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‘As tears go by...’: Changin’ views on the relations between research, practice and politics

Abstract

The contribution reflects on how the author has changed his views about the relationships in the triangle between research, practice and politics through the years he collaborated with Anja, which are the most part of his working life. The views were always somehow different, as Anja has been always more critical, whereas the author has tended to be more of a ‘believer’, at least towards certain aspects, and being critical to others. Anja’s preoccupation was always with culture, whereas this concept was for a long time more or less outside of his attention, considered as a somehow unclear concept, being more of private than of professional interest for him. The author’s preoccupation was always with politics, and with the possibilities of research to influence politics, or rather policies, in a positive way, making it more rational and more just, or at least more equitable.

The title should signal some regret, and also some retreat. The first spontaneous idea has been ‘as times go by’. Then, soon the memory of the title and the melancholic mood of the song by the Rolling Stones ‘As Tears Go By’ came up. It should mean that in the past there had been tears about what could not have been achieved, however, these tears have ‘gone by’ somehow, because the originally desired achievements may finally turn out as being unrealistic anyway, deserving no tears any more but rather reflection. As a next step the author realised that he did not know what the meaning of the song should be and what the title should express, and he looked into the internet. The text of the song does not increase clarity – it is really lyrics. Interestingly a story appears that Jagger and Richards would have originally texted ‘as times go by’, and their manager Oldham would have changed ‘times’ by ‘tears’, so it’s a kind of

patchwork lyrics, and a real coincidence too; maybe this stories can inform us somehow how culture works.

Opening up towards Europe

The first project during which we came in touch was called EUROPROF 'New Forms of Education of Professionals in Vocational Education and Training', a two years EU Leonardo da Vinci Project.¹ The first meeting took place now fifteen years ago in April 1996 in a really old production site for sponges from the sea that has been transformed into a gorgeous hotel and meeting centre at the island of Hydra in Greece. The aims of the project were expressed as follows:

'The long term aim of the project is to develop a 'community' of VET researchers and practitioners and the 'professionalisation' of VET, in other words to gain the recognition of VET as a discipline and a profession in its own right. In the shorter term the project aims to build an international network of VET researchers and to develop new qualifications for VET professionals, planners, teachers and trainers, through a European Masters (MA) qualification to be offered in universities in different European countries.' (Project website, home)

The project had eight 'cornerstones', which turn out very ambitious until today:

1. anthropocentric production supported by 'shaping skills': workers should be given the skills and the autonomy to shape and control technology in the production process and to design and control work organisations
2. developing social innovation
3. social inclusion

¹ A small website about the project is still available:
<http://www.itb.uni-bremen.de/projekte/europrof/default.htm>

4. VET to become recognised as a discipline
5. professionalising VET professionals through university based education programmes
6. need for a new occupational profile for VET and HRD professionals
7. a new curriculum for VET and HRD combining pedagogy with technical and vocational knowledge and work based skills
8. project methodologies based on the concept of collaborative research through an action research approach bringing together research and developmental traditions.

With respect to the understanding of policy making, i.e. of how the cornerstones could feed into practice, the project did not have a deliberate position, and – besides – a European Master for VET does not seem to exist until today (in the internet we can find European Masters of Educational Management, of Adult Education, even an organisation called European Masters for Skilled Crafts, which, however, is a kind of consultancy for implementation of European policies in Oslo).

A key tension in the project has been between the ambitious (utopian) approach of professionalization according to the ‘shaping principle’ which in fact has set out to change the whole enterprise culture as well as the attitudes of employees towards their working environment in the European capitalist economy through the education of VET professionals on the one hand, and the reception and adoption of the professionalising strategies focused towards the Human Research Development (HRD) profession by the ASTD (American Society for Training and Development)² in the United States on the other hand, which rather aims at the

² See <http://www.astd.org/ASTD/aboutus/>; ASTD is not only an US organisation but tries to organise HRD professionals on a global scale: ‘ASTD International works with International Partners to develop and support a global community for learning and HRD professionals. The ASTD International Partner program provides partnership options including ASTD Press, Education Program, International Delegations, Membership, and Regional Events.’ (<http://www.astd.org/membership/international/Internationalpartnerlist.htm>) Partners are shown

strengthening of the HRD profession within capitalist corporations around the world.³ The latter has been supported by quantitative surveys in some European countries about the structures of the HRD-profession, and the basic ideological divide was also paralleled by methodological differences related to a quantitative ‘positivistic’ approach vs. the qualitative orientation towards collaborative action research.

Both Austria and Finland were new member states to the EU at these times, and the author and Anja have taken very different attitudes to this accession process, which resulted in quite different positions taken in the project towards the relationship of research, practice and politics. The experience of the author was rooted in more or less technocratic oriented policy related research about education and employment, and in particular evaluation of labour market policies. The impact and improvement of policies towards reasonable and equitable objectives has been the main mission of this research, and some networking existed with medium level officials in the labour, education, and science ministries who held similar orientations. The EU membership has at these times strongly reinforced these ideas, and brought several additional sources of expertise into the Austrian scene, but has also changed the basic conditions of policy making, as the scope for economic and fiscal policies has been limited for Austria. There were quite polarised debates about these questions, and the author took a very positive position towards the EU and worked also as an expert in the field of the evaluation of labour market and – the then beginning – of lifelong learning policies supported by the European Social Funds (ESF). Despite the critique of the neoliberal drive of the EU the policies and the modes of policy making in the respective fields seemed a progress as compared to the previous Austrian

in Brazil, Canada, China, Japan, Korea, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Spain/Mexico/Argentina, South Africa, Taiwan, and also in some European countries: Denmark, Netherlands, Spain, United Kingdom.

³ ‘At the 1946 convention, ASTD adopted a constitution that set as its goals: to raise the standards and prestige of the industrial training profession and to further the professional’s education and development. Those goals have remained part of ASTD’s mission, even as the profession evolved and needs changed. (...) In recent years, ASTD has widened its focus to connect learning and performance to measurable results. In 2000, the organization chose to refer to itself just by the letters ASTD, to recognize that the profession looks far beyond training in its quest to ‘create a world that works better.’’ (<http://www.astd.org/ASTD/aboutus/history.htm>)

practices, which the author had experienced for about ten to fifteen years in various policy related research and development projects, in particular:

- the quite strong rhetoric towards equity and social inclusion, which has supported at these times positions rather at the margin of the political spectrum in Austria
- the project oriented and at first sight more effective approach towards policy making, which included much more research and ‘rational’ arguments, as compared to the strongly politicised and demagogic style of debates in Austria
- the broadening and elaboration of the materials brought into consideration by the EU-documents, which have related the research community much more strongly to the international scene.

Thus in these times the attitude of the author towards the opportunities for an improvement of practices in the triangle of research, practice and politics has been quite optimistic, with the EU being perceived as an ally towards improvement. The basic intellectual frame was quite old-fashioned, simple and naïve (influenced by Carol Weiss’ position towards evaluation, Peter Wagner’s position towards the impact of research through reform coalitions, and Harold Wilensky’s strong emphasis on the importance of implementation): Policy making can and should improve (the conditions of) practice and research can and should help in this endeavour by providing material for a more ‘enlightened’ way of policy making. Practice itself, however, was (implicitly) taken as a kind of black box in this frame, with the proposition that policy would know too little about practice and therefore would need to be better informed, in order to provide better conditions for practice (a core idea of ‘evidence based policy’). Another more silent proposition has been that practice would need policy for improvement.

On this background the involvement in EUROPROF was led by a more general interest in the possibilities of professionalization to improve education, and in the possibilities of policy to shape the professions, without having a background in working with these professions. The

clash between the utopian shaping approach and the positivistic HRD-approach was not resolvable by the author; somehow it went straight through him, having sympathy for the need for a change in the approach towards working in the capitalist economy (which, besides, seemed somehow not so completely unrealistic at these times before the millennium, when the optimistic views of Post-Fordism has set high expectations in the ‘new economy’), and also for a more pragmatic approach towards improvement of HRD within the enterprise sector and the ‘positivistic’ acquisition of knowledge about these practices. The result was a more or less descriptive mapping of the VET and HRD profession in Austria.

Anja’s approach appeared somehow completely opposite at various dimensions. First her background originated from practice (*‘In my pre-full-time-academic life I have worked as a mathematics and science teacher and teacher-trainer in gymnasium and vocational college, as head of local board of education and in educational planning.’*); second, in research she worked in the academic environment of the university in educational departments; third, her view of the relationship between education and policy making was oriented towards professional autonomy, seeing politics rather as an interfering than as an improving entity, and seeing research as a support to practice; fourth, her perspective towards Europe was much more distant and sceptical, perceiving the economic missions as dominating issue, and the domestic politicians and bureaucrats building a kind of coalition with the EU in order to somehow ‘Europeanize’ the whole community according to similar artificial ‘systemic’ standards of managerialism (the term ‘*Busnocracy*’⁴ is denoting these relationships); fifth, her research was oriented by a clear mission towards the analysis of how culture holds together the different domains of society and produces them somehow, and the use of qualitative and historical methodologies to perform this analyses; finally, her attempts to transnational cooperation in research were always really focused to transcend traditional academic habits of (narcisstic) presentations and confrontations of ready products towards approaches of *real* collaborative activities, attempts that very often

⁴ If the term is typed into google, we can see that Anja has some practical copyright on it, as 42 hits from various countries come up which lead to publications of her, or references to them [search 12.1.2012].

proved difficult for the author (and probably also others being stuck in the traditional habits), but in the end has led to an impressive body of publications.

If we try to relate Anja's approach to the triangle of research, practice and politics, we find that research should defend and support practice against assaults from policy, and deconstruct the abstract and universal images processed in the policy discourses by tracing them back to the time and space of when and where their representations happened, doing this in a reflexive way by being aware that researchers themselves contribute to reality by producing these images (see Heikkinen 2004⁵ as an example of her reasoning).

By contrasting the two positions we can see how differently the relationships in the triangle can be conceptualised. Anja's contribution to EUROPROF was an analysis of how vocational teachers' conceptions of their have changed in Finland (Heikkinen 1997),⁶ as compared to a kind of structural analysis of different types of VET and HRD professionals in Austria by the author. Anja's message was and still is pointing to the direction, that a systematic streamlining of profiles would lead to an impoverishment of the diversity of local practices, whereas the author showed a generalised change from 'old' types of professionals in VET with segmented profiles and high division of labour to 'new' types in HRD with much more holistic profiles.

The innovation hope

Another collaboration has taken place under the COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) Programme between 1997 and 2002 under the heading of 'Flexibility, Transferability, Mobility as Targets of Vocational Education and Training' (Achtenhagen, Coffield and Evaluationsteam 2003).⁷ This broad project covered in five working groups the

⁵ Heikkinen, Anja, 2004: Models, paradigms or cultures of vocational education. *European Journal of Vocational Training*, No. 32 Mai - August 2004/II.

⁶ Heikkinen, Anja, 1997: Education or Training? Changes in Vocational Teachers' Conceptions of Their Work. *Cambridge Journal of Education* 27, 3, 405-23
(http://www.itb.uni-bremen.de/projekte/europrof/docu/doc_3.doc).

⁷ See http://www.cost.eu/domains_actions/isch/Actions/A11; Achtenhagen, Coffield and

whole range of VET from context and inputs through processes to output, evaluation and assessment and included some most important and powerful researchers from 16 countries; it supported only the direct costs of networking mainly through workshops. It has led to several publications, some directly under the project umbrella,⁸ others outside in the academic community (Achtenhagen, Coffield and Evaluationsteam 2003, 25-26). Anja and the author contributed to working group four termed somewhat mysteriously 'initial conditions', which produced an edited volume about issues of flexibility (Nijhof, Heikkinen and Nieuwenhuis 2003).⁹ Anja served as co-editor, and she and the author contributed chapters in the section 'Professional Conditions' about problems of professionalization (Heikkinen 2003; Lassnigg 2003),¹⁰ which either somehow continued the work done during EUROPROF.

The COST experience included two outstanding issues with respect to the relationship of research, practice and politics, first it was a highly political project that reflected the rhetoric about necessary change and innovation at the edge of the millennium, second the working style was strongly determined by a push towards 'excellence' of the publication plans and a climate of competition of being accepted as 'excellent'. The overall structure of the project was based on the rationale that VET research should explore as comprehensive and detailed as necessary the conditions for the promotion of flexibility, mobility and transferability of VET systems. Based on a feasibility study, a mapping of the concepts and the dimensions involved for the achievement of these goals had been provided during the first phase of the project, on which the subsequent research should build (Nijhof, Kieft and van Woerkom 2001).¹¹

Evaluationsteam, 2003: in *Neue Wirtschaftspädagogische Forschungs- und Entwicklungsarbeiten*, ed. Frank Achtenhagen, Göttingen (<http://www.wipaed.wiso.uni-goettingen.de/as/downloads/Band28.pdf>).

⁸ http://www.cost.eu/library/publications?pub-domain=0&pub-year=* &pub-action=A11

⁹ Nijhof, Wim. J.; Heikkinen, Anja; Nieuwenhuis, Loek F.M. (Eds) 2003; *Shaping Flexibility in Vocational Education and Training. Institutional, Curricular and Professional Conditions*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.

¹⁰ Heikkinen, Anja, 2003: *Transforming VET policies and professionalism: a view from Finland*; Lassnigg, Lorenz, 2003: *Professionalism as a path for the reform of VET systems*;

¹¹ Nijhof, Wim. J., Kieft, Marjolein, van Woerkom, Marianne, 2001: *Reviewing flexibility; a systems approach to VET*. Luxembourg: Office for official publications of the European Communities.

The mapping study deliberately proposed to use a broad European research community to structure the whole field of VET towards certain generalised directions by using a systemic approach, and thus to give a strong and concerted impetus to ‘produce reality’. In fact the project attempted exactly to achieve, what Anja has critically analysed as the role of researchers in her historical research (Heikkinen 2004), and she was part of the undertaking. Consequently she tried to bring a reflective turn into the activities, which was somehow a hopeless fight against a group of men eager to exert influence by an excellent publication – around the meetings of the working group the author remembers the fiercest debates with Anja about fundamental political questions of the development of the economy and society. Finally the book included for each section a critical review by an external reviewer (Leif Hommen on institutional and organisational flexibility; Fernando Marhuenda about educational tools, and Phil Hodgkinson about professionalism), in order to bring a reflective element into the undertaking; this must be attributed as a merit to the editorial effort of Anja.

It is not possible here to evaluate the impact of the project on the structuring of VET policies and systems in Europe. We must consider that it took place around the times of the Lisbon Summit which has substantially increased the European activities in education policy by applying the ‘Open Method of Coordination’ also to education. The subsequently developed European Education and Training 2010 Strategy has also developed a quite comprehensive mapping of education and training policy (EU-COM 2008; EU-COUNCIL 2001), which still serves as a kind of blueprint for education and training policy.¹²

At this time the author was very much impressed by the promises of the ‘innovation hype’ in the discourse about Post-Fordism and the New Economy, in particular by the approaches of innovation system by Bengt-Åke Lundvall and his collaborators, which were presented as a

¹² EU-COM Education and Culture, 2008: ‘Education & Training 2010’. Main policy initiatives and outputs in education and training since the year 2000. http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/doc/compendium_05_en.pdf; EU-COUNCIL, 2001: The concrete future objectives of education and training systems. Report from the Education Council to the European Council, 5980/01 LIMITE EDUC 23, Brussels, 14 February 2001. http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/doc/rep_fut_obj_en.pdf

kind of ‘win-win’-alternative to neo-liberalism. In short, innovation should contribute to economic growth which is necessary for prosperity in capitalism, thus policy should support innovation being flanked by distributional policies against exclusion, and education serves as a main contributor to innovation. Because innovation needs continuous learning the education system must be developed towards lifelong learning. In the sphere of work a turn towards innovation would mean more involvement of workers, reduction of the division of labour, flat hierarchies and better use of competences and qualifications (the expression of the ‘high skills equilibrium’ has denoted these expectations) – in short a kind of optimistic and utopian view of economic and societal development which, however, had as its precondition quite fundamental changes in politics away from competitive strategies using low wages and cost cutting towards the support of innovation and lifelong learning. Because strong economic interests were interpreted in this direction, this change should be possible, and was combined with a kind of ‘third way’ attitude towards politics. Of course, this was not seen as a wide and smooth avenue, but a try to changes in this direction was deemed worthwhile. Superficially this approach also fitted well into the Lisbon strategy, which used a similar rhetoric about innovation.

In terms of the triangle of research, practice and politics, the approach mentioned above was reinforced. Research should be brought forward by the analysis of practice along the innovation paradigm, and policy should be informed about how this path can be supported and implemented. There was a fundamental difference between Austria and Finland at these times, as Austria was very traditional in terms of innovation (there is much research available which proves this, and currently there is also a consensus in the policy field that innovation activities should be substantially strengthened), whereas Finland was seen at the forefront – so there were big tasks in Austria to do. Consequently the author took an advocacy position¹³ in favour of

¹³ To show how hard this undertaking was in Austria the author remembers two reinforcing key experiences: The first refers to a high level group of the Social-Democratic Party (SPÖ) that debated the development of a new programme for education; the author tried to make strong arguments for the support of innovation which had been left out in the draft; the answer by one of the members (a university professor who later became the science spokesman of the green party) which was uncontested by the other members of the group was: why should we push towards innovation, this is a topic from the others (he meant the conservative party ÖVP) anyway; the other

analysing and working out the implications of a consequent innovation strategy for education policy, in particular exploring the lifelong learning paradigm and what should follow from it for Austrian education policy.

Within the COST project the contribution was focused on the question whether professionalization can be expected to be a reasonable path towards reform in education. The answer was negative because the exploration showed that the attitudes of professionals must be expected to depend strongly on their self interest and on the shape of the system and the policies taken: if the system and policy is conservative, the professionals will also tend to be conservative. Despite the different approaches towards professionals, this result somehow coincided with the results of Anja's contribution, which also showed a strong influence of the (political) environment on the VET professionals in Finland.

Clash of cultures

In parallel to the COST project another network of VET researchers has been funded by the Fourth Framework programme (FP4) of the EU between 1998 and 2001, the 'FORUM for European Research in Vocational Education and Training'.¹⁴ The official aim of this project was directly related to the support of the 'knowledge based society':

Aim a) 'The 'knowledge based society' as a European path for economic development. The European Commission poses a specific European path for economic development which stresses the centrality of human capital to a high skills- high value added production paradigm in a 'knowledge based society'. Europe can utilise the cultural diversity and richness of social and historical

occurred in the internal presentation of the results of a big task force within the 'future lab' of the SPÖ for the innovation of the public sector to the then Austrian chancellor from the SPÖ; after the presentation he leaned back, stretched his arms behind his neck, and said: this is very interesting and reasonable, however, it would mean that we need less people in the public service, and the consequence would be an increase of unemployment which we cannot want.

¹⁴ http://www.itb.uni-bremen.de/projekte/forum/Forum_framesets.htm

traditions to develop a socially based innovation culture. Vocational education and training is central to the vision of a socially based innovation culture. It provides the basic skills, knowledge and technical abilities required by an industrial and scientific culture to support the work process, to develop a culture of sustainable innovation and the creation of employment opportunity.' (http://www.itb.uni-bremen.de/projekte/forum/Forum_framesets.htm: > Aims)

This network included some thirty partners from 18 countries which should develop transnational research. Five broad topics were selected that structured the work and organised the interested researchers: cultures, values and meanings; labour market; institutions; learning organisations; identity formation. The network met twice a year in different locations for in total nine workshops that were organised according to the five topics and provided a good opportunity for the building of contacts and co-operations among the partners. This worked out well, as previous relationships from the EUROPROF project were reinforced, and the partners formed later the nucleus of the VETNET in the European Educational Research Association of (EERA), one of the most active networks. Anja was co-leading the culture group, whereas the author started as a member of the labour market group, and was selected later as a leader of this group.

The author tried to develop an integrative conceptual framework of how the co-ordination of education and employment might work in contemporary capitalist societies. This framework was strongly oriented to medium level co-ordinating mechanisms (bureaucracy, market, associations, networks), and their interrelationships. The basic idea was that the assumptions about simple and straightforward mechanisms which underlie policy making cannot work because of the complex relationships of interacting coordination mechanisms in real systems. Policy was not addressed directly in this framework, research. An underlying idea was that neither the traditional ideas of bureaucratic planning nor the contemporary ideas of the market as the all encompassing alternative could work as co-ordinating mechanisms, but new policies must be found that take into account the more elaborate self-organising mechanisms among the

actors, in particular networking. The main emphasis was not on policy proposals but on deconstructing and understanding the complex relationships from an underlying innovation policy approach. The idea of informing policy making by research remained alive in this activity.

Addressing the triangle, two issues stand out. First, the network implicitly included the disciplinary tensions between pedagogy and social sciences, as well as the thematic irritations caused by the ‘cultural turn’ in the human and social sciences, by which the ‘cultures, values and meanings’ group was driven. Unfortunately these tensions were not made explicit, and there was not meta level established to discuss them – so the intentions by the culture group to question the simplistic ideas of the ‘knowledge based society’ underlying the project appeared continuously as an irritating criticism of the constructive intentions of informing policy making; as pedagogy has much more in common with a ‘culturalist view’ than the social sciences, there appeared some competition to a (positivistic) social science perspective, and the author learned very much later more about these issues. The second big issue concerned the question of how transnational research should be developed, and in particular what collaborative research could mean. The funding was provided for the travel and the meetings. So the spontaneous practice of the partners was to bring their research into the workshops, exchange ideas, results and methodologies, and to try to produce some publications. Collaborative research would mean, however, not only to bring together existing things, but rather to produce something new out of the network – this attempt proved too difficult.

In retrospect an important question for the author is how the professional practice in the triangle of research, practice and politics was related to the practical development of politics in his country. In 2000, in parallel to the Lisbon summit, the Austrian government changed from a coalition between Social Democrats (SPÖ) and Conservatives (ÖVP) to a new coalition that included the populist right wing party (FPÖ) which had won the second most votes in the election, with the Conservatives who led this government. As is generally known the Austrian president as well as the EU have initially unsuccessfully tried to interfere against the new

government. In fact education policy changed not substantially; the minister remained the same, and got additionally the responsibility for science and higher education as the ministries were merged. The main public officials responsible for schools and universities, the most important of which were Social Democrats, also remained the same. The change agenda of the new government was targeted mainly to the destruction of the corporatist modes of governance and, in particular on the disempowerment of the labour movement and the oppositional Social Democratic Party. In education the rhetoric changed strongly towards issues of ‘quality improvement’, ‘outcome orientation’, and ‘new governance’ according to ideas of New Public Management – in fact a strengthening of what Anja meant by ‘Busnocracy’. However, at the practice level not much has changed in schools, albeit the university has undergone a radical reform towards autonomy – paradoxically this reform was moderated and supported by the longer term Social Democratic director general.

The author acted somehow schizophrenic as he stuck to the previous agenda of trying to inform policy, notwithstanding the different political orientation of the new government. The European and international policies could be taken as some anchor point a fortiori. PISA 2000 was an important event, showing quite mediocre results that were in strong contrast to high expenditure for education as compared to other countries. The search for the improvement of quality became a common agenda in Austrian research and policy; only very few researchers decided to resist a co-operation with the new government. Populism and the fight against it appeared and still appears as the main practical political agenda, and the two established political parties of the traditional conservative vs. social democratic spectre did and do not find a receipt against it, except becoming populist themselves. An important element of this development was that it hid and disguised in fact the appearance of neoliberal policies. Superficially there were no signs of a real neoliberal policy; on the opposite, some liberalisation and rationalisation of the traditional and conservative Austrian structures seemed welcome and necessary to improve education.

‘Evidence based policy and practice?’

Rather late the author joined the main international activity of Anja, the ‘VET and culture network’, not least because he was employed in a non university environment and had to earn money through funded research. ‘VET and culture’ exists since xxxx and is a long living and largely unfunded and academically very productive network that produced among others the Peter Lang series ‘xxx’ co-edited by Anja. The first participation in a network meeting was a very strong experience because of the co-operative and non-competitive climate the author had never experienced before at a similar event. Somehow it was the participation in this network that made the efforts by Anja in the other projects much more understandable.

The recent meeting of the network addressed directly the issues of the relationship between research, practice and policy, and it was very instructive because it was organised jointly with the European Training Foundation (ETF) and combined two cultures, the critical academic culture of the network and the applied policy oriented culture of the ETF. Becoming older, the author has in the meantime accumulated more experience in more direct involvement in policy making and accordingly more tight relationships with policy makers. Milestones were the involvement in events of the Austrian EU presidency 2006, the contribution in a broader consortium for the development of the Austrian NQF, the involvement in a high level Task force about school reform in Austria appointed by the new Social Democratic minister of education, and the participation in a task force for the development of an Austrian Lifelong learning strategy. These experiences allowed somehow for a personal testing of the ideas about the relationships between research, practice and policy, and they led to quite severe changes of the perspectives and assumptions held previously. We can sum up the changes by a kind of late ‘cultural turn’ by the author, and the insight of the severe limits of ‘evidence based policy’ posed by the practice of policy making, as well as by the limitations from research itself.

– A first basic personal misunderstanding concerns the previously assumed curiosity and demand for enlightenment from the side of policy makers about the complexities in the field concerned, i.e. education. In the abstract one can of course better influence and shape education

the better the complexities of the field are understood; however, given the constraints of time and space and the need for taking decisions, there are rather prefigured beliefs than open curiosity. Therefore a debate has come up about a different kind of research needed for informing policy, as compared to academic research ('evidence based policy research') that has to follow certain criteria, e.g. timeliness, brevity, focus to their questions. The big question about this is, whether this separation in fact leads to different results and accordingly different messages from the different kinds of research. The somewhat tricky and cynical slogan of 'policy based evidence' should indicate that policy would select the kind of evidence from the available variety that fits best to the current interests. Summing up, there seem to be different logics from research and policy which might be brought to the formula that research is bringing up ever new questions about what seems clear, however, policy wants answers and tends to reject questions. As a consequence, the policies are often already clear, when research comes into play; the author experienced this in at least two of his policy involvements (NQF and school reform).¹⁵

– A second point concerns the understanding of politics and policy making, in particular the question of how policy is related to practice in the triangle. Here we have two contrasting paradigms that make a big difference for the potential impact of research: a hierarchical relationship with a more or less straightforward impact of politics on education vs. a systemic view that sees politics as a system in its own right situated at the same level as the other subsystems of society without a direct influence on them. According to the latter paradigm the functioning of politics is guided by the aim of the preservation of power and the maximation of votes, which is different from the best possible governance of other subsystems, e.g., education. In this case research provided for politics supports policy practice rather than educational

¹⁵ Shortly after the constituting session of the task force for school reform, at a stage of a brainstorming about the aims and agenda, the members (and several other persons) have received an email with a formal proposal for an amendment to the laws about schooling including a new organisation of school structure, without having been informed about this idea.

practice. The author had to learn during the years that against his previous belief the latter view seems to fit better to reality.

– A third point is that the ideas developed from the research side about good policy proposals tend to differ in kind from the policy proposals that are feasible for the side of policy making. The main issue here is complexity vs. simplicity. A typical example in Austrian education policy is the topic of financing. There is a strong consensus that ‘good’ policies for education must mean to spend more money, therefore better quality means more money; consequently the debate is focused on the question of spending more money or not, other things are too complicated. In particular, policy cannot really cope with the problem, if education is already too expensive. Another related point is that in order to maximize votes simple messages must be brought through the media and messages also must survive the competition with the other parties. This is not easily possible with complex policy proposals. A recent attempt to influence Austrian education policy by a referendum for broad reform has with much effort won about 6% of the electorate, absolute 380.000 signatures; compared to 1,2 Mio students (parents) at school and about 200.000 students in higher education entitled to vote the signatures represent about one in four interested persons.¹⁶

If we relate these issues to the triangle of research, practice and policy the distinction of policy and practice becomes very marked. The triangle literally shows two different paths out from research, one to policy, and one to practice. The original map has been to provide research to policy to improve practice. The revised map says that we cannot assume that policy will improve practice, we even can put into question whether it is able to this if it is willing. Research for policy and research for practice are different things, and the relationships must be

¹⁶ If we estimate the sum of these figures for parents of children and young people at school plus students in higher education, both have been called for support by important representatives about one in four of those ‘directly interested’ persons have signed; a referendum asking to amend the welfare state [2002] into the constitution has won about 12% of the electorate in times of the right wing government; around these times previous referendums for the improvement of education policy [1989 and 2001] have won about 3-4% of the electorate.

established differently. Somehow this is what the cultural approach always was striving for. Questioning the 'Busnocracy' would mean to analyse policy from the perspective of practice, instead of doing the opposite, evaluating practice for the sake of better policy. So the author had to go a long way to arrive where Anja has already been long before.