Applied learning after class

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Abstract
By foregrounding teachers’ practices in the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) this paper illustrates how social class can be deployed to critically explain inequalities and differences in schooling. Applied learning is represented as a practical and ‘un-academic’ schooling option for the ‘difficult to teach’, and has similarities with earlier institutional forms of working class schooling as provided in Technical Schools. Schooling through VCAL prepares students differently than general schooling by instigating a new subjective and cultural shift in schooling.

In this paper it is argued that class as a concept has become contingent and is therefore no longer a ‘general law’ of sociology (Bauman, 1982). In Bauman’s terms the ‘after life of class’ can be found in schooling in a consumer culture where differences are made and new practices of qualification enabled. Other sociologists have also been engaged in theorising class relations (Connell, 1977, 1982, 1985, Skeggs, 2004, Reay, 2001, 2005). Together their theories of class provide resources for a reconsidered sociological engagement with class differences and class struggle in education. A cultural and subjective turn is apparent in recent sociological interventions in class theory and research and has important applications for sociologies of education.

Sociologically, class signifies divisions and differences in power, status, and entitlements to personhood and the formation of a self. Class as a concept has become contingent and is therefore no longer a ‘general law’ of sociology (Bauman, 1982). For Bauman, in the ‘afterlife of class’ not all social divisions and differences arise
through and result from the antagonisms between capital and labour. Class as ‘memory’ for Bauman is (re)imagined in time and space, historically and critically. Class in post-industrial socialities is made manifest in subjectivities. No longer a concept belonging to metanarrative frames, how class is made and known today continues to be immediate yet it is not always obvious. In schooling the consciousness of class (Ford, 1969) is known and learnt in a variety of ways (Lawton, 1975, Connell, 1977, 1982, 1985). Successful students and those deemed ‘unsuccessful’ points to class differences that are subjective. Although schooling practices form subjectivities by treating all students as the same in curriculum terms it marks and forms them differently through processes of ranking and selection.

The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) was introduced in 2002 as a year eleven and twelve option additional to the VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education). Schooling as instituted and organised through teachers work and curriculum frames results in different students being schooled differently. Applied learning involves teachers working differently both inside and outside schools to progress a schooling experience that reveals the salience of class differences. Different types of schools and approaches to schooling exist be they public/private, elite/ mass, technical/ general, religious/secular and are formed through different interests. This paper argues that ‘working–class’ schooling as it was known in the past operated institutionally through divisions between general and academic and technical education. Today working-class schooling is known through approaches aimed at recuperating and ‘engaging’ individuals who have historically been excluded from schooling.

Teacher-student relations in VCAL are regulated through a curriculum framework usually promoted (in a policy sense) as ‘Hands On’ schooling. The four pillars of the VCAL curriculum are literacy, numeracy, personal development and work related skills. These subjects are supplemented with either general schooling subjects from the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), Vocational Education and Training (VET) options or other relevant learning options. Teachers’ work in VCAL involves the formation and performance of a type of schooling that can be characterised as working class because on the surface it seems that it is ‘un-academic and informal’
(Johnson, 1981). Teachers’ work in VCAL is ordered and arranged by emphasising the ‘self’ in order to prepare people for life after school.

Drawing upon interview data collected in 2009 for the purposes of a doctoral study into applied learning and working class schooling this paper maintains that class continues to be vital for understanding and explaining differences in and entitlements to schooling. To do this the paper presents a sociological account of how class as both a historical and subjective theoretical project is implicated in individualisation and a cultural politics that orders who can become an ‘individual’, a subject of ‘value’ (Skeggs, 2004). It is argued that schooling in VCAL involves exchanges between teachers and students and that this interaction is mediated through curricula in specific times and spaces to constitute socialities where class continues to be apparent.

Class, the way we were/are.
For Bauman class emerged through the changes to the organisation of society. What is significant about Bauman’s sociology of class is the historicity of the changing conditions of labour and work. In particular his sociology charts the reduction in value to the labour associated with craft workers and the concomitant changes to social order. In his historicity of class, Bauman locates class as a necessary precondition for capitalism emergence, rather than its product.

The new power that ushered in industrial capitalist society is understood as an outcome of a ‘disciplinary force’ of which the factory system became an important institutional form. Bauman traces the emergence of class society in former institutions of enclosure, such as the workhouse and later the school. Enclosure is an important strategy of separating order from disorder in Bauman’s sociology of class. New patterns of work grew out of the transformation of older established patterns of labour. Bauman’s account describes the era when the formation of industrial capitalist production came about, through the deployment of old and new social agencies in the service of retraining the free-spirited and refractory craftsmen in a fashion more appropriate to the discipline of the factory. Among those deployed, the family and the rapidly expanding system of education were perhaps the most prominent. Both acted as grass-roots, diffuse and ubiquitous agencies of discipline power. Their
primary impact consisted in the ‘individualisation’ of workers, achieved simultaneously through the weakening of communal authority and reorientation towards personal success (Bauman, 1982, p. 116).

At the local and personal level, discipline power was enacted to regulate and ensure compliance in the new order of industrial capitalist production. In this context through schooling teachers work is directly implicated in the economic aims and objectives of the state and the social order associated with industrial capitalism.

Bauman goes on to argue that in late post-industrial capitalism no longer are the ‘working-class’ the ‘historical agent’ or master referent.

In the later stage of industrial society, the stage we live in now, there is no group, or assembly of groups whose interests could withstand a discursive scrutiny as the ‘universal’ interests of the society as a whole. (Bauman, 1982, p.194)

In signalling this shift Bauman sociology of class moves beyond economic determinisms of Marxian class theory to underline the politicisation of everyday life in late or what he has come to term liquid modernity. A historical moment where where anchors have been lost, made anew or found through consumption in the process of assembling a self. For Bauman the very contingency of class rests upon appreciating the politicisation of everyday life where not all suffering, exploitation or discrimination emerges as a result of the antagonisms between labour and capital. Patterns of inclusion and exclusion that are injurious for Bauman are a result of power, a power that has shifted from a collective class basis to a much more potently individualised experience. Bauman does not argue that class is dead but rather that in a liquid modernity its afterlife can be seen in the politics of difference and practices of exclusion where the making of new outcasts occurs.

Making through marking

Skeggs (2004) on the other hand tackles class with a focus on inscription, where ‘making through marking’ illuminates how class shapes bodies and behaviour through socio-cultural frames and structures that are personal. The reproduction of middle-class experience as universal for Skeggs is at once political and symbolic. Unlike
Bauman’s historicity of class that tracks the historical emergence of class from the paternalism of pre-capitalist society, Skeggs locates class culturally to examine how it impacts on the body, socially and subjectively. A sociology of dispositions is refracted through the Bourdieuan quadrant of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital in Skeggs work. It is from the cultural and the symbolic capital that Skeggs sociology of class theorises patterns of class formation and the production of classed subjectivities. For Skeggs,

The self is seen not as a subject position, but as part of a system of exchange in which classed personhood is produced through different technologies, such as narration…(where) different forms of personhood and individuality were integral to how class interests become inscribed onto different bodies in the name of the ‘self’ (2004, p.5).

Skeggs problematises individualisation as something that is not always universally available, wherein some and not others have access to the resources to become an individual and to forge a ‘self of value’.

Skeggs’ sociology of class engages in the politics of the distributional affects in the relationships between power and inequality. Nowhere more so in the area of knowledge is this apparent, as Skeggs points out, the way in which class is marked and difference known is through drawing boundaries around certain practices and knowledge, in order that only some people can be seen to comfortably make use of them. By deriding those who step out of place, boundaries are maintained (Skeggs, 2004, p.108).

Skeggs’ sociology of class provides an explanation of how entitlement is resourced through the institutional and property rights of bourgeois society. What people are entitled to, and how these patterns of entitlement are produced is prefigured through culture and played out on bodies. Bodies that are marked as brilliant and clever stand in stark contradistinction to those deemed slovenly, dull, and unintelligent. The self is classed through the methods of its’ constitution. Through exchanges bodies are positioned and fixed as deficit while other bodies are able to move and assign, appropriate and consume value (Skeggs, 2004).
Teacher’s work in VCAL

In VCAL the teachers’ work is re-ordered through an institutional enclosure in the patterns of schooling where teachers, with students make schooling by making things and learning differently. Through VCAL applied learners are ‘made through marking’. Ten teachers were interviewed in 2009 and vignettes from three of these interviewees are presented in this paper to illuminate how students are schooled to become capable individuals premised upon classed subjectivities. The teacher practices in the context of the following two curriculum pillars: Personal Development and Work Related Skills, provided a contextual basis for the interviews. The data collection focused on teacher student relations, and teacher identity, to reveal contemporary understandings of class and schooling. The teacher views presented in this paper understand their work in VCAL as being aimed at responding to students around ‘their issues’. In particular the teachers views underline how the work they are doing occurs at the breach of inclusion and exclusion in schooling. The vignettes presented in this paper come from three VCAL teachers, Catherine who is employed at a catholic secondary school in regional Victoria, along with Angela and Cheryl who both work in a non-school setting located at a Technical Learning Centre (TLC) on an outer south eastern suburban TAFE campus in Melbourne. As the sociology of Bauman and Skeggs reveals, class as memory and as a cultural politics is made through exchanges that are historical cultural and value–laden and have implications for how people become individuals deemed to have moral worth. Their work provides a theoretical basis for knowing about contemporary patterns of class and hence informs a sociology of education where ‘working-class schooling’ is known through understandings of teacher’s work.

Not fitting, tracking and changing pace

Catherine works in a regional Catholic secondary school and has done so for the past twenty years. She is not a Catholic so in some ways feels like a bit of an outsider, although she believes in the school ethos and culture and cares about her work and the students she works with. VCAL opens up a schooling approach that Catherine believes is more accommodating for kids at the school with particular traits.

These kids they were … their history would be that they didn’t submit work, they didn’t attend classes, they may or may not have been into drugs, they may or may not have been sleeping around, they may or may not have had
stable families, they weren’t interested in doing Maths, Science, English.
…And they didn’t fit. And they knew they didn’t fit. …but they also knew
that they weren’t dumb. But they just couldn’t fit into our school environment.
And schools, from the time you’re in Preps to Year 10, you’re basically told
“sit down, shut up and do what I say”.

(Catherine)

To Catherine people who come to VCAL are marked morally as ‘not good’ students
in schooling structures that ignore ‘different skills’. Catherine underlines that those
excluded know they are ‘not dumb’ and believes VCAL provides a space where
student differences can be accommodated through a more diffuse experience of
schooling.

VCAL for Catherine addresses the student interests through making spaces for
students to follow what is going, and keep up. Catherine describes the schooling
experiences of the VCAL students in the following way,
a lot of them have problems tracking from the board to the paper, so by the
time they have written something down, they’ve lost their spot and so it takes
them such a long time to do that... With the VCAL and that they can slow
down. You would write something on the board but leave it there and they
would do it at their pace; pace is what is the problem. A lot of the kids want to
do the work but they can’t maintain the pace.

(Catherine)

Finding your own timing, your own pace is central to productive engagements with
learning. Knowing that your pace slows or quickens through various points of the
school day, or indeed your school life, occurs when you don’t lose your ‘spot’. In
applied learning, the application is always to the ‘self’. Catherine knows the young
people in VCAL want to do the work yet they are marked not as students but rather as
‘applied learners’. Like past forms of working class schooling such as that provided in
separate and streamed technical schools these young people are marked differently to
become not so much students but rather ‘applied learners’. Applied learners learning
amongst students in the same institution yet achieving a different schooling.
While schooling through VCAL involves the four curriculum pillars it can also include general education and/or vocational education. As Catherine explains,

We’ve got a girl who is doing Health. She can’t maintain that pace and the quality that’s required, but she just really is interested in the subject. So I’ve negotiated that she enrolls: that parents and student knows that she will fail it because she won’t be up to the standard but she gets credit then in some of her VCAL stuff with her Literacy and her Personal Development and her work skills.

Student interests are sometimes known and responded to in the school environment yet specific rules and structures can limit potential responses and narrow participation in schooling. In VCAL learning to pass or learning to know because of your ‘interest in the subject’ is not dependant on ‘academic performance’ but rather a ‘personal’ curiosity. Failure is offset by the experience and the abilities afforded through participating and learning for ‘other’ purposes. The normalisation of failure for this young woman as an ‘applied learner’ ensures in Skeggs terms that class ‘boundaries are maintained’ and could be viewed as fixing failure onto the working-classes (Connell, 1977, p.166, Reay, 2005). Yet is also affords students opportunities to participate on different terms.

‘We don’t sweat the small stuff’

Students come to be schooled in VCAL if they ‘self-select’ in or are deemed as not capable of keeping up with mainstream schooling. Cheryl works full time and Angela part-time as teachers at a Technical Learning Centre. Both teach Personal Development (PD) and Work Related skills (WRS). The students they work with have left school or were asked to leave. Angela and Cheryl understand VCAL as being connected to ‘real life’ concerns. As Angela and Cheryl both describe, their work in VCAL is not constrained by general schooling patterns or expectations.

So while I’m teaching WRS or PDS I’m able to say to these students “Look, guys, if you’re in the workplace, and you had your mobile phone while I’m talking to you, and your employer is giving you instructions, that could be a sackable offence, so step outside. That’s different to teaching, whereas if I was in a secondary school, I’d say: “Right, I’ll give you a detention, you see me
Wednesday afternoon” and we’ll deal with it that way. And we don’t sweat the small stuff.  

(Angela)

Like I certainly don’t sweat the small stuff. If they’re swearing, if they’re throwing an aeroplane, they’re acting like they’re at secondary or high school – it’s not an issue for me. If they’re productive and getting the work done, I’m going to acknowledge that. I’m actually not going to pay any attention to the misbehaviour.  

(Cheryl)

Angela and Cheryl’s relations with students acknowledge productive participation where misbehaviour is not made an issue, it’s the ‘small stuff’. Being ‘productive’ involves getting work done just like any other classroom yet its is they believe a schooling made outside of and in opposition to what is generally accepted as schooling.

At the TLC Angela and Cheryl don’t do yard duty or parent teacher interviews and they work with non-teachers such as trades people who also teach in VCAL. Angela and Cheryl school young people through practices that they identify as different from traditional conceptions of schoolteachers. This is so much the case that Cheryl and Angela do not see themselves as traditional teachers let alone as teachers affected by the ‘mindset of school’ more generally. As Cheryl describes,

They come and it’s a really big change for them, and it takes so much time to lose that mindset of school.

I’d like to… like we call each other names as adults, I’d like them to be able to feel comfortable enough to be engaged with me… It’s still taking a long time to remind them of that. That’s sort of drilled into them at secondary college or at high school. It’s hard for them to lose that.

It’s just the way they act it out; it’s still like you’re the teacher.  

(Cheryl)

Angela and Cheryl’s work in VCAL with students who have been variously excluded from schools provides them with the conceptual distance to misrecognise their work
as ‘not teaching’. If young people in VCAL are marked as ‘applied learners’ in opposition to being ‘students’ then it is inevitable that teachers like Angela and Cheryl would also not see themselves as teachers.

In describing the differences Cheryl and Angela were adamant that they are indeed not teachers, as Angela indicates.

… we’re trying to be more guides and mentors and not that power authority – the old teacher. At that structure, like secondary college, that’s the image of a teacher. (Angela)

Angela associates the ‘old teacher’ with institutional structures, and images of the teacher with power and authority. VCAL authorises teaching practices that challenge teachers own conceptions of their work, to push past schooling through the ‘hegemonic curriculum’ (Connell, 1985) to make a contemporary type of ‘working-class schooling’. A working-class schooling where teachers are not teachers and students are applied learners.

The purposes of schooling in VCAL are individualised and are tailored through different relations of learning. It’s about personal changes. The teacher’s interactions with students provide them with scope to teach for change in different ways. What Cheryl likes about her work is change.

I get off on every small change. I see small changes from the beginning. from being completely rebellious to stopping their rebellion or reducing it. They’re not as rebellious…..

What I like about my work you know …for me it’s the freedom. (Cheryl)

Freedom to orient schooling on different footings opens up ways of knowing about changes in teachers’ practices and changes in schooling. Yet from the insights and explanations of the three teachers presented here class interests and student interests are mashed together to be almost indistinguishable.
Working-class schooling and applied learning

Class sociologically continues to be a way of knowing differences that are political, social, cultural, moral and more specifically subjective, especially in schooling and how teachers are enabled to work inside and outside schools. As schooling and education are further marketised it is exchanges imbued with class that remake schooling. As schooling has shifted from an elite to a mass system of provision it is now moving towards levels of total participation. Given the recent increases in school attendance to the age of seventeen in most Australian states, in Victoria schooling that has historically excluded people in the past is today recognising these individuals not as students but as ‘applied learners’. Teachers in VCAL are also =, as these vignettes reveal, re-classing themselves as ‘not teachers’. Working-class schooling always seems to be valued as less than and never equal to middle-class precepts of what good schooling or worthy schooling is, VCAL is no exception.

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