“This is as good as it gets”: Classroom lessons and learning in challenging circumstances

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The Changing Schools, Changing Times research, on which this article is based, is a three-year project to examine how four high schools serving culturally diverse and disadvantaged communities responded to opportunities and constraints when they set out to improve the quality of student learning. The article draws upon an aspect of the research that focuses upon learning and teaching within the classroom. It describes the process that resulted in the Day Diaries, brief but accurate recounts of a day in the life of a Year 8 class in each of the four participating schools. The paper reports on the nature of the teaching and learning scripts adopted in the lessons and how school leaders and teachers responded to the patterns when the Day Diaries were fed back as tools for reflection and discussion. It explores the idea that two interlocking logics, one of practice and the other of justification, work as a kind of grid or frame to create a “safety zone” for teachers in these very difficult classroom contexts while at the same time restricting the possibility that learners will engage with high-challenge curricula.

Introduction

Pedagogical reform has become a central focus of concern within educational policy in NSW. In 2002, after an extensive review of schools throughout the state, and of school reform more generally, the Independent Inquiry into the Provision of Public Education in NSW recommended that “improvements to pedagogy should formally be afforded the status of being a major strategic priority of the NSW public education system during the coming decade” (Esson, Johnston, & Vinson, 2002, p.102). In the following year, the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) launched its major curriculum initiative, the Quality Teaching Framework (NSW Department of Education & Training, 2003).

The framework is primarily an adaptation of ideas about teaching and assessment that were initially elaborated by researchers working at the University of Wisconsin in the USA (Newmann, Marks, & Gamoran, 1996), and developed further in Australia by researchers working on the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study, 2001). The NSW framework, which applies across all years of schooling in all key learning areas, focuses the attention of teachers on three dimensions of quality teaching: intellectual quality, quality learning environments and significance.
The Quality Teaching Framework, with its emphasis upon such aspects of teaching and learning as higher-order thinking, quality learning environments, high and explicit student expectations, multiple ways of knowing, and meaningful connections with prior knowledge, challenges the conventional wisdom about instruction in classrooms characterised by high levels of poverty and cultural and linguistic diversity. Knapp, Shields and Turnbull (1995, p. 771) described this conventional wisdom as follows:

These approaches emphasise curricula that proceed in a linear fashion from the ‘basics’ to ‘advanced’ skills (though seldom reaching the latter), instruction that is tightly controlled by the teacher, and ability groupings that harden into permanent tracks at an early age. ‘Good’ instruction is that which keeps children at work on academic tasks. Children who fail to keep up are targeted for re-teaching and extra practice on discrete skills ... Although these approaches may improve children’s grasp of the basic skills (and there is evidence that they do), they risk short-changing the learning of more advanced skills in comprehension, reasoning and composition.

Pedagogical reforms such as the Quality Teaching Framework go through a long chain of translations as they enter the educational field and eventually find their way into schools and classrooms. In his later writings, Basil Bernstein traced such a trajectory and identified three major sites (Bernstein, 2000). Firstly, at the site of production, for example universities and research organizations, academics and researchers construct the ideas of authentic or productive pedagogy together with the research evidence to support the claims. These interpretive constructions subsequently find a home within sites of re-contextualisation such as curriculum and professional services units within educational departments. Here the initial, highly abstract ideas are selectively reinterpreted and translated into more practical texts, such as guidelines, discussion documents, video presentations, and case studies. Finally, what has now become an institutionalised process of pedagogical reform enters the site of reproduction, such as schools and classrooms, where, as the name suggests, the focus is on applying the principles, rubrics and procedures of what are now officially endorsed practices.

The success or otherwise of pedagogical reforms that introduce high-challenge curricula depend in part on the translations and recontextualisations that inevitably occur at various points along the trajectory. In this particular paper, we focus upon the classroom. Before we can understand how external ideas about challenging curriculum or productive pedagogies are received, translated and applied by teachers and students, we need to analyse the dynamics of taken-for-granted classroom practice. Our research in classrooms in schools characterised by high levels of poverty and cultural and linguistic diversity suggests that teachers and students in these difficult environments construct a widespread and resilient logic of practice that restricts the possibilities of high-challenge curricula. Any new idea or innovation, such as the NSW Quality
Teaching Framework, is recontextualised and adapted to fit within the logics of practice that shape what is seen to be possible within these classroom.

A view of classrooms

During 2005-7, we studied four public high schools in NSW working in very challenging circumstances. Three were in metropolitan areas and one was in a rural town. The students in all four schools were primarily from linguistically, culturally and socio-economically diverse backgrounds. Our primary research purpose was to investigate how principals, school leaders and teachers, working under these conditions, can shift the focus of their school from day to day crisis management and a preoccupation with welfare issues and discipline to efforts to enhance the quality of student and teacher learning.

In different ways, and to various degrees, all four high schools in our study have been trying to improve the quality of learning and teaching in their classrooms. One school expended considerable time and energy inducting all the staff into an approach to learning ("Format") that sensitised teachers to the importance of having diverse experiences in their lessons to match the different learning styles of the students. The others are "doing Quality Teaching," and that generally means setting aside a few periods for teachers to meet to talk about, and perhaps experiment with, one or other of the dimensions in the DET's Quality Teaching Framework.

In collaboration with the schools, we have made the classroom the central focus of our most recent cycle of research visits and meetings in the schools. Although we had observed classroom lessons in earlier visits, we wanted a more systematic way to develop descriptions about what went on in classrooms that we could feed back as tools for reflection and discussion to school leaders and teachers.

The result has been the Day Diaries. These are recounts of a day in the life of one Year 8 class in each of the four participating schools. They were constructed by means of a three-stage process. The purpose of the first stage was to document what happened during each lesson over the course of the day. To gain an accurate record, three observers attended each class to observe and record what happened during the lesson. Two of the observers were from the research team and the third was a teacher nominated by the school. Each observer took detailed notes on what happened during the lesson. The aim of second stage was to draw upon these detailed accounts to construct a brief but accurate recount of what happened from one moment to the next over the course of the lesson. This entailed a conscious effort to strip away from the recounts any attempt to interpret or evaluate the practices being described. Finally, we went through the recount we had constructed with the teacher who had conducted the lesson to check it for accuracies, omissions and bias.

We were working on the assumption that one can gain an understanding of learning in classrooms, not by trying to get inside the head of the learner,
but by observing closely what they are required to do from one moment to
the next. "Learning," according to John Dewey (Dewey, 1997, p. 169), "is a
product and a reward of occupation with subject matter." Within the space
of a lesson, the teacher creates a classroom environment wherein students are
given a sequence of activities or tasks. Some of the tasks may provoke thinking
or the noting of connections, that is higher order intellectual skills on scales
such as Bloom's taxonomy, whereas others may offer more limited or shallow
understandings. In the first instance, we were particularly interested in noticing
what the teachers gave the students to do.

We have included an example of a recount of a lesson in appendix 1. The
following table is an abbreviated account, based on the Day Diaries, of what
learning was like over the course of a day for students in a Year 8 class in one
of the case study schools.

Table 1: Classroom activities required of a class of Year 8 learners over the
course of day.
(The unshaded cells indicate procedural activities such as listening to instruc-
tions or receiving worksheets.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson 1: Science</th>
<th>Lesson 2: Visual Arts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enter classroom.</td>
<td>Enter classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sit at desk.</td>
<td>Sit at desks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receive instruction to take out books</td>
<td>Receive photocopy handout of a painting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen to instructions about task</td>
<td>Respond to teacher's questions about handout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copy OHT into books</td>
<td>Listen to teacher's explanation of handout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receive first worksheet</td>
<td>Receive a worksheet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observe an OHT &amp; listen to teacher's explanation</td>
<td>Listen to instructions about the worksheet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paste OHT in books</td>
<td>Observe teacher demonstrate an aspect of the worksheet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen to instructions and ask questions about the task</td>
<td>Work individually to complete the worksheet by writing sentences to explain art terms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work individually to colour in the worksheet</td>
<td>Listen to students read the sentences in their worksheets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receive second worksheet</td>
<td>Listen to teacher evaluate the students work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observe a magnet in use and listen to teacher's explanation</td>
<td>Pack up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen to teacher's instructions about worksheet task</td>
<td>Exit classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work individually to label the diagram in the worksheet.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 3 - Visual Arts</td>
<td>Lesson 4 - PE</td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enter class</td>
<td>Enter gymnasium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sit in groups</td>
<td>Listen to teacher’s instructions about the activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen to teacher’s instructions about the lesson</td>
<td>High-Knee running up and down the gym</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen to teacher’s explanation of worksheet</td>
<td>Listen to teacher’s instructions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respond to teacher’s questions</td>
<td>Running on the spot and up and down the gym</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receive a worksheet</td>
<td>Listen to teacher’s instructions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work individually on the worksheet to create impression of being in a prison cell</td>
<td>Running around gym in group formation passing a ball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen to the teacher call the roll and answer when requested</td>
<td>Listen to teacher’s instructions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take the process diary to the teacher to be marked</td>
<td>Passing a ball in pairs to prevent a defender intercepting the ball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen to the teacher praise a student’s worksheet</td>
<td>Sit on floor and listen to instructions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen to teacher explain what they would do in the next lesson</td>
<td>Play touch football as part of a team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean up the classroom</td>
<td>Exit gymnasium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observe the teacher draw a lucky number and reward student.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pack up</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exit classroom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson 5 English</th>
<th>Lesson 6 Mathematics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enter classroom</td>
<td>Enter classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sit at desks</td>
<td>Sit at desks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen to teacher explain effect of staff changes on class</td>
<td>Receive textbook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen to teacher introduce topic</td>
<td>Listen to teacher revise earlier work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write heading of topic in book</td>
<td>Respond to teacher’s questions about earlier work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observe teacher write four terms on board</td>
<td>Listen to teacher’s instructions about task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respond to teacher’s questions to define the terms</td>
<td>Work individually to copy new work from board into books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receive sample advertisement handout from teacher</td>
<td>Listen to teacher’s instructions about task</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Listen to teacher explain the task | Work individually to complete two exercises from the textbook in their books
--- | ---
Observe the teacher work through an example on the board | Listen to the teacher call the roll and respond when requested
Respond to the teacher's questions about the example | Observe teacher write an additional exercise on board
Work as a member of a small group to analyse advertisements | Listen to teachers instructions about the task
Listen to teacher's instructions about next task | Work individually to complete additional exercise in books
Work as an individual to create an advertisement | Pack up
Pack up | Exit classroom
Exit classroom

Overall, the patterns of interaction between teachers and students were surprisingly similar across and within the four schools in our study. If we summarise the data from the perspective of the learner, we can highlight the following general features of the lessons we observed:

- There was very little variation in the structure of activities and tasks that the students were expected to follow. The typical lesson followed a standard script that proceeded as follows: enter classroom, sit down, pay attention to the teacher, answer questions, receive resource (usually worksheets), listen to instructions, work individually (or occasionally in groups) on a set task, hand in work or make available for inspection, pack up, and exit room.
- Minimal literacy demands were required of the students. Over the course of the day they were not required to read anything apart from simple instructions on worksheets and notes on overheads. Apart from labelling and writing single words on worksheets, the students were only expected to write a few sentences.
- The tasks that the students were given were generally minimal in scope and intellectually undemanding. With the exception of the English lesson, where students were required to analyse and synthesise material, the tasks in the case study presented here were at the factual and procedural end of Bloom's taxonomy of knowledge.
- Student-teacher talk was generally restricted to the teacher conveying procedural information or asking questions that required from the students a one or two word response. It was rare for learners to engage in open, explorative discussion with each other or with the teacher.
- Learners were not given any choice in what they could learn, how they could learn it, when they could learn it, or where they could learn it. At no point were they treated as active, informed participants in the learning process or as co-producers of their own learning.
We have had some very interesting discussions with the school leaders and teachers who participated in the research about the Day Diaries - what they tell us, what patterns they reveal, and why they take the form they do. There was a tendency in the discussions, especially at the beginning, for the school executive to exclude themselves from the determinants that have shaped the patterns and to stress the exceptional nature of the situation: the special characteristics of the students in this particular class, the qualities of the individual teachers that we happened to observe, the fact that the observations took place on a particular day and so on.

To some degree, the unease of the school executive in discussing the patterns of teaching and learning in the Day Diaries was because they had very little direct control over the instructional core within classrooms. Decisions about what should be taught at a given time, how it should be taught, what students were expected to learn, and how it should be assessed were generally made by individual teachers in isolated classrooms. The school leadership was very much in the position described by Elmore (1999-2000, p. 2):

Administrators ... do not manage instruction. They manage the structures and processes that surround instruction; they protect, or “buffer”, the technical core from outside scrutiny or interference; and in order to assure the public of the quality and legitimacy of what is happening in the technical core - the classroom - they give the impression that they are managing it.

In order to support our discussion about the Day Diaries with the principals and teachers in our study, we constructed a simple quadrant diagram based on two variables, the degree of teacher control during the lesson and the degree to which students were engaged in set tasks.

The principals and teachers immediately recognised the tension between the perceived necessity of a tightly controlled classroom and high levels of student engagement. Minimising incidents of misbehaviour and disruption often works against motivating students and engaging them in learning. Therefore, most of the participants viewed quadrant C as desirable and achievable. Few of the participants in our study imagined that a negotiated interactive learning environment (quadrant D) was possible. On analysing the Day Diaries, however, it was clear that a small number of lessons were in unscripted classrooms (quadrant A) and the vast majority followed the standard script (quadrant B).

There seemed to be two interlocking logics operating in classrooms where teacher control was high (quadrants B and C). One element was a practice logic where a high level of order or control was achieved at the expense of student engagement. With the worksheets and overheads, and the undemanding prescribed tasks, teachers constructed a zone of relative comfort; there was safety and security in the top left quadrant!

This practice logic was supported by a set of explanatory logics that provided a range of justifications as to why this particular practice was all that could be hoped for in the particular situation of this classroom, in this school, with
### Figure 1: Teacher control and student engagement in set tasks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Standard script / Orderly restricted</td>
<td>Orderly enabling learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>learning environment</td>
<td>environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High teacher control, low student</td>
<td>High teacher control, high</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>engagement</td>
<td>student engagement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>An emphasis on the maintenance of the</td>
<td>The default script operates</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>default script overshadows attention to</td>
<td>with minimal effort, and students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>learning</td>
<td>are engaged in the set tasks with</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>occasional opportunities for “unscripted”</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>learning.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Arranged enabling learning environment</td>
<td>Low teacher control, high student</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>engagement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The constant struggle to establish</td>
<td>Students are engaged in learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the routines that characterise the</td>
<td>and in co-construction of learning activities with the</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>default script displaces attention to</td>
<td>teacher.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>learning</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The constant struggle to establish the routines that characterise the default script displaces attention to learning. 

These two interlocking logics operated as a kind of grid or frame that ensured a very widespread and resilient survival-mode of teaching within the case study schools. From the teacher’s point of view, the logics worked to minimise emotional tensions; it was intellectually difficult and emotionally demanding to engage students in academic work in schools such as these. But from the students’ perspective, the consequence was that the intellectual demands were likewise minimised. Any new idea or innovation, such as the NSW Quality Teaching Framework, has to be somehow fitted within the interlocking logics that shape what is possible within these classrooms.

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**Volume 31**
**Number 2**
**June 2008**
In an extensive study of American high-poverty elementary school classrooms, the researchers described around a third of the classrooms as having “orderly restrictive” learning environments. Within these classrooms, teachers maintained “a tight, restrictive control that effectively narrowed the range of learning opportunities and instructional strategies that children encountered” (Knapp, Shields, & Turnbull, 1995, p. 772). This description fits the lessons that followed the standard script in our study. A slightly higher proportion of classrooms in the American study offered the students a somewhat looser, but still orderly, classroom environment, a wider range of routines, and a greater variety of instructional strategies. Within this “orderly enabling learning environment” the learners exhibited an enthusiasm for learning that was not present in the “orderly restrictive environments” (Knapp, Shields, & Turnbull, 1995, p. 772). Unlike the American research, the Day Diaries in our study revealed few “orderly enabling” classroom-learning environments. Even more rare were classrooms in which power was more equally shared between students and teachers and where students were highly engaged in negotiated tasks. Despite the scarcity of such learning environments in our study, we have retained this category and return to its potential later in our discussion.

The task for school leaders is to have a strategy at the whole school and faculty level to assist their teachers to move through the quadrants so that the proportion of orderly enabling learning environments increase over time, and to support explorations of negotiated learning environments. At one school, the feedback discussion about the Day Diary data reached a critical point when the Science and the English Head Teachers talked about the risks involved in relaxing the frames in order to allow student autonomy to increase. Experienced teachers, who have worked over the years in challenging schools, used language like “breaking through” or “pushing through the barrier” to describe how hard it was break free from the standard script. A considerable emotional and intellectual effort was required before they could step out of the comfort zone created by this script, relax the control frames, and allow the students greater autonomy as active learners.

Moving beyond the orderly restricted learning environment is not only a matter of reworking the mode of classroom order and control. In classrooms where students come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, a transformation of knowledge and the curriculum is also required. Knapp, Shields and Turnbull (1995, p. 772) reported from their study that teachers who took active, constructive steps to connect learning to the students’ backgrounds were more likely to adopt meaning-oriented approaches to the teaching of reading, writing and mathematics. In mathematics, they moved away from reliance upon computational practice to a broader range of mathematical topics and tasks to deepen the students’ conceptual understanding. In the language-based subjects, they shifted from a primary focus on basic skills to a variety of texts and a wider range of tasks. Instead of the “restricted” forms
of writing task that predominated in the Day Diaries (e.g., fill-in-the-blank exercises, short answers to specific questions on a worksheet), the meaning-oriented teachers in the Knapp, Shields and Turnbull study adopted texts and activities that provoked the students to express their thoughts in more personal and elaborated forms.

"Teaching for meaning" in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms requires a curriculum that serves two purposes: "building on the familiar," and "unlocking the unfamiliar" (McNaughton, 2002, p. 26). A wide curriculum that allows incidental and concurrent student learning is more likely to accommodate a diverse range of skills and knowledge and make connections by building on the familiar. The challenge for teachers in designing such a curriculum is to construct versatile activities and multiple learning sites that enrich the ways that students and teachers interact, and increase the "opportunities for them to work out, in their own minds, their ideas about the literacy tool they are using, and to invent other ways of engaging in the activity" (McNaughton, 2002, p. 44). Such an approach does not rule out the necessity, from time to time, to adopt a narrower skill-based, sequential curriculum that supports learners in "unlocking the unfamiliar." The challenge for teachers here is to recognise when students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are unfamiliar with the rules and practices that are required to perform classroom activities and to intervene with explicit instruction and support.

Interactions in highly controlled classrooms

In classrooms where teachers spent time and energy establishing and maintaining the standard script, two sets of interaction occurred simultaneously. Sometimes they ran along parallel lines, sometimes they intersected. In one lesson, for example, the teacher struggled to interest the students in the topic about Everyday Life in Ancient Egypt. The lesson script required the students to sit at their desks, take out their notebooks and pens, open their text books, listen while nominated students read aloud from a page of text, copy down a paragraph from the white board that had been paraphrased from the text, and reproduce a diagram from the text book into their notebooks.

The reason the teacher was struggling to interest the students in these tasks was not because the students were actively rebelling or blocking the teachers efforts, but because they were following a script of their own that involved quite different activities, such as chatting among friends, joking about, exercising their personal freedom to move about, engaging in mock fights, listening to their iPods, checking their mobile phones, or staring into space and daydreaming. For most of the students in the class the peer generated buzz of conversation and physical interaction was the real business of the lesson, and the competing reality of Everyday Life in Ancient Egypt had somehow to be accommodated into this primary reality. When the teacher managed to penetrate or
interrupt this reality by insisting that the students read a few sentences, or copy a paragraph into their books, they generally complied but not with any enthusiasm or engagement.

Jules Henry, an insightful observer of classrooms, described this kind of cognitive separation as “training in disjunction” (Henry, 1971, p. 93). When students are not interested in the subject matter of the lesson, they become detached, and in an effort to avoid boredom they cast about for ways to escape from the situation – moving around, chatting to friends, listening to an iPod, day-dreaming etc. These alternative activities become psychologically rewarding, and for some students they become the main business of schooling.

Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and illusio provide further insight into the disconnection that we observed in these classrooms. If the students do not share the habitus of the teacher, then the structure and significance of the “game” represented by the lesson will not be in their minds. Bourdieu describes the capacity and motivation to be cognitively and emotionally committed to playing the “game” as illusio (Bourdieu 1998, pp. 76-77):

Illusio is the fact of being interested in the game, of taking the game seriously, being caught up in and by the game, of believing the game is “worth the candle,” or, more simply, that playing is worth the effort. [It is] to recognise the game and to recognise its stakes.

It implies, according to Bourdieu, “a feel for the game,” which is to say a sense of what is significant or interesting and what is not, and whether to invest time and energy in this activity or that. Teachers generally rely on learners to take seriously the stakes and rules of the lesson “game” and to invest cognitive and emotional energy in playing the game. In many of the lesson “games” that we observed in the “orderly restricted” classrooms, students demonstrated a weak and fluctuating inclination to participate in the game or take it seriously. They lose interest in the lesson “game” and have to be constantly re-engaged by the teacher, or they physically or mentally leave it altogether to follow an alternative, peer-generated script.

There was, of course, a range of variations on the degree of disconnection or parallelism that we observed in highly teacher-controlled classrooms. When the lesson script was well established and required minimal attention, more engaging material and unscripted dialogue was made possible. For example, in one Year 8 lesson about Religions in Japan, the teacher countered the tendency for the peer-generated activity set to become dominant in the lesson by embroidering the underlying “orderly restricted” script with more engaging material that drew the learners into the lesson “game.”

As with many of the lessons we observed, the timing, pace and flow of the lesson was dictated by a series of colour-coded and numbered worksheets that contained information and tasks for the students to complete. The teacher reminded the students what to do with each type of worksheet, but it was clear that the worksheets were an expected, regular part of their Japanese lessons.
The tasks themselves – completing a seven sentence cloze passage, reading silently while listening to fellow students read a seven sentence paragraph, completing six multiple choice questions based on the paragraph, and cutting out and pasting shapes to make a pagoda – largely involved factual knowledge and comprehension.

While the students worked on these lower order intellectual tasks, chatting quietly among themselves, the teacher introduced her own meta-narrative. She screened images on the Smartboard of Japanese religious sites and circulated to the class photographs from her visits to temples and shrines in Japan. Her anecdotes about her travels wove interest and engagement into the dry factual information that the students were ‘learning’ via the worksheet tasks. The students responded to her stories and images, by calling out comments and asking questions; in terms of engagement, the meta-narrative became the more intellectually interesting and challenging part of the lesson.

In an interview after the lesson, the teacher explained how difficult it was within the school to achieve a degree of order and control, and described the effort it had taken for her to develop a structure, based on the worksheet templates, so that the students “would not explode in class.” “The wall I am pushing against now,” she explained, was how to take risks and develop more intellectually challenging classroom learning. There was a deep sense of ambivalence in her voice as she described the possibilities of using Bloom’s taxonomy to prepare a range of different tasks that would provoke and extend her students’ thinking, while mindful of how much time and effort would be involved in developing such material after an emotionally exhausting day’s teaching, and whether her students had sufficient maturity to be independent learners.

Inequality and learning paradigms
A range of sociological studies has demonstrated that school and classroom processes often unwittingly contribute to educational inequality (Mehan, 1992). Some of these studies have focused upon social background and the mismatch between linguistic practices in the family and the school (Lareau, 2003a, 2003b). Others have examined the formation of student sub-cultures within the school and their effects upon learning and educational futures (Willis, 1977; Woods, 1979). Yet another strand has looked closely at the routine institutional processes that identify students as “belonging” to a particular educational category that requires special treatment in an educational program or ability grouping (Mehan, Hetwick, & Mehlis, 1985; Oakes, 1985; Oakes, Wells, Jones, & Datnow, 1997).

We have gained from these various interpretive studies a view of schools and classrooms as complex fields of interaction. Through the mundane, routine, repetitive work of giving lessons, attending meetings, administering tests and conducting student and parent interviews, teachers interpret the moral
and academic behaviour of their students and provide them with different educational opportunities.

Our research has focused upon the day-to-day negotiations that take place in the classroom environment around order and the level of student engagement in set tasks. The disconnections that arose in such classrooms and the weak and fluctuating commitment on the part of students to “play” the teacher’s lesson “game,” gave rise to a trade-off that has serious equity implications. Within classrooms tightly controlled by teachers, a logic of practice produces a zone of relative comfort by restricting the quality of the learning environment available to the students.

Is it possible in such difficult classrooms to support teachers and learners in the risky transition to more shared and negotiated forms of learning? The typical response is to provide extra resources for teachers to tinker with the old script, tweak the structure here and there, to make it work better. In a recent lecture in the USA, Professor Richard Elmore described the highly resilient default pattern of instructional practice in American high schools (Elmore, 2006). This robust set of practices, similar in nature to that described by the standard script in this paper, is deeply rooted in the structure of the institution and in people’s beliefs about the nature of teaching. In the following passage, Professor Elmore reflects on whether an incremental approach to improvement is likely to succeed.

When you code classroom practice for level of cognitive demand, that is, what is the nature of the questions or the tasks that the students are asked to do, and do the students understand the tasks ... you get a number in our network that says pretty much what the aggregate says about the US. Eighty percent of the work is at a factual and procedural level, and students have no idea what it means ... If I were to show you the transcripts of the descriptions of instructional practice in nominally high performing schools and nominally low performing schools you would not know the difference. That is, the patterns of practice in nominally high performing schools looks pretty much like the pattern of practice in nominally low performing schools, which suggests that anything different that is happening in nominally high performing schools is not a consequence of the instruction but a consequence of social capital. You don’t change a culture like this. This culture has been defeating people who try to change it for decades. You don’t change a culture like this – you replace it! You take it out and put something else in its place. And the way you do that in the initial stages is not very pretty. It involves requiring people to do things that they think are impossible to do. That’s not the end state. The end state is that you build up the capacities and culture to the point where these people are the ones who are making the decisions about what the next level of work is. But if you ask people to do high level work in classrooms in the current culture, they will do low level work and call it high level work. The predominant pattern of our classrooms is teachers teaching high level content with low level pedagogy.

Throughout our research we have been using the metaphor of a “script” to describe the patterns of practice adopted by teachers and learners in classrooms. Charles Leadbeater argues that enhanced learning will only happen...
in schools if we stop tinkering with the old scripts and instead bring together ideas from different scripts or frameworks (Leadbeater, 2004). This approach, which we rarely encountered in our study, is characterised by negotiated interactive learning (quadrant D). Leadbeater’s own proposal, “personalisation through participation,” allows learners a more direct, informed say in constructing the scripts that shape their learning. Such an approach, where learning is a co-production, involves a radical break with our conventional notion of the teacher who decides in advance what learners need to know and delivers the knowledge by means of a predetermined fixed sequence. He describes a pedagogical situation where there is close consultation and extended dialogue between the teacher and the student to bring out the needs, aspirations and preferences of the learner and an expanded choice for the learner over the mix of ways in which their needs may be met. Such a process would enable the learner to access a range of learning sites and networks beyond the confines of the classroom.

The rationale for exploring such possibilities has been made by Lemke in his discussion of multiliteracies and new technological platforms for learning (Lemke 1988). He contrasts the curricula learning paradigm, embedded within most schools and classrooms, with the interactive learning paradigm that is more characteristic of libraries and research centres. The curricula learning paradigm, which grew out of industrial capitalism and factory-based mass production, assumes that someone else will decide what you need to know, how it will be packaged, and how the learner will receive the information. The teacher is the gatekeeper, the custodian of knowledge; ideas flow out from this special place, the school, into the broader society; learners are positioned as passive consumers of knowledge and information (Leadbeater, 2006).

The interactive learning paradigm assumes that learners determine what they need to know based on their participation in activities where such needs arise, and in consultation with knowledgeable specialists, and at their own pace and timing. Lemke points out that this mode of learning, where access to information is valued over the imposition of learning, is the paradigm of those who created the Internet and cyberspace (Lemke, 1988). Learners no longer want to be passive spectators, but participants and co-producers of their own learning. The interactive learning paradigm is evident when institutions provide learners with the technological tools and platforms to self-organise their own learning. Working within this paradigm, teachers would need to develop a new kind of professional practice.

The interactive learning paradigm, explains Lemke, is the one that people with power and resources choose for their own learning and some social groups (white, male, middle class, English speaking, technophiles) will feel more at home with the new participative technologies than others who will be excluded or disadvantaged. Pedagogies developed within this paradigm, such as Leadbeater’s “personalisation through participation” teaching script,
are much more costly in terms of time and resources than the standard script that operates as a default mode in the schools we have studied.

We may be seeing a new axis of disadvantage within schooling. On one side of the division are less well resourced schools, serving culturally diverse and economically disadvantaged communities, where students are perceived not to have the abilities, cognitive skills or social and emotional maturity to be autonomous learners within an interactive learning paradigm. In such schools, it will be very difficult to break free from the standard scripts of teaching that we have described in this article. On the other side of the division are well resourced schools, selecting students from families who are keen to bear the costs of a more participative interactive learning pedagogy in the expectation that such an investment will produce future economic and social returns for their offspring.

References


Note

1 The research described in this article is drawn from a larger research project, Changing Schools in Changing Times. The project is based upon a three-year study of four high schools in NSW that serve disadvantaged communities and uses a variety of qualitative and quantitative measures to analyse the change process with the schools. It is funded through the Australian Research Council's Linkage program and is a partnership between the University of Sydney, The University of Technology, Sydney and the NSW Department of Education and Training. The members of the research team include: Narelle Carey, Debra Hayes, Ken Johnston, Ann King, Rani Lewis-Jones, Kristal Morris, Chris Murray, Isbell Murray, Kerith Power, Dianne Roberts, Kitty te Riele and Margaret Wheeler.
Appendix

Day Diary: a recount of a Year 8 mathematics lesson

At the start, there were 7 students and two more arrived in the second half of the lesson. The room was arranged in rows with a central aisle. Students sat towards the rear and sides. The room, chairs, desks and walls were marked by graffiti. The noticeboard at the rear was empty and torn.

During the first 5 minutes, folders were distributed, as well as pens to those who needed them. The teacher wrote on the board seven probability questions: e.g., probability of picking a red card, the ace of spades, or a red jack from a pack of 52 cards.

He then moved to the back desk to talk to some boys who were talking loudly. He asked them to start work. But they continued to talk very loudly. He mentioned that they would be detained at the break if they did not comply.

Two girls sharing an MP3 player commenced working on the task.

About 10 minutes from the start of the lesson, the teacher started going through the questions on the board. He directed questions to two noisy boys at the back, and, some of the girls called out answers. Loud comments from the boys continued (a lot of swearing and name calling directed at each other).

The teacher commenced answering the questions on the board, and the girls at the front often called out the answers. "Good work, people are getting the hang of this, those were just quick questions to wrap up last week’s work."

The teacher announced the start of a new topic and wrote "Measurement" on the board, and talked about and wrote a series of relevant words on the board; e.g., centimetres, volume, litres, surface area, and kilometres. The students were asked to create their own title pages, and the teacher provided some ideas for what they might include (5 minute time limit). Throughout this activity the girls worked quietly and the boys were very noisy. More swearing and noise from the boys prompted the teacher to again threaten detention at the break. He also noted that he was looking for someone to provide a merit certificate to.
When the teacher went to rub out the probability questions and answers, several boys asked him to stop. They were given two minutes to finish the questions and the title page.

The teacher moved around the room commenting on the students' progress. In between, he wrote short problems on the board requiring students to copy and fill in blanks related to measurement (area) problem.

The teacher continued to discuss the work on the board with the girls. At the same time, a desk was tipped forward, two boys wrestled, and a book was thrown on the floor.

Throughout, the teacher commented favourably on participation and correct answers; he remained calm and quiet.

The teacher noted that he would remove one student. A female teacher arrived at the door and removed one of the boys who the teacher had reprimanded several times during the lesson. The teacher continued with the work and the girls provided answers.

About 45 minutes into the lesson, a sheet was handed out, "Area activities," and the students commenced work.

A student commented: "How much longer is left of this shit lesson." The teacher noted the inappropriateness of the language, provided the answer with reference to mathematical equations and assisted the student to complete his work.

Two more students entered loudly and joined the boys sitting at the rear. The teacher provided the worksheet and pencils to the new arrivals.

A new heading was written on the board: "Perimeter." The boy who had been removed returned.

The boys at the back threw paper at each other. At the same time, the teacher drew a diagram on the board and worked through two examples on the board.

The teacher continued to comment favourably on participation and corrected answers: "Well done." The disruptive student was asked to leave again, and a teacher appeared to remove him from the class. The girls who were working started to draw on each other's arms.
A teacher came into the room to collect a desk for the student who was removed. The students returned to working quietly.

Two of the boys started to become disruptive again.

The teacher commenced answering the worksheet questions on the board. One of the new arrivals asked: “How long until the end?”

The waste paper bin was surrounded by wads of paper.

An absenteeism sheet was delivered to the room.

In the last few minutes, the teacher asked questions to review the lesson, folders were returned to the front, more paper was thrown, a student left and was brought back by the threat of being marked a truant. Hangman was played led by the teacher. The class ended and level sheets were marked and signed by the teacher.