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Dominant workplace literacies in vernacular disguise: Disputable discourses at the production floor

Abstract

In this paper, I discuss the results of an ethnographic study on literacy practices drawn upon by machine operators in a car factory in Sweden. The aim of the paper is to show that the concepts dominant and vernacular literacy practices are problematic within workplace literacy research. Instead it is suggested that a focus should be placed on workplace discourses and especially on the distinction between institutional and professional discourse. The workplace in this study has introduced a total quality system and has therefore been highly textualized. The management has presented the new texts and the newly generated practices as worker-friendly and vernacular. The texts found on the central notice boards and the incident report forms are all introduced as practices that are there to assist the workers and make their work tasks easier. A no-blame culture is promoted as essential to these texts, meaning that the texts are there to prevent or locate problems and not to discipline the staff. The workers, however, see through the dominant nature of these texts and resist them by drawing upon a professional discourse, based upon their own work knowledge and experience. What is interesting is that they do not create new texts, but they internalize the already existing ones to fit their own purposes and interests.

Keywords: literacy practices, workplace texts, dominant literacies, vernacular literacies, workplace discourses, ethnography.

Introduction

The concept of *vernacular reading* and *vernacular writing* has been discussed within literacy studies as the opposite to dominant forms of reading and writing. Vernacular literacy practices have been described as having to do with aspects of our everyday life, as self-generated (Barton 2001) and unregulated and are usually associated with initiatives taken at a local level, influencing only at the level of the individual or of the community. These come into sharp contrast with reading and writing that originates from dominant institutions such

as schooling and authorities, which are usually imposed (Barton 2001), highly regulated and associated with disempowerment and constraint. Researchers within the field of New Literacy Studies have set out to unravel the breadth and significance that vernacular reading and writing has in people's lives and to question, in this way, a deficit model of literacy and the monopoly of dominant literacy practices within education (inter alia: Barton & Hamilton [1998] 2012; Barton, Hamilton & Ivanič 2000). Such studies have researched the role reading and writing plays at places outside traditional schooling and have significantly contributed to the creation of a broader and more complete picture of situated literacy.

A research field that has been the focus of much attention within the above described discipline is the workplace. Studies of situated literacy have revealed a rich inventory of literacy practices not only in professions where language has traditionally played an important role (such as lawyers, teachers, etc), but also and mainly in workplaces where physical labor had traditionally been dominant. Having as an aim to capture a complete picture of literacies within workplaces, these studies make reference to various forms of reading and writing and they often make clear reference to the dichotomy of dominant and vernacular, giving it new names and new forms. For example, in a study on administrative processes in an agricultural farm in France, Joly (2010) makes a distinction between "real writing work" and "compulsory writing work" and shows the different attitudes of farmers towards them. Similarly, on her account of the literacy practices generated by the ISO quality-control system in a high-tech company, Kleifgen (2005) refers to "official literacies" and "endogenous literacies". In these and other studies, the dominant forms of reading and writing are usually documentation forms created by the management and are often perceived by the employees as surveillance and/or discipline tools. These practices are opposed to reading and writing that is initiated by workers and is therefore meaningful to them, associated with feelings of ownership and empowerment (e.g. Folinsbee, 2004).

The question that this article seeks to answer is whether the dichotomy between dominant and vernacular literacy practices is still relevant when discussing literacy practices at today's post-modern workplace. The study discussed here is an ethnographic research of the literacy practices drawn upon by machine operators in a car factory in Sweden. This study suggests that the dominant is often disguised to vernacular and vice versa and the use of these terms therefore becomes blurry and perplex. However, what is evident is the use of

different discourses for different purposes and functions at the workplace and different discourses representing various aspects of dominant and vernacular literacy practices.

The question sought to be answered here can be better framed if we consider the deep changes on the role of workplace literacy and the way it influences the workers' practices and sense of identity, as described by workplace ethnographers the last twenty years (e.g. Hull 1997; Belfiore et al 2004). The increasing presence of texts in the post-modern workplace has been described as the outcome of the introduction of total quality methods that aim to ensure high performance, quality control and continuous improvement. Such methods have changed the role of workers in big industries, as they require them to be directly involved in achieving and controlling efficient production. Gowen (1996) argues that total quality methods could in theory prove to be empowering and democratic, as workers are given an equal saying to the managers and the opportunity to manage and control their own work. However, argues Gowen, management always retains the total control of the workers' practices, texts and discourses and the work towards standardization of performance and documentation does not provide them with the freedom and creativity necessary for empowerment. On the contrary, total quality methods often force workers to participate in literacy practices where the main objective is to police each other's work (Jackson 2000) and, as a result, they develop mistrust towards high performance and total quality methods.

Another characteristic of the post-modern workplace has been argued to be its highly collaborative nature (Brandt 2005; Searle 2010). Knowledge in the workplace is shared and belongs to teams and not to individuals. In this way, losing an employee does not necessarily mean losing specialized knowledge. Reading and writing are also collaborative practices as texts circulate within various departments and forms are worked up in groups. Many companies use collaborative writing in order to promote a 'no-blame culture', where the focus lies on the event described in the text and not on the people involved in it. Nikolaidou & Karlsson (2012a:42) have shown that collaborative writing is also used by the employees as a means of protecting themselves in cases of mistakes and as a means of negotiating the content and the language of the forms.

Finally and for all the above reasons, the post-modern workplace requires workers who are proficient users of texts and who have mastered the workplace discourses. Despite the strenuous efforts made by companies' management for standardization, Kleifgen (2005)

suggests that total quality discourses are taken up differently by different individuals and I would add by different workplaces. The employees' differing identities, cultures and experiences, as well as specific workplace discourses all have an impact on total quality literacy practices and therefore we can argue that the discourses involved in them develop on a local rather than on a global level.

Taking into consideration the extent to which the workplace has changed, it is worth asking whether the dichotomy between dominant and vernacular literacy practices is still relevant in this field. In workplaces that were associated with physical labor, vernacular knowledge was never put in paper, but was orally circulated. Additionally, labor work has usually been perceived as having low status and labor workers are often immigrants and therefore have been associated traditionally with non-dominant forms of literacy. These groups of people and their practices have for a long time been neglected and downplayed by both research and education. With the textualization of the workplace such neglected workplaces and their workers came into focus. The workplace started being discussed as a dominant institution and the literacy practices these same people drew upon at work were described as dominant, more formalized practices with more value, legally and culturally (Barton and Hamilton 2012:252). It seems like in our effort to define literacy practices as dominant or vernacular we need to make clear whether we are talking about people, texts, functions or practices.¹ And what happens when we talk about all these at once and we find big differences between them?

An alternative way of discussing the nature of workplace literacy practices is to use tools from discourse analysis. Searle (2002, 2010) argues that literacies at work are situated within the specific discourses of the individual workplace and that a good employee should engage successfully in those. In a previous study on the literacy practices of care-workers in the elderly care sector (Nikolaidou & Karlsson 2012b; Karlsson & Nikolaidou 2012), we showed that the employees were drawing upon three different discourses, an institutional (imposed by the management), a professional (based on the workers' knowledge and experience) and an individual (based on each worker's life background) discourse. Texts, practices and people in the research were discussed according to the discourse that was each time promoted and the identity projected through the decision to use one or the other

¹ Anna-Malin Karlsson, personal communication.

discourse. In this article, I use the concept of discourses using Gee's definition of Discourses (with a capital D), as "ways of being in the world or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes" (1996:127). What I aim to show here is that the workers of this study find themselves caught between the institutional and the professional "ways of being" at the workplace and it is often a fight for them to choose or to promote one of the two over the other.

The study

The study discussed here is a nine-month ethnographic research in three production departments of a car factory in Sweden. Data were collected through weekly participant observations at the production floor, informal discussions with the staff, ethnographic interviews and group interviews, as well as document collection from the field. The data consists of fieldnotes from observations, audio recordings of meetings and interview transcripts. These were analyzed using content and thematic analysis and the results were later discussed with the research participants in further meetings and informal interviews.

The research participants are production floor workers from three different departments at the production floor, as well as two middle managers who act as production leaders in these departments. The majority of the workers have a foreign background and those were specially invited to participate in the project, as one of the project's focuses has been to understand the role of Swedish as a second language at the workplace and the impact this has to the workers' sense of identity. The field of workplace literacy is relatively new in Sweden and only a few researchers have set out to study the role of literacy in work life and vocational education (e.g. Eriksson Gustavsson 2005; Karlsson 2006; Gunnarson 2011), whereas the second language factor has not been often taken into account (Karlsson & Nikolaidou 2012).

The workplace in this study had adopted a total quality system the last four years and each single process was managed and controlled through this system. The impression I initially got was that the total quality practices were long established and all the work practices were firmly regularized within this framework. The workers walked me through the departments and referred to the total quality system every time they explained their tasks and how they operated the machines. Reading and writing was an indispensable part

of the production process and texts were to be found everywhere in the departments. In an attempt to understand whether these texts and the practices around them were imposed by the management or initiated by the workers, I got mixed messages. I got the impression that some practices were originated by the management but were disguised in such a way to assimilate spontaneous reading and writing, whereas other practices should be more formal but were personalised and altered by the workers.

The notice board

An indicative case of the mixed practices in the factory was the notice boards. Every department had a notice board centrally placed and it was regarded as the lifeblood of all activity. Every shift began and ended with a staff meeting in front of a whiteboard. The team leader, who was also a machine operator, went through the different sections of the board, summarised the events of the previous shift and planned the activities of the next shift. Some of the sections to be found on the notice board were the following: 'good and bad news', 'security and environment', 'quality', 'production outcome', 'discrepancies', 'remedies', 'staff and shifts' 'schedule', 'contact list', 'team schedule', etc. The notice board was arranged in such a way to look approachable and user-friendly. It was promoted as a tool for the staff and all workers had access to it. They were encouraged not only to go through it regularly on a daily basis, but also to write on it and interact with it. They were told that language mistakes were not an issue and they should therefore not hesitate to write as long as they could make their message come through. In other words, the notice board was meant to be friendly to the staff and was promoted as a worker initiated practice. The structure of the board, its central placement, the way the meetings were taking place internally without any member of the management participating, were supposed to give the workers a feeling of independence and autonomy. They alone were planning their work, they were responsible for the production outcomes and for any discrepancies and they continuously had to come up with ideas in order to improve the department's running. The practices were given a highly vernacular and endogenous nature, both in what it concerns the people participating in them and the function they were fulfilling.

Even though the management promoted the notice board as a practice that would improve the departments' running, it was disliked by most of the workers. Even though they

saw some of its positive aspects, in our discussions they continuously expressed the belief that they were forced to use it in a specific way by the management. What was even more annoying to them was some of the texts on it that attempted to regulate their work in a way that they found unrealistic. For example, the 'production outcome' section indicated how many pieces should be produced by each machine daily, but the machinists claimed that these numbers were too ambitious, since they had not taken into consideration the time it takes to set up a machine, to follow the maintenance procedures, to correct possible mistakes, etc. At the end of the shift they had to write on the board how many pieces they had actually manufactured and if they had not reached the indicated target they had to use a pen with a different color to mark it. Some workers claimed that they just ignored these indications, since the time calculations were so unrealistic. Producing such a larger number of items, according to them, was not only too ambitious but also bad for the condition of the machines.

Another interesting section of the notice board was the one measuring the quality of the production. The workers were asked to use a chart and mark with green color every day that passed without any discrepancy and with red color those days when discrepancies occurred. The goal was to have as many days as possible marked with green and in the center of the chart they measured the total days in a row without any discrepancies. Many machinists argued that they did not see how these charts were helpful to them. Sometimes they laughed with them and some other times they simply ignored them. Similar charts and diagrams indicating the quality and the speed of the production were to be found for every machine, in many different shapes and colors.

Another function of the board, according to the management, was to lift the blame for possible mistakes from the individual and place it on the team. Nowhere on the board were any names mentioned. The 'discrepancies' section was mostly written using passive form, avoiding in this way to indicate the person in charge (e.g. "better cleaning needed in machine 404"). The machinists, however, felt that the 'no-blame culture' was fake, since it was possible for everyone to know who was held responsible for each machine at any given time and therefore who was to blame for any possible mistake, since all steps of the production were thoroughly documented. Another dimension of this practice was the collective blame. Collective responsibility was not always welcomed by the workers either,

and as one operator characteristically said “why should I take the shit for someone else’s mistakes?”

Jackson (2000:13) argues that the methods of generating and publicly displaying production data in order to monitor production standards also serves to publicly discipline poor performers. This is how the notice board was probably perceived by the machine operators: as a collection of dominant texts imposed by the management and intended to control, discipline and in some cases even punish. The workers used the notice board and sometimes even found it useful, but in our discussions it became obvious that they never ceased to perceive it as a practice imposed from above. In other words, it can be argued that the texts on the notice board were dominant texts disguised in a vernacular form. The management wanted the workers to feel comfortable with it and believe that it is there to help them and they did that by giving it an informal and almost sloppy look, by allowing them to write freely on it, by encouraging them to introduce new sections and by letting them have internal and informal meetings with the use of the board. The workers’ literacy practices around the board were a mixture of dominant and vernacular. Their choice to ignore the indicated production numbers and to ridicule the quality charts shows that they often distanced themselves from the institutional discourse. By saying to me that the indicated production numbers and the equivalent time calculated are unrealistic, they adopted a professional discourse towards their work tasks. They meant that they knew better how many pieces a machine could produce during a shift and trusted better their own knowledge and experience.

The ‘fast problem solving’ report

In case of a serious discrepancy the machinists were asked to fill in an incident report, entitled ‘fast problem solving’. In this form, they had to describe the incident, locate the cause of the problem and come up with possible solutions. The aim was that every operator would be able to fill in such a form, but for the time being they were working on them together with the team leader (a trained colleague) and the production leader (a manager). The report initiated a series of meetings with the aim to fill it in, discuss the problems and find common solutions. Once again, this report was presented to the workers as being a text that was meant to help them, a text through which they would locate common problems and find permanent solutions. They were all encouraged to fill in such reports on their own if

they could and here as well they were told that the language used in it was not important. Additionally, they were ensured that they did not need to include any names when indicating errors and that the aim was to locate the problem and not the person who had caused the mistake.

However, the dominant nature of this text was hard to escape, meaning that in reality it filled the institutional function of documenting errors. The 'fast problem solving' report was discussed by the workers as a complicated form with a lot of traps and unclear questions and this can be clearly seen from the fact that they often avoided working with them. Searle (2010) argues that workplace texts have an ideological nature and this is evident in this incident report. The workers were asked to locate the problem and this often meant to report themselves and their colleagues. For example, one of the form's questions is "Is this a recurring problem?" One of the machinists explained to me that this is a tricky question because if the answer is yes, they will then be accountable for not having found a solution the previous time the problem occurred. However, he explained, not all problems can be easily fixed and it is preferable to lie than to explain in writing why this has been a recurring problem. During the meetings, the machinists had long debates with the team and production leaders on the causes of the discrepancy and they would often disagree. In my observations, I noticed that the report was often used by the production leader as a means of questioning the workers and that they had to account for their actions, while they sometimes insisted on their own point of view.

The form called the machinists to look for possible trouble in all areas of the production: the people, the machines, the methods and the materials used. In order to fill it in therefore the workers had to debate and analyze the situation and then find the appropriate language to describe the problem. They seemed to feel the need to satisfy the managers by filling in the form, but at the same time to protect themselves and their colleagues. They often found ways around the report by postponing the meetings or participating in them by giving vague answers and claiming not to remember the events clearly. Other times they lied or ignored certain questions. They were willing and even anxious sometimes to find the cause of the discrepancies, but they did not believe this was the right way. Once again a dominant text was handled with the use of vernacular practices. The machinists employed a professional discourse and, when possible, filled in only those parts of the form that they found useful for their work. Efficiency and good working

conditions were more important to them than filling in a complicated form that was time consuming and did not usually result in problem solving.

The small number of worker-generated texts

A final interesting observation when it comes to the dichotomy between dominant and vernacular literacy practices in the car factory is the very limited use of typically vernacular practices, that is practices that were generated from the workers and did not belong to the total quality system. The most obvious one was a notebook, in one of the departments, which the machinists used to communicate with each other. This was a very informal notebook and was filled with quick notes, reminders and even drawings and a few jokes. The main purpose of the notebook was communication between shifts. In all other departments, the workers of different shifts communicated during the meeting in front of the notice board and the paperwork that was part of the quality system. Another vernacular practice had to do with a machinist that had recently been transferred in a new department and had to learn how to operate different kind of machines. He kept a personal notebook with reminders and instructions to himself. All other machinists used the formal instructions found close to the machines and only in case of emergencies. Finally, a machinist who was also the team leader for one of the departments once created a list with the aim to locate the exact machine that caused an error in a specific set of items constructed in their department. The list would circulate together with each individual item from machine to machine and from person to person in order to locate the exact time and place of the problem. This list was not part of the formal quality system, but the machinists seemed to welcome its use and, by using it, they managed to locate the problematic machine and solve the problem.

Unlike previous workplace ethnographies (e.g. Hull 1997), the literacy practices generated by the workers are indeed very few. The question that arises is what this suggests about the state of literacy at the post-modern workplace. A possible answer is that the standardization processes that are part of the total quality system have dominated to such an extent that vernacular practices have disappeared. Indeed the total quality system in this workplace had created texts for all possible cases and the management seemed to have foreseen almost all possible problems. Additionally, the documentation demands were so high that the workers found little time or energy to create new texts of their own. This also

gives space to a different possible explanation: the dominance of oral communication. Indeed, my observations show that the workers chose very often to overlook the official channel of documentation and solve their problems on the spot, by gathering in front of a machine every time a problem occurred and look for solutions. Most problems were tackled in this way, without the use of forms and without involving the production leader. Oral communication therefore was an additional vernacular practice and it meant avoiding the use of dominant texts and institutional discourses.

Discussion

The cases discussed above show that the total quality system in the car factory and the standardization processes that are part of it do not leave much space for initiatives and creativity from the part of the workers. The ideology promoted at the workplace is one of equal participation and shared responsibility. The workers are encouraged to use the paperwork that is part of the quality system in order to improve production efficiency and working environment. However, the workers often feel restricted by these literacy demands and do not see how they contribute to the smooth running of their departments. Instead, they believe that paperwork is a means of regulating their work, often in unrealistic ways, and a means of disciplining them and their colleagues in case of errors. The workers respond to the institutional demands by using a professional discourse, a discourse based on their professional knowledge and experience. They often use oral instead of written communication to solve their problems and when writing they focus on what they consider important for the department's efficiency and wellbeing. Additionally, they chose to ignore production calculations that they consider unrealistic and instead they work based on what they believe to be possible and good for the department, for the machines and for themselves. They cannot completely avoid using the dominant texts imposed by the management, but they evaluate their significance based on their professional experience and spend time and effort on them depending on how useful they find them to be for the completion of their work tasks.

Going back to the discussion on the terms 'dominant' and 'vernacular' literacy practices, it becomes clear that the use of these terms becomes problematic in a workplace setting. The hierarchical structures of the workplace shape the workers' literacy practices and one cannot always say with certainty whether the texts they work with are

institutionally imposed or informal and initiated by them. The total quality system invites workers to use dominant texts by disguising them and the workers' literacy practices into vernacular. The workers often react to these imposed texts by clearly expressing their dislike, by mocking them and by choosing not to use them or to use them in their own ways. Additionally, they are restricted from creating their own vernacular texts, as the flow of existing texts is so large that there does not seem to be enough space for initiatives when it comes to documentation.

What I have argued in this article is that instead of discussing literacy practices at the workplace in terms of dominant or vernacular, it is safer to focus on the discourses that the workers draw upon through their practices. The distinction between institutional, professional and individual discourses seems to apply well in workplace research, when it comes to the workers' literacy practices and texts. The institutional discourse is evident in all documentation practices as well as in the organizing structures of the departments. The total quality control system penetrates all aspects of the departments' running and all work practices, including texts, are formalized and standardized. The professional discourse originates from the workers' professional experience and their everyday social practices at the workplace. They are the ones in direct contact with the machines and they have therefore opinions about how things should be run. The data shows that this discourse is suppressed rather than enhanced by the total quality control system, but it finds expression in the different ways the workers deal with texts and in their oral interactions. In this study, I have not found evidence for the existence of the individual discourse, since it is difficult to argue with certainty which literacy practices can be connected to an individual (as opposed to a professional) discourse without a very close contact with each individual worker (see Karlsson & Nikolaidou 2012).

Farrell writes that texts which are meant to ensure standardization are used in many different ways at different places "according to the social, political, and historical contexts at the local site and the pragmatic conditions under which they operate" (2009:188). Instead of a number of dominant literacy practices, what the total quality system has created is a hybrid of practices with interplay between an institutional and a professional discourse. The workplace here becomes a connection point between the local and the global and thus between the dominant and the vernacular and the institutional and the professional and the way this is done is through the hybrid nature of the literacy practices put into play.

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