

11 Governing Through Feedback

From National Orientation Towards Global Positioning¹

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Introduction

It is striking to notice how during the past decades it has become increasingly important to come to understand oneself through comparison. This is not only the case when it comes to the self-understanding of regions in a global world or to member states in the European Union. The comparative dimension is also evident in, for instance, how schools understand their position in a national educational system, how teachers and students are asked to understand themselves, and how academics and scholars come to know themselves. The gaining of self-knowledge through comparison seems to include that this knowledge is mainly about *positioning* oneself: where do I or we stand in relation to others, or in relation to my or our past position? These and similar questions not only orient today's modes of self-understanding but are clearly part of our self-government as well: the 'will to know through comparison' is at once about a 'will to improve' continuously one's position as a region, EU member state, school or teacher. Far from all this being something that is enforced or imposed, comparative knowledge and related forms of monitoring increasingly appear as something vital, that is, it seems to be part of who we are and what we want. It feels as 'we' are permanently in need of information in order to position ourselves and to improve that position.

The aim of this chapter is to argue that the evident need for and exchange of comparative information should be regarded as a symptom of a new mode of governing that installs less-evident power relations. The approach is taken from Foucault who analyses governing as a form of 'conduct of conduct' or a more or less calculated and rational attempt to direct human conduct by applying specific technical means (Foucault 1982: 237). The thesis is that the current 'conduct of conduct' takes shape as 'feedback on performance', and which logic can be summarised as follows: what is of strategic importance today is the circulation of *feedback* information, and as far as the actors involved in education come to understand what they are doing as a *performance*, feedback information is experienced as indispensable. Hence, in line with the literature on 'governing by numbers' (Rose 1991; Grek 2009; Ozga 2009) and 'governing by comparison' (Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal 2003), the chapter first aims to focus on mechanisms of 'governing through feedback', and specifically to examine how educational

policy and state authorities increasingly rationalise (and justify) their role as collecting and offering feedback information. Within the scope of this chapter, the argument is developed while focusing in particular on the role of feedback information for Flemish educational government. Hence, the focus is limited to Flanders – being a community within the federal state of Belgium responsible for educational policy. Second, the objective of the chapter is to come to an understanding of the new power mechanisms that spread through today's modes of governing. It is argued that instead of the power of surveillance (in the panopticon) and the power of examples/exceptions (in the synopticon), it is 360° feedback that offers a paradigmatic articulation of new forms of power today.

A Government in Need of Feedback

In many countries information from the well-known *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) and *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Studies* (TIMSS) has come to play a role at the level of national educational policy. Belgium, and particularly the Flemish community, is no exception. The subtitle of the policy declaration (2004–2009) of the previous Flemish Minister of Education (Vandenbroucke 2004) was very instructive in that regard: 'Today champion in mathematics, tomorrow also in equal opportunities'.² Based on the good results of international, comparative studies, the document claims that it is the task of educational policy to 'consolidate and stimulate' the high quality of education in Flanders, as well as to focus on the weaker performance with regard to 'equal opportunities' in education. Concerning the latter, and drawing on the 2003 PISA report, the policy document highlights the strong influence of socio-economic status on the performance of students in Flanders compared to the average in other OECD countries. As a result, this information, combined with national statistics, is used to identify and justify problem areas for policy intervention in a specific way. Educational policymakers in Flanders see it as their task to enhance the quality of education, and moreover 'quality education' is now framed as 'international performance' (Vandenbroucke 2005). In a similar way, yet at the level of European Union, these approaches are in evidence.

In the European context, educational policy is still claimed today to be the responsibility of the member states (justified by the principle of subsidiarity). The European Union is therefore required to limit its contribution 'to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between member states and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action' (Maastricht Treaty 1992). In this context, the Open Method of Coordination is used, and in order to meet the goals of the Lisbon strategy, benchmarks or 'reference levels of European average performance' have been introduced regarding education and training (Lisbon European Council [LEC] 2000: §37). It is claimed that although these reference levels are based on comparable data, they should 'not define national targets'. Yet the Council (2003: 4, see also 2005) expects that these benchmarks will be used by national governments to orient their educational policy. With regard to Belgium/Flanders, and similar to the results of PISA, this is indeed the case.

An example was the benchmark introduced relating to the number of early school leavers: 'By 2010, an EU average rate of no more than 10% early school leavers should be achieved' (Council 2003: 4). This benchmark was used as well at the level of Flemish educational government to identify weaknesses in the performance of the Flemish educational system and to formulate policy measures (Vandenbroucke 2004: 14). Another example was the benchmark concerning lifelong learning. Participation of the adult working age group in lifelong learning of 12.5 per cent by 2010 was put forward as a target (Council 2003: 5), and used by the Flemish government (Vandenbroucke 2004: 14) to assess their present performance and to take initiatives for its optimisation. The use of similar benchmarks – as part of the follow-up programme *Education and Training 2020* – continues today.

'Europe' thus enters the policy context of Flanders through the development of educational quality standards that are being expressed in data on performance indicators, and additional information on best practices. As a result, domains as well as objectives of educational policy increasingly have a European, comparative dimension. Moreover, as the case of Belgium/Flanders clearly indicates, this global and European framework of educational quality was welcomed and even perceived as a necessity. For instance, the minister of education (Vandenbroucke 2005, 2006) in Flanders stressed:

An information-rich environment [...] is notwithstanding essential for educational policy in Flanders. [...] Are enough data, indicators and benchmarks available at the level of central policy to shape central government and to monitor local policy? [...] Are we able to check our policy based on the best practice of other countries?

Although the minister (Vandenbroucke 2005) argued that Flanders has made great progress in what he calls the 'professionalisation of educational policy' based on 'international stimuli', he stressed that more data are conceived to be indispensable. It is important to understand, however, what kind of policy and what kind of state/agency perceives 'professionalisation through information' as vital. Or to reformulate this in Foucault's approach of an ontology of the present: who are we (today), we for whom a particular kind of information has become necessary in order to govern ourselves and others? In order to answer that question, a more detailed analysis of current processes of governmentalisation, and the implied modes of conduct of conduct, is required.

Processes of Governmentalisation

Although the main interest is the role of national policy (Flanders, in Belgium), the focus first is on some features of the current role of Europe, in particular relating to education. As mentioned earlier, the European Union conceives its task as one of developing educational quality. However, the EU limits its governmental actions by claiming to respect the responsibility of member states. As such, the EU (LEC 2000: §41) rationalises this limited role as 'a catalyst' in

order to establish 'an effective framework for mobilising all available resources for the transition to the knowledge-based economy'. Within the scope of the Lisbon strategy this limited role is an *economic* role in three different ways (Foucault 2004: 253). First, it is economic for it reflects upon its own governmental practices in economic terms, i.e. governmental interventions are 'economised' by taking into account and using existing governmental practices (member states). Second, it is economic for it conceives of these practices in economic terms as resources that should be 'managed' in a particular way in order to reach the strategic goals. And as far as these strategic goals are themselves to a large extent economic (e.g., the knowledge economy), also at this level a kind of economic government can be noticed.

This catalyst or enabling role is exemplified very well in the Open Method of Coordination, through which member states, and all other partners that are mobilised for these strategic goals, come to understand themselves as 'calculative' agencies being part of 'calculable spaces' (Haahr 2004: 219). As such, the freedom and responsibility presupposed in the principle of subsidiarity is of a particular kind, that is, a freedom that encompasses the responsibility to calculate and mobilise resources and the virtue to optimise one's performance in view of common targets. Furthermore, part of this role of Europe is the construction of a new identity of the European Commission: 'an institution capable of legitimately and authoritatively passing out grades to member states, thereby establishing their relative forwardness or backwardness in terms of virtue' (Haahr 2004: 223). The Open Method of Coordination hence opens up the space to reflect upon the role of the Commission in 'managerial' terms with one of its main tasks being the management of information on performance.

Instead of regarding Europeanisation as a gradual process of integration ultimately resulting in a kind of 'nationalisation of Europe', the developments mentioned above help to understand it in terms of a 'governmentalisation of Europe' (Masschelein and Simons 2003). The emergence of a managerial mentality and procedure reconfigures the role of Europe as well as the entities to be governed. What takes shape is an 'art of European government' that constitutes the European Union, its institutions and experts, as central 'agencies of coordination', i.e. of managing the conduct of member states (Barry 1994). It would be more precise to approach this as the *managerialisation* of Europe.

In order to have a clearer understanding of these processes, it is important to discuss the specificity of the 'calculable spaces' in which member states frame their national system of education. As the title of the earlier cited policy declaration in Flanders – 'Today champion in mathematics, tomorrow also in equal opportunities' – suggests, the Flemish educational system is ranked with other (European, OECD) systems related to its performance. As a consequence, policy in Flanders affirms that educational systems are commensurable, can be compared and measured on a single scale of performance or output. In this context of 'performativity', as Lyotard (1979) discussed some time ago, the criteria of efficiency and effectiveness become of central importance. 'Good education' is framed as effective and efficient performance with respect to specific indicators (e.g., achievements relating to mathematics) and calculated on the basis of

European/global average performance (Commission 2006). A particular kind of information becomes indispensable if one is positioned within such calculable spaces of efficiency and effectiveness: that is, comparative information on one's performance in relation to a specific norm, average or past performance. This kind of evaluative information is defined by Wiener (in cybernetics) as feedback and its function is to control the operation of a system 'by reinserting into it the results of its past performance' (Wiener 1950/89: 61). As calculating agents, member states, and in particular the Flemish government, come to experience this kind of feedback as essential at two, related levels.

On the one hand, comparative information evaluates the performance of a state's past and present educational policy and can be used to re-orient educational policy and to optimise its performance. As such, information generated through the European coordination method and other international assessment instruments is welcomed in Flanders in order 'to have a better understanding of one's own educational policy' (Vandenbroucke 2004: 25) and it is perceived as a kind of stimulus for the 'professionalisation of educational policy'. Clearly, this process of professionalisation has a particular focus: the activity of educational policy itself is framed as performance in an international, competitive environment and it is perceived as engagement in a 'process of competitive self-improvement' (Haahr 2004: 223). On the other hand, feedback on the performance of national educational systems justifies and reinforces the role and tasks of national government in terms of performance management. The issue of 'equal opportunities' for example is used as an indicator of the system's performance, and information on this indicator evaluates whether resources are mobilised in an optimal way. As such, central policy in Flanders seeks to become a kind of 'performance targeted policy' (Vandenbroucke 2006) in an international/European, competitive environment. At this level, feedback is crucial to inform the management of processes of competitive self-improvement of an educational system. And the urgent need for additional performance indicators and a rich information environment, expressed by Flemish policymakers, should be regarded as a logical outcome of this managerial attitude.

Thus, as far as (optimal) conduct is conceived as (optimal) performance, both at the level of educational policy and the educational system, feedback is needed in order to direct this conduct. In short, governing, or what Foucault approaches as the 'conduct of conduct', takes the form of 'feedback on performance' in the practices being discussed, and the collection and distribution of feedback information becomes a powerful steering mechanism (Bröckling 2006). Moreover, it is exactly within this configuration of governing that new centres of monitoring and calculation take shape and, drawing on Callon (1986), start to function as 'obligatory passage points': European benchmark reports, and international studies such as PISA, become increasingly indispensable for (member) states to know themselves in view of improving performance (see also Grek *et al.* 2009; Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal 2003). Furthermore, the emerging *will to know* and *will to perform* of these actors actually reinforce the authority of these reports and studies, amplify their visibility but also (and therefore) 'black box' their

production mechanisms and the organisations and experts 'behind' them (Latour 1987). As the Flemish case exemplifies, what is put centre stage, or more precisely, what is inscribed as a reality, is that educational quality is about performance, that the educational system is champion when it comes to mathematics, and that Finland – the example of best performance – shows it is possible to become champion as well in equal opportunities.

The Good Conduct

The current mode of governing through feedback helps to understand the emergence of new 'policy virtues' as evidenced in the conduct of the Flemish government in its role as calculating agency: (1) a readiness to learn from comparison; (2) to benchmark and look for examples, to collaborate in order to compete; and (3) to be proactive or reactive.

1 Feedback is needed for national government in order to position itself within a competitive environment, but primarily it seeks to feed the process of ongoing self-improvement. Here 'learning' enters the scene: '[A]ll actors in the education and training process have to be ready to learn; and mutual learning, as implicit within an "open method of co-ordination" is a way of increasing the quality of service delivered to the citizen' (Council 2001: 16). Yet it is important to keep in mind that this 'readiness to learn' is from the very beginning framed within a competitive environment where learning outcomes are derived from the best performing policies and educational systems. What is at stake is learning from comparison and learning for the optimal organisation of input, process and output or the optimal mobilisation of resources. As a result the 'need for feedback' and the 'need for learning' reinforce each other. The policy declaration of the Flemish minister of education (Vandenbroucke 2004: 25) – in need of feedback, as mentioned earlier – uses for instance the notion of 'policy imitation' or expressions such as 'learning from others to make progress in achieving one's own objectives, learning from the successes of others, as well as from their failures'. In its staging as a competition state (Yeatman 1993), the Flemish government not only frames the task and object of government in managerial terms, but also discovers *learning* as the fundamental force or resource to re-orient and optimise performance, that is, as a solution for innovation and improvement within a competitive environment. Furthermore, (mutual) learning is not only perceived as a process to secure the optimal performance of each (member state), but at the same time to secure the overall economic (and social) performance of Europe (in comparison with the USA and Japan, for instance). Hence, learning based on feedback on performance plays a kind of strategic role for it brings about a 'double bind of individualisation and totalisation' (Foucault 1982: 232). Learning is regarded as what constitutes optimal performance of one individual member state (Belgium/Flanders), yet at the same time links this individual performance with a totality (Europe). Due to this double bind, questioning the importance of (mutual) learning becomes a vice, and actually comes down to disconnecting oneself from the European strategy.

2 The combination of the 'need for feedback' and the 'will to learn' in a competitive environment helps in understanding the importance of benchmarks and examples of best practice (Arrowsmith *et al.* 2004: 315). The former minister-president of Flanders (Leterme 2006) explained the governmental importance of benchmarking very well:

Our Flemish welfare is in the year 2006 more than ever a relative issue in space: we are a high performing, open economy in an increasingly globalised world with open borders. Therefore, the Belgian horizon cannot be our benchmark. Our most important trade partners and competitors have done radical conversions [...]. We were down in too many international classifications.

What is clearly assumed is a spatial, or rather ecological, understanding of Flanders (and its economy) in a global, European environment and commensurability at the level of (economic) performance: 'Where do we sit in relation to others?' (Larner and Le Heron 2004: 227). A typical feature of this ecological reasoning is that 'good conduct' (with regard to education or economic policy, for example) is no longer about acting in accordance with general principles or norms, and for instance in accordance with a country's historical mission or traditional identity. Contrary to modern, historical reasoning, ecological (self-) understanding involves mobilising one's resources that are available here and now in view of an optimal performance in comparison with the performance of others. Hence, specific targets or benchmarks are needed as 'global positioning systems' and in order to set a momentary level of optimal performance. The benchmarks or 'reference levels of European average performance' with regard to education and training are illustrative here.

Based on these benchmarks, and statistical data on performance indicators, a table with the 'best performers in the five benchmark areas' as well as information on progress of each performer (member state) is distributed in order to stimulate 'learning from best performance' (Commission 2006). Benchmarking here functions as a kind of calculative 'practice of comparison' (Larner and Le Heron 2004: 218) that satisfies the need for feedback (at the level of Flemish government, for example). But it also reinforces the idea of learning being a fundamental resource in the process of competitive self-improvement.

Considering that a number of EU member states are already achieving world-best performances in a number of areas, whereas others are faced with serious challenges, there is real added value available in exchanging information on best policy practice at European level.

(Commission 2006: 9)

What has to be learnt first and foremost is to understand why some are better performers, i.e. why and how some manage in a more optimal way the mobilisation of available resources. As a result, the calculative practice of benchmarking leads to the identification of so-called 'best practices', and more specifically the

willingness to know 'background variables' and 'context' that explains the 'added value' (Desjardins *et al.* 2004: 2 and 90). What is assumed, as part of this ecological reasoning, is that all, despite the so-called 'cultural differences', are actually doing the same – performing in a challenging environment – and hence, everyone in principle can be an example for and learn from everyone else. Thus what is installed, and continuously reinforced, is a very specific 'space of equivalence' (Desrosières 1998). Part of this space is that the criterion for truth claims is 'what works' or what has proved to perform better or worse given the set indicators or benchmarks. This criterion in fact results in a situation where each truth claim on performance is at once a normative claim for measures of improvement. In sum, the prevailing message today is no longer 'look back' or 'remember your history', but 'look around' – both in order to know how you perform and to find examples for better performance.

3 Finally, global positioning of performance and mutual learning through benchmarking involves a managerial virtue that combines in a particular way an attitude of collaboration and competition. The information exchange, and mainly the information on benchmarks and good practices, functions as feedback information for each of the member states so that they can orient themselves in an international environment and assess and re-orient/consolidate their performance. But in order to maximise this competitive environment, at the same time member states collaborate with each other: as partners in order to formulate common objectives, as suppliers of information to calculate averages and best performance, and as peer reviewers. Thus collaboration is needed in order to have feedback information at one's disposal and in order to be able to monitor, assess and optimise one's own performance. A combination of collaboration and competition works as a procedure of 'coopetition' (Brandenburger and Nalebuff 1996), and this procedure is closely related to a shift in general (political) attitudes at the level of national government.

Broadly speaking, the distinction between 'conservative' and 'progressive' was used to classify political attitudes and policies in the welfare state. What both labels presuppose is a temporal or more specifically, a historical understanding of society, that is, the classification in terms of progress or conservation includes a linear time conception. However, the current mode of governing primarily involves a spatial, ecological understanding of society as an environment and stresses the 'here and now', that is, the time of opportunities, the instant moment or, as Beck (1992: 135) suggests, the 'eternal present'. Permanent monitoring becomes the ideal and correlates with the establishment of global performance indicators in order to answer the typical ecological, and not historical questions, on where we are or how we perform in relation to others. This ecological and global understanding of educational policy in the competition state seems to give birth to new political attitudes: a distinction and tension between a reactive/defensive and a proactive/offensive attitude. The policy declaration of the Flemish government, for example, stresses the importance of a 'proactive stance' of Flanders and of a 'European and international strategy' in order to use the support of Europe in developing and collecting suitable performance indicators (Vandenbroucke 2004: 25). This is clearly a political

message of the minister of education to those who hold a kind of reactive and even defensive attitude towards Europeanisation and globalisation. And more specifically, the spatial, global frames of reference also allow for new nationalist and culturalist repositioning, for instance of Flanders against the 'less performative' community in Belgium.

The Power of 360° Feedback

Without the ambition to make any universal or epochal claims, it is striking to notice that patterns of governing through feedback described at the level of (member) states and Europe are also visible elsewhere: government, for instance, seeks to steer schools through offering them feedback on their past performance, feedback becomes a strategy to govern teachers as part of modes of performance appraisal, and increasingly personalised learning trajectories of students seem to correlate with permanent monitoring and feedback systems (Simons and Masschelein 2008). Moreover, questions like 'Where are we?', 'What is our position?', 'How did we perform?' today are treated no longer as symptoms of lack of self-confidence or trust, but appear as legitimate concerns and hence self-evident for good conduct. Drawing on this observation, the challenge is to identify the dominant form of power in the present regime of feedback on performance. This will be done by differentiating it from other power mechanisms identified by Foucault. First, two paradigmatic forms of power – panoptical and synoptical power – will be discussed and illustrated in order to propose '360° feedback' as a third modality of power suited to articulate power relations at work in governing through feedback today.

Typical modern power mechanisms, according to Foucault (1997), seek to discipline human beings through the normalising gaze of experts. Like inmates in a prison, pupils in a school, labourers in a factory and patients in a clinic come to understand themselves in terms of normality and normalised development under the normalising gaze of experts (teachers, managers, doctors) and their examinations and inspections. The paradigmatic articulation of disciplinary power – 'the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form' – is for Foucault (1977: 205) the panopticon, designed by Jeremy Bentham in 1791 as a specific architectonic model of an inspection house. It works according to a logic where the few in the middle of the circle continuously observe the many, but without the many necessary having to know whether there is actually someone observing (Figure 11.1). The ambition, Foucault (1977: 201) argues, is to arrange so that 'surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action.'

Today, the 'power of surveillance' can be noticed in classic practices of school inspection. Here indeed, the few (i.e. school inspectors) observe and control the many (i.e. schools or teachers), often without the latter knowing when to expect the visit of the inspection. The surveillance is not permanent, yet part of this form of power is to give the impression that inspection can take place at any moment. The inspection, furthermore, works through the judgement of examined cases in view of a fixed set of norms or standards. These function as stable

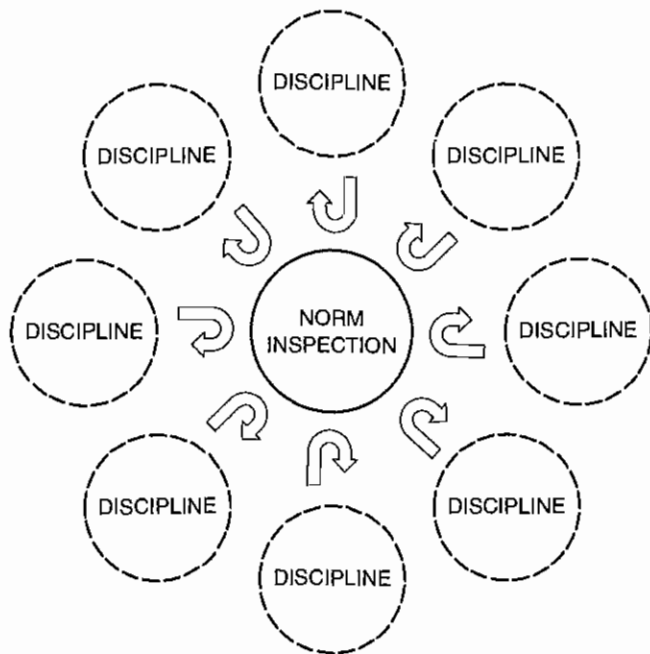


Figure 11.1 Panoptic diagram: norm (instrument); discipline (mode of subjection); inspection (technique).

orientation instruments for both the inspected and inspecting agencies. In the case of the inspection in the Flemish community, the 'attainment targets' – that is, the minimal requirements expected from schools to achieve with their students – operate according to this logic. As fixed and uniform reference levels beyond the empirical realm, they can function as norms or standards that offer a permanent point of orientation, and hence discipline the conduct of for instance schools. It is expected that when references to normality or standards become part of the school's self-understanding, the circle closes and the power machinery runs.

Although disciplinary power clearly has not disappeared today, it no longer seems to be the dominant form of exercising power. It is striking to see, for instance, that in Flanders the school inspection and its normalising judgement is strongly criticised for not being sufficiently objective. An evaluation of the inspectorate by the Court of Audit, for instance, mentions: 'As the school inspection doesn't have a sufficient number of well-established performance data, there is a risk that the inspection focus may not be representative. There is not always evidence that the inspectors found their judgments on performance data' (Court of Audit 2011: 2). The point being made is that professional judgement is insufficiently objective, at least in contrast to objective testing and measurement of school/student performances. Instead of looking at this discussion as merely a matter of validity or reliability, we can look at it as a symptom of changes in governing, including changes in justified forms of power exercise and modes of knowledge production. This should become more clear when elaborating

on synoptic power first in order to attempt to identify the diagram of power in governing through feedback afterwards.

Disciplinary power is quite different from the power mechanisms of the spectacle (Foucault 1977). In the spectacle of public punishment, as well as in the theatre for example, the many observe the few and this observation is meant to control the masses (cf. Mathiessen 1997: 219). The synopticon is the paradigm of power of the rule or the law: the many observe the few in the middle of the circle whose punishment or gratification is set as an example, and this observation of the example/exception is aimed at reinforcing submission to the rules or laws. Through exemplification or gratification – and hence by governing through the staging of consequences – the (sovereign) power of rules and laws is re-affirmed, and what is hoped for is further submission.³ It could be called the 'power of (the) example/exception' (Figure 11.2).

This rather old modality of power is very visible today. An obvious example is the teacher who seeks to govern students through setting an example – a gratification or punishment of someone in front of the whole classroom. But also the PISA reports and other international or European rankings offer images of performance or 'best practice' and organise a kind of (mass) spectacle. The arena of education, and its performance, is rendered visible to all. These public reports operate as a kind of *mass* media that allow the many (schools, states) to watch and observe the few (cf. Vinson

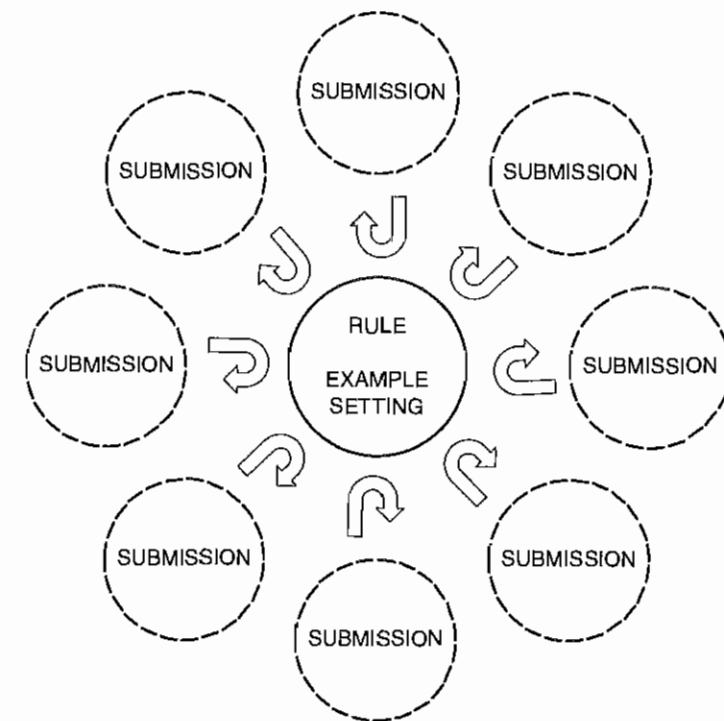


Figure 11.2 Synoptic diagram: rule (instrument); submission (mode of subjection); example setting (technique).

and Ross 2001). What is being watched in this synoptic diagram is a spectacle or arena of the best performers or those representing in an exemplary way optimal performance or 'good conduct'. The spectacle or championship of performance puts states, but also schools or teachers, into a position in which they long themselves to become an image of good performance, to be part of the happy few being watched and admired by the many, and to be a champion themselves (or avoid becoming seen as a loser). The title of the Flemish policy declaration (2004–2009) is perfectly clear in that respect: 'Today champion in mathematics, tomorrow also in equal opportunities.' The Annual Progress Reports on European benchmarks – naming the top three 'Best EU performers' and those making 'Most progress' – and the exchange of 'good practices' among European member states express a similar logic. In Flanders, the synoptic diagram is also visible in the public presentation of 'good practices on school innovation' that are derived from successful so-called 'testing grounds' and that are expected to inspire other schools (Vandenbroucke 2004). Another case in point are the numerous national or European (s)elections of teachers or schools of the year.

A basis synoptic mechanism is the steering in the absence of direct control, that is, power occupies the time in between two public events. Different from the random discontinuity of surveillance and panoptic power, synoptism includes an ideal of regularity and hence allows for purposeful preparation and targeted submission. Current synoptic practices are clearly distinct from their classic predecessors. Whereas classic synoptic power works according to so-called impartial judgement and the reinforcement of law and order, the current power of best performances or good practices is based on so-called accurate and reliable measurement. What is assumed, and constantly reinforced, is what could be called the 'law of performance', framed for instance as, the most efficient and effective use of resources, the best mobilisation of competencies, the highest outcomes. The arena or scaffold thus is replaced by public rankings or by the presentation of practices that are de-/re-contextualised in such a way that they can function as either a good or bad example. As soon as one focuses on the ranking or the example, the circle of power closes: the joined submission to a common law or rule is affirmed, one thinks and acts in its presence and behaves accordingly.

Panoptic and synoptic power diagrams, however, only partly make the exercise of power in today's governing through feedback intelligible. Enabled by new digital information and communication technologies, public stages or constructed frames of reference have become a permanent setting today. They function in such a way that they are the place and time for each and all to become observed and more particularly, to become real. When the Flemish minister of education (Vandenbroucke 2004) argues for the construction of an information-rich environment for Flemish government and for schools, it is exactly about the construction of a data-based stage where the visibility for others is the condition for becoming visible for oneself as government or school. When looking at oneself as performing in a staged environment, the main concern is a kind of permanent 'reality check', that is, monitoring the balance between how one is seen and how one sees oneself. What takes shape as the correlate of permanent monitoring is a kind of 'data-based self' (Simon 2005); the self becomes a collection of multiple (performance) indicators and flows of data that can be monitored. In other

words, performance no longer only refers to some exemplary measured and staged quality, but becomes a way of life and hence an instrument to be noticed or to be seen; to be, is to be seen or noticed, and hence to perform. While rules ask for submission and norms invoke discipline, performance necessitates monitoring. This is again very precisely phrased by Wiener (1950/89: 30 and 24) when he argued that feedback is about 'the property of being able to adjust future conduct by past performance' and that it requires agencies that 'perform the function of tell-tales or monitors – that is, of instruments that indicate a performance.' It is not at random inspection or regular example setting, but permanent, data-driven feedback that enable the, for instance, self-monitoring school and member state to perform.

A practice that articulates this logic is the 'school feedback report' offered by the *Center for School Feedback* on payment to Flemish schools with information on the school's 'added value' (as the difference between the 'factual means' and the 'expected means').⁴ This 'fast, automated feedback' is produced by the school delivering test scores (and other contextual information) and comparisons with reference groups of similar schools (and records of previous test scores). What takes shape is a 'data-based school'; and Flemish school life becomes real as staged performance and subject to monitoring. Another practice is the *Education and Training Monitor*, a follow-up of the EU progress reports but now drawing on a Joint Assessment Framework, and published yearly to monitor progress towards the *Education and Training 2020* objectives and benchmarks (European Commission 2012). Since it does not install a permanent feedback stream this new practice includes elements of the synoptic diagram, but it moves beyond that for it allows member states to become real at a common reference stage and in relation to common indicators and feedback. The mode of subjection is not about disciplining oneself in view of norms or submitting oneself to certain rules, but monitoring oneself in view of performance (Figure 11.3).

The diagram of today's power then is not the synopticon nor the panopticon, but is to be found in the technique of 360° feedback. As a management tool, 360° feedback puts the employee in the middle of a feedback circle composed of all relevant actors in the employee's environment: managers, subordinates, friends, family, customers The ideal situation is when the employee's self-evaluation coincides with how all others evaluate her performance. It promotes a kind of self-government that includes a staging in the centre and where one submits oneself permanently, voluntarily and openly to the gaze of others – and actually installs a dynamic in which one's own gaze and that of others merge.

The diagram of 360° feedback takes elements of both the synopticon and panopticon, but its logic of operation is different. It is not about the impression of continuous surveillance, but actual and permanent monitoring; not about watching the examples or exceptions in the arena, but staging or positioning oneself in the middle of the circle in order to be seen and receive feedback on the observed performance. What is installed is a permanent and multiple gaze while staging oneself in the middle of the arena and turning one's life or organisation into a performance in need of an audience to

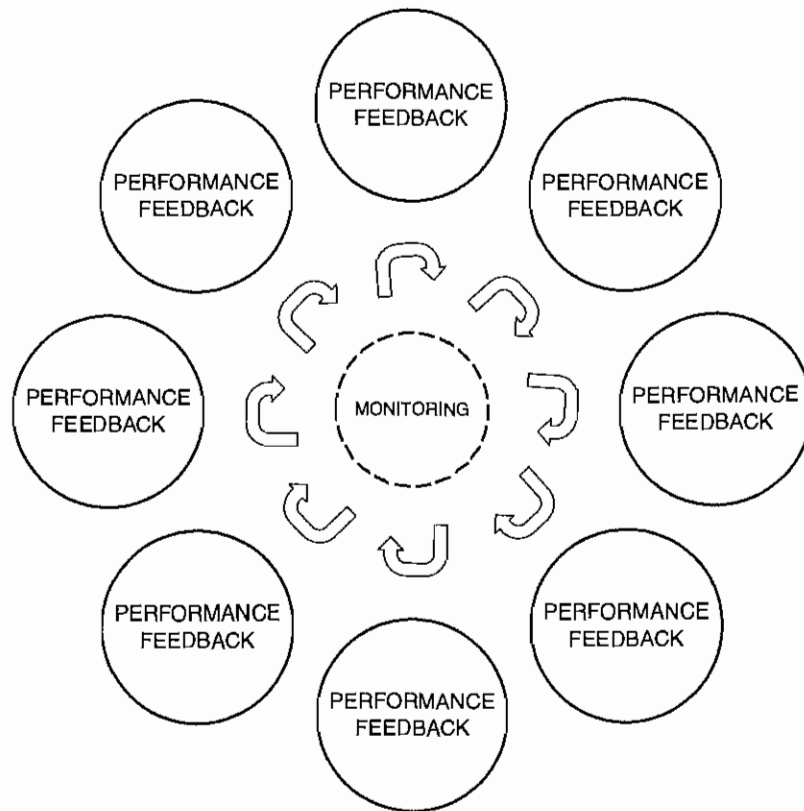


Figure 11.3 360° feedback diagram: performance (instrument); monitoring (mode of subjection); feedback (technique).

become real. Applause, as Wiener (1950/89) already noticed, is the first, basic form of feedback. The driving logic of the 'power of feedback', that is, the moment when feedback actually turns into a power mechanism and the circle closes, is when applause, so to speak, decides on who and what one is and wants to become (as a country, school, teacher, student, etc.). And that means that one no longer knows what to do or how to behave without feedback. Without feedback and monitoring one is lost – which means that feedback actually works as a global positioning system. Within this feedback diagram, there is one thing that is more threatening than a low ranking or negative feedback: not to be seen, or not being able to stage oneself, and not being successful in having recognised what one is doing as a performance.

Conclusion

This chapter has tried to clarify that governing in education today is not only about surveillance or regulation and legislation, but the organisation of feedback

loops and related monitoring apparatuses. The main mode of governing is no longer about orientation based on stable, institutionalised points of reference, but about a permanent positioning in space and drawing on flexible performance levels; no longer mainly or only about a linear, historical time conception, but a conception of instant time and opportunities available here and now. Because power is involved in the governmental regime of performance and feedback, this is not necessary bad. But without doubt, it is potentially dangerous (Foucault 1984: 386). It is especially dangerous because the message indeed becomes: 'perform, or else' (McKenzie 2001; Lyotard 1979), and because it becomes very difficult for us, in how we reflect upon ourselves and upon education, not to be part of it. In other words, the mechanisms become powerful when feedback on performance turns into an indispensable navigation tool. This attempt to identify the type of power at stake could be regarded as a modest counter-act, or an attempt to 'enhance the contestability' (Rose 1999) of the regime that seeks to govern us. Is that kind of critical analysis sufficient? In line with Latour (2005), this analysis can be regarded perhaps as a critical gesture that includes a movement of 'making things public': an attempt to turn our increasingly self-evident dealing with education in terms of performance and feedback into a matter of concern again and to gather people as a public around this issue. For that reason, this study does not at once attempt to set new rules, standards or to organise different feedback. But that is not because of an ill-placed intellectual modesty or a so-called relativist postmodern stance. It is because the attempt to combine a critical analysis with (new) modes of subjection – similar to a panopticon, synopticon or 360° feedback – creates a power circle. Critique as a public gesture instead aims at making things public, that is, breaking the power circles and turning the state of affairs in governing education into a matter of public concern again.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is a revised and elaborated version of an article published in *Journal of Educational Policy* (Simons 2007).
- 2 The quotes from Flemish policy documents and reports are translations of the author.
- 3 The important discussion on the distinction between disciplinary and sovereign power (and between Foucault and Agamben) cannot be elaborated in this chapter, but see for instance Agamben (1997), and also Simons and Masschelein (2008).
- 4 For detailed information: <http://www.schoolfeedback.be/>

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World Yearbook of Education 2014

Governing Knowledge: Comparison,
Knowledge-Based Technologies and
Expertise in the Regulation of Education

**Edited by
Tara Fenwick, Eric Mangez and
Jenny Ozga**

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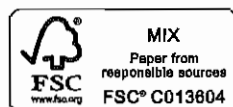
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