

Framing 'competencies' for a 'New Work Order': the textual practice of 'competence' in times of change

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Preamble

When I wrote the abstract for this paper I was interested in the way that 'textual practice' was implicated in judgements of formal 'competence'. Language and literacy 'competencies' had assumed prominence in the competency statements developed for specific industries within the National Standards Framework. The whole complex matter of language, literacy, work and diversity had received unaccustomed attention in the National Framework of Language and Literacy Competence. My interest lay, not so much in the ways that language and literacy competencies were themselves defined and assessed in individual workplaces, but more in the way that language and literacy practices mediated judgements about other kinds of competencies, competencies in substantive areas of work like weaving, warping and tanning for instance. It seemed to me that such an abstracted, normative and standardised framework for making judgements would inevitably reward people whose language and literacy practices were like those of the assessors and disadvantage those whose language and literacy practices were different. I was interested in whether there were differential material outcomes of linguistic difference, if

invisible linguistic norms were invoked to 'go proxy' for valued workplace skills.

In retrospect, I assumed too much. It was a simplistic framework within which to understand what was going on in restructuring workplaces, especially in industries like the textile industry, which were under immediate pressure from off-shore competitors after dramatic tariff reduction I had relied on the public rhetoric of the competency agenda, highly persuasive rhetoric that asserted that a comprehensive training and assessment program was in place. What I found when I initially talked to people working in individual workplaces in the textile industry was something different; inevitably, the reality was far more complex than the rhetoric suggested. Many workplaces had indeed adopted the formal competencies to some extent, but they were experiencing difficulty implementing formal assessment procedures, even when they had participated in formal assessor training. In the words of the human resource manager in a successfully competitive textile company ' You can look at anything else, but not that. We're lousy at it.' One of the reasons they were 'lousy' at it, it seemed to me, was that they were not really concentrating on it. While the discourse of 'competency' remained significant in the workplace, the discourse of 'quality' was an increasingly insistent presence, sometimes elbowing 'competency' entirely out of the way. It became clear to me that, if I was to gain any understanding of the ways in which textual practice and 'competence' of any kind are aligned in specific workplace I had to discard any narrow expectations of focussing on formal competence and look instead at language and literacy practices in a workplace struggling to accommodate 'new times'.

This paper begins, therefore, not an exploration of the textual practice of 'competency', but an exploration of the textual practice of work. It focuses on one workplace in the textile industry, a workplace in which formal 'competency' frameworks sit in uneasy alliance with a compelling 'quality' agenda, sometimes in accord, sometimes in blatant contradiction. It is a workplace which is attempting significant change, not in direct response to a quality agenda, or, for that matter, a 'competency' agenda. If it is changing, it is changing in order to satisfy the primary objectives of meeting production deadlines and maintaining and increasing market share in order to survive.

'Competence' and 'Quality' at Australian Fabric Manufacturers
The principles and practices surrounding 'competency' and 'quality' approaches to workplace learning and change are now well documented (see for instance, O'Connor 1993, Jackson 1995, Gee, Lankshear and Hull 1996) and I will not go into them here. It is, however, important to point out that both approaches foreground changes in language and learning as significant pre requisites for workplace change, and as significant indicators that workplace change has occurred (Kantor 1991, Wiggenhorn 1990, Senge 1991, 1994). They also act as 'social

organisers' in the way that Jackson uses the term; they provide a beguiling, and apparently impermeable, structure within which to think about the purposes and processes of language change and learning in workplaces. The two approaches are in conflict, however, in so far as 'competency' approaches stress outcomes and 'quality' approaches stress processes. It has been said that a company could follow quality procedures to the letter and still make life jackets out of concrete.

What remains unclear in these confident assertions about the importance of language change in workplace change is whose language changes, what the language changes from, what it changes to, and what has become speakable, and unspeakable in the process. It is the explorations of these questions that is the focus of this paper. I want to begin that exploration by looking closely at the texts and practices around one word in the everyday workplace discourse of a section of one company and the way in which those texts and practices are challenged and transformed in the 'quality' processes of a team meeting.

Australian Fabric Manufactures (AFM) is a private company producing a range of fabric for use in apparel, furnishing and automotive upholstery. It has survived the dramatic industry restructuring that saw the closure of many businesses by establishing itself as a supplier to several large multinational corporations. Like most textile manufacturers, AFM did not emphasise formal training of the workforce until relatively recently. In the last two years, however, some staff

have received a great deal of formal training while others have received none. The educational biographies of workers on the shop floor are, therefore, relatively consistent. While some have undertaken apprenticeships overseas, and others had come to the company after training at TAFE colleges, the most common practice was, and remains, to train new workers on the job. AFM employs many workers who have significant knowledge and skills, developed over many years and acknowledged by their peers within the company, but which go unrecognised in any formal way. While the company now has trained workplace assessors, competency assessment is largely confined to those areas where it is a legal requirement. As one team member noted 'We have the assessors, they just don't do any assessing'. The assessment of competence is too difficult, too disruptive and too time consuming to be given priority when the company has a precarious hold on its major clients, a hold that depends on the demonstrated adoption of a 'quality' procedure.

At AFM, highly prescriptive quality procedures are imposed by a major multinational client. The client has developed a 'Quality Assessment and Rating Procedure' which must be applied by every supplier. It documents a standardised procedure for evaluating every aspect of the work process, apparently institutionalising as it does so radical and complex changes to work organisation. To achieve a sufficiently high

score a company must, for instance, have in place structured problem solving processes employing team based organisation. 'Quality teams' must meet once a month, their deliberations must be framed by agendas and recorded by minutes, and they must employ specific quantifying tools. The company must institute the specified workplace reforms, adopt the specified work practices, and be assessed against externally determined criteria. If it fails to achieve the minimum score it loses a major client, even if the product it supplies is acceptable in every respect.

In this context, questions about whose language changes, what the language changes from, what it changes to, and what has become speakable, and unspeakable in the process are central in understanding the textual practice of work in new times. Here I want to begin the exploration by looking closely at just one word, the word 'fault', charting its course from a context in which it is central to the discourse, the context of 'mending', to a context in which it assumes an ambiguous and shifting location, the context of the team meeting. To begin, I must explain about the texts and practices of mending.

Texts and practices of mending

In a wide, high room, ten women sit, mending. They sit, one at each large table, like an oversized draughtsman's desk, on chairs that move along runners from one end of their table to the other. They sit, with their burler and their scissors resting in the palm of their hand, their needle pressed between the thumb and the index finger. Some protect their middle finger from the blisters made by the constant pressure of the end of the needle a narrow piece of fabric wound up to the knuckle. Rolls of fabric rest in large tubs, called trucks, behind the tables; four, five, six hundred metres of car upholstery fabric waiting to be spread out on the tables to be checked against the light for faults, and to be mended.

The constant repetition of the pattern doesn't mesmerise the menders as they spread their fabric across their table, pulling it down off the roller above their head with one hand, slipping their burler out of their palm to catch a knot, pull it through to the back and smooth it off both sides of the fabric, as if it had never been there, with the other. They have learned to look differently. They have learned to

detect irregularities, knots left from tying in, breaks in the weft, threads which break and leave 'end outs' that extend for 400 metres, mistakes in warping that leave a single white thread where a grey should be for the entire length of the roll, and the next, and the next, until the run is finished. They point to the fabric and ask me to look, and I do look, but I can't see the fault until they slip their needle behind the faulty thread and gently slip it out from behind the weft, replacing it, replacing every single tiny loop that the electronic loom has made, with the grey thread in their needle. Then I

can see it, with the white thread showing more distinctly against the grey; I see the fault, but only when they are mending it.

To know how to mend a fault it is best to know how it happened. It is best to understand that warpers can make a mistake in reading a new or complex pattern, and set up the creel transposing grey (medium) and grey (light), so that the pattern does not accurately repeat itself over the width, or that the tyers can make an error, tying in the wrong colour yarn halfway through the roll of fabric so that the pattern changes midway through the length, or that a loom can, despite the technology, fail to detect a yarn end out and so continue weaving hundreds of metres of fabric, with a single thread missing. It is best to know how a thread can be stripped on the loom and so create two faults, a stripped thread which must be replaced and a knot of stripped fibres that must be painstakingly unravelled, pulled through and smoothed over. It is best, too, to see the pattern as the designer saw it, as a mathematical formula constructed of yarns distinguished by colour, but more precisely by numeric code. It is best for a mender to see in the fabric, not a leaf, but three light green threads next to two yellow, next to three medium green, next to a grey. In this way the mender can identify the fault and choose the best way to mend the fabric.

When the mender has transferred the entire roll of fabric from the truck containing the unmended fabric behind her table to the truck containing the mended fabric, the mended fabric is sent to the finishing department for final examination, washing, sometimes, and laminating and despatching. Only the menders know when an individual mender has done fine, or exacting, or imaginative work. Routinely, it is only they who know the condition of the fabric when it reaches the mending room, the mending skill involved in making imperfect fabric perfect, and the deadline worked against to ensure that the client gets the order on time. Only when faults remain are the menders called to account for their work, to explain how long it takes to remove and reweave, or 'mend', with a domestic sewing needle, a single thread extending for 400 metres. While the work left undone is obvious, the work that has been done is, and must be, invisible.

There are no formal competencies for mending, at least there are none in the textile industry. The large ring binder with 'National Competency Standard', TEXTILES' printed down its spine uses laminated tabs to identify the authorised activities of textile production: dyeing, finishing, hosiery, knitting, non -woven, spinning, textile printing and finishing, tufting, and weaving. It is silent on the subject of mending. Perhaps it is that, to document the activities of the menders is to document the limitations inherent in the processes of knitting, weaving, warping and the rest; to authorise competencies in mending is to acknowledge modest fluctuations in quality elsewhere.

There are no formal competencies in mending, and there is no formal

training either in the form of traditional apprenticeship or the modern traineeship. What learning menders do, they have always organised for themselves. Learning the craft of mending, while not formalised, is

serious. Mary, who supervises the mending room, teaches new menders. She shows them how to hold their burler and their scissors in the palm of their hand while they hold their needle and pull the fabric through.

She starts them with fabric based on the simplest weave and the simplest pattern, shows the kinds of faults that typically occur and demonstrates the techniques that can be used to mend them, giving them more complex fabrics, and more difficult mending jobs as they gain control of the principles of pattern construction and fabric production. She regulates the work, ensuring that only highly skilled menders work on the complicated Jacquard fabrics that the designers are increasingly providing to meet the demands of the competitive automotive market. The more complex the pattern the higher the rate of faults. The more complex the pattern the more skill involved in identifying the fault, understanding how it happened and mending it.

The industry provides no formal manuals for mending. Mary has prepared her own. It is a manual to give menders a place to start when they are faced with an unfamiliar fault or an unfamiliar fabric. Mary's manual begins with typed descriptions of mending techniques, accompanied by photographs she has taken of experienced menders performing the technique at their tables in the mending room. Samples of fabrics exhibiting different faults are placed inside plastic sleeves so the menders can see the fault and the mend, take the fabric out and examine the back, check it against the fabric they are working on. Next to the faults are explanations of the possible techniques to use to mend it, and how a mender might decide which to use. The manual lies hidden from view on a shelf under Mary's desk, only the menders know it is there. Supervisors from outside the mending room have been known to insist on how a specific fault is to be mended, ignorant of the range of techniques available to a skilled mender and eager to invoke their authority as a warper or a weaver. They have laughed with disdain at the mending manual, and now it is kept out of sight. Crucial to the craft of mending is the ability to conceal.

As supervisor of the mending room Mary must keep track of the rolls of fabric. She enters information about each roll in the computer database, so that workers in other departments, and in other plants, can regulate their work and locate specific orders. Mary also keeps a fuller, handwritten record of the mending process, recording the time a roll arrives in the mending room, and the time it leaves, the condition of the fabric, the name of the mender assigned to it and the time taken to mend it. This account is for her own purposes, to check the accuracy of the data base records and to provide the information she needs to defend the menders against accusations of slow or sloppy work.

When a roll of fabric is returned, this record ensures that it is

generally returned to the original mender, to complete her work.

There are complex texts, and systematic practices, around the work of mending, but they are local and informal. The public discourse of competence and training is silent on the skills involved in mending; the competences remain unauthorised and therefore invisible. Perhaps not surprisingly, the menders are invisible too. In this firm where fifteen menders are employed, all but one trained by Mary, ten are employed on a casual basis. Most have been here, on and off, for many years.

The textual transformation of 'fault': a quality process.
The word 'fault' occupies a central place in the discourse of the menders at AFM. It pairs with the word 'mend' to 'go proxy' for the skills and embodied knowledge of the menders and to define and legitimate their place in the processes of textile production.
However, a curious thing happens at the team meetings where 'quality'

procedures are introduced and developed; the word 'fault' loses its currency. When it does feature in the talk its meaning is significantly diminished and it is rarely used in the specialist sense in which it is routinely used by the menders. In the standardised, process and document focussed world of quality, 'faults' are nothing more than something to be documented and eliminated, and the first place they are exercised is from the 'quality' discourse. It is almost as if they can be eliminated simply by making them unspeakable.

Another outcome of the textual transformation of 'fault' is that, in marginalising 'fault' in the quality team discourse the legitimacy of the menders as significant skilled workers in textile production is questioned. In fact Mary rarely speaks at these meetings, she, literally, has nothing to say.

(i) The 'fault' and the 'mend'.

For menders a 'fault' is, first and foremost, a unit of work. Mary allocates work to the menders on the basis of the frequency and severity of the 'faults' she can see in a piece of fabric at a cursory glance. The simplicity, and singularity, of the word 'fault', used as a unit of work, can be misleading if you are not a mender. It gives little indication of the numerous distinct species of fault, with well understood characteristics and identifiable causes, that menders understand. 'Fault' also functions, as a generic term for the menders.

In their everyday talk it 'goes proxy' for skills and embodied knowledge. A 'fault' always implies a 'mend'. A mender's work is first to see the 'fault', then to assess it, and to choose from a range of strategies those which will best mend it, taking into account the pragmatic constraints of the severity and extent of the fault and, of course, production timelines. The transcript below gives an indication of some of the skills and knowledge that are obscured in everyday conversation about 'faults'. I am sitting with Mary and with Joanne, a

mender, as Joanne mends at her table:

LesleyWhat's the fault here
MaryIts an end missing.
LesleyAn end missing. OK
JoanneAnd that runs for, um for, a few metres, it runs out about
MarySo its about four or five metres long, isn't it? So, we've got to
mend that back in now.
LesleyHow do you do that?
MaryWith a needle, hand weave it sort of thing, you know. This what
Joanneyou take the yarn out
Lesley where do you get the yarn from?
JoanneWell, I just take it from the side
Marythe side
If you need longer bits you get a bit from the bottom and pull it out
or cut a piece off and use it like that
LesleySo you have to take it through each of these
MaryYeah, you've got to weave it back in exactly the same pattern, so
you can't really see it.
...
MaryYou've got a have a bit of concentration. some of the patterns are
harder. It takes a fair while to learn, mending. Some people think
you can just walk off the street and sit down and do it. Its no where
near that easy. Plus, you've got to have good eyes, you know, and the
patience. A lot of people can't sit and do it for a long time. They
get bored or they want to go for a walk or. But you've just got to be
able to sit and concentrate.
and then you've got to make sure its the right colour because in this
one we've got two colours, one's a blue and one's a grey
LesleyOh and you'd never know, or I wouldn't know
MaryNo, you've got to know that you put the right one in.

JoanneIf you put the wrong colour in it stands out
Maryit shows up, if its a blue one if its a blue one it will be three
blue together because its one of each you know, so you have two blue
and
LesleyHow do you know that, how do you what the pattern is?
MaryWe just work it out. See, if you learn to mend you know how to do
it.
LesleySo you're experience teaches you that this pattern it's there of
blue
Maryto know the stitches yeah, yeah
Joanneor you just got to work it out
Mary Work it out. You just look, and you go to the edge, and you pull
that one back and you see what it is and then you know straight away
and you follow it through because now we're getting Jacquards
...
MaryThis bolt is about 4 or 5 hundred metres, so Joanne will run
through, and anything that's out of the normal, or ordinary or,

whatever, sticking out, fibre, whatever she sees she fixes up as she goes

. . .

So, for the menders the term 'fault' functions as a unit of work as well as a generic term which, with its companion term 'mend' covers all that the menders need to know and be able to do to ensure that fabric leaves the factory on time and of adequate quality to meet the requirements of the client. But the generic use of the term 'fault' repays closer examination. For the menders, at least, it calls up the skills, and practices which together identify a mender. It represents the focus of their work identity, locating them as workers within the larger processes of textile production and providing the foundation of professional pride:

Joanne:sometimes you think you are doing miracles

Maryyes, well sometimes you are. . . you're making a silk purse out of a pig's ear

Joannesometimes you get a piece that's got so many faults that are just nearly immendable and you think my god how am I going to do this

Maryyes and then its done and you get it fixed but people outside of here don't really know what you have to do to recover that, you know

Finally, it is important that I draw attention to one common meaning that 'fault' does not carry in the menders' discourse. 'Fault' is not generally used in the sense of 'at fault', it does not attribute blame.

Some faults, certainly, occur as a direct result of a mistake in the warping or weaving sheds, or earlier in the dying, but the term 'fault' does not necessarily, or even usually, imply error. Some faults are a direct and unavoidable outcome of the warping and weaving processes, others occur as a result of a wire on a machine bending out or as a consequence of a minute and unexpected variation in the specification of yarns from different batches. For the menders, what is significant about any 'fault' is that it must be mended.

(ii)The 'fault' and the discourse of quality

AFM has adopted a number of procedures to satisfy the demands of various 'quality' processes, and one of these is the team meeting. The team I am interested in here consists of supervisors of the various sections, including Mary from mending, the manager of the personal department, the systems manager and the human resources manager. This team has been constituted to, first learn about various kinds of systematic problem solving techniques, and then institute these techniques in continuous improvement teams that they convene. It is facilitated by an enterprise based teacher. The manager of the company has told the team that he sees their job as being unambiguously about reducing waste - the waste, I want to suggest, associated with

avoidable faults. He sees the team meeting he attends as being an occasion for :

a fairly right wing sort of discussion about, you know, why we are sitting around this table so that the company can make more money by reducing the waste product, it can make more money by doing things better than it does right now.

...

Why this group of people? I guess, um, you've been singled out as, perhaps, over achievers or the higher achievers the people who have got the power within the organisation to be able to drive through the sorts of changes that are necessary. It is also important that these changes are driven through by people at the coal face because that's at the end of the day where everything happens.

From an outsider's perspective it seems natural to assume that the word 'fault' would be central to any discussions of 'quality' that this team might have. After all, important clients reject fabric, and return it, because it has faults. This is where waste occurs. I would expect that there would be two approaches to avoiding waste - avoiding faults and mending them. According to the General Manager at least, these people are meeting around the table because of what they know and can do on the shop floor.

(iii) Audits, hiccups and variations: textual transformation and the quality process

Quality procedures are essentially about the documentation of practices and standardisation of processes. The quality manual guiding much of the activity at AFM is essentially content free. In these quality team meetings talk about 'faults' is actively discouraged except where they are process events to be quantified and documented. When discussing the extent to which they 'document what they do, do what they document', a team member refers to the loom operators:

hand[ing] a sheet over of the faults they have found
This sheet becomes a 'fault audit', a document that needs to be filed:

Where we put it, we've got it in a filing cabinet
and which, according to the facilitator, may generate more documentation:

if you file the audit, what other sort of documentation might you need?

In this exchange, a 'fault' becomes an event, rather than a characteristic of the fabric and, as an event, it is documented on a fault sheet, quantified in an audit, and filed. It certainly isn't mended.

A fault audit can, as the facilitator has already suggested, be further documented. It can form the basis of a report, a report which transforms individual faults into a pattern of 'variation', variation which, by definition, offends against the quality requirement of standardisation. The report, perhaps by virtue of its bulk, it is 'that thick', becomes a weapon turned against the loom operators who

provided the information for the fault audit in the first place:

I just threw it up in their faces and showed them how much variation there was.

Rendered in quality discourses about process, a fault is not, however, as serious a matter as the forgoing comment might suggest. Once it becomes a variation it is a simple matter to transform it to a 'hiccup', a trivial matter which can be eliminated by tweaking the process.

In this way, content specific faults (characteristics accruing to the product) are quantified into 'audits', and transformed into content free 'variations' and 'hiccups' (characteristics accruing to processes) and the attention of the group is focussed on the detail of the problem solving process. As this operation proceeds the contribution of some members of the group is privileged simply because they can talk the talk of 'process'. Others, like Mary, are silenced.

Directions

The project I have discussed here is very much a work in progress, and this paper is only the beginning of an exploration of the textual practice of work in times of change. One of the most interesting lines of inquiry for me concerns the nature, extent and implications of language change in 'quality' processes. In the brief analysis of the textual transformation of 'fault' that I have sketched here it seems clear that textual practice can change significantly when quality processes are instituted. Changes in textual practice do not, however, necessarily signal the dramatic, and positive, changes in workplace organisation that are often claimed. In the instance I discuss here, the invisibility of the menders is reinforced rather than challenged. For the menders, at least, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

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