Creating a world in common?

The role of workplace educators in the
global production and interpretation of workplace texts

A paper presented to the
2001 Annual conference of the
Australian Association for Research in Education

Freemantle, December

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Abstract

In this paper I am concerned with the challenge workplace learners and educators face, as they engage with global economies, to create 'a world in common' (Smith 1999). I focus on the role of language in 'border crossing' and especially on the needs for and dangers of, the standardisation of language across local workplace settings. I argue that a critical dimension of the work of many workplace educators is the standardisation of language practice across institutions on a global scale. I use Fairclough's (1996) idea of the 'discourse technologist' to understand the role of the workplace educator in creating workplace texts and in mediating local and global discourses. My focus is on the role that workplace educators play in producing and interpreting the material texts of the contemporary workplace, the CV, the Training Manual, the Quality framework etc. I call on a study of workplace educators operating in a range of settings - enterprise-based, trade union-based, VET-systems based and private provider based - to explore their role in mediating the local and the global at local sites.

Introduction

Knowledge, thus conceived, is always in time, always in action, among people, and always potentiates a world in common as, once again, known in common. This account of knowledge and telling the truth represents them . . as dialogic sequences of action in which the co-ordinating of divergent consciousness is mediated by the world they can find in common. (Smith 1999:127).
In this paper I want to talk about Dorothy Smith’s idea that knowledge relies on ‘a world [we] can find in common’. In particular, I want to think about it in relation to the kind of ‘knowing’ that is done in workplaces and the role that workplace educators play in mediating the dimensions of difference that we encounter in globally networked groups of companies so that knowing and coming to know can happen. I think it is helpful to understand why formal and informal workplace education is increasingly concerned with text-based skills that, nevertheless, bear little relationship to the ‘basic’ literacy skills that have been generally understood to be the province of workplace education and training.

I want to begin by looking closely at the Ford Motor Company website for the insight it offers into why global companies need to find ‘a world in common’ and how they go about creating such a world and making it ‘known in common’. I’ll argue that it has to do with the importance of innovation, or knowledge production, in the contemporary economy, and the challenge of producing the right kinds of new knowledge in a business environment marked by what Smith calls ‘divergent consciousness’. I’ll use the website to explore the argument that, in this context, it is helpful to think about ‘knowledge’ as *textually mediated social action*, that the role of the text in mediating the social action is critical and that a good deal of workplace education and training activity is, and will increasingly be, centrally about coordinating the social action of a geographically, temporally and culturally dispersed workforce.

Next, I want to take a closer look at the role that workplace educators play in constructing the texts that mediate the social action of dispersed workforces and so contribute to the construction of the kind of knowledge that seems to drive global corporations. When I talk about workplace educators here I am talking about a wide variety of workplace educators, people working in TAFE colleges, certainly, but also people working in industry as trainers and as human resource managers, people working in training functions unions and people working as private providers.

Finally, I want to develop the argument I have begun elsewhere that workplace educators play an important role in ‘creating a world in common as, once again, known in common’. I will argue that workplace educators are operating as ‘discourse technologists’ and that, in doing so, they are contributing to the production of knowledge in companies. But, this is not a neutral activity, knowing is a political act and it has its consequences.

**Finding a world in common at the Ford Motor Company**

My concern here is first, is to explore why global companies need to ‘find a world in common that is known in common’ and second, how they go about doing so. Briefly, my argument is that any company that has pretensions of participating in a global knowledge economy faces the challenge of making and using new knowledge in a context where people work in remote locations, are animated by local values and desires and have available to them a range of local and global discourses which will often compete with, and sometimes overwhelm, the discourse of the global company. Global companies recognise that routine communication between remote locations is their major challenge and they explicit address it.

I am taking the Ford Motor company as my example partly because it is indisputably a global company, in the sense that it has branches and supply chains that extend all over the world and partly because it so unequivocally identifies itself as a global company participating in a global knowledge economy.

The Ford Motor Company web page provides us with some insight into why it needs to find a world in common and how it goes about it. First, I am interested in knowledge and knowing, and the way the web page situates the company as concerned with making and using
certain kinds of new knowledge. Second, I am interested in divergent consciousnesses and the way it explicitly and implicitly co-ordinates and navigates difference, especially the tensions between the local and the global. Third, I am interested in the way it uses and produces texts, especially the way it sets up a framework for ‘knowing the world in common’, providing templates for texts that create a join between the local and the global.

(i) Why a world in common? Knowing and Doing at Ford Motor Company

The Ford Motor Company needs to create a world in common because its core business is knowledge creation, diffusion and trading and because its workforce and supplier base is geographically, temporally and culturally dispersed. It must, therefore, manage knowledge creation in an environment that is marked by dispersed consciousness. This is a difficult thing to do because knowledge is a local achievement – to ‘know’ something is to engage in certain kinds of social practice at a particular local (not necessarily geographically local) site. It takes effort for people who are not naturally part of a community to ‘know’ something in common, but if global companies are to survive and prosper by producing knowledge it is necessary that some things, at least, are known in common – across the global web of production.

Ford Motor Company is, according to its web page, centrally about two kinds of knowledge creation. The company introduces itself like this:

At Ford Motor Company, we have a passion for Better Ideas. Whether pushing the limits of technology and design, or bringing people together within a community, we work to approach every challenge with ingenuity and caring

(wysiwg://58http://www.ford.com/?SECTION=ourCompany

In this statement the company commits itself equally to two kinds of knowledge production: the technical knowledge production associated with technological and design innovation and the social knowledge production associated with social innovation – ‘bringing people together within a community’. It might seem at first that a commitment to social knowledge production is empty rhetoric designed to enhance Ford’s corporate image. I want to argue that innovation in the social technologies of the workplace it is a pragmatic requirement of a successful global company; without it technological and design innovation can not be effectively utilised.

As a global company, Ford is faced with a significant and common issue; the people who work for it are dispersed across the globe; they are not, geographically, socially, or culturally, ‘together within a community’. While this has real advantages in terms of efficient production, innovation and niche marketing, it also poses a particular kind of problem. Like most successful companies in the global economy, Ford views its major business, not as making cars and trucks but as producing ‘Better Ideas’. It produces new knowledge in a global arena and trades innovation on a global market.

However, while knowledge may be traded globally, it is produced and used at local sites, it is produced and used within ‘a community’. So Ford is faced with the significant challenge of constructing ‘a community’ so that it can generate, access and exploit innovation. Somehow, Ford must manage to be simultaneously local (in a range of local sites) and global. Ford’s website gives some insight into this tension.

Ford’s ‘Heritage’ page locates the company explicitly and unequivocally within the United States. Its history begins in 1903
The history of the Ford Motor Company is, in many ways, the quintessential story of the American Dream.

Henry Ford is presented as an American hero (you can access ‘Henry Ford Quotes’) and the Ford Motor Company is explicitly presented as ‘the realisation of an American Dream’. Ford is unambiguously constructed as a local company that is centrally located in local mythology.

Ford’s Australian web page also has a ‘heritage’ page, but here the history begins in 1967 with a history of the Falcon GT – a car that was, apparently, developed in the You Yangs and became a classic. In Australia Ford is also constructed as a local company, with local heroes, in a local mythology.

At the same time, Ford’s web page stresses the global nature of its operations. Ford’s Country Sites web page emphasises the global reach of the company. It invites us to ‘Explore the World’ by selecting a Ford website in a region (of eight) or a country (over 120) in which Ford has a presence. While these websites share a template and a corporate identity they are designed to capture something of the distinctiveness of each location and of each market.

If this were the extent of Ford’s global reach then the procedure for co-ordinating diverse consciousnesses would be relatively straightforward. If knowledge is textually mediated social action, and if texts create the join between the global and the local, then Ford would need to produce textual templates and train people in their use; policing discursive practice might be an issue but legitimacy would not.

The diversity that Ford is dealing with does not end with its branch offices, however. Ford is typical of global corporations in that it out-sources many of its operations. It relies on external suppliers for parts of engines, transmissions, chassis, fabric etc. These parts are manufactured all over the world. The Ford Supplier Network page gives some indication of the scale of the task of co-ordinating the activities of companies which have no direct connection with Ford apart from the individual contracts they sign. From the web page it seems that most critical task is the sharing of information. It’s a complicated problem.

Revolutions in communication technologies mean that vast quantities of data and information can, at least in theory, be moved instantaneously around the globe. From a technical point of view there should be few problems in having a dispersed workforce and outsourcing network. Organisations rely on this instantaneous transfer of data and information to remain competitive. The data and information can only be used to produce knowledge, however, if the world in common is actually ‘known in common’. People need to be able to understand and use the data and information at their local sites and they must be able to transfer it to other local sites in ways that other people can understand.

Ford recognises this problem as being about the social technologies of the workplace, about bringing people ‘together in the community’. I want to suggest that the reason that Ford, quite pragmatically, suggests that social technologies and innovations are as important as technical and design innovations is because it has learned that it cannot use the technical and design innovations it has generated if the social technologies of the global workplace are not in place. Ford’s web page provides explicit acknowledgement that, if it is to be an innovative company it must create a world in common, it must create ‘people in a community’.

\[ \textit{How? Co-ordinating divergent consciousnesses at the Ford Motor company} \]
A Day in the Life with Covisint Collaboration Manager...

During the product development process, a vehicle team receives direction from marketing to increase the capacity of a glove box. The engineering lead for the instrument panel is given the task to incorporate a larger glove box while maintaining functionality and performance. The engineer learns that the supplier for the glove box door needs to finalize the tool in three week to support the vehicle launch deadline.

The modification requires coordination throughout the vehicle program team (engineering, interior styling, human packaging, testing) as well as the supplier's organization. The engineering lead estimates the change will take six weeks to implement with their current process - three weeks longer than the supplier has for final tool modification.

The engineering lead decides to use the Covisint Collaboration Manager tool. He logs on to Covisint and creates a workspace for the Glove Box Modification project. Then, he adds team members, loads the marketing specification documents, and the project- specific documents, into the workspace. The team members are notified via e-mail and receive a URL directing them to their workspace.

In the next three weeks, the team uses Collaboration Manager to review documents, conduct virtual design reviews, and assign and track issues. The team quickly reviews all design decisions and carries out various "what-if" studies. Through the use of Collaboration Manager, the designer develops a solution for the glove box and uploads the new design on the workspace. The design is approved and the supplier's tool deadline is met.

This vignette comes from the Covisint web site. ‘Covisint’ – is described on the Ford Motor Company web page as a ‘global, independent, eBusiness exchange for the automotive industry.’ Covisint facilitates a number of different kinds of exchanges. On the one hand it
facilitates the transfer of data by providing a number of applications which can be
customised to suit individual companies and ensure privacy while ensuring that appropriate
data can be read across the field. It is, however, the second kind of exchange which
interests me here. Covisint is explicitly designed to co-ordinate social action across remote
sites. The ‘collaboration manager’, for instance, is specifically designed to create a world in
common that is known in common:

With the industry shift to outsourced engineering, program teams have
become widely dispersed groups composed of members from different
companies and geographic regions. In addition, product development cycles
are shrinking. As a result, team members must have access to information to
execute business decisions quickly. To co-ordinate virtual teams and make
critical program information readily available, team members need to be able
to collaborate effectively. The team needs one central source of information
on which to base their daily business
decisions.(covisint.com/?/solutions/collab/collab_mgr.shtml 22/11/01
12.31pm)

The collaboration manager does much more than facilitate the transfer of information. It
provides a template for collaboration; setting the parameters of a virtual workspace within
which a group of people may establish the temporary community necessary for the
production of knowledge. It does this by regulating textual practice.

Smith argues that the written text ‘creates a join between the local and the global’, and that
this join, the text, allows the world to be ‘known in common’. Others have also noted that the
knowledge economy demands textually mediated, or codified knowledge:

The nature of knowledge, particularly the degree to which it may be codified,
influences the ease with which it may be transferred between economic
agents. . . the commercial creation and use of knowledge encourages the
process of codification (Roberts 2001:99).

Elsewhere I have looked closely at the way that globalising written texts are taken up at
individual local sites I have argued that texts mediate social action, they do not regulate it. In
practice it seems that participants call on local and global discourses to interpret texts and
so negotiate ‘what counts’ as knowledge in the local/global context (Farrell 2001 a, b). Here I
am interested in the way Ford constructs a web of texts which are specifically designed to
regulate social action, and produce knowledge, at remote workplaces, texts which are
intended to promote, and to control, a world in common.

The website implies that the textual practices involved in using the collaboration manager
are neutral, that the virtual workspace provides a convenient space in which geographically
dispersed workers can share information and solve problems, as if they were together on the
shop floor. In fact the participants in the virtual workspace are socially and culturally
dispersed as much as they are geographically remote. It is no simple matter to participate in
the virtual workspace and workplace educators play an important role in shaping the
discursive practice of workers at remote sites.
Workplace educators ‘working knowledge’ in the global economy.

J managers Enterprise based education at a TAFE college in Victoria. Here she is talking about a particular program the department runs:

J Its called the Holden quality – the Holden Production Certificate.

L With the Holden Production Certificate is there a requirement on the local Holden company to have a certain number of their employees go through that?

J All of them have to go through it eventually. Its been introduced in the last twelve months and only a few have been handpicked to go through it. These people have been handpicked thinking they are – because they’re are so bright – and Holden handpicks the ones that have got the terrific ideas because they want to get the ideas from them, but they’re a bit shocked at the number that can’t do, fill the requirement and they’re being very rigid about that requirement, which to my mind - if the guy is able to stand up and do a nice presentation with overheads and stuff then surely that’s enough, but no, if he can’t do it the proper way he doesn’t get the certificate.

L And the proper way is written in a specific format with specific headings?

J Its quite sophisticated.

L What sorts of features are required in that to pass?

J Well there’s the graphs, there’s all sorts, just anything that you need to demonstrate your solutions.

... 

J And why we’re looking at it and what is the problem. What’s the extent of the problem, so they need to have tally sheets to show how often this particular problem arises – or perhaps extract reports. They would access all of that. They have no problem in that, but its just stringing it together to make some sort of sense.

The Holden Production Certificate is designed to ensure that there is consistency in the way employees conceptualise and talk about the problems they encounter. Problems are a big issue in manufacturing, and, since more often than not they are solved by several people at different locations:

For every problem identified in an assembly plant, a manufacturer issues a problem case. In a typical assembly plant, industry experience shows that there can be anywhere from 15-50 problem cases issued daily. Extrapolating those numbers globally
results in potentially over 3.2 million problem cases per year for the automotive industry. Currently, each case must be responded to in the manufacturer specified format. A supplier invests a significant amount of time and energy in the administrative tasks of answering problem cases. This time could be better spent in preventive quality planning to avoid the problems in the future.

Covisint's Problem Solver tool provides customers and suppliers with a web-based means to communicate problems and prompt proper permanent corrective action plans from one central, individually secure, hosted location. The tool provides an industry standard methodology to respond to problem cases. Because the tool is based on XML formatting, each manufacturer can view the response in their specific company format.

Problem solving is knowledge production, in the global workplace problem solving is textually mediated; it relies on textual practice that has been standardised in order to take account of differentiated consciousnesses – different people securely located in their different local sites. The standardisation of textual practice is seen as the answer to the problem of creating ‘people in a community’. However, providing standard textual templates (like the collaboration manager) does not guarantee that smooth problem solving, or collaboration, will occur. Different participants bring different discursive resources to the text and this will affect how they take up the standardised texts.

The problem that J identifies in the transcript segment above is common – capable people do not read and write in the standardised way. They can solve problems but they cannot solve them through the textual practices offered to them. Workplace educators like J and her colleagues are employed as ‘discourse technologists’ Fairclough (1996) argues that the global economy demands discourse technologists, people whose job it is to intervene in the textual practices of work at local sites in order to shift discursive practice to standardised global discourses. Discourse technologists are understood to have access to special kinds of knowledge, reified knowledge that comes from outside the organisation. Specifically, discourse technologists research the discursive practices of institutions, design discursive practices in line with institutional aims and strategies and train people in their use. In general terms, the function of the discourse technologist is to shift the control of local discursive practice from the local to the global. First, they shift the policing of discursive practice from the local to the trans-national level. The material text ‘creates a join between the local and the particular and the generalising and generalised ruling relations’. The function of discourse technologists is to mediate local and global discourses at local sites in order to shift legitimacy to remote authorities.

In many respects, shifting policing is a relatively simple task because it involves the explicit exercise of authority. The more important part of the discourse technologists role is to shift legitimacy, and that is more difficult. Shifting legitimacy involves investing authority in a remote institution but it also involves obscuring the identity of the institution so that demands made by the institution are normalised, they seem transparently natural and right, just ‘best practice’. Experts outside the organisation not only police discourse practices (by, for
instance, providing forms to report faults or protocols by which problems might be solved) but, through that process, shape 'what counts' as knowledge and who can say so.

Conclusion

What I've tried to do in this paper is to tease out what it means to find a world in common, and to know it in common, in the contemporary workplace. I've argued that it is a critical challenge for many global companies to create, even for a moment, 'people in a community' when the people who might make the community are geographically, socially, culturally and temporally distant. I've looked at the role of the text in the contemporary workplace, taking up Smith's idea of knowledge as textually mediated social action, and begun to look at the way that Ford tries to create a community, and regulate social action, by mandating the use of certain kinds of texts, texts that assume certain kinds of social practices and certain kinds of social relationships. I've pointed out that the process is not as straightforward as it might seem to be; textual practices are not simply laid down, or taken up, they are incorporated into the various local worlds that groups of participants already have in common.

Participants in global webs of production have, in Smith's terms, divergent consciousnesses and it is no simple matter to co-ordinate them although, I have argued, that is what workplace educators often try to do. This is why I think it is important to discuss the role of workplace educators in mediating the local and global textual practices of the globally distributed workplace. The mediation of textual practices across global fields of exchange is a political act and it has political consequences, although these consequences cannot always, or even usually, be predicted. When workplace educators mediate the production and interpretation of workplace texts what they do matters to people and to organisations. It helps shape what people can know, what they can do and who they can be in a global economy; it begins to create, for better and for worse, a world that is known in common.

References