

In-Sites: A study in workforce literacy

Some preliminary findings

by Judy Hunter and Sue Folinsbee

In-Sites is the first large-scale Canadian ethnographic research project to study literacy and literacy learning at work. This two-and-a-half year project, supported by a grant from the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development Canada, is housed at Ryerson Polytechnic University in Toronto. This article provides some background on the In-Sites Project and reports on some very preliminary findings

Workforce literacy as a complex social practice

The name 'In-Sites' is a pun of course, because ethnographic research seeks understanding and insights into social practices. This project then, is different from research work aimed at mapping individual skills or understanding workforce literacy as a skill issue. We want to consider workforce literacy as a complex social practice. For us, literacy as a social practice refers to how and why people do or do not engage in literacy activities as part of social roles, relationships and power dynamics in the workplace. Skills and tasks are part of, not separate from, the social processes in which they occur. Our intention is to provide a more complex, integrated framework for thinking about workplace literacy by focusing a finely grained analysis on the lived experience of literacy within the social context at the workplace.

Researchers and research sites

Research is taking place at four work sites in manufacturing, grocery production, hospitality and textile industries. The inter-related studies of these different sites will bridge practitioners' work and theories of literacy and learning, and current understandings of the changing nature of work. The team consists of three practicing workplace educators and two academics. The field studies at work sites started in the fall of 1999. At the point of writing, we have finished six months of data collection and will spend the next year analyzing the data and writing and putting together a book.

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Emerging theory and research

Emerging theory and research support the idea of examining workforce literacy as a complex social practice. Theorists and researchers from industrialized countries (Castleton, 1999; Holland et al., 1998; Hull, 1997; and Darrah, 1997) argue that the dominant discourse around literacy and work attributes literacy problems to individual worker deficits in the face of rising workplace demands. However, more and more observers see shortcomings with this common approach. Problems with incorporating literate tasks at work are not always, or only, about skill deficits. So, how else can these problems be understood, or remedied?

Preliminary findings

In our research, we've found large amounts of print and graphic information to be an integral part of current Canadian working life; in fact we could characterize all our sites as increasingly document-driven environments. Many forms of "reading and writing" occur in these workplaces, and that leads us to use the term 'literacies' in the plural, to reflect the multiple ways of dealing with information. But increasingly, these multiple forms of literate practice are prescribed and regulated in detail, as part of print-driven quality control and production management systems. Working together on the preliminary analysis of our data, we've been able to refine our questions and themes, focusing on what we see as key literacy practices across our sites.

First, our focus is on four overarching questions: What are people doing when they're working "with the program," as full members of the print-driven workplace culture? What outcomes and opportunities arise from successful participation? Alternatively, what are people doing when they're not participating, and what kinds of tensions arise related to lack of full participation? How are power relations and a sense of 'value' at work embedded in participation in workplace literacies? We plan to address these questions by looking for both commonalities and differences across our sites. Second, we've identified several major themes around literacy practices that weave throughout our sites. One is that literacy practices are powerfully shaped by many other aspects of people's work, like job knowledge and experience, production and time constraints, and relationships with co-workers and superiors, along with work tasks themselves. Another is that print materials are frequently used in different ways to transmit the company culture and expectations, sometimes taking the form of posted notices and fliers, sometimes embedded in other kinds of documents and their use, and often supported and modified through personal interaction [[See below](#)].

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We have found that the role of literacies in workplace learning and job training is a CONSTANT and has varying degrees of importance. For example, documents are used formally and informally in training, and the literacy demands in training may differ from those on the job. Documents are heavily used in quality improvement and control programs, in charting work flow and for accountability, for instance. We've observed that personalized and unofficial work documents are sometimes used discreetly by individual workers to perform their jobs more effectively. These literacy-related themes, of complex integration of work and literacy, communicating company culture, learning and training, quality, and individualized work strategies will be explored in depth through our ongoing analysis.

One example of literacy at work: Power relations

The following brief portrait of a document practice at one of our sites illustrates how print materials can be used by management to enact company policies but by employees to serve other purposes.

The Non-Conformance Report (NCR) is a one-page form that the textile factory uses to document non-conforming situations as part of the company's quality procedures. Examples of non-conforming situations might include the wrong yarn sent by a supplier or fabric that is out of spec. Management views the NCR as a critical tool for documenting problems as part of the company's continuous improvement process. They were concerned that the reports were not always completed as required, which they attributed to employees' skills or knowledge problems. But the researcher's conversations with workers showed another meaning given to NCRs. Language like "writing me up," "writing them up," and "against me" abounded in their stories about NCRs. One could be "written up" by a superior or co-worker. Some would not complete an NCR because they did not want to create bad relations with a co-worker. One woman said that she did not want to write up an NCR for dirty equipment because she knew which co-worker was responsible. But as it turned out, the co-worker wrote her up for the same problem. Other workers, with a sense of security, used NCRs to achieve their own goals. One man in Shipping and Receiving used the NCR to document what he considered the Lab's lack of promptness picking up yarn from him. He believed that writing NCRs was "a way to get people to pay attention". The lab employee, his "feathers ruffled", suggested that he could "find plenty" to write up against the shipper.

While management identified the problem with NCRs as primarily a skills or knowledge gap, there was clearly much more going on. In order to understand the dynamics of worker participation in literate practices, we must examine the incentives or disincentives for doing so within the existing power relationships at the workplace.

Conclusion

The increasing importance of literacy in current Canadian workplaces is well-established in workplace education conversations. Our study corroborates its importance. But we're also learning through our research that literacy is a complex, multi-faceted social practice, and our preliminary findings echo the perspectives of the emerging voices on workplace literacy cited above. A focus on skills alone can't answer questions about how people participate in literate practices at work. In practice, workplace literacy is densely interwoven with knowledge and experience, purposes, activities, social positions and social relationships. In order to understand and evaluate the place of literacy in Canadian work sites, we need to look more intensely at literacy from this perspective. As our study progresses, we will continue to communicate our developing analysis.

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In-Sites team members include the authors, and Mary Ellen Belfiore, Tracy Defoe and Nancy Jackson. For more information please contact principal investigator, Judy Hunter at juhunter@acs.ryerson.ca.

May 2000
