policy research. We have suggested that the challenge is to represent the complexity of the negotiated relationships of research and policy, where the researcher is not a naïve ‘outsider’ ignorant of the demands of the policy context, nor the policy manager ignorant of the possibilities of research.

While we have represented ‘the researcher’ as an external consultant to a public sector organisation, we suggest that much of the argument applies to research consultancy in the private sector, or indeed internal organisational research. This is so, we have suggested,

because time pressures and other exigencies of the contemporary workplace and the competitive business environment means that research is enmeshed with policy - linear models of research-for-policy, are likely to lack application to the realities of business policy formation. Though we have not explored the point here, conceptions of research drawn from behavioural science that entail such linear and exceedingly rational models of policy decision-making, may be less applicable.

We have advanced a different view of research and policy as a co-production. Research contributes to the development of policy through the formation of reciprocal understandings by parties to the policy process, where each party grasps both their own and the other party's perspectives on the policy question as a basis for working together on it. This is the basis for what we have described as a management of negotiated management of meanings in research for policy that assumes the changeability and imperfectability of the policy process.

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