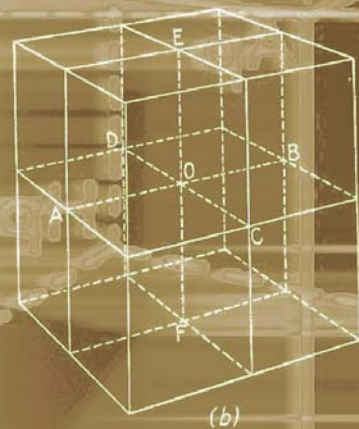


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SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT TECHNIQUES HAVE MADE SOME HEADWAY,  
BUT THE RATE OF UPTURN IN RESULTS IS GLACIAL...AS A RESULT,  
THE LANGUAGE OF *IMPROVEMENT* AND *REFORM* HAS GIVEN WAY  
TO THE LANGUAGE OF *TRANSFORMATION* AND *RADICAL INNOVATION*.

# THE SEARCH FOR NEXT PRACTICE: A UK APPROACH TO INNOVATION IN SCHOOLS



**EN BREF** Les termes *amélioration* et *réforme* en éducation ont cédé la place à la terminologie de la *transformation* et de l'*innovation radicale*, ces derniers étant les deux objectifs du programme de l'organisme The Innovation Unit, au Royaume-Uni, et des écoles avec lesquelles il travaille. L'approche est particulière : au lieu de mettre l'accent sur les preuves qui existent au sujet des pratiques « exemplaires », elle vise à susciter dans les écoles une innovation disciplinée et axée sur les résultats, tout en étant radicale. Bien que de nombreux autres organismes cherchent à trouver et à soutenir les pratiques exemplaires, The Innovation Unit se distingue en visant explicitement à engendrer les « prochaines » pratiques au moyen d'un processus de réflexion, d'analyse et de conception créative pour passer à l'instauration en temps réel, à l'autoévaluation et à l'évaluation des impacts; partageant ensuite le travail, sous des formes très accessibles, avec le milieu des politiques et avec d'autres collègues.

IN 2002, the Labour Government in the UK established an Innovation Unit, within government, to support practitioner-led innovation in schools. Two considerations led to this action. First, there was an increasing sense that amidst the plethora of national strategies and change programs, an important element was in danger of being lost: the professional creativity of teachers and school leaders, who were increasingly feeling more like operatives than true professionals. Second, there was a strong sense that education had to change more rapidly to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – that innovation was here to stay.

In its early years, The Innovation Unit worked by grant-aiding interesting projects proposed by schools and seeking to disseminate their findings. This led to some useful developments, but could not be described as a particularly powerful approach to supporting innovation, nor was it sustainable. Moreover, there was a sense that, as a part of the Ministry, there was an inbuilt constraint on what practitioners might consider.

Fast forward to 2009. The Innovation Unit ([www.innovation-unit.co.uk](http://www.innovation-unit.co.uk)) is now an independent, not-for-profit agency, entirely independent of government, which works with schools, collaboratives, local authorities and many other agencies to promote innovation in learning. After developing a self-critique and an entirely new methodology, The Innovation Unit was spun off in 2006. It is now completely self-supporting, without government grant funding, and thrives through undertaking commissions, tenders, and contracts with a wide variety of clients. However, its history within government and its closeness to the policy process has given it a unique insight into the dynamics of change within the system.

### INNOVATION – A NEW IMPERATIVE?

In the period since The Innovation Unit was established, the interest and focus on innovation has grown rapidly for a variety of reasons. Increasingly, educators are dissatisfied with the rate of progress we are making to overcome the weaknesses in our systems: not enough young people achieve well and become successful learners. School improvement techniques have made some headway, but the rate of upturn in results is glacial. Moreover, there is an increasing sense that, in any case, schools are not addressing the real challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They do not focus on the skills, knowledge, competencies, and dispositions demanded by this new century. As a result, the language of *improvement* and *reform* has given way to the language of *transformation* and *radical innovation*. These latter objectives now form the agenda for The Innovation Unit and the schools it works with.

Furthermore, in 2008, an additional incentive to pursue radical innovation appeared in the shape of the global financial crisis. Whereas previously educators have often conceived of innovation as a 'nice-to-have' set of marginal experiments supported by discretionary funding, the game has changed. Across the world, the resources supporting public services are diminishing. The assumption of everlasting growth and investment has received a nasty shock, and it is increasingly understood that the options are stark: either reductions in service quality and reach or radically new ways of working.<sup>1</sup> This new global environment has provided another important focus for The Innovation Unit; we are working with practitioners to develop solutions that will deliver significantly improved outcomes at significantly reduced costs.

### SOME KEY IDEAS ABOUT INNOVATION

The approach of The Innovation Unit to fostering innovation is a distinctive one. It acknowledges that the prevailing efforts to effect reform and improvement have been – and remain – important and, in some respects, effective. However, we argue that this is simply not enough. The improvement paradigm could be characterised as focusing on deploying the existing evidence base about 'what works' on a wider scale. It is about disseminating good (or sometimes 'best') practice. But to transform our approach to learning – creating a truly 21<sup>st</sup> century model in the context of powerful new technologies, demands, constraints, and (perhaps as important as anything else) values – will require new approaches which, by definition, go beyond the existing evidence of 'what works'. We term this approach the search for 'Next Practice'. We stress the 'practice' aspect because, although we believe that theory and thought leadership have a very important role to play, it is in the crucibles of practice that significant new approaches are being developed. Hence we work with able and informed practitioners who display some of the following characteristics:

- They are well aware of existing good or 'best' practice, but acknowledge its limitations and are driven by the desire to do better for their learners.
- They are collaborative, enquiring, and outcomes-focused.
- They work with their learners, constantly seeking ways to incorporate a 'user focus'.
- They demonstrate direct thinking and action on addressing serious, contemporary problems.
- They want to take risks, in partnership with others, to achieve breakthrough.

A second organizing idea for The Innovation Unit is based on the recognition that in the context of the public services, where resources are tight and diminishing, and where young people's life-chances depend on the outcomes, there is little scope for random and unfocused experimentation. Accordingly, we stress the idea of *disciplined innovation*.<sup>2</sup> This may appear antithetical to many prevailing notions of innovation – for example, that it requires unfettered freedom and creativity. However, the literature of innovation suggests that this is actually far from the case. Disciplined innovation implies that understandings about which processes give rise to successful innovation are systematically applied. Further, in the context of the public services as described above, risks are not altogether eschewed – but they are made explicit and managed. And finally, though the creativity and ideas of service users and practitioners are valued and privileged, they need to be set into the frame of the existing knowledge base and developed in a way that will evolve new knowledge (whether that be of success or failure).

The question confronting The Innovation Unit, therefore, became how to foster innovation in schools that will be disciplined and focused on outcomes, yet radical. While many other agencies work to find and support best practice, The Innovation Unit uniquely and explicitly sets out to foster *next practice*. It has become an 'innovation intermediary' – a new breed of entrepreneurial organization working with the public sector with 21<sup>st</sup> century methods.<sup>3</sup>

### HOW THE INNOVATION UNIT WORKS

The Innovation Unit sees its role as *stimulating*, *incubating*, and *accelerating* innovation. It is important to note that the Unit is not the source of ideas, proposals, or action. Next practitioners, driven and informed by the needs of their learners, are at the centre of the process. When they are supported by disciplined methods, the chances of success are higher, and the scope for impact on the system is increased.

In diagrammatic form, the framework that the Innovation Unit utilizes for its work in schools (and in other public services) is shown below.

Essentially, the Unit seeks to help practitioners address some of the most intractable problems facing us today by enabling them to model 'next practice' in their work. This moves through a sequence of reflection, analysis, and creative design to practical implementation in real time, self-evaluation and impact assessment, and sharing the work in highly accessible forms with the policy community (which is often the major sponsor for the program) and with other colleagues in Communities of Practice. In doing this work, we stress some key values with the schools we work with.

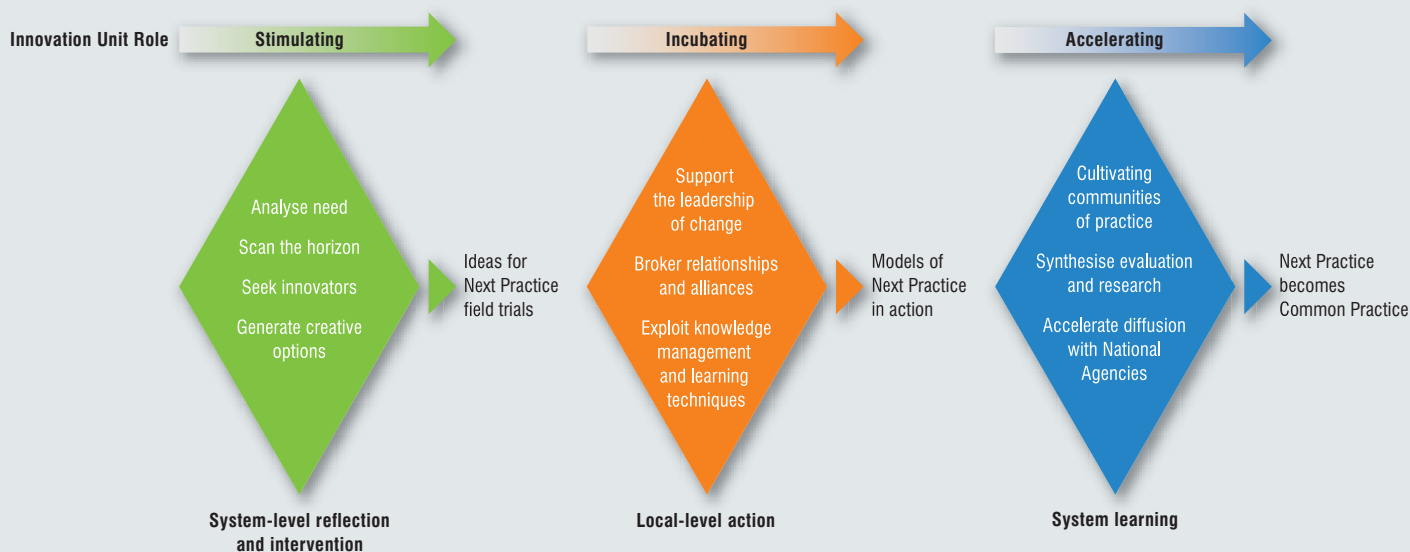
- **Collaboration.** We believe that collaboration is essential to fostering a culture of innovation. We share our ideas in a spirit of openness and work in partnership with other organizations.
- **Support and challenge.** We believe that innovators and leaders benefit from external support and challenge when trying to achieve radical innovation. We provide consultancy support and coaching to innovators, and we seek to stimulate debate, argument, and new thinking.
- **Learning.** We believe that innovation requires a learning mindset. We embrace different ideas, perspectives, and backgrounds. We systematically learn from our experiences, and contribute to an evolving knowledge base.
- **Creativity.** We believe in the creativity of the people who use public services and the practitioners who work with them. We help innovators to engage deeply with the public, their colleagues, research, and external expertise.
- **Action.** We believe that new ideas are not enough; innovation is about turning new ideas into action. We help innovators to create the conditions locally and nationally for change to happen.

Finally, the Innovation Unit is explicit with the schools we work with about the services that we, as an innovation intermediary, will bring to the endeavour. They can be seen as an 'offer' (see opposite page).

In the last two years, schools keen to move into the space of transformation have been involved in a range of 'Next Practice' programs, sponsored by a wide range of agencies including the National College for School Leadership (NCSL), the Training and Development Agency (TDA), private foundations, and the Department for Children, Schools and Families. The themes for this work have included:

- Personalising education
- Workforce reform (Communities for Learning)
- New approaches to system leadership (across localities and services)
- Parental engagement<sup>4</sup>

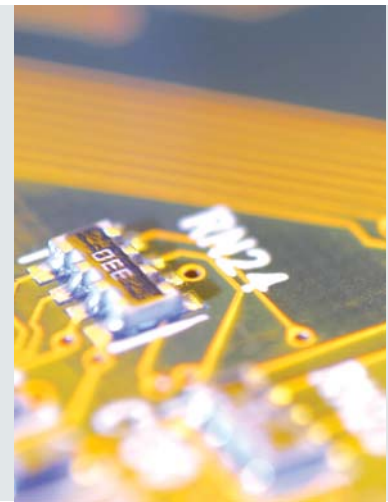
### Next Practice Innovation Model: A disciplined approach to system-level transformative change



## The IU incubation 'offer' to selected field trials



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A good example to illustrate the approach is that of the *Learning Futures* next practice program, which is sponsored by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation.<sup>5</sup> This program is focused on new pedagogy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The central problem at issue is how we design learning opportunities for young people, both inside and outside the classroom, which genuinely and powerfully engage them in their own learning and help them to become motivated lifelong learners.

Applying the framework set out above, schools were invited to workshops and creative events; the existing knowledge base was assessed and the horizon scanned for existing examples of potentially transformative practice. Schools across the country were then invited to put in their proposal for a four-year program of work to develop next practice in this area. The 15 selected schools began work, both individually and as a collaborative, in May, and their projects are due to go live in September 2009. The content ranges from projects that touch the entire school to those targeting a particular cohort. The processes they are bringing to bear seek to fundamentally shift the balance in schools towards a deeper social constructivist approach incorporating:

- Co-construction with students
- Thematic, project-based assignments
- Re-balanced skills vs. knowledge approaches
- Enhanced mixes of in- and out-of-school contexts and settings
- Peer tutoring, mentoring, coaching
- Enhanced use of parents, community, 'experts', and a changed learner-teacher mix

The final 'diamond' of The Innovation Unit framework is all about making the findings of the field trial sites more widely available, certainly to policy makers, but also – as importantly in our view – to other practitioners. Thus, while policy seminars with the sponsoring agencies are held to look at aspects of the work, an important dimension of the work has been setting up the *Next Practice Acceleration Space (NPAS)*<sup>6</sup> which is a social networking and practice-sharing site for innovative schools who wish to learn more about each others' practice through collaboration and direct contact.

This work is, of course, in its infancy. However, the enthusiasm and deep engagement of schools is palpable. The time really is ripe for a fundamental re-think of some

of our priorities. Businesses classically deploy anything upwards of 2 percent of their resources on the innovation imperative (not just 'improvement'). Public service budgets deploy a tiny fraction of this amount to similar real innovation.

This article has concentrated on The Innovation Unit's direct work with schools. There are, however, many other strands, of which more details can be found on <http://www.innovation-unit.co.uk/>

The Innovation Unit has always been outward-facing and has had many powerful and constructive engagements with other jurisdictions, in Europe and across the world. A new venture, about to commence in September 2009, is a *Global Education Leaders Program*, in partnership with Harvard Graduate School of Education, the Hay Group, McKinseys, and the Gates Foundation. The program is sponsored by Cisco and will bring together five system leaders from each of the 4 jurisdictions to learn, work, and explore together how they can address the radical innovation needed to bring about transformed education (or 'Education 3') across their jurisdictions. Subsequently these are planned to expand, year-on-year, to jurisdictions in varying circumstances, including in the developing world; Ontario is one of the first cohorts.

Innovation flourishes through diversity: this program is more about building a global 'movement' than about a conventional professional development 'course'. As William Gibson remarked:

*The future is already here: it is just unevenly distributed.* |

VALERIE HANNON is a Managing Partner with The Innovation Unit in the UK.

### Notes

- 1 A first major indication of a new type of response is evident in California, where Governor Schwarzenegger has ended the use of textbooks in favour of total transfer to digital resources in the face of the fiscal crisis confronting the State and the collapse of the funding base for schools. <http://gov.ca.gov/press-release/12225>
- 2 For a longer discussion of these issues see Valerie Hannon, *Next Practice in Education: A Disciplined Approach to Innovation* (The Innovation Unit, 2006). [http://www.innovation-unit.co.uk/images/stories/files/pdf/nextpractice\\_in\\_education.pdf](http://www.innovation-unit.co.uk/images/stories/files/pdf/nextpractice_in_education.pdf)
- 3 For more on innovation intermediaries, see Matthew Horne, *Honest Brokers: Brokering Innovation in Public Services* (The Innovation Unit, 2008). <http://www.innovation-unit.co.uk/about-us/publications/honest-brokers.html>
- 4 For more details see Hannon.
- 5 For full details see: *Learning Futures: Next Practice in Learning and Teaching* (Innovation Unit, 2008). [http://www.innovation-unit.co.uk/images/stories/files/pdf/learningfutures\\_booklet.pdf](http://www.innovation-unit.co.uk/images/stories/files/pdf/learningfutures_booklet.pdf)
- 6 <http://www.innovation-unit.co.uk/content/view/442/1034>