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# That's Not For Our Kids: The Strange Death of Philosophy and Ethics in a Low Socioeconomic Secondary School

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## Abstract

*This paper is a critical reflection on the teaching of the new Philosophy and Ethics course in a low socioeconomic context in Perth, Western Australia. It charts the successes and failures of the Philosophy and Ethics course, leading to the eventual demise of the subject at the end of 2010. We frame this reflection within Deleuzian notions of geophilosophy to advocate for a Philosophy and Ethics that is informed by nomadic thought as this offers potential for students to become innovative and creative of their selves – the critical freedom we see as potentially transformative for contemporary society. We see the strange death as being influenced by many factors, but that it is best considered as a ‘missed opportunity’ because it has so much potential to be transformative of student subjectivities in schools. We see that this critical reflection could be invaluable in a reconsideration of the scope and focus of the subject often viewed as elitist and impractical.*

## Introduction

Our paper focuses on the implementation and teaching of the Philosophy and Ethics course at Marri City College, a public co-educational high school in Perth Western Australia. It charts the rise and demise of the subject, the successes and challenges over a two year period from 2009-2010. Ultimately there is no happy ending as the course, offered first in 2009 and restricted in 2010, will not be run in 2011. This paper will chart the experiences of teaching Philosophy and Ethics in a ‘challenging’ school context to make a case it could offer so much to students, but that there are significant challenges in making this relevant to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. In doing this we engage with Deleuzian analytics concerning philosophy and education that we see as explaining much of our ambitions and experiences.

We first met as students doing a unit that looked at contemporary educational philosophy. Since that course we have embarked on a series of collaborations that seek to problematise the ‘accident of history’ that is mass, compulsory schooling. This paper grew out of our experiences, firstly as teachers of the subject (albeit in different schools and different year levels) and secondly as educators concerned with the essentialising subject formation we saw in secondary schools. During this period, one of us was working as a teacher in Philosophy and Ethics at Marri College, while the other was critically researching student subjectivities at Marri College. This is a shared paper that explores those experiences and conversations and our interest in the promise of Philosophy and Ethics for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Philosophy and Ethics fascinated the students at Marri College because they saw it as giving the opportunity to wrestle with ideas that were the ‘stuff’ of their worlds. We approached Philosophy and Ethics as a vehicle to problematise and challenge the stuff of their world, because: “once one steps outside what’s been thought before, once one steps outside what’s familiar and reassuring... thinking becomes, as Foucault puts it, a ‘perilous act’ whose first victim is oneself” (Deleuze 1995, 103). We are strongly opposed to the single-minded application of instrumental or vocational orientations to the curriculum that we have found deeply embedded within many institutions dealing with people who live within low socioeconomic areas (Reid 2009, 11). Smyth, Angus, Down and McInerney (2008) have identified schools in similar contexts to Marri College as being representative of “excluded communities”. These “patterns of exclusion bear down on schools” and one of the effects of this is that many of these schools adopt curriculum that can best be considered as preparation for work (Smyth, et al. 2008). In this context, Philosophy and Ethics could be the

kind of subject that disrupts this devaluation and exclusion of students in disadvantaged social positions because it challenges the vocational determinism so often found in schools in lower socioeconomic areas. Smyth, et al. argue that bringing student lives into the curriculum is a strategy to combat the alienation and irrelevance that many students experience in schools (2008, 70-71).

We decided to teach Philosophy and Ethics in a manner that challenged the vocational conceptualisation of education found at Marri. Marri is a school whose curriculum indicates a strong vocational orientation, rather than an adherence to those subjects traditionally seen as producing academic, tertiary-study bound students. Rather than maintaining this curriculum of disadvantage we saw an opportunity for Philosophy and Ethics to be taught in such a way as to acknowledge and value the students' distinct experience, their cultural capital, to turn them on to the inventive, creative and experimental becomings that we see as potentially transformative and emancipatory (Colebrook 2006, 2; Semetsky and Lovat 2008; Semestky 2008, viii). Our aims were political, yet open and pragmatic. Rather than middle-class salvationism, we saw philosophy not for its potential to direct but to "donate a gift of potential for use in other people's lives and projects. Philosophy is a doing, and it acts for change"(Massumi 2010, 3).

Teaching Philosophy and Ethics in a low socioeconomic context challenged this corporate or vocational philosophy of education by offering a course that was often seen as a dubious subject choice in a school known for its strong vocational orientation, rather than for producing academic, tertiary-study bound students for which Philosophy and Ethics may be more 'suited to'. In 2008, the Principal's first reaction to the idea of offering a Philosophy and Ethics course in 2009 was: "Philosophy? That's not for our kids. You can give it a try but I don't think you will get enough kids to run a class in that [subject]." With some strategic 'selling' that centred on the 29 Questions attached as Appendix A, Philosophy and Ethics began as a combined 11/12 class of 25 students studying at the 1A/1B non-TEE level. This made it the biggest Humanities subject offered at Marri College in its first year. Its demise some three years later represents, to us, a 'missed opportunity'; contextual, systemic and programmatic that we will explore in this paper.

## **Theory/Literature**

In this paper we utilise the philosophical method of 'geophilosophy' of Deleuze and Guattari to unmask the relationship between thought, "territory and the earth" (Deleuze and Guattari 1996, 85). For Deleuze and Guattari, philosophical thought concerns movement within mapped terrains that revolves around a triple connection or three movements, finding territory or territories, abandoning or leaving them (deterritorialising) and then re-creating them in slightly different forms (reterritorialising) (Deleuze and Guattari 1996, 67-68). For Deleuze and Guattari, philosophy should be 'done' rather than be "content to reflect, pronouncing upon the world from a disengaged posture of explanatory description of judgemental prescription" (Massumi 2010, 3). It is this pragmatic aspect that explained to us how we could best engage with the contextual uniqueness of our students; their experiences, narratives and expectations.

Philosophy and Ethics is both a territory itself and a concept that forms part of the terrain of education, which itself is a concept that is part of the becoming of late modern subject as "concepts link up with each other, support one another, coordinate their contours, articulate their respective problems, and belong to the same philosophy, even if they have different history" (Deleuze and Guattari 1996, 18). In other words, Philosophy and Ethics, its syllabus, rationale, implementation, pedagogy, and assessment is part of the wider world of competing and contradictory discourses that shape mass, compulsory schooling (Ball 2008, Symes and Preston 1997, Popkewitz 1998, Hunter 1994). So, Philosophy and Ethics is not valueless or divorced from its context, it is part of the wider milieu, informed as much both those competing and contradictory discourses that we could loosely term the philosophies of education; highly contested, contextual and productive.

We explore Philosophy and Ethics in the relationships, connections and becomings valued by the corporate and neo-liberal context of education within Australia and the connection being made within those landscapes. We do not see young people as victims of their socioeconomic narratives; we see them as ideally situated to think in new ways about the world or ‘territories’ they move within. For us, this is about students unmasking how they could be freer within their territories. This is similar to the explanation Foucault gives of his role: “to show people that they are so much freer than they feel, that people accept as truth, as evidence, some themes that have been built up at a certain moment during history, and this so-called evidence can be criticised and destroyed” (Ball, 1990, pp. 1-2). It would seem to us that this was the promise of a subject like Philosophy and Ethics because it engaged with thought in a way few (if any) school subjects allowed.

As expected, there was a continual tension and conflict with corporate discourses of education that currently seem to hold much sway within contemporary philosophies of education that support a performative culture (Hey 2002, Ball 2003, Thompson 2010). However, it also presented multiple opportunities and rewards that we doubt we would have experienced in other situations. Partly this can be thought of as the tension between nomadic and state orientations played out in education. For Deleuze, nomadism is the ‘smooth space’ between ‘two striated spaces’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1996, 384-385). Nomadism is characterised by dynamic, unknown landscapes that create new concepts, new forms of flow or movement in deterritorialising ways through previously controlled or regulated landscapes. This smooth space is caught between statism or sedentary spaces, which is that method of enclosing territories within rules, practices, truths and dominant discourses (Deleuze and Guattari 2005). This means advocating for “dynamic and evolving character of philosophical contexts versus their having forever-fixed and eternal meanings” (Semestky 2008, vii).

In essence, this was our project – to use Philosophy and Ethics as a vehicle for young people to challenge some truths about themselves and their worlds that they had previously been educated to accept in often unsophisticated and uncritical ways. We wanted them to experience “nomadic movements” (Massumi 2010, p.7) uncontained within the boundaries of existing identities and unregulated by the economy of the normal, gridded channels of circulation (eg. school, syllabus, Department of Education policies). Nomadism offers opportunities for young people to engage with rhizomatic knowledge, concerned as it is with multiplicities, lines, and stratas (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 4). Rhizomatic knowledge is a multiplicity, a plane of possibilities and potentials in contrast to the Western ‘tree’ where knowledge is organised and hierarchical. The rhizome is of the smooth space of the nomad, rather than the cultivated, enclosed space of the state.

However, we recognise that there are limits within which we are forced to work. The first of these is practical. We work within limits imposed by the education systems – the cultivated, enclosed spaces of education that have come to dominate the mass, compulsory schooling. That this is a significant tension in our project increasingly became apparent as we will explore. Advocating for critical thought within the striated spaces of schools challenges many individuals conceptions of what education should be. The second limitation is a theoretical one. Nomadism and statism are not rigid binaries that should be valued one over the other. That we prefer nomadism is significant, but as Deleuze and Guattari point out – it is about dosages. “Staying stratified – organised, signified, subjected - is not the worst that can happen; the worst that can happen is if you throw the strata into demented or suicidal collapse, which brings them back down on us heavier than ever” (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 161). We see nomadism in pragmatic terms; it is about assisting young people to use the stuff of their worlds in new ways rather than overthrowing the corporate culture of schools that we find so challenging, and we see Philosophy and Ethics as potentially nomadic (and therefore deterritorialising) within the enclosed terrain of the corporation of education. And it is this potential, once realised and made possible, that can serve as a catalyst for these students to (re)invent themselves and shape their becomings as members of various communities in freer ways.

## **About The Site**

Marri City College is a public, co-educational high school that operates within the city of Marri. It is the amalgamation in 1996 of two smaller high schools 'Jones' Senior High School and 'Smith' Senior High School. The school was combined as part of the Western Australian government's rationalisation of school that occurred in the mid-1990's. In this period, many smaller state schools were closed or amalgamated to form larger schools as a means of cutting costs and providing better resourced schools to a wider population. In 2009 there were approximately 547 students at the college from Years Eight to Twelve (Education Department of Western Australia, 2010). In 2009, the attendance rate at Marri was 83%, significantly lower than the state average of 88.0% (Education Department of Western Australia, 2010). In 2009 16 students, which represents 32% of the Year Twelve cohort studied the required number of TEE students to qualify for direct tertiary entrance (Education Department of Western Australia, 2010). Only 1 student achieved a scaled score of 75+ in their TEE. 16% of the student population were classified as Aboriginal, and the school ran specific programmes for Aboriginal students such as Aboriginal School Based Traineeships in conjunction with the Education Department (Education Department of Western Australia, 2010). In 2009 NAPLAN testing, Year 9 students at Marri scored significantly lower than the national average in the areas of Numeracy, Reading, Writing, Spelling and Punctuation and Grammar (Education Department of Western Australia, 2010).

## **The Strange Death Of Philosophy And Ethics**

Enrolments in Year 11 and 12 subjects in the Society and Environment-based courses at Marri College were in a steady decline in 2007 and 2008. This tended to mirror the experience of many schools in Western Australia, at least partly explained by structural changes in the calculation of a student's Tertiary Entrance Rank. In response to this decline, many hours at Departmental level were spent on thinking how these subjects could be made more appealing to students. One strategy to reverse the trend was to offer a wider variety of courses in an 'expo' format in late 2008 and let students in year 10 vote to which courses they most wanted to study. The school administration decided that the three most popular courses chosen by the students would be offered in 2009. Philosophy and Ethics was among the three voted favourites.

At the start of 2009, Philosophy and Ethics 1A/1B course had 22 enrolled students, the highest number of enrolments in any of the three Society and Environment-based courses. Due to popularity amongst Year 12 students, the decision was made to offer the course as a combined Year11/Year12 class. By the end of 2009 another four students had changed subjects to study Philosophy and Ethics as word of mouth spread. In comparison, the course with the second highest enrolment in this learning area had 14 students. Student feedback suggested their main reasons for choosing Philosophy and Ethics were that it was new and interesting, it seemed relevant to students' world, they were motivated by the promising of exploring their thinking in their own terms as well as grounding some of their anxieties such as success, friendship and love. There was also a feeling that it would be interesting as it was taught by a teacher who was known for creative, innovative pedagogical approaches to traditional subjects offered in the school curriculum.

From the outset, it was clear that students engaged with the content that they saw as 'speaking' to their worlds. Part of the sub-text to the syllabus is the idea of interrogating the discourses of the happy life that dominate, often in uncritical ways, the aspirations and understandings of these students. There were many occasions where these explorations had unplanned benefits such when a student explained that his relationship with his father improved because of their discussions about what constituted a 'happy life'. As well, students often reported appreciating the freedom to pause, think and express themselves.

For many this was a new experience. They could not recall (m)any other times either in their school life or in their life outside of school when they felt their thoughts and opinions were valued. This became increasingly important as many of these students wrestled with other people and problems as they moved

through their schooling. For example, a gay, anti-religious student and a group of strongly religious Christian students got a chance to speak to each other very openly about homosexuality and ideas of sin in a way they reportedly had never before had the opportunity.

Students began asking philosophical questions outside of the classroom: “Sir, what is normal?”, “Is school just like a habit some people get good at?”, “How real is friendship online?”, “If thinking can make you really upset why do it? That’s not happiness is it?” These were just some of the questions asked by students studying Philosophy and Ethics, often randomly in the school yard, sometimes during a class in a different subject, sometimes online during and after hours using Moodle or social networking sites. This illustrates that for these students, there were aspects of the Philosophy and Ethics course that was both challenging and potentially transformative as it impacted on the ways they saw and understood their worlds.

This point was further reinforced by teaching colleagues who provided similar, positive reports about the impact of Philosophy and Ethics courses in their own classes. For example, after approximately one semester three English teachers separately reported they could point out which of the students in their class also studied Philosophy and Ethics. This was because they had so clearly improved not just their expression, but their confidence and mastery in thinking critically about the content of their English course. In another example, the coordinator of a very successful mentoring programme for Indigenous students reported how the two Aboriginal students in her programme enjoyed Philosophy and Ethics not just for the novelty and variety of discussions but for it being one of the very few places at the school they could openly and confidently talk about the issues of race and contemporary issues affecting Indigenous students.

However, these positive experiences were offset by inevitable tensions implicit in the conceptualisation of contemporary education. One of the challenges was in thinking about how we could shape and reshape the traditional ‘enclosed spaces’ of Philosophy and Ethics in ways that would prove more accessible and educative for our students. In particular, the student cohort at Marri College studying Philosophy and Ethics were different from many stereotypical expectations of who would choose to study such a ‘traditional’ subject. The group was diverse in terms of academic achievement (from a Year 12 student awarded for highest achievement to a few recent migrants with poor English) and ethnic background (11 white Australian-born students, 3 Aboriginal students, 2 black South African students and 9 Phillipino migrant students who had migrated 1 - 5 years earlier and had English as a Second Language, an unusually high concentration of these students in one class). This was a culturally diverse group, and along with this came a number of challenges in working with this diversity. For example, most Phillipino students found the notion of disagreeing with a non-Phillipino student or a teacher very challenging, which often made the exchange of ideas in the classroom very difficult. As one of our aims was to decentre the relations of power in the traditional teacher/student relationship, this required careful thought. We decided to explore new technologies as a tool to see if they could ameliorate the challenges of different attitudes towards authority found in this diverse class.

As a result, the thoughtful use of Moodle learning management system and other IT tools became one of the major factors contributing to the successes of Philosophy and Ethics. Moodle was used as a support tool to in accessing key course materials (course documents, key readings, and links to useful sites, stimulus images and videos). However, the most important part of Moodle was the way it was used as an interactive tool for the teacher and students, allowing collaboration and the exchange of views within and beyond the space and time of class(room) through online forums, wikis and student-generated glossaries. Online forums played a particularly important part in this decentring of those traditional and vocational discourses of schooling at Marri College. They were frequently used by students to explore, contest and problematise ‘commonsense’ knowledge that they had previously taken for granted or felt they lacked the positionality to critique.

The forums offered a number of different benefits. For students who were less inclined to talk in the class, possibly because of a fear of failure, cultural understandings of shame, peer pressure, poor English, teacher

presence and group dynamics, forums were a chance to ‘level’ with others without raised voices or being cut off by the more outwardly dominant students. Forums gave all students a chance to take their time asking questions, constructing answers and critiquing the responses of others at any time. Easy insertion of hyperlinks, images and media made substantiation and explanation of claims a lot easier while offering opportunities to extend the students’ critical understanding. One of the hallmarks of this process was that many students became skilled at challenging the assertions of others by asking for proof or evidence to support their claims – a challenge to traditional methods of teaching philosophy where analytic traditions are often taught first and ideas and concepts come later. Apart from using online forums in Moodle to stimulate, guide and evaluate conversations it was possible to gather important personal insights about students that arguably would not have surfaced in classroom discussions (for example, certain cultural and career expectations) but were freely supplied by students online, often through a private channel with the teacher.

But perhaps the most important aspect of Moodle forums was the possibility for all students to ‘unbind’ conversations from those ‘prescribed’ by the teacher and start conversations they were interested in by themselves, then generate and nurture interest by others by replying and developing threads. This rhizomatic exploration of concepts was far more creative and innovative than anything that could have been generated by the teacher alone. As well, the students grew with the rhizomes, as they were given opportunities to become both knowledgeable and powerful within the context of their study. We would argue that this growth had the potential to shift the focus in the course from epistemological to ontological, as students became increasingly concerned with their self and their place in their world, in the context of normalised concepts often found in schools such as ‘success’ or ‘authority’.

But not everything went well in Philosophy and Ethics. One of the major challenges in teaching Philosophy and Ethics at Marri College was to do with the expectations of the curriculum and many of the hidden assumptions enshrined within its pages. The first of these was the Community Of Inquiry, which was one of the key requirements of Philosophy and Ethics course. Basically, a Community Of Inquiry is a pedagogic tool expected to engage students in verbally interrogating and arguing in an inquiring mode about key concepts and ideas. As such it privileges those students who come from a background that is immersed in verbal debate and have a firm grasp of English that allows them to structure coherent and rational responses. It assumes that these students will have a tradition in understanding academic arguments and criticism, or an expectation that it can be learned quickly. In our experience, this was not the case. Throughout the course, we explicitly and repeatedly stated the aims and format(s) of Community Of Inquiry and particularly the difference between exploratory, listening, common-ground seeking dialogue and the more combative, competitive debate. Students often said they liked the idea of Community Of Inquiry in its dialogue format but despite changing formats to improve participation (small groups, smaller focus, flexible topic choices, role plays, more teacher-led facilitation) Community Of Inquiry very rarely developed into anything more than sessions of long silences and painful ‘extraction’ of questions and ideas by the teacher. Participation was usually restricted to a handful of the more confident class members. Interestingly, students often expressed the wish to do win-lose debates instead of engage in dialogue seeming to indicate that they were far more familiar with the adversarial form of knowledge, no doubt because this hierarchical examination was part of the landscape they viewed as ‘normal’ (Thompson 2010). While there was some minor improvement in Community Of Inquiry activities, forums and other online activities were far better in engaging students in dialogue and debate, and it would appear that this was the richest learning environment for these students.

While the programme was carefully mapped out at the start of the year to cover the content and assessment requirements set up by Curriculum Council, we simply had to skip several smaller sections or approximately 15-20% of syllabus content in total. The two most common reasons for this were the poor English language skills by a disproportionately high number of ESL students (nearly one half of the class) and the wish and willingness of students to explore some topics, often due to what they saw as important or

relevant to their lives. The latter left us with the constant dilemma whether to forgo depth of thought and engagement at the expense of the prescribed coverage of content, particularly the seemingly more 'technical' and less attractive aspects of the course such as the analytic rules of argument and logical fallacies. We found that students engaged with the big ideas approach more in line with 'continental' philosophy rather than prescriptive and argumentative approach consistent with the 'analytic' tradition. Priority was given to expression and struggle with 'big ideas' in students' lives and less to technically correct ways of thinking. This is not to say we ignored the 'thinking tools' of philosophy, we simply used them in the context that we felt was of primary importance to the students.

We believe that a significant part of the challenge of teaching Philosophy and Ethics at Marri College concerned a misunderstanding or 'bad press' as to what philosophy actually was. In the minds of various members of the school community, Philosophy and Ethics was seen as an elitist subject that offered little practical assistance for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The reaction of the Deputy Principal in 2008 (who became the school's Principal in 2009) to the idea of offering Philosophy and Ethics as an upper-school subject was to argue; "That's not for our kids". We explain this as being representative of the ways that schools (and members of school communities) idealise attributes and characteristics in terms of the grand narratives of class, gender and ethnicity (Thompson, 2010; Wetherell, 2009; McLeod and Yates, 2006). It is these normalising judgments that Foucault argued could be found within schools as "a sort of apparatus of uninterrupted examination" that has as its purpose the disciplining and self-disciplining of the subjectivities of young people (Foucault 1991, 186).

Throughout 2009, the Principal rarely expressed interest in how the course was going, gave any feedback to teachers regarding it or in any other way acknowledged the course, either formally or informally. He seemed wary of the subject and warned the Humanities Learning Area against offering courses like Philosophy and Ethics due to the potential for scaling variations in TEE/WACE exams, instead advising them to offer the more 'settled' and traditional courses such as Geography and History. The Principal publicly spoke about the subject when acknowledging that Philosophy and Ethics in 2009 was indeed a successful course but despite that a decision was made not to offer it in 2010. The reasoning for this seems hard to justify. The course was enthusiastically supported by the current students, and many students in lower grades spoke of being excited at the possibility of studying Philosophy and Ethics. While there was some resistance from the staff, there were also many teachers who supported the subject as they saw the benefits in their own class. This decision not to offer Philosophy and Ethics was later reversed due to community protest. Finally the school offered Philosophy and Ethics in 2010, but only as a 2A/2B course to Year 12 students with no Year 11 enrolments or courses at 1A/1B level. This effectively meant the slow, strange death of the subject.

In 2010 the course has only 14 students, two of which will be sitting a Philosophy and Ethics WACE end-of-year examination. This has required that the new teacher exhaustively cover the content for fear of missing something that will disadvantage the two students. As a result, we understand that there has been a gradual erosion of student interest as the content becomes more superficially covered and the assessment tasks become more complex and less transferable. The grades of the students, particularly those not planning to sit the examination, have fallen. This becomes part of the self-fulfilling prophecy – at the end of the course the results will probably support the view that Philosophy and Ethics was not for our kids. Philosophy and Ethics will not be offered as a subject choice in 2011.

We do not blame the Principal for the demise of Philosophy and Ethics as this would neither be fair nor accurate. There also were staff members across the school not comfortable with the meaningful scrutiny and critical inquiry fundamental to our approach to Philosophy and Ethics. Perhaps this was because this can often force students to challenge the 'comfortable' assumptions played out in schools and disrupt notions of authority or normality. There were also many challenges presented by the student cohort themselves that have been previously mentioned. These challenges often meant that for the students, one of the greatest



challenges was escaping the(ir) 'schooled' subjectivities to move across the enclosed terrains of their thought in freer (nomad) ways. For example, we found that over the course of the year, students became more and more fixated on the examination, and expressed a resultant desire for certainty – the need for concrete answers that they could rely on. However, what it does reinforce is that within schools there are a myriad of competing and contradictory discourses that coalesce into hegemonic visions concerning what education is and should be. In a school in a low socioeconomic setting, we found there were significant structural and pedagogic incentives for the reproduction of the status quo rather than the transformation of schooling to become more flexible, dynamic and creative (Symes and Preston, 1997).

Partly this was exacerbated by the lack of support offered at the systemic level for this new subject. Other than a handful of philosophy units at undergraduate and postgraduate level, a keen interest in Philosophy For Children (P4C), educational philosophy and critical thought, the teacher did not have a formal certification or extensive training in philosophy. This could be understood within the context of the impoverishment of philosophy in undergraduate teaching degrees – many teachers would report a similar difficulty. In 2008 the Curriculum Council offered one day pre-course workshop/PD sessions. However, these were often clashes with other required PD sessions offered by the Curriculum Council so it was impossible to attend more than one. At the session, the teacher received some reference materials aimed mostly at teachers and students in the more 'advanced' streams of 2A/2B and 3A/3B. The attempt to set up mentoring relationships for less experienced teachers was fairly unproductive, largely because the mentor assigned had little knowledge and experience of teaching in a low socioeconomic setting and offered very limited advice, aimed mostly at catering for the 'elite' students. By far the most useful support came from the Curriculum Council Officer, however contact was often difficult to organise. It was very difficult to see a live example, even a video clip, of a Community Of Inquiry working in another school. Networking events were occasionally publicised by the Curriculum Council Officer but without the support of the school in terms of funding and/or leave and with demands to complete Professional Development for other courses taught, more extensive training, networking, collegial sharing and enrichment across the state remained a wish.

## **Discussion**

For us, the Philosophy and Ethics course at Marri College presented a number of challenges, but also a number of opportunities. To paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari, we worried that the institutional and systemic drive to "do" Philosophy and Ethics would mean that students had little time to think (Deleuze and Guattari 1996, 1). What became increasingly clear to us was the ways that the landscape of education 'gridded' the possibilities inherent within the course. It is this gridding that maps the terrain through which the individual moves, communicating possibilities and normalities, orchestrating connections and always enmeshing the individual within complex systems and games of power. One of the ways that this manifested itself was in the tension inherent in advocating for critical thought within an institution that has become increasingly dominated by philosophies and orientations that are predominantly anti-creative. This is not new, the tension forms part of what we now know as the modern school, explained by Hunter (1994) as the clash between historically competing visions. These contradictory visions comprise the vision of the school as a form of vocational training exemplified by "discipline, rote learning and inculcation of subaltern moral values" set against the vision of education as "democratically organised and dedicated to human emancipation" (Hunter 1994, xi). That Marri College wrestled with these competing discourses should be understood within wider genealogical understandings of the Australian education system. Hunter (1994, 3) argues that these visions should be seen "not as the flawed realisation of a principle, but as an improvised reality ... assembled for the available moral and governmental 'technologies'". We suggest that part of the reason for the failure of Philosophy and Ethics needs to be understood in the broader context on ongoing education debates and

policies that have increasingly come to value globalised and performative systemic and schooling cultures that seem driven to reproduce the social stratification so visible at Marri College.

One of the greatest series of lines that gridded the terrain at Marri concerned the conception of the aptitude and capabilities of the student who came from a low socioeconomic status. This was a key feature of our experience at Marri College, the positioning of these young people within highly vocational discourses that assumed that they were destined to become certain types of citizens; retail workers, tradespeople, manual labourers, and as such subjects like Philosophy and Ethics were not of their world. There has been much research that argues that schools are reproducers of disadvantage (and advantage) rather than social levellers despite the rhetoric and, we believe, best intentions of those associated with schools (Symes and Preston, 1997). Partly what we contested was the deficit model often applied to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Instead we saw them as advantaged in certain ways and sought through our pedagogy (such as the use of Moodle and online forums) to advantage their unique positionality within the context of schooling. What we found most difficult was that many of these young people are so trapped through their subjectivation that they found it difficult to move through their terrains in new ways. This movement takes time to learn, and we feel that just when they were beginning to become more dynamic and creative, the course was effectively emasculated through the institutional apparatus of schools. In part, this reinforces research that suggests that because of the terrains in which people move, they find it incredibly difficult to escape the faces that they wear (Deleuze and Guattari, 2005; O'Sullivan, 2006; Thompson 2010). The students studying Philosophy and Ethics at Marri struggled with thinking as a creative act, largely we believe, because this was a practice they were unfamiliar with. They were highly suspicious of attempts to ask them to interrogate their worlds in school (even though they were highly critically aware about many things due to their disadvantage) because of the way they had been positioned as disempowered within their experiences of school. Our experiences of teaching Philosophy and Ethics increasingly led us to question the role of the school in the 'making of the self', particularly the "low socioeconomic self" (McLeod and Yates, 2006). We also began to increasingly interrogate the curriculum as a reterritorialising terrain, rather than the vehicle we wanted to assist young people in examining their selves and their worlds.

One of the most significant successes of Philosophy and Ethics at Marri College lay in the use of alternative modes of pedagogy, particularly through the thoughtful use of technologies such as Moodle. Linking student's exploration of ideas with online technologies allowed them to engage in more embodied and authentic ways with concepts that had often appeared foreign and impractical for their worlds. As well, it enabled a shift in the relations of power that drove an epistemology emphasising rhizomatic thought. Students were able to follow their ideas, often in unique and challenging ways, and explore the ideas of others in a way that challenged the traditional role of the teacher as the knowing expert. The impact of this will be difficult to assess, we wonder whether these students understanding of this potential will become increasingly reterritorialised as they finish their schooling. It is difficult to challenge the ways students are made subject across the length and breadth of schooling when the majority of their time is spent in classes that favour a more traditional approach. Thrusting the students into widely divergent approaches to knowledge many students found frustrating, it would be interesting to know whether they changed their understanding or whether they decided it was easier to 'maximise their return' by acting in highly normalised ways.

If Philosophy and Ethics wants to become a subject that is studied in a wide range of schools (as we would argue it should), we feel that it must be carefully evaluated in the light of who it privileges, both in terms of the curriculum, the pedagogy supposed and the ways it is implemented and administered at a systemic level. As well, we see that it is highly important that structures are put in place that better support the implementation of a new subject. In doing this, we argue, the subject will be better placed to become more than the niche subject that it is currently.

## Conclusion

This paper has focused on the experiences of teaching Philosophy and Ethics in a secondary school within a low socioeconomic area. It has explored the successes and failures of the subject which, despite its initial positive uptake by students, will not be offered at Marri College in 2011. As well, it has examined how the challenges and opportunities of teaching Philosophy and Ethics in new and innovative ways to students who come from backgrounds many see as non-traditional for the subject. Our experiences suggest that there are contextual and systemic tensions in implementing this subject that unfortunately contributed to the demise of Philosophy and Ethics. Our purpose in writing this article was not to criticise but to unmask some of those experiences as lessons for the future. Our positive experiences centred on the enthusiasm and aptitude many of these students showed for this subject. As well, we found the thoughtful use of new technologies presented many rich learning experiences for the students that were highly significant in an emerging critical awareness of their worlds. The rhizomatic opportunities for these students to unmask and interrogate the commonsense assumptions of their worlds was highly successful in the short term, although we are unsure as to how this will be maintained over time given the institutional inclination to endorse more traditional approaches to epistemology.

However, these successes were largely offset by powerful discourses that we believe disadvantaged our students. Traditional disciplinary approaches to knowledge, normalised constructions (largely vocational) of what is appropriate for the students at Marri College and the wider performative culture of education inevitably clashed with our emphasis on critical and problematising thought. Our attempts to ask our students to think and become different, to contextualise Philosophy and Ethics polarised the school community. Unfortunately this seemed to divide the school between the students and the administration, between many students who wanted the subject to continue and the school administration that resisted or could not see its potential. We argue that it is this critical approach that attracted the students, yet it was also this approach that seemed to harden the opposition of members of the school community. Ultimately, Philosophy and Ethics will not be offered at Marri in 2011, and we see this as a missed opportunity, not just for the growth of the subject, but for the lives of the students themselves.

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## Appendix A

- Would you lie to protect a friend?
- Is it fair that students need to wear a school uniform?
- Why are some people popular?
- Does money bring happiness?
- What is ugly?
- Is anyone's opinion and taste of equal value?
- What is trust?
- Should we help the poor?
- Which animals should be killed or protected?
- Should everyone be treated the same after making a mistake?
- Is it ever right to steal?
- Should you ever help someone to die?
- Should wealth be inherited?
- Can anyone tell you what to do with your body?
- Is anything unforgivable?
- How do you measure love?
- Why is tobacco legal and marijuana not?
- Should criminals in jail be allowed to vote?
- Why is God a 'he'?
- Is it a right to have children?
- Why is a soldier killing an enemy soldier not called a murderer?
- Does Paris Hilton have talent?
- Should your parents be permitted to search your room?
- Is it fair to punish the whole class for one student's mistake?
- Is downloading music for free stealing?
- Should working people pay to support people who don't work?
- Should Ben Cousins get the dole?
- When is it OK to reveal a secret?
- Can jokes hurt if they are just jokes?