Teaching the sociology of education: constructing a school system in a semester

The teaching of the sociology of education has been categorised as “service sociology”, a complex area mainly inhabited by “invisible sociologists”, with a history which “remains to be written”. The aim in this paper is to cast a brief light on the sociology of education in Australian universities, and from this to provide an example of the use of sociological concepts to construct a school system in a semester. It is argued that teaching through concepts provides a practical theory for an understanding of the system of schools which is more appropriate for teachers in training than traditional approaches where learning and applying sociological theory is the aim. A method is proposed for teaching sociology through concepts that relate institutional categorisation and order to structural and demographic factors outside of schools that influence types of curriculum and differences in educational outcomes. Described are ways students work with empirical materials to construct the system and build visual representations of schools in the state, private and independent sectors. It is concluded that the course has theoretical portability and provides a practical understanding of a system and a method to carry into teacher’s professional lives.

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Introduction

A recent report, Teaching Sociology in Australia (Marshall, Robinson, Germov and Clark, 2009), contains no reference to the sociology of education. It reports minimally (Section 5.3) on education, situating it within a “service sociology” (with nursing, social work, criminology, etc.); where teaching is not clearly about sociology, but about linking some aspect of the discipline to student’s future occupations. Directly above (Section 5.2.2) is a short description of “invisible sociologists”; staff in faculties and schools who may be sociologists – “But generally, they’re not teaching explicit sociology.” I would like to briefly address these questions of service and invisible sociology in that the terms have some relevance to sociology in teacher education and how it should be taught. Thus the next section of the paper sets out a very brief overview of some factors that have shaped this part of the field. This is followed by three sections about: a degree in secondary education and the place of sociology within it; a rationale for teaching sociology through concepts; and a description of how these concepts are employed to construct a system of schools in a semester. Conclusions are then made about the theoretical depth and the transferability of the subject.

Some comments on the teaching of the sociology of education as a “service sociology”

In Australia, the sociology of education was not so much founded, but brought into being by an increased demand for teachers in the early 1970s. The then Teachers’ Colleges adapted the British model of pre-service Diplomas with sociology as one element of the “foundations of education”. The subject was taught mainly by first generation autodidacts without doctoral training recruited from teaching to fill positions in the Colleges. The sociology of education had no real institutional
foundation and no operational models that had been set by previous generations. Unlike psychology, sociology lacked the professional opportunities and public status which form the criteria for recruitment which are supported by a recognized professional deontology (duty-based ethics). There were then, as now, limited career enticements for studying sociology or becoming a sociologist of education. On this point then, sociologists of education and other pre-service university staff enter a part of the field where, as (Marshall, Robinson, Germov and Clark, 2009) suggest, they can be “invisible” sociologists teaching an “invisible” sociology. But this has not always been the case.

From the 1970s to the early 1990s requirements for teachers to up-grade from Diplomas to Degrees were supported by pay increases, which drew large numbers of teachers into universities and the Colleges. This period was probably the high point for sociology in teacher education. Theory about education and empirically based sociology expanded (c/f Halsey, Heath and Ridge, 1980). Education drew attention in sociology through Bernstein (1973) in Britain, Bowles and Gintis (1976) in the United States and Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) in France. In the same period, qualitative and ethnographic research was established in sociology (Hymes, 1972) and carried into the school-based ethnographies Willis’ Learning to Labour (1977) in Britain; and then Making the Difference (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler and Dowsett, 1982) in Australia. In this environment qualitative and ethnographic methods became central to pre- and post-service sociology of education; sociology majors could be formed and carried into coursework Masters of Education. These subjects held relevance for teachers in terms of understanding education and the promise of a career path and they gave credence to the position of sociology of education. But as sociology lost ground with neo-liberalism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, funding stopped for teacher up-grading, with the MBA, and more recently educational leadership becoming the preferred avenues for promotion. Social science offerings have since been squeezed into “socio-cultural” courses to make room for more occupational content. A saturation of qualitative methods across disciplines means staff from many areas will teach them effectively.

In summary then, a strong pre-service sociology of education was only sustained in certain conditions. These included: an expansion in teacher training coupled with a volume of teachers seeking post-service upgrading; a disciplinary separation where sociology held sway over qualitative methods and related ethnographic research; and where sociological content was accepted as core for teacher preparation and promotion within teaching and administrative careers. These conditions are unlikely to be repeated. Leaving aside the macro-changes to the field such as restructuring, lower funding and

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1 The British sociologist Olive Banks (1976) remarked in passing that colleagues in the 1960s were puzzled about what subject matter would suit the sociology of education, turned initially, and without a serious purpose, to social mobility as a default.
the possibility of the demise of the sociology of education\textsuperscript{2}, a pressing problem is what to teach and how to teach sociology in the sole one-semester course available in most education faculties? This, it is now argued, rests on making our courses conceptually sound and relevant to the system students enter. Perhaps in this way the invisible “service” sociologies and the invisible sociologists can make their presence felt?

\textbf{The degree and the place of sociology within it}

The local four-year degree, Bachelor of Teaching (Secondary) is comprised of two sections each of two years. First and second years are devoted to building on knowledge from high school in selected teaching areas (drama, health and physical education, technical education [manual arts], science, English, mathematics, languages, history, geography). Third year is about learning to teach these curriculum areas and two practicums, each of four weeks in high schools. A final practicum is completed in first semester fourth year as well as assessment, psychology and research subjects. Sociology, psychology, vocational education and an elective are prescribed for the final semester of the degree. Students enter the program with no sociological background and unaware of the divisions within sociology. Most students have attended only one secondary school before entering university and usually in one sector – private or state. Many have little idea of how another sector operates apart from common sense and stereotypes (e.g. the private school students who say “the school down the road is okay for them but not us” or students from state schools who either envy or openly resent private schools and those with little awareness of elite private schools and where they are located). Similar pre-notions probably exist in other “service” students in policing, nursing, medicine or social work about their clientele.

Given their academic socialisation, education students are limited in their capacity to work from theory to a substantive level as is expected when sociology is studied as a major. In assessment, social science students in education can play an academic game, but the more practically oriented students are less inclined to do so; especially technology teachers who fondly refer to their social science courses as “bullshit” subjects. Enforcing a sociological reading program to under-prepared students and essays for assessment invites only stylistic written pieces, often strong in writing style but without substance, from arts trained students, and a passive resistance from those without this form of academic capital.

\textsuperscript{2} In point of fact, the material in the remainder of this paper is adapted from a position paper I presented to my faculty, where strong claims had to be made to avoid sociology becoming merged into a foundation “socio-cultural” subject in a review of the program. The philosophy of education subject was cut in the review when the relevant staff member was on study leave and unable to defend its further inclusion.
For these reasons the course that I teach centres on methods for understanding particular schools, concepts that force all students to work empirically on data about particular schools rather than on theoretical generalisations, and finally on assessment which strips away advantages of previous cultural capital. The assessment is situated in workshops where concepts are tied to data about particular schools so that gaps in student knowledge about the variations across the system can be explored through data about schools, and not opinion. A poster presentation where two schools are compared is the centre piece of assessment because this form helps to strip away the usual advantage given to writing style. It forces students to work from particular data about chosen schools and to avoid broad generalisations. A final essay is set with questions set to test knowledge of the school system.

A rationale for teaching sociology in pre-service teacher education

A central intent in the sociology of education is to differentiate between individual/psychological and social/structural explanations of educational phenomena. Relations between individual teachers and students are, for example, at the centre of teaching. But this relationship, and the success of teaching and the quality of educational outcomes, are very much influenced by the type of institutions in which individuals come to interact and by structural and other conditions outside of the school. Combined, these social and structural factors determine variations across schools in the system, which are often beyond the direct control of individual teachers and students. It is for this reason that pre-service teachers require a clear understanding of the pressure of factors within and outside of schools as institutions that shape one school in one way and another school in a different way.

The method used in the present course works from propositions to questions and the use of concepts to provide an empirical analysis from which students construct representations the system. The propositions for this approach are as follows. If sociology is the study of institutions and institutional life, then the sociology of education should have as one of its aims to provide an understanding of the system of institutions and how life and learning in them varies across schools. And as a part of this, should come a further understanding: that the capacity to become an effective teacher in a pre-service program depends on a practical knowledge of what it means to teach in the various types of institutions in different places in the system. Given this, a sociology of secondary schools must entail the analysis of institutions, and a sociology course has to be situated in the part of the program where students can reflect on their experiences of a practicum and working with the curriculum.

Always at issue in pre-service programs are questions of how to frame “theoretical” courses so that
they can be taught as ‘practical theory’ in response to students who may lack a motivation to engage with them. Most students have an interest in the practical aspects of their degree. In a nutshell, the challenge in social science courses is to situate students so that they can understand, practically, how a sociological explanation differs from a psychological explanation of what will be faced in practice.

**Teaching sociology through concepts**

To provide pedagogy for understanding of the secondary education system, as critical, informed teachers, my course begins with a list of questions posed as problems which are explored through concepts and analysis of materials about particular schools. These are:

1. *What are the categories of secondary schools in Queensland?* Under what broad types can they be placed? What are some similarities and differences between schools? How do they translate into variations in curriculum and educational outcomes across the school system?

2. *What type of order is possible within schools?* How do ways of keeping order differ according to enrolment requirements and student population? What relations might there be between types of order and curriculum on offer sorting students and to different school-based "careers"?

3. *How can some schools ensure success while others have to face failure?* How has the present hierarchy within the curriculum come about and who does best within it? Historically, how is it that success has now come to be a feature of some parts of the system while failure appears to have been driven to other parts?

4. *What types of teaching and likely outcomes are possible across the system of schools in which you might teach?* Which institutional factors might assist or impede the transition from Years 10 to 11 in different parts of the system. How do schools and teachers deal with students who don't fit models of the ideal student?

Questions and relationships to sociological concepts are brought together in Table 1 below.
Table 1: Questions and concepts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Some central sociological concepts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What are the categories of secondary schools in Queensland?</td>
<td>Membership categorisation device</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Heterogeneous/ homogeneous populations</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. What type of order is possible within schools?</td>
<td>Moral order, Interaction order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How can some schools ensure success while others have to face failure?</td>
<td>Monopoly access to curriculum, Curriculum hierarchy, Import and export of failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What factors influence success and failure, understanding and misunderstanding in the subjects you teach?</td>
<td>Forms of capital (cultural, social, economic, symbolic)</td>
</tr>
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Reading and using concepts

The task in lectures is to teach how to read given texts so as to extract the concepts being discussed so that they can be used practically in workshops. The concept of order is multi-dimensional. The focus can be, for instance, on ways some schools with homogenous populations secure a moral order of sorts (through membership categorisation devices such as strict penalties on dress code and general appearance in public) while others with more heterogeneous intakes seek an order suited to different groups. But within an “interaction order” (Goffman, 1982) the focus is on the extent to which a school can hold students to the content and pace of high cognitive demand subjects (maths, science, languages) and where a school has to “deregulate” its interaction order by bringing in less demanding subjects. From this, patterns of curriculum hierarchy in different schools can be represented in a concrete visual form, as can be the extent to which some schools can “export failure” to others forced to “import” poor results, and so on.

Considerable attention is given at the same time to demographics of suburbs in which schools are situated through which an understanding is gained about relations among schools, curriculum and occupations. Two instances serve as examples. In contrasting statistics on education, occupation and other factors such as industries within a catchment area, and a school’s curriculum hierarchy, it becomes possible see and represent how curriculum becomes a mirror image of social structure³. Instances where an elite private school is within a stone’s throw from a low achieving state school provide examples of two institutions being close in geographic space, but at the same time far apart in social space. Such relationships are illustrated visually in the design of posters where schools are compared, and from which a pattern of the system of schools students could teach in is represented in a semester’s work. Knowledge is then further tested in a written essay.

To conclude this far, a revision sheet given in the lead up to poster presentations, Figure 1 below, provides an example of how schools and their positions within a system can be read in terms of

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³ These insights and concepts used about curriculum would not have been possible without reference to research by Richard Teese (2000).
concepts. The intention is to illustrate how curriculum hierarchies are formed across schools shown on a continuum, from homogenous to heterogeneous, with different orders, to a capacity to regulate and deregulate curriculum. It illustrates how schools on the left-hand side of the continuum with a moral order (AMO) and regulated interaction orders (Reg. IR) have high enrolments in high demand sciences and social sciences and negligible enrolments in the more modern subjects. It illustrates how his reverses in schools with heterogeneous student intakes where vocational and recent “modern” subjects outnumber social science and maths and sciences. In this way the feel for various schools and for teaching within them can be gained from locating schools and factors which place them in that position and not another.
Figure 1: Schools in a system on a continuum
Theoretical depth and the transferability

It has been demonstrated that sociological concepts can be employed to construct a system of high schools in a single semester course. The reasons for teaching via such concepts have been first, that most pre-service teachers enter their degree with little or no grounding in social sciences; and second, added to differences in background experiences, a diverse socialisation into their teaching disciplines often means low motivation to engage with “theory” courses that are not grounded in preferred areas; and third, there is a need for pre-service teachers to understand differences between individual, psychological and social, structural phenomena. An important question is whether this approach provides necessary theoretical insights?

What is inculcated in this course is a practical theory for placing selected schools in a space or field where factors which push some schools to an elevated “fortified” part of the space and others to where schools are “exposed” to failure. Instead of the names of theorists and their theories, students learn a method for locating any school of choice and situating it on a continuum and have an idea of how they might approach teaching within that school.

Given that universities cannot teach to all schools, the course gives something of a number of points of view from various points within the system and of how schools are grouped within social and geographical space. Students have an understanding of what factors force different parts of the system away from each other and structural reasons for how and why this happens, and how failure and success are not solely about individual teachers and individual students. A course such as this could transfer into most Australian states and other countries where there is a public/private divide, though Canadian students, from a comprehensive system are often bemused about these divisions in the Australian system. Students from China, Singapore, Japan and India have compared their education with the Australian system with the result being some theoretical insights into each system. This suggests theoretical transferability at a practical level and possibly, that the method will endure longer than the favourite theories of the invisible sociologists in the practices of the “service” students enter.
References


