

Restructured work, restructured worker

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New discourses of work and new modes of knowledge production have become integral to all kinds of workplaces from universities to the factory floor. In our work as academic researchers and teachers we are experiencing and working with significant changes both within our own restructuring institutions as well as in the restructuring workplaces of our students and our research sites. One major effect of these changes is that the distinctions between workplaces in terms of education and training are becoming increasingly blurred. Universities are now more like businesses with their employees expected to develop multiple modes of 'being' at work; identities which include entrepreneurial activities in the form of consultancies where research often takes a backseat to the development and delivery of training. At the same time workplaces engaged in the full spectrum of service and manufacturing activities also see themselves as learning organisations where all employees are expected to take part in a variety of ongoing training programs. This has given rise to new ways of thinking about what counts as knowledge, and debates have shifted to focus on, for example, issues around whose knowledges, what is knowledge production and where is it produced. (Gibbons et al, 1994)

The socio-political context is, to a large extent, the context of the economic restructuring of industry in Australia and overseas and the creation of global markets and economies. The new discourses constructing and negotiating this context link work and education and training inextricably. Collaborative and co-operative partnerships between government, industry and universities have been hailed as having a significant role to play in the success of workplace training reforms, and thus in the increased productivity and competitiveness of the Australian economy. However, such partnerships are complex and not unproblematic bringing together different histories and positions as well as sometimes conflicting desires regarding outcomes.

Working with colleagues as academic researchers and teachers we have taken up the challenges of collaborative partnerships with industry, and we are developing understandings of the complexities around the construction of workplace knowledges and practices. Questions such as 'how (can) we make explicit our interest in the social identities of workers and their practices in 'reconstructing' workplaces given the lack of readiness of workplaces and industry bodies to engage in such complexities?' (Scheeres & Solomon, in press) are central to our research goals and agendas. The interrogation and deconstruction of a rational and linear view of workplace restructuring and new workplace knowledge(s) may help to open up an engagement with these complexities rather than falling into the trap of either being seduced into complying with or resisting the belief that there is a new set of 'truths' to be learned.

It is at this point that I want to take you to a particular workplace - a site where new discourses; new work practices and new knowledges are as much a part of the everyday as the material production processes. The narrative fragments and analysis which follow relate

to and illustrate some of the issues discussed above. My ongoing research in this workplace over the past eight months has given me the opportunity to interview, shadow, record, read documents and generally 'be' in the environment of the factory floor as it struggles with ongoing change.

The workplace is in Sydney - a site of 800 or so employees in the manufacturing sector; a site where up to 80% of the production line employees are from language backgrounds other than English and where 25%- 30% of the workforce is casualised; a site that is un-unionised and where people are rung or called in unexpectedly to be offered different positions - sometimes promotions or sometimes the sack .

This is a company which brought in a new management team four years ago to restructure the previously family-run organisation with a view to both cleaning up its act and becoming, in the government's terms, 'more globally competitive' and 'more efficiently productive'. They followed an accepted pathway of developing a mission statement and a set of core values ie the establishment of a new culture; a way of thinking whereby particular social identities of workers are constructed, and related social practices which they were expected to learn, demonstrate and value, are outlined. (Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996).

A major change was the creation of a new section or department called World Class Manufacturing (WCM). WCM has been set up comprising a manager and five facilitators whose function is to develop workplace teams. The manager was selected by someone higher up the lines of authority - he was rung at home on a Friday night and offered the job with the suggestion that it would be good for his career. He isn't sure why he was selected - certainly no-one has ever told him why - but he thinks it was probably because he was doing a good job as a supervisor and because he was studying a management course at university. The five facilitators had been leading hands under the old system and they went through a similar selection procedure. One of the facilitators described the process in the following terms:She was told:

'I've got a good job for you, you're going to do W's job in plant 1'.

'But I don't know anything about it.....'

'You'll be good.....You'll be good.'

Thus the unit was ready to operate .

The perceived relationships between this unit and the rest of the organisation are both interesting and significant. The changing subjectivities of these key people as they assumed very new work roles is foregrounded as they still are struggling to reconstruct themselves: a struggle where they are positioned by management and by co-workers as well as consciously repositioning themselves. Within WCM the discursive construction of selves is a central activity and emphasises DuGay's claim that 'it is the power relations rather than facts about reality which make things true' (1996:45).

Initially, my research was to centre on the operator level worker, that is, the team member, problem solver and new knowledge worker of the restructured workplace. However, as it is the culture of the whole workplace - the changing discourses and practices - that creates these new ways for operators to be at work, the WCM unit soon became a key focus of my study. It occupies a unique position within the organisation's hierarchical structure ie as a wing with a middle level manager and senior workers imbued with responsibility, coupled

with confusion among the members about their powers and search for a secure and fixed location.

One of the facilitators tries to explain their position in the organisational structure as:

'Allan (WCM manager) comes under Ian (production manager) so he's higher than the plant manager, and we're supposed to come under him, but we are not higher than the team leaders. I don't think we're higher than the people on the floor. I think mostly my level's there on the factory floor.'

and

'I don't think the plant manager has any authority over me well, he sort of does.'

And further, commenting on the operators' perception of their relationship with the facilitators:

'I think I get confused as to what they see me as.....'

For management, questions about power and confusion regarding WCM are non-existent. It is a much simpler story: the creation of a new unit with specific functions working towards the common goal of improved productivity. They employ discourses of commodification and technologisation with which they are familiar in a manufacturing industry, and apply them to the production of the new worker. Thus, the new workers of the WCM unit need some new things - in this case, new knowledges regarding participatory and problem-solving activities as outlined in contemporary management and organisational change literature. A large consultancy company is called in to provide a package of new knowledges in the form of train the trainer programs. The consultancy company remains linked to WCM and works closely with them as a knowledge packager and transmitter. The emphasis is on a rational, logical and linear development from a state of ignorance through a set of procedures towards enlightenment - a production pathway. The mode of knowledge production is very glossy; slick manuals and power point presentations carrying the essential message that it is up to each individual to act; to learn; to make a difference. Follow these rules and you will be able to do it. Agency is perceived as individual choice with no notion of the complexities of the cultural construction of class; gender and ethnicity operating both within the practices of the workplace itself as well as within the cultural baggage brought into the workplace each day by each employee. This is the pattern set up for the facilitators which they in turn are expected to use in their facilitation roles.

This is one story of the process. However, for the WCM manager and the facilitators the story is a different one. As they struggle with their own identities, there is a recognition that the human production line working towards the alignment of selves and work is not necessarily one with glitches which must be straightened out or solved by following the procedures in training manuals, but rather it could be seen as a site of on-going discursive construction of how and what to be in the new workplace. They constantly question and comment on what is going on. On the one hand they use the discourses of teamwork theory and practices with voices sweet to the ears of management; they want to succeed; to make it work; to do it right etc; while on the other hand they have become aware that it doesn't happen quite like this.

During my time with WCM both the manager and one facilitator (the most competent according to the manager) took every opportunity to talk with me - they saw me as a

confidante and counsellor eg 'you should have a session with her, it's really good'. From the beginning I was an active participant in the research. I too constructed a story, only my story had already been partly structured before entering the workplace. It went something like this: new workplace discourses and practices present a veneer of inclusiveness and sharing of power, whereas in reality they actively reproduce the hierarchies of power already operating. I have come to see this as a rather simplistic, ideological position. My discussions with the people above, and my shadowing of the facilitator in particular, highlight du Gay's and others' argument that these discourses and practices 'are not merely functional responses to, or legitimisations of, already existing economic interests or needs. Rather than simply reflecting a pre-given social world, they themselves' actively' make up a reality. and create new ways for people to be at work' (Du Gay, 1996: 53).

It was not that the WCM workers believed a set of truths set out in manuals and handed to them from management or in training sessions; but rather that they took what was laid out and went about their jobs in the contemporary moment however they found it and albeit within the parameters and constraints of a unit which sees itself as 'without power'. I would argue that it may be the very location or (dis) location of the unit which has provided the opportunity for a different approach to developing workplace practices. As the members struggle with ways of being and the construction of identities which are recognisable, credible and comfortable within this hierarchical and linearly-labelled organisation, they realise that it is possible to work like this in a more postmodern condition. Their discourses include cries of confusion about their 'real place', but they actively use this as a flexible position whereby they try out the new and different. It is the difference between the plant manager's definite position that ' what happens here on the shop floor myself or my team leaders are responsible. We are the owners -they (from WCM), are there as a tool to help us get to our final destination,' and the facilitator's view that 'the responsibilities aren't clear. The roles are not clear cut — perhaps they need to be a bit blurred because they are breaking down boundaries, old strict demarcations, but it does make things difficult.'

That is, the facilitator sees possibilities in hybridity which may lead to outcomes which had not been envisaged. In WCM, the facilitators are not a neat fit with clear lines of power and responsibility; however, to see this position as a (re) location with the potential to open up spaces for different approaches and processes to work is part of the struggle for identity which engenders both feelings of insecurity and liberation.

What about the operators themselves - the production-line workers who have been doing their jobs for many years. Here is another set of stories to tell. In all of the discourses and practices around participation, consultation and working in teams to problem solve and trouble-shoot someone forgot to ask these workers what they think about it all. The first principle of participation and consultation implemented here is that it begins with a directive that teams will be formed; then the makeup of the teams is determined; groups are organised and meetings are called at a designated time. Does the participation begin now? Well, yes after the teams have been trained (very quickly) to be in teams and there are enough roles in the consultant's STAR program to give everyone a job and a title. It also means everyone has quite a bit of reading and writing and numeracy to do as minutes need to be taken; quality reports read; production numbers calculated and so on. The meeting room is soon lined with computer-generated charts and graphs as well as information about team positions and structures; newsletters etc. But that is another story - a story about the extraordinary increase and complexity of language, literacy and numeracy practices in restructured workplaces.

Again, most of the workers want to succeed; they want to do well. Some talk about helping the company to retain the competitive edge - there was even a rumour expressing concern that I was a spy for a rival organisation. This was in contrast to the belief that I was a spy for

management and would report exactly who said what about whom. Again, contestation and struggle are evident. New ways of being in teams didn't just happen easily after a little training in speaking out and conflict resolution and the like. My one brief and unexpected conversation with the production manager elicited the comment that 'I can't understand why they just won't co-operate; there are too many who just don't want to change.' For him the change was a development of some communication and group skills and then the use of these skills to move production along. Anyone who didn't go along with this, ie any disruption, was read as non-compliance and active obstruction. For him the struggle and contestation was of a different framing. He remains light years away from his workers. The discourse communities of the managers and the workers overlap, but the meanings being constructed about their worlds of work and about themselves as workers are very different.

There is an expectation that the operators or team members will meet regularly and take on projects - this means they identify a problem and follow a set procedure (Problem Solving Plus) to solve it. As might be expected, some take to the challenge, others remain silent and/or inactive and yet others are loudly cynical or angry. There are no illusions about what the new relationships and powers are. However, it is not a simple story of creating discourses to make the workers believe they have some decision-making power. The teams exist and the workers meet to discuss and work to solve problems in their material world, while at the same time they work at discursively constructing selves in these new roles. The facilitator is always there and seems to recognise this dual construction. Sometimes the formation of subjectivities dominates in team meetings and no progress is made towards solving the production problem. There is a balancing act going on - there is a point at which the team is brought back to the material task - the performativity principle wins out. But the disruptions are there and the spaces to see them as a necessary and productive part of reconceptualising work and workers open up - the facilitators and the team members are at once part of the same struggle.

For the operators the new discourses and new knowledges are not so much about how to work in teams and how to problem-solve and be participatory, but rather how to 'be' and 'do' in this new context of work as talk. They have already learnt what to do on their section of the production line and now the learning is of a different kind. It is not the learning of consultancy manuals and training programs constituted as sets of skills and strategies, but, I would argue, the forming of new subjectivities. The spaces for this to be played out are made available in collaboration with the WCM facilitators.

The implications for us as researchers and as teachers in higher education are substantial. Our new work roles as commissioned researchers and teachers in workplaces working within new collaborative partnerships could easily lead to getting caught up in prevailing political binaries either as compliers or resisters. We must not lose sight of the importance of working to understand the complexities of these new times and the importance of foregrounding the struggles workers are facing in developing ways of being and knowing at work.

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