From Risk to Relationship:
Redefining Pedagogy through Applied Learning Reform

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I certify that the thesis entitled:

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is the result of my own work and that where reference is made to the work of others, due acknowledgment is given.

I also certify that any material in the thesis which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by any other university or institution is identified in the text.

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ABSTRACT

The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) emerged to provide more relevant curriculum programs that would cater for increasing retention rates of post-compulsory students. It is also an example of the ‘new’ learning arising from contemporary debates and reforms that highlight inadequacies of the more traditional modes of learning.

This thesis focuses on the pedagogical and sociological issues emerging from the VCAL being introduced as an ‘alternative’ learning pathway for ‘at-risk’ students within a traditional secondary school culture. Through the eyes of an insider-researcher, the thesis argues for a deeper understanding of applied learning as a ‘re-engaging’ pedagogy by studying the schooling experience of VCAL students and teachers.

The thesis concludes that traditional academic modes of teaching contribute to the social construction of ‘at-risk’ students and argues that secondary school pedagogy needs to be redefined as a cultural phenomenon requiring teachers to be reflexively aware of their role in bridging the gap between students’ life experiences and the curriculum.
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INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION

Who amongst us has not experienced the negative feelings that accompany failure? Many educators would argue that the experience of failure is an integral part of the learning process – something that makes us stronger. Yet this is not the experience for many of our young people, for whom the experience of ongoing educational failure, may result in deep feelings of detachment from school-based learning, a complete rejection of the system of education during their middle and upper years of secondary schooling, or even the development of a self-identity rooted deeply in the notion of just ‘being dumb’. These students are frequently defined as being ‘at risk’ by their teachers and are commonly counselled into what are seen to be the non-academic programs, such as Vocational Education and Training in Schools (VETiS) and the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). In some cases, the students may even be counselled out of the school.

The offering of VETiS and VCAL programs within the post-compulsory curriculum of the Victorian education system is consistent with the vocationalisation of education on a global scale and the broader context of globalisation and economic risk management. Vocational and applied learning programs represent an attempt by governments and schools to re-engage students who risk disengagement from their schooling and, eventually, long-term unemployment. In one sense, they have emerged as programs designed to cater for students who are at risk of failing to stay on the dominant Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) pathway that travels from school to further study and work. However, within the school context, they also represent a struggle to provide more legitimate post-secondary choices for students who are not focused on university entrance as the primary motivation for completing post-secondary schooling, but rather may wish to pursue a pathway into work or Technical and Further
Education (TAFE). But placing vocational and applied learning programs alongside the VCE within the post secondary curriculum has ultimately created a challenge to the dominant academic discourse informing traditional modes of school-based pedagogy, as students, parents and teachers struggle with conflicting messages about vocational and academic pathways and their access to cultural capital (Foucault, 1972).

This study represents my attempt to understand two key dimensions that are critical to the success of the broader vocational agenda: (i) the nature and essence of successful pedagogical relationships as revealed through a focus on VCAL and VETiS students, who are generally considered by schools to be undertaking ‘alternative’ programs; and (ii) the nature and essence of the sociological challenges presented by the ‘alternative’ vocational programs such as the VCAL, when delivered alongside the ‘normal’ curriculum pathway. By studying the pedagogical and sociological issues that emerge from the ‘alternative’ pathway, I also hope to reveal more of the assumptions that underpin the ‘normal’ pathway, and the traditional dichotomy assumed to exist between academic and applied learning. It is argued that traditional academic pedagogy represents an imbalance towards the reproduction of the education system and is a significant factor in the pedagogical construction of students ‘at risk’. The thesis calls for a re-definition of what is considered to be ‘normal’ pedagogy and the development of a ‘new’ language of pedagogy that has respect for the true complexity of pedagogical relationships.

DEFINING THE RESEARCH

THE NEED TO ASK CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Set against the risky backdrop of youth unemployment and the forces of globalisation, Australian schools have been increasing their vocational curriculum content since the early 1990s, particularly within the post-compulsory years of schooling. VET in Schools initially emerged as a response to the need for more
relevant curriculum programs that would cater for the increased retention of post-compulsory students. Most recently, the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) has also been offered by many secondary schools to increase the number of work-related and TAFE-based post-compulsory options for students, and to encourage the retention of post-compulsory students who are most ‘at risk’ of leaving before completing their twelve years of schooling.

But the inclusion of programs such as VETiS and the VCAL into the existing academic context of the VCE is not as simple a task as introducing just another few subjects into the VCE. In particular, the introduction of the VCAL alongside the VCE has created the need for schools to ask critical questions such as: What is the real difference between academic and applied learning? What does it really mean for a student to be ‘at risk’ and how does existing academic curriculum and pedagogy contribute to students being defined as ‘at risk’? Which students are most suited to studying the VCAL and how are they best identified? How can the VCAL be introduced alongside the VCE without suffering the negative connotations of being defined as an alternative pathway to VCE? Ultimately, the success of the VCAL and VET in School programs and the sustainable re-engagement of students ‘at risk’, depends on the ability of educators to seek answers to these questions and to think critically about how they construct themselves as learning communities.

SEEKING ANSWERS BY EXPLORING PEDAGOGY

Failure and Risk

This study seeks to portray the initial phenomenon of pedagogy as manifested in the schooling experience of students who have been perceived to be ‘at risk’ within a large secondary coeducation college, and who have been counselled into vocational and applied learning programs as the most suitable educational pathway for them. It follows their journey from ‘failure’ to ‘success’ as they re-engage in learning relationships with their VCAL and VETiS teachers, and
construct, reconstruct or affirm their own frequently well-defined vocational pathways that will take them into a life beyond school.

The phenomenon of risk is also a critical dimension of this inquiry and is a recurring theme that is explored within several different contexts. It is argued that being ‘at risk’ is a complex but inevitable social construct contributed to by a school’s culture, the current system of schooling, and the broader phenomenon of living in a ‘Risk Society’ (Beck, 1992). To be a youth is to be in a state of risky transition: between childhood and adulthood; between dependence and independence; between being irresponsible and being more responsible; and most significantly, between living for now and the living for the future. But the phenomenon of risk extends to other members of a school community also.

Teachers who are willing and able to make a difference with ‘at risk’ students must take ‘professional and emotional risks’ themselves, in order to re-engage their students in learning experiences and achieve their legitimised participation again in the system of post-compulsory schooling. The recent development of the VCAL has been a critical event in the re-establishment of legitimate pathways through post-compulsory schooling for students who have been defined within schools as being ‘at risk’. But for schools to become successful at ‘dealing’ with ‘at risk’ students, there is also the risk of losing ‘academic status’ in the minds of the parents and the broader community, who still generally regard the VCE-university pathway as the only ‘successful’ way to make the transition from full time secondary education to work and adulthood.

**Otherness and Community**

To teach and learn in what is commonly perceived by school communities to be a lesser, ‘alternative’ pathway to the VCE, also brings with it a strong dimension of otherness, as students, parents and teachers struggle through the conflicting messages that they receive about vocational and applied learning programs. *The VCAL is a good ‘alternative’ to the VCE because it uses ‘alternative’ learning*
strategies; it won’t take you to university – but you don’t want to go there anyway’ (Teacher’s advice to a Year Ten student). The phenomenon of ‘otherness’ that is lived-out by applied learning students and their teachers is also explored, as they struggle to regain a legitimate place within the learning community, and to justify ‘alternative’ approaches to learning. However, being ‘other’ cannot be assumed to be all bad. For VCAL students, the sense of ‘otherness’ created by their involvement in an ‘alternative’ program, has a strong dimension of micro-community about it, as well as bringing a new dimension to students’ learning experiences, which is deeply embedded in a shared responsibility for each others futures.

Waiting to Leaving

The experience of ‘waiting to leave’ is another aspect of the ‘at risk’ students’ schooling that is explored in this research. For many students undertaking the VCAL, there is a strong sense of waiting for the right opportunity to arise so they can leave school to pursue a pathway of further vocational study and/or work. With this sense of waiting, there is a desire to ‘take opportunities’ as soon as they emerge. Apprenticeship and training opportunities generally bring a shared excitement to the VCAL classroom, but may also be portrayed as being ‘kicked out’ by the students and teachers involved in the ‘normal’ pathway. The importance of school relationships and friendships is a central theme that students have expressed a deep fear of losing while they are waiting for their opportunities. Waiting and leaving can therefore be a very confusing experience for students. Although frequently it means they are ‘escaping’ school or gaining employment related to their interests, it also brings a deep sense of loss in terms of friendships and the opportunity to take the pathway that ‘everyone else is on’.

Redefining Learning

Finally, this thesis explores the unique pedagogical relationships that develop between VCAL teachers and their students. The emerging phenomenon is one that
sees students journey from their initial experiences of being ‘at risk’ and the phenomenon of schooling as failure, to the development of deep pedagogical relationships that reconstruct the experience of schooling for these students and, by redefining what it means to learn, assists in their struggle to establish legitimacy to their vocational and applied learning pathways. In this instance, the phenomenon of pedagogy is vastly different to the one experienced by most students in the dominant academic mode, which has a strong dimension of learning for the ‘system’.

The pedagogical experience of the applied learning students involved in this study is significantly more humanistic, and involves the development of relationships between students and teachers where the notion of in loco parentis is embedded in a deep sense of ‘parental-type’ care and mutual respect. The pedagogy of applied learning experienced by students and teachers in this study also has a local language of learning that is critical of the ‘system’, and ultimately reconstructs students as learners for their own future. But for students and teachers involved in this inquiry, applied learning pedagogy is an experience of ‘walking the tightrope’ as they balance the needs of ‘learning for the system’ with learning for their own immediate needs and individual futures.

Seeking Deeper Answers

The meaning and understanding that emerges from the phenomenological dimension of this inquiry is used as a platform to consider the deeper pedagogical and sociological issues that emerge from the study. On a theoretical level, the thesis questions the existence of a true pedagogical dichotomy between applied and academic learning. It explores pedagogical relationships as a social phenomenon and argues that the traditional dichotomy between academic and applied learning emulates the ongoing struggle of teachers to reproduce the social structure of the education system within which they work, while at the same time attempt to teach their students in a manner that emphasises the importance of their individual life-worlds and unique learning styles. In other words, there is always a
struggle between the need to reproduce the social structure of the schooling system and the need to teach and relate to individual students in a manner that can be called genuinely pedagogical. Any attempts to bring about deep cultural reform within schools must take into account the complex sociological nature of this pedagogical struggle.

SUMMARY

In summary, this thesis aims to develop a deeper understanding of the essence of teaching and learning by studying students and teachers involved in the ‘alternative’ pathway of an applied learning program. By studying what is seen to be an alternative pathway, the thesis also aims to learn more about what is considered ‘normal’ post-compulsory education within secondary schooling. The meanings and understandings that emerge from the phenomenological portrayals are then used as a touchstone in the reflexive consideration of deeper pedagogical and sociological issues. It is an intention of the study to inform educational policy and practice by exploring critically the significance of these meanings and understandings within the broader educational, social and economic contexts of the secondary college involved in the study.

FOUNDATIONS FOR RESEARCH

DRAWING ON INTERPRETIVE TRADITIONS

This inquiry has its foundations in the interpretive traditions of hermeneutic-phenomenology and begins with my own seventeen years of lived experience and reflections as a teacher and school administrator within the secondary school sector. The phenomenological emphasis of the research seeks to portray the essence and meaning of pedagogical relationships that form between students and teachers who have been involved in the VCAL. The inquiry also adopts a socially critical dimension, however, as it then seeks to understand the essence and nature
of the social structure that always precedes - and is a product of - pedagogical action.

Conversational interviews are an important part of the inquiry process on two levels: initially to explore and gather narrative material which serves to deepen my understanding of the essence of teaching and learning; secondly, to develop empathetic conversational relationships with students, teachers and parents based on the meaning of their experience in the VCAL. Close observation and reflection is also used as a method to generate empirical portrayals and anecdotes that will enlighten the search for pedagogical meaning.

The phenomenon that is ultimately the focus of this research is the experience of teaching and learning as portrayed to me by VCAL students, teachers and school administrators. The portrayals and themes that emerge from my own lived experience while conducting this research are then used as a platform to explore reflexively, the deeper sociological and pedagogical questions that are born out of the day-to-day struggles of the participants in the research.

A CRITICAL DIMENSION

The critical dimension of this inquiry questions the notion of structure and agency within the various layers of structure that shape pedagogical action, and ultimately the wider the education system. To achieve this task, Giddens' Theory of Structuration is used to challenge the traditional dualism existing between the concepts of structure and agency. It is proposed that the 'duality of structure' (Giddens, 1984, p. 25) as advocated by Giddens, has the potential to provide greater critical insight into the forces that bind schools as social systems in space and time. Viewed in this light, pedagogical action involves a process of using the social structure of schools to teach and learn, as well as reproducing that structure at the same time. Applied learning programs represent attempts to change the institutionalised structure of schools, such as curriculum and pedagogical practices, but face the tyranny of enduring social structures that seem to have been
preserved in ‘social concrete’. Ulrich Beck's work on 'Risk Society' (Beck, 1992) and 'Reflexive Modernization' (Beck et al., 1994), is juxtaposed with Giddens' thesis on trust and risk, and are drawn together to provide insight into the ‘forces’ that bind a society together - the same forces that challenge any efforts for enduring social change.

The research also draws on the work of Michael Foucault to raise and explore critical questions about the sustainability of vocational initiatives such as the VCAL and its ability to achieve its objectives on a systematic level. The VCAL could be viewed as an attempt by governments to address a crisis of legitimacy (Offe, 1984) in secondary schools, particularly for students who are ‘at risk’ of leaving school early. If the panoptic power (Foucault, 1995) of the traditional school curriculum and pedagogical practices is unable to engage ‘at risk’ students, then vocational initiatives such as the VCAL have been charged with the responsibility of establishing a new, more legitimate means of control through ‘alternative’ curriculum and pedagogy. But Foucault’s work poses some key questions for such vocational initiatives: Does defining VCAL students as different to other students by their ‘need’ for applied learning, eventually result in the further social exclusion and marginalisation of VCAL students within the social structures of schools? Does the vocational agenda in secondary schools simply provide a new technology of discursive dominance for academic learning?

REDEFINING PEDAGOGY

Finally, this thesis returns to the concepts of teaching and pedagogy and draws on contemporary thinking into pedagogy, andragogy and social structure to challenge the dichotomy that is frequently assumed to exist between academic and applied learning. It is proposed that, inherent in the act of teaching, there is always a struggle between need of teachers to constantly reconstruct the social context of the schooling system within their classroom relationships, and the need to relate to students on a deeper pedagogical level. In essence, the act of teaching involves ‘walking a tight rope’ between a pedagogy oriented towards the system of
schooling and a pedagogy oriented towards the life-world of students. Within the context of the secondary school curriculum, the notion of academic learning is a construct that reflects a greater emphasis on the reconstruction of the system of schooling – and broader social structure - through abstracted curriculum and pedagogical relationships, that have meaning in the context of transmitting knowledge that is essentially abstracted and reified. Students ‘needing’ an applied learning approach, where the knowledge to be learnt can have an immediacy of application for them, are essentially defined by their lack of acceptance of a normalised curriculum and pedagogy that is focussed more on abstracted knowing. This thesis explores the possibility of academic learning and applied learning being reconstructed as a part of the same pedagogical continuum.

STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

Part I: Introduction to the Research and Summary

In Part I, the broad aims and objectives of the thesis have been introduced in Chapter One of this thesis and a summary of the research findings has been provided.

Part II: Reviewing the Literature

Chapters Two to Five have focussed on the theoretical literature that informs the pedagogical and sociological issues that have been explored in the thesis and provides a touchstone for discussions throughout the remaining chapters. Chapter Six examines the research methodology and procedures relevant to this thesis.

Part III: Risk to Relationship

Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine are included in Part III and present the phenomenon of pedagogy as manifested in the VCAL students’ and teachers’ experiences of schooling. The themes addressed in Part III include: ‘Failure and
Success'; ‘Risk and Academic Deficit'; ‘Risk and Otherness'; ‘Risk and Leaving'; ‘Academic and Applied Learning'.

Part IV: Through Enlightened Eyes

Chapter Ten is the final chapter for this inquiry and includes a synthesis of the meaning and understanding that I have constructed from the hermeneutic dimension of the research presented in Part III, with my reading of the theoretical literature presented in Part II.
PART II: REVIEWING THE LITERATURE
CHAPTER 2
THE CONTEXT OF REFORM

RIISING YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

GRIM PREDICTIONS

Much of Australia's initial vocational reform agenda has been driven by the ailing employment prospects for young people during the 1980s and 1990s, and the grim predictions for future youth unemployment that were emerging at that time. The high rates of youth unemployment have been documented by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) alongside the social significance of such a phenomenon:

Youth unemployment is a major issue for the government, policy makers and planners. Although unemployment is a social problem, youth unemployment is of particular concern because of the effect it can have on a person's future. Youth is an important time for choosing a career, gaining and developing skills, establishing an identity and obtaining independence...Over the last 15 years, the youth unemployment rate has been much higher than the total unemployment rate. In 1994, the youth unemployment rate was 17% compared to an overall unemployment rate of 10%. People aged 15-19 had the highest rate of unemployment of any age group, 23%.

(ABS, 2002)

Researchers such as Freeland (1996) and Sweet (1995) have also documented much empirical research about the teenage labour market in the post-World War II years of this century. From their research, perhaps the most significant data is that which indicates the massive decline in full-time employment opportunities for 15 - 19 year olds since the 1970s. It appears that with each recession of the
economic 'boom and bust' cycles over the past thirty years, there has also followed a significantly decreased opportunity for young people to participate in the full-time workforce. While employment opportunities in the other areas of the jobs market have generally been restored to growth with each economic recovery period, the youth labour market has failed to recover from each recession.

FRAGMENTED TRANSITIONS

The significant changes to the labour market for young people have resulted in fragmented transitions to work (Sweet, 1995, Kelly and Kenway, 2001, Kosky, 2002). Some of these changes include:

- Nearly 50% of teenagers who are not in full-time education, are also not in full-time work;
- Most school leavers are only able to gain casual or part-time work, and often work for multiple employers;
- Many young people are socially marginalised by their inability to find permanent, secure work, or any work at all;
- Young people are also being marginalised by their dependence on poorly paid jobs that are often only a few hours work per week;
- The cost of education is preventing an 'education solution' to the problems of many people;
- The rate of teenagers 'dropping out' of education and work is increasing.

Although there was once a time when the majority of students left school when they had completed their compulsory years of schooling, the increasing youth unemployment rate has caused many students and their parents to re-evaluate the need to complete their schooling to at least Year Twelve (Kenway and Willis, 1995). At some stage in the late 1980s, students who left school immediately after completing their compulsory years of schooling were beginning to be defined as being 'at risk' of dropping out of school, and their being 'at risk' had economic connotations for their future, and the future of Australia more generally. Research
conducted by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum (DSF), investigating students 'at risk' of dropping out of education before completing their upper secondary education, has highlighted the relationship between leaving school early and unemployment.

Labour markets are increasingly differentiated by skills and risk of unemployment is unequally distributed among skill groups. This suggests that education attainment and young people's chances of gaining employment are intimately linked. Young people in most OECD countries who have not completed upper secondary education are more vulnerable to unemployment. Early school leavers are particularly vulnerable. Many of these young people are caught in a low income cycle of intermittent work and unemployment

(DSF, 2000, p. 14).

For young people and their parents, the prospect of leaving school early, becoming unemployed and staying unemployed has been a significant factor in their decision to leave school before completing Year Twelve. But for governments and policy makers, the issue of rising youth unemployment has created a new way of defining young people who are not participating in a post-compulsory education – 'at risk'.

GLOBALISATION

Something New Is Happening

The increased awareness of risk for young people throughout the late 1980s and 1990s has also coincided with an overall increased awareness of global economic and environmental risk generally. If every generation believes that it is living through major social change, then there can be no doubt that the phenomenon of globalisation has been at the forefront in the 'major-change stakes' for this current generation. Most recently, the phenomenon of global terrorism has emerged to heighten our awareness of the global nature of our existence

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Only a few years ago the word [globalisation] was hardly used. Now one comes across it everywhere. I doubt if there is a single country in the world where globalisation isn’t being discussed. The global spread of the term is evidence of the very change it describes. Something very new is happening in the world.

(Hutton and Giddens, 2000 p1)

Beck has noted that the term globalisation has been the ‘most widely used – and misused – keyword in disputes of recent years’ (Beck, 2000b, p. 19). He also suggests that it is rarely defined clearly, the most nebulous and misunderstood, as well as being the most politically effective. Beck does identify a number of dimensions of globalisation, however, without making any claim to completeness or rigour. Beck’s dimensions of globalisation include the rapidly changing developments and perspectives in:

- Communications technology
- Ecology
- Economics
- Work organisation
- Culture and Civil society

The Need to Compete in the ‘New Order’

The dimensions of communications technology, global economics and work organisation have been at the forefront of concern for governments and policy makers in their dealings with post-compulsory education over the past 15 years. In particular, the vast improvements in information and communication technology have created the capacity for ‘international capital to move around the world at short notice to take advantage of local circumstances (most notably, cheap labour)’ (Smyth et al., 2000a, p.3), leaving businesses, governments and policy
makers to cope with an unprecedented level of unpredictability, particularly with respect to work organisation and workplace skill.

The development of a new awareness of our existence in the ‘new’, globalised economy has also brought a new heightened awareness of the need to compete with other nations in the global marketplace. The phenomenon of living in a global marketplace requires governments and businesses to keep track of constant and evolving changes in order to stay competitive. Australia’s education system has also been intricately drawn into the need to stay competitive, as has been noted by Henry and Grundy (2003):

As Australia’s cultures, societies and its economies are driven remorselessly towards new forms, still to be shaped firmly but spoken about in terms of globalisation of business, learning societies and innovation and knowledge economies, pressure to respond accordingly is gathering increased momentum within Australia’s education system.

(Henry and Grundy, 2003 p.1)

Key Elements Of The ‘New Order’ For Work

Focussing on the dimension of economic globalisation, Belinda Probert has outlined the key elements of the ‘new order’ for the globalised world of work in which young Australians must compete (Probert, 1996, 1998, see also Gee et al., 1998):

- The decline of many traditional industries, in particular the manufacturing sector, but the rapid rise in other industries, such as finance, tourism and the other sector industries.
- The changing structure of the labour force reflecting a collapse in the full-time employment market for young people and an overall declining employment rate for men and increasing employment rate for women.
• High levels of unemployment and under-employment in the low skill/early school-leaver end of the labour market.
• Increasing levels of part-time and casual employment arrangements.
• A new pattern of work and industrial relations which focuses on post-Fordist principles: team-based organisation rather than hierarchical; multi-skilling instead of highly specialised; and individual enterprise agreements rather than awards.

Although the exact meaning and consequences of globalisation may be contested and influenced by different political agendas, the use of the term generally brings about a sense of fear and seemingly unavoidable change and uncertainty that no one can escape. The economic discourse of the education reform agenda has been no exception and, for the past ten or so years, governments have usually portrayed globalisation as a force to be reckoned with by reformist policy.

Globalisation has become a key force of change in most countries of the world. It is offering new opportunities, new markets and new wealth. But it also demands of governments, and education systems in particular, a capacity to respond quickly to change. It can also have negative consequences for those individuals who have low skills and who are unable to adapt to the constantly changing environment.

(Kirby, 2000 p29)

Globalisation, and the economic discourse that has emerged from it, has therefore had a significant impact on the education reform agenda by focusing on the needs of a globally competitive workforce, and ultimately, the role of learning and education in achieving it. The ‘New Learning’ identified by the Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE, 2001) stressed the need for learning to be both lifelong and lifewide (see also Laver, 1996), but also noted that the traditional model of learning in schools and universities is not faring well in the preparation of young people for the economic and social risks of globalisation:
Lifelong learning means that education is no longer located at a discrete time on your life, your one chance to learn, a time when you learn things that are sufficient for life. Specific skills and knowledge learnt today may be obsolete in twenty years time or even five years time, and we will increasingly need to retrain and relearn throughout life.

(ACDE, 2001 p.55)

‘New’ learning has evolved as a ‘new’ discourse of ‘risk-management-through-learning’ that seeks to use lifelong learning to ameliorate the effects of a society that is seen to be changing rapidly. It has become the learning discourse for a ‘risk society’.

EDUCATION AND THE RISK SOCIETY

Since the early 1990s there have been a significant number of Federal and State Government policy initiatives that have attempted to reform the education system in Australia – particularly the post-compulsory and VET sectors - as a way to address the social, political and economic risks of maintaining high levels of youth unemployment and an inflexible workforce. Governments have attempted micro-economic reform of the labour market to address the new demands for re-skilling being created by globalisation. The concepts of ‘modernisation’ and managing global economic risk have been strong meta-narratives underpinning the vocational reform agenda. It is therefore worth reviewing the literature that is able to provide a sociological framework with which to understand the globalised context of these, and other developments resulting from ‘modernisation’, as they ultimately influence the nature and essence of all relationships that are formed within school communities.
'Riding the Juggernaut'

Rather than accept that society has reached a stage of post-modernity (Lyotard, 1984), authors such as Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, Scott Lash and John Urry have argued that we have reached a stage of high modernity (Giddens, 1990a, Giddens, 1991a), reflexive modernity (Beck et al., 1994), or the end of 'organized capitalism (Lash and Urry, 1987). In The Consequences of Modernity Giddens argues that '[t]he reflexivity of modern social life consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character' (Giddens, 1990a, p. 38).

Additionally, Giddens argues that the 'level of time-space distanciation introduced by high modernity is so extensive that, for the first time in human history, 'self' and 'society' are in a global milieu' (Giddens, 1991a, p. 32). In later work, Giddens has described the emergence of a 'post-traditional society' (Giddens, 1994, p. 57) in which modernity has been forced to 'come to its senses' by its own generalisation across the world. The dynamic combination of the reflexive appropriation of knowledge (institutional reflexivity), with time-space distanciation and the development of 'disembedding mechanisms' has resulted in the radicalising of modernity (Giddens, 1990a, p. 52-53), and the phenomenon of what he calls 'riding the juggernaut' of radicalised modernity.

In his analysis of the changing conditions of modernity, Giddens has argued that, in contrast to the pre-modern environments of localised trust and risk, modern society has developed trust relations that are vested in 'disembedded abstract systems'. According to Giddens, ontological security in pre-modern times was facilitated by the primacy of kinship relations, the local community, religious cosmologies and tradition. In contrast, modernisation has emphasised the importance of personal relationships or sexual intimacy as a means of stabilising social ties. Similarly, the primacy of local community (place) has been destroyed by disembedding and time-space distanciation.
Place has become phantasmagoric because the structures by means of which it is constituted are no longer locally organised. The local and the global ...have been inextricably intertwined. Feelings of close attachment to or identification with places still persist. But these are themselves disembedded: they do not just express locally based practices and involvements but are shot through with much more distant influences.

(Giddens, 1990a, p. 108-109)

The reflexivity of modern social life has replaced the ontological security gained by religion and tradition, with a sense of security derived from the reflexively produced knowledge of science and rational thinking.

**The New Risk Profile**

In contrast to pre-modern environments of risk (including dangers from nature, human violence and a possible fall from religion), Giddens proposes that the modern environment of risk has stemmed from the successful industrialisation and modernisation of society. The new 'risk profile' includes dangers that emanate from the reflexivity of modernity itself, such as the ecological impact of industrialism and the threat of industrialised warfare. In particular, the threat of personal meaninglessness is created by the reflexivity of modernity as applied to the self. Giddens summarises this new risk profile in *The Consequences of Modernity*:

1. Globalization of risk in the sense of intensity: for example, nuclear war can threaten the survival of humanity.
2. Globalization of risk in the sense of the expanding number of contingent events which affect everyone or at least large numbers of people on the planet: for example, changes in the global division of labour.
3. Risk stemming from the created environment, or socialised nature: the infusion of human knowledge into the material environment.

4. The development of institutionalised risk environments affecting the life-chances of millions: for example, investment markets.

5. The awareness of risk as risk: the 'knowledge gaps' in risks cannot be converted into certainties by religious or magical knowledge.

6. The well-distributed awareness of risk: many of the dangers we face collectively are known to wide publics.

7. Awareness of the limitations of expertise: no expert system can be wholly expert in terms of the consequences of the adoption of expert principles.

(Giddens, 1990a, p. 124-125)

The importance of trust in abstract systems is one of the conditions of time-space distanciation and ontological security in conditions of modernity (Giddens, 1990a, p. 113). But ontological security does not simply rely on a sense of continuity of things or events. Rather, trust in the impersonal principles of abstract systems derives from an initial personal (intimate) trust created at access points. '[(I)ndividuals at access points normally go to great pains to show themselves to be trustworthy...(in order to)...provide the link between personal and system trust'] (Giddens, 1990a, p.115). With the demise of pre-modern systems of trust (and ontological security), an individual must now find his or her own identity in a process of reflexive self construction, using the options provided by abstract systems.

A New Modernity

In *Risk Society* Beck (1992) also develops the thesis that we are witnessing the beginning of a new modernity that is beyond its classical design. He notes that:
Just as modernization dissolved the structure of feudal society in the nineteenth century and produced the industrial society, modernization today is dissolving industrial society and another modernity is coming into being.

(Beck, 1992, p. 10)

Beck's reflexive modernisation of industrial society is contingent on two key strands of argument. In the first instance, many of the social traditions, which were built into industrial society when it 'replaced' feudal society, are now being dissolved by the reflexivity of social modernisation. Such traditions have included social classes and stratification, the nuclear family and gender roles and the standardisations of labour (Beck, 1992, p. 153). The result is a process of 'individualisation', where-by people are 'set free' from these traditions and must essentially cope (producing their own biographies) with the day-to-day risks and anxieties of life without the security of 'naturally ordained' ways of life.

In the second instance, Beck argues that the reflexivity of modernisation has resulted in a radical transformation of the structural social conditions of modernity through the scientisation of the risks of modernisation. Although science initially developed to free people from the external risks of the gods and nature, science today has become one of the causes of new internal risks through its globalisation and self-demystification. Science is also the 'medium of definition and source of solutions' to risks, creating a contradiction between the risks which science causes (and defines), and the public critique of such risks.

Central to Beck's thesis is the difference between classical industrial society, which was 'concerned mainly with the distribution of goods such as wealth and income', and the risk society, which is 'concerned with the distribution of risks, such as job insecurity, unemployment and underemployment' (Watkins, 1997, p. 113).
(The)...concept of the industrial society supposes the dominance of
the 'logic of wealth' and asserts the compatibility of risk distribution
with it, while the concept of risk society asserts the incompatibility of
distributions of wealth and risk, and the competition of their 'logics'.

(Beck, 1992, p. 154)

The Need To Manage Risks

While the development of industrial modernisation has helped achieve degrees of
successful emancipation from scarcity, the reflexive modernisation of industrial
society has created the need to manage the political and economic risks that have
emerged with the wholesale 'success' of such development.

Modernization is becoming reflexive; it is becoming its own theme.
Questions of the development and employment of technologies (in the
realms of nature, society and personality) are being eclipsed by the
question of the political and economic 'management' of the risks of
actually or potentially utilised technologies — discovering,
administering, acknowledging, avoiding or concealing such hazards
with respect to specially defined horizons of relevance. The promise
of security grows with the risks and destruction and must be
reaffirmed over and over again to an alert and critical public through
cosmetic or real interventions in the techno-economic development.

(Beck, 1992, p. 19-20)

As with wealth, risk is not distributed throughout society evenly, creating 'social
risk positions'. Although some of the dimensions of risk distribution follow the
typical class and strata positions of an industrial society, Beck argues that the
'risks of modernization sooner or later also strike those who produce or profit
from them' (Beck, 1992, p. 23). In this sense, some risks have the potential to
make redundant the class and strata divisions of industrial society by affecting
even the rich and powerful. They also have the potential to produce new
international inequalities, however, as is exemplified by the risks of industrial pollution. From within the context of post-compulsory education, however, it is clear that young people have become more susceptible to falling into newly emerging and dangerous ‘social risk positions’, particularly if their transition from school to work is problematic. This is also a point reinforced by Brennan, who notes that:

Within this context, young people are particularly vulnerable. Little seems to make a difference in finding new ways for all or even the majority of young people to make a successful transition to work and independence, despite a plethora of government policy initiatives over the past two decades. There are thus significant proportions of young people from 15 to 24 years old who are and remain at risk of not engaging in the full years of schooling and further education but are also unemployed or at best employed in marginal labour market activities. Most of those at risk did not complete year 12 at school.

(Brennan, 2000, p. 7)

Vocational Programs As Risk Management

Watkins (1997, p. 114) has appropriated Beck’s thesis to argue that the growing intervention of vocational educational programs is a direct response to public concern for the risks of unemployment and chronic under-employment in the youth labour market, and therefore a mechanism for governments to also retain legitimacy. Many of the traditional structures that provided ontological security in the transition from school to work (social classes and stratification, the nuclear family and gender roles, and the standardizations of labor) have been dissolved under the process of reflexive modernisation. The resulting ‘individualisation’ that occurs, as people are made ‘free’ from such traditions, also creates an experience whereby risks (and inequalities) are also distributed in an individualised manner. Young people develop a greater dependence on the flexibility of the labour market, and the choices created by expert social systems (such as education), as
they attempt to manage their exposure to risk in the process of creating their own biographies.

While the youth unemployment problem may have been buffered by the increased education participation rates in school, the essential problem of youth unemployment still remains. To add to the complexity of the problem, it appears that the completion of secondary schooling to Year Twelve is not sufficient to guarantee students full-time, or indeed part-time employment after they leave school. On leaving their secondary years behind them, students are still faced with the real risk of long-term unemployment or underemployment.

Australian Young People now face a more uncertain world which at the same time offers greater opportunities than their parents experienced when leaving school.

(Kirby, 2000 p29)

From the context of the collapsing youth employment market, it is clear that vocational policy aims to address the social, political and economic risks of maintaining high levels of youth unemployment, by encouraging young people to complete their secondary education, and by increasing the orientation of schooling towards the labour market. In doing so, it is argued that young people can acquire the vocational capital (Kemp, 1996) needed to enter the workforce successfully. But, contrary to the rhetoric, this assumes that there is sufficient work for all school leavers.

In his discussion on the 'destandardization of labour', Beck draws on the work of Michael Piore and Charles Sabel (Piore and Sabel, 1984), and notes that jobs are being made more flexible in terms of their working hours, work sites and labour laws, resulting in a:

[r]isk-fraught system of flexible, pluralised, decentralised underemployment, which, however, will possibly no longer raise the
problem of unemployment in the sense of being completely without a paid job

(Beck, 1992, p. 143)

Elsewhere, Beck has referred to the 'Brazilianisation of the West' (Beck, 2000a, p. 1) to describe the unintended consequences of labour market flexibility. But who gains the full-time employment and who will suffer the underemployment? In answering this question, the role of vocational education policy becomes entwined with the distribution of the risks of unemployment (rather than the distribution of resources) within the flexibilised workforce of reflexive modernity.

**Vocational Programs As Security**

When viewed in a different light, vocational programs also act as a source of ontological security, providing a form of trust and security that will give students and parents hope in the face of youth unemployment. As Watkins has noted, the ontological security derived from vocational programs:

...provides young people with the sense of security inherent in a sense of continuity of being. Within vocational education programs, the sustaining framework of ontological security is deeply ingrained by the family and the local community, it is natural and proper for young people to enter the workplace after school. The prospect of gaining a position through work experience or work placement, engenders feelings of trust and belonging.

(Watkins, 1997, p. 116)

The vocational agenda is therefore deeply bound up in the mechanism of trust (Giddens, 1990a, p. 83) in the abstract social structures and systems of society (local community, nation-state) into which schools are embedded and ultimately help constitute. Governments and school communities are relying on the vocational agenda to address the crisis of legitimacy (Offe, 1984) which has been
created by a collapsing youth labour market on one hand, and the persevering
dominance of the academic traditions within post-compulsory schooling, on the
other.

Summary

Since the early 1990s the declining youth labour market has created a sense of
anxiety and risk around the issue of young people leaving school before
completing at least two years of post-compulsory schooling. In addition to this
context of early school leavers 'at risk' the phenomenon of globalisation has
created anxiety about the need for a new flexible labour force that has the capacity
to respond rapidly to the unpredictability of life in the 'new order'. Lifelong
learning has emerged in educational discourse as a means for individuals to
manage the risks of living in a 'risk society', where reflexive modernisation has
resulted in the decay of many of the traditional social institutions of industrial
society. For young people 'at risk' of leaving school early, lifelong learning skills
acquired in vocational programs at school serve as a means to restore a sense of
security in the social systems of education.
CHAPTER 3

VOCATIONAL POLICY REFORM

EARLY VOCATIONAL POLICY REFORM

LINKING EDUCATION TO EMPLOYMENT

Vocational Education as Micro-economic Reform

In addition to addressing the issue of high youth unemployment, much of the vocational agenda since the late 1980s has been founded on the notion of a 'changing world of economics and work', and the need for Australia's workforce to manage the risks associated with globalised capitalism. However, vocational curriculum programs in secondary schools were very limited in the early 1990s and most of the traditional technical schools had been closed in favour of comprehensive high schools (Spring and Syrmas, 2002).

On a national level, the report by the Australian Education Council on Young People’s Participation in Post-Compulsory Education and Training (Finn, 1991) was the first of a series of reports in the early 1990s that would firmly establish a micro-economic reform agenda using vocational education. Reports following the Finn review included: the Mayer Committee’s development of the Key Competency Profiles (Mayer, 1992); the proposal of the Carmichael Report (Carmichael, 1992) for the competency-based vocational training certificate and targets; the recommendation by the Karpin Report (Karpin, 1995) to increase the emphasis on enterprise education in schools; and the establishment in 1995 of the new Australian Vocational Certificate (AVC). The Mayer report notes that:

Australia's economic success and hence our standard of living depends on a work force and a work environment that is capable of matching, or improving on, world best practice. Workplaces must become more

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competitive. They must be committed to continuity of service and quality of outcome, setting and meeting deadlines, and responding to the needs and wishes of clients, individually and collectively. To meet these commitments the focus of work and how work is organised will change...The pace and scale of change will increase over the next five years as the Australian economy becomes even more closely integrated with the economies of the region and our major trading partners. The most obvious change in workplaces is a move away from specialised jobs and structures that provide separate functions towards more broadly-defined work roles and organisational structures that provide for devolved and shared responsibility for planning and decision making. Greater value is being placed on factors such as creativity, initiative, being entrepreneurial and being able to think critically about how to improve work practices.

(Mayer, 1992, p. 2)

Leaving Fordism Behind and Becoming Flexible

But to view the techno-economic world of the West as approaching a new epoch is to assume that we are leaving behind some common understanding of a world that once was. In the analysis of industrial relations and the sociology of work for most of this century, the principles of Fordism have commonly been used (but not uncontested) as an analytical framework. In his analysis of the origins of Fordism, Watkins (1994, p. 2) has noted the important role of Frederick Taylor (1911), whose principles of scientific management led to the fragmentation of labour into very specific, simple tasks in industry and their separation from the work of design. Such principles were a marked departure from the previously valued characteristics of a highly skilled craftsman.

Ford's appropriation of these new principles in the car industry, along with the addition of automated, continuous-flow assembly lines and greater control over the personal lives of his workforce, resulted in the (mass)production of 2.1 million
Model T Ford cars in 1923. This revolutionary figure compared to the average of one-car-a-day for manufacturers like Aston Martin, who relied on the skills of craftsmen (Womack et al., 1990, p. 27). But this new mode of production was also generally degrading to the worker, who laboured on the assembly line doing extremely simple and highly repetitive, low-skill tasks. Gramsci (1971, p. 303) argued that the Fordist-Taylorist mode of production also resulted in the emergence of new forms of industrial and social hegemony, which was achieved through a management system of coercion (fragmentation and division of knowledge and labour) and consent (high wages).

The inherent need for change to occur in Australian workplaces, expressed by Mayer (Mayer, 1992), is underpinned by the thinking of Michael Piore and Charles Sabel, in their work titled The Second Industrial Divide: Possibilities for Prosperity (Piore and Sabel, 1984). The motivation for change on a global scale has its roots in a theory of economic crisis, embedded in the Fordist relations between production and consumption:

Economic downturns no longer seem mere interruptions in the march to greater prosperity; rather, they threaten to destroy the world markets on which economic success has depended ever since World War II. Meanwhile, upturns avert disaster without solving the problems of unemployment and slow growth, which have become chronic in all most all of the advanced countries.

(Piore and Sabel, 1984, p. 1)

The first industrial divide, according to Piore and Sabel, was marked by the emergence of an economic system based on the industrial principles of a Fordist mode of production (mass production, rigid centralisation, economies of scale and Keynesian economics of regulated trade). In contrast, the second industrial divide is underpinned by the post-Fordist principle of flexible specialisation, and is a reaction to the crumbling of organised capitalism (based on Keynesian economics) throughout the 1980s.
Flexible specialisation is a strategy of permanent innovation: accommodation to ceaseless change, rather than an effort to control it. This strategy is based on flexible – multi-use – equipment; skilled workers; and the creation, through politics, of an industrial community that restricts the forms of competition to those favouring innovation. For these reasons, the spread of flexible specialisation amounts to a revival of craft forms of production that were emarginated at the first industrial divide.

(Piore and Sabel, 1984, p. 17)

Watkins (1994, p. 9) has noted that Piore and Sabel's version of a post-Fordist epoch is just one in a number of theoretical interpretations which seek to explain and transcend the perceived social and economic crises of capitalism. These include the French Regulation School (Aglietta, 1976, Boyer, 1990), the Japanese model (Kenny and Florida, 1988, Wood, 1989), the end of organised capitalism (Lash and Urry, 1987), and the manageralist/flexible-firm (Atkinson, 1984).

While the philosophical basis of Piore and Sabel's work can be found in the work of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the foundations of the Regulation school are placed in Althusser's structuralism (Watkins, 1994, p. 10-15). With an increasing emphasis on the use of new technologies and a rhetorical need - of management at least - for team based, multi-skilled workers, 'the Regulationists suggest that the new regime of accumulation and consequent modes of regulation have invoked a neo-Fordism which has taken over from the previously dominant Fordist mode' (Watkins, 1994, p. 11). The Japanese mode of production, which emphasises teamwork, job rotation and flexibility in production, has seen the worldwide acceptance of many of its 'best-practice' production strategies, such as JIT (Just In Time or kanban) and TQM (Total Quality Management). Notably, this mode of production seeks an 'economy of scope' through diversity and flexibility. Watkins has noted the contradictory nature of the Japanese mode of production in terms of the 'apparent' democratic relationship between workers and management. Although the
devolution of decision making processes has empowered workers through teams, other practices, such as personalised pay rises, reflect classical Taylorist production strategies.

The theme of increasing flexibility for management also continues in Atkinson's (1984) development of the 'flexible firm'. In the 'flexible firm', employers seek functional and numerical flexibility, which enables the rapid re-deployment (flexibility by multi-skilling) or downsizing (flexibility through part-time, casual work and 'outsourcing') of employees as required. Additionally, financial flexibility provides the opportunity for employers to link costs with production and consumption, as well as remuneration systems, which reflect the flexibility of the firm. Watkins has linked this post-Fordist view of the 'flexible firm' to 'the coercive strategies of the New Right. For education, this means closely linking education to the needs of industry, especially in the supply of a disciplined but docile workforce' (Watkins, 1994, p. 21).

BROADENING VOCATIONAL POST-COMPULSORY OPTIONS

Pressure to Change

In addition to government policies and reports linking education more intimately with employment, the collapse of the youth employment market has had a profound effect on the re-shaping of post-compulsory schooling in Australia. Most immediately, it resulted in massive increases in the retention rate of teenagers at secondary school: from 35% in 1983 to 77% in 1995 and 71 % in 1996 (Ainley and Flemming, 1996, p. 2). In 2001 the percentage of students remaining to their final years of post-compulsory schooling was just over 73% (Fullerton et al., 2003). It is clear that leaving school to gain full time employment, prior to completing an upper secondary certificate, has become a very unlikely option for students. But with this increased retention of students, schools have experienced a significant amount of pressure to change their traditionally academic approach to dealing with post-compulsory students and curriculum in order to cater for the increased diversity of students.
The senior secondary curriculum clearly needs to respond to the needs of the students for whom an academic course is not attractive. To provide opportunities for these students it is essential that schools offer pathways to training and employment and just as importantly that students think of schooling as providing that pathway.

(Kemp, 1996, p. 2).

Prior to the establishment of the Australian Vocational Training System (AVTS) in 1995, there was minimal participation in vocational education by post-compulsory students. Vocational education in schools prior to 1995 tended to occur ‘through individual school initiatives involving mainly unstructured work experience or observation of work practices’ (Spring and Syrmass, 2002, p.5). However, following the 1994 agreement achieved by the Ministerial Council on Employment, Education Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), the new AVTS allowed the dual accreditation of vocational education and training in schools and structured workplace learning in industry. In 1995, the MCEETYA Task Force on VET in Schools (VETiS) and the Australian Student Traineeship Foundation (ASTF) were both established, along with funding for VET in Schools by the Australian National Training Authority.

By the end of 1996 participation had grown dramatically to 60,000, with 16 per cent of all students involved. The inclusion of the new concept, structured workplace learning, which required substantial supervised work and training to be assessed to industry standards, proved to be attractive to both young people and employers alike. It was also very important to young people at this time to have the opportunity to gain all or part of a nationally accredited VET qualification while at school.

(Spring and Syrmass, 2002, p.6)
Developing the Talents and Capacities of all Students

The 1999 Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century (MCEETYA, 1999) further reinforced the importance of vocational education in schooling by developing specific references to VET in Schools and the links between education, training and industry.

Schooling should develop fully the talents and capacities of all students. In particular, when students leave school they should:

• have employment related skills and an understanding of the work environment, career options and pathways as a foundation for, and positive attitudes towards, vocational education and training, further education, employment and life-long learning.

In terms of curriculum, students should have:

• participated in programs of vocational learning during the compulsory years of schooling and have had access to VET programs as part of their senior secondary studies.

• Participated in programs and activities which foster and develop enterprise skills, including those skills which will allow them maximum flexibility and adaptability in the future.

Schooling should be socially just, so that:

• All students have access to the high quality education necessary to enable the completion of school education to Year 12 or its vocational equivalent and that provides clear and recognised pathways to employment and further education and training.

(MCEETYA, 1999)

By 2000, the vocational reform agenda had well and truly challenged the traditional academic curriculum in secondary schools and made an unprecedented
impact on post-compulsory education in Australia. The reforms achieved by the end of 2000 have been summarised by Spring and Syrmas (2002, p.7) to include:

- Establishment of industry-focussed vocational courses within schools in accordance with ANTA’s new National Training Framework requirements and Training Packages;
- Further growth of school-industry partnerships on a local level, regional or industry basis;
- Reform of secondary school curricula to provide more choice for those not intending to proceed to university and to improve the participation rate of those young people ‘at risk’ of leaving school early;
- Provision of transitional support and counselling to assist students ‘at risk’ of early school leaving;
- Introduction of integrated forms of part-time school and work, including school-based new apprenticeships (SBNA);
- Collaborative arrangements for shared delivery among education and training providers (public and private schools, public and private VET institutes, industry trainers);
- Ensuring that school leavers attain competence to a specified standard in either generic or industry-specific skills.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

The Need for More Flexible and Relevant Learning

The Report from the Prime Minister’s Youth Pathway Action Plan Taskforce, *Footprints to the Future* (2001), specifically noted that ‘schools do not do enough to cater for the broad range of aspirations among their students, not just those who want to go from school to higher education’ (Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce, 2001, p.4). The Taskforce made twenty-four recommendations, including an emphasis on the need for more flexible and relevant learning environments that will encourage young people to complete their twelve years of
schooling, the need for improved community partnerships and better transition from school to work. The MCEETYA Taskforce on VET in Schools (MCEETYA, 2001b) broadened the vocational agenda well beyond secondary schooling to encompass all stakeholders in enterprise, career and vocational education, including: schools, training providers, industry/business and employers, higher education, government agencies and the wider community (MCEETYA, 2001a). The VET in Schools Taskforce proposed that to support the achievement of the national goals, the new framework for VET in Schools would require the following six key elements (MCEETYA, 2001b):

- Vocational education and training
- Enterprise and vocational learning
- Student support services
- Community and business partnerships
- Effective institutional and funding arrangements
- Monitoring and evaluation

To assist with the ever-expanding horizon of the vocational agenda in Australian education, the VET in Schools Taskforce also differentiated between three important components of lifelong learning: vocational learning, enterprise education and vocational education and training (VET). Vocational learning is defined as 'learning that has a vocational perspective... (and)... includes elements such as general employability skills, enterprise education, career education and community and work based learning' (MCEETYA, 2001b, p.21). Enterprise education has a focus on the development of a 'learning culture which results in greater numbers of students enthused and equipped to identify, create, initiate and successfully manage personal, business, work and community opportunities' (MCEETYA, 2001b, p21). Finally, VET has been defined as 'appropriately accredited and industry-specific entry level training programs that deliver competencies endorsed within the National Training Framework (NTF) and certification of industry accredited training aligned to the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) (MCEETYA, 2001b, p.21).
THE KIRBY REVIEW

Consolidation Rather Than Fragmentation

At the local State level, the Final Report of the Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria (Kirby, 2000) also stressed the need to provide a more integrated, flexible system for students in their post-compulsory years of schooling. Kirby acknowledged the shared responsibility of post compulsory education and training and emphasised the potential benefits to be gained by supporting a local cooperative approach, particularly with respect to planning and minimising the duplication and competition between agencies. The Kirby Review notes that:

The pathways for young people are uncertain, unequal and poorly signposted. The transition process from education and training to employment has become more complex and unpredictable. Victoria’s and Australia’s education and training for young people is mediocre, by international standards. Our levels of participation are poor, and the patterns of outcomes are too strongly skewed against certain groups and geographical regions. The linkages between education and training, employment and industry, and other support and safety net resources are weak. There is a lack of coordination between the parts of the education and training system, and there is a need for a stronger and clearer vision. The system lacks accountability for all young people: ‘many fall through the cracks’ (Kirby, 2000, p.7).

But the vocational trend in post compulsory education was strongly endorsed by the Kirby Review as a move towards consolidation rather than fragmentation. In particular, it noted the ‘opportunities for more coherent and outwards-looking policy frameworks, greater collaboration and integration between providers, stronger linkages between education and training, industry, other government agencies and the community, and a more ‘seamless’ system for young people
The overall themes that were emphasised by the Kirby Review have been summarised by Kelly and Perry and include:

- The need to provide a range of accessible, high quality programs that allow for flexibility in learning and teaching;
- The need to break down the barriers between education and training sectors, encouraging articulation between courses and collaboration between providers;
- The need for education and training to work much more closely with industry and the broader community, especially in relation to understanding and planning to meet local needs;
- The need for cultural change in community attitudes towards young people and acceptance of responsibility for their futures; and along with this,
- The need to provide better, more informed individual support for young people.

(Kelly and Perry, 2002, p.55)

The Local Network Approach

The formation in 2001 of incorporated, but government backed, Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENS) across Victoria was one of the first key initiatives resulting from the Kirby review. The thirty one LLENs across Victoria are community-based networks involving a broad range of federal, state and local stakeholders and education and training providers, including: government and non-government schools, universities, TAFE, ACE, local government, business and industry representatives, unions, Koorie and local youth agencies, and any other members of the community with an interest in youth affairs. By reporting directly to the Victorian Learning and Employment Skills Commission (VLESC) the LLENs have the ability to bring local issues directly into the agenda of the State Government.
The relationship formed between the LLENs and the State Government is consistent with global trends (OECD, 1998) in the relationship between governments, local communities and industry, whereby governments establish broad frameworks for the delivery of government-funded programs and services, which are then delivered by a range of local and government organisations with increased accountability for achieving effective outcomes. It is argued that the local network approach of the LLENs is more effective than traditional, program-based approaches because of their potential to overcome bureaucracies.

LLENs are intended to be localised learning communities who use local and contextual knowledge and contacts to create solutions to the issue of disengaged youth within a community. Traditional barriers to the formation of such learning communities have included the competition and tension between various agencies, lack of strategic partnerships, under-representation of employers, a focus on narrowly defined outcomes, and limited local responsibility and empowerment (Morris, 2001). The shift of responsibility from a centralised program-approach to a more locally-based network-approach is structured into the key role and functions (D.E.E.T., 2001) of the LLENs, which are to:

- Plan for the provision and support of post-compulsory education, training and employment, focused on the need of the individual;
- Collaborate across and within education, training and employment sectors and with industry, the community and government;
- Facilitate and promote a collaborative and cooperative approach between providers for the provision of programs and services, including flexibility in program delivery to better accommodate diverse learning needs;
- Link post compulsory education and training with industry and economic development, and in particular, with local and regional employment and enterprise opportunities;
- Facilitate and support creative and innovative approaches to provision and support focused on the achievement of successful pathways and outcomes for individuals;
• Strengthen enhanced collective provider responsibility and accountability for outcomes;
• Facilitate the improved monitoring of the progress of people, particularly young people, as they undertake individual pathways;
• Monitor levels of participation, completions and outcomes for individuals in post compulsory education and training and in particular for groups that currently have poor outcomes;
• Provide advice to the Learning and Employment Skills Commission, including appropriate measures of outcomes and destinations for people.

The Australian Council of Deans of Education - in their discussion relating to the new learning and the Australian education system - also identified the need for increased quality networking between local education providers:

New learning requires fluidity, flexibility and diversity. It also requires greater collaboration and co-ordination...Collaboration between schools and universities, between schools and VET providers, between schools and businesses, and between schools and local councils, will become increasingly important. Some progress is already being made here, particularly through VETiS programs, however most present links are minor. The university sector, in particular, needs to become more closely involved with schools.

(ACDE, 2001 p.97)

The emphasis on quality networking through collaboration and co-operation has created the need to ‘blur the institutional boundaries’ (ACDE, 2001 p.59, Henry and Grundy, 2003) that have existed to keep ‘formal’ learning within the confines and control of historically balkanised educational institutions such as schools, TAFE colleges and universities. Emphasis has now been placed on the need to form learning partnerships within the local community and between educational institutions. One of the first system-wide developments in the formation of
flexible and collaborative learning partnerships has been the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL).

THE VICTORIAN CERTIFICATE OF APPLIED LEARNING

The New ‘Hands-On’ Option

In addition to the formation of the LLENs, another significant initiative that has emerged from the Kirby Review is the development of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), which was accredited and trialled by the Victorian Qualifications Authority (VQA) in 2002 and introduced to schools, TAFE institutes and the ACE sector more broadly in 2003. The VCAL is promoted to students, teachers, parents as being ‘the new hands-on option for Years Eleven and Twelve...(which)...gives you practical work-related experience, as well as literacy and numeracy skills and the opportunity to build personal skills that are important for life and work’(VQA, 2002, p.2). It is expected that students who elect to study the VCAL in Years Eleven and Twelve are most likely to be interested in further study and training at TAFE, undertaking an apprenticeship or obtaining employment after completing their secondary education.

VCAL students study four compulsory strands, including: Literacy and Numeracy Skills; Work Related Skills; Industry Specific Skills; and Personal Development Skills. There are also three levels of study within the VCAL: Foundation; Intermediate; and Senior level. VCAL students are permitted to start at the level that most suits their needs and abilities. The emphasis on flexibility in the way students study the VCAL seeks to encourage potential early school-leavers - students who were identified by the Kirby Review as loosing interest in school but having the desire to work – to complete their twelve years of schooling. Most VCAL students also undertake VET in Schools or a School Based New Apprenticeship (SBNA) program as a part of their Industry Specific Skills, and like VET in Schools, the growth in schools offering the VCAL has also been very rapid: Two hundred and twenty two schools, TAFEs and other post compulsory
education and training providers in Victoria offered the VCAL in 2003 (VQA, 2003).

Most recently, the Victorian Learning and Employment Skills Commission (VLESC) has sought to continue the agenda of the Kirby Review by outlining the requirements of a ‘good post-compulsory education and training system’:

- Young people should be offered a range of relevant skills or topics for them to learn – which serve both to ‘engage’ them in learning, and to provide them with practical outcomes;
- Delivery of teaching should be flexible and matched to the needs of young people – in terms of both their learning skills, and their personal circumstances;
- A qualification system which gives full credit for learning in a range of contexts is needed;
- Effective and personalized support for young people, and in transition to employment.

(VLESC, 2003 p.3-4)

The development of the VCAL has been consistent with these requirements by extending considerably the flexibility and range of vocational learning options available for post-compulsory students, and the flexibility of the qualification system that supports them. It has also re-established strong links between teaching in the VCAL and the immediate learning needs of young people.

An Applied Learning ‘Alternative’

A fundamental element in the introduction of the VCAL into the post compulsory education and training sector has been the critical emphasis on applied learning and teaching methodology within the school and classroom environment, and a significant exposure to workplace and vocational learning experiences within a TAFE or workplace environment. The focus on applied learning and work
placement is fundamentally different to the academic traditions of the existing VCE. But the strategic introduction of the VCAL’s applied learning methodology alongside the VCE has presented significant cultural and pedagogical challenges to the dominant academic paradigm that has existed within most secondary schools since the 1950s. A number of the critical development challenges for the VCAL have been identified by the *Evaluation Report of the VCAL 2002 Trial* (Henry et al., 2003):

- The need for a new conceptualisation of quality curriculum that resists the domination of the generalised/abstracted knowledge-based curriculum experiences of the mainstream secondary school education, and establishes instead applied learning of vocationally-oriented knowledge as a sustainable and valued pathway for students;

- The need for the development of teaching approaches for secondary school students that are informed by the principles of adult education and, as a result, are a clear departure from the teacher-centred, expository, classroom-based pedagogies that are very much the norm in secondary schools today;

- The need for schools to enter into new partnerships and collaborative arrangements with other schools in their regions and with local community service agencies, employers, and TAFE and ACE providers in order to address more comprehensively the educational, training and employment needs of young people enrolled in applied learning and vocational education courses;

- The need for an expanded conception of the role of the teacher, as part of a diverse range of efforts necessary to address the above three points;

- The need to develop schools as more broadly based, inclusive and flexible learning and social environments for young people; and
The need to overturn negative stakeholder perceptions about vocationally-oriented applied learning in comparison to vocationally-oriented academic learning, and to general and abstracted education.

(Henry et al., 2003 pp. 4-5)

A deep understanding of the challenges presented by the state-wide implementation of the VCAL in Victoria is immensely significant in effecting real change in the overall agenda for the reconstruction of the post compulsory education and training framework. The pedagogical and sociological challenges (Henry et al., 2003) that are currently being experienced by the implementation of the new VCAL are indicative of the historically limited capacity of schools - as social institutions - to change their culture. There are significant sociological ‘forces’ within schools that are deeply resistant to change and innovation, but poorly understood by professional educators generally. The process of changing a school culture is complex, as a school must use its culture to change its culture. In particular, the simplistic dichotomy assumed to exist between academic and vocational learning which has been a part of the traditional culture of schools, universities and TAFE colleges respectively for many years, presents one of the greatest challenges for the new, locally-networked learning reforms such as the VCAL. In confronting this challenge, Henry and Grundy note:

The new learning possibilities of community-networked schools will be achieved through curriculum and associated pedagogical developments that break new ground beyond this form of vocationalism and the form of academic learning that has been dominant in Australia’s secondary schools for decades

(Henry and Grundy, 2003 p. 7).
Summary

Vocational policy reforms in Australia since the late 1980s have sought to link education to the creation of a more flexible and productive workforce that can respond to the economic challenges of globalisation. The declining youth employment market and steadily increasing post-compulsory participation rates over that time have also created the need for post-compulsory schooling to cater for all students, rather than emphasising the traditional academic pathway to university. The development of the VCAL is consistent with educational and government policies that have emphasised the need for communities and educational institutions to become much more flexible and collaborative, particularly in their provision of post-compulsory education.
CHAPTER 4
RE-DEFINING PEDAGOGY

THE CHALLENGE OF A ‘NEW’ LEARNING DISCOURSE

REVERSING TRADITIONAL BINARIES

A Shift In Attitudes

By demanding that traditionally isolated education and training institutions work more cooperatively, the ‘new economy’ discourse of vocationalism (Ball, 1994) has challenged the existing ‘traditional’ learning discourses and cultures within schools, TAFE, universities and workplaces. The traditional divisions of academic and vocational education have now been recast as a hindrance to economic growth and national prosperity (AECRE, 1991). With the development of what has been called the new ‘knowledge worker’ profile to match the post-industrial knowledge economy (Senge, 1992), there has also been a significant shift in attitudes towards different forms of knowledge and pedagogy (see for example ACDE, 2001). With the vocational agenda’s utilisation of the contemporary workplace context as a key site in the production of ‘economically important’ knowledge, the adequacy and utility of traditional academic forms of knowledge have come into question. Discourses such as ‘work-based learning’ (Boud, 1997, Marsick and Watkins, 1990) and ‘learning organisations’ (Senge, 1992) question the traditional institutional understandings of knowledge, and in some sense:

(they) …reverse the traditional binaries that once privileged one form of knowledge over its ‘other’. Today, epistemological discourses appear to privilege knowledge constructed as practical, interdisciplinary, informal, applied and contextual over knowledge constructed as theoretical, disciplinary, formal, foundational and generalisable. Or as Gibbons (1994) and Luke (1996) put it, there has

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been a shift in emphasis away from ‘culturally concentrated’
(academic) knowledge to ‘socially distributed’ knowledge.

(Chappell, 2000, p.3)

Re-constructing Learning Cultures

The cultural challenge presented to traditional education and training providers by
new vocational policy is therefore much more complex than simply offering
additional vocational and applied learning programs within their post compulsory
curriculum. For schools and universities in particular – who have been
discursively constructed in the academic traditions of knowledge and learning –
the challenge is one of the discursive re-construction of themselves within the
newly emerging vocational discourses. Despite the difficulty of this task, Henry
and Grundy have stressed the need for coordinated cultural change in all of
Australia’s learning institutions when they note that:

Although the education system has been fragmented, historically,
across States and Territory boundaries, with Federal interventions, and
across sectors connecting to the Australian population from pre-school
years through to adulthood, the once neat geographical and sectorial
compartments of this ‘national’ system are also under pressure as
separate silos of education provision. A transition to a less-bunkered
form of institutionalised education appears to be central to the change
processes now being lived through by the education professionals and
learners currently engaged with Australia’s education system.

(Henry and Grundy, 2003 p. 1).

Paradoxically, the vocational and applied learning programs in schools - such as
VET in Schools and the VCAL - are currently given the lowest status in terms of
the secondary school curriculum hierarchy (Teese, 2000, Boston, 1998, Henry et
al., 2003), yet it is the type of learning associated with vocational programs – such
as the VCAL - that has greatest relevance in terms of the current economic
knowledge discourse (ACDE, 2001). Unfortunately programs such as the VCAL suffer negative perceptions as a result of their being subjugated to the dominant academic paradigm. These negative perceptions have been documented as impediments to the continued in-school development of applied learning in the *Evaluation Report of VCAL 2002 Trial* (Henry et al., 2003).

While parents were very supportive of VCAL, some had noticed that there was a stigma attached to the program and a number cited this as a major issue for them. They wanted something done quickly so that VCAL did not become regarded as a course for 'kids who weren’t smart'.

(Henry et al., 2003, p.135)

**Changing Identities**

Tensions also emerge as teachers and vocational curriculum planners attempt to re-contextualise working knowledge into the traditional academic curriculum context. ‘The implicit and contextual nature of working knowledge, for example, does not fit with traditional educational practices that rely on knowledge conceptualised as explicit and generalisable’ (Chappell, 2000, p.8). For secondary school teachers, whose identities may have been constructed on the basis of their academic and disciplinary expertise in dealing with generalisable, abstracted knowledge, the new task of vocational teaching requires a discursive shift towards the other end of the ‘epistemological spectrum’, where knowledge is defined as contextual, transient and performative. This may also require a change of the teacher’s professional identity and understanding of how they construct meaning in their own workplace.

Yet another paradox emerges from schools being workplaces themselves, and teachers and school administrators engaging in their own contextualised workplace learning with a discourse of ‘suspicion’ of any ‘academic’ or ‘economic’ innovations imposed on their own work practices by universities and
external management theorists. The challenge by teachers aimed at any notion of 'academic' learning involving their own workplace seems to mimic the same suspicion held by 'non-academic' students, who question the validity of their academic learning experiences at school. The challenge of workplace learning discourse has also influenced the identity of contemporary university academics and has been discussed by Boud and Solomon:

Previously workplaces were of interest to academics mainly as sites of research or as the destination of their students. Workplaces were 'other'. However in the contemporary university, while there are likely to be many sites of resistance and struggle to the corporatisation of the university, management practices in the university and the everyday work practices of almost all academics, mean that it is difficult not to experience the university as a workplace. While, of course, academics have literally always 'gone to work' in a 'workplace', conventionally, the subject position of academics has been constructed by disciplinary practices with expertise knowledge and curriculum structures rather than organisational imperatives...the identity of academics is influenced by a new role in the learning process – one of facilitator or expert in learning rather than an expert in a disciplinary body of knowledge.

(Boud and Solomon, 2000, p.13).

It appears that the traditionally privileged position of academic learning in educational institutions such as universities and schools has been significantly challenged by the vocational agenda, and consequently re-defined - for some - what it means to work in these institutions through the discourse of workplace learning. Boud and Solomon note that it is not surprising that some academics are even confused about their role and identity:

On the one hand they can be asked, for example, to ensure that the individualised work-based projects of the learners in a work-based
learning program add value to the company’s productivity goals. On the other, at the same time in university forums, they are frequently challenged about the academic merit of these individualised programs.

(Boud and Solomon, 2000, p.14)

In his review of the literature relating to work-based learning and the professional development of the VET sector in Australia, Henry (2001) has outlined the centrality that has been placed by ANTA on work-based learning as a model for the professional development of practitioners of VET in the National Training Framework. ‘The logic of this argument, in essence, is that to most effectively contribute to the creation of a post-industrial Australian economy constituted by ‘learning-organization-enterprises’, the providers of workforce training/learning to these emerging enterprises need to be in the process of becoming learning organisations themselves; and work-based learning (WBL) will drive the Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) in this direction’ (Henry, 2001, p.7). Following this line of thinking, then it appears that secondary schools and the university sector must also consider the merits of work-based learning in the professional development of teachers and academic staff if they too are to ‘contribute to the economic wealth of the nation’.

WORK-BASED LEARNING – AN EMERGING PARADIGM

THE CENTRALITY OF EXPERIENCE

The term work-based learning could be described as an umbrella term that has relevance in a broad range of learning situations resulting from a range of education/training provider and workplace partnerships. ‘The defining characteristic of work-based learning is that working and learning are coincident’, (Boud and Solomon, 2000, p.4) whereby the tasks involved in the learning process are influenced by the work, just as the work undertaken is influenced by the learning achieved. Work-based learning arrangements between education/training providers have the specific purpose of providing learning in a
workplace context. In a secondary school situation, some of these situations typically include:

- Work related skill strand of the VCAL that involves regular work placement of students in industry with the purpose of learning and developing transferable work related and vocational skills in a workplace context.
- Structured work placements in VET in Schools arrangements, involving industry specific work placement.
- School-based New Apprenticeships, involving ongoing part-time employment and study arrangements between industry and schools.

Five typical characteristics of work-based learning programs have been outlined by Boud and Solomon (2000) and may be summarised by the following points:

- Learners may be employees of the workplace or are at least in some sort of contractual or negotiated learning and working relationship. Individual learning plans may involve negotiation between educational institutions and the workplace.
- The needs of the workplace are critical in the development of learning experiences rather than being developed and controlled by a disciplined curriculum plan provided by the education/training provider.
- The learner’s existing level of competence is typically determined and used as a starting point in planning the workplace learning experience. A learner’s competence takes precedence over existing educational qualifications.
- Learning projects are usually undertaken in the workplace context and draw on a broad range of interdisciplinary resources. Such projects are typically oriented towards the needs of the work, the needs of the learner and the needs of the organisation.
• Educational institutions play a role in the assessment of learning outcomes that have been achieved in the workplace learning context, typically using a transdisciplinary framework of standards and levels.

In considering the theoretical underpinnings of work-based learning, Henry (2001) has noted the significance of two main domains of research and debate: ‘that related to the development of theoretical perspectives relevant to adult education and learning, and that associated with the transformation of organizations into so-called ‘learning organisations’’ (Henry, 2001, p.8). Additionally, the important role of experience has been located centrally in work-based learning discourse, by authors such as Marsick and Watkins (1990), who draw on the work of Dewey (1938) to argue that learning occurs ‘through an ongoing dialectical process of action and reflection’ (Marsick and Watkins, 1990, p.8). The centrality of experience is also a key theme that emerges in holistic theories of knowing and learning (Kolb, 1984), which encourage ‘integrative perspectives on learning that combine experience, perception, cognition and behaviour (action)’ (Kolb, 1984, p21 quoted in , Henry, 2001, p.9), as well as theories on adult learning (Knowles, 1990, Kolb, 1984), or andragogy, which have been contrasted with the traditional pedagogical paradigms common in a secondary school environment.

THE TRADITIONAL PEDAGOGICAL MODEL

Passive Learning And Submissive Students

Knowles has defined the common pedagogical model of education as being ‘a set of beliefs – indeed, as viewed by many traditional teachers, an ideology – based on assumptions about teaching and learning that evolved between the seventh and twelfth centuries in the monastic and cathedral schools of Europe out of their experience in teaching basic skills to young boys (Knowles, 1990, p54). Knowles argues that, since that time, the ‘entire educational enterprise, including higher education was frozen into the pedagogical model’, which determines that all
decisions about what is going to be learned and how it will be learned, are the full responsibility of the teacher. He has defined it as ‘teacher-directed education’ that ultimately constructs the learner in a submissive role that is highly dependant on the teacher’s instructions. Knowles has argued that the assumptions underpinning the traditional pedagogical model are:

1. *The need to know.* Learners only need to know that they must learn what the teacher teaches if they want to pass and get promoted; they do not need to know how what they learn will apply to their lives.

2. *The learner’s self concept.* The teacher’s concept of the learner is that of a dependent personality; therefore, the learner’s self concept eventually becomes that of a dependent personality.

3. *The role of experience.* The learner’s experience is of little worth as a resource for learning; the experience that counts is that of a teacher, the textbook writer, and the audio-visual aids producer. Therefore, transmittal techniques - lectures, assigned readings, etc., are the backbone of pedagogical methodology.

4. *Readiness to learn.* Learners become ready to learn what the teacher tells them they must learn if they want to pass and get promoted.

5. *Orientation to learning.* Learners have a subject-centred orientation to learning; they see learning as acquiring subject-matter content. Therefore, learning experiences are organised according to the logic of the subject-matter.

6. *Motivation.* Learners are motivated to learn by external motivators – grades, the teachers’ approval or disapproval, parental pressures. (Knowles, 1990, p.55-56)

Knowles’ assumptions of what he calls the ‘traditional pedagogical model’ are also consistent with what Hager has called the ‘standard paradigm of learning’ (Hager, 2000, Hager, 2001). In the standard paradigm, Hager argues it is assumed
that learners have isolated individual minds that are ‘steadily being stocked with ideas’ (Hager, 2000, p.2) through the learning process – a process involving ‘circumstances that favour the acquisition of ideas by minds’. The product of learning in this model, according to Hager, is the gradual build up of a ‘stock of accumulated ideas’ as well as an understanding of how the ideas relate to each other. The standard paradigm has an emphasis on the ‘learning by minds’ as being superior to the learning that is carried out by the body, a point that Hager attributes to an allegiance with the ‘mind/body dualistic understanding of human beings as inherited from classical Greek thought and from Descartes’ (Hager, 2000, p.2).

A Mind-Body Binary

Drawing on the work of Toulmin (1999), Hager also argues that the standard paradigm for learning involves the assumption that the ‘...supposed interiority of mental life is an inescapable feature of the natural processes in our brain and central nervous system’ (Toulmin, 1999, p.56, quoted in, Hager, 2000p. 3). The standard paradigm therefore assumes that our sense organs exist to collect information and ‘add content to mental life’, leaving the mind as some sort of a ‘spectator that is not itself in the world, but able to represent the world to itself via propositions’, which are themselves viewed as being timeless. According to the standard paradigm, learning therefore constitutes a change in the contents of the mind. Finally, in his review of assumptions that are made by the standard paradigm, Hager draws on Winch (1998), to argue that the assumption ‘if we have learnt well, we will be able to bring the learning to mind’ (Hager, 2000, p.3), presumes that learning itself is also transparent. This last assumption would define any form of non-transparent learning as being non-formal learning and essentially a ‘second rate kind of learning’. Hager has summarised the main implications of the standard paradigm of learning to include:

- The best learning resides in individual minds not bodies;
• The best learning is propositional (true, false; more certain, less certain);
• The best learning can be expressed verbally and written down in books;
• The acquisition of the best learning alters minds not bodies;
• Such learning can be applied via bodies to alter the external world.

(Hager, 2000, p. 4)

But the binary assumed to exist between mind and body, and the inherent dangers of ‘bookish’ passive learning approaches in schools, were challenged by Dewey as early as 1916 in his work on Democracy and Education (Dewey, 1916). Insightfully, Dewey warned that:

As societies become more complex in structure and resources, the need of formal or intentional teaching and learning increases. As formal teaching and training grow in extent, there is a danger of creating an undesirable split between the experience gained in more direct associations and what is acquired in school. The danger was never greater than at the present time, on account of the rapid growth in the last few centuries of knowledge and technical modes of skill.

(Dewey, 1916 p.9)

Unfortunately, when the traditional post compulsory academic curriculum is viewed from the perspectives of Knowles’ common pedagogy model and Hager’s standard paradigm of learning, it is apparent that the dominant pedagogical practices in most schools are testimony to Dewey’s warnings going mostly unheeded for the past eighty eight years. The overwhelming emphasis on text books, teacher-centred classrooms, tests, verbal and written learning activities for example, is evidence of the focus that most secondary schools have on propositional knowledge and mental capacity as being the most accepted way of knowing and learning. The emphasis on highly ordered and rarely integrated
disciplines of knowledge as the content of curriculum programs, such as the subjects in the VCE, is as much a technology of control and subjugation of students (Foucault, 1995), as it is a means to order the propositional knowledge contained within the curriculum. Based on the assumptions of Knowles and Hager, the academic curriculum experience for post compulsory students is one that emphasises individualised and decontextualised learning outcomes, and the devaluation of any knowledge that is not pre-defined as propositional knowledge within the disciplines of the curriculum, or is associated with the learner’s life-world experiences in a social context other than the classroom.

Finally, returning to Dewey’s educational philosophy and, in particular, his ‘dualism’ between ‘experience and education’ (Dewey, 1938), it is apparent that the traditional academic approach to schooling - as described by Knowles’ traditional pedagogy and Hager’s standard paradigm – neglects the co-dependence described by Dewey, as existing between the ‘student and the curriculum’. Rather than maintaining pedagogy sensitive to Dewey’s delicate balance and ‘continuities’ between students’ life experiences and the demands of a disciplined curriculum, the traditional academic approaches have stressed subject disciplines and abstracted knowledge outcomes at the expense of student interest. Considering this imbalance in the experience-education dualism, Fishman (Fishman and McCarthy, 1998) has drawn on Dewey’s Ethical Principles Underlying Education (1897) to argue that:

Dewey had dark visions...of lectures with students sitting in rows answering their teachers’ rote information questions – what Dewey elsewhere calls a ‘penitentiary pedagogy’. He could see the less competitive students yielding to boredom, losing interest, deciding they had nothing to contribute which the teacher did not already know or which others could not more rapidly supply.

(Fishman and McCarthy, 1998 p. 23)
In contrast to the passive role of the learner and abstracted knowledge of the traditional academic pedagogy, Dewey argued that ideas cannot be passed to students 'like bricks' (Dewey, 1916 p. 4) and that such an approach to 'f(ormal instruction...easily becomes remote and dead – abstract and bookish' (Dewey, 1916 p. 8). He contended that education requires a pedagogy involving the active attention and effort of the learner – where learning is tied directly to the use of student-valued knowledge and the experience of students’ needs, doubts and discoveries (Dewey, 1933) are used to inform a pedagogy sensitive to the experience-education dualism. Fishman develops this point further by extending Dewey's 'brick' metaphor to see the relationship between isolated 'bricks' and the structures that can be built by joining them together in a purposeful and meaningful way:

[L]ike bricks, [ideas] are separable. They can be isolated and decontextualised. But, according to Dewey, to understand aims, beliefs, and ideas we must...see bricks as part of the buildings they support, as connected purposefully to other bricks as well as to timber and steel. Further, to even care about bricks, we must have the need to use them. We must have the desire to live in a building, construct a new one, or demolish an old one.

(Fishman and McCarthy, 1998 p. 20)

The pedagogical consequence of Dewey's educational philosophy therefore requires that teachers integrate 'non-school learning' (Dewey, 1916, 1933) with learning in the more formal sense. Such an approach involves the use of more 'indirect pedagogy' (Dewey, 1933) compared to the traditional 'direct' lectures and instruction of the academic model. It recognises that learning can never be passive, but is, rather, a dramatic, emotional and communal experience that requires active exposure to genuine life-related and community-valued problems that will encourage and excite students’ interests as they engage and explore subject matter in a more contextualised and meaningful way. Such a pedagogical approach consequently re-defines the traditional relationship between students and
teachers in a way that re-constructs students as valued and responsible partners in their own education and is congruent with the sort of community-building learning partnerships proposed by Brennan:

If we value democracy, students need to experience it directly and to engage with as diverse as possible sets of communities in order to build resilience and familiarity with difference. Their experience of schooling must foster capacities to engage in community-building, across differences, obtained by direct participation in such activities. Therefore, students need to be recognised much more directly as equal partners in their own education. They need, in particular, to be recognised as

- Curriculum partners
- Assessment partners
- Governance partners
- Organisational, planning and research partners.

If students themselves are not active agents in their own education, then they do not learn the skills or acquire the judgement needed to navigate in a changing world.

(Brennan, 2000, p. 6)

Dewey’s educational philosophy is, in fact, more consistent with contemporary theories of adult learning (Knowles, 1990, Toulmin, 1999) that have informed the current post compulsory applied learning reforms and ultimately engages the ‘non-traditional’ sites of learning – such as work places and the community – that have been identified as integral to these reforms.

**ADULT LEARNING**

**Learning As A Process**

Returning again to the assumptions of the ‘common pedagogical model’ described by Knowles or the ‘standard learning paradigm’ described by Hager, more current
holistic theories of learning (Kolb, 1984) have, in contrast, emphasised Dewey’s centrality of the learner’s experience in learning and the incorporation of dialectical thinking in the process of creating new knowledge. According to Kolb’s six propositions of adult experiential learning:

1. Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes;
2. Learning is a continuous process grounded in experience;
3. The process of learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world;
4. Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world;
5. Learning involves transactions between the person and the environment; and
6. Learning is the process of creating knowledge.

(Kolb, 1984, p.25-38, quoted in, Henry, 2001, pp. 9-10)

Kolb’s respect for the experienced-based, holistic nature of knowing and learning, and an emphasis on the dialectical thinking processes, is also congruent with the andragogical model for learning that has been proposed by Knowles (1990). In contrast to the assumptions of the pedagogical model discussed above, Knowles’ assumptions underpinning an andragogical model (Knowles, 1990, p.57-63) of learning can be summarised to include:

1. *The need to know:* Adults need to know why they need to learn something before they are willing to undertake learning it. They are more likely to be interested in the benefits to be gained by learning something, or the negative consequences of not learning something. This is in contrast to the pedagogical model, where the role of the teacher is significant in defining the knowledge to be learned to enable a pass.
2. *The learners’ self-concept:* Adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions and for their own lives and develop a deep
psychological need to be seen by others and treated by others as being capable of self-direction. Adult learners are more likely to resent situations where they feel others are imposing their will on them. This is in contrast to the pedagogical model, which constructs the learner’s self-identity as highly dependant on the teacher.

3. **The role of the learners’ experience:** Adults come into an educational activity with a greater volume and a different quality of experience, which is more likely to be influential in defining the self-identity of the adult, compared to the younger person. Importantly, the adult’s life experience is given much more importance in the learning process than that given to a younger person experiencing the pedagogical model.

4. **Readiness to learn:** Adults become ready to learn those things they need to know and be able to do in order to cope effectively with their real-life situations. This is in contrast to the readiness to learn which, is determined by the teacher in the pedagogical model.

5. **Orientation to learning:** Adults tend to be more life-centred, or task-centred, and are more motivated to learn something if they perceive that it will assist them in performing a task or deal with a real-life problem. Adults learn new knowledge, understandings, skills, values and attitudes most effectively when they are presented in the context of application to real-life situations. In contrast, the experience of students in the pedagogical model is that of a discipline centred curriculum which is usually abstracted from the context of any application.

6. **Motivation:** While adults are responsive to some external motivators (better jobs, promotions, higher salaries, and the like) the most potent motivators are internal pressures (the desire for increased job satisfaction, self-esteem, quality of life, and the like). Motivation to keep learning can be blocked by such barriers as negative self-concept as a student, inaccessibility of opportunities or resources, time constraints, and programs that violate principles of adult learning.
The Pedagogy–Andragogy Binary

Knowles’ treatment of pedagogy and andragogy is somewhat antithetical, a point which he acknowledges, but explains in terms of his understanding of pedagogy as a form of ideology, ‘requiring loyalty and conformity by its adherents’ (Knowles, 1990, p.63), and typically sanctified by the notion of academic standards. Knowles does not see his andragogical model as being a form of ideology, however, but rather as ‘a system of assumptions that includes the pedagogical assumptions’ (Knowles, 1990, p.64). He argues that there are situations when the assumptions of the pedagogical model, as he has outlined, are appropriate for learning, particularly for young students, however, there are clearly situations when it is not, as in the case of adult education.

I would consider the pedagogical assumptions defined as acceptable by Knowles as less than ideal for learning in most situations, primarily because of their focus on reproducing a pedagogical structure and education system consistent with Dewey’s worst nightmare. Such pedagogical assumptions erode the dignity of students and serve as a source of discouragement to learning – a point that was made by Dewey’s early works (Dewey, 1916). The andragogical model, as proposed by Knowles, is significantly more humanistic than the pedagogical model he describes, and has its foundations in values such as genuine respect for the relationship between the teacher and learner, a more democratic context where both the learner and the teacher contribute more equitably to the learning experience, and a greater significance placed on the role of learners’ life-worlds in the process of learning.

The andragogical model can also be understood in terms of Hager’s ‘emerging paradigm of learning’ (Hager, 2000, Hager, 2001), which has a holistic, integrative emphasis that seeks to avoid the traditional dualisms of ‘mind/body, theory/practice, thought/action, pure/applied, education/training, intrinsic/instrumental, internal/external, learner/world, knowing that/knowing
how, process/product, and so on’ (Hager, 2000, p.10). The main implications of this andragogical understanding of learning include:

- Knowledge, as integrated in judgements, is a capacity for successful acting in and on the world;
- The choice of how to act in and on the world comes from the exercise of judgement;
- Knowledge resides in individuals, teams and organisations;
- Knowledge includes not just propositional understanding, but cognitive, conative and affective capacities as well as other abilities and learned capacities such as bodily know-how, skills of all kinds, and so on. All of these are components conceivably involved in making and acting upon judgements;
- Not all knowledge can be or has been expressed verbally and written down;
- Acquisition of knowledge alters both the learner and the world (since the learner is part of the world).

(Hager, 2000, p.10)

But rather than draw a distinct line between andragogy and pedagogy, I would consider that pedagogy, as defined by Knowles, needs to be redefined to take on more of the humanistic principles and assumptions that underpin andragogy, and to re-focus the meaning of the word pedagogy on the essence of a learning relationship. Adult theories of learning are more consistent with Dewey’s objective of overcoming the student and curriculum dualism by focussing on the learning process – the pedagogical link between student and curriculum - rather than either the student or the curriculum. The applied learning reforms in post-compulsory education, and the adult learning principles that underpin them, have served as a reminder that effective pedagogy needs to address sensitively the student-curriculum tensions outlined by Dewey nearly a century ago.
Finally, the adult education theories that underpin the work-based learning discourse of the vocational and applied learning agenda, as expressed through the VCAL for example, have presented a significant challenge to the current traditional academic discourse by standing beside the academic curriculum, albeit uncomfortably, and refocussing on the principles of good and effective learning. But if there is to be a redefinition of pedagogy in more humanistic terms, then schools and other education providers must also redefine themselves as workplaces and become much more reflexive as learning communities, seeking to understand how society comes to be constructed in the first place, how they contribute to the structure of society, and what it is about the structure of society that seeks to retain academic learning as privileged over more humanistic learning discourses.

RE-DEFINING PEDAGOGY

RESTORING THE ABSENT RELATION

The contemporary meaning of the word pedagogy, at least as defined by Knowles and Hager, has a much stronger orientation towards the formal system of school education in our society than it does for the learner and the more authentic methods of learning originally described by Dewey. A redefinition of the meaning of the word pedagogy therefore needs to restore the absent relation between learners and teachers - particularly in the secondary school model - and to communicate ‘what is essential to the excellence of our educational lives’ (van Manen, 1991b, p.30) with young people. Consistent with Dewey’s original emphasis on the contextualised and moral dimension of pedagogy, van Manen has – more recently – provided a broad definition of the essence of pedagogy that adopts a strong, practical and moral orientation to the in loco parentis relationship of learning between students and teachers. He notes that:

Pedagogy is ultimately a practical affair. Pedagogy must be found, not in abstract theoretical discourse or analytic systems, but right in the
lived world, where the newly born is first held and gazed at by the new mother, where a father quietly restrains the child from blindly crossing the street, where the teacher winks at a pupil in acknowledgement of a task well done...pedagogy is cemented deep in the nature of the relationships between adults and children. In this sense, pedagogy is defined not only as a certain relationship or a way of doing, but also pedagogy lets an encounter, a relationship, a situation, or an activity be pedagogical.

(van Manen, 1991b, p31)

Contemporary definitions of pedagogy and the traditional technical language of curriculum and instruction have tended to orient us away from the learner-teacher relationship and to focus on the abstracted knowledge disciplines and technical systems of delivery. However, van Manen’s orientation towards pedagogy tends to bring out the human or personalistic elements of education, as well as identifying with the importance of contextualised learning that is also fundamental to the work-based learning discourse and Dewey’s original educational philosophy. Although van Manen does not play down the importance of disciplined knowledge and the mind/body dichotomy as much as work-based learning discourse does, his emphasis on the human relations of learning does restore a balance to the need for practical learning - which always occurs in a context and focuses on experience - and occasions of more abstract learning. Such occasions result from the eventual development of a learner’s ‘language of learning’ and the ability to conceive and reflect on what has been learned through abstracted language and ideas. It is, after all, the development of an ‘abstracted language of learning’ that allows a learner to become reflexive through experiences of applied learning – a point that may be underemphasized in work-based learning discourse.

Additionally, the provision of education within an organised, social system will always require a technical dimension to the role of teachers in reproducing that social system from one generation to the next. However, van Manen’s restoration
of the human dimension of pedagogy provides a ‘compass’ to steer teachers along the narrow but essential path that exists between a ‘pedagogy for the system’ and a ‘pedagogy for the student’. By emphasising the pedagogical relationship in the phenomenon of learning, van Manen also ensures that the focus remains sensitively on learning – the dialectic link connecting the student-curriculum dualism that Dewey contended to be the integral dimension of a balanced pedagogy. By restoring the absent learning relationship to the phenomenon of pedagogy, van Manen also reminds us that pedagogy has an important moral dimension.

The Moral Dimension Of Pedagogy

The moral dimension of pedagogy is emphasised by van Manen when he suggests that ‘pedagogical intents are not simply intellectual convictions or curriculum plans and learning objectives that we have committed to paper. Pedagogical intents are involved in all our active and reflective distinctions between what is good and what is not good for the child’ (van Manen, 1991b, p.23). Rather than a pedagogy that is embedded in the process of sorting and segregating students on the basis of their academic performance in the system, the concept of pedagogy, as perceived by van Manen, has its roots in a teacher’s desire for a student to ‘fare well in life’. This moral dimension draws heavily on the essence of parenthood that is also reflected in van Manen’s pedagogy, and emphasises the understanding that a teacher is always acting as an adult, in loco parentis. But the term in loco parentis does not have the technical, system-based responsibility connotation that is the essence of more contemporary legalistic discourse, but rather, it is conceived in an understanding that pedagogy is itself a vocation, ‘inspired by education as a calling’.

In other words, pedagogy may be defined as the ‘excellence of teaching or parenting’ because it helps us to identify the essence of true child rearing and teaching. It orients us to the value, meaning, and nature of teaching and parenting. More pointedly pedagogy orients us
(teachers, parents, counsellors, etc.) to the child, to the child’s immanent nature of being and becoming...The satisfaction of pedagogy does not lie primarily in some intrinsic scientific curiosity, but rather in the interest in the child’s growth for the sake of the child. Or, to say it somewhat differently, my pedagogical orientation to children is animated, but not instead by the ‘disinterested’ attitude of ‘objective’ science, but instead by my love or concern for children. And naturally, out of this pedagogical interest may spring questions regarding theories of child development or approaches to teaching.

(van Manen, 1991b, p32-33)

Van Manen’s moral dimension of pedagogy sheds new light on Dewey’s original emphasis on growth as an open-ended goal of education. Dewey also expresses the moral dimension of education when he notes that ‘[t]he criterion of the value of school education is the extent in which it creates a desire for continued growth and supplies means for making the desire effective in fact’ (Dewey, 1916, p.53). Much like a parent is morally responsible for the physical development of a child, teachers are morally responsible for the growth and development of students in their care. This care is expressed through a pedagogical relationship that places neither the student nor the curriculum at the centre of education, but, rather, focuses reflexively on their mutual dependence in learning for growth and development.

The Pedagogical Moment

By emphasising the importance of relationship and context to the concept of pedagogy, van Manen has also introduced the need to understand the ‘pedagogical moment’ (van Manen, 1991b, p.37) and the need for teachers to be reflexive about pedagogy and their educational philosophy which underpins it. He notes that ‘a pedagogical situation is the site of everyday pedagogical action, everyday pedagogical practice. The pedagogical moment is located at the centre of that praxis’ (van Manen, 1991b, p.40). Van Manen’s pedagogical moment can be seen
in the lived experience of pedagogy as teachers, students and parents relate to each other on a day-to-day basis, often making major decisions on the spur of the moment that will affect the future of a student’s life. An example of such a pedagogical situation which relates most immediately to the topic of this thesis, is when a Year Ten girl, who is failing many of her subjects and is unmotivated to continue her schooling, approaches the counsellor or subject coordinator and says ‘I don’t want to do Year Eleven – I just want to leave and get a job as soon as possible’.

When the teacher begins to consider the wider context of youth unemployment for early school leavers, the student’s academic performance, subjects and programs available at the school, her parental expectations, the student’s own career aspirations, and so on, it becomes clear that the advice given can only be considered right or wrong from within the context of the situation, and whether its pedagogical intent is centred around what is deemed good for this young person. Therefore pedagogy also requires a form of teacher reflection that is ‘oriented toward understanding the pedagogical significance of events and situations...(and)...understanding the pedagogical goodness of one’s or others past actions with respect to the lives of these children’ (van Manen, 1991b, p41).

Teacher Reflection

One of the greatest challenges to schools and the profession of teaching is to create opportunities for teacher reflection and a work-place culture that supports it. This is a challenge that has been given even more weight by the contemporary vocational agenda within education more broadly, and the conflict between the traditional academic and work-based learning paradigms. In considering different kinds of reflection that may be associated with pedagogy, van Manen suggests four types (van Manen, 1991b, p.101):
• Anticipatory reflection, which enables us to deliberate about alternative courses of action and then plan and decide which action to take.

• Active or interactive reflection, (reflection-in-action) which allows us to come to terms with an immediate situation by stopping and thinking to make instant decisions.

• A ‘mindfulness’ type of reflection, which is distinct from anticipatory or active reflection by its immediacy in our actions. This mindfulness is also associated with ‘tactful pedagogues’.

• Recollective reflection, which helps us make sense of past experiences and gains insights into the meaning of current experiences.

By developing the notion of a teacher as a ‘tactful’ and ‘reflective practitioner’, van Manen therefore posits that teaching - and pedagogy - is essentially a reflective practice, whereby teachers constantly reflect in action and make decisions which are guided by theoretical and practical principles, which are operating in a more or less tacit fashion. In this sense, teachers’ own pedagogical learning experiences are conceived as continuous processes that are grounded in their pedagogical experience with students. It is a holistic process that requires transactions between people and the environment, as well as the ‘resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world’ (Kolb, 1984, p.29).

Paradoxically, when van Manen’s notion of the ‘reflective practitioner’ is juxtaposed alongside the principles of work-based learning, it can be argued that there is already an element of adult learning (Knowles, 1990) which is implicit in the concept of pedagogy, and always happens through a teacher’s reflexive pedagogical relationship with the student, albeit with an emphasis on the teacher’s learning. However, the principles of adult learning – and of applied learning about pedagogy itself - are intimately connected to the students’ learning through the
teacher as ‘reflective practitioner’, and ultimately affect the student’s experience of learning through the pedagogical action of the teacher.

By emphasising the importance of pedagogical relationships and context as discussed by van Manen, - and recalling Dewey’s original emphasis on learning as the resolving link between the student-curriculum dualism - the difference between andragogy and pedagogy are perhaps much more blurred than Knowles might propose. The andragogy-pedagogy dualism might be better conceived as existing on the same ‘learning continuum’ and sharing the same holistic principles of ‘good learning’, however, differing only by the culturally constructed nature of pedagogical/andragogical relationships, and the way that pedagogy/andragogy is used to reproduce the social context in which it exists. With the emphasis turning to the social structure of pedagogical relationships, it is appropriate to now review the literature relating to the sociology of education.
CHAPTER 5
PEDAGOGY AND SOCIETY

INTRODUCTION

Earlier in this thesis I have made reference to the progressively growing discourse of economic and political risk that have been attributed to globalisation and underpinning vocational reform in Australia’s education system. I have noted that the intentions of these vocational and applied learning reforms are to ameliorate the risks of globalisation, including the important personal, social and political risks of sustaining high levels of youth unemployment, and the economic risks of sustaining a nationally uncompetitive and inflexible workforce. I have also referred to the challenges created by placing applied learning pedagogy alongside traditional academic pedagogy in the post secondary curriculum and, in particular, questioned the validity of a genuine pedagogical difference existing between the principles of andragogy — underpinning work-based and applied learning — and the pedagogical principles underpinning the traditional academic paradigm.

In this chapter I draw on contemporary sociological literature to further extend the argument that andragogy and traditional academic pedagogy are essentially dialectically linked according to Dewey’s concept of the student-curriculum dualism. A number of critical questions emerge from my inquiry into the relationship between pedagogy and society. What sociological assumptions are being made about the need to reform only the post-compulsory programs offered primarily to students considered to be ‘at risk’ or on an ‘alternative’ pathway? Does the ‘traditional academic pedagogy’ of the VCE also need vocational and applied learning reforms and a shift away from the abstracted subject disciplines if this pathway is to contribute to the need for more flexible learning? Does the emphasis of traditional academic pedagogy on an abstracted curriculum and pedagogical relationship construct students ‘at risk’ by subjecting them to a ‘penitentiary pedagogy’ (Dewey, 1897). To pursue answers to these questions I
have begun by questioning the traditional relationship assumed to exist between social structure and agency.

STRUCTURE AND AGENCY

Traditional Positions

Traditionally, many sociologists of education have approached their work from either the macro or the micro level of research. Consequently, this has produced research that typically falls into the camp of functionalist/post-structuralist sociology, or one of the pure interpretive forms of sociology. Studies of the macro-features of education, such as social systems and state policies, have traditionally placed primary importance on the role of social structures. This is exemplified by a variety of theorists' (Bowles and Gintis, 1976, Bernstein, 1982) attempts to explain the structure and function of schools in society. For functionalism and post-structuralism, social structure has primacy over the action of individuals.

Alternatively, the study of the micro-features of education, which have typically utilised traditional ethnographic methodologies and case study, have frequently involved the study of classrooms and single school environments. By providing a 'thick description' of the school settings and the events that occur within them, these researchers have generally sought to reveal and analyse the intentions and actions of the individual actors within schools. In opposition to the centralised feature of structure in the functionalist/post-structuralist approaches, the pure interpretive forms of educational research, which focus only on action and meaning in sociology, have placed the individual at the centre stage of their analysis. Van Manen's work on phenomenology and pedagogy (van Manen, 1991a, van Manen, 1996, van Manen, 1998) is typical of hermeneutic interpretive research which places prime importance on the meaning of pedagogy as portrayed by the actions of students and teachers. In considering the focus of these two traditional approaches – structuralists' emphasis on social structure and the
interpretive emphasis on agency – there has existed an unhelpful dualism between structure and agency in educational and sociological inquiry.

OVERCOMING THE STRUCTURE-AGENCY DUALISM

In considering the traditional dualism between structure and agency, Anthony Giddens has noted that the main differences between these opposing perspectives on sociology have 'often been taken to be epistemological, whereas they are in fact ontological' (Giddens, 1984, p. 2). He argues that the 'basic domain of the study of the social sciences is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of societal totality, but social practices ordered across space and time' (Giddens, 1984, p. 2). Giddens dialectic approach to overcoming this dualism is much like Dewey's dialectic analysis of the student-curriculum dualism.

In the development of Structuration Theory, Giddens (1984) has challenged the functionalist division between the synchronic and the diachronic. Typically, the synchronic study of a social system involves the study of a 'timeless snapshot', as opposed to the diachronic study of a social system, which investigates how the system changes over time. Giddens argues that this conceptualisation of time makes the fundamental mistake of identifying time with social change. In contrast, he argues that 'social systems exist as systems only in and through their 'functioning' (reproduction) over time' (Giddens, 1995, p. 17). Accordingly, in Structuration Theory, the problem of social order is therefore concerned with:

...how form occurs in social relations, or (put in another fashion) how social systems 'bind' time and space. All social activity is formed in three conjoined moments of difference: temporally, structurally...and spatially; the conjunction of these express the situated character of social practices.

(Giddens, 1995, p. 30).
Within the context of vocational and applied learning reform in secondary schools, my inquiry into the enduring cultural aspects of schools as social systems is therefore, according to Giddens’ thesis, also an inquiry into how schools are bound as social institutions through space and time. To explore this notion further I will address what Giddens has called the ‘duality of structure’ (Giddens, 1984, Giddens, 1990b) as a means to understanding how cultural and broader social systems such as schools are bound through space and time.

PEDAGOGY AND THE DUALITY OF STRUCTURE

Day-To-Day Pedagogical Relationships

By reconceptualising the core notions of structure and agency in Structuration Theory, Giddens has resolved the structure-agency dualism, and replaced it with the notion of a 'duality of structure'. Social structures, according to Giddens, are defined as being produced and reproduced by the people who make them during the course of the day-to-day interactions and relationships. This is how social structures endure through time and across space.

According to the notion of the duality of structure, the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize.

(Giddens, 1984, p. 25).

Thus, the notion of structure, according to this definition, loses its traditional image as simply a constraining force on people. The vital emphasis on the day-to-day pedagogical relationship and context as conceived by van Manen (1991b), must therefore also be broadened to include Giddens’ concept of how this relationship is recursively structured within the social context of the school and society. The day-to-day pedagogical relationships between students and teachers presume the social structure that describes – or pre-scribes – how they are
‘supposed’ to relate, but such relationships also reproduce the social structure which allows these relationships to be defined as pedagogical in the first place.

Giddens also makes a clear distinction between the concepts of social structure and social systems:

Social systems are composed of patterns of relationships between actors or collectivities reproduced across time and space. Social systems are hence constituted of situated practices. Structures exist in time-space only as moments recursively involved in the production and reproduction of social systems. Structures have only a virtual existence.

(Giddens, 1995, p. 26)

This reconceptualisation of social system and structure opens up the possibility for recognising the many different social systems, which may be contained largely within the boarders of a nation-state, such as education systems, or may go beyond, such as capitalism. It is also very different to the Durkheimian and Marxist tradition which assumes that social systems are generally seen as less complex social structures, that function to 'meet the needs' of a broader social structure. In this traditional sense, social structures and social systems are generally characterised as being 'external' to the actors whom they influence, in order to meet the 'needs' of society.

The consequence of viewing pedagogical relationships as being both the ‘medium and the outcome’ of school culture, on a local ‘micro’ level, and of educational systems, on a broader ‘macro’ level, is the identification of a dialectic link between educational inquiry as a form of cultural studies and educational inquiry as sociology. But to extend this understanding further, more discussion on how Giddens analyses structure is required.
Analysing Structure and Social Systems

Giddens argues that social structure - and therefore the reproduction of social systems - can be analysed as recursively organised sets of 'rules' and 'resources' (Giddens, 1984), which people produce and reproduce in their day-to-day interactions. He notes that 'rules' should not be confused with the 'social facts' of a functionalist approach to sociology, but rather seen as 'techniques or generalisable procedures applied in the enactment/reproduction of social practices' (Giddens, 1984, p. 21). He develops his concept of rules further by suggesting they can also be analysed by two key features – the semantic and normative aspects:

The semantic aspect of rules refers to the qualitative and procedural meaning of practices, the locales associated with their performance, and some (not all) of their likely outcomes. The normative aspect of rules refer to the same practices, locales and outcomes from the standpoint of rights and obligations that establish their legitimate or illegitimate nature as well as the appropriate and inappropriate ways in which practices may be carried out.

(Cohen, 1989, p. 27)

A teacher who adopts a non-reflexive pedagogical interaction with a 'non-academic' student, typically draws on structural rules, which ultimately construct that student as being 'non-academic', and, through the interaction, results in the reconstruction of the rules that define what it means to be non-academic. Such rules only exist as a result of their use in social interaction, however, and cannot be defined as an entity that exists external to social interaction. In other words, the rules that define what it means to be academic or non-academic are constructed and reconstructed when students and teachers interact.

In his analysis of power, Giddens notes that structural 'resources' consist of an allocative or authoritative nature (Giddens, 1984, p. 258), and are integral to the
coordination of social systems across time and space. Allocative resources refer to the capability of an individual to generate control over material objects and the means of material production and reproduction, including instruments of technology and the goods produced from them. Authoritative resources, on the other hand, refer to the individual's capability to influence the actions of other individuals. The availability of structural resources to an individual is essentially the basis of power that an individual has to act.

Giddens notes that structural rules and resources may 'stretch' beyond the single control of any individual person – such as stretching across education systems or nation-states. However, returning to the culture of a classroom based on a traditional academic pedagogy, Giddens' understanding of structural rules and resources allows an analysis of the social structure that produces and reproduces academic pedagogy in day-to-day relationships. Giddens' structural analysis allows us to ask: What are the 'rules' and 'resources' that define the social structure of pedagogical relationships? How culturally embedded are these 'rules' and 'resources' in defining schools as parts of the broader social system?

**Schools As Social Systems**

In using Structuration Theory, this thesis can seek to establish how structural rules and resources bind schools together – as social systems - and how deeply embedded they are, in a temporal and geographic sense. Thus, the analysis of pedagogical interactions between students and teachers, or the broader vocational policy agenda in education, cannot be seen as simply the analysis of student-teacher relationships or governments and policy makers as external structural systems that impose change on individuals and communities. It is also insufficient to undertake an analysis that focuses only on the perceptions of people, neglecting that they too draw on structural principles that may stretch far beyond the location of a classroom or school site. On the contrary, the people who constitute schools, communities and governments are all 'agents', who draw on the structural
principles of society (rules and resources) in the dual process of producing and reproducing the structural systems that constitute particular societies.

The continuity and discontinuity of social systems reflect the inherent change-potential in the duality of structure. The 'idea of the duality of structure carries with it the implication that the seeds of change are present in every moment of the constitution of social systems across time and space' (Giddens, 1995, p. 27). The people who occupy the different 'social positions' within social systems draw upon the different rules and resources that are associated with these positions and, consequently, may also reproduce these social principles as a result of the tensions that are associated with the position. However, their knowledgeability is always 'bounded by unacknowledged conditions and unintended consequences of action' (Giddens, 1995, p. 28), resulting in a situation whereby people make their own biographies in circumstances which may not be of their choosing (Giddens, 1991a).

When applied to the pedagogical relationship (van Manen, 1991b, p.77), the duality of structure, as conceived by Giddens, also reveals how pedagogy is not just concerned with the contextualised learning of knowledge and skills or teacher's pedagogical reflexivity, it is also concerned with the production and reproduction of the social system that allows one teacher to take charge of thirty students and to act in loco parentis, on a day-to-day and week-to-week basis, from one year to the next and from school to school. Within pedagogical action, teachers teach and students learn, but school systems are also created and recreated. While van Manen’s focus on the importance of context and relationship restores the centrality of the learner to the concept of pedagogy, it tends to presume the existence of the social structure that pre-exists in any pedagogical relationship and its context. Giddens’ Structuruarion Theory addresses this issue by enabling pedagogy to also be defined in terms of the social structure that must pre-exist before pedagogical interaction, but which is also a product of pedagogical interaction. It could be said that structure is always embedded in the
'pedagogical moment' (van Manen, 1991b), in addition to any other pedagogical intent of the teacher. But how do people change their circumstances?

AGENCY

The Dialectic of Control

The capability of people to change social systems (agency) focuses on their power to transform or intervene in the social interactions within which they are involved. Giddens notes that to be an agent:

...is to be able to deploy (chronically, in the flow of daily life) a range of causal powers, including that of influencing those deployed by others. Action depends on the capability of the individual to 'make a difference' to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events.

(Giddens, 1984, p. 14)

But Giddens also notes that the continuity of social systems over space and time only occurs as a consequence of the regularised power relations (of autonomy and dependence) between people or collectivities. However, all forms of dependence offer at least some resource, which ultimately allows a degree of reciprocal influence (sanctions) within the regularised power relations of social systems. Giddens has described this reciprocity as the 'dialectic of control'. In this sense, a teacher cannot teach if a student is not willing to learn, and therefore pedagogy is also concerned with the reproduction of the differential power relations between teachers and students.

Pedagogical action contains the inherent need for teachers to constantly deal with the dialectic of control. A teacher must be able to draw on the social structure (rules and resources) of 'schooling' to act in loco parentis and be 'present' in a classroom with the authority of a teacher – this is a precondition of pedagogical interaction. However, a teacher must also, knowingly or unknowingly, re-create
those same rules and resources to allow the pedagogical process to continue tomorrow, and to be undertaken by fellow teachers and other schools. If this were not the case, then the system of schooling would have to be reinvented on a daily basis, and teachers and students would spend more time establishing the structure of their relationships than they would learning other knowledge and skills.

Therefore, the structure of pedagogical relationships assumes that students will be ‘present’ as ready and willing to learn, and to accept, knowingly or unknowingly, the authority of the teacher in the pedagogical relationship, as well as the legitimacy of the educational discourse and practices that are used – academic standards, disciplined knowledge, uniforms etc. In contrast to compliant students, a student who questions the legitimacy of the social structure of the schooling system – perhaps because it is boring, unjust or irrelevant to him or her - also risks undermining the social structure on which teachers are reliant to engage their students pedagogically – they risk disorder in the classroom, and therefore are labelled as being ‘at risk’ themselves. To engage that student a teacher must exercise pedagogical tact (van Manen, 1991b), and ultimately walk a tightrope between pedagogical action which reproduces the structure/system on which pedagogy relies, and pedagogical action aimed at re-engageing the student on an individual basis. Such a tightrope requires the teacher to address the dualism between student interest and the curriculum and may therefore mean breaking the ‘academic rules’. In this sense, pedagogy is not just constructed by the teaching strategy brought to the classroom, but is also a product of the students’ agency and contributions to the pedagogical structure.

Discursive and Practical Consciousness

Traditionally, post-compulsory students who have challenged the legitimacy of the academic paradigm of secondary schools have been ‘moved out’, or elected to ‘opt out’ of the school system on they basis that they were not appropriate for the upper-secondary levels of schooling. In this sense – paradoxically - their agency resulted in them being defined ‘at risk’ of leaving school early. The introduction
of vocational and applied learning programs to the secondary system, however, has increased the possibility of student agency by discursively challenging the structural rules and resources of the existing academic pedagogy that constructs some students as inappropriate for the schooling system. The andragogical foundations of the VCAL program in Victoria, in particular, engage students on a discursive level about their own learning within the agenda of work-based learning, and increases the possibility of agency by developing and legitimising their own language of applied learning.

On this point, Giddens refers to the knowledge of individuals as being integral to the patterning of social life, through forms of 'discursive consciousness' and 'practical consciousness' (Giddens, 1984, p. 26). He notes that discursive consciousness describes the ability of people to articulate their knowledge of the social conditions in which they interact. It also allows for the reflexive monitoring of persons' own behaviours and situations, as well as the behaviour and situation of other individuals. This reflexive monitoring provides the starting point for people to continue to act in a certain way, or to change their behaviour and situation. Applied learning increases the discursive consciousness of traditionally 'at risk' students by engaging the notion of their own learning in a more adult way.

Practical consciousness, on the other hand, 'consists of all things which actors know tacitly about how to 'go on' in the contexts of social life without being able to give them direct discursive expression' (Giddens, 1984, p. xxiii). Routinised and day-to-day activities, such as the use of the English language in a conversation, are typically associated with a practical level of consciousness. Although a person may obviously have the appropriate knowledge to carry out a conversation, he or she may not be able to - or want to - articulate the grammatical reasons for constructing each sentence in a particular way. By not continuously contesting the grammatical rules of the English language, people are able to sustain a conversation with a sense of security in their system of communication.
Trust and Ontological Security

According to Giddens, people can gain a sense of trust and ontological security if there is sufficient routine in the social systems of their day-to-day lives. Just as the rules and resources of the English language - grammar and vocabulary - are reproduced in the act of conversation, the rules and resources of social systems are reproduced in the social structure of day-to-day activities. Giddens refers to the repetitiveness of day-to-day activities as the 'recursive nature of social life… (where by)...the structured properties of social activity – via the duality of structure – are constantly recreated out of the very resources which constitute them' (Giddens, 1984, p. xxiii).

Giddens’ analysis of practical and discursive levels of consciousness can also be applied to the concept of pedagogy. Students who resist the dominant academic paradigm are exercising a practical level of consciousness through their resistance – they ultimately decide that school is not for them because the pedagogical structure does not align with their own practical sense of learning. But by resisting the more accepted pedagogical pathway, such students risk the security that is awarded through the recursive nature of the school system. It is also obvious that teachers possess a practical level of consciousness in relation to pedagogical action as they are frequently able to make decisions ‘on the run’ - decisions relating to the teaching of knowledge and skills, as well as practical decisions relating to the reproduction of pedagogical structure. But to achieve the sort of reflexivity that has been proposed by van Manen (1991b) – and ultimately an ‘applied learning about teaching’ - teachers must also develop a discursive level of consciousness surrounding the phenomenon of pedagogy.
REPRODUCING CULTURAL INEQUITY

The persistence of the problem

Despite a significant body of research relating to cultural reproduction and correspondence theory, (Willis, 1976, Bernstein, 1982, Giroux, 1983, Apple, 1990, Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990, Kemmis and Fitzclarence, 1991, Lundgren, 1991, Levinson and et al., 1996) teachers’ and students’ level of discursive consciousness in relation to pedagogical structure has not generally developed alongside the research, possibly due to the lack of structured teacher reflexivity in traditional definitions of pedagogy, and a division of educational labour which has seen most of the research undertaken by universities, using traditional research methods, rather than schools adopting participatory research strategies, such as action research (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988). Perhaps it is not enough to just say that schools – on a theoretical level at least - reproduce class, gender, race and other structural divisions within society and expect that this awareness will produce more positive outcomes for disadvantaged students. This realisation must be incorporated into a redefinition of traditional pedagogy in a way that allows teachers to construct this realisation in action. In this sense, the dichotomy between research in education and educational practice needs to be reconstituted as a dialectical relationship within a redefinition of pedagogy.

Revisiting Learning to Labor (Willis, 1976) quickly reveals that resistance to the school curriculum and pedagogy, demonstrated by the working-class ‘lads’ in Willis’ seminal work, still seems to be a persistent theme in contemporary classrooms, where some students also reject the pedagogy and curriculum to the point of disengagement. What is different now is that the rejection of schooling is not necessarily limited to a group as clearly defined as the ‘working-class lads’, but more commonly involves a broader range of students who frequently express a desire for future lives that involve a pathway other than university. Such ‘alternative’ pathways may include the desire to undertake apprenticeships, TAFE studies, or to seek full-time employment – the vocational pathways from school.
Unfortunately, however, these students may also be defined by the dominant academic tradition as being ‘non-academic’, ‘lazy’, ‘unmotivated’, and sometimes even ‘dumb’. They seem to attract an ‘aura’ of being disadvantaged for not having the ‘desire’ and ‘motivation’ – or even ‘intelligence’ - to undertake the main stream pathway through VCE, and eventually further study at a university. In this sense they are considered to belong to a group within the school community that has a dimension of ‘otherness’ about it.

But to belong to the ‘other’ group clearly has some advantages, as students frequently make the choice not to ‘conform’ by rejecting the academic culture of the mainstream and its promises of a pathway to life in the ‘educated class’. While the working-class ‘lads’ in Willis’ research were also seen to be educationally and culturally disadvantaged, and their resistance to schooling was seen as a form of rejection of the upward mobility promised through education, the inevitable outcome of their resistance was the consolidation of their working-class identity and culture.

Social Structures and Reproduction

It appears that contemporary students, who identify with the vocational pathways in their upper years of schooling, also attract a sense of being educationally and culturally disadvantaged when compared to students in the main stream. Ironically, this stigma remains even though many students undertaking the VCE may also be ‘under-performing’ and lack a clear pathway through their schooling and beyond. However, the ‘normalised’ curriculum and pedagogy of the mainstream still assumes that the ‘security’ provided by traditional academic pathways is the one that all students should strive to assimilate into, and that the ‘other’ vocational pathways are culturally inferior by their assimilation into a sort of ‘working class’.

Inherent within this dualism between the academic and vocational pathways, there are obviously cultural assumptions about the dominance of academic learning
involving the ‘mind’ over vocational learning involving the ‘body’. This link between cognitive and social structure has been analysed by Bourdieu’s reflexive sociology (1992). He argues that:

There exists a correspondence between social structures and mental structures, between the objective divisions of the social world — particularly into dominant and dominated in the various fields — and the principles of vision and division that agents apply to it.

(Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.12)

But it is anomalous to assume that all students who elect to study vocational pathways can be grouped into the category of ‘working class lads’, although there is a strong degree of correlation with students’ socio-economic backgrounds. Research investigating the social divisions within the curriculum clearly shows that students who study subjects considered to be traditionally academic and attract high tertiary entrance scores (such as Chemistry, Specialist Mathematics, LOTE, Methods etc.), are most likely to be from families with a high socio-economic status, compared to students who study practical VCE subjects with a low tertiary entrance score (such as Systems & Technology, Materials & Technology, Outdoor Education, Health Education etc.), who are most likely to have come from families with a low socio-economic status (Teese, 2000).

It is not just any subjects that occupy the top levels of the curriculum, but those that give the greatest play to the economic power, cultural outlook and life-styles of the most educated populations. Located at the top of the hierarchy are languages, advanced mathematics and the physical sciences. These have a strong cognitive architecture. That is, each is a system of concepts in an ordered relationship that is pedagogically well defined. Attached to these theoretical structures are masses of data — lexical, chemical, physical, mathematical — samples of which enter the syllabus as the growth media for the conceptual elements with which teaching is really concerned. In each
case, the pedagogical aim is to master this interior space of fundamental ideas, arguments, laws, principles and rules, or at least to be proficient in the operations that depend on them, such as algorithms, writing chemical equations, producing correct sounds and sentences.

(Teese, 2000, p.197-199)

The correspondence between students’ successes in the ‘top level’ academic subjects of the VCE and access to the cultural and economic benefits of a university degree - cultural capital (Foucault, 1972, Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) – that is demonstrated in Teese’s work, also reinforces Bourdieu’s correspondence between the abstracted curriculum and pedagogy that underpins academic subjects and the social divisions and cultural hierarchy existing in society generally. In other words, the abstracted system-based pedagogy that is supported by the dominant academic paradigm in most secondary schools, produces and reproduces rules and distributes resources that constitute the structure of our society generally, as well as reproducing the social structure that allows schools to function as social institutions.

It is also not a coincidence that, of the two hundred and twenty two education and training providers that are delivering the VCAL in 2003 (VQA, 2003), the vast majority are state secondary colleges and outer region catholic colleges – schools most likely to cater for students from lower income families. Teese notes that ‘the hierarchy of the curriculum cannot be exploited as a system of social advantage without a hierarchy of schools in which to deposit the ‘reserves of talent’ created by educated middle-class families’ (Teese, 2000, p.203). With this in mind, it is worth noting that the VCAL has not been a popular curriculum consideration for high-fee independent schools, as it does not correspond with the access to cultural capital that an academic curriculum offers.

Unfortunately, within this context of secondary school stratification based on socio-economic status and academic merit, schools that do offer ‘non-academic’
curriculum programs, such as the VCAL, may end up further legitimising the social stratification by their unintended production of a new, more effective method of discursive formation (Foucault, 1972) of schools that ultimately defines the ‘cultural inferiority’ of a vocational pathway. If the VCAL remains limited to schools that cater for low socio-economic families and poor academic status, it may simply consolidate further the hegemonic (Gramsci, 1971) dimension of the schooling system by its provision of a vocational pathway which has a strong sense of ‘otherness’ and ‘subjugation’ (Foucault, 1980) when compared to the dominant VCE-academic pathway.

**VCAL as a Technology of Control**

Within schools that offer the VCAL as an ‘alternative’ pathway to the traditional academic pathway, the VCAL could also be seen as a new form of ‘disciplinary force’ (Foucault, 1995) which allows schools to regain legitimate control over students who were otherwise disengaged from their schooling. Just as the academic achievement discourse of the ‘normal’ curriculum and pedagogy could be argued to have panoptic (Foucault, 1995) power in the discipline and control of ‘consenting’ students who conform to the requirements of the secondary school system, the VCAL may also be seen as a new, more legitimate means of student control and management for ‘applied learning’ students, who otherwise did not accept the legitimacy of the academic schooling system in the regulation of their behaviour.

This panoptic (Foucault, 1995) outcome for the VCAL may not have been the intention of the Victorian State Government and the developers of the VCAL, but it could be the intention of school teachers and administrators who do not engage reflexively on the pedagogical reasons why some students may become disengaged from their schooling in the first place. Such teachers and administrators may remain driven by competition within the ‘education market’ and would rather protect and preserve the academic tradition of the school by
legitimately ‘removing the troublemakers’ from the classes containing the brightest academic students, and relegating academically ‘at risk’ students to the ‘applied learning’ program as a sort of ‘cure’ for their ‘learning illness’. In this way, the VCAL may be just another way of re-establishing ‘docile bodies’ (Foucault, 1995) and the social stratification of schools, that occurs on a broader level of society, may continue to be legitimised by further reinforcing the academic norms – applied learning programs could be seen to be like ‘doing time’ in prison - and the ultimate stratification of subjects within the secondary curriculum still based on the traditional notion of academic merit.

From the perspective of the government/education system, students who were otherwise disengaged by the academic curriculum and pedagogy, and ultimately presented to schools as academic failures and behaviour risks, and to governments as long-term unemployment risks, now have the potential to be re-engaged in the education system by quiet coercion in the VCAL. The danger of this occurring is yet still another reminder of the need to return to a critical redefinition of pedagogy that is not a product of academic discourse, but rather has a deep respect for the complex relationships that are formed between teachers and students. It is also a reminder of the difficulty faced by schools, as social institutions, when they attempt to address the complex issues created by having to use existing social structure to change social structure.

**STUDENT IDENTITY AND PEDAGOGY**

In considering the attempts of schools’ to re-engage students in schooling, McFadden and Munns have drawn on the work of Jones (1989) to argue that ‘teachers do not solely control the classroom, (and therefore) change cannot be found purely in modifications to their paradigm alone’ (McFadden and Munns, 2002, p361). Without considering the identities and experiences that students bring to the classroom, any attempt to redefine pedagogy in more holistic terms will be limited to only one half of the pedagogical relationship between students and teachers. In his work on disaffected students, Furlong (1991) has emphasised
the need to consider the psychological dimension of students’ experience of schooling, in particular, the emotions that students bring to the classroom, which construct students as people, not just learners. Such emotions are frequently the result of a student’s lifeworld experiences outside the classroom, but still remain an important factor in the construction of pedagogical relationships with teachers. McFadden and Munns note that:

What determines whether classroom practices are ‘authentic’ and ‘productive’ depends on the ways that these relationships play out. In this sense, student Engagement is a process rather than a product.

(McFadden and Munns, 2002, p.362 original emphasis)

Unfortunately, traditional academic pedagogy frequently engages students on the assumption that their own adolescent knowledge of life is largely inferior to the disciplined knowledge that is delivered via the subject discipline of the curriculum. Traditional pedagogy therefore contributes to the construction of student identities in which their own personal understanding of the world is subjugated (Foucault, 1980) to the knowledge of the education system. In this way, students’ personal knowledge has been constructed as:

…a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity.

(Foucault, 1980, p.82)

For many students in the upper years of secondary schooling, who are also on the verge of becoming young adults with an increasingly independent view of the world, the subjugation of personal knowledge may therefore amount to a subjugation of their identity, and eventual disengagement from school as they come to realise that their identity does not match the type ‘required’ to remain at school. McFadden and Munns have argued that:
Traditional methods of assessment, in particular, are implicated in this process of disengagement. But also, pedagogical methods that leave no space for students to insert their culture, experience or language are also implicated in what can amount to an educational lock out.

(McFadden and Munns, 2002, p.363)

The relationship between curriculum, pedagogy and students’ identities as learners has been extensively theorised by Bernstein’s (1996, 1999) work on ‘the issue of how variations in the distribution of power (classifications) and variations in the principles of control (framings) impose or enable variations in the formation of identities and their change, through differential specialisation of communication and of its social base’ (Bernstein and Solomon, 1999, p.271). According to Bernstein, the strong ‘classification’ and ‘framing’ of the traditional pedagogical approach of teachers and schools limits access to particular codes and rules which are used by students in their perception of the world and that allow an understanding of the discursive practices of power. In this way, Bernstein has argued, the curriculum and pedagogical approach of schools contribute significantly to the construction of students’ identities as learners, within the school context, and as future adults, once they have left school. ‘Students quickly come to understand when school is not working for them and when the practices of teachers are not of any use in their own lives or, more pointedly, when their use is illusionary’ (McFadden and Munns, 2002, p.362). However, in their discussion on ‘productive pedagogies’, McFadden and Munns have drawn on the work of Bernstein (1995) and Jones (1989) to suggest that if a...

‘...disruption of the discourse of power occurs in a group setting where the group has some control over the framing of the pedagogical context, this can lead to positive social change with the group as its essential unit. In this context, individuals within the group begin to think the previously ‘unthinkable’; that is, they are able to break free of the boundaries and limits that previous pedagogical formations
have put on what they were able to express validly as worthwhile knowledge’.


In considering the role of schools in facilitating the transition of students from childhood to adulthood, several authors have also emphasised the ‘core business’ of schools as essentially being one of youth identity formation (Grundy, 1994, Freeland, 1996, Smyth et al., 2000b). ‘Secondary schools might be best understood as places in which young people are attempting to navigate their futures whilst in a continual state of metamorphosis’ (Smyth et al., 2000b, p.48). But the fact that schools are deeply involved with students’ transitions from childhood dependence to eventual adulthood and independence – essentially a process of self identity formation - is a critical point in considering the necessary reflexivity of a pedagogy which disrupts the traditional discourse of power, and the need to restore the centrality of human relationships to the definition of pedagogy. In particular, such a pedagogy needs to balance the differential needs for autonomy and dependence that normally occur within any class of twenty five to thirty adolescent students, by emphasising the development of a reflexive pedagogical relationship (van Manen, 1991b) between students and teachers within the class.

BEING CONSTRUCTED ‘AT RISK’

The notion of self-identity has been the subject of renewed focus for the social sciences (Rose, 1990, Giddens, 1991a, Bernstein, 1996), with a particular emphasis on the idea of the ‘self’ not being seen as ‘neutral representations of the subject-person but rather as discursive interventions that do important political and cultural work in constructing, maintaining and transforming both individuals and their social world’ (Chappell et al., 2002, p.6). The formation of identity is now seen to be a ‘contingent and constructed concept’ which is ultimately a continuing process requiring ‘discursive work to be done in order to construct the
symbolic boundaries that are used to differentiate one particular identification from that which surrounds it' (Chappell et al., 2002, p.7).

In addition to the important relationship between pedagogy and identity discussed above, the emphasis of work-based education discourse on the knowledge and skills required for the post-industrial economy could also be understood as an attempt to change the identity of students and, eventually, the workforce. In other words, 'changing selves has therefore become the aim of new vocationalism' (Chappell et al., 2002, p.8). For post compulsory students who have been discursively constructed as being 'at risk' by their failure in the academic paradigm of learning, there is also the danger of being constructed as being 'at risk' by post-industrial economic discourse, unless their efforts in applied learning programs are successful in re-constructing their identity.

But the theme of risk (discussed earlier) has been considered by Giddens (1994) and Beck (1992) as being an important meta-narrative in this age of 'reflexive modernisation' and 'Risk Society', and has significant implications for self-identity also. 'Just as modernization dissolved the structure of feudal society in the nineteenth century and produced the industrial society, modernization today is dissolving industrial society' (Beck, 1992, p.10) and all of the social traditions that were built into it. Although people have been 'set free' from these traditions, they must now cope with the production of their own biographies (Giddens, 1991a, Lash and Friedman, 1992) and the day-to-day management of risks which might have otherwise been the responsibility of industrial state apparatus. Beck (1992) refers to this process as 'individualisation' – a process where individuals themselves become the 'reproduction unit for the social lifeworld' (Beck, 1992, p. 130 original emphasis).

However, the process of individualisation is carried out by processes of 'standardisation', whereby the market and abstract systems penetrate the lifeworlds of individuals, and force risks to be managed by individuals within institutionalised risk frameworks. In other words, as a result of individualisation,
there has been a significant shift away from the traditional ‘socially shared and constructed continuities that bind people together towards those that are more reflexive’ (Lawy, 2002, p. 408) and ‘can only be solved on an individual level through personal action’ (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997, p.4-5). Standardisation has resulted in individuals’ greater reliance on expert and government systems that attempt to manage institutionally defined risks.

The resulting discourse of risk has significant implications for understanding the concept of self-identity. As a consequence of the ‘manufactured uncertainty’ of reflexive modernisation, Giddens has argued that there exist:

...new mechanisms of self-identity which are shaped by – yet also shape – the institutions of modernity. The self is not a passive entity, determined by external influences; in forging their self-identities, no matter how local their specific contexts of action, individuals contribute to and directly promote social influences that are global in their consequences and implications.

(Giddens, 1991a, p.2)

Vocational and economic discourse that seek to prepare young people for future work in a globalised economy, has mobilised (neo)liberal governments (Kelly, 2001) to insure against future risks of high unemployment and poor economic performance by *colonising the future* (Giddens, 1991a, p. 111 original emphasis) of young people. In other words, a heightened awareness of economic risk has prompted (neo)liberal governments to attempt to construct the identities of young people in a way that will allow them to make responsible decisions as they individually manage the risks of a globalised economy. In this sense, ‘lifelong’ and ‘lifewide’ learning (ACDE, 2001) discourse is as much about participating in the individualisation of economic risk as it is about standardising governmental response to the perceived risks of a globalised market economy.
INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I outline my approach to the research procedures for this thesis. I begin by introducing how my ‘gaze was turned towards pedagogy’ as a phenomenon of inquiry and the consequential research concerns that I bring to the research. I have then summarised my research concerns as ‘focus questions’ that have been used to inform my choice of research procedures. This chapter also explains how I have structured the approach to inquiry using ‘human science’ (van Manen, 1998, Dilthey, 1987) to reveal and portray the multi-faceted essence of applied learning pedagogy, and a critical approach (Foucault, 1972, 1980, 1995, Lash and Urry, 1987, Giddens, 1990b, Beck et al., 1994) to reflection and analysis to understand pedagogy as a broader social phenomenon. Finally, I have included in this chapter a discussion of my response to the research dilemmas brought about by my role as an insider-researcher.

TURNING MY GAZE TOWARDS PEDAGOGY

I wish I could say I first ‘turned my gaze’ to the phenomenon of pedagogy out of a dutiful reading of the professional literature. But the fact is my head was turned ‘forcibly’ and my gaze ‘fixed for me’ by a group of uncontrollable Year Eleven Agriculture students – affectionately known as the ‘Aggies’. Fifteen years ago – as a young teacher – I was awarded the task of teaching the ‘Aggies’ Year Eleven General Mathematics - including calculus and probability. But the uncontrollable and spirited nature of the ‘Aggies’ was in direct contrast to my other class of students – the well-behaved and obedient Year Twelve Chemistry students. As a young teacher I found teaching the Chemistry students was relatively ‘easy’. I had the support of a disciplined body of knowledge that was ‘unquestionable’ in terms of its relevance to the lives of my students, and an authoritative ‘pedagogical
relationship’ with my class that was sustained by the school system. My Chemistry students were willing to sit still in my classes, dutifully taking copious notes on material I had told them was important to the course, the exam and their futures. But the ‘Aggies’ were a different matter. They would neither sit still in my class nor accept as relevant, any of the curriculum material I gave them. The disciplined body of mathematics knowledge had little effect on their motivation to learn and any sense of an ‘authoritative pedagogical relationship’ with the ‘Aggies’ was experienced as a constant struggle for classroom control – I used the course content to threaten their failure as students, and they used their lack of value for ‘schooling’ to threaten my failure as a teacher.

Ironically, my gaze was turned to the phenomenon of pedagogy by the juxtaposition of my ‘success’ as an academic Chemistry teacher and my ‘failure’ as a teacher of the ‘Aggies’, who would not accept as legitimate my academic approach to learning mathematics. After four years of successfully teaching Chemistry, and just a few months ‘with’ – I won’t say teaching - the ‘Aggies’, I found myself becoming suspicious of the ease with which I controlled my Chemistry classes. I began questioning the efficacy of the traditional academic pedagogy on which I relied, and eventually, after thoughts of leaving the profession altogether, I began to explore more deeply the ‘art’ of teaching and learning by enrolling in the Masters of Education program at Deakin University. Armed also with my curiosity of the successful learning experiences that the ‘Aggie’ students derived from their involvement on the college farm, I began to explore their ‘world of applied learning’ by using a farm-based enterprise to provide my senior Chemistry students with more authentic learning experiences.

Together, with my ‘Aggies’ and Chemistry students - and some help from the farm manager - we collectively developed what became known as the college’s Fish Farm enterprise, stocking over two thousand adult rainbow trout that we had raised from eggs. We researched the mathematics and chemistry required to build such an enterprise, eventually building concrete tanks, holding ponds, feeding systems and a water purification system. Just how much mathematics and
chemistry we had learnt – and its social significance - became obvious when we applied for government permits to pump water from the local creek, and to return it, after treatment and purification, through the Chemistry students’ water treatment plant. When we were granted the appropriate permits to proceed with our project there was a sense that what and how we were learning was indeed authentic and valuable.

‘My Aggie’ students took great pride when asked by the then Board of Studies to display their four-metre scale model of the Fish Farm at a major education exhibition in Melbourne. The model was built in their mathematics class and came complete with live adult trout. Although we had to eventually remove it after four days because the smell of fish was a bit too real for the exhibition organisers, their (and my) pride in what ‘we’ had learnt and built was a stark contrast to their resistance towards my initial attempts to teach them using traditional academic pedagogy. Ironically, by their non-compliance to what I had assumed to be the normal way of learning, the ‘Aggie’ students forced me to become more reflexive about what was being assumed in my own pedagogical relationships. After completing four years of undergraduate study in ‘teaching’, and then another four years of ‘successfully’ teaching senior Chemistry, it was eventually the ‘Aggie’ students who ‘turned my head and focused my gaze’ on the issue of pedagogy and learning.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS

A SENSE OF STRUGGLE

My subsequent years of teaching and an eventual role as a Deputy Principal (Curriculum) have generated many other similar stories of struggle stemming from my own biography and the lives of teachers and students. Students being forced to leave school because of their academic failure; teachers removing students from their class because of poor grades; some teachers receiving retribution from their colleagues for ‘doing things differently’ and failing to
support the ‘team’…these stories of struggle are important to this research, as they position my role as a researcher within my identity as a teacher, a researcher, a Deputy Principal and parent. They are all eventually bound together by a common sense of struggle between the theme of authentic pedagogy and the system of schooling. In coming to this research I bring a number of concerns derived from these different identities but located around the same sense of struggle:

**Being At-Risk And Failures**

- A concern for students who have been rejected by the school system as being ‘non-academic’, ‘at-risk’ and ‘failures’, and who are consequently marginalised to the point of leaving – or perhaps escaping - school as soon as they can. I am equally concerned about many students who are failing or ‘performing poorly’ in their academic post-compulsory schooling, yet are not seen as being ‘at-risk’ because of their compliance with traditional academic behaviours. There is a common belief by teachers and parents that these ‘chronic poor performers’ are at least doing the right thing by staying at school to complete their VCE – but are they? Focus question: *What is the experience of schooling like for students who have been labelled as being ‘at risk’?*

**Special Pedagogical Relationships**

- A concern for the ‘special’ pedagogical relationships that some teachers are able to form with ‘at risk’ students by their use of ‘non-traditional’ and particularly applied and work-based learning to re-invent the experience of schooling for marginalised students and potential early school leavers. These ‘special relationships’ have a sense of struggle about them, but are also typified by a spirit of resistance that ultimately results in confidence being restored to students and the notion of being ‘at-risk’ diminished. Focus Question: *What is the nature of the pedagogical relationship formed between*
teachers and students in the applied learning program and what is the nature of their struggles and resistance?

Sustaining Applied Learning Reform

• A concern that current attempts in Victoria to reform the dominant academic contexts and practices in schools (Kirby, 2000) by the introduction applied learning pedagogy and programs (VQA, 2002, Henry et al., 2002) must overcome the deep resistance of most schools to change their academic culture. Such reforms may be unsustainable in the longer-term and on a systemic level, unless the theory-practice gap (Greenwood and Levin, 2000) existing between educational research and practice is overcome at the same time. Focus question: What is the experience of teaching an Applied Learning program like for teachers within the dominant academic context of the VCE?

Understanding Pedagogy, Schools and Teachers

• A concern that the existing language of pedagogy remains under theorised in schools and, by focussing mainly on curriculum delivery and behavioural outcomes, limits teachers in their struggle to understand the complex social nature of pedagogy as a social phenomenon. Focus question: What is the nature of teachers’ reflections on curriculum and pedagogy around the issue of pedagogical reform?

Pedagogy and Society

• A concern for the need to extend recent research into academic success and social power (Teese and Polesel, 2003, Teese, 2000) which has re-ignited the debate surrounding schools as sites for social reproduction and re-emphasised the role of curriculum in the reproduction of academic culture and social power. Such critical research creates the need for educational inquiry to also refocus on the true complexity of pedagogy as an important social
phenomenon in social (re)production (Giddens, 1984) if it is to avoid remaining in the ‘interests’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) of universities – the cornerstones of academic culture – rather than seeking to make a difference in schools. I am concerned that, despite the struggle to create critically self-reflective schools (McTaggart, 1991, Zuber-Skerritt, 1996, Carr and Kemmis, 1986), there still exists a significant research/theory-practice gap (Greenwood and Levin, 2000) surrounding the issue of pedagogy, schools and social reproduction. Focus question: How can the cultural phenomenon of pedagogy be linked to the broader phenomenon of social (re)production and pedagogical reform as a means to school reform?

SUMMARY OF GUIDING QUESTIONS USED TO INFORM THE RESEARCH PROCEDURES

- Focus Question 1: What is the experience of schooling like for students who have been labelled as being ‘at risk’?
- Focus Question 2: What is the nature of the pedagogical relationship formed between teachers and students in the applied learning program and what is the nature of their struggles and resistance?
- Focus Question 3: What is the experience of teaching an Applied Learning program like for teachers within the dominant academic context of the VCE?
- Focus Question 4: What is the nature of teachers’ reflections on curriculum and pedagogy around the issue of pedagogical reform?
- Focus Question 5: How can the cultural phenomenon of pedagogy be linked to the broader phenomenon of social (re)production and pedagogical reform as a means to school reform?
ADOPTING A RESEARCH APPROACH

A Rejection Of Positivist Approaches And Claims To Disinterest

Having highlighted my research position as an active teacher-practitioner and school administrator, it is clear that the concerns I bring to this research are not the concerns of a disinterested researcher in the traditional method of objective social science. With the concerns of this research being deeply embedded in struggles emerging from my identity as a teacher and school administrator, it would be disingenuous of me to make any claims to being a dispassionate observer. On the contrary, this research rejects any notion that the role of 'disinterested researcher' would be achievable, let alone suitable as a method for this research.

Historically, the positivistic approaches to educational research drew on the logic of the physical and life sciences by assuming that there can also exist a 'natural science of society' (Tucker, 1998, p. 36). The role of a researcher in the positivistic tradition is that of a 'detached and objective' data collector who conducts research on passive informants (LeCompte and Preissle, 1994, p. 24). Positivistic research also seeks to generalise the results of the research and to develop universal laws, which may be applied to other social settings.

'Durkheim's Rules of Sociological Method remains perhaps the boldest expression of such a (positivist) view...According to Durkheim, the object of sociology is to construct theories about human conduct inductively on the basis of prior observations about that conduct.

(Giddens, 1993, p. 138)

In contrast to the positivist methods, this research embraces the obvious qualitative differences between humans and the objects of natural science that would ultimately render a positivist approach fallible. Unlike inanimate objects,
the students, teachers and the researcher involved in this research are capable of reflection and thought on the knowledge that is produced about them. Rather than being the ideal, passive subjects of positivistic research, the participants of this research are changed by the research process and their contribution to new knowledge. As such, this research identifies with the more genuine ‘human science’ approach to research (van Manen, 1998, Dilthey, 1987) which does not aim to produce universal laws in the same way that the natural sciences can.

[A]ny approach to the social sciences which seeks to express their epistemology and ambitions as directly similar to those of the sciences of nature is condemned to failure in its own terms, and can only result in a limited understanding of human society.

(Giddens, 1993, p. 19)

A Rejection of Structural-Functionalism as a view to society.

Similar to the positivistic approaches, structural-functionalism also seeks a 'science of society', similar to that of the natural sciences, but manages to move beyond Durkheim's 'social facts' by drawing on the sensitivity of Max Weber to the role of values and meaning in social research. However, functionalists, such as Talcott and Parsons (1971), assume a methodological logic that remains close to that of the natural sciences:

1. An objective world of facts exists apart from the observer.
2. One understands the world through observations which can then be tested empirically.
3. The concepts of scientific knowledge are internally consistent and stable over time.
4. The truth of a proposition is distinct from its origins.

(Feyerabend, 1964 in, Tucker, 1998, p. 61)
Both structuralists and functionalists therefore tend to view society as having its own needs in order to function, with changes in society occurring as endogenous and naturally unfolding events. Although functionalists, such as Parsons, are concerned with the subjective decision making of people, it is argued that the material, physical and normative constraints of society influence such decisions beyond their control. In structural-functionalism, the 'stage is set, but the actors only perform according to scripts which have already been written out for them' (Giddens, 1993, p. 21).

In considering the concerns brought forward by this research, I intend to draw on Giddens' criticism of the structural-functionalist approaches which questions the dualistic assumption that 'structure' is external to the human action that it is supposed to influence (Giddens, 1984, p. 16). The suggestion that a social system is independent of the action and consciousness of the people within that system neglects the significance of power in structuring social relations.

We should not conceive of the structures of domination built into institutions as in some way grinding out 'docile bodies' who behave like the automatons suggested by the objectivist social scientist. Power within social systems which enjoy some continuity over time and space presumes regularized relations of autonomy and dependence between actors or collectivities in contexts of social interaction.

(Giddens, 1984, p. 16)

In contrast to the dualistic determinism of the structural-functionalist approaches to social analysis, this research seeks to draw on Giddens' notion of the 'duality of structure' (Giddens, 1991b), which has more respect for the reflexivity and action of humans in the structuring of social systems.
TURNING TO A HUMAN SCIENCE APPROACH

In rejecting the positivist research methodology and structural-functionalist views to society, this research turns to the ‘human sciences’ for methodological approaches that will be consistent with the research concerns. In adopting a human science approach, it is my intention that the following broad methodological concerns will be addressed:

- The need for a research approach concerned with interpreting and understanding rather than explaining.
- The need for a research approach comfortable with my research role as an active participant-researcher.
- The need for a research approach concerned with the socially constructed nature of meaning rather than its pre-given reality.

Historically, the distinction of a ‘human science’ approach to social inquiry, as opposed to the ‘natural sciences’, has been attributed to the work of Wilhelm Dilthey (1987), who argued that the human sciences (Geisteswissenschaften) were fundamentally different in nature and purpose from the natural sciences (Naturwissenschaften). In contrast to the external observations and causal explanations of positivism, the human sciences seek to understand human action through interpretation and understanding. Although, the critical distinction between ‘explanation’ (Erklären) as an aim of the natural sciences, and ‘understanding’ (Verstehen) as an aim of the human sciences remains as an unsettled issue in contemporary research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), it is not my aim to engage this debate within the limits of this thesis.

What can be said, however, is that with an emphasis on interpretation and understanding, the methodological diversity of human science approaches (including symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, critical theory, ethnography, ethnomethodology, gender studies and semiotics) all share the central notion of hermeneutics (Schleiermacher, 1977, Dilthey, 1987, Heidegger, 1962, Gadamer,
1975, Ricoeur, 1981). Hermeneutics is essentially the 'theory and practice of interpretation' (van Manen, 1998, p.179) and, in contemporary human science research, 'a concern with hermeneutics involves a concern with meaning' (LeCompte and Preissle, 1994, p. 31). The concern with meaning of the human science approaches is consistent with the sensitivity required to understand the dialectic nature and meaning of the struggle between authentic pedagogy and the system of schooling. The hermeneutic intent of this research therefore aims to understand the complexity of pedagogy as a social phenomenon by revealing the essence of schooling through the voices and lived experiences of students, teachers and myself as the researcher.

In addition to their hermeneutic intent, the focus of the human science methods also generally involves the elimination of the subject-object dichotomy, which is typical of the 'objective' positivist and functionalist methodologies. This dichotomy is typically eliminated by recognising the participation of the observer in or with the object of study, and an analysis that focuses on the constructed nature of social meaning and reality (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). In coming to this research as an active teacher-practitioner and school administrator, it is my intent to change my workplace through the research process and political engagement on a local and systemic level. It is not my intention to keep my researcher identity completely separate and isolated from my identity as a teacher and Deputy Principal. Similarly, it is not my intention to artificially separate to any significant degree, my activity in each of these domains. In this sense there are no traditional subjects and objects for this research, but rather it is my intention to view all participants as co-researchers who contribute to the research process.

STRUCTURING THE RESEARCH APPROACH

It was originally my intention that this research would take the form of a critical ethnography, with clear steps and processes that I would be able to follow as I progressed through the research. However, when the time came to begin 'living
with the data’ (Piantanida and Garman, 1999) I quickly realised that the process would be much more complex and reflexively layered than I originally considered and that critical ethnography used as a single, linear method would not be sufficient to address this issue. In particular, I was not satisfied that the multifaceted nature of pedagogy as a cultural phenomenon could be expressed through critical ethnography alone. As it became clear to me that the meaning of applied learning pedagogy was not a singular, static phenomenon, but rather something much more organic and changing, I began to seek a research approach that would be more accommodating and expressive.

Eventually I decided to refine the structure of the research to use a mosaic of methodologies that would remain consistent with my research concerns, but faithful to the complexity of my own experience of research - as pedagogical inquiry - and the phenomenon of applied learning pedagogy. The outcome is a research method that draws on hermeneutic phenomenology and narrative techniques to explore and express the multifaceted nature of pedagogy as a cultural phenomenon. It then adopts a critical approach by drawing on the body of critical and post critical thinking (Giddens, 1993, Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, Foucault, 1995, Beck et al., 1994) to establish a link between the cultural manifestation of pedagogy in schools, and pedagogy as a broader sociological phenomenon. In this sense the research aims to critically rethink pedagogy and schooling as ‘apparently familiar educational phenomena’ (Freebody, 2003). The structure of the research approach may be summarised by two key moments:

1. Using personal narrative and hermeneutic phenomenology to reveal and portray the multi-faceted essence of pedagogy as experienced by applied learning students, teachers and the researcher.

2. Using critical reflection and analysis to understand pedagogy as a broader social phenomenon and the complexity of its relationship in the (re)production of the system of schooling.
The following discussion outlines how I have addressed the research concerns and structured the research approach by synthesising the cultural focus of personal narrative and hermeneutic phenomenology with the broader sociological methods of critical reflection. The discussion begins with my use of hermeneutic phenomenology as a human science approach to educational inquiry and then provides details of the data collection process, thematic analysis of the data and the research dilemmas faced as an insider-researcher.

HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGY

Hermeneutic Phenomenology as Human Science


• Hermeneutic phenomenology as a research method involves a study of lived experience. ‘It aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences’ (p.9).

• Hermeneutic phenomenology also involves the ‘explication of phenomena as they present themselves to consciousness’ (p.9). The process of phenomenological reflection on lived experience is therefore recollective experience, as it involves reflection on experiences that have passed.

• Hermeneutic phenomenology involves the study of essences. ‘The essence of a phenomenon is a universal which can be described through a study of
the structure that governs the instances or particular manifestations of the essence of that phenomenon' (p.10).

- Hermeneutic phenomenology involves the ‘description of experiential meaning we live as we live them’ (p.11).

- Hermeneutic phenomenological research is the human scientific study of phenomena. Because the subject matter is the structures of meaning of the ‘lived human world’ (p.11), hermeneutic phenomenology is a human science.

- Hermeneutic phenomenology is ‘the attentive practice of thoughtfulness’ (p.12).

- Hermeneutic phenomenological research is a ‘search for what it means to be human’ (p.12).

- Hermeneutic phenomenological research is ‘a poetising activity’ that seeks a primal telling of the experience (p.13).

In terms of this research, my use of hermeneutic phenomenology as a method seeks to ask preliminary questions like: What is the experience of schooling and applied learning like for students and teachers? What does the experience of schooling and applied learning mean for the students and teachers involved? By focussing on the experience of schooling and seeking answers to these questions I intend to develop a deeper understanding of the essence of pedagogy as manifested through applied learning and schooling.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is therefore intended to inform directly the first four of my research concerns, which seek to understand the struggles revealed through: ‘being at-risk and failures’; ‘special pedagogical relationships’; ‘attempts at applied learning reform’; and ‘understanding pedagogy, schools and teachers’.

The fifth research concern - the struggle to understand the relationship between ‘Pedagogy and Society’ – is also addressed in part by synthesising hermeneutic phenomenology as an approach to inquiry with Giddens’ (1993, 1984) concept of ‘Structuration Theory’ and his ‘New Rules of Sociological Method’. Giddens’ notion of the ‘duality of structure’ provides an opportunity to understand the
recursive nature of ‘meaning structures’ (van Manen, 1998) revealed by hermeneutic phenomenology.

INVESTIGATING PEDAGOGY AS A LIVED EXPERIENCE

‘Collecting the Data’ and ‘Painting the Picture’

This research investigates the lived experience of pedagogy through the interplay of students’ and teachers’ experiences that are ultimately all filtered through my own experiences as a teacher-researcher. To be consistent with the methodological approach of the research, the notion of ‘data collection’ is intended to relate to the collection of valuable experiences and reflexive insights that have been gained through the research process, rather than anything of a more quantitative nature. I have used the phrase warily and taken note of van Manen’s warnings of the potential for human science ‘data collection’ to be confused with the traditional positivistic understandings when it is described with reference to the more conventional terminology:

In some respect it is quite misleading to talk of “data” in this context, particularly since the concept of “data” has quantitative overtones associated with behavioural and more positivistic social science approaches. And to speak of “gathering” and “collecting” human science data, as if one is speaking of “objective information,” may admittedly be an attempt to borrow the respect that so-called “hard” sciences have enjoyed.

(van Manen, 1998, p.53)

Contrary to the notion of collecting hard quantitative data, the data collection methods used in this research are intended to capture the recollections of experiences, reflections on experiences and transcribed conversations about experiences, even though they are merely ‘transformations of those experiences’ (van Manen, 1998, p.54). With this in mind, the procedures of data collection used
in this research are intended to ‘paint a vibrant picture’ of the phenomenon of pedagogy - as experienced through schooling and applied learning - which will contribute to the verité (Piantanida and Garman, 1999) of the research. The research procedures for the collection of data can be summarised as:

- Personal narrative accounts complied by keeping a journal of my lived experiences and ongoing reflections;
- Audio-tape recording of conversational interviews conducted with students and teachers;
- Audio-tape recording of the Pathways Committee meetings – a committee established by the school to track and case-manage students who are considered to be ‘at-risk’.

Membership of the Pathways Committee includes: the Careers Coordinator; VET Coordinator; VCE Coordinator; Pathways Facilitator; Middle School Learning Coordinator; two VCAL Teachers; and the Director of Curriculum.

Story as a Starting Point

Citing the work of Tierney and Lincoln (1997), Kamler (see also Barone and Eisner, 1997, Thompson, 1999, Richardson, 2000) has noted that there has been ‘a burgeoning interest in story and narrative across a wide range of disciplinary contexts (education, composition, sociology, literacy) as a framework for understanding the construction of knowledge in relation to lived experience’ (Kamler, 1999, p.45). In discussing the specific rather than abstract nature of stories as a narrative research method, Kamler also emphasises the distinction between lived experience and a story offered as a representation if it.

Stories do not tell single truths, but rather represent a truth, a perspective, a particular way of seeing experience and naming it. Stories are partial, they are located rather than universal, they are a representation of experience rather than the same thing as experience itself (‘not authentic’). (Kamler, 1999, pp45-46)
In this research I have used a narrative approach to collect and portray some of my ‘located’ experiences and stories as a starting point for the research. The progressive recording of my ‘lived experience descriptions’ (van Manen, 1998, pp. 63-66) in a reflective journal allows me to adopt a two-step - but dialectic - approach to generating narrative accounts of my own lived experience. In the first instance, the use of protocol writing (van Manen, 1998) in the journal gives a ‘direct description of my experience as it is, without offering casual explanations or interpretive generalisations’ (van Manen, 1998). As an insider-researcher, this is an important first step because it creates possibilities for a ‘clearer separation’ (Kamler, 1999, p.46) between my life as a teacher-researcher, and the lived experience of pedagogy that I am writing about. It also allows the prospect of making more explicit my preliminary assumptions and understandings, by locating myself in the research in a way which is ‘less naturalised’ (Kamler, 1999, p.46) and more accessible to the reader as the teller of a story. As van Manen (1998, p.46) has noted, the ‘problem of phenomenological inquiry is not always that we know too little about the phenomenon we wish to investigate, but that we know too much’. My use of narrative accounts of my lived experience is intended to locate and orientate myself in the research, whilst also providing a rich description of the phenomenon of schooling as I have experienced it.

My use of narrative accounts in the ‘data chapters’ of this thesis also serves as an important rhetorical device (Richardson, 1990) to draw the reader into the phenomenon of schooling and pedagogy as experienced – through my eyes - by the participants in the research. It is my intention that the narrative account starting each of the ‘data chapters’ will serve as a conduit for the reader to experience and relate to the phenomenon as I have portrayed it. The portrayals provide a context into which subsequent reading of the data in each chapter can be placed. It is important to note that the narrative accounts provided at the beginning of each of the data chapters have been extracted from my Journal and serve as my portrayal of actual events. However, the portrayals are not intended to be read as ‘the facts of the matter’, but are offered as ‘literary text’ (Barone and Eisner,
1997) which are open to 'multiple readings' (Thompson, 1999) and 'multiple layers' (van Manen, 1998) of meaning.

Conversational Interviews with Students and Teachers

The second approach to the 'collection of data' involves my audio-tape recording of conversational interviews (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000) with students and teachers who have been involved in the VCAL program. By using conversational interviews, it is my intention to add phenomenological richness and verisimilitude (Bruner, 1986) to the textual portrayals of the phenomenon, by inviting the participants to enter into a conversation with me about their experiences of schooling. In this sense my use of conversational interviews seeks to construct a textual portrayal or account of the experiences and meanings of schooling as articulated by the participants in the research – including myself.

In hermeneutic phenomenological human science the interview serves very specific purposes: (1) it may be used as a means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon, and (2) the interview may be used as a vehicle to develop a conversational relation with a partner (interviewee) about the meaning of an experience.

(van Manen, 1998, p.66)

The students and teachers in this research were 'interviewed' about their recent and current experiences of schooling using 'unstructured' or 'open-ended' discussions (van Manen, 1998, Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, Freebody, 2003, Burgess-Limerick and Burgess-Limerick, 2004) to allow participants the flexibility to tell a story grounded mostly in their experience. Within the context of this research, conversational interviews have also been used as a recursive process (Bruner, 1986) in which the dialogue between myself and the participants
build upon previous conversations and experiences which we may have a shared knowledge of as members of the same school community.

As in all conversations, the open-ended, conversational interviews used in this research are also laden with cultural assumptions about how such conversations should proceed between myself, the students and teachers involved in the research. In this sense, the conversational interviews are themselves deeply embedded in the social context and history of the research site – they are socially structured - and are perhaps best viewed, as suggested by Freebody (2003), as being dynamic, data generating activities which also contribute to the social order of their context.

The interactions that make up interviews are dynamic, not static, forms of social action: in each interview, all participants, including the interviewer, re-encounter and reproduce social order in and for the site of the interview itself.

(Freebody, 2003, p.137)

Participant Observation of Pathways Meetings

The final approach to the ‘collection of data’ used in this research involves the audio recording of fifteen Pathways Committee meetings over a period of fifteen months. The recordings of the Pathways meetings were then transcribed verbatim to text and used as another source to analyse and portray the phenomenon of schooling and pedagogy. By using Pathways meetings as a source of data, it is my intention to view the phenomenon from a ‘different angle’ by changing some of the more obvious contextual assumptions present in my conversational interviews with students and teachers.

In contrast to the more explicit emphasis placed on my role as researcher in the conversational interviews – which were conducted with the primary purpose of ‘data collection’ - my role as a member of the Pathways Committee was primarily
as a teacher/school administrator and participant in the normal activities of the Committee. The data created by the Pathways Committee meetings is therefore constructed as a portrayal of teachers’ action and discussion about the phenomenon within the context of more ‘normalised’ social relations and conversations that responded to needs of the Committee rather than my needs for data. While it was understood by the members of the Pathways Committee that our meetings were contributing to my research, it was also understood that I was not using the Pathways Committee simply as a focus group for the sole purpose of data collection. My primary role on the Pathways Committee was as the Director of Curriculum and my research questions would not drive the agenda of the Committee according to the traditional dichotomy between ‘the researcher’ and ‘the researched’. Data emerging from my involvement as an insider-researcher on the Pathways Committee is therefore more pre-reflective than in the conversational interviews, and driven by the normal agenda of Pathways Committee meetings. But that is not to say that the research questions did not influence the Pathways Committee agenda – they did through a process involving my reflexive interaction with the data created by the meetings. As noted earlier, my motivations for conducting this research have been born out of my involvement with students and teachers who have occupied the Pathways Committee agenda for several years, creating a significant overlap between the agendas of the Pathways Committee and the concerns of this research.

In addition to the regular arguments, discussions and deliberations of a school Committee meeting, the frequent tendency of teachers to converse and relate through shared experiential stories and anecdotes made the Pathways Committee meetings a rich source of teacher narratives. The Pathways Committee meetings were therefore a source of teachers’ own practical theorising about the phenomenon central to this study, revealed through the stories and accounts contributed to the meeting, and within a context in which it would occur more naturally than that of an interview. Such anecdotes have a strong ‘concrete reality of lived experience’ and serve as one of the ‘implements for laying bare the
covered-over meanings’ (van Manen, 1998, p.119) that are essential to the phenomenon of pedagogy.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Structures of Meaning

Phenomenological themes may be understood as ‘structures of meaning’ (van Manen, 1998) that are revealed through an analysis of the lived experience of a phenomenon. They are not intended to be any kind of broad generalisations, in the positivistic sense of the word, but are:

...more like knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes. Themes are the stars that make up the universes of meaning we live through. By the light of these themes we can navigate and explore such universes.

(van Manen, 1998, p.90)

In defining the notion of phenomenological themes, van Manen (1998, p87-98) offers a number insights which are useful in considering what a theme is and how it can be related to the phenomenon being studied. I have drawn on van Manen’s insights to establish the following defining features of themes for this research:

- Themes are the essential experience of ‘focus’ or ‘meaning’ that emerge on reflection of a phenomenon.
- Themes are ‘at best a simplification’ of the lived experience of a phenomenon, however, they exist as a defining quality of the experience.
- Themes cannot be understood as objects or things that ‘one encounters at certain points or moments in a text’ - they are themselves ‘intransitive’.

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Themes emerge as a way to capture the phenomenon by describing the ‘structure of the lived experience’.

But themes serve as an important methodological device (van Manen, 1998) for this research as they are the means with which analysis of the data begins.

- Themes act as a ‘tool for getting at the meaning’ of the lived experiences of schooling and pedagogy.
- Themes serve to give ‘shape to the shapeless’ and ‘express the ineffable essence’ of the phenomenon.
- Themes are able to ‘touch the core’ of the lived experience of pedagogy and schooling and open up the possibility of understanding.
- Themes serve as a ‘reduction of a notion’, although they can never define completely the full meaning of a lived experience.

This research aims to determine the experiential structures that make up that phenomenon of schooling and pedagogy by using themes which are ‘mined’ (van Manen, 1998) or ‘distilled’ (Willis, 1998) from the textual data. The pedagogic intent of this research is to understand the essence of pedagogy by analysing the thematic structures that give meaning to the experience of schooling and pedagogy. It then seeks to go beyond the immediate lived experience of schooling and pedagogy to reveal how the phenomenon of pedagogy is entwined in the structuration (Giddens, 1984) of society.

Isolating the Themes

The process I used to construct themes from the research data involves several strategies that can be summarised as follows:

- I personally transcribed all text from the audio-tapes to ‘re-live’ the experience from a more reflective and focussed disposition and to
'listen' for the subtle interactions that are easy to miss during the 'business' of interviews, meetings and conversations.

- Once all of the data had been transcribed to text, I undertook several readings of the complete set of data to capture a 'wholistic picture' (van Manen, 1998) and to reveal sentences and phrases that might be considered as essential to the lived experience.

- Having completed a 'wholistic' reading of the data, I then undertook more selective and detailed reading and re-reading of the texts to seek individual statements and phrases that were particularly revealing.

- In analysing the data I used the four existentials considered as belonging to the essential structure of the lifeworld (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, van Manen, 1998) as a guide for reflection on the lived experience of pedagogy and schooling. The four existentials are: Lived space or spatiality; Lived body or corporeality; Lived time or temporality; and Lived other or human relationality.

- To organise and assist in the thematic analysis of the data I used qualitative research software (QSR, 2003) to allow me to manage the large volume of data that was generated during the research.

In determining the essential nature of a theme, van Manen (1998, p.107) notes that 'our concern is to discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is'. I have sought to isolate essential themes from the data that allude to the fundamental meaning of the research participants' lived experience of schooling. The themes I have presented are in no way intended to be representative of the fullness of the participants' experiences of schooling and there are as many other possible interpretations and themes as there are readers of this thesis.
Portraying The Themes

The essential themes that have emerged from this research have been portrayed in Chapters 7, 8 and 9 of the thesis by drawing together hermeneutic phenomenology with the expressive and arts-based methods (Barone and Eisner, 1997, Eisner, 1991, 1993). Each of the ‘data’ chapters is divided into four parts that also reflect my own ‘pedagogic process’ of making meaning – moving from the wholistic pre-reflective experience of the phenomenon to the eventual development of essential themes and constructed meanings:

- Within each of the data chapters, Part 1 seeks to draw the reader into the theme by telling a story that has been derived from my Journal. The story has been selected because I think it has the potential to reveal, in a wholistic way, information that is essential to understanding the subsequent themes raised in the data chapters. The stories represent a pre-reflective account of my lived-experience of the phenomenon and reveal, not only the context of the research, but also aspects of my own biographic details and ultimately the eyes and mind through which the research ‘data’ has been filtered and constructed.

- Part 2 in each data chapter is presented as a ‘gallery of themes’ that the reader is invited to experience as verbatim transcriptions of my conversations with students’ and teachers’. I have presented the transcriptions under a series of sub-themes - derived from the texts – and as being representative of the essential experience of the phenomenon portrayed. This ‘pre-structured’ reading of the experience in Part 2 is intended to portray the phenomenon through the stories of the students and teachers. By using these short, compiled quotations it is also my intention to illustrate the ‘diversity within sameness’ (Richardson, 1990) that is essential to the themes.

- Part 3 of the data chapters seeks to ‘distil the meaning’ (Willis, 1998) from text and is a result of my use of phenomenological writing-as-research (Kamler, 1999, 1998, van Manen, 1984, Piantanida and Garman, 1999,
Richardson, 2000). I have presented the structure of the meaning within the sub-themes raised in Part 2 of each data chapters.

- Part 4 of the data chapters seeks to express the essence of the phenomenon through the use of poetic reflection and writing (Barone and Eisner, 1997, van Manen, 1998, Richardson, 1990). It represents a portrayal of the meaning that seeks ‘transparency’ in its expression and is offered as a means to ‘reawaken’ (van Manen, 1998) in the reader the experience of the phenomenon.

SEEKING DEEPER ANSWERS USING CRITICAL METHODS

While the pedagogical intent of this research is to understand the essence of applied learning pedagogy, the sociological and political intent is to understand and challenge the current dominant paradigm which marginalises some students and constructs them as being ‘at risk’ on the basis of being learning/schooling failures within the academic tradition. The research seeks to explore the irony in the marginalisation of students in an applied learning program – as an ‘alternative’ to the VCE - considering current global trends (see for example ACDE, 2001) towards the development of such new, more flexible modes of learning to meet the demands of a risky and globalised world.

This second critical dimension of the research has been undertaken by reviewing the transcripts and emerging hermeneutic themes with a view to being informed by:

- theories of the constitution of society (Giddens, 1984, Giddens, 1990b, Giddens, 1991a);
- theories of power, knowledge and governmentality (Foucault, 1972, Foucault, 1980, Foucault, 1995)
The critical dimension of the research has been integrated into the final chapter of the thesis in a discussion of the research findings and recommendations.

LOCATING THE FIELDWORK

The research site is a co-educational secondary college in the outer north-western suburbs of Melbourne, in the State of Victoria, Australia. The college has nine hundred students attending school from Year Seven to Year Twelve and offers a comprehensive curriculum based on the Victorian Curriculum Standards Frameworks to students in Years Seven to Ten. The curriculum offered to students in Years Ten to Twelve includes subjects from the VCE, VCAL and VETiS programs. The data collection process occurred over a period of fifteen months while I was also employed at the college as the Director of Curriculum and VCE Chemistry teacher.

The fourteen students, who participated in this research in one form or another, were invited to participate because of their involvement in the VCAL program and being defined by the school as ‘at-risk’ of leaving at the end of Year Ten. The fifteen-month data collection process corresponded to the students’ second semester of Year Ten – their final year of compulsory education - and most of their time in Year Eleven. Of the original fourteen students, five left school at the end of Year Ten or early in Year Eleven. While all of the original students were involved in the process of research, six of the remaining VCAL students were involved in extended conversational interviews over the fifteen-month period.

The eight teaching staff who participated in the research were invited to do so because of their involvement as teachers of the VCAL program, or as participants on the Pathways Committee. The staff contributed to the data through conversational interviews and Pathways Committee meetings, as well as through my reflections of day-to-day happenings in the school. The fifteen Pathway Committee meetings that were audio-taped and transcribed corresponded to a period of time when the students were in their final months of Year Ten and most
of their Year Eleven. The students were frequently the topic of discussion in the Pathways Committee meetings, as was the introduction of the VCAL for Year Eleven and Twelve students.

RESEARCH DILEMMAS AND INSIDER-RESEARCHER ISSUES

ETHICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

My position as insider-researcher raises a number of potential ethical and methodological issues and hazards that are important to include in a discussion on research procedures. In the first instance, my position as a Deputy Principal (Curriculum) brought with it the need to consider the ethical implications of institutional power differences between myself and the other research participants – the teachers and students. Would they feel obliged to participate in the study if I asked them directly? Would they feel threatened by my ‘interest’ in their affairs? Would they feel safe in telling me things that might be considered otherwise risky? Experience has taught me that my actions – however simple and well intentioned - are always potentially (mis)construed as being related to my role within the school’s social hierarchy. What my actions mean to teachers and students are not always what I intend them to be. This point may be illustrated by a short Journal entry that was made early in the research process:

*I think one of the most difficult things in my life at the moment is balancing work, study and my family life. They are three balls that I constantly juggle in the air and, occasionally, I drop one - like the time I forgot to pick up my kids after school! By the time I had extricated myself from the curriculum meeting – I was supposed to get them before the meeting started - I was twenty-five minutes late.*

*But it may as well been two hours late because... there stood my two daughters – ‘abandoned’ at just six and eight years old – because*
they were the last ones to be picked up from school! It didn't help that they were new to the school either...but their tears and my guilt were enough to make sure that I have never 'abandoned' them again.

Today I habitually checked my watch at 3:25pm standing outside the staff room, and I noticed one of the new teachers leaving early to beat the parent traffic at 3:30pm – 'probably rushing to get her kids too', I thought. But she saw me looking at my watch as she left the staff room and, by the look on her face, I knew immediately she thought I was making a 'non-verbal gesture' about her early departure.

I responded quickly by saying 'I've gotta' get my kids too...' which seemed to put her at ease and elicited a smile as she rushed off, but it struck me just how easily my position as a Deputy could change the meaning of my actions. Looking at my watch at 3:25pm, as that teacher left the staff room, meant something different to both of us – I did not intend to make any point about her early departure - but I could not assume what that simple action meant to her. If that could happen so easily by just looking at my watch, what could happen by asking students or teachers to be involved in my research?

Journal Entry, March 2002

Initially, the issues of truly 'informed consent', 'rights to privacy' and 'protection from harm' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000) weighed significantly on me as an insider-researcher occupying a position of relative power within the school. To begin with, it would be unethical for me to coerce participants into this research – wittingly or otherwise. My response, in the case of seeking student participants, was to advertise for 'interested students' in the school newsletter rather than personally ask students to be involved in the research. In doing this, however, I was also worried that the students might dismiss the invitation as being trivial, or that the advertisement would be lost in the sea of daily messages that students receive.
But the student response to the advertisement was very encouraging and it turned out that all of the VCAL students were very keen to become involved. They seemed to feel they were an important part of ‘big changes’ happening in education across the state. We had already engaged in many conversations about the introduction of the VCAL and the students appeared to have a strong sense of ownership of the project. At the time of seeking their involvement, the students had also begun to develop a ‘language of applied learning’ with the two applied learning teachers and seemed to enjoy engaging in ‘official’ discussion that rendered them – probably for the first time in their lives as students – as privileged over other ‘successful’ students in the school. This emerging group identity of the students as ‘VCAL students’ also seemed to give a strong sense of commonality, purpose and legitimacy to their individual stories. Within this context the students received my offer of research participation very positively - it too was contributing to the formation of their new identity.

Mindful of the potential ethical conflicts caused by my role as a Deputy Principal, my approach to gaining staff involved a direct invitation to participate in the research. The invitation included an expression of my ethical concerns and I also told several of the teachers my ‘watch story’ as a way of opening up the ‘ethical space’ between us. My dilemma was that certain teachers were vital to the research, particularly the applied learning teachers and members of the Pathways team, but I did not want to coerce unwittingly any of the teaching staff into participation. As it turned out, all of the teachers invited to participate were keen to be involved in the research for similar reasons to the students.

Some of the teachers were particularly motivated by a strong sense of social justice and the ‘need to change the system’, and this research had possibilities for telling their story. Our shared objective in establishing the VCAL at the school – a primary objective of the Pathways Committee – also made the research questions relevant to the whole group. The research was also seen as a means to address political questions surrounding the VCAL at a local school level and at the
broader systemic level. In the end I think my concern for teachers and students being coerced into participation was diminished significantly by the very positive history and context into which the research was being received. Contrary to my concern for potential coercion, the students and staff received the invitation to participate with a sense of potential empowerment. But I think I would be wrong to assume that this would always be the case.

On a methodological level, the potential dilemmas presented by being an insider-researcher were related to the pre-existing assumptions and ‘normalised understandings’ that I already held upon entering the field as a researcher. How would I be able to ‘suspend or bracket’ (Husserl, 1970) my practical understandings of events that I was involved in on a daily basis? How would I be able to experience the phenomenon and ‘see’ (Eisner, 1991) it at the same time? My concern was not how to be ‘objective’, in the positivistic sense of the word, but how to be open to my own pre-existing, common sense assumptions about the phenomenon. In considering this dilemma, van Manen notes that:

If we simply try to forget or ignore what we already ‘know’, we may find that the presuppositions persistently creep back into our reflections. It is better to make explicit our understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories. We try to come to terms with our assumptions, not in order to forget them again, but rather to hold them deliberately at bay and even turn this knowledge against itself, as it were, thereby exposing its shallow or concealing character.

(van Manen, 1998, p.47)

Similarly, my position as an insider-researcher presented challenges stemming from my pre-existing relationships with the other research participants. How much would teachers and students omit from our conversations assuming that I already knew the answers to fundamental questions? How much would they – by assumption - draw on our ‘shared experience’ of the phenomenon? On the other
hand, how much would they set the tune of our conversations to a melody they thought I would want to hear? How could I avoid a ‘stiff research attitude’ that would construct a corresponding ‘stiff informant attitude’ in the participants?

These methodological concerns brought about by my role as an insider-researcher were essentially an issue of being able to overcome the familiarity of my relationships with the research participants, while at the same time constructing an appropriate reflective research ‘attitude’ (Dewey, 1938) that would enable me to pursue the research questions using ‘(my)self as an instrument’ (Eisner, 1991).

Responding To The Dilemmas

My methodological response to these concerns turned to Dewey’s notion of ‘education as reconstruction of experience’ (Dewey, 1916), which emphasises that it is the interpretive and reflective ‘act of reconstructing the meaning of experience’ (Piantanida and Garman, 1999, p.143) that ultimately constructs learning. Reflection on the meaning of my experiences is therefore critical to my role as an insider-researcher. My methodological response can be summarised as following three reflective strategies:

- An emphasis on the role of procedural reflection (Piantanida and Garman, 1999, Eisner, 1991) in the research process;
- An emphasis on my insider-researcher role as ‘reflective practitioner’ (van Manen, 1991b) and avoiding any notion of the ‘abstracted academic researcher role’ in the research procedures. I also used an ongoing ‘Personal Research Profile’ (Piantanida and Garman, 1999): to assist in self reflection and understanding; to ensure the research concerns remained relevant to the research context; and to avoid the traditional dichotomies between abstracted theory and praxis, between researcher and
participants, and between universities and society (Greenwood and Levin, 2000).

I have used these reflective strategies as a means of developing my ‘Enlightened Eye’ (Eisner, 1991), and as a strategy to develop reflexivity in my approach to constructing meaning from my experiences. Reflection and reflexivity are ultimately my tools for learning.

**An Emphasis On Reflection And Reflexivity**

By emphasising the important role of reflection and reflexivity as methodological dimensions of this research, I have sought to become more finely tuned in using ‘self as instrument’ (Eisner, 1991). In considering the notion of reflection as an important dimension of phenomenological research, Piantanida and Garman (1999) have outlined three distinctions (see also van Manen, 1998) which guide qualitative research procedures. Firstly, the notion of ‘reflection as recollection’ allows researchers to give an account of the experience by resonating ‘with the situational aspects of encountered experience, recalling the specific details of what happened, when it occurred, and who was involved’ (Piantanida and Garman, 1999). My use of reflective protocol writing (van Manen, 1998) in this research serves to recollect my experiences and the specific details surrounding them.

The second form of reflection is that of ‘introspection’, which researchers use to ‘look within, examining their own mental and emotional responses to encountered experiences’ (Piantanida and Garman, 1999 p.142). The use of my journal (Holly, 1997) for introspective reflection was an important research tool in becoming more aware of my own responses to being an insider-researcher. Although warning against the possibility of ‘solipsistic blatherings’, Piantanida and Garman have noted that ‘(t)hrough introspective reflection, the researcher begins to ponder possible meanings embedded in encountered experience’ (Piantanida and Garman,
1999 p.143). But it is not only the meanings I make that informs introspective reflection, it is also what I understand to be the meanings made by others.

The final distinction is that of 'conceptual reflection' in which 'researchers begin to connect their recollective and introspective reflections with broader theoretical concepts and issues. Instead of relying on their immediate or instinctive interpretation of events, researchers begin to draw upon formal knowledge to (re)construct the meaning of experiences in relation to the phenomenon under study' (Piantanida and Garman, 1999 p.143 original emphasis). Conceptual reflection through writing is an important methodological dimension of this research as it ultimately facilitates the development of what Eisner (1991) has called an 'enlightened eye' - the source of reflexivity in the research.

**Writing As Research**

In considering the traditional approaches to research as a 'think-then-write' process, Torrance and Thomas (1994 p.108) have argued that the 'having of ideas and the expressing of these as text as discrete and unrelated activities' is both an unhelpful and incorrect understanding of the process of research. In contrast to the notion of research writing being a process that simply records knowledge, Torrance and Thomas have argued that research writing is also a process that constructs it:

Research writing is not simply a description of the researcher's activities, but a constructive process that uses research findings as raw materials to build one of several possible accounts of a program of research. In the course of writing, the researcher makes decisions about the audience to aim his or her account at, what results to report, the theoretical framework in which to set the account, what conclusions to draw and so forth. Each of these decisions constrains not only the rhetoric but also the meaning of the text that is produced.
Research writing is, therefore, not simply a communication of knowledge but a negotiation of knowledge claims.

(Torrance and Thomas, 1994 p.108)

This research seeks to transcend the ‘think-then-write’ approach by adopting the more reflexive orientation to ‘writing as research’ as outlined by authors such as Richardson (1990, 2000), Lee (1998), van Manen (1998) and Kamler (1999). To draw on the thinking of Richardson (2000 p.924), ‘I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I didn’t know before I wrote it’. In considering how the ‘minded act of writing’ orients itself reflexively and pedagogically to the phenomenon under research, van Manen (1998 pp124-133), drawing on the work of Barthes (1986), makes several points about the use of writing as research which I have summarised below:

- Writing ‘mediates reflection and action’ and therefore writing is our method (p. 125)
- To write is a measure of thoughtfulness because: ‘it separates us from what we know and yet it unites us more closely’; it ‘distances us from the lifeworld, yet it also draws us more closely to the lifeworld’; it ‘decontextualises thought from practice and yet it returns thought to praxis’; it ‘abstracts our experience of the world, yet it also concretises our understanding of the world’; it objectifies thought into print and yet it subjecifies our understanding of something that truly engages us’ (pp.127-129).
- Writing exercises ‘the ability to see’ and ‘insightful praxis in the lifeworld’ (p. 130).
- To write is to show reflectively ‘how phenomenological knowledge is held and what it is like to know things pedagogically’ (p. 130).
- To write is to rewrite by dialectically - reflexively - ‘going back and forth between the parts and the whole in order to arrive at a finely crafted piece that reflects the ‘signature’ of the author’ (pp. 131-132).
By using writing as research I have therefore sought to bind together reflexively my experiences of life - as a teacher and a researcher – in a way that will allow me to become more ‘open to understanding’ the context and questions that inform this research, as well as my reasons for asking them. It is also the conduit through which my role as an insider-researcher seeks to unite theory and practice through a more ‘thoughtful approach’ to both research and teaching.

**Insider-Researcher As Reflective Practitioner**

The research approach and procedures I have outlined above seek to emphasise and enhance my insider role as a ‘thoughtful and reflective practitioner’ (1998, van Manen, 1991b). By seeking to develop an attitude of ‘pedagogic thoughtfulness’, my combined roles as insider-researcher, Deputy Principal and teacher add potency to the critical orientation of the research towards informed action, rather than abstracted theory generation, which is divorced from practice. My research procedures have influenced my work and life as a teacher, school administrator, parent and researcher, by providing links that unite each of these domains. It has changed the way I orient myself pedagogically towards students, teachers, parents, and my own children by challenging the ‘normalised’ tendency to keep these domains separate for reasons of objectivity. The ‘phenomenological attitude’ transcends my insider-researcher role and has influenced significantly decisions I have made as a school administrator, as well as decisions others have made in the school community.

However, my insider-researcher role as a reflective practitioner has required a constant resistance to adopting the traditional dichotomies that have plagued educational and other social research. Such dichotomies have been discussed by Greenwood and Levin (2000) and include the traditional gap between abstracted theory and praxis, researcher and researched, and universities and society. The struggle to become and remain reflective is made more difficult within the secondary school context, by the high level of traditional value placed on the attainment of academic knowledge. But in resisting those traditional dichotomies
— and the instrumental knowledge principles that underpin them — van Manen reminds us that ‘phenomenological research gives us tactful thoughtfulness: situational perceptiveness, discernment, and depthful understanding. The fundamental thesis is that pedagogic thoughtfulness and tact are essential elements of pedagogic competence’ (van Manen, 1998, p.156). By adopting hermeneutic phenomenology as an approach to my inquiry, I have sought to ‘utilise’ my insider-researcher role by developing my own pedagogic thoughtfulness and tact as a means to research and understand pedagogy as a phenomenon.
PART III: RISK TO RELATIONSHIP
CHAPTER 7
FAILURE AND SUCCESS

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I have explored the phenomenon of pedagogy through the experience of academic failure at school as portrayed by 'at risk' students who were encouraged to undertake the VCAL at the end of Year Ten. Their portrayals draw from a journey that begins at the end of Year Ten and travels through their study of the VCAL in Year Eleven. I have also explored the phenomenon from the perspective of teachers over the same period of time in an attempt to construct layers of meaning through a multi-storied and evolving text. I have approached the phenomenon of Failure as being dialectically linked to the phenomenon of Success as the students' experiences of pedagogy changes with the implementation of the VCAL – moving from failure to success- and is defined differently by students and teachers. In this sense, the phenomenon of pedagogy is experienced not as a linear or static phenomenon, but rather as being much like a 'mineral crystal' (Valle and Halling, 1989), which reveals its true structure when viewed from different perspectives and with different sources of light.

The chapter is divided into four parts:

Part 1: Journal Entry: In this first part I have attempted to draw the reader into the phenomenon of pedagogy by providing a narrative account of my own experience of a failing student. By adopting this narrative style I also hope to expose the reader to my own orientation to the phenomenon in a pre-reflective or natural way, and to reveal some of my own biography as an insider-researcher within the context of research, without becoming the focus of the research.

Part 2: Gallery of Themes: Part 2 begins to reveal the themes that have emerged from the stories of students and teachers and their lived experience of pedagogy expressed through the key themes of failure and success. The transcripts have
been extracted from my research database of student and teacher interviews, and the Pathways Committee meetings.

Part 3: 'Distilling the Meaning': The third part of this chapter seeks to distil meaning from the themes that have emerged from the lived experience of students and teachers.

Part 4: 'Poetic Reflection'. In the section I have drawn on the themes and meaning emerging from the stories of students and teachers in an attempt to reveal the essence of the phenomenon through poetised reflection.

THE PEOPLE

The names of the people used in the following narrative and transcripts are not the real names of the students and teachers in the research to protect their identity. I have identified the Year Ten and Eleven VCAL students by a pseudonym first name and teachers by pseudonyms with titles – such as Mr Blake, or Ms P. In taking this approach – rather than identifying the participants as 'Teacher' or 'Year Eleven Student' – I hope to make it easier for the reader to identify whose words are being used in the transcripts and in a way that reflects the power differences between students and teachers. Students are normally expected to address teachers by their title, however, VCAL teachers encourage this 'unspoken rule' to be broken in the VCAL classes and are identified by their first names. I have 'introduced' the students and teachers below to allow the reader to become more familiar with the people involved in the research.

VCAL Students: Tony; Nick; David; Paul; Letitia; Sharni; Adam; Rachel; Sally
VCAL Teachers: Mr P. (Mick); Ms N (Jane).

Teachers and Coordinators: Ms P; Ms G; Mr B; Mr S; Mr T. Mr L; Ms K; Ms M; Ms J.
PART 1: BECOMING DRAWN INTO THE PHENOMENON:
JOURNAL ENTRY

MY MEETING WITH TONY

I had a late night last night! The Information Evening for Year Nine and Ten parents seemed to go on forever. It was 5:00pm and I was just finishing a letter and looking forward to getting home early, but just as I was about to finish the last paragraph and leave for home the phone rang. It was Leanne, the Year Ten Level Coordinator, and by her attempts to adopt a persuasive tone in her voice, I knew I wasn’t going home early tonight. She asked me if I would conduct an interview with Tony and his parents at 5:30pm. ‘Tony was failing everything’, she said, and it was ‘time to have a chat with them – you’re good with these kids!’ I replied that I would be happy to stay for the interview and, as I put the phone down, I wondered how many times I had ‘had a chat’ with parents and students like Tony. As a flood of names came rushing to my head, I began to sink a little lower in my chair and recall the many times I had been expected to ‘play the bad cop’ with students who were ‘failing everything’. The euphemistic description of ‘having a chat’ seemed to hide the reality that there was a crisis situation surrounding Tony’s remaining at school, and I was about to become deeply involved in determining his future.

I kept typing the letter I was working on, until I saw Leanne’s smiling face at my door. I could tell the smile was one of nervousness, however, and I gestured for her to come in and sit down. As four people entered the room in silence I was wondering if I would have enough chairs. Luckily I had borrowed one from the office across the hall. I could sense a high degree of tension in the air, as Leanne, Tony (Y10), his mum and dad all entered the room. His mum and dad sat propped to attention opposite me at my desk, Leanne sat slightly behind me on my side of the desk, and poor old Tony seemed left out on his own, slouched in his chair miles away from anyone. “Sit-up straight Tony”, mum said in strong Italian accent. Tony grunted, twitched a bit, and then sank a little lower in his chair as he
observed his mum place her hand firmly on his father’s hand to stop him fidgeting. I could immediately tell that his parents were not here to contest any of Tony ‘bad behaviour’ or failing progress reports that Leanne had been discussing with them earlier. They were here to find out what Tony’s fate would be, and from the anticipation in their eyes, I could see that they were trusting that I would know what to do.

They had obviously engaged in some serious discussions prior to coming into my office, which had prompted an angry response from Tony. Leanne saw the picture of my restored ‘mid-life’ motorbike on the coffee table (framed and jokingly placed there by the VCE secretary), and immediately sought to break the stony silence by drawing Tony’s attention to it. ‘Tony is into motorbikes too, Mr Blake, she said. ‘Go on Tony, show Mr Blake your poster!’ Tony then proceeded to unravel a scruffy poster of a yellow trail bike that he had been carrying with him everywhere for several days. It was tattered around the edges, but I could tell by the way he carefully unfolded it that it meant a lot to him. ‘Nice bike!’ I said to Tony, as I sat down. ‘Do you have one of those things, or are you looking to buy one eventually?’ Tony replied: ‘I’ve got an old one that I fixed-up myself, but I do want to get one of these too’. I gestured towards the photo of my old machine and said, ‘What do you think of mine?’ I think he approved, because his eyes seemed to light-up as he said ‘Not bad for an old thing, I suppose!’ I sensed immediately that Tony was taking the liberty to regain some of the ground he had lost earlier, as our conversation had now ventured into his domain of youth and motorbikes – he knew I was really asking his permission to talk on a deeper level by offering such a comical reflection of myself. I could see that Tony even cracked a slight smile, as he propped himself a little higher in his chair. The silence that followed our little discussion about motorbikes somehow didn’t seem as threatening as the one they had carried into my office just a few moments earlier.

Leanne started the ‘serious’ discussion by drawing my attention to the many difficulties that Tony was facing with his study. Apart from the academic difficulty and behavioural objections that had been raised by most of his teachers, he had
also broken his hand several weeks earlier and was unable to participate in VET Furnishing activities. Leanne noted that for some strange reason, the broken hand seemed to be taking a long time to heal, but it didn’t prevent him from engaging in sport, or VET Automotive. Tony said quite forcefully that he wanted to “get-out of VET Furnishing because he had trouble with the teacher”, even though the same teacher taught him VET Automotive. I replied that it might be a bit too late to just swap his class to another elective subject, as most subjects were half finished, and it would be very unlikely that another teacher would accept him.

As Leanne continued to list all of Tony’s other failures in his core subjects and reinforcing the jeopardy he was in, I was sure that Tony and his parents had probably heard them all them all before, and perhaps it was time to take a different approach. I decided that I would not pick-up the discussion from the focus on his failures and wondered to myself if Tony had thought much about what he really wanted to do in the future, or was he just living for the moment? I thought that the scruffy poster of his trail bike probably held some secrets to his dreams. I asked Tony what he wanted to be doing when he was 25 years old. His reply was a simple grunt ‘I dunno!’ Too far ahead, I thought. A few more similar questions gained a similar response. At that stage I proceeded to do my ‘What car will you drive?’ trick. Most of the boys I talk to in a similar circumstance seem to have a well thought-out answer to that one, and I thought at least it will start us talking about his future. Tony knew immediately that he was a ‘Holden-Man’ and that he would probably be spending $5500 when he was 18 to buy a VN Commodore – only two years to go! He also said that he probably wanted to be a motor mechanic, and to work on motorbike engines. “I knew that poster meant something more to him!” I then went into the ‘What about insurance?’ routine, where I compare the cost of insurance on a car with the cost of ‘educational-insurance’ on a salary that might earn him $50K for the next 40 years. We also talked about getting married and leaving home and lots more. To Tony’s embarrassment, we even started to talk about what his parents did when they were his age (Tony’s father spoke very poor English and had been unemployed for the past 12 years; Tony’s mother also spoke poor English, and was the breadwinner
in his family). I could see that these details made Tony feel a bit uncomfortable, on one hand, as they were not things that he wanted teachers to know, but he seemed to be ‘warming-up’ to the discussion and at least he was smiling. He even laughed as we talked about him living with mum and dad when he was 35, along with his wife and kids. As Leanne joined in the discussion with a much more positive approach than when we started, I sensed that a door seemed to be opening to make it safe for Tony to talk about his future with us.

But I had been in this situation before, and somehow I knew that Tony’s failures in his subjects would probably continue, despite our conversation about his future and his promise of a commitment to his study from now on. The tension between Leanne and Tony had abated, but I could not help feeling that Tony was probably going to be one of those students - if not already - that teachers labelled as ‘needs to get a job’.

By the end of the meeting we had decided to withdraw Tony from VET Furnishing, and to negotiate entry into the Automotive Appreciation class. He would also work with Mr R for four periods to consolidate his other studies. His options were three fold for the end of Year Ten: Continue into VCE (unlikely); be offered a place in the VCAL program (most probable); we would help him find a job by the end of the year if he became ‘disengaged’ any further.

After the meeting, Leanne shared with me a few more stories of her involvement with Tony over the past 8 months. There was even the time that she went to his house to drop-off some work while he was absent with his injured arm. His father insisted that Leanne stay for some pasta. Leanne recalled how Tony cringed with disbelief at the dinner table, as he shared his meal with his Level Coordinator.
PART 2: A GALLERY OF THEMES: INTERVIEWS AND PATHWAYS MEETINGS

FAILURE

‘I’m Not Good Enough To Keep On Going’

NICK: He [teacher] picks on Tony a lot. One day we were sitting in class and Letitia said something to Tony and Tony laughed. Then he kicked Tony out for no reason. He asked him to come back in 15 minutes later, so he came back in and Tony asked him what work he was doing; then he kicked Tony out again. He is always picking on Tony, but it is not usually Tony’s fault. It is usually me, or David, or someone else’s fault.

NICK: They [teachers] won’t go out of their way to talk to you or help you with your work. Some teachers will help you and have a laugh with you; like some teachers will kick you out if you say a joke, but others will just laugh with you.

DAVID: I had a bit of trouble with Miss M in Year Nine. She just kicked me out every class even though I would do nothing. Even the class agreed that she would just pick on me. But then when I got into Year Ten she tried to be my friend again, but I just walked straight past her. She said “David, get back here”. I said “what for”? “You would be mean to me and now you know what I felt like”. If they aren’t nice to you, they can’t expect you to be nice to them either.

NICK: Yes. Like with Miss A. Some days I wouldn’t do nothing and I was always getting in trouble; they would think that it was my fault. But then when I got the ‘N’, even after doing my English homework, mum began to realise. When I was away for a week, Miss A. reckons that she told me to come and see her about the work, but mum told her she couldn’t have [asked me to see her] because I wasn’t even at school that week.
NICK: Yes, he [teacher] is trying to get me to leave, but teachers should be trying to get students to stay and do Year Twelve. He rang Tony as well. Tony’s parents weren’t home, but he spoke to Tony and said that he should try to find a job because he doesn’t want him at school.

DAVID: Just hearing that…if a kid wants to stay at school and not leave yet…like I don’t want to leave yet. If Mr R rang my house and said ‘I want you to leave’ I would be pretty pissed off. It would not be good for your confidence either; I would think that the teachers obviously think that I’m not good enough to keep on going. It just sort of shows that Mr R doesn’t have any faith in the kids. You would think that a teacher would have a lot more of faith wouldn’t you?

PAUL: They [parents] were worried; I wasn’t going real well; getting low Cs and below all the way through. They were concerned for me a bit. I was getting bored and reckless; getting in trouble a bit a school.

PAUL: It [Year Ten] just dragged on and I was starting to think for no reason. It just dragged on forever.

LETTITIA: Just for the kids who are struggling and aren’t doing as well.

NICK: He [Year Ten teacher] thinks we are all no-hopers!

‘I’m Not Very Academic’

NICK: I’m not very academic; I don’t like sitting in class and doing that sort of work. With this [the VCAL] I get to go out on a Tuesday afternoon and a Wednesday all day on work experience and that.

DAVID: I think maybe that I didn’t get invited [into the VCAL] because my brother was pretty smart and he went here. I find that a lot of the teachers who I don’t get along with, put me in my brother’s shadow. My brother was pretty smart
and wanted to go to uni and all that stuff, so I think that maybe they thought I was just like my brother. I didn’t hear about it initially because it was by invitation, but when I asked Miss P, she was actually pretty happy about it and that I had gone to her.

DAVID: But with the VCE, I think I struggled because I don’t particularly like doing homework. Some people are disciplined enough to do it, but I would rather go out and have a kick of the footy than go and do homework. I haven’t got the discipline to do it.

SHARNI: I don’t think I would have been able to do the VCE because I don’t like all of the tests and that sort of stuff... The subjects in the VCE, well I didn’t really need any of them; I just needed English and Maths and anything else that I might have got was an extra.

SHARNI: Mum likes it [the VCAL] because I’ve been through all of the uni stuff and I know I’m too dumb. But dad is still not sure – he didn’t really like it. But he’s getting there (laughter).

LETTITIA: The teachers have been good for me, although I have found it tough some years, like Year Ten. I found it tough, but I got through it and now I’m doing VCAL.

‘There Are Going To Be Kids That Nobody Wants’

MS G: I was saying to Veronica [teacher] that Sammy [student] is driving me crazy in Food Tech. She said ‘how did he end up there, I didn’t recommend him? He drove me insane last year!’ But ultimately, there are going to be kids that nobody wants anywhere and we have to be very careful.
MR P: Then following on from your point, would the process be to see what his semester results are and then someone approach the family to say that, from our experience, he is unlikely to finish Year Twelve.

MR S: It is a two edged sword; it [the VCAL] serves a purpose for those kids because they don’t see school as relevant; therefore they latch onto the apprenticeship or practical sorts of areas.

MR P: She [Level Coordinator] reckons that some kids are failing and not coping with the schoolwork.

MS G: We are saying that some of the kids in Year Ten are disengaged, because it is boring: ‘It’s boring and I don’t want to do this’.

MR B: This is probably about the time of year that most of the teachers have made up their mind who is going to pass and fail – generally speaking.

MS G: Some people are saying that this kid should be moved into something else, but how can you move them into something else at this stage? If they fail the kid now, what do they do for the rest of the semester?

MR P: My guess is that if you look at both Carl and Nathan’s reports, there won’t be a basis there for doing Year Twelve, but they might not be VCAL either. They are kids who might just not have much going for them. A bit like [past student’s name], he wasn’t even practical at all. I think he is still sitting at home doing nothing.

MS G: Our Mission Statement says we value academic rigour – we can’t pass everyone!’
‘Everything Is All On About Academic Success’

MR P: And they feel that if their kids don’t go to university then they have failed. But that is also encouraged by the school; everything is all on about academic success. I mean what do parents receive from the school during the reporting process? That is what the reporting system is all about - academic learning.

MR P: I guess the point is that, if you know a kid is not going to go on to Year Twelve, there is no need for them to do any subjects like the languages, or some of the maths stuff. And this argument that ‘you are closing their options’, as long as the only option is VCE, then we will close options.

MR T: She saw me this morning about that, and from what I could get out of her, it was mainly the maths that was the problem. She wants to go into nursing, but most nursing courses require maths at least to Year Eleven. It’s the maths that seems to be the problem.

MR P: I took a group of kids to the football on Saturday and I had a kid who is doing one of the higher maths in the group. I asked him to read the road directory and he had no idea how to read it. I gave him the key and told him the map page, but he had no notion of where we were when we got off the freeway – whether we turn right or left. We understand that, if you walked into a VCAL class and they were looking at road maps, we would say that, because of our experience, that is fairly basic stuff – because we know it!

Kids Who Consider Themselves Dumb

MR B: She was trying to convince me that she was just dumb. I said to her ‘You’re not dumb’! She said: ‘No I’m dumb, I really am dumb’. Then her friend said to me, ‘She is dumb Mr B.’ I said to her friend ‘your dumb for saying that’. I could tell that she was down and a bit depressed about school.
MS G: Well these are the [student names] that I got from staff after the VCE teachers’ meeting. The concern that I do have is that we still need to look at what their problem is; is it a behavioural one or is it an academic one. For instance, Year Eleven Psychology, Tanya [surname] and Megan [surname] are academically poor and getting the work done, but they are really not up to it I guess. Then you have people like Robert [surname], who we know has lots of problems not handing in the work on time and poor attendance. Rachel is not performing either, and she is doing Religion & Society as well. Alex [surname] and Paul [surname] for Physics are another two; there have been incident reports of these buggerising around; Paul wants to be there, but he does nothing while he is there...Lisa [surname] and Steven [surname]...I don’t know what is happening there.

MR S: Lisa...I would imagine would be academic. She is not dumb.

MR S: I had her in Year 9, as you know; she can do reasonable work; she is not stupid, but probably just erratic.

MS G: I explained to her that the VCAL is not just for the dumb kids. It is for the kids who are focussed on other things, not Year Twelve necessarily. But she thinks that she wants to do Year Twelve.

MS N: I think that the VCAL English is as challenging as the VCE English! The need to do VCAL English is because of a pathway – not a need to do it. I’m a little concerned that we are getting painted as the course you do because you can’t do VCE, and that is coming across from teachers and things like what you just said – he needs to do VCAL. VCAL is a whole option; it’s not a dummies program. I think that the picture has been painted that it is for dummies and that is unfair to the students; it unfair to the course; and I wonder why you would leave a student in VCE, which has a University orientation, when you have another option and you know the child wants to go into that other option.
MS G: I think he genuinely is interested in Hospitality...But the trouble with Chris is he’s not dumb. His verbal skills are really good, but his writing skill is really poor. He’s got a thing about his hand-writing. He said to me there’s no point writing...you just won’t understand it. I said to him ‘Chris, just write it...I’ll read it!’ But I can’t physically get any work out of him!

MS G: He’s not dumb...he works at Safeway in Watergardens [shopping centre]. I’ve seen him work and he’s good, very efficient and has held that job for quite a while. He’s not a fool.

MS N: And if we are not careful, we can unconsciously tell the kid they are dumb; it is pushing it up hill from that point on - I know because I’ve got one. We were just talking at home about brains, and Mitchell came out with ‘if I had one’. He is an intelligent boy, but he perceives that, because he doesn’t learn the same way as others, people see him as dumb. And some do – that’s the reality. We have got all of these kids who consider themselves dumb; that is what we have been working with, convincing them that they aren’t.

SUCCESS

‘Even The Long Days Don’t Feel As Long...’

DAVID: When I heard about VCAL I thought it would be perfect, because I would get experience with work, with the work placement and that. It has been really good and I enjoy it at the moment.

NICK: I reckon I learn more there than I learn at school.

DAVID: I had a complete turn around in Year Ten when I got Miss J [applied learning teacher]; she made it much easier to work. It is pretty handy if you have a good student-teacher relationship. With Jane [Ms N] too, my work is going all right.
SHARNI: No. At the end of Year Ten I was thinking of leaving and doing a pre-apprenticeship. Mick [Mr P] was my maths teacher, and he told me about the VCAL, and that is when I started getting interested.

SHARNI: [What attracted me to the VCAL was that] is wasn’t VCE, but something different. You could go out of school and there was hands-on learning…it wasn’t like all tests and texts books, it was like, just going out and doing the community service, or going out into the workplace.

SHARNI: Mum likes it because it is the work stuff that I want to do and it keeps me in school; I wouldn’t be at home annoying her. It gave me opportunities as well; I get to go out into the workplace and learn new things that I wouldn’t be able to do at school.

LETITIA: I am going really good. I’m getting all of my work done because at the interview with Jane [Ms N], she said I was getting an average of A+. If I had been doing VCE I wouldn’t be getting that.

PAUL: Time feels quite different. It goes faster, although sometimes it doesn’t. But even the long days don’t feel as long as they did last year.

SHARNI: I’m looking forward to going to the Uni – Victoria Uni – to do my Hospitality.

PAUL: Yes. I’m happier. I’m happier with the teachers and what we are doing. We are not sitting down in a class for five days a week. We are out actually helping people and doing things.

‘It Has Taken Us A Little While To Realise That You Do Fit In A Path’

MR P: But even kids like David doing one and a half days at the [local primary school]; he probably won’t become a teacher, but he is picking up a lot of skills.
MS N: And it is working. I think the fact that we are acknowledging that it doesn’t matter where those skills come from, as long as they are getting those life skills. And that has taken us a little while to realise, that you [the students] do fit in a path.

MR S: Well if he is showing interest in some area, then you have to develop that. Even if a year down the track he says that ‘I don’t want to do this any more’, he has still developed skills.

MS N: And [he has] been engaged for a whole year.

MS. N: Nick and David are in VCAL and I can’t keep the work up to them. Nick was capable student, but an absolute pain in the throat last year. He is researching jobs in Darwin and things in Adelaide now, because he finishes the work early. As long as they can read and right and are on a career path, I get the work done as quickly as I can in there, and then give them some freedom to do whatever they want to look for [career information].

MS. N: It is just so much better when you have positive outcomes too...there has been a huge change with the VCAL kids.

MR P: At the moment it [the VCAL] is still sitting out there on the edge and it is probably seen as the easy option. As one parent said the other day she was ‘worried about it because her kid was enjoying school’. You are supposed to hate school!

MR P: Yes that is quite true. I think a lot of teachers believe that if kids are enjoying their learning then they can’t be doing anything.

MR P: The kids aren’t talking about getting out as much, and some are talking about going to Year Twelve now and have the confidence to do that within
VCAL. They probably see a pathway there that wasn’t there for them before, in VCE.

MS G: He told me that he was really enjoying his community service working with the primary kids. He told me that it was really good and that he loves it.

MR P: Sharni wants to do hairdressing and is excited [about the VCAL], Rachel is excited about it, Sally is excited about it. She is good at English so I’ve asked Mr B if she could join the VCE English.

PART 3: DISTILLING MEANING

FAILURE

I’m Not Good Enough To Keep Going

For the students, an essential part of their schooling experience of failure involves being ‘kicked out’ of the classroom frequently by their teachers. Although they noted that there may have sometimes been legitimate reasons for being kicked out of a class, they generally felt that ‘being kicked-out’ was unjust and a consequence of ‘being a failure’ at school. *He is always picking on Tony, but it is not usually Tony fault*. For the students, Being a Failure, involves Being Kicked-Out. To be kicked-out means occupying a space that is outside the door of classroom, usually a long, silent hallway that is conspicuously absent of any other students, except the one or two others up the hall who may have been kicked-out also. In the hallway only the muffled voices of the teachers and students in classes can be heard. Standing alone in the hallway, students can see into the classroom through a window or door and witness what the remainder of the class are doing and learning, but they cannot participate, as a solid wall separates them. Students who are kicked-out are also ‘under the gaze’ of the teacher and students who remain in the class – they are gazed on as an outsider who has been refused participation.
The temporality of being kicked-out is experienced by students in several ways: the waiting for the teacher to call the student back into class; the waiting for the bell to announce the beginning of the next class and the end of ‘being kicked-out’; and the recursive nature of the ‘being kicked-out’ on a day-by-day and week-by-week basis, according to the pattern of relations between the teacher and student. ‘She kicked me out every class even though I would do nothing.’ For students, being kicked-out involves waiting at the discretion of the teacher or the bell, and ‘playing the game’ on a recurring basis.

The students’ experience of ‘being kicked-out’ also involves negative student-teacher relations that are defined by a high degree of abstraction, and usually established as a pattern by the teacher. For the students, the ‘failure relationships’ with some teachers may mean expecting that they are rarely acknowledged as a person in the classroom, or ignored in the playground. ‘They won’t go out of their way to talk to you or help you with your work’ The relationship can sometimes be confusing, however, when a teacher appears to ‘change’ by attempting to relate in human terms beyond the walls of the classroom. Sometimes the experience may be one where the student feels ‘picked-on’ in the relationship with the teacher, and is always ‘getting into trouble’. ‘Even the class agreed that she would just pick on me’. But being picked-on and always getting into trouble are met with a sense of reciprocity by the students’ attempts to ‘return the favour’. ‘If they aren’t nice to you, they can’t expect you to be nice to them either’.

For the students, the experience of failure eventually means dealing with ‘being pushed-away’ and ‘being unwanted’, because they are somehow inferior to the other members of the school community. Being a failure means being seen as a ‘no-hoper’ by the teachers, attending ‘boring classes’ that seem to ‘drag on forever’. Eventually students become resigned to the ‘naturalised’ experience of failure as being ‘just the way things are’, although they don’t always accept that that is the way things should be. They are not good enough to stay in a classroom with the other students and, in due course, they are not good enough stay at school

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If Mr R rang my house and said ‘I want you to leave’ I would be pretty pissed off. It would not be good for your confidence either; I would think that the teachers obviously think that I’m not good enough to keep on going.

Their experience of failure means: being kicked-out; being picked-on; being ignored; being always in-trouble; being bored and reckless; being a no-hoper; being not good enough to keep on going.

I’m Not Very Academic – I Know I’m Too Dumb

Students also experience pedagogy as failure through an image of themselves as being ‘not very academic’, and a being a ‘struggler’ with anything that involves academic learning - the VCE represents an academic approach to their learning. Their experience of academic learning is one that ultimately means doing exams and tests – they feel they are being weighed and measured by the system, and ultimately found ‘academically wanting’. ‘I don’t think I would have been able to do the VCE because I don’t like all of the tests and that sort of stuff. For the students, being academic also means sitting still in class for hours on end, kept within the confines of four walls sitting behind a desk, only being let-out at recess, lunchtime, or to do it all over again when they move to the next class. ‘I don’t like sitting in class and doing that sort of work’.

The experience of academic learning involves studying subjects that do not relate to who they are now and what they want to become in the future. Time for the students ‘drags on’ during class, as they are required – by the teacher - to focus on tasks relating to text-books and to solve routinised problems that have been set by the teachers. Their experience of time has doubtful connections to their future, as they sit in class, suspicious that the abstracted material that is presented by the teacher will ever have relevance now or in the future. ‘I never wanted to go to Uni or whatever, I always wanted to go into a trade or along the lines of that. I was just picking [VCE] subjects that would be more of a bludge.’
For the students, being academic means an endless invasion - by teachers - into their home-life and personal time, through the experience of repetitive homework tasks that, in the eyes of the students, have questionable purpose and learning outcomes. ‘But with the VCE, I think I struggled because I don’t particularly like doing homework. Some people are disciplined enough to do it, but I would rather go out and have a kick of the footy than go and do homework. I haven’t got the discipline to do it.’ Not being academic means being undisciplined, in an academic sense, and placing a higher value on learning that has more immediate relevance in the life of a student – although this learning may not be valued by the school.

Being non-academic means having a different pathway to what is seen to be the ‘normal’ pathway from school to university, and studying subjects that are seen to be of lesser in quality because they are practical and do not provide for the ‘normal’ university access. ‘The subjects in the VCE, well I didn’t really need any of them’. For some students, being non-academic and not taking the normal pathway may also mean seeing themselves as dumb. ‘I’ve been through all of the uni stuff and I know I’m too dumb’.

There Are Going To Be Kids That Nobody Wants

For some teachers, the experience of student failure is one that involves failure, in an academic sense, but also a failure of some students to respond in class and to conform to what is required by teachers and the school to maintain the ‘learning environment’. In the academic sense, a failing student usually means he or she has performed poorly on the tests, assignments and exams that teachers use as ‘objective’ measures of students’ learning outcomes. For teachers, student failure often means persistent failure over a period of time - several weeks or frequently one term. It also involves failure in a subject discipline, such as chemistry or maths – the very vehicle through which the teacher relates to the student. For some teachers, a student’s persistent failure in a subject may eventually mean a failure to be able to relate to that student, as the conduit for their relationship – the
subject - has failed to keep them connected. For some teachers, to be failing a subject, or to have failed a subject is also to be ‘disconnected’ and ‘disengaged’ for the remainder of the subject. For some teachers, students who have failed are disengaged – they embody failure - and should be removed from the subject. Some people are saying that this kid should be moved into something else, but how can you move them into something else at this stage. If they fail the kid now, what do they do for the rest of the semester?

The experience of student failure may also mean that a teacher has ‘maintained the high academic standards’ of their subject discipline, and their own identity as a ‘good teacher’. Teachers are generally wary of other teachers who award too many A’s in their classes, and who are ‘afraid’ to fail anyone. They are able to retain their own sense of ‘academic status’ and legitimacy by ensuring that an ‘appropriate’ number of students pass and fail – usually according to the normal distribution curve. ‘Our Mission Statement says we value academic rigour – we can’t pass everyone!’ For some teachers, the experience of student failure means that he or she has been able to make an ‘objective’ decision about a student’s assessment by abstracting themselves in the student-teacher relationship, and upholding the standards of the subject discipline and the school. For some teachers, failing students is carried out with a strong sense of duty. Academic failure is ultimately formalised in semester reports, which also become the basis for a school’s next course of action in dealing with failing students. ‘My guess is that if you look at Carl and Nathan’s reports, there won’t be a basis for doing Year Twelve...’. ‘This is probably about the time of year that most of the teachers have made up their mind as to whom is going to pass and fail – generally speaking.’

A teacher may also experience a student as a failure if he or she fails to respond in class and to conform to what is required by teachers and the school to maintain a disciplined ‘learning environment’. ‘I was saying to Veronica [teacher] that Sammy [student] is driving me crazy in Food Tech. She said: How did he end up there - I didn’t recommend him? He drove me insane last year! For teachers, the
experience of students who are failing in this sense is essentially one of an ongoing struggle to ‘deal with’ the student’s behaviour. In many cases, the experience feels like a ‘loosing battle’ between the teacher and the student. The classroom presence of students who are seen, by teachers, as ‘behaviour failures’ may be experienced as a source of chronic angst by teachers – an angst that would disappear with the ‘removal’ of the student from the class. Frequently a teacher’s struggle with a student’s behaviour may also turn into a struggle with the school’s administration to have the student removed. There seems to be a general feeling that teachers are not being supported; there is a lot of discontent about the way they have been administered. Some teachers’ perceptions of students who are failing academically and behaviourally focus on the students’ inability to ‘fit in’ at school and the urgent need for the student to leave as soon as possible. They are kids who might just not have much going for them. A bit like [past student’s name], he wasn’t even practical at all. I think he is still sitting at home doing nothing’. ‘But ultimately, there are going to be kids that nobody wants anywhere and we have to be very careful.’

**Kids Who Consider Themselves Dumb**

For some teachers, working closely with students who have been cast as failures at school means working with young people who have a low self-esteem, and a deep sense of being limited in their future. For these teachers, failing students are seen to be carrying the burden of ‘being dumb’. Although being dumb may have been ‘naturalised’ in the way many teachers and students relate to students experiencing failure, some teachers see it as their duty to convince the student otherwise. She was trying to convince me that she was just dumb. I said to her ‘You’re not dumb!’ She said: ‘No I’m dumb, I really am dumb’. Then her friend said to me, ‘She is dumb Mr B.’ I said to her friend ‘your dumb for saying that’. I could tell that she was down and a bit depressed about school. For some teachers, relating to students who see themselves as being dumb usually means a degree of personal intimacy that connects the teacher and the student through the experience of failure – the student’s experience of academic failure becomes the conduit for
connection with a teacher rather than the technology for disengagement, as experienced when the teacher only relates through a subject.

For teachers who are working closely with failing students – especially students who accept the portrayal of being dumb - there is an essence of working with young people who have been abandoned by the system. They feel that they are working with students that no one else wants to work with. They have a strong sense of mission in their role as an educator that elevates the student’s experience of success above what they define as limited definitions of academic success within a subject or the broader academic curriculum. Their role is to make a difference for the students who are failing by redefining their self-identity. We have got all of these kids who consider themselves dumb; that is what we have been working with, convincing them that they aren’t.

But teachers who relate to students through their experience of schooling as failure, also express their struggle to change the way students are portrayed as failures. They are very attentive to the power of everyday language in discussing strategies to ‘deal with’ students who are failing the ‘normal’ academic program. In their interactions with other teachers who are concerned with failing students, there is usually a deep sense of self-reflexivity that focuses on what it means to be a teacher. I think that the VCAL English is as challenging as the VCE English! The need to do VCAL English is because of a pathway – not a need to do it. I’m a little concerned that we are getting painted as the course you do because you can’t do VCE, and that is coming across from teachers and things like what you just said – he needs to do VCAL. VCAL is a whole option; it’s not a dummies program...And if we are not careful, we can unconsciously tell the kid they are dumb; it is pushing it up hill from that point on.’

The experience of working with ‘dumb kids’ has, for some teachers, an essence of engaging students’ dreams of the future, even though they are dreams that are not highly valued by the school community because they do not involve academic success or university entrance. To make a difference means to restore value to
those dreams, and to engage students with a strong focus on accepting who they are now, and who they want to become in the future. It means accepting and valuing different pathways from the ‘normal’ VCE pathway taken by many students, and redefining ‘being dumb’ as simply ‘being different’. I explained to her that the VCAL is not just for the dumb kids. It is for the kids who are focussed on other things, not Year Twelve necessarily.

Everything Is All On About Academic Success

In the struggle to make a difference with students who are failing, some teachers have expressed their battle with social forces that go well beyond the classroom, their relationship with students and even beyond the school. To be making a difference for students who are failing at school is also to be counter-cultural, on a local school level and the broader community level. ‘And they [parents] feel that if their kids don’t go to university then they have failed. But that is also encouraged by the school; everything is all on about academic success. I mean what do parents receive from the school during the reporting process? That is what the reporting system is all about - academic learning.’

But there is also a sense of irony that comes with making a difference for students who experience schooling as failure. In particular, teachers who employ a ‘practical’ or ‘applied learning’ emphasis to their approach with students, have described as ironic, the ‘dumbness’ of academic students when taken out of the classroom context and into situations where knowledge must be applied. I took a group of kids to the football on Saturday and I had a kid who is doing one of the higher maths in the group. I asked him to read the road directory and he had no idea how to read it. I gave him the key and told him the map page, but he had no notion of where we were when we got off the freeway – whether we turn right or left. We understand that, if you walked into a VCAL class and they were looking at road maps, we would say that, because of our experience, that is fairly basic stuff – because we know it! To be making a difference is also to be suspicious of what has become ‘naturalised knowledge’ for schools and teachers.
Even The Long Days Don’t Feel As Long

While the experience of academic failure may have defined failing students as being ‘non-academic’, ‘disengaged’ and ‘dumb’ within the ‘normal’ school context, the re-establishment of new student-teacher relationships, particularly with applied learning teachers who have used the failure experience as a conduit for relations, means that academic failure, in one sense, also becomes relationship success, in other terms. Schooling has been transformed from failure to success, and is experienced quite differently to their earlier accounts of failure. *Time feels quite different. It goes faster, although sometimes it doesn’t. But even the long days don’t feel as long as they did last year.*

For some students who are working closely with teachers who seek to make a difference, being an academic failure means being successful at school in a way that is not limited to the academic values of schooling. They see that they are going beyond the traditional experience schooling. *I’m happier with the teachers and what we are doing. We are not sitting down in a class for five days a week. We are out actually helping people and doing things.* The phenomenon of renewed relationships with some teachers brings about students’ re-definition of schooling as a success on their own terms. *It gave me opportunities as well; I get to go out into the workplace and learn new things that I wouldn’t be able to do at school.*

For the students, the relationship with the teacher is a central element of this phenomenon, and one that they value greatly. *‘I had a complete turn around in Year Ten when I got Miss J; she made it much easier to work. It is pretty handy if you have a good student-teacher relationship. With Jane [Ms N] too, my work is going all right.’ ‘I am going really good.’ ‘I’m getting all of my work done because, at the interview with Jane [Ms N], she said I was getting an average of A+. If I had been doing VCE I wouldn’t be getting that.’*
Ironically, although the students are still conscious of being academic failures in one sense, their re-defined experience of schooling in terms that go beyond the context of the academic curriculum, re-defines the meaning of academic failure to be something that is essentially surreal, and only relevant within the confines of the school. Being ‘non-academic’, or an ‘applied learning student’ means that schooling – and a renewed sense of learning - has a very significant role in creating a pathway that is more relevant to their learning styles and dreams for the future. For students who have redefined academic failure as applied learning success, being at school is about being involved in learning that is relevant now, in terms of how they learn best, and relevant for their future, in terms of who they want to become. ‘[What attracted me to the VCAL was that] it wasn’t VCE, but something different. You could go out of school and there was hands-on learning...it wasn’t like all tests and texts books, it was like, just going out and doing the community service, or going out into the workplace’. ‘Mum likes it because it is the work stuff that I want to do and it keeps me in school; I wouldn’t be at home annoying her. It gave me opportunities as well; I get to go out into the workplace and learn new things that I wouldn’t be able to do at school.’

It Has Taken Us A Little While To Realise That You Fit Into A Path

For teachers who have been involved in re-defining the academic failure of some students as applied learning success, the phenomenon is experienced as a positive transformation of the students’ experience of schooling, by going beyond the traditional understandings of what schooling means. ‘Well if he is showing interest in some area, then you have to develop that. Even if a year down the track he says that ‘I don’t want to do this any more’, he has still developed skills.’ ‘And it is working. I think the fact that we are acknowledging that it doesn’t matter where those skills come from, as long as they are getting those life skills.’ ‘And that has taken us a little while to realise, that you [students] do fit into a path’.

For teachers, the transformation from failure to success also means re-engaging students positively about their future as young adults who are valued in the
community. There is a sense that they are ‘listening’ more carefully to the
students’ dreams - even though they are not the dreams of academic success and
university entrance - and then becoming involved in the realisation of these
dreams through the process of schooling. Pathways that were previously obscured
by a sense of academic failure have now been clarified by a sense of applied
learning success. ‘The kids aren’t talking about getting out as much, and some are
talking about going to Year Twelve and now have the confidence to do that within
VCAL. They probably see a pathway there that wasn’t there for them before, in
VCE.’ ‘Nick [surname] and David [surname] are in VCAL and I can’t keep the
work up to them. Nick is a capable student, but an absolute pain in the throat last
year. He is researching jobs in Darwin and things in Adelaide now, because he
finishes the work early.’
PART 4: POETIC REFLECTION

I have tried and tried,
But to no avail,
I just cannot relate,
To your detail.

‘Time drags!
It’s boring!
I want to shout,
You know that too well!
You kick me out.

The hallway is cold,
I’m all alone,
I’ll call my mate,
On my mobile phone.

I know I’m not good enough,
To keep on going,
The tests!
The exams!
Your constant moaning!

I’m not academic,
I don’t want your perfection,
But my hopes,
My dreams,
Are met with rejection.

I’m just a no-hoper,
To you, I’m just dumb.
I guess failure must always,
Be destiny for some.

But just as my day,
Is dragged slowly to night,
Along comes a teacher,
Carrying a light.

Her eyes don’t gaze on me,
She does not despise,
She removes her gown,
Of academic disguise.

She talks with me,
She listens,
She knows who I am,

I am not just someone,
Doomed,
To a bricklayer’s van
CHAPTER 8

‘AT RISK’

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the phenomenon of pedagogy expressed through the sense of risk that surrounds students who were considering leaving school at the end of Year Ten because of their chronic academic failures. The journey from ‘wanting to leave’ school in Year Ten, to undertaking the VCAL in Year Eleven and ‘wanting to stay’ reveals the complex nature of what it means to be ‘at risk’. The essence of being ‘at risk’ is explored through three dimensions: risk as experienced through ‘academic deficit’; risk as experienced through ‘otherness’; and risk as experienced through ‘leaving’. But the phenomenon of risk as revealed through these experiences is neither static nor single-sided. The multifaceted, ‘crystalline’ nature of the phenomenon is expressed through the students’ and teachers’ dialectical journey from ‘academic deficit’ to ‘vocational benefit’; from ‘otherness’ to ‘micro-community’; and from ‘leaving’ to ‘staying’. In this sense the phenomenon of pedagogy, as expressed through the applied learning approach, has a dimension of growth and security that is attained by the students.

In Part 1 I have introduced the reader to the phenomenon of being ‘at risk’ by telling ‘Nathan’s story’. The narrative has been drawn from aspects of my research Journal but has been assembled to compress elements of Nathan’s risky journey through Year Eleven before the option of VCAL was available.

Part 2 reveals ‘A Gallery of Themes’ surrounding the phenomenon of risk as they have emerged from the lived experiences of students and teachers.

Part 3 seeks to distil the meaning from the themes that have emerged from the lived experiences of students and teachers.

In Part 4 I have drawn on poetic reflection in an attempt to reveal the essence of risk as revealed through the themes.
NATHAN

He Just Hasn’t Got It

During winter the library is always a popular retreat for many students at recess as they attempt to escape the rain and the freezing cold wind. But today, as I stood outside the library on yard duty, looking through the library window at the poor librarian’s attempts to keep the order, I heard a friendly voice behind me say ‘G’day Mr Blake, how are we today?’ As I turned around my eyes were drawn upward by the happy smile of Nathan.

I taught Nathan in Years Nine and Ten and have always enjoyed his happy-go-lucky company, and his warm cheer was certainly a distraction from the cold wind. ‘Hi Nathan’, I replied, ‘How’s Year Eleven treating you?’ As we spoke I thought back to our time in the classroom together - I taught him RE in Year Nine and Science in Year Ten. I recalled our many discussions in the past about how much he hated school – and certain teachers - and his deep desire to leave as soon as possible. I had always felt sorry for him because his tall, large frame seemed to make him loathed by some teachers, as they were forced to look-up to him when they were ‘telling him off’ - even in Year Nine.

When I first met Nathan in Year Nine he also came with the label of being non-academic. Teachers had told him frequently that he didn’t belong in their class because his academic performance was ‘just not up to standard’. For this reason, Nathan was considered by many of his teachers to be ‘at risk’ – at risk of failing his subjects, but also at risk of leaving school early. When it came to Nathan’s schooling, some of his teachers would often speak about him as ‘missing something’. ‘He just hasn’t got it!’ they would say to me when we were discussing his progress in maths or English. Nathan was determined that he was leaving school and even though he filled all of the criteria of ‘being at risk’, his teachers were generally pleased that he was making the ‘right decision’. But at the end of Year Ten I had convinced Nathan to stay at school for at least another year and to
enrol in the VET Horticulture course, alongside his other VCE subjects, including the VET Agriculture that he had started in Year Ten, and the VCE-vocational program that we had created (pre VCAL), including VCE Foundation English, VCE Foundation Maths, and a Personal Development program involving community service and work experience. His mother had also been instrumental in keeping him at school and she was determined that he would not become 'stuck at home' by leaving school. It was not uncommon to see his mum in the staff room foyer at recess, arguing with a teacher about the need for Nathan to be given another chance. But this year, since starting Year Eleven and becoming involved in the 'modified' VCE program, I had noticed a big change in Nathan's outlook towards his schooling. His confidence in his ability to complete Year Eleven seemed to be increasing.

'I'm going really great Mr Blake, and passing everything'! Nathan continued our conversation with a deep sense of pride. 'And I'm really enjoying the VET Horticulture - I'm even considering doing Year Twelve now'. But with those words my heart sank, and I began to notice again, just how cold it was. Just days before I had been told by two of Nathan's VCE teachers that he was really struggling to get his work in, and that his writing ability was 'really holding him back'. They had told me - at length - that, despite his improvements, they did not think that he would be able to pass Unit 3 & 4 English. They 'still considered him to be at risk of failing his VCE, even though he would probably just pass his Year Eleven subjects this year.' I was expected to understand that his Year Eleven passes for VCE were - in some way - a sort a charity on their part. I tried not to reveal to Nathan my worry about what his teachers had said - I did not want to crush his new self-confidence. He had even said that he might 'pick-up Accounting 3&4, and Outdoor Education 3&4' in Year Twelve, without having done either in Year Eleven. His enquiries into these subjects had already raised some alarm bells with the teachers of these subjects, and the Accounting teacher had already told me that he considered it impossible for this to happen. I knew that Nathan and I needed to talk more about the situation because first semester was about to end. Soon we would be enrolling students for next year. We made an
appointment for him to see me with his mum. While I was complaining to Nathan about the cold weather, I could not help thinking that things were about to get colder for him, as some of his teachers 'took measures' to ensure that he would not be in their class in Year Twelve.

I'M Proud Of Him For Getting This Far

Last evening, as I sat in my office with Ms P, the Year Ten coordinator, Nathan's mother appeared at my door and wondered if I had a few minutes. As Ms P announced that she was just leaving, I welcomed Nathan's mum, Mrs Harmon, into my office and offered her a seat. Her face was smiling as she entered and sat down - it certainly appeared that she had some good news to tell me. I had met Nathan's mum on several occasions over the past few years, usually at Parent-Teacher Interviews or special meetings to discuss Nathan's progress. They were rarely occasions for celebration, however, as they usually involved a discussion about Nathan's struggle with his schooling, and what we could do to stop him leaving. But I knew she appreciated my friendship with Nathan, and particularly my efforts to keep him at school. I chuckled to myself as I recalled that, over the Christmas holidays, she seen me in the supermarket and 'chased me down the aisles' to give me a box of chocolates to say thanks for helping her son. I was deeply moved by her gesture and felt that, as parents, we had some kind of a special connection.

Mrs Harmon launched into the conversation enthusiastically, proclaiming that she was 'really happy with Nathan's progress this year'. For the 'first time in Nathan's secondary school life' she was genuinely happy that Nathan had a strong sense of direction. I remembered our conversations at the end of Year Ten and how she was so worried about him leaving school. It must have been demoralising for her to see her son hating school so much because he did not measure-up to the academic standards. But the end of Year Eleven was approaching rapidly, and by eventually completing his Certificate II in Horticulture, Nathan had achieved a significant step along what was emerging as
a clear pathway to a future career. He loved working outside, and our most recent conversations had determined that he wanted to pursue a career in turf management, and to eventually become a green keeper. He had even built a Japanese garden outside the library - on the very spot where we had a conversation about his future earlier in the term. I was proud of him too! I had even taken his photo standing beside the Japanese garden and placed it on the cover of the school prospectus. I often thought of the irony that this photo carried.

As his mum informed me of her gratitude that Nathan had ‘finally developed a passion for his future’, I could tell that her fears of him ‘being left behind’ had faded. Her worry that her son was going to miss out in life because he left school early seemed more distant now. For her, the sense of urgency and risk surrounding Nathan seemed to have diminished with his growing passion for horticulture. But her next comments caught me by surprise. Mrs Harmon looked at me and, with a deep sense of conviction, said ‘I don’t want him to do Year Twelve anymore’. ‘I’m proud of him for getting this far, and anyway, he doesn’t need it if he goes straight into TAFE at the end of this year’.

On hearing this, I paused for a moment and replied, ‘Yes, you’re right’! As I continued to agree with her that Nathan had a wonderful future in Horticulture, even without completing his Year Twelve, I was aware that she had probably received many contradictory messages about her son leaving school. To many of his teachers, he was a ‘sure-failure’ if he stayed to attempt Year Twelve – the risk was too great for them. But then he was also a failure for not completing Year Twelve - she had been told by the careers teacher and level coordinators that he was at risk of falling into casual employment if he didn’t complete his VCE.

But in her honesty to me about her expectations for Nathan, I knew that Mrs Harmon was also expressing the sadness and pain that she had experienced when Nathan’s older brother, Steven, attempted to finish Year Twelve. Like Nathan, Steven had struggled through school – he eventually failed most of his VCE subjects and enrolled at TAFE. He was also labelled as being ‘at risk’ throughout
his school life, and eventually left his final years of secondary schooling with teachers chasing him for pieces of work, and an E.N.T.E.R. score that left no doubt about his being a failure – at least in the minds of his teachers. I wondered if Mrs Harmon was tired of being told how her sons were so academically deficient and if her experience of schooling had taught her that Nathan’s successes in Horticulture would ultimately become overshadowed by his potential ‘failures’ in the academic subjects. I wondered if the system was too big for her to fight it any longer. Perhaps she had had enough. As a parent, I could understand her pain in deciding to encourage Nathan to leave school at the end of Year Eleven.

He Was Being Kicked Out

At the Parent-Teacher Evenings last night, I was sitting in my office waiting for my next appointment. Most of the teachers had gone home, leaving just a few parents and a handful of teachers sitting at desks and discussing busily, the progress of their children. But as I watched the activities outside my office, Mrs Harmon appeared in my doorway. The worried look on her face told me that she was keen to discuss something with a fair degree of urgency. ‘Would you like a coffee?’ I said, as I gestured for her to come in and sit down. Her silent refusal with a slight shake of her head let me know that we were about to discuss something serious.

‘I’m really up-set about what Mr R said to Nathan’, she said. ‘He told him that he was being kicked out of the school and that he had no other choices but to go’. ‘He said to Nathan that not doing Year Twelve meant that he was leaving early, and that it was second rate compared to staying and completing his Year Twelve’. As I listened to Mrs Harmon, I became aware of a cold draft that was coming in through the door, and the need for us to talk more privately. I also noted that she was trying desperately to hold back the tears in her eyes, so I stood up in silence to shut the door, also gaining a few moments to think. As I returned to my seat I searched for something to say that would make her feel better – something that
would diminish what Nathan’s teacher had said. All I could think of was ‘I’m sorry that he said that Mrs Harmon. He is wrong!’ As I spoke I noticed Mrs Harmon’s eyes glance towards the door. It was Nathan. He had come to tell me what had happened too.

Nathan usually bounces into my office unannounced and says ‘G’day Mr Blake’, but not this time. As he entered the room his big burly shoulders were sunk in his chest, his eyes glancing at the floor. He knew what we had been talking about before he entered the room, and as he dropped his body into a chair, he blurted out ‘He reckons I’m getting kicked out!’ I had never seen Nathan look so hurt before, despite all of the terrible things that had been said to him over the years. What Mr R said to Nathan had certainly damaged something that was precious. I looked across at the disappointment in his mother’s eyes as she gazed at her son and struggled to find some words that might dissolve the hurt. ‘I don’t think Mr R really meant to be hurtful’, I said. ‘I think he was just trying to be chummy’. But as I struggled to say something that might undo the damage, I thought just how easy it was to destroy this boy’s confidence with a few thoughtless words from a teacher. Just a few days earlier, Nathan was happy and confident that he had a legitimate pathway to his future – one that was relevant to what he liked doing and to whom he wanted to become. But now he was full of doubts about his decision to go to TAFE and to continue his study of Horticulture. He was told that he was being ‘kicked out’ because he couldn’t do Year Twelve, and now he felt that he was less than everyone else.

After this incident, I began to hear stories from other students that Nathan wanted to stay to complete Year Twelve, but ‘was being being ‘kicked-out’ by Mr R. As the end of term approached, Nathan was becoming more and more anxious about what was happening next year and he even began to miss a few days from school.
Huddled Around The Rock

I was sitting in my car at the end of recess, waiting for Nathan to arrive so we could begin our exploratory journey to Kangan TAFE. Thinking that he was taking a little too long to come, and that we would be late for our appointment with the Head of Horticulture at Kangan, I opened the car door to go and find out where he was. But as I stepped out of the car, I noticed Nathan walking down the pathway to the car park with his friend Andrew – he was bringing his moral support. As they arrived at the car I asked Nathan where he had been. ‘He was waiting for me Mr B’, Andrew replied quickly. ‘I wanted to come to check it out too!’

Our trip to Kangan was initiated a few days earlier when I met Nathan at the drinking taps during lunch. I had just been to the shops to buy my lunch, but as I walked from the car park towards the staffroom, I noticed Nathan with three of his friends, huddled around the large rock in the garden adjacent to the drinking taps. They had ‘claimed’ the large rock as their space earlier in the year, and the chip packets and lolly wrappers wedged between the cracks of the rock stood as their ‘deed of title’ – at least until they were told to clean the up by the teacher on yard duty. But rather than their usual sprawling occupation of the rock garden, harassing everyone who ventured past, today their bodies formed a tight, closed group around the rock. Although they were not talking, it was clear to me that, in their silence, they were communicating something very serious.

As I approached the group I waved my serving of Singapore Noodles in front of them and said ‘I’m going to enjoy these!’ They knew I was teasing them to break their silence, and hopefully be permitted into their serious discussion. ‘Hi Mr B.’ Nathan said in an anxious voice. ‘We were just talking about me getting kicked-out’. The impact of his teacher’s comments several days earlier seemed to have amplified further as he discussed the matter with his friends. ‘It’s not fair’ Mr B. John said. ‘The school can’t just kick him out like that!’ ‘But he isn’t being
kicked out’, I replied. ‘If he goes to Kangan TAFE next year, he is just taking a different path to a career in Horticulture’.

Like Nathan, John had also been in my Year Nine RE class and Year Ten Science class over the past two years. Even though John’s grades were not too much better than Nathan’s, he was one of those ‘cases’ where teachers seem to separate a student’s intelligence from his sometimes unruly behaviour – ‘John’s not stupid’, they would say, ‘he’s not working as well as he should, but he has got a brain’. Unlike John, for some reason – in the eyes of his teachers - Nathan’s occasional misbehaviour always remained connected to what his teacher’s would label as ‘being dumb’. One teacher had even told me that he was ‘builders’ labourer material’. ‘But some of the teachers reckon that he’s getting kicked out because he couldn’t pass Year Twelve – we’re gonna’ miss him!’ On hearing those words I realised that Nathan’s leaving involved so much more than just the pursuit of his career in horticulture. His friends seemed to have realised that things around the rock would not be the same once he had left – there was only four weeks to go.

I tried to re-focus our conversation on the positive side of Nathan studying horticulture, and to redeem the passion and energy that Nathan had expressed about going to Kangan TAFE. ‘Why don’t we go for a drive to Kangan and check it out?’ I said to Nathan. ‘We can have a look around the place, and I’ll arrange for us to meet the person in charge of horticulture - we can ask him some questions about what you want to do in your study’. Nathan’s eyes looked up again – it may have the thought of getting out of school for a day, but I was hoping that it was because he was thinking about his dream to study Turf Management. ‘Sounds like a good idea Mr B!’ Nathan replied, and he began to discuss which classes he would have to miss. When I returned to my office I made arrangements for our visit to Kangan TAFE. But the decision to support Nathan leaving was such a struggle for me. I had always thought that if he had the right teachers he could probably pass Year Twelve. But like his mum, I had also seen how tough it could be for students like Nathan, when a teacher determines that a
student 'just hasn't got what it takes'. Was I kicking him out, or was I helping him to achieve his dream?

Both of the boys got into the back seat of my car – usually they will fight to get in the front, but today they seemed to want to sit together. As we drove to Kangan - two weeks before school finished - John began recalling stories about our time in Year Nine RE. We laughed as we remembered the time I took the whole class to see 'Gladiator' at the movies, and had to pull Nathan and John out from under the back seats at the theatre. But as we drove along the highway, I was very conscious of the friendship between these two boys and the sense of closure that was in our journey. It made me wonder why we don’t celebrate students who make a successful transition to their chosen pathway without completing Year Twelve – perhaps a graduation ceremony for them. I wondered why we have to see them as ‘dropping out’ of school? As we drove, I told Nathan that the school would still be there and that he better make sure that he visits us. We would also be there to help if things didn’t workout as planned. I knew that he was genuinely grateful for these words, as our discussion quickly turned to the teachers that they ‘didn’t like’, and whether I disliked them too. Although I always feel guilty about listening to students reflect on other teachers’ ‘problems’ in the classroom, I always feel honoured to have been trusted and accepted as ‘humane enough’ to be told.

When we arrived at Kangan TAFE, Nathan and John immediately noticed the age and cultural diversity of the students as they moved around the campus. They walked slowly along the path, taking in the large number of buildings on the campus and a seemingly endless array of signs. Together we got lost trying to find the Horticulture building. But when we eventually arrived there, I was delighted to see two past pupils from last year walking out of a lecture theatre to take their coffee break. Nathan and John new both of these students well and immediately responded with a sense of relief at the thought that all was not completely foreign. After talking to the course administrator, Nathan was also guaranteed a place in the Certificate IV course next year. On the way home we stopped for a hamburger
and coffee at McDonald's and our discussion focussed on Nathan's future in Turf Management. 'It's what I want to do!' he said, 'But do they have to say I'm getting kicked-out'?

Postscript: Nathan didn't accept the offer to study Horticulture at Kangan TAFE at the end of his Year Eleven. However, after working part-time in the takeaway food industry for twelve months, he eventually accepted the offer.

PART 2: A GALLERY OF THE THEMES FROM INTERVIEWS AND PATHWAYS MEETINGS

RISK AND DEFICIT: FROM ACADEMIC DEFICIT TO VOCATIONAL BENEFIT

They have tended not to be academically inclined

MR S: He doesn't have the staying power...he is a day-at-a-time kid and he is immature. He is a builder's labourer material.

MR S: [Students 'at risk'] struggle with it ...simply because once you get to year Eleven or Twelve, the work is more difficult, and they have tended not to be very academically inclined; there are some who have done very well.

MR S: [Being 'at risk'] often means that, academically he struggles, socially he or she may feel a bit on the outer, it may mean that home life can't be what you would want it to be...that they are at risk of falling into casual work and not having a direct area to go to...

MR P: I think there is only one now who is 'at risk', and that is because it is particular to him - like his own personal problem. It is more a psychological problem, or some problem that places him beyond our means. He is unable to see
beyond himself at the moment. He is also beyond the means of the program and probably should have had some testing done much earlier. He could have probably had some treatment of some description I would expect...I think it would be an advantage for the school if he left, because he is really affecting the other students. He is a unique case.

MR P: I would presume that [employment] would be helpful for him. I think he just has to grow up a lot and I'm not too sure what growing up in his case is – some people have a condition that they may just have to learn to live with and maybe he might be like that all of his life, I don't know.

MR S: I think that another criteria [for being ‘at risk’] is that these kids would flounder if they were in the VCE, and the VCAL is a way of keeping them in a learning environment. They are not quite ready for TAFE, not mature enough for TAFE; and not able to handle a regular VCE course. They have got to have something else.

MR S: The Year Tens I have got are really apathetic; I've only got one or two academic kids.

We Tend To Monitor Them Really Well And We Tend To Identify Them

MR S: I guess the question is almost does the school create ‘at risk kids’...or are they at risk because of their baggage, or whatever circumstances they get delivered? I think that kids would still be ‘at risk’, but to our credit, we tend to monitor them really well and we tend to identify them. I think that has been helped in the last couple of years because of the work that Mr P has done and we've got Ms K; we've developed some structures and things for dealing with those kids; I don't know how those kids would go if they went to [the local independent school]; if they are struggling academically, then they would struggle at [the local independent school]; if they went to [the secondary college] then there's the possibility that they are going to be lost in systems and therefore they
will be more ‘at risk’ because they don’t have the resources to follow the kids; and yet I know there are very committed people over there and they work really hard with the kids.

MS G: Since my VCE meeting, where I asked people to give me the names of kids who were ‘at risk’ – I didn’t define risk – Craig came to me and said ‘I have got kids who can’t cope academically, then I’ve got kids who are little buggers.’ I said that they could sometimes be the same thing; not coping therefore buggerising around, or they could be kids like Tim Smith, who has a brain in his head but still buggerises around. If they are just buggerising around, I told him, then see the coordinators or house teachers, but if they are just not coping academically, then they are the sort of kid who we are looking at.

MR P: I think if you got away from the work risk - struggling academically, not behaviourally. Because what happens is that, a lot of those kids who are struggling academically will also be behavioural problems, and they will be nominated as struggling academically. The kids who are just behaviour problems...we can deal with them too, but we can’t deal with everything; I think we are really just after the kids who are struggling academically.

MR P: If the behaviour problems stem from their academic struggle, then they do come into our category. I think you need more than circumstantial evidence, and it is only going to come with his results at the end of the semester.

MR L: And the reality is that the students who are most prone to divorcing themselves from school are just ones who don’t have any real connection with anyone.

MR B: Those kids who have developed a relationship with teachers are not perceived to be ‘at risk’, even if the kid is struggling academically.
MR S: I think that's where some of your strugglers are [still struggling in the VCE]...that aren't in there waiting [in the VCAL]...but they should be...and then they would see more relevance. But they are being held back by their parents...by perceptions of the VCAL. I guess we will pursue that tomorrow when we look at some of those kids in the group?

MR P: So he is 'clutching the seat in the waiting lounge, no ticket to get on the plane'. And doesn't even know he is at the airport. He is wondering around the tarmac...catching up with his friends.

MR K: Because we only pathway-plan the kids who are 'at risk'; you don't identify the high achievers as being 'at risk' - and they are; they are 'at risk' because no one has spent the time with them to look at the alternatives.

MR B: Then maybe we are focussing on the wrong thing? Instead of focussing on the VCAL, maybe we should be focussing on the VCE and fix the problems of pedagogy that causes so many kids to wander and drift.

MS G: Even with someone like Mario, though, his first work requirement for me is quite good and he is doing ok...it is just his whole attitude and personality!

If You Are No Good At Anything Then Go And Do Tech

MS G: But you know what it is, because we say to kids, you're not very capable, dead wood, or you're not very good at this; I mean look at what happened to the VET courses; look at someone like Steven [past student] that everyone said 'Get him down into that Tech area - he'll be good at that!' Yet he hated it so he mucked around. He would have been better off doing something completely different. There is still that feeling that if you are no good at anything then go and do Tech, or go and play with a car [in Auto]; so you have got kids who are disengaging from everything, and they are being sent down to those areas; there
are staff in those areas who are not particularly competent, but there are staff who are competent in those areas and I just think they feel it is a lack of support.

MR S: I sometimes see kids fall into the VET programs because they don’t know what else to do; it’s the most practical thing for them to do; the classic is those Ag kids from a few years ago...they would do Ag because they didn’t want to do LOTE and then you’d lose two thirds of them at the end of Year Ten because they didn’t want to do Ag and they knew that it wasn’t terribly relevant to them.

MS G: But we also need to look at which kids go into these classes, into VCAL; last year we were picking out kids to go into VCAL, but now people are saying to me that they have kids who can’t read or write and are really struggling; they are asking ‘why didn’t this kid end up in VCAL like the others?’ Some of them may have been asked but didn’t want to do it, like Laura Peterson [student], was she asked?

MS G: At the VCE meeting we asked [the teachers] ‘is any kid having trouble or at risk?’ About a hundred hands went up! I thought I’d get started with these reports.

MR S: Many kids start out [doing VET] as a taster in Year Ten; they are in the VET for one of a couple of reasons: one is that they do have a genuine interest in the area; they see it as an easy option, or the best of the alternatives available to them. Then they get to Year Eleven and they realise, well they have got to think about the next two years, and most of them do think in those terms, but a few think in terms of ‘I want to leave at the end of Year Eleven’ because it has been drummed into them that they really have to have Year Twelve. And that is true to an extent, but it's not true to another extent - the subtlety there is difficult. You and I worked on that a few years ago, when we had to put together a submission [for VCAL] and we felt that there has got to be recognition when a kid finishes in Year Eleven; that it's valued in society. Maybe that is what VCAL is trying to do; to devise a certificate that keeps them getting Year Eleven. But a lot of those kids
are taking VET because it is an area of interest and something that they enjoy; but most of them are not following it afterwards, and I’ve been putting data together about that; most of the hospitality kids do, but furnishing kids are doing it because it is the closest thing they can get to building; and horticulture kids are not interested in pursuing that really, as far as I can see.

MR P: I certainly know that some of these VCAL kids would be fairly restless in the VCE classes...in that way we are doing the school a bit of a service...[by removing them from VCE classes]...but I guess that’s not the point.

MR S: He is a fairly reasonable student at English – I had him last year. I wouldn’t cast him as one who needed to do VCAL English.

MR P: His alternative is to pick up academic subjects next year doing Year Twelve. So if that’s all he’s got...he really doesn’t have an alternative.

MR B: But we will review all of the interim reports, and we will then come up with another list of kids who we define as being ‘at risk’ again. If the ones in the VCAL, who were defined as being ‘at risk’ last year, are no longer considered to be ‘at risk’ any more, what does it mean to be ‘at risk’? Do we always have to have some kids as seen to be ‘at risk’ – the bottom end? Would some of those kids still be ‘at risk’ if they were at a different school – does the school contribute to a student being ‘at risk’?

MR P: Yes I think it would. Some kids could go to another school, where the academic pressure and expectation is not the same as here, and things could be very different. I don’t think that anyone expected Anthony Furillo [past student], who left in Year Ten to go to the [local] secondary college, could have got the good [ENTER] score that he eventually got in Year Twelve. Maybe the pressure was off him there where he wasn’t known as he was here. Remember when you presented that You Can Do It program? I had the sheet that they had to fill – I kept
the sheet that he filled out and, up at the top, he had written, ‘Sorry Mr P., I couldn’t do it!’

MR L: And the reality is that the students who are most prone to divorcing themselves from school are just ones who don’t have any real connection with anyone.

MR B: Those kids who have developed a relationship with teachers are not perceived to be ‘at risk’, even if the kid is struggling academically.

MS G: I ask people what they want to do with the data [on students who are failing in VCE classes]. Do you want me to handle it? It’s not a discipline thing and that’s not my understanding, it’s purely about academic coping in class, and they keep coming up as they same kids.

MR P: Certainly the end of term reports will highlight a few more kids.

MS G: Could we look at the kids’ reports at the end of term, and the kids who aren’t doing very well will glaringly come up, and we could start targeting them that way.

MS G: Some kids are more ‘at risk’.

MR P: The whole school system is built around preparing kids for Year Twelve. If we were able to isolate the Year 9 and 10 kids who are likely to be VCAL kids, you wouldn’t have them doing what they are doing now – you wouldn’t have them doing languages and such.

It Is Always A Good Thing To Have A Few Extra Skills

DAVID: I’m doing VET Furnishing and, although I don’t want to get into that industry, I like working with wood and tools and that. It’s always a good thing to
have, with the modules that get marked off as you go – it all goes towards a certificate. It is always a good thing to have a few extra skills I think. And as Nathan said, it is with our mates too!

NICK: When I heard about VCAL I thought it would be perfect, because I would get experience with work, with the work placement and that. It has been really good and I enjoy it.

DAVID: I knew that it [VCAL] would help me a bit more and, even the boss that I work with on the work placement thinks it’s a good course and he wishes he had been able to do it when he was a kid.

DAVID: I am working with a carpenter at the moment, but I would like to try a few different things with the VCAL. I would like to try brick laying and a few other different things. That’s another reason for doing this VCAL. If I didn’t do the VCAL I wouldn’t get the opportunity to go and work for a carpenter or a bricklayer. It is good to just experience different kinds of jobs like that and I enjoy it. I enjoy the practical and working side of it – it’s probably the best bit of the course.

NICK: Mr P. asked me if I wanted to do it, so I said yes. I told my mum about it and we both went to that information thing as well. She thought it would be good for me, and so did I. It just gets you more experience with on-site work and all of that.

SHARNI: Probably my greatest concern is trying to find my apprenticeship…a hairdressing apprenticeship

SHARNI: Well, there wasn’t really anything to do with hairdressing, and I didn’t want to do auto, or something like that, so I thought that hospitality kind of goes in with hairdressing - working with people and helping people and that.
SHARNI: [The VCAL is good because]...you get work related skills that you wouldn’t get in the VCE. You get to go out and, say you want to do hairdressing; you get to actually see what it is like. Where as with VCE, they sit in the class.

LETITIA: I always wanted to continue, even thought I don’t want to go to uni, I still want finish Year Twelve; I get a better certificate for hospitality if I do that too and get a better placement.

PAUL: Yes, with the VCAL. On the Wednesday we go out and work and we actually get to find out what the job is really like; if you don’t like it you can just change the job. Lucas has been in a couple of jobs; I didn’t find a job until late in first term.

RISK AND OTHERNESS:
FROM OTHERNESS TO COMMUNITY

I Never Wanted To Go To Uni

DAVID: But with the VCAL, I found that when I chose my subjects for VCE – before I knew about the VCAL – I found that I was choosing a lot of subjects that would just fill it in; they weren’t going to be too beneficial because I never wanted to go to Uni or whatever, I always wanted to go into a trade or along the lines of that. I was just picking subjects that would be more of a bludge.

NICK: I have always loved working with wood. I want to build houses and that, but I don’t want to go into cabinet making. I basically chose almost the same subjects when I thought I would be doing VCE; I had outdoor education because I thought it would be fun.

SHARNI: Mum likes it because I’ve been through all of the uni stuff and I know I’m too dumb. But dad’s still not sure – he didn’t really like it. But he’s getting there (laughter).
LETITIA: I chose VCAL because I didn’t want to go to uni and VCAL helps me get to where I want to go.

LETITIA: Hospitality. And if you don’t like the VCAL, you can change. You also get a work experience, so you’re not always at the school as well.

**Dumb People Go To That Class**

NICK: They [other VCE students] think that it [VCAL] is a dead shit class and that dumb people go to that class. One of our mates told us that he was getting an education, but we aren’t getting an education not by doing exams and homework and all that. They just think it is just easy.

DAVID: I have heard people say ‘I wish I was doing VCAL as well’. Part of that is that they might be getting a bit jealous that we aren’t doing homework – but we still are. We are doing stuff that is beneficial to us. I have heard a few people say I wish I was doing VCAL, and it was Year Ten students who want to do VCAL next year.

NICK: Some people do, but some people think you just do nothing and are trying to get out of school. It is not that easy. But if they come in when we are doing work they see that it isn’t easy.

NICK: We are not at school five days a week; we are here for only three and a half. And they just keep talking like ‘well we’re getting an education’. We are not getting an education, but we are getting experience in the workforce. Like, if you are just going to leave school and go straight into the work force, you are going to get a big shock.

SHARNI: Yes, with Katherine and others. They just want to see what I do. They reckon I don’t do anything. They always reckon I don’t do anything.
LETITIA: They [VCE students] just think is a whole bludge…they always just say that you are not as good or as smart because you are in the VCAL. Some of them are probably smarter in the VCE, but we are just looking at different options, instead of just staying to the end of VCE.

PAUL: They have a bit of a joke about it. They say that we are always out of class – they forever see us out of class going to the library or up the street or out somewhere. They give us a bit for it – they’re jealous. The say we are all bludgers and have a bit of a joke about it.

PAUL: I don’t really say anything - I just brush it off. We are always doing something, but it is not necessarily the same thing all the time. I take it as a joke anyway and it doesn’t really worry me.

MR P: I would see that anyone doing this VCAL is joining a different school, and doesn’t fit into what you [the timetabler] are doing. You would be the [timetable] grid person for this other school and they are totally separate.

MS G: I think looking to next year, parents will feel a bit more comfortable, and they are going to hear success stories, it will be a lot easier to get kids into it.

MR S: Two kids were talking in her hospitality class, and one was saying to the VCAL student the ‘you kids don’t do any work…the VCAL is easy…” and all this sort of stuff. The VCAL kid said ‘No, we do this, this and this as work; we have homework, Yeah we are not at school, but we do these things on our day off…we are expected to do these things when we are at school”’ And so on. It’s understandable that that sort of perception would happen. I know [teacher] was really happy that that discussion occurred; she was able to justify what the VCAL kids do. She was also finding that some of the VCAL kids in her hospitality class were doing better that the regular kids who are supposedly smarter…it would be
interesting to ask teachers in furnishing if the VCAL kids are more focussed than last year.

MS N: Once they realise and they [VCAL students] know that...they are different...like today we were watching Russel Coight and they were laughing; and the maths class next door were not impressed, they were in there with [teacher] and I think he was getting a bit annoyed.

I Don't Have Any Problems With That Sort Of Stuff

MR P: Yes. I think that it is a fallacy to think that teachers like myself aren't as respected by the kids as most people - it all has to do with this power thing. I would imagine that Daniel [Year Eleven student seen to be 'at risk'] has more respect for me than most people, and yet I let him get away with certain things, but the fact is that I follow them up.

MR P: I think that the way they [other teachers] go about it is by complaining about me in their own classes; about the behaviours that they know that I don't necessarily mind - like wearing a hat in the classroom.

MR B: For them, is it more of an issue of solidarity, sort of thing - them and us?

MR P: It has to do with power! I keep reminding people that Daniel [Year Eleven student seen to be 'at risk'] doesn't do much different to others, but his large size makes him physically intimidating. He is a big kid, and if he says something it is coming from up there, it is a real challenge to their power base. Yet I have seen other kids do exactly the same thing at the sport carnival as Daniel, other kids were pushing people into the pool, yet the moment Daniel does it, he is out, sent up to Mr N's [Deputy Principal] office - yet other kids were doing it. A staff member gets pushed in by one of the kids and everyone laughs, but if Daniel did it he gets suspended. The thing is that he is a sort of intimidating person I suppose, but I have come from a background that is completely different to other teachers
here and that helps me because I don’t have any problems with that sort of stuff. I can recognise that a guy like Daniel could get through; he can say that he completed his Year Twelve in a college then.

MR P: I have had comments from a teacher taking a VCAL maths sub [replacement class]. It was fairly basic stuff but real stuff like working out discounts. And his comment was that it was real vege maths. It wasn’t the abstract maths that the teacher takes pride in knowing more than the kids.

MS N: But people are funny about everyone doing the same thing. Everyone doesn’t learn the same and it is not an absolute necessity that everyone does the same. VCAA change things all the time.

MR P: Why aren’t we addressing the fact that the kids are not interested in what we are providing? This thing about [student] contracts and exclusion [from classes]...they are all reactive to the real problem.

MR P: Yes, and we should also focus on what we are doing that encourages the kids to do the right thing, and not always focus on the things that they do wrong.

MS N: People often laugh at the way I use jigsaw puzzles with my Year Twelves and it is just a sheet of text in a jigsaw puzzle. By the time they get the puzzle together, the text has gone in a completely different brain pattern.

MR P: I tell you what is a struggle, and I think it is going to develop further, is that the whole nature of the program is to be flexible and to be more relaxed – the whole point is that kids have to enjoy their schooling – then the priorities aren’t whether they are wearing a cap or not, or whether they are nibbling on a potato chip or something like that; they are not the priorities. A classic one is them going out and planning their outings for four periods, and I hear that some teachers are not happy because you are not supposed to take them out. So it is the VCAL thing fitting into the whole school system that will be a problem in the future because
there is going to be more of these sorts of things happening. The problem will be
in the college recognising that the VCAL does operate in a different sort of a way
– the whole notion of it is different.

MR S: The other point is that anyone can teach VCE, but very few people can
Teach VCAL.

MR P: For me it is also negative – probably positive for everyone else – but
occasionally there are kids who have had to conform to what is expected at the
college and, for example, given Thursday detentions for things that I don’t think
are important – they annoy me. An example is when a kid is late for school two
days over a period of time, and he might only be two minutes late, and also, the’re
older kids too, like 11 and 12. I think it is expecting that the same rules have to be
followed through for everyone, especially with 11s and 12s, if we are trying to
help them through this period of time when they have to stand on their own 2 feet
and make their own decisions.

RISK & LEAVING:

FROM LEAVING TO STAYING

I Was Thinking Of Leaving

SHARNI: No. At the end of Year Ten I was thinking of leaving and doing a pre-
aprenticeship. Fr Pete was my maths teacher, and he told me about the VCAL,
and that is when I started getting interested.

SHARNI: Yes. I didn’t want to stay if I had to do VCE. I wouldn’t want to do the
VCE, but I couldn’t find anything else.

LETITIA: Sometimes I was thinking about leaving, but I really want to go onto
Year Twelve and finish.
NICK: Pete, he rang my house the other week asking my dad when I was going to leave. I don’t think teachers should do that – asking ‘when is he going to leave’. I wanted to stay on to get my Year Twelve, but he is just trying to get me out of school.

LETITIA: Tony [student] is leaving, and James [student] has left. Nick and Paul didn’t like where they were going to work so they are going to wait until this other guy gets some work.

LETITIA: I think everyone pretty much wants to leave; Jessica thinks she might want to stay, but there are a couple of people lined-up for traineeships:

SHARNI: If I find an apprenticeship I won’t stay [at school], but if I don’t, I’ll stay and do a pre-apprenticeship at the same time as the VCAL.

NICK: I would miss the furnishing course, and I have got all of my mates in there as well, so that makes it fun, because I’m doing something that I want to and doing it with my mates as well.

NICK: I’m not going to miss Ms A. and getting kicked-out all the time, but I am going to miss my mates. The best part about school are the recesses and lunches when you get to spend time with your friends; some classes are good too - if the teacher is ok and your mates are in there too.

NICK: Yes, he is trying to get me to leave, but teachers should be trying to get students to stay and do Year Twelve. He rang Tony as well. Tony’s parents weren’t home, but he spoke to Tony and said that he should try to find a job because he doesn’t want him at school.

SHARNI: With the other kids in my VCAL class, Chloe and Jess, we all want to do hairdressing so we talk about the different ways you can get into the schools and stuff like that.
LETITIA: Not necessarily, but there are always apprenticeships going at school and they help us get to where we want to go – the teachers here. They help us with apprenticeships and that; some people leave when they find an apprenticeship. If they want to go they can, but then they give us the option of coming back if we don’t like it there. They put all of the work we are doing on the net - Knowledge Centre - so we can catch up if we want.

PAUL: We are all in there for the same reason – because we know what we want to do! Some of us want to do a trade and the girls want to go off and do hair dressing or childcare. We can be pushed along and helped in the VCAL.

PAUL: If something comes up then I will take it, but otherwise I know that school is still here...I was always thinking of the Auto path, but just didn’t know how to get there until VCAL.

Planes That Are Leaving At Different Times

MR S: A VCAL teacher has got to deal on a broader range of things, and it tends to be more on a personal level and how they get along; there are obviously skills of teaching, but there are broader skills, they are not focussed in a particular area...they are more generic, I guess you could say. And they are trying to get them ready for work. I have heard Janine say that to the kids: “look I’m trying to get you ready for work so that you can leave here and get a job, and take the next step on the pathway, or whatever”. I have also heard Mr P. say, “Year Eleven is a transition year for planes that are leaving at different times. And your time might be term three, or it might be term four, it might be term two”.

MR S: Some of them [VCAL students] are ready to leave tomorrow and actually may. Nick and Paul may have got their apprenticeships. I personally feel that they are jumping a little too soon. I’m not going to say that to them, but what I have said to Nick, at least, is that you can come back here if things don’t work out.
They have got that as a fall back position, and that is the beauty of VCAL; if a kid is three months out and says no way, I need more, I need to go back into the family, here, then they can come back.

MR B: So the plane may return due to heavy fog, as long as they don’t lose their luggage on the way. (Laughter)

MR S: And we are air traffic controllers, in some sense! We keep them from crashing into buildings and other planes.

MR P: I just see Year Ten - and certainly Year Eleven and Twelve - as a departure lounge. Some people, parents especially, see Year Eleven & Twelve as a brick wall at the end and you have to reach the brick wall to get over it, and that is the only way forward; I don’t think they even want to know what is on the other side. While they are still in the courtyard, and the brick wall is there, then they feel quite comfortable about it, and certainly kids do too. So rather than use that metaphor, you could say that the kids are in the departure lounge and there are different planes going in different directions; the idea is that you have to find your ticket in the departure lounge and work out which plane you are catching, and it might leave early.

MR P.: They are going somewhere. It is even hard for some people to realise that sometimes. Kids think that I’m kicking them out of the school. If I start talking about the next step, they think that I want to get rid of them. That has been a consistent thing; that is going back to being one of those more difficult things – parents and kids in the, last couple of years, thinking that I am trying to kick them out. In one way I am – if they want to see it as being as kicked out, but what I really want to see is that they are actually focussing on the next step. In the Boys town program, the kids were with us for a year or so, and they came into the program for very specific reasons; we always maintained that, from the first day they arrived, they were in the departure lounge – they were exiting. They went into an exit program they day they arrived; we were getting them to be changed
and to be ready for the next step. I don’t see Year Eleven and Twelve as being much different; for VCE kids, their ticket will be to leave at the end of Year Twelve. But they are still preparing for it and they put the work in.

**The Kids Aren’t Talking About Getting Out As Much**

MR P: The kids aren’t talking about getting out as much, and some are talking about going to Year Twelve now and have the confidence to do that within VCAL. They probably see a pathway there that wasn’t there for them before, in VCE.

MR S: With the VCAL Auto kids, there were no takers with any of the auto apprenticeships [despite students having expressed very keen interest earlier in the year], but there is another intake in September and we will go back to the kids then; they may have a clearer idea on whether they want to pick up an apprenticeship at that stage. I think they have decided that they want to stay now!

**PART 3: DISTILLING THE MEANING**

**They have tended not to be very academically inclined**

When some teachers talk about students who are ‘at risk’, they often seem to focus on what a student is lacking in personal ‘resources’ that are necessary for students to participate in school-life. *I think there is only one now who is ‘at risk’, and that is because it is particular to him - like his own personal problem. It is more a psychological problem, or some problem that places him beyond our means.* But while such resources include what is perceived to be the appropriate – or ‘inappropriate’ - social and psychological development expected for their age group, there is a particular emphasis placed on the waning ‘academic inclination’ of students seen – by some teachers - to be ‘at risk’. *Once you get to Year Eleven or Twelve, the work is more difficult, and they have tended not to be very academically inclined. [Being ‘at risk’] often means that, academically he*
struggles, socially he or she may feel a bit on the outer, it may mean that home life can’t be what you would want it to be... For these teachers, to be working with students who are ‘at risk’ means to be working with young people who are ‘struggling’ at school because of their social, psychological or particularly academic deficiencies. To them, being a student ‘at risk’ means being non-academic and being a struggler.

The experience of relating to students who are ‘at risk’ means, for some teachers, relating to a young person whose future is deemed to be highly questionable, or at least limited to an area of employment that is of ‘lesser value’. They are ‘at risk’ of falling into casual work and not having a direct area to go to... He is a builder’s labourer material. There is a strong sense of fate that some teachers bring to their relationships with ‘at risk’ students, as they assume their destiny has been largely pre-determined by their academic deficiencies; they are ‘at risk’ now because of their ‘academic failures’ and ‘at risk’ in the future because of their ‘limited career pathways’. Relating to a student who is seen to be ‘at risk’ means relating to someone whose future is seen to be limited. The sense of a limited and lesser quality future for ‘at risk’ students contrasts with the reassurance normally awarded by teachers, when they relate to students who enjoy academic success.

There is a general confidence in the academic pathway that apparently ‘requires no further action’ by teachers, although some teachers do not agree with this assumption. We only pathway-plan the kids who are ‘at risk’; you don’t identify the high achievers as being ‘at risk’ - and they are; they are ‘at risk’ because no one has spent the time with them to look at the alternatives.

We Tend To Monitor Them Really Well And We Tend To Identify Them

Being ‘at risk’ because a student is ‘non-academic’, is seen by some teachers to be part of a student’s identity - one that has been ‘revealed objectively’ by the academic standards of the school. [For a student to be ‘at risk’]... I think you need more than circumstantial evidence, and it only going to come with his results at the end of the semester. Being ‘at risk’ is seen as the fate of some students and the
school is seen to have an important role in ‘identifying and managing’ those students. I think that kids would still be ‘at risk’ [even if they went to different school], but to our credit, we tend to monitor them really well and we tend to identify them...we've developed some structures and things for dealing with those kids. Being ‘at risk’ means needing to be identified by the school for further ‘special’ management.

Being a poor academic performer does not necessarily mean that a student is ‘at risk’. For some students, poor academic results are ‘acceptable’ – although not preferred - and the student is not seen as being ‘at risk’, rather just being off-track because of their behaviour. They are accepted as ‘normal poor-performers’ within the VCE, who have ‘got a brain in their head’, but chose not to use it. Students who are ‘normal poor performers’ are usually not identified as being ‘at risk’ because they have developed a significant relationship with one or more of their teachers. And the reality is that the students who are most prone to divorcing themselves from school are just ones who don’t have any real connection with anyone...Those kids who have developed a relationship with teachers are not perceived to be ‘at risk’, even if the kid is struggling academically. Being ‘at risk’ means being identified because a student is ‘relationally removed’ from the teachers at the school.

For students who have been identified as being ‘at risk’, poor behaviour in the classroom is seen to be caused by their academic deficiency. It is assumed that they ‘don’t have the brains’ to know any better – they are not temporarily ‘off-track’ but are permanently on the ‘wrong track’ with no real direction. Some teachers see students who are ‘at risk’ as embodying their failures and risk in a way that ‘normal poor performers’ do not, and their poor academic performance is deemed to be unacceptable and requiring further action. Craig [teacher] came to me and said ‘I have got kids who can’t cope academically, then I've got kids who are little buggers.’ I said that they could sometimes be the same thing; not coping therefore buggerising around, or they could be kids like Tim Dickson [student], who has a brain in his head but still buggerises around. If they are just
buggerising around, I told him, then see the coordinators or house teachers, but if they are just not coping academically, then they are the sort of kid who we are looking at. Being ‘at risk’ means being identified because you are worse than ‘a little bugger’. To be performing poorly and simply called ‘a little bugger’ has an essence of fondness in the relationship between teachers and students, but in the description of ‘at risk’ students who are ‘just not coping academically’, there is an essence of academic and relational deficiency that is bestowed upon that ‘sort of kid’.

If You Are No Good At Anything Then Go And Do Tech

Being ‘at risk’ means that a student is seen to have very limited options within the curriculum and may be ‘forced’ to do vocational subjects as a last resort. For many teachers, there is also a very strong association with a student’s being ‘at risk’ and their ‘need’ to do vocational subjects to allow them to remain at school. [W]e say to kids, you’re not very capable - dead wood - or you’re not very good at this; I mean look at what happened to the VET courses; look at someone like Steven Daily that everyone said ‘Get him down into that Tech area - he’ll be good at that!’ Yet he hated it so he mucked around. He would have been better off doing something completely different. There is still that feeling that if you are no good at anything then go and do Tech or go and play with a car [in VET Auto]; so you have got kids who are disengaging from everything, and they are being sent down to those areas. Being ‘at risk’ means being ‘sent down’ to the technical areas and being ‘limited’ to vocational or applied learning subjects - a ‘lesser’ kind of learning which is carried out ‘down’ in the non-academic space of the technical classrooms. For some teachers, the vocational and applied learning subjects and learning spaces are seen to be more relevant to students who are ‘academically deficient’ and are ‘destined’ to future employment in manual labour.

The recent development of the VCAL has encouraged some academic subject teachers to review their students’ performances in the light of an ‘applied learning
alternative’ to the management of poor academic performers in their class. There is now a greater chance of poor performers being ‘diagnosed’ — by their academic subject teachers — as being ‘at risk’ by their poor academic performance, and ‘needing’ to do an applied learning alternative. The VCAL provides an option for academic teachers to seek the ‘legitimate’ removal of students who are academic strugglers, on the basis of their ‘applied learning needs’. But we also need to look at which kids go into these classes, into VCAL; last year we [Pathways Team] were picking out kids to go into VCAL, but now people are saying to me that they have kids who can’t read or write and are really struggling; they are asking ‘why didn’t this kid end up in VCAL like the others?’...At the VCE meeting we asked [the teachers] ‘Is any kid having trouble or ‘at risk’? ’ About a hundred hands went up! I thought I’d get started with these reports. Within the walls of an academic classroom, being ‘at risk’ means being a student who is ‘beyond’ the teaching abilities of a ‘normal’ classroom teacher — it means being in need of a vocational or applied learning pathway.

It Is Always A Good Thing To Have A Few Extra Skills

For the students involved in this study, the phenomenon of being ‘at risk’ is experienced very differently to most of their teachers’ perceptions. Notably, while the students have frequently defined themselves as being academic failures or as being dumb, none of the students in the study have ever portrayed themselves as being ‘at risk’. The language of ‘students being ‘at risk’’ has always been confined to teachers discussing students who are experiencing chronic failure.

In contrast to the teachers’ definitions of students ‘being ‘at risk’’, the students who contributed to this research have always talked about the phenomenon of risk as being something in their future and external to themselves — the essence of their risk is reflected in their concerns for their future. Probably my greatest concern is trying to find my apprenticeship...a hairdressing apprenticeship. While their experiences of academic failure and limited choices within the curriculum have left many of the students contemplating leaving school at the end of Year Ten,
their experience of risk also involves staying at school and risking further failure by what they have defined as curriculum and teaching strategies that are mostly irrelevant to their future. Prior to the VCAL being offered at the school, the skills experiences they were seeking were not being offered within the curriculum, and this meant that their future dreams to become hairdressers, mechanics, electricians and carpenters were put ‘at risk’ by the school.

For the students involved in the study, the essence of their ‘exposure to risk’ – rather than being ‘at risk’ – involves making decisions and preparing for challenges in their future that focus on further study and employment. They understand that their decisions about their future are risky because they may make the wrong decisions, or they may not be able to find work in the areas of their choice. Although many of their teachers embodied them as being ‘at risk’ because of their academic deficits, for the students, risk is something that can be managed – using their bodies - by collecting skills and gaining experiences that will help them make the right decisions and act as ‘insurance’ for their future. Unlike being an academic failure, being ‘at risk’ – for the students - is not a part of their identity. *I’m doing VET Furnishing and, although I don’t want to get into that industry, I like working with wood and tools and that. It’s always a good thing to have, with the modules that get marked off as you go – it all goes towards a certificate. It is always a good thing to have a few extra skills I think. And as Nick said, it is with our mates too!*

The opportunity to participate in vocational and applied learning programs represents an opportunity for the students to manage their risks by collecting skills that they see as relevant to their future. For the students, being involved in the vocational and applied learning programs means they have filled a void initially left by their sense of academic deficit; they are collecting skills and experiences that have more relevance to their self identity and future. *When I heard about VCAL I thought it would be perfect, because I would get experience with work, with the work placement and that. It has been really good and I enjoy it. I am working with a carpenter at the moment, but I would like to try a few different*
things with the VCAL. I would like to try brick laying and a few other different things. That’s another reason for doing this VCAL. If I didn’t do the VCAL I wouldn’t get the opportunity to go and work for a carpenter or a bricklayer. It is good to just experience different kinds of jobs like that and I enjoy it. I enjoy the practical and working side of it – it’s probably the best bit of the course.

Being involved in the vocational and applied learning programs at the school means being able to confront decisions and concerns for their future – their risks – by collecting relevant skills and experiences with their bodies; it means moving from academic deficit to skill surplus.

RISK AND OTHERNESS:
MOVING FROM OTHERNESS TO COMMUNITY

I Never Wanted To Go To Uni

For many of the students involved in this study, the process of subject selection in Year Ten – involving academic review, career counselling and selecting VCE subjects for Year Eleven – was a significant event in making them feel as if they were somehow ‘Other’. They experienced otherness in their struggle to select and assemble a coherent list of VCE subjects that they – and their coordinators – thought they would be able to pass, but would also be relevant to their dreams for the future. For many of the students, subject selection became an impossible task as they had either failed too many subjects in Year Ten – the semester reports are an important part of the subject selection process and their teachers had lost confidence in their ability continue study in those learning areas - or there were insufficient VCE subjects that the students considered relevant to their desired pathway. VET subjects were appealing to the students, but they were still struggling to complement them with other VCE subjects in order to gain a VCE.

For the students, a sense of otherness was experienced in not being able to establish a VCE course during their subject selection process like ‘normal’ students. Their otherness was compounded further by a desire to study a trade
rather than go to university. I found that I was choosing a lot of subjects that would just fill it in; they weren't going to be too beneficial because I never wanted to go to Uni or whatever, I always wanted to go into a trade or along the lines of that. I was just picking subjects that would be more of a bludge. For the students, subject selection involved coming to a ‘fork in the road’ and being confronted by two road signs. One sign was pointing clearly to the VCE pathway and university entrance, but the other sign, looking worn and difficult to read, simply said ‘Others’. With this sense of otherness fresh in their mind, the students were ‘invited’ to study the new VCAL that the school was offering for Year Eleven students the following year. Although the initial introduction of the VCAL had encouraged the students to remain at school, there was still a sense of otherness – at home and at school - surrounding their ‘choice’ to participate in something that was different to the VCE. Mum likes it because I've been through all of the uni stuff and I know I'm too dumb. But dad's still not sure – he didn't really like it. But he's getting there (laughter). Failing Year Ten, struggling with subject selection for Year Eleven and eventually deciding to participate in the VCAL meant that the students and their families – who were seen by the school to be most ‘at risk’ – were now taking ‘school-sanctioned’ risks by participating in the VCAL.

Dumb People Go To That Class

The students’ participation in the VCAL also means an unambiguous sense of otherness is experienced in their relationships with many of the ‘academic’ students in the school. Much of this sense of ‘academic otherness’ focuses on perceptions about the work VCAL students do – or apparently don’t do - in class and their commitment to getting an education. From within the context of a traditional academic school, the absence of the traditional academic teaching methods from the VCAL means there are questions about the legitimacy of what the VCAL students are learning and how they go about learning it. Ultimately, the students are confronted with the perception that they are studying the VCAL because they are too dumb to be successful in the VCE. They think that it is a
dead shit class and that dumb people go to that class. One of our mates told us that he was getting an education, but we aren’t getting an education by not doing exams and homework and all that. They just think it is just easy. The sense of otherness that students experience by their participation in the VCAL means they risk being called dumb by their peers – not just their teachers.

Ironically, the sense of ‘academic’ otherness experienced in the presence of some VCE students also bring about a new sense of micro-community within the group of VCAL students. Being together because they have experienced academic failure and are collectively interested in non-academic pathways from school to work, means that the students have shared many intense experiences of schooling, including a ‘renewed’ understanding of what it means to go to school – an understanding in which they question collectively, the ‘true’ meaning of being non-academic. The micro-community that is created by their ‘academic otherness’, and the public claims by their VCAL teachers that there are ‘other’ legitimate ways to learn, means that the students have a deep sense of agency in dealing with their otherness experiences. They have a bit of a joke about it. They say that we are always out of class – they forever see us out of class going to the library or up the street or out somewhere. They give us a bit for it – they’re jealous. The say we are all bludgers and have a bit of a joke about it...I don’t really say anything - I just brush it off. We are always doing something, but it is not necessarily the same thing all the time. I take it as a joke anyway and it doesn’t really worry me.

I Don’t Have Any Problems With That Sort Of Stuff

There is also a deep sense of otherness experienced by the VCAL teachers involved in this study. For the VCAL teachers, using applied learning methods, means questioning many of the traditional academic teaching methods that are used by other teachers in the school. For the VCAL teachers applied learning means that knowledge is always contextualised and dealt with actively, on an as-needed basis – never simply derived from a textbook. Assessment means that
students have a responsibility to demonstrate their learning in a context appropriate to what is being assessed – never by routine tests and exams. I have had comments from a teacher taking a VCAL maths sub – it was fairly basic stuff, but real stuff - like working out discounts – and his comment was that it was real vege maths. It wasn’t the abstract maths that the teacher takes pride in knowing more than the kids. For the VCAL teachers, applied learning means being much more flexible than the traditional academic methods, and relinquishing some of the power-base that is derived from being the teacher-expert. It also means a sense of ‘teacher-otherness’ is created by their most basic assumptions about teaching and learning.

But using methods that challenge the traditional system of academic learning – including being more flexible with student behaviour - means that the VCAL teachers are also challenging the very culture of learning that portrayed their students as being ‘at risk’ in the first place. This cultural challenge is a task that they see as necessary, if they are to ‘make a difference’ for their students. But ultimately their challenge to the traditional modes of secondary school learning brings their ‘status’ and identity as a teacher into question. I think that it is a fallacy to think that teachers like myself aren’t as respected by the kids as most people - it all has to do with this power thing. I would imagine that Daniel [Year Eleven student seen to be ‘at risk’] has more respect for me than most people, and yet I let him get away with certain things, but the fact is that I follow them up...I think that the way they [other teachers] go about it is by complaining about me in their own classes; about the behaviours that they know that I don’t necessarily mind – like wearing a hat in the classroom.

But the sense of ‘teacher-otherness’ that surrounds the VCAL teachers also means that they too, are a part of the micro-community that has been formed by the ‘academic otherness’ of the VCAL students. In many ways, their ‘teacher-otherness’ has positioned them as a central axle around which the VCAL micro-community revolves. They have permitted their students to remove the old, worn-out sign at the fork in the road saying ‘Other’, and replace it with a new one that
says VCAL in bright, bold colours. Although the exact meaning of the sign is only known to their micro-community, at least it is clear – the paint is still fresh - and can be read by all as the alternative to the VCE pathway.

FROM LEAVING TO STAYING

I Was Thinking Of Leaving

For all of the students involved in the study, the experience of schooling at the end of Year Ten involved some element of the planning to leaving school – an essential element that was used by the school to describe the students as being ‘at risk’. Their encounters with chronic ‘failure’ in their academic subjects, ‘being kicked-out’ of classes by teachers, being labelled as a ‘no-hoper’ and ‘not good enough to keep going’ were all central elements in their decision to ‘be leaving’ school.

The desire to find an apprenticeship and an eventual career in a trade was also a significant factor for students considering their departure at the end of Year Ten, however, the lack of curriculum options relevant to their desired pathway created their ‘need’ to leave, despite not having a clear educational or employment option once they had left. For many of the students, leaving school at the end of Year Ten was something they felt they ‘needed to do’ because their experience of schooling - as failure and irrelevant - was more than they could tolerate.

The essence of their leaving can be found in their ‘not wanting to stay’ but not being able to ‘find anything else’. At the end of Year Ten I was thinking of leaving and doing a pre-apprenticeship...I didn’t want to stay if I had to do VCE. I wouldn’t want to do the VCE, but I couldn’t find anything else. For the students, the risks associated with staying at school – and failing the VCE - were perceived to be greater than the risks created by leaving school. For the students, being an ‘early school leaver’ meant that they were no longer ‘at risk’ of being a constant failure - they would no longer ‘Be’ at school.
While most of the students were able to interpret the hidden— but not subtle— messages about being an academic failure and staying at school, some students were left in no doubt about leaving at the end of Year Ten as the decision was being thrust upon them by their teachers. For some students, the essence of being kicked-out of the classroom was extended to being kicked-out of the school. *He rang my house the other week was asking my dad when I was going to leave. I don’t think teachers should do that — asking ‘when is he going to leave’. I wanted to stay on to get my Year Twelve, but he is just trying to get me out of school...He rang Tony as well. Tony’s parents weren’t home, but he spoke to Tony and said that he should try to find a job because he doesn’t want him at school. Some teachers become very focused on students who ‘should be leaving’ because school is ‘no longer appropriate for them’; staying at school is not really presented as an option when students relate to those teachers. *Some of those kids shouldn’t have been here anyway. We have a philosophy which says they are better to stay at school where we can look after them...but they should have been on pathways out rather than saying that they could do Year Twelve... He doesn’t have the staying power...he is a day-at-a-time kid and he is immature. For some students, leaving means being rejected by the school community because they do not have the ‘resources’ to remain in the system.

As the end of the school year approaches, students ‘leaving school’ become more sensitive to the elements of their schooling that they will miss—and perhaps not miss. In particular, leaving school means becoming anxious about loosing friends. For students who have decided that they are leaving, time spent with friends becomes more precious and seems to go quickly. Favourite spaces in the school also become more obvious to students when they experience the possibility of leaving school. *I’m not going to miss Ms A. and getting kicked-out all the time, but I am going to miss my mates. The best part about school are the recesses and lunches when you get to spend time with your friends; some classes are good too—if the teacher is ok and your mates are in there...I would miss the furnishing course, and I have got all of my mates in there as well, so that makes it fun,
because I'm doing something that I want to and doing it with my mates as well. For some students, to be leaving school means loosing the security that they derive from time spent with friends in places that bring them enjoyment; it means risking the loss of part of their identity formed during their school life. For a student to say 'I am leaving' means they have embodied the essence of leaving.

But for the students who have chosen to participate in the VCAL, a new light seems to have been shone on the phenomenon of leaving, revealing a different side of the phenomenon; one which can be understood through the essence of staying. For the students, 'I am leaving' has become 'I am staying', and although they have not changed their minds about finding an apprenticeship and a career in a trade, the 'need' to be leaving has become the 'need' to be staying in order to achieve their dreams. Mr P was my maths teacher, and he told me about the VCAL, and that is when I started getting interested. But to be staying rather than leaving also has an essence of 'waiting' for the right opportunity to emerge, as students use the VCAL to collect skills and experiences which will help them negotiate the risks involved in the transition from school to what has become clearly defined career paths. We are all in there for the same reason – because we know what we want to do! Some of us want to do a trade and the girls want to go off and do hair dressing or childcare. We can be pushed along and helped in the VCAL. If something comes up then I will take it, but otherwise I know that school is still here...I was always thinking of the Auto path, but just didn't know how to get there until VCAL.

Planes That Are Leaving At Different Times

The sense of risk that surrounded the students when they were originally talking about leaving school at the end of Year Ten seems to have diminished with the development of their language of staying in the VCAL. While some of the students have left school successfully to undertake apprenticeships – without completing Year Eleven – their departure brings an essence of celebration and achievement, rather than the shame and sense of failure that they were
experiencing the end of Year Ten. Some of the students who were talking about leaving at the end of Year Ten have even ‘turned-down’ apprenticeships that were offered to them because they ‘needed to stay’ to complete their Year Twelve. The kids aren’t talking about getting out as much, and some are talking about going to Year Twelve now and have the confidence to do that within VCAL. They probably see a pathway there that wasn’t there for them before, in VCE.

For the VCAL teachers, the essence of their students staying at school - and waiting to leave - is revealed through one of the teacher’s use of a ‘departure lounge’ as a metaphor to describe the VCAL. *You could say that the kids are in the departure lounge and there are different planes going in different directions; the idea is that you have to find your ticket in the departure lounge and work out which plane you are catching, and it might leave early.* For a student to be ‘at risk’ means they are in the departure lounge without a ticket, with no sense of direction or understanding why they are there. Planes and their passengers are constantly leaving and arriving around them, but the student continues to wander, unaware of the approaching security guards who are about to eject him from the terminal. To be ‘at risk’ is to be without a ticket.
PART 4: POETISED REFLECTION

We need to look,
at which kids,
go into these classes.
Into VCAL classes.
Last year we were,
picking out kids,
to go into VCAL.
But now,
People are saying to me that,
They have kids,
Who can’t read,
Or write,
And are really struggling.
They ask,
Why didn’t this kid,
End up,
In VCAL,
Like the others?
CHAPTER 9
REDEFINING PEDAGOGY

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the phenomenon of pedagogy as experienced through applied learning. The themes emerging throughout the chapter reveal a strong emphasis placed on the 'different' learning style of applied learning – compared to traditional academic learning – and, in particular, the importance of the learning relationship created between the VCAL students and their teachers. These learning relationships have a strong moral dimension and are seen to 'make a difference'. The pedagogical themes emerging in this chapter show how the VCAL students have been able to move: from failure to success; from academic deficit to vocational benefit; from otherness to community; from leaving to staying. The themes that emerge as the VCAL teachers redefine pedagogy show how the VCAL students have been able to move from being 'at risk' to being in a positive learning relationship.

The chapter is divided into four parts:

Part 1: Journal Entry: In part 1 I have introduced the reader to the phenomenon by drawing on a narrative account of a Monday afternoon with the VCAL students. The account is based on my mostly pre-reflective description of actual events and classes as they occurred, which I have used to portray the phenomenon in the context of the school.

Part 2: Gallery of Themes: Part 2 of this chapter is presented to the reader as a 'gallery' of verbatim extracts from the conversational interviews with VCAL students, VCAL teachers, and other teachers who are members of the Pathways Committee. The extracts are also drawn from fifteen Pathway Committee meetings, recorded over a period of fifteen months and transcribed verbatim. The extracts were selected from the total volume of research data and presented under
a series of sub-themes exemplifying the essence of applied learning pedagogy as experienced by the students and teachers.

Part 3: Distilling the Meaning: Part 3 of this chapter seeks to distil what it means to be involved in applied learning from the perspectives of students and teachers.

Part 4: Poetic Reflection: I have poetised some of the students' own reflections on applied learning to revel the essence of their learning experience.

PART 1: JOURNAL ENTRY

MONDAY AFTERNOON

The drone of the electronic bell rings loudly across the school indicating that lunch has finished and it is now time to move to class. Most of the students respond quickly by moving in the direction of their classrooms, but there is a group of Year Eleven boys on the football oval who pretend not to hear the bell. They continue to kick the ball to each other. But their tardiness is noticed by Mr Jones, who is on yard assistance and he dutifully directs them to 'give me that ball please and get to class quickly. You have missed two minutes of your next period already'.

Two of the students in the group, James and Andrew, are Year Eleven VCAL students, and as they walk past Mr Jones to go to their next class, he tells them to tuck in their shirts and to pick up the empty drink cans on the ground near the drinking taps. Despite being hot and sweaty, they both tuck in their shirts reluctantly, but James objects to being asked to pick-up rubbish. 'I didn't drop it, so why should I have to pick it up?' Mr Jones' reply is quick and authoritative 'Because you'll be picking them up during the whole of lunch time tomorrow if you don't!' They know he is serious because he taught them for Maths in Year Ten and they had spent several Thursday afternoons on detention for not completing his assignments from the text. As the boys pick up the cans begrudgingly and place them in the bin, they mumble something about his lack of hair and proceed to take a drink from the taps. Mr Jones is aware that they said something about
him, but decides to let the comments go because he has to rush to get his mathematics text from the staffroom or he will be late for his next class. But he refuses to let them drink from the taps after the bell and says in a stern voice, ‘No drinks after the bell you two. You know the rules now get to class quickly’. The boys leave the taps without a drink and make their way to their next class.

James and Andrew arrive at the multimedia room for their VCAL English class with Jane, who greets them at the door with their critiques of The Matrix II. The class had decided that they wanted to do their review assignment on that movie and had organised the excursion to the cinema last week. ‘Great work guys’, Jane says. ‘I thought is was a pretty ordinary movie too!’ As the boys take their work from Jane, she also offers them a Freddo frog, which they both accept and devour gratefully. They know by her smile that she is pleased with their writing pieces, but the comments she has written on their work also make it clear that she had enjoyed reading their work. Several months earlier, Jane was told by the boys’ Year Ten English teacher that neither boy could read or write English adequately to progress to Year Eleven. ‘Couldn’t...or wouldn’t?’ was her reply to the teacher.

As the two boys enter room they search for two computers beside each other and sit down to commence work by opening their files from the school’s network. The other twelve VCAL students are already logged-on to the intranet and have continued writing their resumes. It doesn’t take long for James and Andrew to access the VCAL portal from the school’s intranet as they have done it many times at school and from home. Jane and the class use the portal to keep details of all work for the VCAL. As the class negotiates the particulars for an English assignment, Jane records it on the intranet immediately.

James is waiting for his files to load and he removes a bottle of water from his bag to obtain the drink he was denied at the taps. Jane notices James taking his drink and comments ‘Kicking the footy again guys, no wonder you get so thirsty!’ James nods his head as he returns the empty bottle to his bag and continues to
work on his resume. They know that the quality of their resumes is important because they have been using them to apply for work experience placements and part-time jobs. The students share their resumes using the intranet discussion room of the VCAL portal and offer suggestions to each other on how to improve them. Two of the students have even secured apprenticeship positions using their resumes and are leaving school to commence them at the end of the term. They had emailed their applications directly from an English class several weeks earlier.

There is a boy sitting at a computer in the middle of the room, taking bites from his salad roll as he works on his resume. David is unable to eat his lunch during the normal time on Mondays because his work placement at a local primary school finishes at 1:00pm. Most of the other VCAL students complete their placements on Wednesday, but there are two other students like David, whose placement involves different days to suit their employers. As Jane walks towards him she asks 'how was it today David?' David had struggled to organise a suitable work placement earlier in the term, but with Jane's assistance, he had secured a placement at a local primary school helping the teacher and students in grade one. David's face lights up as he says 'I was teaching this little kid to read today. The teacher said that I actually taught him to read his first words'. As Jane sits on a chair next to David, she asks 'how did you do that?' She knows David is proud of his achievement and settles into the chair for the detailed response that follows. David was determined to leave school at the end of Year Ten to become a builder, but as he recounts the morning's experiences at the primary school, David announces that 'he might even become a teacher'.

Rachel and Sally approach Jane and ask if they can present their web pages now. The two girls finished their resumes earlier, and Rachel had already used a previous draft to secure a part-time job at a local hair salon. Both girls are keen to become hairdressers and want to own their own salon one day. Much of their work in VCAL has a focus on their chosen career. They are keen to show the class the web pages they developed for the informational task negotiated with Jane.
Jane replies that 'it is a good idea', but suggests that the class take a quick break to get a drink of water if they need one. Rachel looks at her watch and comments that 'time goes so quickly when they work in the multimedia room'. Most of the students are happy to stand-up and move around the room to stretch their arms and legs. The heat from the monitors is making the multimedia room very warm, and several of the students take a drink from water bottles in their bags. Three of the boys step outside the room to get some fresh air and are talking about a job in South Australia they had found on the Internet. The teacher in the Year Eleven maths class next door shuts the door because the boys movement in the corridor is disturbing the silence of his classroom.

The students settle into their chairs after two or three minutes and Rachel opens her web page files on the data show computer. She projects her work onto the large screen at the front of the room and announces 'this is my informational web page for my hair salon'. Jane and the students are very impressed with the quality of the web page and they listen attentively to Rachel’s enthusiastic commentary. She clicks through the pages confidently and shows the class how the site works and the relevance of the information it contains. Rachel explains that the she had obtained much of the information from the salon where she works part-time, but she had also used the Internet and a digital camera to get her photos. She tells the class that she had to teach herself to use Dreamweaver to make the site. As she concludes her presentation the class claps loudly with approval and the bell rings to indicate the end of the period. The students enjoy working in the multimedia room and are grateful that Jane books it regularly for their English classes.

The bell stops ringing and Mick, the VCAL maths teacher, arrives at the door of the multimedia room. He is carrying a box containing tape measures and string in his arms. He reminds the students that they are working on their housing development project on the lower football oval. The students file through the door and say farewell to Jane as they begin make their way down to the football oval. Jane tells Mick about David's success at the primary school that morning and both teachers smile as he walks past them. David knows that they are sharing his
story and adds ‘It was great Mick, I actually taught the kid to read’. As Mick joins him to walk to the football oval, they begin to discuss the details of David’s morning at the primary school. They pass the library on the way and meet several Year Eleven VCE students moving to their next classroom for English. Sam, who is one of the VCE students and a friend of James, notices the VCAL class walking towards the driveway and football oval. He asks James ‘where are you lot off to now? You are never in class are you...when are you actually going to do some work?’ James ignores the comment as he has done on other occasions, but Andrew makes an observation about Sam’s poor test results for Maths Methods. There is no further comment from Sam.

The students arrive at the oval and begin to form a group at the pavilion. Mick begins to hand out the tape measures and reminds the students that ‘they are property developers and their task is to sell the oval for housing development’. The students form themselves into working groups and several begin to make rough sketches of the oval. As they discuss how they will complete the task, a car arrives at the pavilion and a tall gentleman from the local real estate agent steps out of the car. Several days earlier the students had decided that they would consult with the local real estate agent to do some research into the task. Mick introduces John from Stockdale’s Real Estate Agency and thanks him for his time and coming to assist with their work. The students ask several questions about property values, block sizes, roads and footpaths, but after a while the discussion moves to John’s work as a real estate agent and what he ‘did for a living before that’. He answers all of their questions and tells them he wishes he could have learnt maths like they do. James comments that ‘it is much better than sitting in a classroom and staring at a text book all day’.

Eventually the students are ready to measure the dimensions of the oval. They decide that the task will be completed quickly if three of them measure the dimensions and share the information with the remainder of the group. Mitchell, Lachlan and Jacinta volunteer to measure the perimeter and begin the walk around with their 50m tape measures. The three students return and inform the
group of the total distance around the oval. There is a flurry of discussion as each of the groups consider how they will subdivide the land and what factors they need to account for. Mick moves through each of the groups and the students share their ideas about how many blocks they can develop on the oval. He laughs as some of the students tell him they have named a street after him. The lively discussions soon turn to busy activity as each of the groups begin marking out housing blocks with tape measures and string. But as the bell rings to indicate the end of the school day, Mick and the students decide that they will need to spend two more lessons on the oval to finish the task. The students pack-up the tapes and begin to walk back to their homerooms. Rachel suggests that they could use the multimedia rooms to prepare a brochure to ‘sell the blocks’. Mick agrees that a brochure is a good idea and they continue their discussion as they walk back to the school. On the way they also decide to approach the Urban Planning Authority to see if they could extend their class to some of the ‘real’ land subdivisions that are occurring within the community. Mitchell and Jacinta agree to visit the Urban Planning Authority with Mick to see what possibilities might develop for their class.

PART 2: A GALLERY OF THEMES FROM INTERVIEWS AND PATHWAYS MEETINGS

STUDENTS

They Bring Stuff Into Class To Help Us Other Than Textbooks

SHARNI: [The VCAL teachers] don’t go into the classroom and say ‘open the page at blah, blah, blah’ and so on. They bring stuff into class to help us other than textbooks...I don’t like textbooks...I think the worse teachers are always using a textbook and not letting you out of the classroom to learn; always making you sit down and not explaining things properly.
SHARNI: [Studying VCAL involves] doing work, but it is not like the VCE sort of sitting down with a pen and paper and just scribble, then going home and doing hours of homework. It is fun work. It is not textbooks and exercise books.

PAUL: [In the VCAL] you don’t do all of the crap...you just go straight to the point of what you are going to be using it for; like that maths and English [in VCAL] are straight to the point, pretty much.

NICK: And they [academic students] just keep talking like ‘well we’re getting an education’. We are not getting an education, but we are getting experience in the workforce. Like, if you are just going to leave school and go straight into the workforce, you are going to get a big shock.

NICK: They [VCE students] just know to come to school for six hours, have two breaks – they are not working one day a week. The stuff they learn in their subjects really doesn’t have much to do with what you really need in the workforce – they only learn stuff that the teachers think you need.

SHARNI: [The main benefit of doing VCAL is] that you get work related skills that you wouldn’t get in the VCE. You get to go out and, say you want to do hairdressing, you get to actually see what it is like. Where as with VCE, they sit in the classroom and say ‘this is what I want to do and I’ll take these subjects for that’, but they don’t get to see if they will like what they want to do or not.

You Can Go Out Of School And There Is Hands-On Learning

NICK: I’m not very academic; I don’t like sitting in class and doing that sort of work. With this [VCAL] I get to go out on a Tuesday afternoon for VET and a Wednesday all day on work experience and that. I reckon I learn more there than I learn at school...I learn about carpentry...how to do different joints and that. I can’t sit down in a class all day and just listen because it is boring.
DAVID: My mates in the VCE always say 'I've gotta' go an do homework tonight'. But with the flexibility of the VCAL, you can get most of your work in class.

SHARNI: [With the VCAL you can] go out of school and there is hands-on learning…it isn’t like all tests and texts books, it is like, just going out and doing the community service, or going out into the workplace. And you get to make choices about what you learn as well.

LETITIA: Like with English, we are going to the movies for that. We watch a lot of movies and often go down to the drama place [cinema]. We do our movie reviews at the cinemas as well, if the time suits us.

PAUL: The VCAL is lot different, but you sort of still get the same outcome; you go where you want. It is just different learning and different style.

PAUL: Well, with maths we measured the football oval and we turned it into a housing estate. We had to do a scale drawing, write down the size of the blocks that we were going to have, the roads and shops. I had twenty-eight houses on it with fair size blocks! We are going to the Urban Planning Authority soon to do some real subdivisions with them.

PAUL: It is different to the other [VCE] maths students because they just put stuff into a calculator and things that I wouldn’t really be using in a trade. I want to be in automotive, but if you wanted to be in building and construction, you need to know the size of things and how to measure them.

PAUL: So the learning in [VCAL] is more focused on things that you are going to be using.
PAUL: [The teachers] make it more fun too. It is not just ‘sit down and copy off the board’. Mick actually brings stuff out to measure and we go home and measure things there - finding the area and stuff.

PAUL: Applied learning is just the style of how we learn. We go out and it keeps us interested in it, not just copying stuff.

SHARNI: Well, Jane always brings in food for us. If we have to do something, like writing an instructional piece, we will go down to the kitchen and cook something and then write the instructions on it.

They Give You A Choice

PAUL: A good teacher is someone who you can get along with and you don’t have a tension between you. They help you out with things and make it fun; not just make you copy down stuff and order you around; they give you a choice. Like with the movies, we could choose what we wanted to see and we decided to do our reviews at the movies theatre.

PAUL: This year is different from Year Ten… and it is the same for both VCAL classes and you look forward to it because it is something different that you are going to be doing everyday…or you don’t know where we are going next [in a positive way]. Where as last year there was always a set thing every period, where you had to do it everyday. With VCAL, you are learning, but having fun as well and not knowing what you are going to be doing (next).

PAUL: The VCAL has helped. It seems to be easy, but when you look at it, it is not, it is just the same. It is just the different way you are doing things; the break during the day and the VET to be able to do a bit of what you actually want to do. It has helped me at home too because I have two cars that I’m working on…a VH station wagon and a mini panel van.
She Makes The Effort With Teaching

DAVID: It is just doing English with Jane. She makes the effort with teaching and the amount of different stuff that we do is amazing. She always brings in something for us to munch on, or something like that; she just tries really hard to make it different for us. I don’t think there is any student that doesn’t like Jane; they can just see that she puts in the effort for us.

DAVID: If they know that other teachers are putting in, teachers will try as well. That’s the best thing with Jane, she doesn’t want to do just the one type of thing and she hates chalk and talk classes. She always just makes it a bit different. Like today, we went into the computer lab. We barely even used the computers, but we went in just in case we needed them. She was just thinking ahead. I’m not sure that all the students can see that, but I can and I really appreciate it. It makes you want to do good work for her.

LETITIA: VCAL is probably for teachers who aren’t as tough, but are good because it is a fun thing to do and it is more hands-on. Jane and Mick are good teachers to have because they are more fun and hands-on.

LETITIA: They treat everyone good at the start of the year, but then some people just go out of line and start going all crazy and that. So we are finding that they worry less about us because they can trust us, they just worry about the others.

PAUL: I get along with Mick as a mate, and Jane just makes the class fun; we all get along with Jane. She brings in lollies and lets us eat in class. She jokes along with us. She took us to the movies for something we had to do.

PAUL: Well, we ask Jane or Mick for permission first – before we pull food out and start eating or listening to music. Jane said at the start of the year to ‘just ask and you will get a straight answer’.
NICK: And she acts like a kid and has fun with us as well, you know? Some other teachers expect us to be like mature forty year olds, but Jane joins in the fun.

DAVID: As I said, Ms J. is really good. Like last Year we went on a fishing trip with the school and I thought she might be different outside school, but she is the same. She is just a nice normal person.

DAVID: Some teachers just have no tolerance. But like we said, if you tell a joke in class and the teacher has a laugh, it is just a better environment. No one likes getting told off really. Teachers who are easy going and put the effort in are great, but the ones who are constantly having a go at you for nothing…it is sort of like in Year 9 when I had Ms M., my work and grades suffered pretty bad because I just thought ‘well I’m not going to even try’. Then I had a complete turn around in Year Ten when I got Ms. J; she made it much easier to work. It is pretty handy if you have a good student-teacher relationship. With Jane too, my work is going all right.

NICK: Ones that have fun and laugh and can talk to you, so you don’t have to be at uni to understand them. And they have fun with you and are not so up tight; just relaxed.

DAVID: Yes, I think the good teachers would be easy-going and the same all the time. Everyone has a bad day, but some teachers will be as tight-as in the class, but when you are outside, come up and talk to you and expect to be nice, after they have just yelled at you. Jane is just easy-going and not so up-tight, as Nick said.

SHARNI: Miss Malone is really easy to talk to, and Jane is a really good teacher. I have her for VCAL and she is really good. We talk about things like friends or doing stuff at home, or finding a job or something like that.
SHARNI: I think if I enjoy something, I concentrate much more; I don’t tend to do something else instead.

SHARNI: I think she brings us food to help us do work...I don’t know...I think it is because she likes us (laughter). It does help us do work! Other teachers don’t bring food but might take us outside to do work if it is a nice day – they just get us out of class.

SHARNI: Jane was saying that, halfway through term three, she will help with our resumes; we are doing it now, but we will do it properly for an apprenticeship in Term Three. She is also going to speak to our employers where we are now to see if there are possibilities.

SHARNI: My VCAL teachers are just helpful and fun. Good teachers are helpful and you can talk to them and explain stuff. They don’t just give you a sheet a say ‘finish it’.

TEACHERS

You Are Going To Be Enriched By Knowing That In The Future

MR P: I certainly know that some of these VCAL kids would be fairly restless in the VCE classes...in that way we are doing the school a bit of a service...but I guess that’s not the point. No I think people need to understand the nature of applied learning. I have had comments from a teacher taking a VCAL maths sub – it was fairly basic stuff but real stuff like working out discounts – and his comment was that it was real vege maths. It wasn’t the abstract maths that the teacher takes pride in knowing more than the kids.

MR P: Well, for [VCAL] maths, I would put it simply as learning things that you are going to use and do in every day life, and that you are going to be enriched by knowing in the future. You and I, through our experience, have learnt everything...I took a group of kids to the football on Saturday and I had a kid who
is doing one of the higher maths in the group. I asked him to read the road directory and he had no idea how to read it. I gave him the key and told him the map page, but he had no notion of where we were when we got off the freeway – whether we turn right or left. We understand that, if you walked into a VCAL class and they were looking at road maps, we would say that, because of our experience, that is fairly basic stuff – because we know it.

MR P: I have just realised this year, if you have a look at the maths textbook, they learn Pythagoras, and trigonometry, surface area and volume in Year 9. They did the same problems in Year Ten and the same problems in Year Eleven. And I know that they don’t really advance much more in Year Twelve Further [mathematics]. For me that is an enormous waste of time because you can just assume that they will forget it. The notion that we teach it this year, but we will reinforce it all again next year because they will forget it all – they shouldn’t need to do that.

MR P: The [VCAL] kids are happy and are coming to school, enthusiastic about their work; parents say they have changed at home – David’s parents say that David has changed completely…Another one is organisation level: these are kids who are disorganised and they can now get the pieces together and they know what they have to hand in and do it. They have been given a framework which they can achieve within.

The Driving Thing Is That Those Teachers Care About Them

MR S: My office is next door to the VCAL class and when those kids need to be quiet they are quiet. Last year you would have said that you wouldn’t want to have taught them all at one time, but this year they have developed a rapport and respect. It was clear from the first information evening – you saw Mick running down the VCE, saying that the VCAL was great; parents were saying that they wished they could have done the VCAL; all of that is just wonderful to see. Parents were on side, they all showed up, with one exception, and she thought she
was leaving; it’s a good thing she didn’t leave because obviously she was not ready. I don’t know how much contact Mick and Jane have had with parents, but they have worked with a number of those kids finding jobs for the one-day-a-week PD stuff; working in schools or whatever they do. They have also taken the kids outside the classroom and brought stuff back to the classroom to work with. The pedagogy is taken to a more experiential level.

MR S: Basically it has been very positive! The kids - I think - feel much more at home at the school than they did last year; they have got two very good, enthusiastic teachers that really care for them. The VCAL has made a significant difference to their schooling. They are happy to be learning now and they work well together.

MR S: I guess Simon [student] is a good example of how they make a difference…I mean I’m just amazed! The kid has cleaned up his act, and I would say that is because Mick has been the constant in his life for the past two years…he would be calling Simon up in the morning and making sure that he got up and got to school on a daily basis last year; he has continued to work with Simon outside school and keeps in contact. …You don’t have many teachers around who follow the kids up after they leave school; so you then get down to the notion of the exceptional teacher or the exceptional adult who takes on a follows them. It’s an extension of the case management…but its not just case management…case management sounds very cold.

MR S: Yes…Mick can sometimes be a maverick…almost a rogue element, he’ll go around…and his heart is in the right place and its nothing detrimental…and the end of the day you can’t really argue with him because he is doing the best by the student; but I know that he gets angry with kids, and it’s good to see; kids need to know that he has limits and draws the line, but the next moment he can put his arm around their shoulders and their quite happy…just like a parent who gets cross…there is still that respect.
MR S.: Perhaps they might not realise it but I think the driving thing is that those teachers care about them and they are trying to teach them a relevant course, and they are finding it relevant and helpful.

MS W: And for someone like Matthew Jones [student], the work would be overwhelming, even though he can do it. But you just have to sit down with him and say ‘look we have all of this to do, let’s start with this, forget about the other stuff for the moment’.

MS N: And if you can approach it subject by subject and say to the teachers, ‘ok, this week we are only working on English; you (subject teacher) will get your work, but you (subject teacher) won’t get anything this week’. If you can approach like that it works. I know that with [my son], when he gets overwhelmed, I say ok, ditch everything; choose the hardest subject; let’s get that done first. All it takes is a note to say ‘sorry, he will catch up when he can’. They do get to the point where they want to wag school because they feel overwhelmed.

MR P: Teachers are the one who make a difference - obviously a different style of learning and a different style of assessment so you don’t have the pressure. What has changed a lot with using the computer labs in VCAL, is how the girls usually present work much better. The boys are presenting work as just as good now! I believe boys are disadvantaged in the regular assessment methods. The assessment tools are normally more girl-friendly than boy friendly.

MR P: Probably the most positive experience has been to travel through with a group of kids from Year Nine and Ten, in the classroom, and then having the opportunity to do a little bit of work with them in Year Eleven [VCAL], and help them to focus on the next step...and to see the majority of them successfully settled in employment. And at the same time, seeing a change in family dynamics at home with regard to their families getting along together with them. That would probably be the most successful bit.
MR B: I think a lot of the time it is not the kids, it is just that there needs to be a different set of strategies used in the classroom. The VCAL is very focussed on hands-on experience and real applications, which is a good principle of learning anyway.

MS G: But that is why everyone said – after our PD- how good the session was that you and Jane ran on that day. It made me really think about learning styles and actually doing quality practical and hands, creative stuff.

MR B: Then maybe we are focussing on the wrong thing? Instead of focussing on the VCAL, maybe we should be focussing on the VCE and fix the problems of pedagogy that cause so many kids to wander and drift.

Sometimes I Think We Forget Who Our Clients Are

MS N: And that’s the bottom line. I think we pretend that we don’t know that our Year Ten subjects are not suiting our kids. Sometimes I think we forget who our clients are - they are actually our young people who we haven’t got terribly engaged. We need to try to engage them.

MS N: But I think we need to know where they want to go; I think the greatest service we have done these kids in the VCAL is mapping out where they want to go. I don’t think we do enough of that with our students who do want to go to University. If we start that process at Year Ten, where they see the material with all of the different courses; we don’t do enough of it; lots don’t know much about what is available.

MR B: But there is a balance of things: an element of curriculum development that has to happen to allow it to become more meaningful to the Year Tens, more depth and less breadth; more vocational emphasis; there has to be pedagogical changes – teachers have to stop being so dry. The notion of applied learning has to go back into the core classes too!
MS G: And again it comes back to looking at our curriculum and learning styles; that PD that you and Jane did was great – we are doing it next PD day as well. Maybe if we can go back to the grass roots with the staff and look at our teaching as a whole – the way we teach and what we teach; we often talk about curriculum outcomes, but we rarely discuss actual teaching. The kids might feel more engaged and not feel despair at this stage.

MS N: With the VCAL we get the work done as quickly as we can, and then I give them some freedom to do whatever they want to look for. People really struggle with taking on the fact that we teach completely differently [in VCAL]. We are not curriculum oriented; we are not curriculum driven. With the Foundation English, I got the outcomes out of the way in the first month, and now we have had time to sit in the picture theatre and laugh because half of us fell asleep; but we still took the film apart far better than any of my VCE classes have done.

MS N: I think it is also important that we talk here about alternative curriculum to suit kids too. Teachers say that if it is on the report then it has to happen; it doesn’t have to happen. Certain things have to happen, like VCE, where you have outcomes to meet, but even those can be modified. But people are funny about everyone doing the same. Everyone doesn’t learn the same and it is not an absolute necessity that everyone does the same. VCAA change things all the time.

MS N: I certainly think that we need PD with staff saying that it is ok to alter curriculum and then showing them how. It is actually our responsibility and we are supposed to alter curriculum.

MS G: And also being realistic about what you are assessing and how much you assess. I think we over-assess, unbelievably – Graphics had fifty pieces of work!
MR B: I think assessment is used a lot of the time by teachers, not for feedback and learning, but more for classroom control. It is the same with the curriculum. People are reluctant to deviate because things like textbooks are also a control mechanism for kids.

MS N: If we changed our curriculum to say that you must take your students out of the classroom for forty minutes per week, people would die, but eventually they would find their life so much easier; walk them to the top of the driveway and back and it is amazing the effect; or make sure they have a bottle of water in the class for forty minutes and the change can be dramatic. In VCAL, we go and get a drink every twenty minutes if it is hot – it only takes five minutes. We have had a few incidents – kids in rubbish bins being delivered to classes (laughter). That’s funny!

MR P: Yes, and we should also focus on what we are doing that encourages the kids to do the right thing, and not always focus on the things that they do wrong.

MR B: Yes! It’s the same machine-like response that we are trying to remove from the curriculum that we need to remove from the relationships between students and teachers. We don’t want a mechanised culture of learning.

MR P: Like in the Maths classes, having seen what they do, which is basically putting everything into a graphics calculator, which annoys me. But I suppose that sort of stuff could be rearranged. I’m probably a bit caught up with how we present some of our classes...English is studying just novels and Maths is studying Graphics calculators.

MS G: But with these kids who experience a lot of difficulty, how will we get teachers to change what they are doing to help them? How can we find ways to get these kids learning?

MS N: A tape recorder!
MR B: I think we do that by challenging ‘what is applied learning’. That name VCAL has a lot in it.

MS G: We need PD on different learning styles and how I can get information across to the students.

MR B: But people get stuck on content and curriculum.

MS N: That’s right…and then all of a sudden an assignment has been used four years in a row! The world changed in four years and the curriculum and assignment work needs to be changed too!

MS G: You know ‘Diseases’ in Year 7 Science – I made that project up years ago – I saw a kid the other day with it and I thought ‘I made that up’ (Laughter).

MR P: My first year of teaching was in 1973, and I saw a teacher using the exact same program that I had used back then.

The Priorities Aren’t Whether They Are Wearing A Cap Or Not

MR P: I tell you what is a struggle, and I think it is going to develop further, is that the whole nature of the [VCAL] program is to be flexible and to be more relaxed – the whole point is that kids have to enjoy their schooling. Then the priorities aren’t whether they are wearing a cap or not, or whether they are nibbling on a potato chip or something like that; they are not the priorities. A classic one is them going out and planning their outings for four periods, and I hear that some teachers are not happy because you are not supposed to take them out. So it is the VCAL thing fitting into the whole school system that will be a problem in the future because there are going to be more of these sorts of things happening. The problem will be in the college recognising that the VCAL does operate in a different sort of a way – the whole notion of it is different.
MR P: I think it is a matter of education. I would like to see, fairly soon down the track, more teachers in VCAL. I know at other schools they blend the subjects, so you might have VCAL kids doing some Unit 1 & 2 General maths, but then you have the problems where the assessment process is different; so the teachers have to be educated for that and be flexible to have those kids in a class. Then you have VCAL kids saying that 'I don’t have to do this test because that’s not what VCAL is all about'. But I would like to see more teachers involved...and be more educated as to what VCAL is about.

MR S: In some ways I think there is a struggle between two camps of staff, and I know I’ve got a foot in each camp; those who say that if a kid can’t hack it then it’s just too bad, you give him a couple of chances, and then that’s it; And then others that, in many ways mollycoddle the kids and give them too many chances. To me those two groups, or those two different ways of looking at the kids, have created a fair bit of friction. It has left teachers to do what they want because the school administrators have been slack enough that you can get away with either approach; people talk at staff meetings, you know...that you have got to be consistent and that, but there is no follow-up on making sure that’s it; and not all policies fit, so systemically that makes it a struggle, and I think that is very often born out in how kids are dealt with in the school.

MR S: I think the [VCAL] teachers struggle with the kids, who, from time to time, revert to form or the way they have been in the past. I know Tony has been a struggle for them because he has been the last to really come on board. I don’t know if that’s because options have been shutting down for him, and he is realising that.

MR P: One of the skills [of a VCAL teacher] would be the ability to recognise that kids are all individuals and that they have individual needs. And that education should be able to address their needs rather than them all having to fit into a system that is already set-up and which doesn’t have a lot of respect for
where they are at with life... I have also brought some skills of running alternative educational programs, up in Sydney, for kids who don't fit into the regular school system and who have been excluded from that system through permanent suspensions or expulsion from school.

MR P: Just an observation is that I have been in touch with a few kids who have gone through Year Twelve and are now out of school, and I guess what they are doing bears no resemblance to all of the work they did at school... I would see that as putting a question mark about a certain number of kids being pushed through VCE... What they have done is they have been stressed, or not stressed, through VCE not really anything that they want to do and then end up working in a Milk bar or going from one job to another... For me it is also negative – probably positive for everyone else – but occasionally there are kids who have had to conform to what is expected at the college and, for example, given Thursday detentions for things that I don't think are important – they annoy me! An example is when a kid is late for school two days over a period of time, and he might only be two minutes late, and also, their older kids too, like Year Eleven and Twelve.

MR P: I think it is wrong expecting that the same rules have to be followed through for everyone, especially with 11s and 12s, if we are trying to help them through this period of time when they have to stand on their own two feet and make their own decisions.

MR P: I think our existing learning culture it is more for the system. As homeroom teacher I'm suppose to issue detentions if they come in late. That system is there for those teachers who might not have any great pastoral care, and for those who get quite excited about a kid coming late two days in a row, so that they can give detention.

MR P: I'm trying to teach them to take responsibility for their own work and they prove it to me as they go. It is working out really well. The kids who want to be
here are right up to date with their work. Nick’s father says that Nick has gone from doing no homework, to doing stacks and stacks of homework, because he is a slow worker during school and he just wants to get it done.

MR P: Yes I think the school actually contributes to the kids being ‘at risk’. Some kids could go to another school, where the academic pressure and expectation is not the same as here, and things could be very different. I don’t think that anyone expected Anthony [past student], who left in Year Ten Year to go to the [local] secondary college, could have got the good score that he got in Year Twelve. Maybe the pressure was off him there where he wasn’t known as he was here. Remember when you presented that ‘You Can Do It program’? I had the sheets that they had to fill – I kept his sheet that he filled out and, up the top he had written, ‘sorry Mick, I couldn’t do it’. I was really sad, because the pressure was really on him. I am fighting at the moment, quite successfully I think, for people [other teachers] to calm down on their expectations of Daniel [student]. Looking at where he came from, we have to accept that we have made the commitment to take him, boots and all. The climate around him is changing a bit too; more people understand that certain issues are not important, like wearing the wrong socks, or arriving late, or whatever.

MR P: I think that, in general, power is a real issue. I see it out in the street and everywhere. There is a sign in the library that is really irritating me; it is about the computers and it is essentially accusing every kid of damaging the computers. I think that if you put the same sign up in the staff room to manage a problem with the computers in there, you would get everyone complaining that they had been accused of something. That’s one of the reasons that I’m not fussy about the kids calling by my Christian name – you shouldn’t assume that you will get respect just because you are a teacher.
PART 3: DISTILLING THE MEANING

STUDENTS

They Bring Stuff Into Class To Help Us Other Than Textbooks

For the students in this study, the phenomenon of learning new knowledge involves a very different experience to previous encounters of learning in a traditional academic classroom. An applied pedagogy means learning knowledge that is no longer limited to the abstract context of a textbook, menial and repetitive textbook exercises, copying work from the black board or just sitting and listening to the teacher talk. Applied learning means *doing work, but it is not like the VCE sort of sitting down with a pen and paper and just scribble, then going home and doing hours of homework. It is fun work. It is not textbooks and exercise books.* Knowledge that is contained in a textbook is awarded less value than the knowledge learnt by doing an activity. Similarly, the process of learning new knowledge by only using a textbook is seen to be passive and inferior to learning processes that involve active engagement in a physical task.

Learning applied knowledge also means learning knowledge that has a practical value to the student or the community. It is a knowledge that is seen to have more relevance to the life of the student and the ‘real’ world of work rather than the system of education. [*In the VCAL* you don’t do all of the crap...you just go straight to the point of what you are going to be using it for; like that maths and English [*in VCAL* are straight to the point, pretty much.* Applied learning means the opportunity to learn goes beyond the ‘normal’ education conventions to which all of the other VCE students must conform. Such conventions are perceived to limit the VCE students to learning less relevant knowledge using inferior learning methods. The knowledge content of the academic subject disciplines is seen to have limited transference into the workforce and a relevance that is limited to the context of a classroom. For the applied learning students, there is a strong sense of conformity that is associated with academic learning. *They [VCE students] just know to come to school for six hours, have two breaks – they are not working one*
day a week. The stuff they learn in their subjects really doesn’t have much to do with what you really need in the workforce—they only learn stuff that the teachers think you need. Ironically, the applied learning students talk about VCE students with a sense of them being ‘at risk’ because they are uninitiated into the world of work and are given a false sense of security by doing the VCE. They perceive that the knowledge of the ‘disciplined’ VCE subjects is in someway ‘not real’. For the applied learning students, the workforce is the ultimate judge of knowledge worth learning because it determines if you can do something useful with it.

You Go Out Of School And There Is Hands-On Learning

Students experience the phenomenon of applied learning as learning that involves the body as well as the mind. It means not differentiating between knowing and doing, but rather, ‘knowing’ is experienced by ‘doing’. For the students in this study, the most valued learning is a process that requires activity involving the mind and the body. For them, valued knowledge is learnt and applied in a relevant context at the same time. Well, with maths we measured the football oval and we turned it into a housing estate. We had to do a scale drawing, write down the size of the blocks that we were going to have, the roads and shops. I had twenty-eight houses on it with fair size blocks! If we have to do something, like writing an instructional piece, we will go down to the kitchen and cook something and then write the instructions on it. Knowledge is constructed by the class, using their bodies to do learning activities in a context that is relevant to the application of the knowledge. For the students, applied learning means knowledge is constructed and made relevant by its context and application.

To learn new knowledge in the context of its relevance, applied learning means students are being exposed to learning spaces that are well beyond the traditional walls of the classroom and the grounds of the school. [With the VCAL you can] go out of school and there is hands-on learning...it isn’t like all tests and texts books, it is like, just going out and doing the community service, or going out into the workplace. And you get to make choices about what you learn as well. The
learning spaces of the school are seen by applied learning students to be just one of the potential learning spaces that they can learn in. Learning is an activity that goes beyond the school grounds and ventures into places where they aren’t controlled by teachers and have more control over their individual learning experiences. Applied learning means learning in social institutions and environments other than school, where the main purpose of the institution or environment is usually something other than learning. It means the students’ learning experiences may be contributing productively to an enterprise that values the knowledge for its ability to improve the enterprise.

The bodily movement and activity that is an essential element of the applied learning phenomenon, contrasts with the students’ experiences of academic classes, where they were required to be ‘sitting still’ for long periods and doing mind-work that is limited to the context of a classroom. It is different to the other [VCE] maths students because they just put stuff into a calculator. For the applied learning students, academic learning means suppressing their needs to move around regularly – not using their body to learn - and ignoring their ‘need’ to learn new knowledge in the context of its application. I’m not very academic; I don’t like sitting in class and doing that sort of work. With this [VCAL] I get to go out on a Tuesday afternoon for VET and a Wednesday all day on work experience and that. I reckon I learn more there than I learn at school. The highly controlled environment of the academic classroom is a very different learning encounter to the more diverse and risky learning environments experienced by applied learning students.

They Give You A Choice

Applied learning also means being able to have an input into the content of the curriculum by negotiating with the teacher and other students in the class. For the students, making decisions about the content and method of their learning activities means that learning new knowledge is a highly social experience. It means discussions and debates about the usefulness of knowledge and how it is
best to learn. But it also means that the students’ own understanding about learning is valued by the teacher and is eventually integrated into their curriculum and learning experiences. *They [teachers] help you out with things and make it fun; not just make you copy down stuff and order you around; they give you a choice. Like with the movies, we could choose what we wanted to see and we decided to do our reviews at the movie theatre.* Having input into the content and method of their learning activities means the students’ temporal experience of applied learning involves new learning experiences on a daily basis and a certain amount of unpredictability in what ‘learning surprises’ the future might hold. *You look forward to it because it is something different that you are going to be doing everyday...or you don’t know where we are going next.* The recursive nature of applied learning has an essence of ‘newness in learning on a regular basis’ and is a source of motivation for the students.

The ability to negotiate learning activities and the constantly changing learning situations are very different to the students’ previous encounters of academic curriculum and pedagogy. *Last year there was always a set thing each period, where you had to do it everyday.* Their temporal experience of academic learning is one that involves completing activities that have been pre-set by the teacher on a day-to-day basis. The time required to complete the activities is usually limited to a fifty-minute period – the pace of the timetable rather than the pace of the student. The traditionally established subject disciplines of academic curriculum and pedagogy mean that students have limited input into the knowledge and learning experiences that they encounter. The patterns of academic learning are then repeated on a daily basis within each of the different subjects. For the students, the recursive nature of academic learning has an essence of doing the ‘same old thing’ that has been set by the teacher, and doing it on a daily basis. The routine of traditional academic learning experiences means being unmotivated by the predictability of a pre-set curriculum and pedagogy.
She Makes The Effort With Teaching

The students involved in this research identified the positive learning relationships with their VCAL teachers as being the most critical dimension of their ‘changed’ experience of schooling. It was the relationship with their VCAL teachers that changed the experience of schooling as failure and being ‘at risk’. The essence of their positive learning relationships can be found in the students’ perception that the teachers genuinely respect and care for them as young adults. The care for their well being is expressed constantly by the teachers through their ‘different’ methods of teaching that locate the students as being central to the purpose of learning, rather than being driven by the rules of the ‘subject’, school or education system. For the students, the teachers are seen to care enough to risk ‘being different’. The care is also experienced through their teachers’ worries that the students might be hungry or thirsty, or they might not understand the activity and therefore need to change tack. It is like just doing English with Jane. She makes the effort with teaching and the amount of different stuff that we do is amazing. She always brings in something for us to munch on, or something like that; she just tries really hard to make it different for us. I don’t think there is any student that doesn’t like Jane; they can just see that she puts in the effort for us.

The essence of their ‘caring relationship’ with the VCAL teachers is also expressed when they are allowed to ‘break the school rules’ if the teacher and class have agreed that it is in the interest of learning. For the students, being allowed to break or negotiate the normal school rules, such as eating and drinking in class, means they are acknowledged as having basic, bodily needs as ‘growing’ humans, and that these needs influence their ability to learn. But it also means acknowledging their ability to be responsible for their own body and learning environment, rather than being controlled by the draconian rules of the school or education system. Being allowed to negotiate the rules of learning – as opposed to the pre-set rules of behaviour – means that students feel they are being ‘cared for’ like young adults and the conditions of learning are constructed on this basis. I get along with Mick as a mate, and Jane just makes the class fun - we all get along
with Jane. She brings in lollies and lets us eat in class. She jokes along with us. She took us to the movies for something we had to do. Well, we ask Jane or Mick for permission first – before we pull food out and start eating or listening to music - but Jane said at the start of the year to ‘just ask and you will get a straight answer’. Being on ‘first-name’ terms and being ‘mates’ with the teachers means the students experience applied learning pedagogy with much less emphasis on the traditional, institutionalised power difference between students and teachers. ‘Being cared for’ by the teachers as a part of their teaching methodology means being given centrality in their beliefs about schooling.

TEACHERS

You Are Going To Be Enriched By Knowing That In The Future

The essence of teaching applied learning can be found in the challenges it creates. For the VCAL teachers involved in this research, applied learning pedagogy means challenging many of the traditional attitudes about knowledge and pedagogy that have contributed to their students’ experiences of chronic failure. It means challenging what is considered to be valued knowledge, challenging how knowledge is constructed with minds and bodies, and challenging how knowledge and traditional pedagogy is used as a means of power and control over the students. For the VCAL teachers, the abstract knowledge of the traditional academic curriculum has value that is limited to the context of the education system. In contrast, applied learning means valuing knowledge because it has practical and contextualised applications for students. Applied learning means assisting students to build a portfolio of usable knowledge for their future. *I would put it simply as learning things that you are going to use and do in everyday life, and that you are going to be enriched by knowing in the future.*

But challenging the dominance of abstract knowledge means that VCAL teachers are also confronted – within the school context - by the negative connotations attributed to vocational and applied learning. It means struggling to justify an applied way of knowing that doesn’t exist as a clear and disciplined body and with
limited representation in school and university faculties – the sources of traditional teacher learning about knowledge. It means defending a form of knowledge that has a much more mundane and temporary existence – an existence often defined by its sense of being ‘real’ and available to everyone. *I think people need to understand the nature of applied learning. I have had comments from a teacher taking a VCAL maths sub – it was fairly basic stuff but real stuff like working out discounts – and his comment was that it was real vege maths. It wasn’t the abstract maths that the teacher takes pride in knowing more than the kids.*

**The Driving Thing Is That Those Teachers Care About Them**

While the essence of applied learning pedagogy is revealed by pragmatic attitudes to knowledge, it is also revealed in the relationships that VCAL teachers develop with their students. Relating to the students when they are experiencing chronic failure, a deep sense of otherness and a desire to leave school means having a genuine sensitivity towards their vulnerability as young people, making a risky transition to adulthood. For the VCAL teachers, the essence of pedagogical relationships formed with their students is defined by a sense of ‘moral obligation’ – a caring because their students are vulnerable. It is not a care that is given with a sense of pity or charity, but rather it is a care that has roots in compassion and empathy for the ‘trials’ of becoming an adult. This deep care for the humanity of their students means the VCAL teachers are seen to ‘stand-out’ as being exceptional teachers who ‘make a difference’. *I guess Simon [student] is a good example of how they make a difference...I mean I’m just amazed! The kid has cleaned up his act, and I would say that is because Mick has been the constant in his life for the past two years...he would be calling Simon up in the morning and making sure that he got up and got to school on a daily basis last year; he has continued to work with Simon outside school and keeps in contact. ...You don’t have many teachers around who follow the kids up after they leave school; so you then get down to the notion of the exceptional teacher or the exceptional adult who takes on a follows them. It’s an extension of the case management...but its*
not just case management...case management sounds very cold. Being a VCAL teacher means forming ‘warm’ and caring relationships with ‘at risk’ students because they are vulnerable in their transition to adulthood.

Although the nature of the relationship changes as students progress successfully through their study of the VCAL - and they are perceived to be less vulnerable - the essence of caring for young people as they make the risky transition to adulthood remains as a relational ‘glue’ binding the VCAL teachers to their students. To have ‘made a difference’ is to have successfully helped young people in their struggle to achieve the early milestones of a ‘natural’ transition to adulthood, including the decision to leave or stay at school, getting a job and establishing a career path. To genuinely relate to students making a risky transition to adulthood means the concepts of personal development and adulthood become the pedagogical conduit for the teacher’s learning relationship with a student, rather than simply relating through the abstract content of a subject discipline. Probably the most positive experience has been to travel through with a group of kids from Year 9 and 10, in the classroom, and then having the opportunity to do a little bit of work with them in Year Eleven [VCAL], and helping them to focus on the next step...and to see the majority of them successfully settled in employment or further study. And at the same time, seeing a change in family dynamic at home with regard to their families getting along together with them. That would probably be the most successful bit. To teach applied learning to VCAL students means to ‘genuinely relate’ to students by including the concepts of ‘personal growth’ and ‘transition to adulthood’ in a broadened definition of pedagogy.

Sometimes I Think We Forget Who Our Clients Are

Teaching VCAL students means being openly critical of the ‘normal’ curriculum and teaching practices that are taken for granted within the school. It means questioning critically, the dominant academic curriculum and pedagogy of the school and the values and processes that underpin their continuation. I think we
pretend that we don’t know that our Year Ten subjects are not suiting our kids. Sometimes I think we forget who our clients are - they are actually our young people who we haven’t got terribly engaged. We need to try to engage them. To teach applied learning means to accept that many ‘at risk’ and under-performing students are created by an academic curriculum and a ‘normalised’ pedagogy that systematically disengages them from their schooling. But while applied learning means adopting a much more flexible approach to curriculum and pedagogy, it also means confronting the forces that have ‘normalised’ the traditional approaches. People really struggle with taking on the fact that we teach completely differently [in VCAL]. We are not curriculum oriented; we are not curriculum driven...Like in the [VCE] maths classes, having seen what they do, which is basically putting everything into a graphics calculator, which annoys me...I’m probably a bit caught up with how we present some of our [VCE] classes...English is just studying novels and maths is studying graphics calculators.

While applied learning means emphasising the importance of students learning knowledge in a relevant context, it also means emphasising the need for teachers to become applied learners themselves within the context of their workplace. Maybe if we can go back to the grass roots with the staff and look at our teaching as a whole – the way we teach and what we teach; we often talk about curriculum outcomes, but we rarely discuss actual teaching. The kids might feel more engaged and not feel despair at this stage. It means recognising that many teachers are comfortable with the language of curriculum, but struggle to talk about pedagogy as a part of their teaching practice. Applied learning means confronting the irony that, while many teachers are condescending in their discussions about ‘technical knowledge’ and ‘vocational subjects’ because they lack academic rigour and status, they are frequently suspicious of any academic treatment of pedagogy on the grounds that it is ‘just theoretical’ and lacks ‘practical value’. Confronting the dominant academic paradigm with applied learning ‘theory’ means engaging discussions with teachers who are suspicious of any ‘academic’ knowledge of teaching practice, yet place a high degree of value
in their own applied knowledge of teaching. Such discussions occur with limited 'scheduled' time – one or two professional development days per year - and with a fragmented discursive ability to theorise the concept of pedagogy within the context of practice. Applied learning means challenging traditional concepts of pedagogy that are focussed on the technical delivery of curriculum, but doing it without a commonly understood – or commonly valued - language of pedagogy in its broadest sense.

**The Priorities Aren’t Whether They Are Wearing A Cap Or Not**

To teach the VCAL means to struggle constantly with rigid school rules and administrative structures that govern students’ behaviour, while still attempting to create an applied learning environment. It means witnessing the positive outcomes that are created when the VCAL students are given more flexibility and treated as young adults, but then being confronted with the consequences of ‘breaking the rules’ that provide social structure to the traditional experience of schooling. For the teachers, the pedagogy of applied learning means constructing a learning environment based on principles of learning rather than rules of behaviour. But it also means confronting a tension between a ‘student-driven’ pedagogy that is focused on creating a positive learning environment, and a ‘system-driven’ pedagogy that (re)creates schooling as an organised social institution. For the VCAL teachers, there is a struggle to build applied learning into a wider system. *I tell you what is a struggle, and I think it is going to develop further, is that the whole nature of the program is to be flexible and to be more relaxed – the whole point is that kids have to enjoy their schooling. Then the priorities aren’t whether they are wearing a cap or not, or whether they are nibbling on a potato chip or something like that; they are not the priorities. A classic one is them [students] going out and planning their outings for four periods, and I hear that some teachers are not happy because you are not supposed to take them out. So it is the VCAL thing fitting into the whole school system that will be a problem in the future, because there are going to be more of these sorts of things happening. The*
problem will be in the college recognising that the VCAL does operate in a
different sort of a way – the whole notion of it is different.

Applied learning also means confronting issues of power that are constructed and
‘normalised’ by generally unquestioned elements of traditional school culture.
While teaching the VCAL means teaching students to become independent
learners who are more responsible as young adults, the significant power
differences in the traditional learning relationship of the school have tended to
render the students voiceless in the construction of their own learning culture.
With the exception of students who actively resist and reject such a learning
culture – and are labelled ‘at risk’ or ‘disengaged’ – many students ‘contribute’ to
their own culture of learning by simply accepting the differences of power as
normal. Ironically, ‘being engaged’, in a traditional academic sense, frequently
means being engaged as ‘dependent learners’ in a curriculum and pedagogy that
emphasises conformity. I think it is wrong expecting that the same rules have to
be followed through for everyone, especially with 11s and 12s, if we are trying to
help them through this period of time when they have to stand on their own two
feet and make their own decisions...I'm trying to teach them to take responsibility
for their own work and they prove it to me as they go. It is working out really well.
The kids who want to be here are right up to date with their work. Nick's father
says that Nick has gone from doing no homework, to doing stacks and stacks of
homework, because he is a slow worker during school and he just wants to get it
done.
PART 4: POETISED REFLECTION

The VCAL teachers,
Don’t go into the classroom,
And say,
Open the page at,
Blah, blah, blah,
And so on.
They bring stuff,
Into the class,
To help us,
Other than textbooks.
I don’t like text books!
I think!
The worse teachers,
Are always using textbooks,
And not letting you out,
Of the classroom.
To learn!
Always making you sit down,
And not explaining things properly.
Applied learning is,
Doing work!
But not like the VCE,
Sort of sitting down with a pen,
And paper,
And just scribble,
Then going home,
And doing hours of homework.
PART IV: THROUGH ENLIGHTENED EYES
CHAPTER 10
THROUGH ENLIGHTENED EYES

SEEING THE CONTEXT OF EDUCATION

Becoming Post-Industrial

My view of the context of education has changed significantly since, as a young teacher, my gaze first became focussed on the concept of applied learning pedagogy. In 1990, when I began to explore the benefits of using a fish farming enterprise to learn about mathematics and chemistry, I was primarily driven by questions of learning that had relevance in my own classrooms. But as I became more engaged with this type of learning, and eventually undertook further study and new curriculum responsibilities within the school, I also became keen to learn about the growing number of other schools who were exploring enterprising and VET approaches to engage their students in learning. On visiting a number of these schools in the early 1990s, I learnt that several schools had even gained dual recognition (Hayward and Storey, 1993) for the delivery of TAFE certified programs as a part of their post-compulsory curriculum. But while only a few of the schools were accredited for the dual recognition of their programs, I was impressed that they were all using ‘learning projects’ and ‘enterprises’ primarily to engage students in applied learning. Each of the projects and enterprises had deep roots in questions about authentic learning.

As I witnessed the eventual development of the Key Competencies (Mayer, 1992), however, and the fruitless attempts by many schools to deliver them as outcomes of the core Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE) curriculum in Year Ten, I began to see the relevance of the growing number of applied learning and VET initiatives in schools across the state of Victoria, to the emerging project of vocational policy reform and a growing acceptance that society was changing rapidly. It occurred to me that while these projects had the capacity to engage students in real learning experiences through an applied approach to learning, they
were also very relevant to the newly forming vocational policy reform agenda, as they provided working examples of existing school-based successes where local enterprises and projects in applied learning were being used to make some strong vocational links between secondary education and the workforce. Importantly, they also provided some insight into how education would be expected to adapt to a society that was seen to be becoming post-industrial.

Thirteen years later it is clear to me that, on a political level at least, much of Australia's vocational reform agenda since the 1990s has been driven by globalisation discourses and perceptions that society is rapidly becoming post-industrial. During that time there has also been an increasing level of awareness of the social, economic and political risks that have emerged as a consequence of globalisation. The key characteristics of these new globalised risks have featured in many of the education policy reforms (see for example Kirby, 2000) over the past thirteen years and generally include reference to:

- Declining work prospects for traditional industries, such as manufacturing, but new opportunities in other industries related to knowledge and services.
- Increasing demand for employment flexibility related to knowledge, skills and industrial relations, including increasing patterns of part-time, casual employment and short-term contract employment.
- Increasing patterns of post-Fordist production requiring more flexible and rapid approaches to learning and re-skilling.

An understanding of the way which young people respond to this new context of risk is important because it provides deep insights into the future societies that they will help form, as well as the challenges ahead for education generally. On the broadest level, authors such as Beck (1992) and Giddens (1994) have argued that that we are witnessing the birth of a 'new modernity' which involves the reflexive modernisation of industrial society. According to Beck, the main consequences of reflexive modernisation are twofold. He argues that many of the
social traditions of industrial society are being dissolved by the reflexivity of a new globalised society and there is, therefore, an increasing need for people to cope with individualised risks as they are 'set free' from the social traditions of an industrial society. Since the earliest beginnings of my inquiry into pedagogy, I have witnessed students, teachers and parents attempting to cope with a gradual dissolving of traditional relationships between young people and key social institutions such as their families, schools and future workplaces. In particular, the once normalised transitions from school to work and further education, such as that provided by the traditional VCE pathway, and the historically dominant assumptions about school-based learning that have supported these pathways, have changed in a way that is consistent with Beck's thesis of reflexive modernisation. I understand these changes to be examples of the institutionalised traditions of an industrialised society dissolving in response to reflexive modernisation.

Young People, School And Work

The changing patterns of relationship between young people, school and work have been under intense scrutiny by governments and policy makers as a consequence of the past decade's ailing employment prospects for young people. In addition to countering the longer-term economic effects of globalisation by providing a more flexible workforce, vocational education policy reforms have also sought to offset the grim youth unemployment statistics that have emerged over that period by increasing post-compulsory education participation rates for young people. From this perspective post-compulsory education reforms in particular have been concerned with anxiety about:

- High levels of Australian youth unemployment and disengagement - in 1999, there were 19% of 15 to 19 year old Australians not in education or full time work (Marsh and MacDonald, 2002).
- Grim predictions for improvement in the youth labour market and for students 'at risk' of leaving school early (DSF, 2000).

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• Increasingly fragmented transitions from school to work and further study (Kirby, 2000).

The old notion of post-compulsory education actually being ‘non-compulsory’ seems to be fading away as high youth unemployment figures erode the real prospect of students leaving school before the completion of a Year Twelve certificate. The students in this research each faced a journey into that harsh landscape of the failing youth labour market by the end of Year Ten, as they considered seriously their deep desires to leave school at a time when they were labelled by the school to be highly ‘at risk’. But, until the availability of the VCAL, their alternative to leaving was to remain at school to continue their original journey, equally harsh in nature. This original journey involved being categorised as ‘failures’ and ‘dumb’ for their non-acceptance of traditional academic modes of learning, and their desires to pursue an apprenticeship rather than a pathway to university was seen to be less valuable.

The cruelty of the decision to ‘stay or leave’ being faced by the students in this research is not reflected in the official policy reforms that simply seek to increase the retention rates of post-compulsory students without addressing the reasons for students wanting to leave school in the first place. On one level, vocational policy reforms over the past thirteen years can be understood as forms of economic, social and political risk management by governments and policy makers as they seek to ameliorate the effects of youth unemployment, globalisation and reflexive modernisation. In this sense they do represent what appear to be good social and economic policy in a period where the traditional patterns and social institutions of industrial society are decaying. But on another level, their viability as policy depends on the success of deep educational reforms, such as the introduction of the VCAL and applied learning initiatives in Victoria, that seek to respond to ‘on-the-ground’ educational challenges and decisions confronted by students, parents and teachers as they grapple with the real ‘non-compulsory’ nature of post-compulsory schooling, and the true meaning of being confronted with the option to ‘escape’ or remain at school. In essence, applied learning reforms such as the
VCAL are seeking to redefine what it means to engage in post-compulsory education by addressing what it means to learn, particularly for those students ‘at risk’ of leaving.

Learning as Risk Management

The challenge to traditional meanings of school-based learning initiated by the VCAL - experienced first-hand by the students and teachers in this research - is also consistent with educational challenges created by the rapid progression to a post-industrial society, and reforms that seek to narrow the gap between learning and its application in a work context. Post-industrial learning is seen to be more closely linked to the unpredictable needs of a globalised, knowledge-based economy, and has become a form of microeconomic reform that allows the rapid re-skilling of the labour force. In one sense it has become a way for governments to manage the social, political and economic risks of globalisation by closing the traditional gap between what students learn and their economic reasons for learning it. Contrary to traditional industrial ideas of learning that share much in common with nineteenth century factory work, learning for a post-industrial society is seen to be a much more individualised experience, a key pedagogical principle that also underpins the VCAL.

This re-definition of learning on a broad policy level, and on an individual level, is consistent with the reflexive modernisation of society and has resulted in discourses of ‘new’ learning, which are intimately linked to the management of social and economic risks of unemployment and post-Fordist modes of production. Lifelong learning and lifewide learning (Laver, 1996, ACDE, 2001) are specific examples of ‘new’ learning discourses that are replacing the traditional learning dichotomies of an industrialised society, including the historical assumptions about academic and vocational learning. In contrast to traditional learning:
‘Lifelong learning means that education is no longer located at a
discrete time on your life, your one chance to learn, a time when you
learn things that are sufficient for life. Specific skills and knowledge
learnt today may be obsolete in twenty years time or even five years
time, and we will increasingly need to retrain and relearn throughout
life.

(ACDE, 2001, p.55)

However, lifelong and lifewide learning can also be understood in terms of Beck’s
(1994) reflexive modernisation thesis, as they are examples of the
individualisation of risks which have emerged as the traditional social structures
of industrialised society dissolve. Ironically, while students - such as those in this
research - are ‘set free’ from the old traditional modes of learning that labelled
them as failures, they are also expected to individually manage the risks of a post-
industrial and globalised society through the lifelong learning skills they acquire
in the VCAL. They have become more dependant on their ability to learn without
the traditional support of the school and must use their individual learning skills
and networks to cope with the risks of an emerging post-industrial society. But
just as the VCAL has challenged traditional school-based attitudes to learning, the
changing ‘social role’ of learning being defined by ‘new’ learning discourses has
challenged, more generally, the old ‘industrial’ attitudes and assumptions held
about learning. ‘New’ learning discourses have created significant pressure for
change and deep cultural reform in traditional learning institutions such as
schools, universities, TAFEs and workplaces. There is now a significant blurring
of the old divisions between ‘official learning’ in the traditional learning
institutions and ‘non-official learning’ in workplaces and life more generally. As a
consequence, relevant learning is now seen to happen as a ‘just-in-time’ process
rather than a ‘just-in-case’ process. But the cultural tensions emerging between
‘new’ learning and traditional learning are deeply significant and add a new
dimension to the complexity of day-to-day efforts by students, teachers and
parents as they try to make sense of education and learning from within the
context of a system that appears to be in a deep state of flux.
Seeing the Angst of Students and Parents

Seeing the struggle of governments and policy makers to manage the risks of globalisation through vocational policy reform adds new light to the struggle faced by students, parents and teachers as they confront the same issues from within the context of classrooms and schools. This research provides insight into the deep level of angst experienced by members of a school community, particularly students and their parents, as they become more overtly exposed and sensitised to the ‘new risks’ through a combination of academic failure at school and conflicting information gleaned from teachers, the media, government policy and traditional careers counselling. Although all students must ultimately endure these same risks of globalisation and reflexive modernisation, albeit unequally, it is inevitably the issue of being ‘at risk’ and ‘leaving school early’ without completing Year Twelve that precipitates a deep sense of urgency within the community and feelings of being unprepared to cope with life after school.

With the current context of high youth unemployment and the ever-increasing sense of risk that surrounds ‘early’ school leavers, the question as to why students leave school before completing a Year Twelve certificate has therefore become paramount for post-compulsory school education. For the students in this research, the deep desire to ‘escape’ school by the end of Year Ten was a common thread that ran through their individual stories of academic failure, irrelevant post-compulsory curriculum choices and disengagement from the traditional mode of school-type learning. It was eventually the prospect of a ‘new type of learning’ offered to the students in the VCAL that resulted in many of them deciding to remain at school in Year Eleven and Year Twelve. However, the ‘new learning temperament’ that these ‘traditionally at risk’ students bring to the school’s post-compulsory cohort of students has created further significant pressure for change to the traditionally more rigid approaches to post-compulsory education in particular.
SEEING PRESSURE FOR CHANGE IN SCHOOLS

New Learning Temperaments

On a broader level, the pressure for schools to respond to the demand for ‘new’ learning has been experienced on a number of fronts. Most immediately, the increased retention rates of post-compulsory students (see for example Ainley, 1998, Fullerton et al., 2003) has altered significantly the ‘learning temperaments’ of the cohort of post-compulsory students, by increasing the retention of many post-compulsory students who would have once been ‘escapees’ (Henry and Grundy, 2003) from the traditional academic post-compulsory school system. This greater diversity of post-compulsory students is challenging the deeply entrenched industrial-society beliefs held about knowledge, curriculum, school-to-work transition and, in particular, post-compulsory school pedagogy.

Like the struggles faced by the VCAL students and teachers who participated in this research, the broader challenges to traditional education have the capacity to produce sites of cultural struggle, as schools seek to redefine what they do and attempt to reform themselves – knowingly or not - for life in a post-industrial society. The introduction of post-compulsory vocational and applied learning programs - such as VET in Schools (Malley et al., 2001) and the VCAL (Henry et al., 2003) – alongside the traditional VCE, are key examples of the sites of this struggle, which have consequently created the need to review the traditional assumptions about ‘normal’ and ‘alternative’ schooling and pedagogy.

The Need for Pedagogical Reform

Although the more systematic introduction of VET in Schools throughout Australia in the early 1990s sought to provide ‘alternative’ and more flexible vocational pathways for ‘non academic’ students, their assimilation into the traditional VCE in Victoria, for example, has resulted in them being moulded into ‘a better fit within the dominant and exclusionary academic forms of learning’ (Henry and Grundy, 2003, p. 5). Although, in many schools, the origins of VET in
Schools – as dual recognition and enterprise projects - were frequently couched in the desire to engage students through an applied and contextualised approach to learning, the vocational and pedagogical benefits of the current systemic delivery of VET in Schools have been rendered questionable (Henry et al., 2003) by their subsumption into the more academic traditions of learning and assessment within the VCE. More recently, however, the introduction of the VCAL into schools - as an ‘alternative’ to the VCE - has provided a more effective discourse of ‘applied learning’ with which to critique the efficacy of the dominant, traditional academic pedagogy existing in secondary schools.

In particular, the ‘hands-on’ and adult learning principles (Knowles, 1990, Kolb, 1984, Toulmin, 1999, Henry, 2001) underpinning applied learning discourse (VQA, 2003) are congruent with the ‘lifelong’ and ‘lifewide’ learning principles and skills (ACDE, 2001) required for ‘survival’ in post-industrial society and provide a practical and very powerful means – in a political and pedagogical sense – to critique and reform the traditional assumptions of dominant academic pedagogy in schools. The traditional assumptions of school-based academic pedagogy have been critiqued by a variety of authors (see for example Knowles, 1990, Hager, 2000, Toulmin, 1999, Young, 1998, ACDE, 2001), but generally render questionable views that:

- Knowledge and skills can be abstracted from the context of their formation, and then transmitted – as a fixed curriculum of facts - without regard for the social experience of learners.

- Pedagogy is concerned with achieving more efficient ways of transmitting the knowledge and skills that are outlined as outcomes in a pre-set curriculum.

- The learning relationship is one that establishes the ‘teacher-as-expert’, who is in possession of the valued knowledge to be transmitted to students.
There exists a natural binary between ‘learning with the mind’ and ‘learning with the body’. It is assumed that the ‘best learning’ resides in the mind rather than the body.

But just as the VCAL students and teachers involved in this research questioned the relevance of their own negative experiences of traditional school-based learning, the general assumptions of traditional academic learning have, on a broader level, now been redefined as belonging to the ‘old learning’ (ACDE, 2001) ways of industrialised society, and are considered no longer relevant in a post-industrialised society, where learning is becoming intimately linked to the risks of globalisation:

The old learning focused on fixed content knowledge: undeniable facts and theories-to-be-applied, vocational skills and technical information, and these were supposed to last for a life. Applied today, this kind of education becomes instantly redundant. In fact, it fosters a rigid way of thinking which will be counterproductive for the workers, citizens and persons of the near future.

(ACDE, 2001, p.61)

This redefinition of traditional academic learning as being counterproductive for life in a post-industrial society has added to the reforming influence of increased post-compulsory retention rates, resulting in the creation of significant political impetus for innovative curriculum and pedagogical change. Schools are now seen as being central social institutions in the project of post-industrial microeconomic reform reliant upon lifelong learning of Australia’s citizenry.

Lifelong learning starts at school. Young people acquire the foundation skills for lifelong learning in the early and middle years of schooling – both the ‘basics’ and how to learn. Pathways through post-compulsory schooling – give young people the basis for further study or access to work.

(Kosky, 2002, p.3)
But ironically, schools must use their existing industrialised culture to reform themselves if they are to participate in the creation of a post-industrial workforce. This is a task that requires teachers and school administrators to become much more reflective about the broader context of education and to be more thoughtful about how young people and schools respond to this context. It also requires a deeper understanding of how initiatives such as the recent Victorian applied learning reforms have the capacity to respond to this context on both a pedagogical level as well as on a broader policy level, without being subsumed into the traditionally dominant culture of school-based learning. The challenge of ‘new’ learning has created the need for teachers and school administrators to revisit the principles of authentic learning in the new globalised context of education, and to understand how pedagogy is constructed as a cultural phenomenon.

REDEFINING PEDAGOGY THROUGH APPLIED LEARNING

APPLIED LEARNING

In addition to linking education and learning to the ‘new world’ of globalised risk, the andragogical/pedagogical principles underpinning applied learning - and the ‘lifelong’ and ‘lifewide’ learning which they promote - share a significant congruence with the original educational philosophy of John Dewey (see for example Dewey, 1916, 1938). In contrast to the abstracted knowledge of traditional academic pedagogy – and the passive role of the learner it creates - Dewey argued that ideas cannot be passed to students ‘like bricks’ (Dewey, 1916 p. 4) and that such an approach to ‘(f)ormal instruction...easily becomes remote and dead – abstract and bookish’ (Dewey, 1916 p. 8). He contended that education requires a pedagogy involving the active attention and effort of the learner – where learning is tied directly to the use of student-valued knowledge and the experience of students’ needs, doubts and discoveries (Dewey, 1933), which can be used to inform a pedagogy sensitive to the experience-education dualism.
Importantly, Dewey’s notion of an ‘applied pedagogy’ provides a means – other than microeconomic reform discourse - to further critique dominant school-based academic pedagogy in a way that moves beyond the traditional academic/vocational dualisms that have also helped sustain its dominance.

The assumptions underpinning applied learning have been discussed across a broad range of literature and by a significant diversity of authors (see for example Dewey, 1938, Kolb, 1984, Knowles, 1990, Hager, 2000, Toulmin, 1999, Henry et al., 2002, VQA, 2002), but generally include the belief that:

- Learning is the process of creating new ‘relevant’ knowledge and skills and is best conceived as a process that is contextually grounded in experience, and not the transmission of abstract ideas.
- Pedagogy is concerned with the provision of a suitable balance between student interests/experiences and the curriculum. It seeks to integrate students with the curriculum through the social process of active and collaborative learning and by ensuring that what is learned serves an authentic purpose for the student.
- The learning relationship has a strong moral dimension to it and student growth is central to its purpose.
- Learning is a holistic, integrative experience that transcends the traditional binaries of hand/mind, theory/practice, thought/action, knowing that/knowing how, by focusing on the dialectic role of learning as a continuous, reflexive link between experience and education.

These assumptions stand in contrast to the traditional – and deeply embedded - learning assumptions of abstracted knowledge transmission through teacher-as-expert methods constructing students as passive and compliant learners.

The VCAL teachers and Pathways Committee members involved in this research frequently drew on their own understanding of the principles of applied learning to challenge the general assumptions of traditional school-based learning that their
VCAL students had been exposed to, and which they understood to commonly be the cause of student failure. From within the context of the Pathways Committee meetings, the VCAL teachers frequently shared stories of how their students had been ‘failed by the system’ and discussed how the plight of ‘at risk’ students was - and could be - improved by providing them with experiences of applied learning within the VCAL.

Through their stories shared with the Pathways Committee, the VCAL teachers in this research defined themselves in a way that rendered them counter-cultural to the dominant mode of learning within the school. Their stories never referred to their own ‘teaching’ concerns as being focussed on the transmission of knowledge outcomes, using blackboards and textbooks within the confines of a classroom. In contrast, often the first and primary concern of the VCAL teachers was to confront the social disengagement of a student, seen by the school to be ‘at risk’, by restoring their sense of belonging to the school community. For the VCAL teachers, this meant using applied learning to re-create the students as flexible and independent learners who could work together cooperatively and take responsibility for their own learning. By re-creating the students as flexible and independent learners, the VCAL teachers also unchained their students from the traditional system of schooling that had defined them as being failures, and restored their students’ confidence in their own ability to learn.

But being counter-cultural meant the VCAL teachers were also challenging the traditional content-focussed curriculum of the school and the teacher-centred pedagogies that support it. They were challenging traditional beliefs about classrooms as being the most suitable learning spaces by engaging students in learning that usually went well beyond the walls of a classroom, and regularly ventured into workplaces and other local community sites not traditionally considered to be ‘places of learning’. True to the principles of lifelong learning, the VCAL teachers were encouraging their students to be open to the possibility of learning in any context. In doing this, both the VCAL teachers and their students were also experiencing first-hand the counter-cultural dimension of
applied learning when embedded within the traditionally academic context of their school.

INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

On a more systematic level, the institutional challenges that have emerged as a consequence of applied learning reform being embedded into the academic traditions of post-compulsory schools have been well documented by the *Evaluation Report of the VCAL Trial 2002* (Henry et al., 2003) and are worth re-stating at this point. These challenges include:

- The need for a new conceptualisation of quality curriculum that resists the domination of the generalised/abstracted knowledge-based curriculum experiences of the mainstream secondary school education, and establishes instead applied learning of vocationally-oriented knowledge as a sustainable and valued pathway for students;

- The need for the development of teaching approaches for secondary school students that are informed by the principles of adult education and, as a result, are a clear departure from the teacher-centred, expository, classroom-based pedagogies that are very much the norm in secondary schools today;

- The need for schools to enter into new partnerships and collaborative arrangements with other schools in their regions and with local community service agencies, employers, and TAFE and ACE providers in order to address more comprehensively the educational, training and employment needs of young people enrolled in applied learning and vocational education courses;

- The need for an expanded conception of the role of the teacher, as part of a diverse range of efforts necessary to address the above three points;
• The need to develop schools as more broadly based, inclusive and flexible learning and social environments for young people; and

• The need to overturn negative stakeholder perceptions about vocationally-oriented applied learning in comparison to vocationally-oriented academic learning, and to general and abstracted education.

(Henry et al., 2003 pp. 4-5)

The nature and significance of these deep cultural and institutional challenges are particularly important as they provide valuable insight into ‘on-the-ground’ institutional changes that must occur in order for schools to advance alongside young people, as they respond to their future within the context of post-industrial society and reflexive modernisation. The cultural dimension of these changes also reveals how the process of ‘school transformation’ must involve ‘cultural work’, and a path that encourages teachers and school administrators to become more reflective about the school culture that they help create, and their ability to understand how they can change it. It is, in essence, a process synonymous with the hermeneutic intent of this research and requires the development of a much stronger hermeneutic dimension to traditional definitions of school-based pedagogy and the profession of teaching more generally. But it is also a task that has been modelled, in part, by the VCAL teachers involved in this research, as they have confronted cultural challenges and reflected on their work with students who transformed from being ‘at risk’ to becoming engaged learners within the ‘new’ learning principles of the VCAL. But if schools more generally are to become foundational institutions in the provision of lifelong learning skills for all young people, then it is important for teachers to become lifelong learners themselves and to understand how it is possible for ‘at risk’ students to become engaged learners through an authentic, applied learning pedagogy.

I believe that the hermeneutic dimension of this research has the capacity to provide a starting point for further development of this ‘new understanding’ about
teaching and learning by portraying applied learning students and teachers as agents involved in the reconstruction of the meaning of schooling through applied learning pedagogy. In particular, the potential for applied learning pedagogy to be understood as an act of agency can be enhanced by appreciating how the students involved in this research moved from their ‘at risk’ status within the school’s traditional learning context, to the development of successful pedagogical relationships that extended well beyond the traditional walls of the classrooms.

In the section that follows I have drawn from the themes developed in Chapters 7, 8 and 9, to provide an integrated summary of the students’ pedagogical journey from being ‘at risk’ to becoming re-engaged in schooling through applied learning pedagogy. The emphasis on the students’ movement from ‘from risk to relationship’ is intended to re-emphasise the phenomenological research findings portraying applied learning pedagogy as an act of agency. It is also intended to keep these findings close to the critical discussion that completes this chapter.

MOVING FROM RISK...

BEING FAILURES ‘AT RISK’

Schooling as Failure

- The students in this research did not accept the ‘unspoken relevance’ of academic learning pedagogy in their school. They portrayed their traditional learning experiences as driven by textbooks, copying copious amounts of notes from the board, tests, volumes of homework and sitting still in desks as being a routine they could not cope with. It meant learning information that was not relevant to them and had limited correspondence with their understanding of the world. It meant relating to teachers much like prisoners in a prison camp and their experience of traditional academic classes meant having a deep sense of failure by the time they had reached the end of Year Ten.
• For the students, schooling meant being bored and reckless – but then feeling it was wrong to feel that way. They felt that their recklessness was sometimes their own fault, but it was usually caused by the teachers’ way of teaching. Their failure at learning meant being seen as deviant, as was their lack of desire to complete the VCE and go to university – a view that was also reinforced by some of their teachers.

• The students’ experiences of schooling as failure were embodied by their describing themselves as being ‘not very academic’ and ‘not good enough to keep on going’. They frequently defined themselves as ‘being dumb’. For them there was a strong association with schooling as ‘being kicked out’, and spending much of their ‘learning’ time in the hallway outside a classroom.

• Some of their teachers accepted the students’ academic failures as being ‘normal’ because ‘these were kids who did not value the benefits of an academic education’. The students’ poor academic reports were frequently taken - by some of their teachers at least - as an objective measure that these students were ‘dumb’ and meant they should ‘get a job’ or ‘go to TAFE’.

• Some teachers described these students as ‘being kids that nobody wants in their class’. They described schooling failure in terms of a student’s destiny to ‘become a builder’s labourer’ and to be ‘limited to lower class work with their hands’.

Schooling as Risk

• The students in this research were all frequently described by their teachers and coordinators as being ‘at risk’ because of their academic failure.

• Being ‘at risk’ was closely aligned with being ‘academically deficient’ - a status confirmed ‘objectively’ by their poor academic school reports. It meant being described as a potential ‘early school leaver’ whose pathway
from school to eventual work – or lack of it - is destined to be risky and undesirable.

- Being ‘at risk’ also means there may be no real curriculum options to suit a student’s interest, particularly during - and by the end of - Year Ten. Not being able to fill-out a suitable subject selection sequence for VCE means that sometimes the vocational subjects - such as VET in Schools - are designated as the ‘only suitable option’ remaining. Because they were considered to be ‘no good with their minds’ they were advised to ‘go and do one of the technical subjects’.

- The students ‘at risk’ were identified by their poor grades and behaviour and monitored closely by teachers and coordinators, particularly during Year Ten because the advent of VCE ‘raised the stakes’ for ‘non-academic’ students. They were often singled out as being in need of further disciplinary or administrative action.

- The students ‘at risk’ experienced schooling with a deep sense of otherness because they were ‘non-academic’ and could not construct a suitable VCE pathway like the others. By the end of Year Ten they were living ‘on the edge’ of the school community.

- Their experience of schooling by the end of Year Ten was one of being in a ‘state of leaving’ to escape from school. For some students, the ‘more relevant’ world of their part-time jobs outside school hours was seen as an option for a life beyond school and failure - some had been offered more hours of part-time work if they chose to leave school in Year Ten.

...TO RELATIONSHIP

BEING SUCCESSFUL AND ON A PATHWAY

Success

- All of the original ‘at risk’ students from Year Ten who undertook the VCAL in Year Eleven described a significant positive change in their experience of schooling and of planning for the future.
After being involved in the VCAL for six months, the students generally described themselves in terms of becoming successful learners because of the applied learning approach used by their VCAL teachers and the relevance of what they were learning.

There was a sense that they were using their learning as a way of 'collecting skills' that were relevant to them now and which would also be useful in their immediate future. To be learning relevant knowledge and skills in the VCAL meant to be able to successfully offset future risks by getting 'a few extra skills' that allowed them to plan pathways they were interested in. For the students, applied learning was a phenomenon that linked the present to their immediate future.

The students frequently defined the success of their learning in terms of its relevance to work, to make a difference in their local community and to make decisions about their futures. The social utility of their applied learning experiences added a sense of meaning that was celebrated as being 'real learning' and provided an aspect that was missing from their past traditional learning experiences.

Who is 'At Risk' Now?

Although the VCAL students still described themselves as 'being dumb' – quoting what some VCE peers said - their 'new' understanding was that 'being dumb' had a relevance limited to the local school context. It also meant the impact of the expression was diminished significantly, and they did not 'embody it' as they had done in Year Ten. Their 'new' learning experiences in the VCAL had taken them beyond the culture and classrooms of school – into workplaces, TAFE colleges and community settings - and defined their 'new' learning approach as being learning for 'the real world'. Their experience of the VCAL meant they had also become part of a new, 'micro' learning community within the school that had links to 'real world' learning beyond school. Ironically, being described by their VCE peers as 'dumb' seemed to affirm their new sense
of being part of a community that knew 'the truth' about the myths of traditional school-based learning.

- Their understanding that 'real learning' involved much more than the 'school-type' learning to which the VCE students were exposed, also led them to believe that the VCE student were really the ones 'at risk' because many of their subjects – particularly maths - were 'unrelated to the real world' and simply required doing menial tasks and conforming to the teacher’s rules.

- The students’ original Year Ten experience of wanting to 'escape' the irrelevance and monotony of traditional schooling changed with their participation in the VCAL in Year Eleven to become one of 'waiting for the right opportunity' through their participation in the VCAL. Leaving school to undertake an alternative pathway – such as an apprenticeship - before completing Year Twelve became a cause for celebration for the VCAL students. The phenomenon of 'leaving-as-escaping' had been transformed to become a more 'natural' and successful departure from school to embark on a pathway into the future.

**APPLIED LEARNING**

**STUDENTS AND TEACHERS**

**Students**

- For the students, applied learning means to be learning in a way that is very different to the traditional learning methods of the VCE and their earlier experiences of schooling.

- It means that textbooks, copying copious amounts of notes from the board, tests, and sitting still in desks for long periods are never the routine for learning. In contrast, for the VCAL students, applied learning means frequently negotiating the knowledge and skills that they learn and a more flexible approach to how they construct their own curriculum. Their learning involves a much more social process of constructing knowledge
than their VCE peers have access to. It means their teachers treat them more like adults and acknowledge that students have normal bodily needs that influence their learning, and that the life experiences they bring to school are a valuable part of the learning process.

- For the students, learning always has a context of application and their teachers are openly critical about other teachers' abstracted learning approaches. Learning new knowledge is always closely related to the application of that knowledge.

- Applied learning means the students are regularly learning in situations outside of the normal classroom and school grounds. Workplaces, TAFEs and the local community are seen and used as legitimate sites of ‘non-school’ learning. For the students, these ‘non-school’ learning sites possess a more obvious sense of the need to learn and provide the opportunity for learning to be applied at the same time. They also provide the basis for students to build broad learning networks that are linked to their future. Sites of ‘non-school’ learning also contradict the students’ earlier experiences of schooling as academic failures and re-establish a sense of security in their ability to learn within the real world.

- It means classroom activities also possess a more obvious sense of the need to learn and they regularly involve the use of information and communications technology to make learning more relevant to the students’ interests: searching for jobs and courses; writing and emailing resumes; creating a business Web-page; and preparing descriptive writing pieces which are shared in discussion threads are just some examples.

- The applied learning students are very conscious and appreciative of their teachers’ desires to make learning more relevant and fun by including more ‘hands-on’ learning that would not normally be undertaken in a VCE class. The students particularly appreciated cooking a cake - as an applied way of learning descriptive writing - because they got to eat the product of their own learning about writing. They were also aware that no other English teachers would use this method to teach English and felt privileged for the experience.
• For the students, applied learning means taking risks and venturing into places where the teacher may not have complete control over the outcomes of the learning process. For the students it means forming a unique learning relationship with their VCAL teachers based on care and mutual respect, and where success is measured in terms of personal growth.

• It means developing a ‘language of learning’ that is inclusive of students, and with which students are able to define themselves as being in a learning relationship with teachers. This is in contrast to their experience of the ‘traditional language of learning’ that was owned by teachers and defined them as being ‘defective products’ of a system that emphasises abstracted and measurable outcomes of schooling.

Teachers

• For the teachers, applied learning means achieving a deep sense of personal satisfaction that stems from compassion for the plight of young people who have been marginalised by their experience of schooling and labelled ‘at risk’ because of their desire to escape. It means practicing a pedagogy that focuses on the personal growth of young people rather than sorting and judging them based on their academic merit. It means worrying about their students in a way that is similar to a parent’s concern for their child.

• Practicing applied learning means challenging traditional academic values within the school and being seen as ‘different’ as a consequence. It means struggling to argue the merits of a form of learning that is not as pre-defined and clearly laid-out as the academic disciplines, and is often judged as being inferior by its focus on learning-by-doing and more accessible forms of knowledge.

• It means having to struggle with the balance between controlling twenty-five students in a class and providing them with active, individualised learning experiences that will relate to their immediate lives. This struggle is often undertaken without the traditional ‘pedagogical’ means of control
– such as textbooks and passive learning tasks. It also requires access to many more resources – both inside and outside school - than is usually available to most teachers.

- It means struggling with a form of pedagogy that tends to ‘undermine’ the existing academic system – in the minds of other teachers - by allowing students more of the freedoms usually associated with adult learning. This struggle involves great risk on behalf of the applied learning teachers, as it is undertaken with students who have been previously defined as being ‘at-risk’ because of their ‘reckless’ behaviour and ‘poor learning habits’. Students who breach their teacher’s trust, risk having their ‘at risk’ status confirmed in the eyes of other teachers.

- For teachers, applied learning means being constantly reflective about the quality of the learning experiences provided to a class, and how well their students become engaged with the curriculum as a consequence.

The meaning distilled from the lived experiences of VCAL students and teachers involved in this research challenges the efficacy of traditional academic approaches to pedagogy and commonly accepted understandings of what it means for students to be ‘at risk’. It also provides a starting point for deeper, critical insights into the broader phenomena of schooling and education as embedded social systems, and the difficult experiences endured by those seeking to change them.

**A HAUNTING VOICE**

It is alarming to witness the similarity between what the traditional learning approaches meant to the ‘at risk’ students in this research, based on their experiences in school classrooms, and what Dewey had described as ‘traditional education’ over sixty years ago. His insights into ‘traditional education’ brings a haunting dimension to the meaning of learning expressed by the students and teachers in this research:
The traditional scheme is, in essence, one of imposition from above and from outside. It imposes adult standards, subject-matter, and methods upon those who are only growing slowly toward maturity. The gap is so great that the required subject matter, the methods of learning and behaving are foreign to the existing capacities of the young. They are beyond the reach of the experience of young learners. Consequently they must be imposed; even though good teachers will use devises of art to cover up the imposition so as to relieve it of obviously brutal features...Learning here means acquisition of what already is incorporated in text books and in the heads of the elders. Moreover, that which is taught is thought of as essentially static. It is taught as a finished product, with little regard either to the ways in which it was originally built up or to changes that will surely occur in the future. It is to a large extent the cultural product of societies that assumed the future would be much like the past, and yet it is used as educational food in a society where change is the rule, not the exception.

(Dewey, 1938, pp.18-19)

Dewey’s description of traditional learning makes clear the ‘penitentiary’ nature of this approach, an approach that has proven to be remarkably persistent in our school-based education system. However, from the context of this research, the students’ emphasis on their sense of failure, exclusion and being ‘at risk’ because they would not accept this way of learning, brings a deeper layer of meaning that reveals the destructive and potentially enduring consequences that this experience is capable of inflicting on young people.

The dramatic and positive shift in the students’ experience of schooling that occurred through their involvement in the VCAL counters the naturalised belief that ‘schooling always has to be experienced as failure for some’ – particularly those who are ‘good with their hands’. For the students, the transition from schooling as failure and being ‘at risk’ to being in a successful learning
relationship with their VCAL teachers, meant that they had discovered a ‘better way’ of learning that also changed the ground rules about schooling. But what are the real differences between applied learning and traditional academic pedagogy and why have the traditional methods been so enduring?

**BALANCE THROUGH PEDAGOGICAL RELATIONSHIPS**

I have argued that the differences between traditional academic pedagogy and applied learning are best understood as being both sociological and pedagogical. This argument is based on two strands of thought:

Firstly, by returning to Dewey’s notion of education as involving a dualism between experience and education, the task of effective pedagogy becomes one of overcoming the gap between the students’ experiences and the educational curriculum. This can be understood as the ‘student/curriculum dualism’. The link to bridge this divide is the sort of reflexive or ‘tactful’ pedagogical relationship that has been outlined by van Manen (1991b). The consequence is the type of ‘applied learning’ seen in the VCAL, where the ‘tactful’ learning relationship between students and teachers is capable of constructing thoughtful continuities between the traditional dichotomies of mind and body, theory and practice, thought and action, and ‘formal’ school learning and ‘non-school’ learning. It was ultimately the ‘special’ learning relationship constructed between the VCAL teachers and their ‘at risk’ students that reconstructed what it means to learn for these students, and redefined their experiences and meaning of traditional academic pedagogy. Van Manen’s emphasis on the moral dimension of pedagogical relationships (van Manen, 1991b, 2000) is also consistent with Dewey’s focus on education as growth (Dewey, 1916, 1938) and restores balance to traditional pedagogical practices that have focussed on sorting and segregating students according to the ‘naturally ordained needs’ of an education system created to serve industrialised societies’ economic requirements and workforce – societies that are now in transition to a ‘new modernity’.

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In the second instance, by drawing on Giddens’ notion of the ‘duality of structure’ (Giddens, 1984, 1991b) I argue that pedagogical relationships can also be understood as involving the dual process of constructing and reconstructing the social structure present in school culture and the broader social systems that they therefore ‘constitute’. In this sense, ‘effective’ pedagogy is not just concerned with bridging the traditional gap between the students and the curriculum in terms of learning, it is also concerned with bridging the traditional gap between student agency and social structure in terms of social reproduction and transformation. This second sociological aspect of pedagogy can be understood as a dualism between ‘pedagogy for the student’ and ‘pedagogy for the system’. This is the student/system dualism.

The phenomenon associated with this pedagogical struggle between the students and the system, involves questions of balance concerning how and when to break the ‘school rules’ in the name of learning – the same rules that create the possibility of schooling as a social and institutionalised phenomenon that occurs on a day-by-day basis. Effective pedagogy therefore involves the reflexive and ‘tactful’ management of the student/system dualism, as was evidenced by the struggle of VCAL teachers in this research. They were frequently made aware by their peers that breaking the ‘rules’ was making it harder for other teachers to sustain the school’s discipline policies and student management procedures. These were traditional school policies and procedures that had evolved as being reasonable to the maintenance of an academically oriented school as a functioning institution. However the VCAL teachers expressed with clarity, that pedagogy is not just concerned with the mindless adherence to these ‘rules’, but rather it was their moral commitment to the growth of their students that was their motivation. The VCAL teachers used their pedagogical tact to negotiate what they saw to be a more reflective and balanced approach to the student/system dualism.

In considering these two aspects of pedagogy, the apparent difference between traditional academic pedagogy and applied pedagogy is therefore focused on questions of balance concerning how pedagogical relationships are positioned in
terms of the pedagogical student/curriculum dualism and the sociological student/system dualism. I argue that within the context of schools, traditional academic pedagogy does not constitute effective pedagogy because it represents an imbalance towards the curriculum and system ends of these pedagogical and sociological dualisms. Although this imbalance may be understandable in terms of the limited resources and time available to facilitate ‘tactful’ pedagogical relationships – particularly in secondary schools – an inevitable consequence of this imbalance is the pedagogical/sociological ‘creation’ of students ‘at risk’ as a part of the ‘normalised’ way of operating. Traditional school-based pedagogy does not foster the development of a reflective and hermeneutic dimension to the phenomenon of pedagogy and therefore tends to (re)create a culture that is difficult to change. On the contrary, by emphasising the significance of more ‘tactful’ learning relationships between students and teachers, applied learning pedagogy creates the possibility of more reflexive continuities between students’ experiences and the curriculum, and between student agency and the social structure of day-to-day pedagogical practices that ultimately define school culture.

CHANGING SCHOOL CULTURE THROUGH PEDAGOGY

I argue, further, that the enduring nature of traditional academic school culture is sustained by a day-to-day school-based pedagogy that ‘normalises’ this culture through a language of learning owned by teachers and focused on abstracted learning outputs. This traditional language of learning emphasises the reproduction of learning strategies that presume the naturalised existence of traditional school-based classroom culture and allows little room for the inclusion of ‘learning-culture’ as a co-operatively constructed phenomenon. However, the possibility for cultural change has been exemplified by the VCAL students and teachers in this research, and is linked to understanding how pedagogy – traditional or otherwise - is both the ‘medium and the message’ (Giddens, 1984) of school culture.
The applied learning approach of the VCAL students and teachers involved a
tactful pedagogy that was seen by the students and teachers to be a socially
constructed phenomenon. The students and teachers shared a common language
of ‘hands-on learning’ and believed that they were the ultimate creators of their
own learning culture, rather than accepting that it was something pre-ordained and
unchangeable. In this sense, the phenomenon of schooling changed from being
externally imposed on them through a reified notion of school culture, to become
something that was constructed and controlled by them. With this ‘practical’ and
empowered understanding of the potential to create a ‘new’ school culture, the
VCAL students and teachers collectively, but tactfully, redefined their experience
of schooling. Armed with a ‘new’ practical understanding of pedagogy as a social
phenomenon, the VCAL students viewed their VCE peers as contributing to the
‘cultural maintenance’ of the dominant traditions by being conformist, compliant
and ultimately passive in their learning. To the VCAL students, the VCE students
were ‘at risk’ according to this reasoning.

The discussions and stories that were the substance of the Pathways Committee
meetings also portrayed the VCAL teachers’ development of a ‘discursive’
consciousness (Giddens, 1984) of applied learning as a form of ‘tactful’ pedagogy
requiring teacher-reflexivity. I argue that developing such pedagogical reflexivity
– or ‘teachers as reflective practitioners’ (van Manen, 1991b) – is the way
forward in challenging and changing the traditional academic culture of schools
because it redefines the ‘normalised’ academic culture from being an abstract and
self-perpetuating phenomenon into a phenomenon that is understood to be socially
constructed and re-constructed – uncritically - through the day-to-day practice of
an ‘unbalanced’ pedagogy.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

It is ironic that the ‘new’ learning discourse can be understood in terms of
globalisation, individualised ‘risk management’ and reflexive modernisation, on
the one hand, and in terms of Deweyan principles of effective and reflexive
pedagogy on the other. But exploring the relationship between these two incentives for pedagogical reform reveals that they too are dialectically linked. The economic and globalisation discourse that underpins the ‘reform-as-risk-management’ agenda, has an emphasis on the building of ‘new’ social systems of education that, however, can only be reconstructed by recognising pedagogy as a cultural phenomenon and then re-defining it in terms of more balanced Deweyan learning principles. Lifelong and lifewide learning cannot be achieved on a system-wide basis by using the traditional, abstracted pedagogy currently dominating secondary schools – indeed that is what advocates of lifelong and lifewide learning seek to change, albeit for economic reasons. But genuine pedagogical reform based on principles of effective applied learning cannot proceed either, without the political redefinition of ‘new’ learning in terms of education policies informed by lifelong learning discourses. The way forward requires a more reflexive approach to social and education policy and practice that is also aware of the need for these two aspects of reform to co-exist. It requires a deeper understanding of pedagogy as a cultural phenomenon, as schools face the dilemma of using their existing industrialised and traditionally academic cultures to create ‘new’ learning cultures for a society that is rapidly becoming post-industrial.

But while education is in between two historical ‘systems of truth’ (Foucault, 1972) about learning – academic learning for industrial society, and lifelong learning for post-industrial society – there is a risk that the changing definition of learning may just become a new process of redefining the currently monopolised access to cultural capital (Foucault, 1995) in a time when the traditional forms of access are being eroded by reflexive modernisation. Any uncritical momentum gained towards reform may therefore simply result in ‘new’ forms of domination and control – a dark side of ‘new’ learning - that could continue to serve and legitimise the monopolised interests of those who benefit most from the current, but eroding, status-quos. If, for example, the VCAL is to lose its current – somewhat ironic - ‘alternative’ status within post-compulsory education, then it is important that the pedagogical principles of applied learning reform also
contribute to a redefinition of the day-to-day pedagogical practices in the VCE subject-based curriculum in the true spirit of lifelong learning. Traditional academic learning must lose its status as being the preferred means to gain ‘cultural capital’. This point was also made by the recommendations of the Evaluation of VCAL Trial 2002 (Henry et al., 2003). To fail to address this aspect of the pedagogical reform agenda may simply result in the VCAL becoming a new ‘technology of control’ (Foucault, 1995) for ‘disengaged’ students who have rejected the ‘panoptic’ (Foucault, 1995) power of the existing academic curriculum. VCAL students would ultimately be rejecting the social and cultural work that traditional schooling has done on them, while, paradoxically, accepting a re-construction of deep self defined for them – and by them – through their experiences of new and reified forms of this work.

But while the dominance of traditional academic pedagogy has been interrupted by the current discourse of ‘new’ learning, and there exists a growing realisation that traditional forms of secondary schooling can destroy a young person’s appetite for learning, there is the opportunity for applied and contextualised learning to re-emerge as a project of more balanced and authentic pedagogy that may benefit all young people. Such a project poses many new and significant questions to guide future educational policy and practice.

New Questions about Post-compulsory Education Policy:

- How can post-compulsory educational policies integrate ‘new’ and applied learning pedagogy into mainstream academic programs such as the VCE?
- How can the traditional organisational structures of schools be changed to support the need by all post-compulsory students for curriculum and learner flexibility required by the ‘new’ and applied learning pedagogies?
- How can the traditional boundaries between educational, employment and community-based institutions be broken down to support applied and contextualised learning on a more systematic level?
New Questions about Teacher Training:

- How can in-service professional development programs for teachers be re-imagined to encourage the ongoing and contextualised development of teachers-as-reflective-practitioners?
- How can pre-service teacher education programs meet the challenge of reconceptualising secondary school pedagogy as a potentially empowering cultural phenomenon requiring teachers to become life-long learners themselves?
- How can the enterprise and applied learning skills of people currently employed in industry be integrated into the teaching workforce so as to engage young people with real examples of applied learning?

While these questions serve as a starting point for further research in this field, it is my hope that this thesis contributes to the project of reconceptualising pedagogy by demonstrating the genuine potential for applied learning to re-engage students who have been constructed as being ‘at risk’ by the more traditional methods of teaching.
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