The Changing World of Work
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Each day factories move across national borders, companies restructure to improve their competitiveness, and workers are told they must acquire and demonstrate more and different skills and competencies. The United States workforce has witnessed the demise of high-paying, long-term, union-backed manufacturing jobs, and the rapid spread of a so-called "new work order" in a postindustrial, information-based economy. Treaties such as the North American Free Trade Agreement and the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs were signed, amidst great controversy and fanfare, and promises were made that displaced workers should be, would be retrained, retooled, reemployed.

New slogans and programs abound: school-to-work, welfare-to-work, skill standards, workforce investment, tech prep. And everywhere school workers and teachers are urged to put their shoulders to the wheel and produce the next generation of employees whose abilities have been honed for these new work environments. Such is the unsettling context for this journal's New Workplaces and Literacies department.

Global and local changes
My goal for these new columns is to begin an international conversation among reading teachers and other literacy educators and researchers about the world of work, especially the intersection of literacy and work. I'd like us to consider how global and local economic changes are likely to affect our schools and colleges, and how our own notions of literacy and learning might usefully be brought to bear on conceptions of work and learning at and for work.

To be sure, such topics are not standard fare for most literacy educators and researchers. Nonetheless, with this column as a vehicle, I hope to urge readers of this journal to acquaint themselves with the work worlds that now await many students, particularly the majority who will not attend or complete postsecondary school. With this knowledge we can, of course, position ourselves better to assist students as they cope with the requirements and demands of the new workplaces and the new economy, including those related to literacy.

But more significantly, we can also help our students acquire the tools and cultivate the habits of mind needed to alter those worlds. Whether you tend to look hopefully at current workplace transformations, as do many commentators—or with some worry, as I do—there is a great need for literacy educators to help shape the public discourse about work and education, as well as to prepare students to be both competent and critical.

A Silicon Valley story
To start our conversation in this column, let me introduce you to
Moreover, formal departures of teams in work settings that constituted the context of recent organizational change, see Holland, 1998.

Esther (not her real name) came to the U.S. from the Philippines about 15 years ago. After the birth of a child and a short stint in a restaurant, she began to work for a circuit board assembly company at a low-prestige, low-wage, relatively low-skilled job in a “hand-load” line. (Also called “board-stuffing,” this work consists of placing components onto circuit boards manually. Because of their size, shape, or other characteristics, these components can’t be attached by machine.)

At the time my research team met her, Esther’s factory was well on its way toward a corporate-wide reorganization and self-termed “culture change.” The most important component of this was the requirement that all front-line workers participate in self-directed work teams. These teams were made responsible for setting their own productivity and quality goals, as well as for handling significant amounts and types of paperwork associated with these activities—and all this in addition to their usual job tasks.

Such activities were significant departures from standard practice at this company (and most others). Moreover, team members came into direct contact with management at formal meetings, where they reported their collective problem-solving activities. On these occasions front-line workers, most of them recent immigrants, stood at the head of a room full of upper-level managers and executives, including the company’s chief executive officer. They stood with their overheads of carefully prepared charts, their graphs in hand, and their speeches rehearsed and often memorized. It was at one of these formal presentations that we first became aware of Esther.

Esther demonstrated impressive self-assurance and public speaking abilities as she introduced her team’s presentation. Referring to audience members by name, recalling shared memories of the company’s early days, she interleaved accounts of the competent work performed by her, her team, and her hand-loading line with recitals of company rhetoric about self-directed work teams—all the while walking to and fro in the front of the room, establishing eye-contact and gesturing. Pointing a finger to her head, she bragged and joked, “In my mind there’s a computerized drawing of each assembly I’m working.” Then with a smile and nod, “I’m really an expert! It’s guaranteed.”

More to the interests of literacy experts, Esther quickly offered a brief account of on-the-job reading and the importance of documentation in her workplace. “When I do the inspection of the work done on her line, I have my paperwork in front of me. You could go to our building right now, and we have about eight cabinets—they’re brand new—and open those drawers, you could see a lot of paperwork, complete with a BOM (Bill of materials), drawings, and of course the MRP (manufacturing process instructions).”

Paperwork and symbol systems

Indeed, paperwork did play a big role in the day-to-day activities of front-line workers in the circuit board assembly industry. My co-researchers and I identified some eight different functions that reading and writing served in this factory, functions we grouped into seven broad categories: performing basic literate functions, using literacy to explain, taking part in discourse around and about texts and literate activities, participating in the flow of information, problem solving, exercising critical judgment, and using literacy to exercise or resist authority.

Let there be no doubt about it, the factories I studied were saturated with documents. Literacy provided the frame, the scaffolding, the superstructure within which work got done in circuit board assembly plants. With her recital of the types of paperwork that she had at her fingertips, Esther demonstrated her awareness of the role of documentation in her factory, and she revealed her sense of its importance to management.

Literacy in Esther’s factory involved multiple-symbol systems: traditional text, certainly, but also pareto charts, fishbong diagrams, and innumerable forms. People read circuit boards, too. We often saw workers with several forms of representation spread out around them, as they figured out how to set up a work task or solve a production problem. There were multiple tools and technologies connected to literacy and communication: ubiquitous paper forms and correction fluid, computerized data bases, electronic mail. Continuously, workers moved between symbol systems and technologies, often translating from one to the other.

Some literacy practices in the factory were individual, but quite often people did their reading, writing, and problem solving collectively, working together to decipher, interpret, and carry out the tremendous reporting requirements of their jobs and their teams. They coproduced texts and interpretations of texts. They also worked together to solve problems on the line. In fact, in analyzing our data, my research team and I came up with a unit we called a “work event,” when work was stopped
because a problem had occurred, and front-line workers, supervisors, and engineers came together to solve it collectively by talking through the issues and consulting documentation. These were literacy-rich moments, to say the least.

So much and so many types of literate activities were there in this workplace that I believe we would do well to consider the ways in which developing a literate identity is an important part of being a front-line worker. These days, workers are expected to become adept at and comfortable around the paperwork that is part and parcel of everyone's job now on the manufacturing floor. They must learn to conceptualize their work in terms of its written representations. They must be able to master and manipulate the social and institutional rules that govern literate activities in the factory.

**New challenges and power**

Hand-loaders need, then, not only to be quick and accurate at their manual work, but with the advent of teams and new systems of reporting and monitoring, but they need also to conceptualize their work differently—to include as part of it an understanding of goals, goal setting, calculations, and reports, and all the literate acts these activities entail. Put another way, workers are asked to see themselves not only as employees who perform the physical act of placing components on a board, but also as thinkers, as people who monitor their own production rates, reflect on and analyze their problems, and report the same through print and through presentations.

Happily, virtually all of the workers that we observed, most of them recent immigrants representing a range of language backgrounds, ethnicities, and countries of origin, were able to rise to the occasion. Despite having to traverse boundaries of culture, language, class, gender, ideology, and corporate hierarchy, these workers for the most part took up the challenge of developing a repertoire of literate practices, and they met it successfully.

One only need recall the front-line worker standing before a roomful of managers, reciting from her graphs and charts, to recognize and appreciate the task and the achievement. We so often hear of people being "unable," of literacy crises, of employers' worries about the workforce. This research shows that the crisis may be overstated, if work is organized appropriately. At Esther's factory, the best aspect of the team experiment was the creation of a work culture in which collaboration and joint problem solving were the order of the day. As long as people could work together, could pool their intellectual and social resources, they were successful at tasks that might otherwise have been daunting.

In fact, the most formidable challenge for Esther and her coworkers was not, I would argue, developing a literate identity, but was of being perceived as capable of doing so, of being fit for the occasion. It is almost a truism of current literacy theory that reading and writing are connected to power, but rarely have researchers traced those connections empirically. In this project I found that, far too often, workers were asked to become not self-directed but self-monitoring, collecting elaborate, detailed data on their performance, data instantly available to supervisors and managers. My research team also observed that particular functions for literacy—high-prestige functions such as those associated with exercising judgment and problem solving—were most often associated with and available to those in positions of authority, such as supervisors, managers, and engineers.

On the other hand, certain other functions that literacy serves—lower prestige purposes such as accomplishing simple, discrete tasks or using literacy to explain—were most often the categories associated with and available to front-line workers. Taking part in literate activities was not so much a question of ability or motivation, then, as it was a question of rights and opportunities. In other words, patterns of literacy use were generally linked to structures of authority. Practically speaking, this means that skills change when authority changes. Thus, one reasonable measure of whether a factory is truly "high performance"—of whether workers are actually imbued with the power to problem solve and to self-direct—is the types of literate workers are able to practice.

**Esther's experience**

Let us return to Esther, for her experiences illustrate both the promise and the limitations of the team concept for worker empowerment as it was practiced in her particular factory. As a front-line worker Esther typically had little contact with management and few opportunities to display her literate abilities. Yet, by using a company-structured moment to her own advantage, she dared to construct and promote a view of herself and her fellow workers as experts.

We later learned in an interview that Esther wanted intensely to move up to a supervisory position or out of the company altogether. She felt that management's focus on teams and team presentations was a bit of good fortune, for it allowed her to draw on and call attention to her own hidden background and experiences (for example, she was currently a part of a Toastmasters' group). Like other workers in this factory, she initially hoped to ride the new wave of self-directed work teams and other quality-enhancement
programs toward a more personally rewarding job and career path.

When we last saw her, however, Esther was still a quality inspector on the hand-load line—this despite her obvious competence as a team member and as its spokesperson, and despite her ability to manage the literate and other requirements of her work. And her company had moved on from teams to another quality-enhancement program. Rather than being primed by her successful presentations to management to claim and develop a new identity as a worker—a sense of herself or who she might become that would drive her to pursue additional knowledge, skills, and expertise—Esther felt stymied. She professed herself uncertain as to how to apply for a job as a supervisor, and as reluctant even to signal her interest, so doubtful was she about her chances. “I cannot make it happen,” she confided.

The point of this story is not to denigrate Esther’s achievements, or her initiative, or the impressive ways in which many workers were proactive in responding to, adapting, rejecting, or influencing the company’s definition of self-directed workers. The point of it is, however, to call attention to the work policies and practices that often put boundaries around workers’ development and motivation. Esther suggested her doubts about the company’s investment in the team concept with this rhetorical question: “Like now, I make presentation, but after the presentation, what?”

**Work worlds and classrooms**

In what ways are the literacy practices that thread through work worlds congruent with and dissimilar to the kinds of reading, writing, talking, and participating that we orchestrate for the students in our classrooms? In what ways should they be congruent and should they be dissimilar? How are literacy practices in work worlds embedded in and shaped by work practices, which are themselves influenced by their cultural, social, political, and historical contexts? How might such an understanding of literacy as a social practice influence the reading and writing activities that we imagine for our students, especially those students who will go quickly to work?

How do global politics and workplace politics interact with the literacies and aspirations of workers? And how might the identities we promote for our students, as particular kinds of readers and writers, thinkers and doers, and actors-upon-the-world, influence the new workplaces and conceptions of literacy and learning at work? These are the questions I hope we can pursue together.

In my next column I’ll report on an interview with Miles Myers, former Executive Director of the National Council of Teachers of English and author of *Changing Our Minds: Negotiating English and Literacy* (National Council of Teachers of English, 1996). In this book Myers argues in part that certain characteristics of new workplaces, and the language and literacy practices developing there, are a good fit with conceptions of literacy that we should be promoting in the schools.

**REFERENCES**
