

# AFTER THE EDUCATION DISCIPLINES: TEACHING THEORY ON-LINE

SUE MIDDLETON

*Department of Policy, Cultural and Social Studies in Education  
The University of Waikato*

**ABSTRACT** Like all social theorising, the academic study of education is 'reflexive' – complicated by the fact of our immersion in it. This paper discusses an on-line version of an undergraduate teacher-education course, 'Social Issues in New Zealand Education,' that is designed to teach its students how to do such 'situated' educational theorising. Consistent with this theme, the paper is written as a stream-of-consciousness narrative. In an attempt to fix in print the 'counterpoint' of pedagogical theorising in general, as well as more specifically in an on-line setting, it is episodic in structure – more like the lateral leaps of hypertext than the disciplined hierarchies of headings characteristic of the linearity of conventional academic argument. It falls into three parts. The first introduces the on-line virtual classroom environment in which the teaching takes place. Part two locates the course within more general epistemological issues confronting designers of education (foundations) courses in pre-service teaching degrees in the twenty-first century. In Part three, the syllabus of the course is outlined. The paper concludes with examples of students doing 'situated' educational theorising as they engage with course readings and assignments. Through this multi-layered account, I raise for discussion some broad questions about pedagogy in educational foundations courses in today's environment.

## INTRODUCTION

It is 5:00 a.m. and I am seated at the computer in my home office. Some of the books and papers I need as resources for writing this article are strewn across the floor, but must for the moment be resisted. For this morning, from this domestic space, I am teaching my level 200 course, "Social Issues in New Zealand Education". This is the sixth year I have taught this course on-line. My students are pre-service teachers enrolled in the Mixed Media Programme (MMP) (Campbell, 1998). I met them for two 90-minute sessions last week during the second of the two one-week block on-campus sessions they have this semester. Other than these two meetings, all of our interactions take place in our virtual classroom on-line.

... I click on the Remote Access button and dial in to the university. As I wait for the modem to connect, I pick up the invitation to participate in this forum on pedagogy in the *Waikato Journal of Education*. It states that: "much of the work on teaching is under-theorised and we could benefit from a discussion of some different viewpoints on the broader topic of pedagogy."

Pedagogy. My undergraduate students often comment that, before entering teacher education, they had never heard this word. Seldom used in educational circles since Edwardian times, the term re-surfaced in the 1980s and 1990s – not so much in the everyday language of teachers or the wider public – but in some of the more esoteric educational theory texts. Usually preceded by an adjective, such as critical, feminist, radical, or liberatory, this reincarnated word was often smothered in obtuse jargon, dressed to kill with exclusionary language. McWilliam's (1995) research in Australia illustrated how such writing, intended to liberate, instead often alienated undergraduate student teachers. To them, the

purveyor of "liberatory pedagogy" might resemble my Concise Oxford Dictionary's definition of *pedagogue*: "Schoolmaster, teacher (usu. Derog. Implying pedantry)."

To put it simply, pedagogy can be thought of as the art (or, if you prefer, science) of teaching (Middleton, 2003a). It encompasses not only what we do as teachers, but also the reasons we give for doing it and the body of knowledge – theoretical, empirical, practical – on which these depend. As systematised (academic/empirical or disciplinary) knowledge, and as 'lived' or enacted in everyday educational encounters (what, how, where, when and whom we teach), pedagogies are inevitably historically, institutionally, culturally, geographically, and politically (as well as biographically) configured (Bernstein, 1971). In other words, however idiosyncratic teachers' educational ideals and teaching styles may be, they also involve selection, rejection and blending of the concepts, research findings, exemplars and practitioner lore available to them at that time and place (Middleton, 2003a). This applies to any programme, class or course, whatever the mode of 'delivery' – on campus, on-line and so forth. So, while its on-line character is a powerful structuring principle in my 'Social Issues' course, designing and teaching it also demands attention to the more general pedagogical imperatives of education course design and teaching in the twenty-first century. These include epistemological engagement with Education as an organised academic field or discipline; structural compliance with degree regulations; adaptation to the segmentations of the university timetable; understanding of prior learning and expectations of students; and decisions about how best to structure their interactions and curricular engagement. As a course in pre-service teacher education, 'Social Issues' is also subject to surveillance and monitoring by external authorities such as teachers' regulatory bodies (Foucault, 1977).

... The screech of the modem interrupts my thoughts. I open Netscape Navigator, log into Class Forum, and enter the space delineated for the "Social Issues" course. Red flags beside the discussion titles alert me to the fact that new contributions from students await me. But this paper has assumed control of my attention. With one click of the mouse, I absent myself from the classroom by hiding the opened Class Forum behind the Microsoft Word document into which these thoughts are spilling through my typing fingers. Given the topic of this forum, it could be counterproductive to fight this pull out of the virtual classroom and into my theoretical writing about it. If pedagogies are indeed informed by the haphazard realities of (face-to-face or on-line) classroom practice, it makes no sense to treat the two as incompatible or in competition. I want to try to fix in print the counterpoint – the intertwining themes – of pedagogic theorising (in general, as well as more specifically on-line). This demands an episodic form – more like the lateral leaps of hypertext than the disciplined hierarchies of headings characteristic of the linear structure of conventional academic writing (Middleton, 1993, 2002; Poster, 1995).

Good pedagogical reasoning is necessarily convoluted. Like all social theorising, the academic study of education is complicated by the fact of our immersion in it. Bourdieu draws attention to the reflexivity required in the social sciences in order to take account of researcher-theorists' embeddedness in our object of study:

In choosing to study the social world in which we are *involved*, we are obliged to confront, in dramatised form as it were, a certain number of fundamental epistemological problems, all related to the question of

difference between practical knowledge and scholarly knowledge, and particularly to the special difficulties involved first in breaking with inside experience and then in reconstituting the knowledge which has been obtained as a result of this break. (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 1, underlining mine; italics in the original)

Such situated educational theorising is what I want my Social Issues students to learn to do. In this paper, I explore how my pedagogy engages with the broad question of what is required for students of education to confront directly the fact of our everyday immersion – as students, as student teachers, and as teacher-educators – in our object of study, Education? What is implied if we study this (as Bourdieu put it) “in dramatised form”? How does the fact of our *involvement* in education complicate our theoretical or scientific knowledge of it? In what form can such complex epistemological dilemmas be directly engaged with in a level 200 course? How can we make this ‘embeddedness’ an object of study? And, more specifically, how can these be addressed in such a course when the teaching takes place on-line?

In Part 1 of this paper, ‘Time, Space and a Virtual Classroom’, I introduce the on-line arena in which the ‘Social Issues in New Zealand Education’ course is staged. Part 2, ‘Curriculum: The Place of Theory’, locates this course within more general epistemological issues confronting designers of education (foundations) courses in pre-service teaching degrees. In Part 3, ‘Structuring Learning’, the syllabus for my course is outlined. Part 4, ‘Students Learning’, exemplifies student engagement with course material during the learning and teaching process.

### 1. Time, Space and a Virtual Classroom

“Space”, writes David Harvey, “ may be forgotten as an analytical category open to questioning, but it is omnipresent as an unquestioned category in everything we do” (1996, p. 267). For example, the built environment of an educational institution is indicative of the dominant theoretical assumptions of its time and place. Whether pedagogy is teacher-focussed or based on progressive/developmental methods is evident in a school’s architectural features such as the placement of windows or whether rooms are single-cell or open-plan. A classroom’s original character may be modified or subverted according to changing teaching conventions – through the re-arrangement of desks, the selection of different equipment, the introduction of new technologies, etc. (Walkerdine, 1984). University teaching-rooms appear premised on ‘economies of scale’ – the more students who can be crammed into a lecture theatre, the more ‘efficient’ (in terms of resources) teaching is presumed to be. Small-group tutorials are increasingly difficult to arrange in terms of available spaces or times. But what or where is a classroom in cyberspace? How does participation in an on-line course reconfigure the temporal and spatial dimensions of participants’ lives? Is the ‘internet’ merely an ‘empty cell’ or ‘container’ in which learning and teaching take place ‘as usual’?

...I mouse-click on the Windows menu. The Word program disappears behind the virtual classroom – one click has transported me back into class. Red flags inform me that some of the students have already completed module 5 (a summary of the life-history research interview each has conducted and a discussion of the research process). Although some students like to submit work early, they know that I will not mark Module 5 until my designated marking day.

No longer encased in fixed architectural spaces at set hours, on-line teaching can, if one lets it, seep into one's whole day. Jealous of my writing time, I wall my marking and contributions to student discussions of ideas and readings into set hours. The only exceptions are the issues students raise with me in their private "personal queries" spaces. I respond to these as urgently as I would to a knock on the door or a phone call. They know I will answer those as soon as I can. This morning has been demarcated for responding to students' general queries and for me to add my contributions to their group discussions.

Like an on-campus course, an on-line course is embedded in the university's "practical rationalisation of space and time" (Harvey, 1990, p. 259). While on-line study frees participants from the spatial and temporal confines of a lecture theatre, students' (rural) domestic spaces and routines become subjected to the university's (urban) classification and framing of knowledge, time and space (Bernstein, 1971). Degree programmes are segmented epistemologically (into courses, modules, programmes etc.) and temporally (by timetable, sequence, semesters etc.). Students must complete degree requirements by covering the required "portions of knowledge" (courses) and in the prescribed sequence (levels). A net course, then, does not lie on a flat surface, but takes on the contours of the landscapes it traverses.

As a cohort progressing through the Bachelor of Teaching degree in a tightly structured programme, the MMP students have some group cohesion. Some who live in close proximity, meet socially or form their own local study groups. Some contact others by telephone. Others communicate through personal e-mails outside the monitored space of Class Forum. MMP students are also competent users of the internet. Many also like to engage in informal on-line discussions of their lives and work inside the monitored on-line classroom – to spread these conversations about the more personal dimensions of their studies across geographical space. So I delineate chat rooms outside their formal academic discussions (of readings, etc.) and the private spaces where assessment takes place. Last week, as a way of getting to see my students at work, I posted an account of my own "practical rationalisation of space and time" and invited students to write about theirs (Middleton, 2002). Like speech, these conversations are interactive; like a telephone, the internet transmits utterances almost instantaneously. But, unlike the ephemeral utterances of the spoken word, students' typed conversations endure – hang suspended in time and space. Together, student on-line discussion contributions write an electronic text that "is everywhere and nowhere, always and never. It is truly material/immaterial" (Poster, 1995, p. 85).

Juxtaposed on my laptop screen in Hamilton are paragraphs written in a home office in Thames, a kitchen table in Piopio, a lounge-room corner in central Taranaki, a bedroom on an East Coast farm, and a school in the King Country<sup>1</sup>. Sally describes her place:

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<sup>1</sup> From 1999 – 2001 I invited students to contribute to a discussion called 'Sue's research' in which we described the spatial and temporal locations of our work. Students who chose to contribute to this voluntary and non-assessable part of the Class Forum consented to being quoted anonymously in my subsequent research papers on the topic of on-line learning and management of time and space. For a further explanation of how consent was given for this paper, see note 3 below.

When I open the door, I can see the beach across the road, the Firth of Thames and the Coromandel ranges. There are often great flocks of migratory birds here, e.g. the little Godwits that fly from Siberia! It's low tide, now, and I can see one of my neighbours, old "Wild Bill", checking his flounder nets. I can see the point and the channel, where the fishing boats leave from, and sometimes I am lucky enough to watch the big guys manoeuvring the mighty waka out there.

Others discuss their configurations of time. Some describe writing discussion contributions and assignments late at night or early in the morning, thereby claiming study space through management of time. For example, Linda writes that:

It is impossible to study during the day when the kids are around, so I leave it all until after they are in bed at night and study into the wee hours. Once I got used to this it had worked out well. The only problem is that I do have to set myself a limit of around 2 to 3am in the morning as I have to get up in the morning and look after kids and it is very hard when you are tired! Around 1pm I get up to a couple of hours when my youngest is in bed and I can do a little bit of work then, or relax and save my energy for later that night.

The intellectual, spatial and temporal configurations of the university are superimposed onto Linda's domestic space and Sally's beach.

Similarly, the course repartitions time and space for its lecturers. The social issues course starts in the middle of what for on-campus staff and students is the mid-semester teaching recess (thus extending the lecturers' weeks of teaching into what used to be available for planning or research). Four weeks into the course, the students go into schools for a six-week practicum – down-time for this "theory" course, allowing the staff some freedom (from at least one course) during what is normally the teaching semester. We then take up the course again for another six weeks. The assessment pattern has to be adapted to this – to ensure that the course does not fall into two disconnected parts. David Harvey characterises the electronic age as centred on the drive for "the conquest of space, the tearing down of all spatial barriers, and the ultimate 'annihilation of space through time' " (1990, p. 205). On-line teaching turns isolated private places into linked pedagogical spaces. Organised teaching and learning processes (the dissemination and acquisition of disciplinary knowledge) are no longer clearly "segmented" from the domestic arenas of personal, affective, understandings (Bernstein, 1999).

... The loud scream of the telephone in the hallway jolts my awareness back to my immediate surroundings. "Will you speak to a student, who has come to ask about an enrolment matter?" an administrator asks. I agree, since I am Head of Department and technically on duty. To enable me to teach at home one day a week, I pay for a second phone line so I can run the modem and keep the phone available. The student's query is quickly dealt with. I notice a bruising pain in my shoulders and realise I have been sitting for hours at the computer. I wander into the kitchen and switch on the kettle. As I wait for it to boil, I grab the big red hard-covered notebook in which I have made notes for this paper...

## 2. Curriculum: The Place of Theory

I sit in the sun on the swing seat at the bottom of my garden, sipping a huge mug of tea and browsing through my red notebook. This contains summaries of academic texts, notes kept at meetings, daily "to do" lists, random thoughts, rough drafts of course outlines, and, occasionally, even shopping lists. I come upon a quotation from the geographer, David Harvey:

The discursive activity of 'mapping space' is a fundamental prerequisite to the structuring of any kind of knowledge. All talk about 'situatedness', 'location' and 'positionality' is meaningless without a mapping of the space in which those situations, locales and positions occur. And this is equally true no matter whether the space being mapped is metaphorical or real. (Harvey, 1996, p. 111)

The process of designing course content – what students are required to read, do, think and write about – is often described with geographical metaphors: charting territory, mapping the field, surveying the terrain, delineating domains of inquiry, positioning ourselves on the knowledge landscape, etc.. To make sense of my pedagogy in the Social Issues course, I need to 'chart its place' as a compulsory education (or educational theory) course in a New Zealand pre-service teaching degree in the early twenty-first century. As I flick through the ink-splattered pages of my notebook, I come across notes for a position paper I wrote to the School of Education's committee responsible for restructuring the pre-service teaching degree.

The 'Social Issues in New Zealand Education' course is the sole compulsory remnant of a strand of social foundations education courses in the previous four-year degree programme (B.Ed). During the mid to late twentieth century, the academic subject Education had been essentially a major in Waikato's four-year BEd degree. The Education strand involved the study of pedagogy and of the institutions and systems in which it took place (Middleton & May, 1997; Small, 2000). Educational theories were studied as descriptive and prescriptive. They were descriptive in their search for, or assumptions about, the nature of childhood, learning and teaching (psychological theories); and in their interrogation of the political, institutional and cultural contexts in which learning and teaching took place (sociological and historical accounts). They were prescriptive in their assumptions about, or recommendations for, good educational practice. They raised questions about what knowledge was of most worth (curricular or epistemological questions) and how best to facilitate encounters between worthwhile knowledge and learners (pedagogical and ethical theories). Critical educational theories (Marxist, feminist, post-colonial, etc.) also rendered problematic the nature and conditions of their own (and other theories') creation - produced by historically, culturally and geographically located human subjects, educational theories were seen as inevitably coloured by the circumstances of their production.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the 1990s, many educational writers across the western world lamented the downgrading of the educational theory components of

<sup>2</sup> The 'content' of Education as an academic subject in New Zealand is covered in more detail in Middleton (2001).

undergraduate teaching degrees. This was explained in various ways – as resulting from a conservative backlash against Education's supposed leftist tendencies (e.g., Acker's 1995 British critique); to an increasingly technicist emphasis in pre-service degree programmes (e.g., McWilliam's 1995 Australian account); or, as in the case of New Zealand, to market-driven demands for shorter and cheaper degree qualifications. From the early 1960s, Waikato's four-year Bachelor of Education degree had included a compulsory strand of foundations courses in educational sociology, history and philosophy and another in psychology. However, in the three-year undergraduate Bachelor of Teaching degree that has replaced the B.Ed., only two compulsory education courses remain – one in human development and the Social Issues in New Zealand Education course. There are no separate compulsory courses in educational sociology, history and philosophy (although these are available as electives). Although there is a common prescription for the compulsory Social Issues course, different versions of it have been designed for different groups of students. Mine is specifically designed for the MMP students.

Although unhappy about the compression of the Education strand in the shortened degree, I do not defend compulsory courses in the separate social foundations of education disciplines at undergraduate level. Students often encountered these as flat maps or typologies of 'isms'. Fragmented and decontextualised, international debates in educational theory and historical processes of policy formation sometimes appeared as the intellectual productions of remote and disembodied academics, "abstracted from particular participants located in particular spatio-temporal settings" (Smith, 1987, p. 61).

... I sip the last of my tea. The sun has warmed my back. Time, I reflect, to return to my "particular participants" (students) located in their "spatio-temporal settings"...

As I enter my study, my eye is drawn to the books and journals on the floor. I pick up Bourdieu's study of French universities in the 1960s, *Homo Academicus* (1988), and think again about its analysis of reflexivity. Those of us who teach and study Education also "know" schools and schooling "from the inside." We have a huge "investment" in education. It was the school system that afforded (most of) us who now "teach teachers" the social capital (dispositions and qualifications) to enter higher education in the first place. For students in higher (including teacher) education, education remains an object of desire (for professional success, higher academic credentials etc.). As a body of academic and professional knowledge, Education is also the object of our own (as well as our students') study or research. For students who are teachers or prospective teachers (as well as teacher-educators), education is, or will be, their means of economic support. For some – as union members, or parents of school-age children – it may also be a locus of political demand or social activism.

Here I am reminded of Roy Nash's recent paper in this journal, "The Trouble with Kylie" (2002). Framed within a broadly Bourdieuan problematic (Nash 1993), Nash's paper on teaching sociology of education to pre-service teachers at Massey University argues that education students' multifaceted investment in it predisposes many to defend the system and that they do so even against compelling sociological evidence that, for students lacking in social capital, the school (oriented as it is towards the dispositions and habitus of the middle-classes) may be a space of alienation. Nash describes teaching his students Bourdieuan analytic concepts (structure-disposition-practice) as theoretical tools with which to analyse one of his own transcribed research interviews with 'Kylie', a disaffected,

working-class Year 10 student. But, rather than exercising their sociological imaginations, many read Kylie through a lens of what Nash referred to as 'positivist behaviourism'. These students did not explore what a sociological analysis of Kylie's frame of mind might look like. Instead, they personalised her disaffection as symptomatic of her individual or familial pathology. Nash argues that this psychologised discourse of individual pathology has taken hold of popular consciousness and teacher education fails to render it sufficiently problematic.

To gain a critical consciousness of the educational world in which we are immersed, and in which we invest (time, money, etc.), we need, as phenomenologists express it, to suspend belief or stand back from the commonsense understandings gained in the course of our immersion in it (Greene, 1995). An academic appreciation of education as a social phenomenon requires us to locate our own, and others', educational biographies (as pupils, student teachers etc.), as well as our predispositions and preferences as theorists (whether we like or dislike certain ideas such as behavioural psychology) as enabled and constrained by our historical, socio-economic, cultural, geographical, familial and other circumstances. Some teacher-educators attempt this by requiring or encouraging students to keep diaries or personal learning journals. I do not use students' own autobiographical narratives as teaching material. I regard these as private, and respect students' rights to keep personal lives away from pedagogical surveillance.

.... The words on my screen freeze. The cursor won't move. I push the control, option and shift keys on my Mac G3 but this fails to crash me out of the Word program. Cursing quietly, I poke a paperclip into the restart button at the back of my laptop. Waiting for it to reboot is a slow process because the hard drive is quite full. The CD ROM drive whirs as the computer restarts. This contains the CD ROM I have made for my on-line students. As virtual lectures I make PowerPoint slide shows that include many graphics. I copy them to CDs because the files would take up too much room on the university servers. Furthermore, downloading them on-line is impracticable, especially for students with rural telephone lines subject to high phone bills, slow downloads, and sudden disconnections. So I 'deliver' the slide shows (html-formatted Power Points) linked in hypertext to course outlines and assignments tasks on the CDROM. My teaching has always relied on visual images to supplement printed readings. The slide shows include pictures of the architecture and furnishing of school buildings in order to show their discursive origins – for example, the Victorian teacher as filler of empty vessels or the 1950s facilitator of growth and development (Walkerdine, 1984). Textual explorations of historically-located and influential educational (and wider social) theories can be visually enhanced with electronic images of posters for 1920s eugenics conferences, 1950s sex education pamphlets, photos of 1930s open-air classrooms, and so forth.

### **3. Structuring Learning**

I open the CDROM and navigate to the course outline, which includes the following summary:

Lectures and set readings will chart the tides and currents of educational debates, perspectives and policies in relation to wider political tendencies and social movements in New Zealand and will

make connections between local and international movements and theories. As a major component of the course assessment, each student will conduct a life-history interview and will contextualise the interviewee's educational experiences and perspectives in the wider social, economic, political, cultural and geographical settings of the time and place. The course is designed with a three-fold focus – on teachers' and students' varied and personal experiences of education in the course of their life-spans; on the historical, political, cultural and structural contexts that make such experiences possible; and on some of the major theories and methods that educational researchers have used to conceptualise and study them. "Biography, history and social structure" are studied simultaneously. The overall aim is to help students to understand how educational theories, policies and provisions shape, and have shaped, their own (and others') everyday experiences and help construct our 'professional identities' and practice as pupils/students and/or teachers; how major tendencies in educational thought have persisted, changed and interacted over time; how these have varied between cultures and social classes.

As set readings, students have printed texts – a photocopied volume of readings, including a number of primary historical policy documents, and a book, *Teachers talk teaching 1915 - 1995: Early childhood, schools, & teachers' colleges* (Middleton & May, 1997). This book demonstrates the form of analysis the students are being taught to do by means of a discourse analysis of historical shifts and debates in educational policy combined with life-history interviews with 150 present and former New Zealand teachers. As experienced net students, the MMP students are also competent users of on-line library data-bases and other on-line archival resources.

Students are required to make their own research data by conducting and recording a life-history interview, summarising it (module 5), interpreting it sociologically and contextualising it historically. This approach is designed to transcend "the stubbornly different levels of explanation usually known as the 'sociological' and the 'psychological', and with a clue to the secret ... of its operation" (Hoskin, 1990, p. 52). It is also intended to blur the boundaries between sociology and history. Like Bourdieu, I believe that "the separation of sociology and history is a disastrous division, and one totally devoid of epistemological justification: all sociology should be historical and all history sociological" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 90).

The course outline lists the following aims (or learning outcomes):

By means of your assignments, you will show that you have developed:

- A knowledge and understanding of the changing educational policies, ideas and processes that have shaped the educational contexts in which New Zealanders have studied (and are studying) and taught (and teach).

- A knowledge and understanding of some of the major social theories which have informed educational policy and research in New Zealand and the international influences on these.
- A knowledge and understanding of some of the continuing and changing social dynamics and questions concerning equality of opportunity and social justice which have informed educational movements, policy and research in New Zealand – including those pertaining to rural and urban education, Maori and multicultural education, gender relations, and social class.
- An introductory knowledge of some of the ethical and methodological questions, issues, and problems involved in doing life-history research and some practical experience in working through these: interviewing, library research, rigorous bibliographic techniques, and skills of reworking and integrating a series of 'working papers' into a synthesised final report.
- An ability to use the knowledge and understanding of educational ideas encountered in your reading, your interview, and in your own experience as tools to construct your own philosophies of teaching, to identify and critique current educational issues and debates, and to gain in confidence to enter such debates.

In the first four weeks (before practicum) the course is timetabled as 'compressed' and the students do the equivalent of six weeks work. This section is an historical overview of 'situated theory' and the students complete four two-page assignments in each of which they answer two or three specific questions based on required and extension historical readings. Module 1 covers the period up to and including World War Two and questions draw students' attention to social Darwinist and early progressive influences on educational policy and/or teaching practice. Module 2 deals with the post-World War Two period, emphasising tensions between 1940s-1960s variants of progressivism and demographic realities. In Module 3, students discuss the demography and associated (conservative, liberal and radical) social and political movements of the late 1960s and the 1970s. Module 4 takes them from the final years of the Muldoon era, through the neo-liberal restructuring of the state and the curriculum reforms of in the 1990s. Each of these four short modules is marked on-line out of 10 (40% in total).

The students then go on practicum for six weeks and return in mid-semester for their second on-campus session. Here I brief them on research ethics and interview protocol and techniques. They have to go through the formality of gaining written consent from their interviewee. Module 5 (marked on-line out of 20) is a discussion of two readings on interviewing, an outline of the interview and consent process, and a 1000 word summary of the interview. The feedback I give them at that stage serves to help them identify the themes they will address in their final report. The final report is a 2000 – 3000 word essay that is submitted as a hard copy through the post.

This requires students to weave together their interviewee's account of schooling (as a pupil), relevant historical details (of policy, etc.), and a sociological analysis that elucidates relevant structural dynamics (class and/or race relations, etc.). Students are required to:

Explore the educational experiences and perspectives of your interviewee by placing his/her biographical narrative (the story s/he told you in the interview) within the 'constraints and possibilities' of his/her context – historical, cultural, geographical (community) etc. What part did formal education play in making him/her the person s/he is today?

The CDROM includes detailed guidelines. Briefly, students have to indicate a period of historical interest and identify one or more sociological themes of direct relevance to the narrative produced in their interview (Pacific Island immigration in the 1950s, for example). The final research report requires a weaving together of what Mills (1959) referred to as "biography, history and social structure". ...

... A loud "ding" interrupts my train of thought. E-mail. I have set the preferences in Class Forum in such a way that whenever a student contributes, the system notifies me of this in an e-mail. I can choose to postpone looking at it, but this morning I welcome the diversion. I move the mouse to the menu at the top of my computer screen and highlight the icon for Microsoft Entourage. The message tells me "a new message was posted by bej2 in Module 5 discussions". I click on the URL in the message and suddenly I am back "inside" my virtual classroom...

#### **4. Students' Learning**

The course is positioned at the interface of the sociology of (educational) knowledge, the history of (educational) ideas, and social theory more broadly. Its focus is educational theory's multidimensional existence – as a body of academic theory; a site of political contestation and policy-making; and as enabling and constraining teachers' professional knowledge – the rules, maxims, guidelines and hunches that underpin everyday practice. It explores how educational theories help shape, and are shaped within, the cultural and institutional realities of their time and place, how – as students, parents, and/or teachers – we live 'inside' theory. Rather than learn about theory in the abstract (liberalism, progressivism, Marxism, etc.), students are encouraged to see these in 'dramatised form' – as staged, or enacted, in the theatre of policy. As Fanon wrote, "What are by common consent called the human sciences have their own drama" (1986, p. 22).

Bourdieu sees the study of this "drama" as indirectly therapeutic:

I believe that when sociology remains at a highly abstract and formal level, it contributes nothing. When it gets down to the nitty gritty of real life, however, it is an instrument that people can apply to themselves for quasi-clinical purposes. The true freedom that sociology offers is to give us a small chance of knowing what game we play and of minimising the ways in which we are manipulated by the forces of the field in which we evolve, as well as by the embodied social forces that operate from within us. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 175)

I have explained that I do not use journals or other first-person writing for assessment purposes. My students approach an "insider" analysis at one remove, in the "third person," by means of the life-history interview research exercise. In their on-line discussions of the course readings for modules 1-5, however, many students choose to write (non-assessable) first-person comments, electing to place themselves personally inside the era or social structure under consideration. For example, Maureen<sup>3</sup>, a post-World War Two baby boomer, identified herself as a product of First Labour Government policy:

I have just finished module 1 and am about to send it, but thought I would comment on the Fraser article in the course readings. I am amazed at several things in this article: its vision and the manner in which it articulates that vision. Stunning stuff. Remarkable to think that we are a product of that vision, for better or worse!

Another student, Diana, made connections between the 1950s ideology of feminine domesticity and community expectations of herself as a farmer's wife 50 years later:

I have a real struggle with the comment from Watson in Sue's article "women ... work as a means of supplementing the family income ... for a woman it is her marriage that is pivotal". This is an issue I struggle with constantly and I wonder if people in town have the same thing. The general idea out here in the 'backblocks' is that women don't have a career, they stay at home and help on the farm, especially as 'labour units' (yep! that's what they call 'em! ) who have the 'cheek' to demand decent wages these days ... women's pay is mostly a book keeping exercise, they are a form of slave labour as far as I'm concerned. See the ads in the paper " wife to relief milk and rear calves as needed". Did you know that the pay for this is included as part of the man's salary in the farming culture in general? Why does it bother me that people think I should be 'helping' on the farm, and that I am kind of selfishly looking after my own interests by studying, or maybe just getting out of the more grotty jobs with the weak excuse of 'an assignment' to do? I hate it that I feel guilty for seeing myself as a student just as much as I see myself as a mother/wife. How about you, any comments?

Here Diana is beginning to do what Foucault referred to as an 'ascending' mode of analysis when he argued that the role for theory in social research was "not to formulate the global systematic theory which holds everything in place, but to analyse the specificity of mechanisms of power, to locate the connections and extensions, to build little by little a strategic knowledge" (1980, p. 145). Similarly,

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<sup>3</sup> This, and the following discussion contributions, were written by students in the 'Social Issues' on-line MMP classes of 1999, 2000, 2001 and 2002. It is a 'constructed' conversation, although the individual contributions are real. Because I had not anticipated this paper at the time, I had not obtained consent. Therefore, I have personally contacted the five students whose discussion contributions are quoted here and obtained their consent via e-mail.

Bourdieu described the logic of research as: “*inseparably empirical and theoretical*” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 159, italics in the original).<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, in the Module 5 discussion, Janet is ‘theorising upwards’ as she puzzles about how she might create an academically acceptable narrative that melds what her interviewee said with previous research accounts. At this early stage of the assignment (immediately after conducting her interview), Janet expresses her technical dilemma as a question of “correlation” between the interview narrative and other research “evidence”:

I have just had the privilege of interviewing my husband's 86-yr-old Grandfather. What an experience! He felt his memories were a bit sketchy, but we came up with some great stuff. It was wonderful the way that things correlated with the works we have read. He talked about how rigid the curriculum was, the same day in day out, how they had garden plots to tend, (this was a rural school) the only source of reading was from the school journals that came out once a month. I found it great the way it all seemed to fit together. Of course there were all the wonderful stories that I am not sure how to put into my report! It seemed that the biggest difficulty in the 1920s for rural children was transport to and from school and because of this lack of transport there were no interschool sports. I have found several books relating to this school and the general area. Do I use these books to help 'weave' the information from the interview into the historical recollection of others? Does this make sense? In books that I have read it discusses the transport and tiredness of children due to the fact that many of them had to milk cows before school. Grandfather told these same stories, so now do I correlate the two?

... My eye is drawn to a flashing red sign at the bottom of my screen: “Live Message”. Julie has seen my name at the bottom of her screen in the “who’s here” list of those currently logged in. I can never resist a live message. Julie says, “Have a look at the discussion in the Sociology folder. Are we on the right track?” I’m always disturbed by the phrase “right track.” I click into the “sociological theme” discussion that is beginning to take shape as students begin writing their final reports. Diana has written:

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<sup>4</sup> Bourdieu and Foucault are often seen as incompatible. However, both argued against ‘grand theory’ in the social sciences and both wrote at length about social theorising as grounded in the minutiae of empirical research. Bourdieu’s sociological/anthropological reinvestigations involved the statistical analysis of homologies, or structural correspondences, between phenomena such as the hierarchies of academic institutions and the embodied dispositions of social class groups. Foucault’s ‘data’ were archival documents, such as the academic textbooks, professional handbooks, rules and regulations of professional bodies such as medicine, criminology or psychology. While these theorists’ analyses of power may differ, they are largely in agreement on key pedagogical issues such as the process of theory-making and teaching (e.g., see Bourdieu, 1988; Foucault 1977; Middleton, 1999, 2003b).

As to whether schools enhance inequality ... I feel there is an attempt to do this. However secondary and primary have so much political influence, attempts at equality are sometimes unintentionally distracted. To say every child has an equal education or the same choices is fair, however not all children have the same responses to those opportunities related to previous experiences and home influences.

This has stimulated a group discussion on Bourdieu. I do not require students to read Bourdieu in the original, although some of their set of recommended readings quote him (e.g., Nash, 1993). Diana continues:

I believe that Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic and cultural capital, in their most simple form, represent peoples' worth in a predominantly service economy. This notion of 'worth' suggests a model of class which is based on 'capital' movements through social space.

She then places herself "inside" this analysis:

I see the word 'capital' firstly in an economic sense. But now I am going to stick my neck out, and say that we all make sure we do these educational things with our kids, we teach them manners, we wash them and dress them to the best of our ability. Why is this kind of stuff important to us? Why does my son get a bad reaction when he says that he wants to be a pizza delivery man? Why do we spend hours listening to our kids reading etc., when they 'do it all at school'? Why bother?! ..... This imposter is going to say that when I was a farm worker's wife with no money AT ALL, living in a cold, damp and grotty farm cottage, depressed and miserable with no status, I was damned sure that success IS measured in money. Perhaps if we had had more money coming in I would've seen it differently. I think it depends on the 'partners' job/status/career.

Several students then took up this line of thought to help them think sociologically about their life-history interviews. For example, Sarah writes:

The traditional definition of working class is that you don't have inherited wealth or title, or a university education. You attain middle class status when you have a tertiary education... Even though we might like to think we have a classless society I would beg to differ. It is more difficult for working class kids to succeed on the terms the middle and upper class have set for them. They are more unlikely to attend university and more likely to end up "following in their fathers footsteps". My interviewee came from a working class background and did get a university degree - he said in his interview that he never felt as though he belonged there.

Sarah then applies her discussion of class to league tables, decile rankings, and popular perceptions of schools in low socio-economic areas today:

I've seen published "success" rankings of schools in newspapers. We were always amazed at these when we lived in (a low socioeconomic multicultural urban area). The success that school had with the kids was phenomenal – if you looked at how far they had come. They didn't start on a level playing field with the more successful schools. If it was ranked on how big the leap you had made was they would have been top dog. But it wasn't.

The exercise of thinking sociologically can force some students to consider the constructed nature of the neat separation of the taken-for-granted categories of social analysis. Race, class and gender begin to appear as analytic *categories* rather than as discrete phenomena in the 'real world'. For example, being Maori, being rural, and doing manual work are not "separable" experiences. It is social science itself that: "splits and fragments our history this way, as though we did not live our class, our gender and our race simultaneously" (Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989, p. 206). Janet's account illustrates her problematising of categories:

I am having trouble putting it all together! I have 4 sheets of A3 paper with headings and notes and references and stuff... but just how do I put it all together? I thought I was smart making a plan first with different headings "History", "Rural Ed" and "small rural town in the 1920s." Now I have all these notes that cross over and tangle into one big mess!! It is really neat to see how things tie in from the interview and then you read things in the history and they correlate with one another.

Social scientific knowledge, gained through reading of previous research, and interviewees' commonsense understandings may not always be consistent. For example, Margaret describes her experience of at first finding consistency between her interviewees' and the historians' accounts, then having to deal with an inconsistency:

Isn't it amazing how many links come up between the interviews and the readings. It's quite satisfying to be reading through sections of transcript and think "Oh! I read about that in such-and-such." Funnily enough, when I asked my interviewee if there had been any differences between the genders (educationally) when at school, she said no, but as the interview unfolded, many differences emerged.

Maureen responded to Margaret as follows:

When I interviewed my Mum she declared that the genders were treated equally. Then she proceeded to tell me that the girls couldn't do woodwork but did do cooking which the boys couldn't do, that the senior boys got to empty the toilet buckets on Friday afternoon (one occasion I'd be happy not to have equality I think!!), and then she drew me a picture of her school – boys' play shed on one side, girls' on the other side and never the twain shall meet!

These students are grappling intuitively with one of the key problems in the social sciences – what Schutz (1970) described as "second order constructs." By this he

meant the scientific layer of interpretation added by the researcher to a research participant's commonsense account.

Other taken-for-granted social science categorisations may also be thrown into question during this exercise. In the following example, Roger questions the analytical split between "school and society" and the conventional periodisation of history according to decades:

I must say I'm enjoying the research, it's so interesting but it's a matter of knowing what to include and what not to. I've found things happening outside education whether it be nationally or internationally that could have had or did have an impact on education. The era I'm looking at is the mid 1950s to the mid 1960s. I am finding it difficult not to include changes that happened prior to this time e.g. the 1930s as I feel some of it impacted on the era I'm looking at, so where do you draw the line? This weaving is not as easy as it looks! I'm looking at rural education and there is not as much information as I first thought there would be relating to that era.

At an intuitive level, some students begin to experience social scientific analysis as a more complex process than the description or discovery of "facts". I want them to begin to engage with the historicity of social science itself and to produce writing "which is more aware of its status as narrative and which is at least suspicious of, if not rejecting outright, the universal and disengaged subject of empiricism" (Hennessey, 1993, p. 101).

Over the years I have been delighted with most of the final reports students produce. Most interview older family members, or teaching colleagues. I encourage each student to present a copy of the final report to the interviewee as a keepsake. This acknowledgement emphasises the ethics of participatory research, the importance of accurate reporting, careful application of theory, and a scholarly presentation. Many include photos, copies of school reports, and other documents relevant to the person, the school, the era, or place. Although students and interviewees over the years have given me copies of some of the reports, this paper has not quoted from them, as I wanted to emphasise my pedagogical rationale and process, rather than a tidy finished product ...

The slam of the front door jolts me back to my surroundings. It is time to think about dinner. I log out of Class Forum and click the disconnect button in the Remote Access window. As I wait for the programs to quit, I glance again at the red notebook, which lies open on my workstation and read again a statement by Bourdieu that encapsulates my overall pedagogical goal: "the political task of social science is to stand up both against irresponsible voluntarism and fatalistic scientism, to help define a rational utopianism by using the knowledge of the probable to make the possible come true" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 197). Cramped and tired, I command the computer to shut down for the night. I wander out into the kitchen.

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