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Swearing in class: institutional morality in dispute.

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Abstract

This paper explores how swearing in classrooms is variably construed and managed as a moral problem, and how classroom settings can demand higher standards than broader society. We review sociolinguistic understandings of Anglophone settings regarding what constitutes 'bad' language, the pragmatics of swearing across society, and trends over time, to trace a growing tolerance in public settings and media, particularly in Australia. We then review literature regarding swearing in schools. Using Douglas' (1966) theory of purity, hygiene, taboos and moral boundaries, we conceptualize schools as strongly demarcated 'purified' sites that undertake the moral work of imbuing social standards in the future citizen. Students' choices to swear in class despite teachers' repeated corrections can thus be understood as more than inappropriate lexis. The paper then draws from an ethnographic study of prevocational classes catering for 16 to 17 year olds created under Australia's 'earning or learning till 17' policy. Illustrative episodes where students swear in class are analysed to exemplify differently pitched responses. The conclusion reflects on the tension between an increasingly secular society more tolerant of swearing, and teachers' work to purify the moral climate in schools, to consider what the practice of swearing in class and its regulation achieves.

Introduction

Classroom interaction has been shown to be a uniquely structured and variegated form of spoken discourse, which is contextually constrained, legitimated and shaped by institutional roles, shifting conventions, vectors of difference, and curricular goals (Cazden & Beck, 2003). However, it cannot

be hermetically sealed from language practices in broader society. Classroom discourse analysis has contributed much around questions of how classroom talk achieves curricular learning, but it has paid less attention to how the same talk necessarily performs and manages classroom behaviours. Bernstein's (2000) concept of pedagogic discourse would highlight the essential interweaving of both an instructional discourse (the curricular 'what') and its underpinning regulative discourse (the moral 'how') which governs the social order in terms of what is (not) acceptable in terms of 'character, manner, and conduct'. In this paper, we pay particular attention to this moral dimension of the regulative discourse and how some language can be deemed unsuitable for classrooms.

Our interest is sparked by repeated observations of swearing by students, and teachers' constant work to curtail such language, in secondary classrooms created under Australia's recent extension to compulsory education (Council of Australian Governments, 2009). Prior to this national policy, the school-leaving age was typically 16 years across Australian state jurisdictions, at which age students without further academic aspirations could leave school to seek work, apprenticeships, or be eligible for unemployment benefits. The 2009 'Compact with Young Australians' delayed eligibility for any welfare entitlements, and demanded that students be 'earning or learning till 17'. The policy allows the extended phase of compulsory education to be undertaken in 'prevocational' programmes in either secondary schools or Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges. Under this policy, non-academically inclined students tend to aggregate in disadvantaged schools that service communities with poor youth employment prospects, thereby pooling both economic and educational disadvantage. These 'prevocational' classes for 16 to 17 year olds, in such communities, serve disengaged students on behalf of other classes, other schools and other communities (Thomson, 2002). Te Riele and Crump (2002) describe such school populations as 'reluctant stayers' for whom 'school has become a shelter from unemployment' (p. 253).

Our observations in these classrooms resonated strongly with Willis's (1977) study of the 'oppositional working class cultural forms' (p.vii) that played out in classrooms following the UK's Raising of the School Leaving Age in 1972. Willis's ethnography offered numerous verbatim quotes of florid language used by the study's focal 'lads' inside and outside the classroom, yet limited analysis thereof beyond commenting on its misogyny, and its part in the 'subjective preparation' (p. 89) for surviving the shop floor version of adulthood. Cognate studies in different national settings report similar data of students swearing, for example: Walker's (1988) ethnography of young inner city males making the transition from school to work in Australia; Nolan's (2011) ethnography of oppositional behaviours, language and 'attitude' as 'movements of liberty' (p.118) in a heavily policed US school; and Barnes' (2012) analysis of the irreverent, ribald yet defensive masculinities performed in schoolboy humour amongst a group of white working-class Irish boys. The similarities across these diverse empirical windows suggest that while swearing may serve as an everyday part of students' lifeworlds, it pushes the boundaries of acceptable language/behaviour in the circumscribed interactions of classrooms.

We are interested in how swearing in class is construed and managed as a moral problem, and why classroom settings demand higher standards in this regard than broader society might. By swearing, we are referring to lexical choices that are conventionally designated as 'offensive', 'rude', or 'bad' language despite their common usage and their historical persistence. Focussing on Anglophone sources and settings, our first section reviews sociolinguistic literature regarding what constitutes swearing or 'bad' language, different types of swearing, the distribution of swearing across social groups, trends over time, and some of the pragmatics behind why, when, and with/to whom people swear. We then consider the treatment and regulation of swearing and offensive language in contemporary Australian society over time to trace a growing tolerance of swearing in public spaces and media content. Next we review the limited research literature regarding the treatment of swearing in schools. We then develop a theoretical frame from Douglas' (1966/2003) theory of

purity, pollution, and moral boundaries to understand schools as strongly demarcated, 'purified' sites constructed for the moral work of imbuing socially valued standards in the future citizen. We argue that students' choices to continue swearing in class despite teachers' repeated corrections can be understood as more than a linguistic phenomenon.

The paper then presents transcribed moments drawn from an empirical study of the moral order in prevocational classes catering for 16-17 year olds in schools and TAFE settings, created under Australia's 'earning or learning till 17' policy. In contrast to classrooms offering more academically ambitious programmes to students of the same age, in the same government system, observed by the first author in another project (Doherty 2012), these sites of extended compulsory schooling were marked by students' frequent swearing in class and teachers' repeated efforts to curb this behaviour. Episodes where students swear in class are analysed to exemplify different responses to, and accommodations of, swearing in class. The conclusion reflects on the tension between a society that is increasingly tolerant of swearing, and the work to purify the moral climate in schools, to consider how the disruptive practice of flagrant and persistent swearing in class might be interpreted.

A brief sociolinguistics of swearing

Certain language in certain circumstances can be considered rude and offensive. Although there may be a broad public consensus around what constitutes swearing or 'bad' language, sociolinguistics paints a more complex and refracted picture. Swearing shares characteristics with the language of taboo, and the language of offence (Crystal, 2003). The swearing that we are interested in here pertains to lexical choices that are conventionally designated as morally 'bad' language, and treated as such in classrooms, despite the 'swearing paradox' (Fägersten, 2012) of their widespread usage and historical persistence.

There have been various attempts to define and categorise what constitutes swearing. For Wajnryb, (2004), swearing is a type of dysphemistic language involving ‘the substitution of an offensive or disparaging term for an inoffensive one’ (p. 12), thus the opposite of euphemistic language. While the etymology of ‘swear’ refers to the act ‘to take an oath’ (Allan & Burrige, 2006, p. 76), Ljung claims there are two basic ways that contemporary swear words utilise taboo proscriptions: ‘one involving religion and the supernatural, the other bodily waste, the sexual act and the sexual organs’ (Ljung, 2011, p. 5). Religious swearing can be either blasphemous or profane. Blasphemous swearing was considered heresy, an attack on the Church, therefore a sin. Profanity, on the other hand, expressed an indifference to the church and its teachings. According to Allan and Burrige (2006, p. 76), profane swearing ‘uses dysphemisms taken from the pool of dirty words as well as blasphemous and profane (i.e. irreligious) language.’ Swearing through vulgarity or ‘dirty’ words entails tabooed words describing sexual actions and deviancy, certain body parts and effluvia (Allan & Burrige, 2006; Ljung, 2011; Wajnryb, 2004). Importantly, it is social convention and historical context which dictate whether these terms be considered taboo: ‘The dysphemism *shit* is no more dirty than the word *faeces* nor the euphemism *poo*’ (Allan & Burrige, 2006, pp. 40-41).

There have similarly been various attempts by researchers to create lists of functional criteria that define a word as a swear word, and typologies of how swearing is used pragmatically. In this vein, Andersson and Trudgill (1990, p. 53) define swearing as an expression that:

- a) refers to something that is taboo and/or stigmatized in the culture;
- b) should not be interpreted literally
- c) can be used to express strong emotions and attitudes.

Ljung adds that most swearing also qualifies as ‘formulaic’ and ‘emotive’ language, its main function ‘to reflect, or seem to reflect, the speaker’s feelings and attitudes’ (2011, p. 4). In this vein, a corpus-

based study of the word 'fuck' and its derivatives in the British National Corpus (McEnery & Xiao, 2004) distinguished nine pragmatic uses of the word. Pinker (2007) later distils five types of swearing: descriptive swearing (*Let's fuck!*); Idiomatic swearing (*It's fucked up.*); abusive swearing: (*Fuck you, motherfucker!*); emphatic swearing (*It's fucking amazing.*); and cathartic swearing (*Fuck!*). Burridge argues that taboo words are 'more arousing, more shocking, more memorable and more evocative than all other language stimuli' (2010, p. 10). This capacity to intensify affect and the multiple pragmatic functions may explain why these choices historically persist despite social disapproval. These arguments however do not account for the ubiquitous sprinkling of swearwords in contemporary schoolyard talk, to the point that there is little shock value associated with or intended by these choices.

Histories of swearing in Anglophone societies (Hughes, 1991; T. McEnery, 2006) point to watershed moments such as performances of Bernard Shaw's 'Pygmalion' in 1914, the publication of D. H. Lawrence's 'Lady Chatterley's Lover' in 1928, moral crusades by Mary Whitehouse in the 1960s, and the trial of the editors of *Oz* magazine in 1971. These moments and their newsworthiness trace the erosion of Victorian censure over time and the emergence of permissive society's growing tolerance of profanity in media and theatre representations. Global youth culture such as rap music continues to push these boundaries.

Linguists have highlighted differences in broad patterns of swearing and offensive language between Anglophone nations (for example, Dewaele, 2015). Australian English is distinguished by its greater tolerance of swearing (Leitner, 2004). Over time the sting has been taken out of certain British swear words now common and naturalised in Australian speech communities: 'the language of Australians is peppered with the three indispensable Bs -- BASTARD, BLOODY and BUGGER' (Hornadge, 1980, p. 148). Wierzbicka (1997; 2002) considers 'bloody' to be a key word that has

come to purposefully index the historical accretion of Australians' cultural defiance towards authority:

The high frequency of the word bloody in Australian speech does not mean that this word is perceived as acceptable to everyone. On the contrary, its expressive value is linked with a perception that 'for some people' it is not acceptable. This wide use of a word regarded by some people as unacceptable shows that many speakers place a special value on presenting themselves as breakers of some other peoples' conventions. (Wierzbicka 2002, p. 1176)

The variable strength or perceived severity of swear words has been understood through the concept of taboo loading. Taboo loading could be considered the shock value of swearing, a quality which will ultimately be in the ear of the beholder: to some interactants, a word may be considered mildly offensive while to others it may be highly offensive (Ljung, 2011; Taylor, 1975; Wajnryb, 2004; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). It is this uneven reception across populations that makes swearing both risky and potent. In McEnery and Xiao's (2004) UK corpus, *fuck* occurred 12 times more often in spoken language than in written language; men swore more than women; young people swore more than older people; and people with relatively less education swore more than those with more. The study also reported that young (0-14 years of age) people's frequency of swearing is second only to that of 15-24 year olds'. This distribution suggests that swearing is something that young people grow into then out of, which in turn suggests swearing has particular potency or affordances at certain life stages. It also suggests that the secondary school classroom is likely to feature swearing by young people.

Language serves to forge identities and solidarities through shared repertoires that distinguish in-group membership, which is widely regarded to be a pressing concern for youth. Burrige and Mulder (1998, p. 13) highlighted 'the use of conventionally tabooed language' as 'desirable macho

markers of gender identity' in Australia. Eggins and Slade (1997) analysed casual conversations 'punctuated with swear words or expletives' (p.151) to investigate who was swearing how much. They similarly argued excessive swearing served as resource to perform macho identities and establish leadership. However, such regard does not translate to other relationships:

Swearing at someone of lower status is possible without loss of status, though it is generally assumed to demean the person swearing and can, in principle, be legally actionable.

Swearing at someone of higher status is more likely to lead them to take umbrage and pursue sanctions against the low status perpetrator. (Allan & Burrige, 2006, pp. 77-78)

So while swearing may enact and promote horizontal solidarity, its impact is less predictable in hierarchical relations of unequal power. With regard to the workplace, Baruch and Jenkins (2007) distinguish between 'social swearing' and 'annoyance swearing', the former building social solidarity, the latter associated with stress, potentially damaging relationships. Taking these insights into the complex social setting of the classroom, it can be seen how talk amongst student peers could accommodate or even cultivate swearing, whereas the co-present power differential between student and teacher would simultaneously render that same swearing a very different, more risky matter.

The taboo loading of different words may also change over time. For example the sacrilegious taboo loading of religious swear words has decreased over the centuries along with the influence of the church (Wajnryb, 2004). Previously loaded words can become 'bleached' by widespread, normalised usage, pushing new generations to choose other epithets to achieve the same effect (Wierzbicka, 2002, p. 1167). With an increasingly permissive and more secular society, social standards are becoming less stringent, and more risky language is tolerated in more settings. However, such social change is never uniform, even, nor universal, so standards may still differ in sites across the same

society. In this vein, the last chapter in Fägersten's (2012) book documents four controversial moments of uncensored swearing captured in the US media spotlight – the capture and broadcasting of these unscripted moments by the media created different contexts and audiences, which implicated different moral standards. Schooling could be considered another conservative institutional site which seeks to maintain protective and strict standards regarding language, despite growing social tolerance.

Swearing in contemporary Australian society

While there may be growing tolerance of some swearing in some contexts, it is not a case of open slather. To negotiate some middle ground, cartoons have developed the convention of 'gawlixes' (random typographical symbols in lieu of words to indicate swearing in speech bubbles), thus avoiding offence while retaining the pragmatic impact and acknowledging the practice. Similarly, contemporary codes of practice and legislation that govern the media in Australia seek to provide some guidance in the shifting moral ground. These codes use broader terms of 'obscene', 'offensive' and 'coarse' language, rather than 'swearing' per se. The Australian Communications and Media Authority has responsibilities under a number of federal Acts, including the Broadcasting Services Act 1992. Under this Act, Australian media companies are expected to adhere to self-regulated codes of practice so what they broadcast reflects 'community standards'. The public broadcasters each have their own codes of practice (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2014; SBS, 2014) that outline classification systems of programs, (G, PG, M and MA+). Language is graded through these classifications from 'very mild' to 'very coarse', 'infrequent' to 'frequent', and with regard to how justified the language is by the storyline. Commercial stations follow their own code of practice (Commercial Television Industry, 2015). 'Coarse' language may be used in programs classified M or MA+, but must not be 'gratuitous'.

The overriding concern in these codes is the protection of minors from such immoral language, limiting the screening of MA+ programs to after 8:30 or 9pm. These codes of practice also mandate that news and current affairs programs give a warning if offensive material including coarse language is to follow. These social codes, conventions and practices indicate a continued desire on behalf of the social collective to protect younger generations from language deemed immoral. However, in classrooms, the younger generation are more likely to be the parties perpetrating the offence of swearing.

In public spaces, 'offensive' language is deemed a non-indictable summary offence of public nuisance. In Queensland, under the Summary Offences Act 2005, increased penalties apply to offences that occur within or nearby licensed premises. The definition of what is deemed offensive is considered on a case by case basis, taking context into account. There is no definitive list of words that are, in and of themselves, considered offensive. While there may be less overt concern about widely used swear words, there is however growing concern and litigation around discriminatory language or language that vilifies or stigmatises members of racial, sexual or gender categories. However, Section 18C of the Commonwealth Racial Discrimination Act 1975, which makes it unlawful to 'offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate another person or a group of people' on ethnic or racial grounds in public, is currently under political pressure from free speech advocates, so even this moral benchmark is being disputed.

As social conventions and moral constraints undergo gradual change, certain telling moments bring the unevenness of such change to the surface. Toyota's 1999 'bugger' advertisement in New Zealand was widely celebrated for its larrikin humour, but Tourism Australia's 'Where the bloody hell are you?' campaign in 2006 sparked international controversy. Though supported by the conservative Prime Minister, John Howard at the time (Canning, 2006, March 10), it caused controversy in its target markets. It was initially banned in Britain, had to be edited for Singapore and other Asian

markets, was protested by conservative religious groups in the US, as well as transgress Canadian legal requirements (Jefferies, 2006; Sainsbury & Box, 2006). More recently in Australia, the risqué slogans displayed on 'Wicked' campervans were censured in a public campaignⁱ and the unofficial 'CU in the NT' campaignⁱⁱ tested the boundaries of community standards.

This section has argued that the moral pressures on language choices are not universal, uniform or fixed. Rather, this scan of contemporary codes and accounts suggests that more secular societies such as Australia are in transition in this regard, with active debates around what is acceptable, and what constraints on freedom of expression are legitimate. Some find particular choices more offensive than others, and there are fewer non-negotiable parameters around what constitutes morally 'bad' language. The next section reviews empirical work that focuses more particularly on swearing in classrooms.

Researching swearing in classrooms

In empirical studies of classroom talk, swearing within earshot of the teacher is rarely the focus, but more typically crops up as one aspect of classroom trouble. In this way, swearing featured as a behaviour management issue in McNally et al.'s (2005) study of Scottish pre-service teachers' accounts of significant practicum experiences. Given some of the other narratives collected, McNally concluded that 'swearing is on the mild side of life' (p. 175). In contrast, Fries and DeMitchell's (2007) study of 'zero-tolerance' policies in the US through teachers' and preservice teachers' eyes, reported that 'habitual profanity' (p.213) has come to attract severe, predetermined consequences under these policies, negating teacher judgement or contextual considerations of fairness. They argued that such non-discretionary policies impact disproportionately on students of colour and students with special needs, with severe consequences for their educational and life opportunities.

Maybin's (2013) study of the voices of 10 to 11 year old children in UK working class primary schools illustrated how these young students knew to restrain their language within hearing of teachers and adults more generally. Using personal audio recordings across the school day, Maybin documented how students swore amongst themselves at lunch times, but would restrain their use of such language during class times and with adults. While swearing amongst peers was again associated with the performance of prestigious 'macho identities' (p. 391) for boys (see also Dalley-Trim, 2006), it was considered a more marked and risky practice for girls. Under these conventions, Maybin argued that 'official institutional contexts at school, and the more informal institutional context of the peer group, entail different kinds of hearability and the privileging of different kinds of voices.' (p. 391). If children of this age are capable of monitoring the appropriateness of language choices, how might we explain the lack of such monitoring and refusal of responsive adaptation by older secondary students?

Thornberg's (2008) ethnography of two Swedish primary schools sought to identify and categorise the 'muddle' (p. 27) of rules that govern students. The prohibition of swearing fell into Thornberg's category of social etiquette rules, 'about how to behave in social situations' which teachers legitimated in terms of "'tradition", "culture", "manners", "being old-fashioned" and "that's how we do things"' (p. 30). It also featured in his category of 'relational rules' that protect the interests and feelings of others. Thornberg observed that explicit rules were then filtered by students:

If students do not see the point of a rule, they tend to view it as unimportant or unnecessary. Moreover, if they do not believe in the point (i.e., teachers' rule explanation), they also tend to view the rule as unnecessary. Hence, students usually judge such rules as bad or wrong. (p. 26)

He provided the example of students understanding the relational rule of not swearing at others, but disputing the etiquette rule that one can't swear 'when you unintentionally hurt yourself' (p. 30). More generally he concluded that etiquette rules were the most disputed by school students. This tension may be explained by the unevenness of social change in moral benchmarks in broader society, which undermines the legitimacy of teachers' explanation for such rules.

Interestingly, very different uses of swearing are reported in higher education settings, where the social pressure to protect minors from immoral influences no longer applies. Fägersten's (2012) survey of university students of different racial backgrounds in Florida, US, reported that 82% of student participants 'never' or 'rarely' swore during class, but 78% reported 'the in-class use of swear words by one or more professors', a pattern she attributed to 'a pragmatic move on the part of instructors to create an informal atmosphere and establish solidarity with their students' (p. 145).

Though limited, this set of studies document the inevitable presence of swearing in schools, a variety of opinions regarding what kind of problem it poses and which moral sensibilities are being transgressed. The next section moves to conceptualise the moral boundaries and heightened sensibilities that constitute sites of schooling.

Conceptualising classrooms through pollution and purity

As well as cultivating knowledge and skills, the institution of mass schooling undertakes moral work on behalf of society, shaping the child into the future citizen such that society can establish common moral ground and expectations that moderate and discipline self-interest. Durkheim (1925/1973) argued that mass schooling's inculcation of a common 'rational' morality was particularly important in secular, democratic societies fractured by complex divisions of labour. To accomplish this charter,

the moral work of the school is conducted through a simplified or exaggerated heuristic version to better (and repeatedly) instruct the child.

Following in this Durkheimian tradition to understand how moral processes and rules sustain societies, Mary Douglas (1966/2003) looked at anthropological accounts of taboos and religious beliefs and developed a theory regarding the mutually constitutive relationship between purity and impurity. Defining dirt as 'matter out of place' (p.36), she understood dirt to flag disorder. Efforts to tidy or deal with dirt thus equate to efforts to create and reinforce some unifying order: 'Eliminating it is not a negative moment, but a positive effort to organise the environment' (p.2). At heart this requires systems of classification that construct and impose order on complexity. Douglas applied this lens to diverse cultural and religious settings, to understand the deeper logic of hygiene and purity in classificatory systems:

I believe that ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, about and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created. (p.4)

She then paid attention to how anomalies that defy the system of classification inevitably arise, and potentially challenge established classifications. Same sex marriage perhaps serves as an example of a contemporary anomaly that is challenging previously settled categories. Similarly, discrepancies can arise between 'that behaviour which an individual approves for himself and what he approves for others' (p. 131) across time, or in situations where the moral rule allows room for discretion. In such cases, Douglas suggests that a different type of hard-line, less negotiable 'pollution' rule may be applied to reduce confusion.

Douglas and Bernstein shared a close dialogue around the work and power of boundaries (Moore, 2013), which informed Bernstein's (1971, 2000) concepts of classification and framing in pedagogic discourse. Douglas's theory has also been taken up in other sociolinguistic work. Burrige (2010) drew on her conceptualization to explain prescriptive attempts to maintain the historical 'purity' of standardized languages. Andersson and Trudgill (1990, p. 64) similarly gestured towards Douglas's theory in their explanation of swearing as a social restriction premised on social values:

The purity rule is a general principle with several applications. The extent to which people follow the purity rule will show up in how clean, tidy, and orderly they keep their homes, gardens, desks, hair, clothes and so on. We could certainly add their use of language to this list, since swearing is no doubt a good example of the 'untidy' use of language.

Cognate metaphors of 'purity' and 'hygiene' in sociolinguistics highlight the normativity at play in how language usage is exposed to moralised judgment and policing efforts (for example, Cameron, 2012).

Here we use Douglas' (1966/2003) cultural anthropology of purity, hygiene, pollution and moral boundaries to conceptualise the relationship between moral climates internal and external to the school setting, and highlight the work in creating and enforcing a boundary between them. Schools are understood as demarcated, 'purified' sites created for the moral work of imbuing socially valued standards and conventions in the future citizen, however the boundary between inside and outside needs constant work to sustain and legitimate it. Under this lens, swearing in class amounts to a form of dirt that might be tolerated beyond the school, but potentially offends against the school's moral order and challenges the bounded site's constitutive categories (school/society, teacher/student). Punishing such transgression becomes necessary to 'impose system on an inherently untidy experience' (Douglas, 1966, p.4). Without reinforcing the boundary that delineates

what constitutes acceptable language inside versus outside, the whole symbolic architecture of schools as a different kind of sanitised, protective and protected social space is at risk. This attention to boundaries and the strength of classifications they symbolise underpins Bernstein's later work on the pedagogic device (Bernstein, 2000).

Through this theoretical lens, students' choices to continue swearing in class despite teachers' repeated admonishing can be understood as much more than poor incidental vocabulary. Rather, these choices announce the students' intentions to dispute and de-legitimise the institutional order, to ignore, deny and defy the moral boundary protecting and demarcating the school from the world beyond. Continued transgressions despite warnings flout the established order, seeking to break the symbolic boundaries and challenge the reified moral rules that create and order the sanitised institution of schooling. Teachers may resort to blanket 'pollution' rules that remove any claim to discretion, reduce confusion around conflicting morals, and amplify the seriousness of the offence. Under these pressures, the blanket rule reduces the right to contextual discretion (who can swear when to whom) to a black or white matter (thou shalt not swear). We would argue that this imposes an exaggerated moral fiction. Removing contextual discretion might well escalate the defiance thus expressed, and by doing so, exacerbate the moral friction between the school's purity and the dynamic standards beyond schooling. In the same way that profanity was understood to express indifference to the Church and its teaching, students' swearing in class displays a defiant indifference to, and rejection of, the social boundaries and institutional roles that would seek to regulate them. We now analyse moments from an empirical project investigating the moral order of classrooms created by the extension to compulsory schooling under Australia's 'earning or learning till 17' policy in 2009, and unpack them using this theoretical lens.

Methodology

The larger project from which this paper draws was concerned with the nature of the moral order enacted in sites of extended compulsory education created under the 'Compact with Young Australians' (Council of Australian Governments, 2009), and how classroom interactions unfolded in these classrooms. The study was conceptualised through Bernstein's (2000) theory of pedagogic discourse as a combination of the instructional discourse's 'what' and the regulative discourse's 'how', with a particular focus on the latter being the moral underpinnings which carry 'expectations about conduct, character and manner' (p. 13). Under this gaze, swearing repeatedly emerged as a behaviour that attracted explicit interventions and correction, but to little effect.

Observations of eight teacher/class combinations were conducted by the first author in 'prevocational' subjects for 16-17 year old students (Year 11). These teacher/class combinations were spread across five educational sites: two high schools, two technical and further education (TAFE) college settings, and one hybrid site where a school operated classes in a TAFE setting. These sites were all purposefully sampled in Australian communities experiencing high youth unemployment, because these were the communities absorbing the impact of this policy. They offered limited opportunities for the policy's 'earning' option, and thus a greater chance of 'reluctant stayers' being kept longer in school.

The research was conducted as classroom ethnographies, working within the pragmatic limits of budget and reasonable demands of participants. Following Watson-Gegeo's (1988, 1997) approach to classroom ethnography, the research design sought a holistic perspective on teacher-student interactions through extended observation and repeated interviews. Following Hammersley (1990, 2006), the approach was also alert to how social order was achieved, maintained or contested in situ through the parties' interactions. Each class was observed over a three or four week sequence of all their timetabled contact. Class sizes ranged from 8 to 25, though attendance fluctuated widely. Audio-recordings were made of observed classes and interviews for later transcription. Detailed field

notes documented the sequence of curricular topics (the instructional discourse), the pedagogic design of activities and phases (the planned regulative discourse), and moments when the teacher interrupted the flow of the planned lesson to manage or correct students' disruptive behaviour. These moments were conceptualised as regulative flares, being 'moments when any tacit agreement about the "how" of classroom relations and conduct break down, and more overt power moves are made by teachers or students to re-establish or dispute any shared sense of social order' (Doherty 2015, p.60). The field notes helped later identify classroom episodes for detailed transcription and further analysis later. Repeated semi-structured interviews with the teachers over the weeks explored their reflections on observed moments, and their more general rationales for working with these students in these classes. Shorter interviews with a sample of students in each class explored their attitudes to schooling, their future aspirations and their accounts of pertinent moments in observed classes. The raw data set includes approximately 100 hours of lesson observations, 23 student interviews and 21 teacher interviews across all five sites.

Transcriptions of classroom discourse face particular problems, given the number of participants, the range of concurrent discussions potentially happening, and thus the necessity to be selective in focus. The first issue is what to attend to. Given the research focus on moral order, particular attention was paid to audible student talk that attracted teachers' intervention, so it was effectively the teacher that selected the moments and voices that warranted further attention. Field notes noted the time and nature of these 'flares', to allow us to later return to the audio recording and transcribe the audible interactions immediately prior to and after the flare, orienting to the voice the teacher was interacting with. The transcription conventions in this study used standard orthography for the purpose of readabilityⁱⁱⁱ, with attention to representing meaning and turn-taking (Edwards, 1993). This was not the detailed transcription conventions of conversation analysis with its focus on how roles are accomplished. Nor was it the activity structure analysis of Lemke (1990) which better fits a coherent lesson with pliable students. Rather, this classroom ethnographic project was

interested in the moral order, 'the central aim has been to discover the assumptions, rules, strategies, etc., which underlie and produce classroom interaction' (Hammersley, 1990, p.93). In summary, our attention was focused on moments that invoked teacher correction and thus brought to the empirical surface the expectations that underpinned the classroom interaction, and how they were being breached.

Results

Swearing by students was common across all eight class/teacher combinations. For the purposes of this paper, we focus on two teacher/class combinations observed in the same high school, for the reason that these two classes involved many of the same students, but different teachers. The school was a government high school, situated in a regional town with a high proportion of welfare-dependence and transience in the population. In both classes audible swearing by students was frequently observed and recorded. The two teachers however adopted quite different responses to manage student swearing, and offered different rationales for their underlying principles. They are selected here as contrasting cases within the project sample at different points along a notional gradient between the extreme polarities of complete intolerance and complete tolerance.

Teacher E taught the class Prevocational English, which involved some structured classroom lessons and other less structured lessons in the computer laboratory to allow students to work on their drafts for extended writing tasks. For this teacher all swear words were considered 'inappropriate', impure and requiring correction, regardless of their intended audience or pragmatic intent. She thus worked hard to maintain a strict non-negotiable moral boundary around the classroom as a purified site. The seventeen classes observed with this teacher were nevertheless marked by much audible swearing by students, males in particular but not exclusively, and numerous heated exchanges between students and teacher over the issue of swearing. Most of the audible swearing was ostensibly between

students, and not directed at the teacher, thus could be considered to be serving the performance of macho identities and peer solidarity. However, in swearing so loudly with no attempt to adjust wording or volume in the presence of the teacher, the bravura also appeared to be performed with the intention of being overheard by the teacher.

The following moment demonstrates this teacher's constant vigilance in correcting language. In the first observed lesson, the class were using school laptops to work on their draft texts. The teacher used the lesson to move around the room giving individual consultations, dividing her attention between the student she was working with, and monitoring the behaviour of the rest. In this brief exchange she picks up on rough treatment of the school laptop:

Excerpt 1:

TE: Can you please be careful with the laptop, B!

B: I'm restarting this Miss, this format's pissing me off.

TE: B, stop being inappropriate and get on with your work okay?

While 'pissing me off' might be considered innocuous idiomatic use of dysphemistic wording to vent annoyance, the teacher ruled it to be 'inappropriate' for the classroom. In this way, she assiduously did not allow any incidental swearing to pass unnoticed, though her efforts made little impact.

The next set of excerpts came from the fourth observed lesson. Again, students were supposed to be working on their individual drafts, and the teacher was roaming to check on progress with individuals, while keeping an eye on the class. These moments show how students often responded playfully, deflecting her repeated corrections:

Excerpt 2:

TE: Language please!

S: My language is English!

Excerpt 3:

S: Fuck!

TE: Hey S, can you and L please stop?

S: NO!

TE: Please stop, alright? (noise resumes)

Excerpt 4 (Lesson 4):

(boys talking – off task)

S1: Fuck yeah

TE: Hey! Can we -

S1: Fuck!

T: Hey, can you please watch your language? Okay? I don't like it. Alright? It's not appropriate.

S1: You don't like it? ...

S2: [to S1] No, it's because she's pregnant, you're supposed to talk to a baby and if kids are swearing at it all day, it'll come out swearing. [to teacher] It's true isn't it? That's why you don't like swearing.

TE: No, I didn't like you swearing before I was pregnant.

S1: Yeah, but not as much.

The jocular tone adopted in these student responses suggests a taunting defiance that both undermined the teacher's authority, and challenged the legitimacy of the moral boundaries she sought to enforce. Student 1 asked 'you don't like it?' with feigned innocence then the students

discuss and evaluate what they considered a stronger rationale for the teachers' blanket etiquette rule. Field notes recorded the impression that the teacher seemed peripheral to the (off task) activity happening in this class, only intruding momentarily to remind them of the task they should be doing, then quickly forgotten. The focus was on peer to peer interaction, playing for laughs, so these humorous and disingenuous responses were being performed (loudly) for the benefit of their peers.

This teacher's constant battle to impose and police the language boundary built up to a head in the eighth class observed. The students had been set a written task, with a deadline looming. After a productive beginning to the lesson, attention started to drift and students started to distract each other.

Excerpt 5:

S1: [making no attempt to work] 'Holy shit!'

TE: SHHHH! Language!

S2: Calm down!

TE: how many times ... about language?

S2: It's just words!

TE: It's about time and place!

S2: ... why are you angry?

TE: I'll ((log it on formal electronic behaviour record)) ... I keep telling you not to swear.

S3 [audibly to another student]: You asshole!

TE: Hey S3! Watch your language ... that's not appropriate!

The student's responses ('It's just words!' 'why are you so angry?') again undermine and dispute the legitimacy of the moral standard the teacher invokes. Behaviour in this particular class deteriorated

further, with more frustrated corrections by the teacher. At the close of the lesson, the teacher addressed the whole class in a more formal way, to indicate that she would resort to the formal behavioural penalty system in this school with its serious consequences to manage further swearing in class:

Excerpt 6:

TE: Guys, the other thing is that, and I've mentioned it several times to those of you who are quite bad at it. I've asked you several times not to swear. It's not appropriate in the school context. So, I'm going to start ((formally logging)) it. That's how sick and tired I am of it ... I'm so sick and tired of it ... How many times have I asked you, over and over again, not to swear? Numerous times. So I'm saying I've reached my limit. Nothing is changing. I'm saying you've got to learn self control. I've let you get away with it so often, but you know what? I regret that, because you haven't changed your ways ...

S2: But it just comes out automatically!

TE: Stop arguing!

S2: I'm not arguing, I'm talking.

TE: Don't be rude. I've asked you on several occasions – I've reached my limit. I'm over it.

Okay? So please watch your swearing. Don't swear in front of me ...

Again, the same student claims the right to dispute the severity of the charge ('but it just comes out automatically!'). Reflecting on the sequence leading up to this ultimatum, the teacher explained:

... as you can hear the swearing is constant. It's absolutely constant ... I'm sure that in the recordings all you hear me doing is chipping them for language, language, language and I think the thing is with ... I think it was ((S2 name)) who ended up actually tipping over the scales because he was just, he just was ignoring me.

In summary, this teacher was caught between invoking the moral fiction of a heuristically purified space, and the moral friction this stance created with students who would dispute the legitimacy of any boundary. By their continued transgressions of explicit rules, the students refused to dignify her authority to censure them. By using the constant refrain of 'appropriateness', according to 'time and place', she was not damning the students for their language, but rather seeking to sanitize and order the classroom and its interactions, marking them as of a different order to other interactions students may have outside the institution of schooling. While this stance may work well with different students, for whom schooling offers more hope and buy-in, the effort to purify this classroom set her at odds with these students for whom extended schooling offered little value, and who thus stood to lose little by their defiance.

The second teacher, Teacher M, taught the Prevocational Maths subject with many of the same students in her class. Teacher M was more tolerant and accommodating of students' swearing, being 'pretty lenient' in her own words: 'There is a point where you don't want to push them too hard, because that pushes them away.' Her declared priority was keeping these students at school by maintaining amicable relationships at all costs, so by her own report, she carefully picked her battles. By her account, the students did not swear at her: 'They don't talk to me like that ... they'll swear at the head of the department or they'll swear at ((Deputy Principal)) but they don't ever do that to me so there's that difference there.' She thus typically chose not to hear the audible swearing by students in their interactions with each other. Swearing to or at her was another matter, so where Teacher E judged language according to when and where it happened, Teacher M judged language according to who the swearing was directed to. Field notes recorded moments where audible and flagrant swearing in class by the students was not commented on, but rather accepted as a feature of these students' speech that carried little shock value, and was not construed as problematic. For example:

Excerpt 7:

[TM setting up, complains about cleaners moving things.]

S: ... just tell 'em to get fucked.

[TM doesn't react, continues to set up. Addresses class by calling attention to a 'thought for the day' – a feature she routinely includes on her overhead projector slides]

TM: I've got a really nice thought for the day: 'Friends and good manners will carry you where money won't go.' Just remember that ... in the future, when you try to get a job, all those things make a huge impression.

This was a liminal moment between class phases. It demonstrates TM's greater tolerance of student swearing, her choice not to invoke rules of purity as a blanket rule, and her counter-tactic of infusing classes with incidental moral lessons. The thought of the day invoked 'good manners', resonating with Thornberg's 'social etiquette' rules, however this teacher tied this moral lesson to the strategic interests of the students and their desire to transition from schooling to the workplace. Across the fifteen classes observed with this teacher, the students frequently used 'shit' and 'fuck' to which the teacher only rarely reacted, at most with a quick protest: 'Language!', or 'Excuse me!'. In the fourteenth observed class, she admonished the whole group but linked the rule against swearing to job prospects, as she did in Excerpt 7:

Excerpt 8:

TM: the swearing today's really bad. It's not on! I can take a bit ... you're not going to get a job if you talk like that. You have to think what comes out of your mouth.

Her tone was not the frustrated exasperation of Teacher E, but rather observational and cautionary. However, in the next excerpt, a student crossed a subtle line. The class was working through the

construction of a model survey in a teacher-led discussion pooling ideas. A male student complained about another student, 'this dirty cunt!' at an audible volume.

Excerpt 9:

S1: [jumps up from desk] ... this dirty cunt!

TM: Language ... I'm getting awfully angry today!

S2: Don't be rude!

This time the teacher immediately reacted more strongly than usual, and warned that she was reaching the limits of her generous tolerance, which suggests that the 'c' word was not to be tolerated. This word carries considerable taboo loading in Australia and its high degree of impurity threatened the subtle moral order of this classroom. So while Teacher E would treat all swear words as offensive (the non-negotiable blanket taboo), for Teacher M, some swear words were considered more offensive than others, while others were considered sufficiently 'bleached' of offence. The next move in Excerpt 9 was by a female student (S2) who interceded to support the teacher's position. The gender dimension in this exchange is probably significant, given the nature and offence of the 'c' word. This exchange suggests that while there may have been more tolerance, there was still a boundary, albeit weaker, to protect the hygiene of the classroom to some degree – as understood and asserted by both the teacher and other student.

The students' language in these excerpts may be shocking to some readers, and familiar to others. These classrooms were produced under opportunistic policy extending compulsory schooling for students who would otherwise have moved into the adult world (Doherty, 2017). These teachers monitored and policed appropriate language in what seemed a losing battle given the students disinterest in the curriculum and schooling more broadly. Though different in their approaches, both teachers expected and worked to achieve a degree of purity in the classroom.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the disputed nature of classroom morality in Australia's extended compulsory education for 'reluctant stayers', in terms of teachers' regulative work in invoking and enforcing moral standards for classroom talk, and students' resistance to such work. These students moved in and out of the school context, then across differently calibrated moral micro-climates in their school day, each distinguished from their life beyond school in terms of explicit or implicit boundaries and moralised expectations. So while there is unevenness in broad social attitudes towards swearing, there can also be some unevenness within the institution of schooling.

We would not argue that one teacher's response is necessarily better than the other. Rather, together they give some indication of the deeper problem that flagrant swearing in class poses if the school is ostensibly responsible for the protection of minors' innocence. Extending the compulsory age of schooling also extends the work of maintaining its purity. Meanwhile the legitimacy of the underpinning rationale of protecting minors starts to erode as students approach adulthood. While teachers seek to purify the institutional space, at this late stage of secondary schooling it is the students' own swearing that the boundaries seek to exclude. The constant work of suppressing moral disorder that is already inside can heighten the students' power to challenge, undermine and disrupt schooling through defiant language choices.

The sociolinguistic literature reviewed above illustrated the complexity of swearing in broader society. Firstly, it is a language practice that flourishes despite efforts to prohibit it. Its usage is unevenly distributed across populations and communities, according to gender, class, religiosity and age group. In this way, there can be no necessary consensus around the taboo loading of particular words. The non-academic late secondary classroom might be expected to pool the propensity to swear, something that schools should think about in terms of whether policing classroom language

need get in the way of last chance educational opportunity. Secondly with uneven social change and an increasingly secular, permissive and inclusive society, there is more diversity of opinion and variable tolerance of swearing in the broader community. Teachers will themselves be positioned somewhere on such a continuum, possibly moving along it over time, as will students and their families. A blanket taboo rule that seeks to purify the school setting absolutely seems a nostalgic relic, a vestige of more morally conservative times. The unevenness of attitudes towards swearing both inside and outside the school setting may exacerbate the corrective work teachers undertake to maintain a sanitised institutional site.

This article has enlisted Douglas' (1966) theory of purity, hygiene, taboos and moral boundaries to conceptualize schools as 'purified' sites that rely on symbolic boundaries, and swearing as a form of pollution or dirt that threatens these institutional premises. If student swearing were understood more as symbolic protest, disordering, disputing and dirtying the moral boundaries that seek to retain and regulate them in schooling, then society might ask bigger questions of what extended compulsory schooling might offer these students.

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ⁱ <http://www.news.com.au/finance/business/media/peoplepower-win-after-sydney-teacher-paula-orbea-launches-petition-against-misogynistic-and-degrading-slogans-on-wicked-campers-vans/news-story/590bd925e5a81170a7773ca71cbb7651>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-11-08/c-u-in-the-nt-tourism-slogan-causes-social-media-stir/8004430>

ⁱⁱⁱ In the transcriptions presented, CAPITALS denotes emphasis; ... denotes inaudible data; [] describes action; (()) glosses meaning for confidentiality purposes; and - denotes interrupted speech.