

# **Re-thinking workplace learning:**

**Worker subjectivity/ies as  
sites of alignment and  
resistance**

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**A thesis submitted to the University of Technology, Sydney, in fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**Faculty of Education  
August 2007**

## **CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY**

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Student

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## Acknowledgements

There are many people that need to be thanked for assisting me with the completion of this thesis. First, I would like to acknowledge the involvement of my supervisors on this project, Nicky Solomon, Hermine Scheeres and David Boud. All three have contributed to the development of this thesis in different ways and at different times. Dave, as chief investigator on the Uncovering Learning in the Workplace project played a key role at the beginning, particularly the initial conceptualisation. Nicky was incredibly generous throughout, in terms of the way she superbly introduced me to poststructural literature and the time she spent working with me on my ideas for the thesis. The ongoing discussions that we have had, even when she moved to another university on the other side of the world, far exceeded what one might expect from their supervisor. Hermine has had the 'tough slog' at the final stages, expertly guiding me through the 'wrapping-up' of a thesis that seemed impossible to 'wrap'. I would also like to thank Carolyn Williams for her generous contribution of ideas and feedback on sections of this thesis.

Just as important are the numerous conversations and coffees that I've had with my thesis writing friends and colleagues Donna Rooney, Julie Gustavs and Bernice Melville. I'd also like to thank my work colleagues at (the now defunct) OVAL research, UTS – Steven Yates, Clive Chappell, Geof Hawke and Jayne Groves.

Next I need to thank all those who participated in the Uncovering Learning in the Workplace project, particularly our research partner, as well as each of the workgroup members that were involved in the project. I am not able to name you because that would contravene ethics – it seems more unethical not naming you, but that is the politics of contemporary research. Crucial, also, was the financial support I received from the Australian Research Council in way of an APAI scholarship. This research would not have been undertaken without this scholarship and funding for the 'Uncovering Learning in the Workplace' project.

Finally a very special acknowledgement to my partner Erik, my daughter Pia and my dog Harry (Harry is no longer around, but he was a wonderful friend when he was alive). Erik, I would not have started this thesis if it wasn't for you and I most certainly would not have finished it! And thanks to Mum who continues to im-press with her ongoing commitment to her own genealogical explorations.

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## **Abstract**

The concern of this thesis is the way workplace learning is able to be known and spoken about and the effects of the contemporary privileging of an experiential learning discourse in the workplace. Following an analytic method outlined by Foucault, I explore a field of multiple and mobile force relations between professional developers, trade teachers, workplace learning academics, senior managers, organisational consultants and organisational learning theorists, and the purposes to which discourses of workplace learning might be put. The research site for the study was a recent industry-university collaboration that explored workplace learning in a large public sector organisation.

Using various organisational texts including: interview transcripts from workers participating in the industry-university research project, documents produced during the project, documents produced by a Professional Development Unit (the industry partners on the project), and academic texts on organisational learning, I examine the circulation and intersection of different workplace learning discourses. I also examine the positioning, position taking and resistances around the subject position of 'the workplace learner' in a workplace.

A number of Foucauldian themes guide the analyses in this thesis including: power as multiformed, power as relational, the distribution of power, multiple subjectivities, and subjectivity as a site of resistance. This enables an examination of workplace learning discourses as instruments of power, but also as providing points of resistance.

This thesis makes a significant contribution to knowledge in the fields of organisational learning and workplace learning by foregrounding complex mechanisms whereby technologies of power interplay with technologies of the self. These citings/sitings/sightings of power and subjectivity have implications for professional development practices and the 'management' of workplace learning, as well as the practices of workplace and organisational learning researchers.



## CHAPTER 1

### Shifting boundaries

#### Introduction

The boundaries between work and learning are no longer as distinct as they once might have seemed. It could be said that learning has escaped from its traditional location in educational institutions and has been ‘uncovered’ in other sites, including those of the workplace (eg. Boud, Solomon and Rooney, 2006). Indeed, the workplace is now even named by some as the Learning Organisation (Garvin, 1993; Marsick and Watkins, 1990; Senge, 1995). Similarly, work has crossed institutional boundaries and is increasingly counted as learning within the academy. For example, many undergraduate degrees incorporate a work-based learning component, professional doctorates are now available in various disciplines and work-based learning sometimes comprises entire degree programs (Boud and Solomon, 2001a; Solomon and McIntyre, 2000). The blurring of boundaries between work and learning both contributes to, and is the consequence of, emerging workplace learning discourses; and these discourses provide ways of conceptualising and organising contemporary workplaces and educational institutions (Contu, Grey and Ortenblad, 2003; Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996).

This thesis examines the circulation of workplace learning discourses, both in the organisational learning literature and in a contemporary workplace, and the different tactical functions to which discourses of workplace learning might be put. Following a method described by Foucault (1998, pp. 92-102) and introduced below, and using the Uncovering Learning in the Workplace project<sup>1</sup> as a research site,<sup>2</sup> I explore a field of multiple and mobile force relations between professional

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<sup>1</sup> A recent Australian Research Council (ARC) funded project that explored everyday learning in the workplace (or learning embedded in workplace practices).

<sup>2</sup> Foucault (1998, p. 98) advocates starting at: “local centers” of power-knowledge: for example, the relations that obtain between penitents and confessors, or the faithful and their directors of conscience, to explore power-knowledge formations.

developers, workers, workplace learning academics, senior managers and organisational learning theorists.

Using various texts, including interview transcripts from workers participating in the Uncovering Learning project, documents produced during the project, documents produced by the Professional Development Unit (the industry partners on the project), and academic texts on organisational learning I examine how workplace learning was able to be spoken about, and by whom, and the effects of knowing workplace learning in particular ways. This analysis directs attention to the different purposes to which discourses of workplace learning might be put, and:

*the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy (Foucault, 1998, p. 101).*

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault proposed the following questions be asked in order to explore emerging discourses of sex in Victorian times (1998, pp. 97-98):

*In a specific type of discourse on sex, in a specific form of extortion of truth, appearing historically and in specific places...what were the most immediate, the most local power relations at work? How did they make possible these kinds of discourses, and conversely, how were these discourses used to support power relations? How was the action of these power relations modified by their very exercise, entailing a strengthening of some terms and a weakening of others, with effects of resistance and counter investments, so that there has never existed one type of stable subjugation, given once and for all? How were these power relations linked to one another to the logic of a great strategy, which in retrospect takes on the aspect of a unitary and voluntarist politics of sex? In general terms: rather than referring all the infinitesimal violences that are exerted on sex, all the anxious gazes that are directed at it, and all the hiding places whose discovery is made into an impossible task, to the unique form of a*

*great Power, we must immerse the expanding production of discourses on sex in the field of multiple and mobile power relations.*

The above quote informs the research agenda of this thesis. Similar questions are asked and a similar analysis undertaken in order to examine discourses of workplace learning and the way these discourses act both as an instrument of power, but also as points of resistance.

The trigger for this analysis came from my participation in the Uncovering Learning in the Workplace project, a three-year, collaborative research project between an Australian university and their industry partner, a large public sector organisation. Using qualitative methods from the social sciences, a cross-institutional research team of academics and professional development practitioners set out to 'uncover' learning in this workplace. As a university-industry partnership, this knowledge would provide the basis for the development of interventions that could be used to further enhance learning in the workplace. In this sense the project both came out of, and contributed to, the production, circulation and consumption of learning discourses in the workplace.

While this might suggest homogeneity and unity in terms of the way workplace learning was known and understood, the project was a site of intersecting discourses and contestation around the meaning of workplace learning and the purposes to which discourses of workplace learning might be put. For example, the project provided a space for the intersection of the institutional discourses of the academy, a site traditionally understood as a site of learning, and the institutional discourses of the workplace, a site traditionally understood as a site of labour and production. This is not, however, to suggest that discourses of learning were not already in circulation in this workplace. Indeed it is the bumping together and intersection of different learning discourses that is of interest here. The project was also a site where various disciplinary knowledges and approaches to learning intersected, as well as a site for the intersection of workplace learning discourses and other discourses in circulation in a contemporary workplace. Thus, the Uncovering Learning project provided a site for exploring both alignments and

contestation associated with the circulation of workplace learning discourses in a contemporary workplace.

My participation in the Uncovering Learning project generated numerous questions connected with my interest in the relationships between power, knowledge and the shaping of worker subjectivity/ies (du Gay, 1996a; Rose, 1996, 1999a, 1999b). These questions went beyond the scope of the Uncovering Learning project and include:

- What learning discourses are in circulation in the workplace?
- Where do these discourses come from?
- What are the effects of the circulation of these discourses in the workplace? For example, what subjects do these discourses construct as seemingly natural? And how do professional developers talk about workers and learning at work?
- What happens when different workplace learning discourses intersect?
- What happens when workplace learning discourses intersect with other discourses in circulation in the workplace?

These questions guide the investigation central to this thesis and the structure of the thesis. These questions are explored through the chapters that follow.

I illustrate my methodological approach in the remaining part of this chapter through juxtaposing my interests and concerns in relation to learning at work with the questions of the Uncovering Learning project. While my doctoral research was enmeshed with the Uncovering Learning project, I explored different questions from those asked by the project. In the next section I provide an introduction to the Uncovering Learning project by describing the players, the project research design and the goals of the project. This more traditional account of a research project and knowledge production is followed by an autobiographical account of my introduction to the project and how this led to the thesis. This story introduces the multiple learning discourses in circulation in the Uncovering Learning project and the manifold objectives in relation to workplace learning. I conclude this introductory chapter by providing a brief outline of the chapters that follow.

## **Introducing the Uncovering Learning project**

The Uncovering Learning project was an Australian Research Council funded project and part of the Strategic Partnerships with Industry – Research and Training (SPIRT) program. SPIRT programs have since been replaced by Linkages programs but the goal of both these programs is to encourage research partnerships between industry and the academy, and the production of ‘new knowledge’.

As a SPIRT funded project, the Uncovering Learning project involved a research partnership between an Australian university and their industry partner, a state government department. More specifically, workplace learning academics from a university research centre, which will be referred to in this thesis as the Research Centre for Workplace Learning (RCWL), worked in partnership with professional development staff from the industry partner organisation to explore the significance of everyday learning (or learning embedded in everyday work practices and experience) in the PSE workplace.

The RCWL is located within a Faculty of Education in a metropolitan university in Australia. This university will be referred to as City University throughout the thesis. The RCWL conducts research in the interrelated areas of organisational, vocational, and adult learning. The mission statement of the research centre positions its interests in the following way:

*[RCWL] aims to be a leader in researching and developing understandings about new forms of knowledge and learning that are emerging through the changing nature of work and educational institutions and their relationships.*

The academics from the RCWL might be understood (by some) as authorities on workplace learning and, indeed, it was because of their expertise in this knowledge domain that they were able to enter into a collaborative relationship with their industry partner in order to investigate learning in this workplace.

The site for the exploration of workplace learning (or everyday learning) was an educational organisation in the post-school sector. This organisation provides state

government funded vocational education and training (VET) in NSW and is itself a learning institution. However, rather than focusing on this organisation as a VET provider, the interest in the Uncovering Learning project was on the organisation as a workplace and a potential site of everyday learning for organisational members.

The post-school educational institution, the industry partner in the Uncovering Learning project, is a large public sector organisation in NSW. This organisation will be referred to as post-school education (PSE) throughout the thesis. PSE has various campuses located throughout NSW which are grouped by geographic region into 'colleges'. PSE is a large organisation and employs approximately 35,000 people in NSW.

A group of professional developers from PSE, referred to in this thesis as the Professional Development Unit, were the industry partner representatives on the Uncovering Learning project. The Professional Development Unit is a centrally organised group and act as a broker of professional development knowledge and services to the colleges. The actual provision of staff training is generally conducted at the college level, usually by professional development staff. The Professional Development Unit describe their role in PSE, on the PSE intranet, in the following way:

*The [Professional Development Unit] is committed to supporting [PSE] staff in acquiring and maintaining the skills and capabilities essential for [PSE] to maintain its position as the leading vocational education and training provider in Australia.*

The researchers conducting the empirical work of the Uncovering Learning project (referred to in this chapter as 'the research group' and in later chapters as 'the researchers'), could be described as a cross-boundary group, as members were from both City University and PSE, as well as across various disciplinary areas. In this sense, the research group can be thought of as an exemplification of their object of study – the blurring of boundaries between work and learning. The research group comprised two academics from City University, both recognised internationally in the field of workplace learning; a representative of PSE who

worked in the professional development unit; a part-time research associate; and a doctoral student who had migrated to the Faculty of Education from a School of Industrial Relations and Organisation Behaviour at another university. I am the doctoral student.

While all the members of the research group had some connection with workplace learning, as a cross-boundary group our disciplinary backgrounds and research interests were very different. We were a 'heterogeneous assemblage' of players (Rose, 1996). For example, Associate Professor 'N' had a background in education/linguistics; Professor 'D', in adult education/physics; Janice,<sup>3</sup> the research associate, in sociology; Eva, our industry partner, in psychology; and myself with a background in visual arts/psychology/organisation studies. Not only were we a heterogeneous group but the forward slashes ("/) and multiple disciplinary backgrounds suggest that our 'selves' were not very unified either.

The research group worked in 'collaboration' with four workgroups from PSE over the duration of the three-year project. The scare quotes signal a problematisation of the term 'collaboration' (Scheeres and Solomon, 2000; Solomon, 2000) and the complexity of such researcher/researched relationships (MacLure, 2003; Wray-Bliss, 2003). The four workgroups were nominated by senior management from PSE to participate in the Uncovering Learning project and selected by the research group as they were considered reasonably representative of the varying hierarchical levels and occupational 'types' across this large work organisation. One workgroup comprised senior level managers at a college; another, a group of trade teachers at the same college; a third group worked in a human resources unit at a different college performing administrative functions such as payroll; and the final group was operating in a commercial capacity and providing business related training to external organisations. The four workgroups were located at two different PSE colleges.

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<sup>3</sup> Janice later left the project and was replaced by Debbie who, with a background in adult education and a desire to gain entry to an academic position in this discipline (she was currently undertaking her doctorate in this area) was more closely aligned with the workplace learning academics.

A qualitative methodology, incorporating the collection and analysis of interview data, was used throughout the Uncovering Learning project. In this sense the project followed an established model of research where researchers: enter the workplace, collect data, analyse the data, and then report the findings to the research partner, academic communities and other relevant stakeholders. The collection of data was conducted in two stages. Stage One involved initial interviews conducted with individual workers from each of the four workgroups. Twenty three interviews were conducted, each approximately one hour in duration, where workers talked about the challenges and changes involved in their work. The interviews were transcribed and analysed with different members of the research group focusing on different aspects of the data. For example, one area of interest was the way learning was and was not spoken about by members of the workgroups; another was a typology of learning in the workplace; a third analysed the workgroups using communities of practice indicators.

At the completion of Stage One the preliminary findings in relation to everyday learning were reported back to each of the workgroups, separately, at specially organised sessions. These sessions were designed as discussion sessions with an exploratory focus rather than occasions where the researchers simply told the workgroups what they had found. These sessions also did the 'setting-up' work for the next stage of the research.

Stage Two of the project comprised a series of workgroup meetings where a particular learning theme relevant to the group was explored. For example, the theme for the trade teachers was named *learning through the challenge of new students*, and for the senior managers, *learning through transition*. Themes were also developed for the Human Resource administrators: *learning through adopting a learning position*; and the workplace trainers: *learning through becoming*. These two workgroups, however, failed to participate in Stage Two of the project. The Human Resource administrators had their attention diverted to a more immediate concern with a restructure taking place in their section and the workplace trainers were virtually impossible to contact as they were out doing their job, which was conducting training in other workplaces. At the completion of Stage Two a final



discussion meeting was held with each of the workgroups and this information was used to compile a report for circulation throughout the wider PSE organisation on everyday learning in this workplace. As a member of the research group I was involved in most aspects of the project including the project planning meetings, the interviewing, the analysis of the interviews, the feedback sessions, and the Stage Two workgroup meetings.

This description, however, is beginning to sound very neat and cohesive and the Uncovering Learning project was anything but that. This is not however to suggest that this particular project was somehow deviant and lacking, but rather as symptomatic of the way that research and the production of knowledge is a messy and complex business (Bauman, 1993; Foucault, 1980; Harman, 2004; Latour, 1993; Law, 1994; MacLure, 2003). For example, my multiple positionings as both a member of the research group and 'the doctoral student' begin to flag this complexity. Was I meant to be a 'knower' or a 'learner' on this project? And in relation to whom? This was further complicated by my doctoral supervisors being the academic investigators on the project. How might I take up the position of 'the critical scholar', a position produced through the discourses of the academy, while being a productive member of the research group and contributing to the performative objectives of the project?

While I have suggested in the previous paragraph that the production of knowledge is messy, this messiness tends to disappear in the textual products of research (Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn and Walkerdine, 1998; Latour, 1987; Law, 1992; Rooney, Boud, Harman, Leontios and Solomon, 2003). Using the methods of science, the privileged mode for producing academic knowledge, research accounts work to construct seemingly objective and neutral findings (Latour, 1987). However, poststructural theorists point out that knowledge is never neutral and meanings are never fixed (Weedon, 1987). Through foregrounding the discursive mechanisms whereby knowledge is produced, as part of my thesis, I re-write the Uncovering Learning project as a site of struggle and contestation: a struggle around the meaning of learning at work, and depending on the meanings that become fixed as 'the truth' of workplace learning, who workers might 'be' and how they

might act and be acted on. This is a different view of knowledge production to the view offered in much of the organisational learning literature and one that weaves power back into an account of knowledge producing activities.

## **My interests, concerns and methods**

(taking up the position of 'the doctoral student')

I joined the Uncovering Learning project at the end of August, 2001. I had responded to a newspaper advertisement for an APAI (Australian Postgraduate Award – Industry) research scholarship that was attached to the Uncovering Learning project. The advertisement briefly described the APAI scholarship and the Uncovering Learning project, and both had great appeal for a number of reasons. I was nearing the completion of a Master's research thesis in the field of organisational studies at another university and I had decided that I wanted to 'be' an academic. In general, in contemporary Australian universities a doctorate is a minimal qualification to gaining a tenured position. I was therefore eager and complicit in taking up the position of 'the doctoral student' as it provided me with an opportunity to gain access to the academy.

The ARC funded research was advertised as being in the field of workplace learning<sup>4</sup> which was even more appealing. My (most recent) disciplinary background was in organisational studies.<sup>5</sup> The research also linked to part of my (also hybrid) employment history – the part that was in the field of training and development. Perhaps I could begin to weave some connecting threads into my fragmented academic-trainer-artist biography? But probably the most appealing aspect of the research was that it was a collaborative project with industry. At last, 'real' access to a 'real' workplace over an extended period of time to find out the 'real truth' of workplace learning. An organisational researcher's dream come true.

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<sup>4</sup> At the time I applied for the position I did not realise that workplace learning and organisational learning have quite different meanings, at least for some workplace learning theorists.

<sup>5</sup> I say most recent because I am a bit of a disciplinary hybrid (Czarniawska, 2003), having traversed the disciplinary areas and fields of practice of fine arts, psychology and organisational studies. Also, the field of organisational studies is far from cohesive and unified.

## **Meeting ‘the Chief Investigator’**

(where I am positioned within the hierarchy of the academy)

I met with the Chief Investigator of the Uncovering Learning project to discuss my application for the doctoral scholarship. This meeting took place in his office. I was impressed – it was as you might imagine an academic’s office to be – full of texts, from ceiling to floor. I scanned the shelves for titles that I recognised and came across some familiar names – Senge (1990), Argyris and Schön (1978); more Schön: *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983); Nonaka (1995); Marsick and Watson (1990); Kolb (1984). I kept scanning and found others – Zuboff (1988), and Morgan (1997). That was more like it, perhaps we might have some common ground after all. There was a very large desk at one end of the room with a Macintosh computer that occasionally croaked as incoming emails appeared, and at the other end, three comfortable chairs around a low table. Even though the professor and I sat in the comfortable chairs, the chairs that are meant to take the pressure off, to equalise, I did not feel like an equal. We talked about the project and my current research. As it turned out the professor knew my master’s supervisor from the days when he had also worked at the same university. Then he asked: *What have you found in your research?* and I mumbled something about developing a grounded theory and it still being work in progress. I felt uncertain, cautious, tense. I felt like I needed to perform – but whom or what was I meant to be performing? (It was not until later that I realised that I was meant to be performing ‘the doctoral student’, that is, ‘the learner’). But it took me some time to work this out and at this meeting I (mistakenly) tried to perform as ‘the knower’. But perhaps one thing that worked in my favour was that at the end of the meeting I asked him to recommend a text that might give me a good overview of the field of workplace learning. At last, I was performing ‘the doctoral student’. And so I entered the field of workplace learning.

## **More positionings**

On commencing my doctoral research I found out more about the Uncovering Learning project and how my research should fit within the scope of the project. The focus of the Uncovering Learning project was on how learning might be better

understood in the workplace. For example, in the project proposal written for the ARC, the research questions were initially proposed as:

1. *How do employees construct learning through their work relationships for their own benefit and for that of their work, thereby furthering the strategic goals of the organisation?*
2. *What conceptions of learning do employees hold and how do these limit their opportunities and those of the organisation for learning*
3. *What formal interventions can be made in the organisation to maximise the identification and utilisation of learning opportunities without undermining the effectiveness of existing learning processes?*

The Uncovering Learning project would produce knowledge about workplace learning thereby enabling learning in this work organisation to be enhanced. In the above text, learning is conceived as a solution to enhancing both individual and organisational performance. It is in this sense that the project can be understood as coming out of a modernist epistemological tradition where the social sciences are used as a way of knowing 'the truth' about the social world, in this case the object of knowledge being processes of learning in the workplace. Once 'the truth' of workplace learning was inscribed through the research practices of the Uncovering Learning project, then learning interventions for enhancing learning at work might be developed.

Not surprisingly, my doctoral research was to fit within what could be described as the performative focus of the collaborative research project, with its emphasis on output-driven knowledge (Usher, 2000; Usher and Solomon, 1998). For example, in the same document the doctoral research was positioned in the following way:

*The APAI will undertake a discrete, but integrated, part of the overall study focusing on an analysis of the outcomes of learning 'on-site' at work compared with 'off-site' learning outcomes from university and [PSE].*

I was happy enough to perform in this way – to produce a thesis that met with the performative requirements of the project – as this also suited my purpose, which was to gain my doctorate. Indeed, the sense of promiscuity associated with selling my services to this organisation (but which one? ARC, PSE, City University? or all of the above?) provided a certain appeal. And this way of doing research was ‘normal’ for me. I was unfamiliar with an approach outside of a scientific frame and other ways of playing the research game (eg. Scheeres and Solomon, 2000; Stronach and MacLure, 1997).

However, my association with the Uncovering Learning project has not been without tension and my discomfort was in part connected with the scholarly work that I brought with me to the project and the contradictions this produced. When I first joined the Uncovering Learning project preliminary work had already commenced. The rest of the research group had been working together for about four months exploring conceptual frameworks and developing a research design for the project. At the time of my entry the research group was exploring the potential of communities of practice as a conceptual framework for examining everyday learning at work. This seemed like a good place to start as it was a concept receiving considerable attention in the organisational literature (eg. Brown and Duguid, 1991; Contu and Willmott, 2000; Easterby-Smith, 1997; Gherardi, Nicolini and Odella, 1998; Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). I began reading Wenger’s (1998) *Communities of Practice*, and while this was in many ways a seductive text (Harman, 2003), I was not completely persuaded. My resistance was connected with my alignment with critical management theory in the field of Human Resource Management and my identity as an organisational researcher and critical scholar.

As I indicated previously, prior to commencing work on the Uncovering Learning project I had been undertaking a Master’s research thesis with a School of Industrial Relations and Organisational Behaviour at another university. I had also been working as a casual academic in the area of Human Resource Management (HRM)/Organisational Behaviour. During the past decade the field of organisational behaviour/HRM has been deluged with literature on organisational learning and

this topic has been integrated into the curriculum of many management subjects at universities. I have been both a student and teacher of management subjects that incorporate an organisational learning component. Often the work of Senge (1990) and Argyris and Schön (1996), with their emphasis on enhanced organisational performance through the introduction of reflective practices in the workplace, are used to provide an introduction into this field of knowledge in HRM subjects.

As well as this more mainstream view of organisational learning, a more critical focus is provided in the critical management literature (Boje, 1994; Contu *et al.*, 2003; Contu and Willmott, 2003; Coopey, 1996; Coopey and Burgoyne, 2000; Fulop and Rifkin, 1999; Snell and Chak, 1998). The critical literature draws attention to power and the way organisational learning is used by management as an ideological tool for furthering their own interests through ‘falsely’ aligning workers with their goals.

It was the critical management literature, with its focus on power, that I found most persuasive and which I brought with me to the project. I came into the project with the idea of wanting to ‘trouble’ the unitarist<sup>6</sup> assumptions of work organisations presented in much of the mainstream organisational learning literature. My idea was that, following a reality versus rhetoric style of argument (Legge, 1995), I would be able to show the limitations of a mainstream perspective by offering a more ‘truthful’ representation of organisational reality gained from my empirical research and reading in critical management. In other words, I would use the methods of science to reveal the ‘truth’ about workplace learning. But my participation in the Uncovering Learning project has connected me with other ways of knowing than those offered by the social sciences, enabling me to move outside a reality/rhetoric (or scientific/ideology) binary (Henriques *et al.*, 1998; Latour, 1988).

Initially, my interests and concerns were focused on the question of whether workplace learning empowers or disempowers workers? However, following Foucault’s analytics of government which enables a move outside of Enlightenment binaries such as power-freedom and science-ideology (Flax, 1990; Foucault, 1982,

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<sup>6</sup> An Industrial Relations term where employee goals are assumed to be aligned with organisational goals (see Fox, 1974).

1998; Ransom, 1997; Rose, 1999b), and an individual-society dualism which prevails in the social sciences (Henriques *et al.*, 1998), my emphasis shifted to exploring the complexities of the connections between relations of power, knowledge and emerging workplace learning discourses. These conceptual themes are explored further in Chapter 2.

### **Renegotiating the thesis**

While the gaze of the Uncovering Learning project was on everyday learning in the workplace, with the implication that through a better understanding of everyday learning interventions might be developed to enhance workplace learning, I was able to renegotiate this focus for my doctoral research. My gaze moved to the production of workplace learning knowledges and the competing ways of giving meaning to the world (and of acting on workers) that are enabled through the circulation of various learning discourses in the workplace. In this sense the doctoral research has been used to make space for questions that could not be asked in the Uncovering Learning project and to open up the meaning of workplace learning to ongoing reconceptualisation.

Using Linstead's (no date) play on re-citing, re-siting, re-sighting, where she calls for different ways of speaking, knowing and seeing in undertaking organisational research, my thesis could be described as a re-citing/re-siting/re-sighting of workplace learning. While the texts of the Uncovering Learning project cited/sited/sighted everyday learning as a solution to producing more productive workers in the PSE workplace (this is discussed further in Chapter 5), thus contributing to discourses of 'the truth' on workplace learning, I rewrite the Uncovering Learning project as a site of struggle over the meaning of learning rather than a site for the production of neutral knowledge on workplace learning. This re-writing of the project reintroduces the subject of power in knowledge-producing activities. By directing attention to the ways discourses regulate what can and cannot be said about learning in the workplace, and the material effects of the circulation of workplace learning discourses in terms of the ways workers can be conceived and acted on (Foucault, 1982; Henriques *et al.*, 1998; Patton, 1994; Rose, 1999a), an understanding of knowledge as separable from power is disrupted.

## **Discourses of learning, work and workers**

When I first started work on the Uncovering Learning project I felt like Sarup's (1996, p. 10) *stranger* in the Faculty of Education:

*Strangers are, in principle, undecidables. They are unclassifiable. A stranger is someone who refuses to remain confined to the 'far away' land or to go away from our own. S/he is physically close while remaining culturally remote. Strangers often seem to be suspended in the empty space between a tradition which they have left and the mode of life which stubbornly denies them the right of entry. The stranger blurs a boundary line. The stranger is an anomaly, standing between the inside and the outside, order and chaos, friend and enemy.*

The workplace learning academics working on the project spoke about workplace learning in a very different way to the way I knew and understood learning and this drew attention to our disciplinary differences and boundaries. And neither do all the academics in the Faculty of Education speak the same language of learning. There are multiple discourses of learning in circulation in this faculty.

On commencing my doctoral research, I was introduced to poststructural perspectives on work and learning (eg. Chappell, Rhodes, Solomon, Tennant and Yates, 2003; Edwards and Usher, 2000b; Garrick, 1998; Garrick and Rhodes, 1998; Gee *et al.*, 1996; Rhodes and Garrick, 2002; Scheeres, 2004a, 2004b; Solomon, 2003; Solomon and Rhodes, 2003; Usher and Solomon, 1999). Many of the researchers working at RCWL,<sup>7</sup> including one of my supervisors, were using poststructural approaches to theorise workplace learning. This approach directs attention to the identity work that is performed in workplaces and the production of subjects through the discursive practices of the workplace. In other words, it explores the 'who' we learn to be at work.

A poststructural approach had great appeal as it provided a language for talking about multiplicities, indeterminacy and messiness (Bauman, 1993; Law, 1994;

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<sup>7</sup> The same physical space where my work area was located.



MacLure, 2003), all the 'contagion' that I had managed to disinfect through the cleaning work of social science methods in my Master's research. But it also produced a huge tension for me – how could power possibly be productive? I was imbued with a critical management focus where power is understood as only taking the form of oppression and constraint.

Following on from Sarup's (1996) migratory metaphors where he talks of strangers and frontiers, the Uncovering Learning project can be thought of as a 'frontier'. Frontiers are both barriers, and places of communication and exchange. While I was a stranger in this new territory, the project connected me with new people and new ideas that have been very productive, this thesis being one example. It is in this sense that the assemblages (or connections) of the Uncovering Learning project have produced specific material effects (Rose, 1996).

This autobiographical tale draws attention to the tensions that my entry into the project and the crossing of disciplinary boundaries produced, and I suggest these are related to identity and discourse. One way this story can be read is that I represented the discourses of management and organisation on the project and indeed (one way), I understand my 'self' is as an organisational researcher. This produced tension as I drew on very different discourses to talk about learning from those of the workplace learning academics, with this tension exemplifying the (sometimes) problematic union of the institutional discourses of the workplace and the academy. For example, I could not understand why the workplace learning theorists did not use a consultancy model in this project and establish action learning groups in each of the workgroups (eg. Cunningham, 1993; Evered and Louis, 1981; Whyte and Lentz Hamilton, 1965). In my experience in business and management schools, the site of my previous academic 'apprenticeship', a consultancy model for undertaking research in workplaces is 'normal' (eg. Gummesson, 1991).

Another tension was produced through my alignment with the critical management literature and the particular take on power that I brought with me to the project. The notion of productive power, an important theme in a poststructural sighting, was anathema; as was the mainstream organisational learning approach that

represents learning at work as always empowering, a frequent recitation by the professional developers working on the project. And while I was different from the professional developers, there were also similarities. I too had been 'apprenticed' in the methods of social science, and I too believed that there was a truth to be revealed about workplace learning through the empirical work of the project.

Being positioned as 'the doctoral student' in the project also created discomfort as it produced tension with my identity as a 'knower' and a 'Master of Commerce' and being an experienced organisational researcher. The knowledge I brought with me to the project no longer seemed to count. I came from a land of theoretical dinosaurs. It could be said that the discourses that regulated my research practice, and the way I knew and spoke about work, workers and learning at work, intersected with those of other members of the research group.

As the Uncovering Learning project moved through each of its stages with the production of various texts including: project proposals, meetings, conference papers and reports; thereby discursively constructing 'the workplace learner'; the Foucauldian concept of governmentality, while producing tension, also offered promise. Governmentality draws attention to the relationships between power, knowledge and subjectivity (eg. Burchell, Gordon and Miller, 1991; Dean, 1994, 1999; Foucault, 1991b; Rose, 1989). In this view, knowledge is never neutral and has very material effects. As an organisational researcher and producer of knowledge on workplace learning, I am entangled in networks of power that work to re-produce particular modes of worker subjectivity as seemingly natural (Butler, 1992; Rose, 1989; Walkerdine, 1997; Weedon, 1987). However, these networks of power operate largely unnoticed both in the academy and in the workplace. Weedon (1987, p. 126) points out that:

*In order to develop strategies to contest hegemonic assumptions and the social practices which they guarantee, we need to understand the intricate network of discourses, the sites where they are articulated and the institutionally legitimized forms of knowledge to which they look for their justification.*

## **Organisation of the thesis**

Taking up Weedon's suggested areas of focus, that is: discourses, local sites and legitimized forms of knowledge, I have organised my thesis in the following way:

### Chapter 2 – Using Foucault

In this chapter I discuss the theoretical concepts that frame the thesis. I am using Foucault's work on governmentality (1980, 1982, 1988, 1991a, 1991b, 1998), which draws attention to the relationships between power, knowledge and subjectivity to explore processes of subjectification in the PSE workplace and the tactical uptake of discourses during the Uncovering Learning project. I introduce a number of Foucauldian themes in this chapter that are used throughout the thesis including: power as multiformed; power as relational; the distribution of power; multiple subjectivities; and subjectivity as a site of resistance.

### Chapter 3 – Exploring workplace learning discourses

In this chapter I examine the learning discourses in circulation in the organisational learning literature. I focus on this literature as these are the learning discourses in circulation in the research site. I group the organisational learning literature into three areas: a mainstream view where learning is understood as always empowering, and as a process of rational reflection on experience; a critical approach where learning at work is viewed as disempowering and the means for maintaining ideological control of workers; and a communities of practice approach where learning at work is understood as a process of socialisation. A discursive analysis enables particular meanings of social reality embedded in these theories to be made more explicit.

### Chapter 4 – Constructing 'the workplace learner' subject

In this chapter I analyse two organisational learning texts, Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* (1990) and Wenger, McDermott and Snyder's *Cultivating Communities of Practice* (2002), in terms of the subjects these texts construct as seemingly natural. These particular texts have been selected for analysis as they provide a discursive frame (a way of thinking, talking about and doing workplace learning) for a group of professional developers in the PSE workplace (see Chapter 7). This chapter

directs attention to the construction of 'the workplace learner' in the mainstream organisational literature as either: an autonomous, self-developing subject through the circulation of an experiential learning discourse; or a collaborative, organisationally aligned subject through the circulation of a communities of practice discourse.

#### Chapter 5 – Governing the subject

This chapter explores the imbrication of knowledge and power by focusing on the Uncovering Learning project, a site for the development of knowledge about workplace learning. I examine the alignments and contestations of the project, with a focus on the professional developers and the workplace learning academics. While the professional developers (at times) drew on similar learning discourses to those used by the workplace learning academics, these discourses were used for different purposes. The stories about the Uncovering Learning project in this chapter provide a different account of knowledge production to that made available in much of the organisational learning literature where knowledge/knowledge production is understood as a linear and rational process, and thus separable from power and politics.

In Chapters 6, 7 and 8, I examine the intersection of discourses of workplace learning, introduced by the researchers on the Uncovering Learning project, with discourses in circulation in three workgroups in the PSE workplace. Through analysing the take up and failure to take up the subject position of 'the workplace learner' by workers in PSE, I am able to explore when and for whom a workplace learning discourse has appeal, and for what purposes discourses of workplace learning might be put. This analysis foregrounds the tactical function of discourse and the ways subject positions provide both positions of alignment and positions of resistance.

#### Chapter 6 – 'The intelligentsia'

In Chapter 6, I examine the intersection of workplace learning discourses with discourses in circulation in a group of senior managers in the PSE workplace. My focus in this chapter is on Beryl, a newly appointed director of the senior managers' workgroup. A discourse of everyday learning, where learning is understood as

intricately connected with everyday work practices, often produced tension for Beryl and the senior managers as it positioned them as 'learners', thus conflicting with their shared identity as 'the intelligentsia' and authorised 'knowers' in this workplace. Beryl's subjectivity is re-presented in this chapter as discursively constructed rather than essential, thereby opening to question the certainty of the autonomous, self-developing subject.

#### Chapter 7 – The discursive practices of professional development

My gaze now turns to Eva, a professional developer at PSE and the industry partner on the Uncovering Learning project. This chapter foregrounds the connections between the privileging of an experiential learning discourse in the organisational learning literature and the practices of professional development at PSE. I examine learning discourses in circulation in the professional development workgroup at PSE and their effects in terms of what Eva is able to think, say and do in relation to work, workers and workplace learning. I suggest that Eva is the embodiment of an experiential learning discourse. However, rather than thinking of Eva's subjectivity as wholly determined, I explore the circulation of other discourses that positioned Eva in other ways, as well as Eva's use of an experiential learning discourse in ways that were not necessarily aligned with organisational goals.

#### Chapter 8 – 'The master tradesman'

The focus of this chapter is on the tensions produced when discourses of workplace learning circulated by the researchers on the Uncovering Learning project intersected with discourses in circulation in the trade teachers' workgroup and the ongoing renegotiation of relations of power between 'the researchers' and 'the researched'. This analysis is undertaken by focusing on the positioning of a group of trade teachers as 'the workplace learners' during the Uncovering Learning project and the take up and failure to take up this subject position. This chapter foregrounds subject positions as both positions of alignment and resistance (in relation to other competing discourses).

#### Chapter 9 – A connecting story

In the final chapter I link (some of) the threads of the thesis together in a connecting story. The connecting story makes visible a network of power that reproduces the

'truth' of autonomous subjectivity and the parts played by organisational and workplace learning theorists, professional developers, workplace managers and workers in this network. The stories of the Uncovering Learning project provide one account of the multiple and mobile field of force relations connected with workplace learning *wherein far-reaching, but never completely stable, effects of domination are produced* (Foucault, 1998, p. 102). The circulation of workplace learning discourses enable the conjunction of specific power-knowledge formations but they can also be used to resist other relations of power.

In providing a more nuanced account of the shaping of worker subjectivity/ies than available in much of the organisational learning literature this thesis makes a significant contribution to the field of organisational learning, with implications for professional development practices as well as the practices of workplace learning researchers. In making these complex connections more visible I hope that producers, distributors and consumers of workplace learning knowledges can begin to devise tactics for understanding and renegotiating relations of power in the workplace.

## CHAPTER 2

### Using Foucault

#### Introduction

As I have indicated in Chapter 1, my initial interests and concerns in relation to workplace learning were around the question: does workplace learning oppress or empower workers? However, this question works within and contributes to a power/ knowledge binary which frames much of the discussion around learning and power in the organisational learning literature. Thus, taking up Foucault's call to *cut off the King's head* (1980, p. 121) and to consider the complexities of power, this thesis explores workplace learning using a conceptual frame of governmentality.

In this chapter I discuss the Foucauldian concept of governmentality and the ways I am using this concept to explore discourses of workplace learning. Drawing on the work of Foucault (1980, 1982, 1988, 1991b, 1991c, 1991d, 1998), commentators on his work (eg. Dean, 1994, 1999; Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982; Gane and Johnson, 1993; Gordon, 1991; Mills, 1997; Patton, 1994; Rabinow, 1984; Ransom, 1997; Weedon, 1987), and work by writers such as Miller and Rose (Miller and Rose, 1993, 1995; Rose, 1989, 1996, 1999b, 2000) and du Gay (1996a, 1996b) who use governmentality to theorise worker subjectivity, I have identified concepts that are useful for exploring the complex connections between broader political objectives and the ways we know and understand our selves. Foucault's work is important as it enables me to read and write everyday learning in ways that de-naturalise the self-actualising, autonomous subject.

#### Governmentality

The concept of governmentality is where I began my poststructural wanderings and wonderings around everyday learning. While the notion of governmentality had appeal (because of its focus on power), entering at this point in Foucault's oeuvre

was difficult as this work builds on and extends themes he had been developing in earlier work, including power/knowledge and disciplinary power (Foucault, 1980, 1991a; Gordon, 1991). Foucault can be rather opaque in his writing about governmentality. For example, in an essay on technologies of the self he says: *This contact between the technologies of domination of others and those of the self I call governmentality* (Foucault, 1988, p. 19). What is a technology of domination? And what is a technology of the self? And what is governmentality? Perhaps it was the 'slipperiness' of governmentality that contributed to its appeal? However, as these 'slippery' ideas provide the theoretical frame for this thesis it is important to discuss how I understand governmentality and how I am using these ideas.

In *Governmentality*, Foucault (1991b) traces a shift in thinking in Western Europe during the eighteenth century around the way governing was understood. At this time a new rationality of government emerged where the state came to be understood as an end in itself. This marked a shift in emphasis from the rights of the sovereign ruler to the strength and power of the state, and in order to produce a healthy and productive state, a healthy and productive population was required. The population came to be understood as a resource, and the role of the state was to manage (or govern) 'the population'. In an effort to govern this resource efficiently, knowledge about both 'the population' and 'the individual' was required. Foucault (1998, pp. 143-144) argues that this provided the context for the emergence and spread of biopower, a new and different form of power to sovereign power:

*If one can apply the term **bio-history** to the pressures through which the movements of life and the processes of history interfere with one another, one would have to speak of **bio-power** to designate what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life...*

*...Such a power has to qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize, rather than display itself in its murderous splendour; it does not have to draw the line that separates the enemies of the sovereign from his*



*obedient subjects; it effects distributions around the norm.* [Foucault's emphasis]

Biopower has been described by Danaher, Schirato and Webb (2000, p. 64) as technologies that were used for *analysing, controlling, regulating and defining the human body and its behaviour*. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1991a) writes about disciplinary technologies and the formation of disciplinary power.

Disciplinary technologies enable the behaviour of individuals to be observed, measured and shaped within a range of institutions and settings such as schools, prisons and factories, the aim being to forge a *docile body* (Foucault, 1991a, pp. 135-169). Disciplinary technologies were developed, then, in an attempt to regulate the conduct of workers, children, patients, and so on (Gordon, 1991).

Through the establishment of various institutions such as hospitals, prisons and asylums, which divided 'the sick' from 'the healthy', 'the mad' from 'the sane', and 'the criminal' from the 'law abiding citizen', differences between 'the normal' and 'the abnormal' were socially defined (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982). Co-emerging with the development of these institutions was the development of the social sciences providing knowledge about the social world. Disciplinary institutions such as prisons and asylums provided opportunities for employing techniques of surveillance and normalisation. The 'abnormal' could now be observed and studied and this surveillance provided knowledge about 'the human subject':

*A meticulous observation of detail, and at the same time a political awareness of these small things, for the control and use of men, emerge through the classical age bearing with them a whole set of techniques, a whole corpus of methods and knowledge, descriptions, plans and data. And from such trifles, no doubt, the man of modern humanism was born.* (Foucault, 1991a, p. 141)

The inscription of 'the subject' made it visible and 'knowable' in particular ways, and as Rose (1989) points out, a domain must first be 'known' in order that it may be governed.

Knowledge of 'the subject' contributed to the production of disciplinary discourses which define 'abnormal' and 'normal' ways of being, with the study of abnormality being one of the ways that power relations are established and reproduced in society. For example, it is the psychiatrist who speaks about 'the mad person', the doctor who speaks about 'the patient', the educator who speaks about 'the learner' and so on. It is in this way that disciplinary technologies seek to impose their own standard as the only one that is acceptable as 'normal'.

Another technology that Foucault connects with the spread of biopower is the technology of the confession, an old power technique traditionally used by the church (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982; Foucault, 1998). Using the technology of the confession, pastoral power individualises through enabling 'the truth' to be spoken about our innermost thoughts and feelings. In speaking 'the truth' we are better able to know our 'real' or 'authentic' self. In other words *one becomes a subject for oneself* (Rose, 1999a, p. 244). The incorporation of pastoral power in modern times by the state has enabled power to extend into *the very grain of individuals* where it *touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives* (Foucault, 1980, p. 39). For example, Foucault traces the spread of pastoral power in modern times through 'experts' such as psychologists and doctors and describes this mode of power in the following way (1982, p. 212):

*This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects.*

In other words it is through processes of subjectification, where technologies of power interplay with technologies of the self, that power is exercised (Foucault, 1982, 1988; Rose, 1989, 1996, 1999b). This has meant that in modern times power no longer resides with an individual or group, it has become distributed in complex networks of interconnecting technologies (Foucault, 1998; Miller and Rose, 1993; Rose, 1989). Thus, forms of power have changed shape and multiplied (Ransom,

1997). It is through expertise, including the knowledges produced by the social sciences, that the 'ideal types' against which we self-regulate are constructed (Patton, 1994; Rose, 1996).

However, it is a sovereign view of power, where power is understood as being top-down and a thing that individuals or groups possess, that dominates the ways we tend to think and speak about power (Foucault, 1980, 1998). In a sovereign view of power, power, knowledge and subjectivity are understood as separable rather than necessarily related. This view, however, enables the exercise of power to go unnoticed as it makes other understandings of power less visible (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982). Foucault points out that *power is tolerable only on a condition that it mask[s] a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanism* (Foucault, 1998, p. 86).

### **Foucault's Moves**

Foucault makes various conceptual moves, described below, that enable power to be understood in a different way from the taken for granted notion of power as top-down and oppressive. These moves disrupt a binary ordering of the world that has prevailed since Enlightenment times. Enlightenment thinking posits that general, objective laws ('truth'), uncontaminated by sectional interest and subjective desire, can be discovered through scientific method and the exercise of reason (Flax, 1990; Toulmin, 1990). Power and knowledge were thus understood as separable and scientific method became the privileged way of producing knowledge in modern times. An Enlightenment view pre-supposes a cohesive, rational subject who is able to objectively report 'discoveries'. As knowledge was understood as both objective and neutral, with an underlying assumption that there is a neutral language available that simply reflects reality, it was believed that the application of knowledge would lead to progress and freedom for all. Thus, knowledge became linked with freedom, and domination and oppression were linked with superstition (Flax, 1990).

In the binary ordering of the world that has prevailed since the Enlightenment, the relationships between dimensions such as power–knowledge, power–freedom,

truth–ideology, knowledge–experience, mind–body and subjectivity–objectivity are overlooked, thus working to make these divisions appear natural. I suggest that a binary way of thinking orders (or regulates) the way everyday learning tends to be understood (see Chapter 3).

### **Power-knowledge**

Foucault's conceptual moves disrupt a binary ordering. The first of these moves is the reintroduction of power into knowledge producing activities (Foucault, 1980; Henriques *et al.*, 1998; MacLure, 2003). Foucault's concept of power-knowledge, where power and knowledge are understood as being inextricably entwined, disrupts the separation of power and 'the truth'. Foucault (1980, p. 52) says:

*Knowledge and power are integrated with one another, and there is no point in dreaming of a time when knowledge will cease to depend on power; this is just a way of reviving humanism in a utopian guise. It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power.*

### **Power as multiformed**

By reinstalling power in knowledge-producing activities, Foucault (1980, 1998) is able to propose an alternative perspective on power – it is multiformed. Power not only constrains (and is oppressive) but also enables (and is productive). Power operates through the construction of 'new' capacities and ways of being rather than through constraining pre-existing ones (Patton, 1994; Rose, 1996). This is a very different view from the taken for granted approach where power is understood as only taking the form of oppression.

In reconceptualising power as multiformed, Foucault is able to disrupt a taken for granted understanding that power and subjectivity are separable from one another. Instead, Foucault proposes that modern forms of power need particular types of subjects, and it is through the exercise of power that particular modes of subjectivity are produced (1982). For example, a neo-liberal mode of power requires active subjects who understand themselves as autonomous and self-actualising (Burchell, 1996; Burchell *et al.*, 1991; Miller and Rose, 1995). These

ideas trouble the commonly held view that power and freedom are necessarily in opposition (Rose, 1999b).

The notion of power as only taking the form of oppression is a persuasive explanation of power and is the prevailing view found in the social sciences. For example, the separation of power and knowledge underlies a Marxist and neo-Marxist meta-narrative. In this account of the social world, which claims that economic relations determine all social relations, repression is understood as the general form of domination. Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982, p. 129) describe this take on power in the following way:

*As a systematic refusal to accept reality, as a repressive instrument, as a ban on truth, the forces of power prevent or at least distort the formation of knowledge. Power does this by suppressing desire, fostering false consciousness, promoting ignorance, and using a host of other dodges. Since it fears the truth, power must suppress it.*

Foucault disrupts a common understanding of knowledge where 'the truth' is understood as being intrinsically opposed to power and therefore playing a liberating role. In other words, that we are able to resist repression by speaking 'the truth' (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982). Instead, Foucault's (1998, p. 60) work suggests that an understanding of power as separable from knowledge actually supports domination as it makes the exercise of disciplinary power less visible:

*The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, "demands" only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can finally be articulated only at the price of a kind of liberation. Confession frees, but power reduces one to silence; truth does not belong to the order of power, but shares an original affinity with freedom: traditional themes in philosophy, which a "political history of truth" would have*

*to overturn by showing that truth is not by nature free – nor error servile – but that its production is thoroughly imbued with relations of power.*

## **Power as relational**

Foucault proposes that modern power requires subjects who understand themselves as having choice and as capable of acting. Power and freedom are not in opposition, then, rather modern power requires freedom (Foucault, 1982; Rose, 1999b). In proposing that power is more a question of *guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome* (1982, p. 221), Foucault draws attention to a relational element and the indeterminacy of power. Power is not just exercised through top-down mechanisms but requires the active take up of subject positions. This view of power introduces the possibility of resistance – particular subject positions produced through the circulation of dominant discourses may fail to be taken up, or they may be used subversively for purposes other than intended by authorities (de Certeau, 1984). This leads Miller and Rose (1993, p. 84) to conclude that: *Whilst ‘governmentality’ is eternally optimistic, ‘government’ is a congenitally failing operation.*

## **The ongoing renegotiation of power**

Associated with a relational understanding of power is the notion that modern power is distributed rather than a thing possessed by individuals or groups. There are many competing authorities and discourses, rather than authority residing solely with the church, or the sovereign, or the state. Thus, relations of power are less fixed and always open to ongoing renegotiation. Foucault (1998, p. 93) points out that:

*Power’s condition of possibility, or in any case the viewpoint which permits one to understand its exercise, even in its more “peripheral” effects, and which also makes it possible to use its mechanisms as a grid of intelligibility of the social order, must not be sought in the primary existence of a central point, in a unique source of sovereignty from which secondary and descendent forms would emanate; it is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their*

*inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable. The omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. And "Power", insofar as it is permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-reproducing, is simply the overall effect that emerges from all these mobilities, the concatenation that rests on each of them and seeks in turn to arrest their movement.*

A similar take on power is proposed by actor network theorists, such as Latour (1986). Using what he describes as a translation model of power, Latour (1986, p. 273) argues that power is not the cause of people's behaviour but the consequence of *an intense activity of enrolling, convincing and enlisting*. Therefore, a translation model of power conceptualises power as resulting from a network, or chain of actors. For example, the power of a manager is not something that the manager possesses but is the effect of *a long series of telephone calls, record-keeping, walls, clothes and machines* (Latour, 1986, p. 276). The focus shifts from an understanding that the manager possesses power, what Foucault (1991b) would describe as a sovereign view of power, to an understanding of power as the effect of a heterogeneous network. Thus, existing relations of power are less stable and fixed than they might appear. Latour uses the concept of 'the token' (1986, p. 267-268) to describe the ongoing renegotiation of power:

*the spread in time and space of anything – claims, orders, artefacts, goods – is in the hands of people; each of these people may act in many different ways, letting the token drop, or modifying it, or deflecting it, or betraying it, or adding to it, or appropriating it...the chain is made of actors...and since the token is in everyone's hands in turn, everyone shapes it according to their different projects. This is why it is called the model of translation.*

This view of power represents subjects as actively negotiating relations of power rather than as passive subjects, who are only able to be acted on. It is a networked, and therefore less fixed, notion of power that I am seeking to foreground in this thesis.

In summary, the concept of governmentality, in focusing on the relationships between power, knowledge and subjectivity rather than viewing these as separable, provides a theoretical frame for linking the macro and the micro. It provides analytical space for exploring the discursive mechanisms whereby knowledge is produced and worker subjectivities are discursively constructed. The way these ideas are linked with everyday learning are discussed below.

### **The discursive production of knowledge**

In re-connecting power with knowledge/knowledge production, Foucault directs attention to the importance of language and the discursive mechanisms whereby knowledge is produced. There are no 'natural' objects of knowledge waiting to be revealed through, for example, the 'objective' methods of science. Rather, what gets to count as knowledge is the outcome of a discursive struggle over meaning. Knowledge production is a much 'messier' business than the social sciences, or indeed the sciences, tend to acknowledge (Bauman, 1993; Latour, 1987; Law, 1994; MacLure, 2003). However, this does not result in a relativist free-for-all with one view being considered as good as the next. As du Gay (1996a) explains, what gets to count as 'the truth' is a political achievement with authority being the prize for the struggle over meaning.

### **The discursive construction of subjectivity**

Poststructural theorists (amongst others) point out that language never simply reflects reality. Indeed language *provides a mechanism for rendering reality amenable to certain kinds of action* (Miller and Rose, 1993, p. 81). Through the inscriptions of the social sciences, particular conceptualisations of, for example, 'the worker' are constructed. And reciprocally, in constructing 'the worker' in particular ways, particular interventions for governing this subject are able to be developed. For example, there is a common sense notion that there is a 'natural' or



essential way for workers to 'be' and it is this common sense view that provides the starting point for various theories and explanations of worker behaviour found in the organisational behaviour literature. Different accounts of worker subjectivity can be located in different managerial theories such as the economic subject of scientific management and the social subject of human relations theory.<sup>8</sup> These theories are presented as neutral and scientific accounts of 'the truth' of the worker and the workplace. This, however, ignores the political implications of knowledge as it is in knowing and fixing specific versions of 'the worker' as natural, that particular interventions for acting on this subject are able to be organised.

Using a genealogical approach that draws on Foucault's analytics of government, Nikolas Rose (1989, 1996) has mapped the heterogeneous networks of 'psy'<sup>9</sup> that work to produce the self-actualising, autonomous subject. Rose (1996, p. 189) suggests that:

*The human is neither an actor essentially possessed of agency, nor a passive product or puppet of cultural forces; agency is produced in the course of **practices** under a whole of more or less onerous, explicit, punitive or seductive, disciplinary or passional constraints and relations of force. Our own 'agency' then is the resultant of the ontology we have folded into ourselves in the course of our history and our practices. [my emphasis]*

This view directs attention to practices, including the practices of the workplace, in the shaping of subjectivity, and the historical and social contingency of subjectivity.

### **Processes of subjectification (the embodiment of discourse)**

Weedon (1987), drawing on a Foucauldian concept of governmentality, provides a useful account of processes of subjectification and the relationship between language and subjectivity. I draw on her work in later chapters to discuss the mechanisms whereby the meanings and values embedded in discourses become

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<sup>8</sup> See Legge (1995), Rose (1975) and Taylor (1911) for more detailed descriptions of these theories.

<sup>9</sup> Rose uses the term 'psy' to talk about the combined psychological sciences including psychology and psychiatry.

interiorised and then understood as coming from within. In other words, the interplay of technologies of power and technologies of the self (Foucault, 1988; Rose, 1996, 1999a).

Links can begin to be drawn with workplace learning (as an object of knowledge), the Uncovering Learning project (as a site for producing knowledge about workplace learning), 'the workplace learner' (a subject constructed by knowledges about workplace learning) and worker subjectivities (the ways workers know and understand themselves).

The 'reality' of workplace learning is inscribed through the social sciences, with the knowledges produced by the Uncovering Learning project both coming out of, and contributing to, that knowledge domain. However, a governmentality view alerts us to the imbrication of power and knowledge, both in terms of the conditions for the production of knowledge and the materiality of its effects. Particular meanings of social reality and associated values are embedded in various knowledges about the workplace and knowledges about workplace learning. For example, a Maslowian conceptualisation of workers as self-actualising subjects tends to be taken for granted in much of the managerial literature (du Gay, 1996a; Rose, 1989, 1996, 1999b) (see Chapter 3). This conceptualisation of workers provides the rationale for the introduction of specific workplace interventions that promise improved organisational productivity at the same time as enhancing worker satisfaction (eg. Gabarro, 1990; Hackman and Oldham, 1980; Herbst, 1976; Herzberg, 1968; Katz and Kahn, 1978; Kramer and Tyler, 1996; Senge, 1990; Walton, 1985; Weisbord, 1990). One such intervention is the contemporary organisation of the workplace as 'the Learning Organisation' (eg. Argyris and Schön, 1996; Brown and Duguid, 1991; de Geus, 1997; Field and Ford, 1995; Garvin, 1993; Leonard-Barton, 1992; Marsick and Watkins, 1990; Senge, 1990).

The way learning in the workplace is inscribed through the texts of the Uncovering Learning project is entangled with power as these texts work to construct particular subjects as seemingly natural and essential, thus enabling workers to be conceived and acted on in particular ways. Therefore, what gets named as learning at work is never a 'neutral' recording of 'reality'. The complex interconnections between

power, knowledges about workplace learning and worker subjectivity/ies are explored in this thesis.

I will argue in later chapters that specific subject positions, or ways of being, are made available to workers through the circulation of various discourses in the workplace, including mainstream discourses of organisational learning, and that some learning discourses have more power within the institutional context of the workplace than others. Subject positions provide identity categories and when people identify with and take up subject positions they take up an identity related to that subject position. It is in this sense that discourses become *embodied* (Weedon, 1987), or what Hall refers to as a *suturing* of the subject in the structure of meaning (1996); and that power is exercised.

Thus, a Foucauldian conceptualisation of processes of subjectification, where technologies of power interplay with technologies of the self, enables me to explore the ways discourses and their associated meanings and values become embodied and understood as individual and essential characteristics coming from within. This is important as it foregrounds the discursive practices of the workplace and provides a view of knowledge production as embedded in practice. Through focusing on processes of subjectification and the embodiment of discourse, the hidden curriculum of the workplace (Gherardi, 2006), and the exercise of disciplinary power in and through everyday workplace practices is made more visible. Workers are not only acted on by others, but they also act on themselves (Deetz, 1998; Scheeres, 2004a; Solomon, 2000).

A Foucauldian, poststructural approach also points to the individual as a site of conflicting modes of subjectivity as power is distributed rather than unified (Ransom, 1997; Rose, 2000; Weedon, 1987). Workplaces provide a site for the circulation of multiple discourses and the multiple positionings in the workplace made available through the circulation of differing discourses often result in tension. It is in this sense that identity is not fixed but rather in process as identity is always forged in relation to other subject positions (Hall, 1996). It is for this reason that programs of government are never completely realised in institutions (Miller and Rose, 1993). Rose (1996, 2000) refers to this as the subjectivity wars. There are

always other discourses in circulation that produce other subject positions and other ways of being. This view of identity provides space for an examination of both the take up and failure to take up subject positions in the workplace and for an analysis of competing discourses, and resistance and contestation.

A Foucauldian emphasis on discourse enables me to explore specific power-knowledge formations connected with workplace learning, including the contemporary circulation of an experiential learning discourse in the workplace, and the subjects this discourse constructs as seemingly natural.

## CHAPTER 3

### **Exploring workplace learning discourses**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter I examine learning discourses in circulation in the organisational and managerial literature. I focus on this literature as these are the learning texts that have gained authority in the workplace, at least with a group of professional developers in the PSE workplace (see Chapter 7). In examining learning discourses in circulation in the organisational literature, the links between various learning theories and the meanings of social reality embedded in them can be made more explicit. I suggest that the learning discourses in circulation in the organisational learning literature remain within an individual-society dualism of the social sciences where subjectivity is only able to be conceived as: unified and essential (and thus separate from the social and relations of power), or determined by pre-existing social structures, or as a dialectic between 'the individual' and 'the social'. This is problematic as in 'knowing' and understanding worker subjectivity in this way, the complex mechanisms whereby technologies of power interplay with technologies of the self remain out of sight.

#### **The emergence of the organisational learning literature**

In the late 1970s, Argyris and Schön (1978) introduced the concept of 'organisational learning' in the management literature. This was a necessary capacity, they argued, for organisations to develop in order to adapt to increasingly turbulent (Emery and Trist, 1965) environments. These authors claimed that organisational learning was something more than just the individual learning that transpired in organisations, but that organisations, because they are made up of people, learn only through the experience and actions of individuals:

*Organizational learning occurs when individuals within an organization experience a problematic situation and inquire into it on*

*the organization's behalf. They experience a surprising mismatch between expected and actual results of action and respond to that mismatch through a process of thought and further action that leads them to modify their images of organization or their understandings of organizational phenomena and to restructure their activities so as to bring outcomes and expectations into line, thereby changing organizational theory-in-use. In order to become organizational, the learning that results from organisational inquiry must become embedded in the images of the organization held in its members' minds and/or in the epistemological artifacts (the maps, memories, and programs) embedded in the organizational environment.*(Argyris and Schön, 1996, p. 16)

Gherardi (1999, 2006), who examines organisational learning as a discourse, traces the concept of organisational learning even further back in the organisational literature to Cyert and March who used the term in their writing on decision theory in the 1960s. These authors proposed that: *organisational goals result from a 'continuous bargaining – learning process'* (cited in Coopey, 1995, p. 199), suggesting the ongoing negotiation of goals in the workplace. However, it was not until the early 1990s that 'organisational learning' was translated into 'the Learning Organisation'. This translation can, in part, be attributed to Senge's *The Fifth Discipline*, which was published in Australia in 1992, and became a bestseller and a popular text both in business schools and in workplaces (see Chapter 4 for an analysis of this text). Learning at work was on the managerial agenda and the workplace was now able to be 'known' and named as a site of learning. A metaphor for explaining behaviour in workplaces had thus been reified and turned into a 'thing' – the Learning Organisation – and prescriptions for producing this type of organisation developed (Coopey, 1995).

A review of management and organisational literature since the 1990s points to the increasing importance of learning as an object of interest in relation to workplaces. For example, there are numerous organisational and management journals,<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For example the *Journal of Workplace Learning, Learning Organization, Management Learning, Development and Learning in Organizations.*

conferences<sup>11</sup> and books<sup>12</sup> that incorporate 'learning' in their titles. There are even university courses that now include the term 'organisational learning'.<sup>13</sup> There has been an escalation in writing, thinking and talking about learning in relation to work. Workplace managers, organisational theorists, degree programs, academic journals, organisational consultants, university departments (beyond Education faculties and departments), workplace trainers, government agencies (the list goes on) have all taken up the language of learning. For example, learning now forms part of a suite of contemporary management practices for enhancing worker productivity (Cheetham and Chivers, 2006; Contu *et al.*, 2003; Contu and Willmott, 2003; Coopey, 1996; Coopey and Burgoyne, 2000; Cross, 2007; Gherardi, 2006; Goldsmith, Morgan and Ogg, 2004; Montano, 2004; Sims, 2006; Sloman and Philpott, 2006) and it is included as a topic in many texts used in human resource management subjects at university (eg. Linstead, Fulop and Lilley, 2004; Nankervis, Compton and Baird, 2005; Wood *et al.*, 2004). It is in this sense that learning can be thought of as a powerful discourse in the contemporary workplace (Contu and Willmott, 2003; Gee *et al.*, 1996). But what gets to count as learning within the institutional context of the workplace? And who is able to speak about its 'truth'? One way of exploring this question is to examine the discourses of learning in circulation in the organisational learning literature.

There is an abundance of literature on organisational learning and this is, in part, because of the interdisciplinary nature of the field (Easterby-Smith, 1997; Easterby-Smith, Antonacopoulou, Simm and Lyles, 2004; Easterby-Smith, Snell and Gherardi, 1998). The literature comes from various disciplines and fields including management, adult education, sociology and cognitive psychology. Easterby-Smith, Snell and Gherardi (1998) note that organisational learning theories differ in scope and that different writers will have different interests in relation to the topic and will be attempting to answer different questions. For example, a management focus

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<sup>11</sup> For example the Researching Work and Learning Conference and the Organisational Learning and Knowledge Conference.

<sup>12</sup> For example *Organisational Learning* (1 and 2) (Argyris and Schön, 1978; Argyris and Schön, 1996), *Managing Organisational Learning* (Field and Ford, 1995), *Informal and Incidental Learning in the Workplace* (Marsick and Watkins, 1990), *Informal Learning in the Workplace* (Garrick, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> For example the Bachelor of Arts in Organisational Learning at the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia.

might be concerned with the question: How does learning in the workplace impact on organisational performance? This approach focuses on workplace learning in respect to the relationship between learning and organisational productivity. Whereas an educational focus might be concerned with the question: How does the organisation of work impact on workers' learning? This approach might focus on learning processes within the context of the workplace. Rather than assuming that workplace learning has a generally accepted meaning, the learning discourses underpinning the organisational learning literature, and the meanings of social reality embedded in these views, are explored below.

## **The learning discourses in circulation in the organisational learning literature**

In examining the learning discourses in circulation in the organisational learning literature, I have grouped this literature into three broad approaches: mainstream, with an emphasis on the individual; mainstream, with an emphasis on the social; and the critical organisational literature. What I refer to as 'mainstream' literature is literature that has been widely taken up and used in the workplace. In other words, it has been incorporated in workplace practices (at least those of professional development) and can therefore be understood as what is important, or what counts as learning (at least among professional developers and Human Resource Development and Human Resource Management departments). The critical management literature, as the name suggests, provides a critique of the mainstream organisational learning literature.

### **The mainstream literature**

#### ***Learning at work with an emphasis on the individual***

The mainstream organisational learning literature tells a story of enhanced individual and organisational performance brought about through transforming a workplace into 'the Learning Organisation'. This literature tends to describe the characteristics of 'the Learning Organisation', how to create one, and the competitive advantages that learning organisations provide (eg. Argyris and Schön, 1996; Brown and Duguid, 1991; Easterby-Smith, 1997; Foley, Harrington and Kelliher, 2006; Garvin, 1993; Harrison and Boyle, 2006; Leonard-Barton, 1992;



Marsick and Watkins, 1990; Nonaka, 1991; Powell and Swart, 2005; Senge, 1995; Sloman and Philpott, 2006). For example, Garvin (1993) proposes a framework for building learning organisations that incorporates: systematic problem solving, experimentation, learning from past experience, learning from others and transferring knowledge. Nonaka (1991) says that successful companies will be those that consistently create new knowledge, disseminate it widely throughout the organisation, and quickly embody it in new technologies and products. Watkins and Marsick (1993, p. 259) describe the ways the continuous learning of individuals can be *strategically tied to future organisational needs*.

A very persuasive account of learning in the workplace is provided in this literature where learning is offered as an effective strategy for enhancing both individual and organisational performance. As Coopey (1996, p. 348) notes, the organisational learning literature brings together three longstanding managerial themes:

*how to structure organizations to enhance performance; how to facilitate individual learning and development in a corporate setting; and how to ensure that organizations adapt quickly to changes in their external environment.*

For example, Watkins and Marsick (1993, p. 192) claim that common elements of the Learning Organisation are: *systems thinking, decentralization, continuous learning, and empowerment*; and that learning organizations incorporate:

*organization-wide cultural change programs that measurably change the skill and innovation base in the organization, that alter bureaucratic and hierarchical relationships, and that create collegial, problem solving teams aligned around a globally understood mission.*

In mainstream organisational learning texts learning tends to be viewed as liberatory and outside of regulation and the means through which oppression and domination can be overthrown (Cross, 2007; Leslie, Aring and Brand, 1997; Senge, 1990; Van Woerkom, Nijhof and Nieuwenhuis, 2002; Watkins and Marsick, 1993).

The often taken for granted assumption of a relationship between learning and enhanced productivity in the organisational learning literature, combined with an underlying assumption that learning is necessarily liberatory and the means for achieving progress and development, has contributed to everyday learning (or learning from experience) becoming the contemporary object of a managerial gaze.

### ***Theories underpinning mainstream organisational learning literature***

Much of the mainstream organisational learning literature can be traced to neo-human relations literature from the 1950s and 1960s by authors such as Abraham Maslow, Frederick Herzberg and Chris Argyris. The neo-human relations literature proposes that in order to harness worker commitment, workplaces should be organised in ways that take into account the social and relational aspects of work.<sup>14</sup> Neo-human relations theories have been widely taken-up in the management literature and underpin much Human Resource Management (HRM) theory<sup>15</sup> and Human Resource Development (HRD) theory (eg. Schein, 1987; Schön, 1983; Walton, 1985; Weisbord, 1990).

Two theorists from the neo-human relations tradition, Chris Argyris and Donald Schön, have had a significant impact on the knowledge domain of organisational learning (Argyris, 1982; Argyris and Schön, 1978; Argyris and Schön, 1996; Schön, 1983). These scholars draw on the learning theory of Dewey (1938) to talk about learning in workplaces:

*We use “inquiry” here not in the colloquial sense of scientific or juridical investigation but in a more fundamental sense that originates in the work of John Dewey (1938): the intertwining of thought and action that proceeds from doubt to the resolution of doubt. (Argyris and Schön, 1996, p. 11)*

The learning theory of Dewey privileges experience as a way of knowing and as a means of providing direct access to reality (Michelson, 1996, 1999). Everyday experience has for some time been theorised as a way of learning (Argyris and

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<sup>14</sup> See Rose (1975) for an overview of neo-human relations theory.

<sup>15</sup> See Legge (1995) and Thompson and McHugh (2002) for detailed reviews of the HRM literature.

Schön, 1996; Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1985; Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984; Lave and Wenger, 1991), and the notion of learning from experience is, for many, a taken for granted way of talking about learning. This has given rise to an experiential learning discourse that is articulated in much of the mainstream organisational learning literature (eg. Argyris and Schön, 1996; Marsick and Watkins, 1990; Senge, 1990). In this literature everyday learning, or learning from experience, is understood as a process of rational reflection on experience (Fenwick, 2000).

An experiential learning discourse presupposes a rational, unified and conscious subject; one that is able to rationally reflect on practice. For example, the presupposition of this subject is evident in Argyris and Schön's description of single-loop learning:<sup>16</sup>

*Line managers may respond to an increase in turnover of personnel by investigating sources of worker dissatisfaction, looking for factors they can influence, such as salary levels, fringe benefits, or job design, to improve the stability of their work force. (p. 21)*

Single loop learning is presented by these authors as a solution to problems requiring an instrumental learning approach. If, however, the goals or norms of the organisation need to be adjusted, then the concept of double loop learning is recommended:

*In this type of organizational double-loop learning, individual members resolve interpersonal and intergroup conflicts that express incompatible requirements for organizational performance. They do so through organizational inquiry that creates new understandings of the conflicting requirements – their sources, conditions and consequences – and sets new priorities and weightings of norms, or reframes the norms themselves, together with their associated strategies and assumptions. (p. 25)*

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<sup>16</sup> A concept developed by these authors to describe a mode of learning that takes place in the workplace.

For these authors, then, it is through a rational process of linear inquiry that problems are solved and learning takes place. Associated with this view of learning is an action research model of inquiry that has increasingly been taken up in the workplace (eg. Altrichter, Kemmis, McTaggart and Zuber-Skerritt, 1991; Argyris, Putnam and Smith, 1985; Cunningham, 1993; Grundy, 1982; Whyte and Lentz Hamilton, 1965). An action research model proposes the following stages in a learning cycle: plan, act, observe, and reflect (see Figure 1), thereby separating thinking and doing.

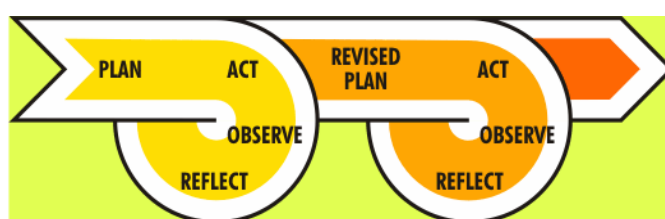


Figure 1 Stages of action research cycle  
Source: McKernan (1996, p. 26)

In summary, an experiential learning discourse prevails in much of the mainstream organisational learning literature. This discourse is underpinned by a constructivist perspective of learning where *the learner reflects on lived experience and then interprets and generalizes this experience to form mental structures* (Fenwick, 2001a, p. 248). Learning is understood as a linear process of rational reflection on experience, with the worker understood as guiding the inquiry process. In this learning discourse workers are understood as transcendent selves, able to *split rational consciousness from messy matters of the body* (Fenwick, 2001a, p. 244). The emphasis on reflective practices in an experiential learning discourse works to reinforce binaries such as knowing/doing and mind/body (Michelson, 1996).

### ***Learning at work with an emphasis on the social***

More recently, a communities of practice discourse has gained currency in the mainstream organisational learning literature (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Easterby-Smith, 1997; Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1998; Gherardi, 2000, 2006; Mitchell, 2003; Mittendorff, Geijsel, Hoeve, de Laat and Nieuwenhuis, 2006; Wenger, 1998; Wenger *et al.*, 2002). In this approach learning at work is theorised as the

socialisation of workers through their participation in communities of shared practice in the workplace. For example, Wenger (1998, p. 45) says:

*Being alive as human beings means that we are constantly engaged in the pursuit of enterprises of all kinds, from ensuring our physical survival to seeking the most lofty pleasures. As we define these enterprises and engage in their pursuit together, we interact with each other and with the world and we tune our relations with each other and with the world accordingly. In other words, we learn.*

*Over time, this collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise. It makes sense, therefore, to call these kinds of communities **communities of practice**. (Wenger's emphasis)*

The communities of practice literature is linked with a different theoretical tradition from the individualised notion of learning in the neo-human relations literature. In a communities of practice view the worker is re-presented as the socialised learner, where learning is theorised using the conceptual lens of identity. Here, 'the individual' in interacting in a dialectical relationship with 'the social' (their community of practice) becomes a teacher, a manager, a researcher, and so on.

The communities of practice literature is underpinned by a theory of situated learning (Chaiklin and Lave, 1993; Lave and Wenger, 1991) where learning is understood as situated within a social, historical and cultural context rather than an individual activity that takes place inside a person's head. In other words, what is learned cannot be separated from the learning context. Situated learning theory also draws attention to the relationship between work practices and the forging of identity. For example, Gherardi (2006, p. 14) says:

*...in everyday practices, learning and knowing are not separate activities; they instead take place in the flow of experience, with or without our being aware of it. In everyday organizational life, work,*

*learning, innovation, communication, negotiation, conflict over goals, their interpretation, and history, are co-present in work practice. They are part of human existence.*

The concept of communities of practice was developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) during a series of ethnographic studies where they examined situated learning in various work settings such as Vai and Gola tailors in Liberia and Yucatec midwives in Mexico. These authors proposed that newcomers become part of a community of practice through a process of *legitimate peripheral participation* (p. 98) whereby the learner moves from peripheral to full participation within their community. Learning is thus understood as a shift from 'apprentice' to 'master', thereby linking it with an underlying notion of development through experience.

Communities of practice provides a different language for talking about everyday learning (or experience) to an experiential learning discourse. The everyday learning that takes place in the workplace is described by Lave and Wenger as legitimate, both from the perspective of the learner and the community. They propose that it is considered legitimate by the learner as it takes on a *use value*, thus enabling: *Acceptance by and interaction with acknowledged adept practitioners* (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 110). At the same time, the learning of the newcomer is considered legitimate from the perspective of the community as the learner is contributing to the production of the community. This suggests that the learning of the community is embedded in practice and that what counts as learning is open to ongoing renegotiation.

In the above overview of the communities of practice literature I have focused on the earlier work of Lave and Wenger (1991) on situated learning as this work foregrounds the interrelationship of practice and learning and provides a contrast with a more individualised approach in an experiential learning discourse. However, the communities of practice literature is itself in transition, as is the literature on experiential learning (see Baker, Jensen and Kolb, 2005). In the more recent work by Wenger *et al.* (2002) the context in which the community of practice is situated, that is the broader institutional context of the workplace, appears to be completely ignored (Fox, 2000; Nespor, 1994), thereby re-presenting

everyday learning (at work) as 'natural' development and outside of regulation (see Chapter 4). The complex mechanisms whereby technologies of power interplay with technologies of the self fail to be examined in this literature.

### **The critical literature on organisational learning**

The critical management literature provides a critique of the mainstream organisational learning literature by directing attention to the relationship between everyday learning and relations of power in the workplace (eg. Casey, 1995; Casey, 2003; Contu and Willmott, 2003; Coopey, 1996; Coopey and Burgoyne, 2000; Fenwick, 2001c; Garrick, 1998; Snell and Chak, 1998). Where a human relations approach (that underpins much of the mainstream organisational learning literature) suggests that politics can and should be removed from workplaces (eg. Senge, 1990) and that learning in the workplace is necessarily empowering, the focus of critical literature is to reintroduce the theme of power and politics in the workplace and to analyse its effects.

While there is a dearth of literature that approaches the subject of organisational learning from a critical perspective (Fenwick, 2003a), in the literature that is in circulation, workers tend to be represented as subjugated and acted on by top-down management forces. For example, in an analysis of power in the Learning Organisation literature, Coopey (1996, p. 365) concludes that:

*Given continuing pressure on organizations operating in turbulent conditions to become ever more productive it was argued that [control] boundaries are unlikely to be moved anything like as far as implied in the more utopian prescriptions, with consequent effects on the scope for individual and collective learning.*

...

*Finally, it is likely that senior managers within enterprises where the principles of a learning organization are put into practice will be able to bolster and safeguard their prerogatives by articulating aspects of the ideology implicit in the literature of the Learning Organization.*

Workers, it is argued, will be 'duped' into aligning with management's goals through the introduction of various organisational learning practices. While it may not intend to the critical literature on organisational learning, including that using a Foucauldian conceptualisation of disciplinary power, often conveys a sense of monolithic and top-down power residing in management. For example, Casey (1999, pp. 173-174) describes the cultural colonisation of workers and the production of designer employees in the following way:

*The decentralization of discipline enables deeper levels of identification with the company as employees assume, and honor, the authority and identity of the disciplining executive-father as representative of the organization-ideal. The repeated admonishment to be a good, familial, team-player, the immediacy of the fear of team and family discipline, and the selective retention of traditional industrial disciplinary methods, allow few avenues of dissent and few places of retreat at work from work. The new culture's disciplinary apparatus effectively delivers the new designer employee.*

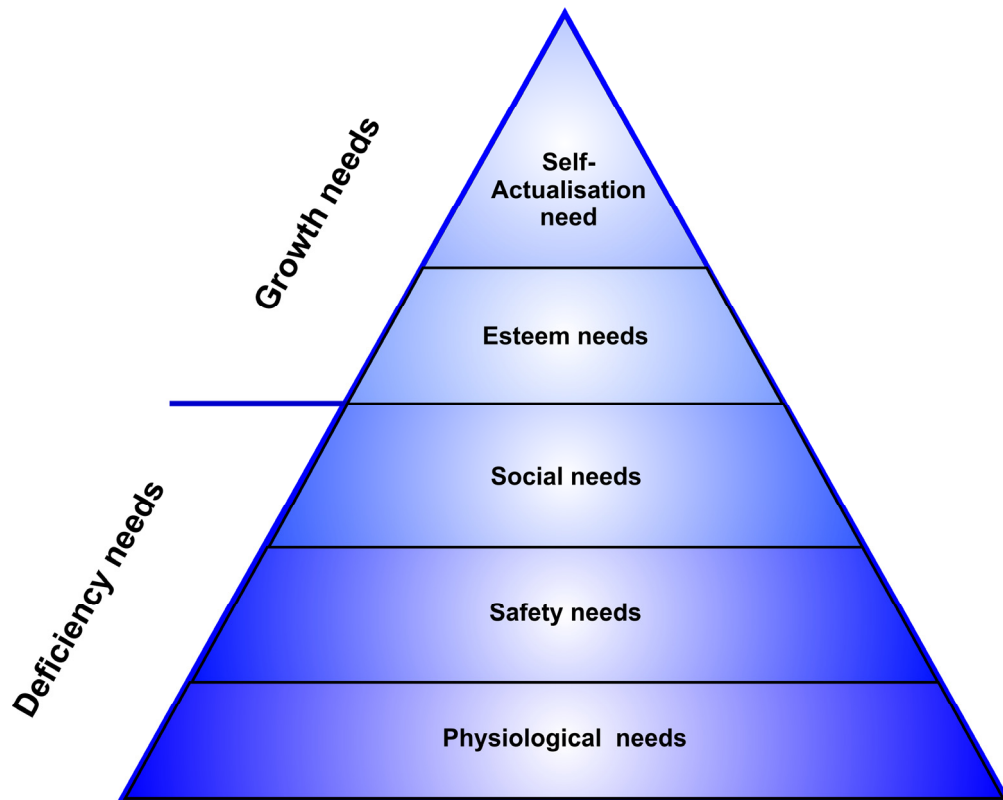
The emphasis on a prevailing managerial ideology in this literature conveys the impression of a unified and all-consuming managerial culture, leaving little space for resistance and contestation.

### **The meanings and values underpinning these learning discourses**

The learning discourses in circulation in the organisational learning literature can be further examined in order to analyse the meanings of social reality that are embedded in them. For example, an experiential learning discourse is underpinned by a liberal humanist discourse where an autonomous subjectivity is taken for granted (Michelson, 1996). In a humanist discourse 'the individual' is understood as a unitary, essentially non contradictory and rational subject and as the centre and origin of change (Henriques *et al.*, 1998). This view of subjectivity pre-supposes that we have an inner essence, *a unique, fixed and coherent core*, that makes us what we are (Weedon, 1987, p.32).



Similarly, the neo-human relations theory that underpins much of the organisational learning literature also has its theoretical roots in a psychological model of 'the individual' (Rose, 1996). A psychologised conceptualisation of 'the worker' is perhaps best exemplified in Maslow's theory of motivation (1943), where self-actualisation is represented as the pinnacle of a hierarchy of human needs, and provided as an explanation of human behaviour in the workplace (see Figure 2).



*Figure 2 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*

Based on: Wood, J., Chapman, J., Fromholtz, M., Morrison, V., Wallace, J., Zeffane, R., Schermerhorn, J., Hunt, J. and Osborn, R. (1998, p. 137) and Robbins, Bergman, Stagg and Coulter (2000, p. 551)

Following Rose (1989), I suggest that Maslow's theory of motivation has become a dominant discourse in the managerial literature and its subject, the self-actualising worker, has become an ideal type against which workers might self-regulate in contemporary workplaces. The above diagram can be found in most introductory organisational behaviour texts used in undergraduate and postgraduate management courses conducted in universities in Australia and elsewhere, and it is this conception of 'the worker' that underpins much of the mainstream organisational learning literature.

In contrast, in much of the critical management literature, it is pre-existing social structures that are understood as producing a socialised individual, and change. While the critical management literature importantly incorporates power into an analysis of workplace learning, the top-down view of power in this literature is problematic. This literature tends to draw on a Marxist discourse where power is understood as only taking the form of oppression and domination (Patton, 1994; Ransom, 1997; Rose, 1996, 1999b). The analysis of power in critical texts presupposes economic relations as the ultimate determining factor in power relations in the workplace (Mills, 1997; Weedon, 1987). In the critical literature power is understood as suppressing an authentic, 'autonomous' subjectivity of the worker through a mechanism of false consciousness (Miller and Rose, 1995). This reproduces a unified and sovereign view of power where workers are acted on as if they were cultural puppets. The active negotiation of identity by workers and the ongoing renegotiation of relations of power fails to be examined in this view.

Similar to much of the mainstream organisational learning literature, the critical literature tends to be underpinned by a humanist discourse that assumes an 'authentic' human nature that that can be liberated through accessing 'the truth', thereby overlooking the imbrication of power and knowledge. This literature works to reproduce a reality/ideology binary and the idea that there is a pre-existing social reality that can be objectively 'known' (Henriques *et al.*, 1998; Ransom, 1997).

In a communities of practice perspective, a more dynamic relationship between 'the individual' and 'the social' is re-presented. However, this relationship is theorised as dialectical, where (seemingly) pre-existing social structures act in a top-down way on a (seemingly) pre-existing individual, who acts back. Therefore, neither the social structures, nor the individual with agency, are adequately theorised in this literature (Fox, 2000; Walkerdine, 1997). For example, Wenger's *social ecology of identity* diagram re-echoes the dialectic between 'the individual' and 'the social' underpinning this literature (see Figure 3).

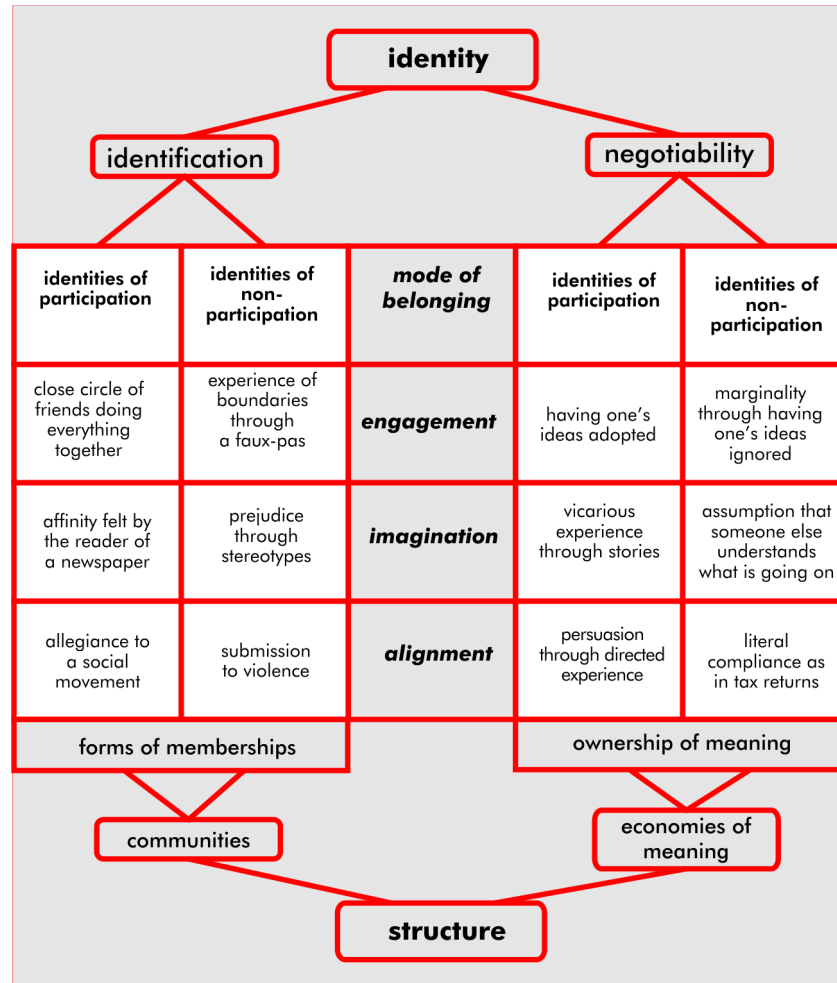


Figure 3 Social ecology of identity  
Source: Wenger (1998, p. 190)

The splitting of identity and structure in this diagram reproduces a taken for granted assumption of 'the individual' as separate from 'the social'.

### The separation of power and knowledge in the organisational learning literature

While coming from different theoretical traditions, I contend that these three perspectives on workplace learning are underpinned by an Enlightenment view where the production of objective knowledge by rational, unified subjects is understood as the means of achieving progress and development for all (see Chapter 2). In this view, knowledge (and learning) tends to be understood as the means for becoming liberated from power rather than intricately entangled with power. For example, the separation of power, knowledge and subjectivity in an experiential learning discourse suggests that there is a transcendent position,

uncontaminated by political interests, from which it is possible to gain direct access to reality, and the 'truth'.

The communities of practice literature also maintains a power/knowledge binary by overlooking the complexities of power and the way power both enables and constrains (Patton, 1994; Ransom, 1997; Rose, 1996, 1999b). The socialised account of learning provided in this literature tends to reproduce a top-down and monolithic view of power. The complex mechanisms whereby the social becomes interiorised and understood as coming from within are overlooked in this literature. Also, while it may not intend to, it fixes the subjectivity of 'the worker' with its truth, thus working to naturalise a conceptualisation of all workers as workplace learners. This is problematic when learning is understood as outside of regulation (see below).

The ongoing re-presentation of worker subjectivity: as unified and autonomous, in an experiential learning discourse; or completely determined by a pre-existing social structure, in the critical literature; or as a dialectical relationship between 'the individual' and 'the social' in a communities of practice discourse; is problematic as complex processes of subjectification, whereby technologies of power interplay with technologies of the self (Rose, 1989, 1996), remain hidden.

### **A poststructural critique of 'the sovereign subject'**

A Foucauldian poststructural literature, in drawing attention to the relationships between language, social institutions, subjectivity and power, provides a more nuanced account of subjectivity and experience than provided in much of the organisational learning literature (Butler, 1992; Michelson, 1996; Rose, 1999b; Weedon, 1987). For example, a Foucauldian conceptualisation of subjectivity problematises the assumption in an experiential learning discourse that experience provides direct access to reality. Michelson (1996, p 634) critiques the *experiential foundationalism* of an experiential learning discourse where it is taken for granted that:

*Through the exercise of transcendent reason, certain knowledge is deliverable from the raw data of experience by individual but largely interchangeable human beings.*

She argues that a discourse of experiential learning works to separate experience from knowledge, and what we know from who we are. A poststructural account, however, draws attention to the mutual determination of experience and knowledge. Not only does experience produce knowledge, the taken for granted view in experiential accounts of learning, but knowledge produces experience. We can only ever know the world and ourselves through the discourses to which we have access. Thus, experience is discursively produced (Rose, 2000). It is in this sense that theories for explaining reality also work to constitute reality.

A Foucauldian conceptualisation of the shaping of subjectivity also disrupts the often taken for granted view in mainstream organisational learning texts that learning is always empowering. As Dean (1999, pp. 36-37) points out:

*by noting that notions of 'empowerment' are capable of being used by very different political stances and are themselves imbricated in definite sets of power relations, we produce a certain discomfort for the advocates of such notions of all political persuasions, particularly those who imagine themselves to be standing outside relations of power. Similarly, a consideration of how the self-governing capacities of the governed are a key feature of contemporary political rule problematizes the radical view of emancipation as the liberation of the agency of those who are oppressed.*

Thus, a Foucauldian conceptualisation of the relationships between power, knowledge and subjectivity makes space for other stories to be told about everyday learning. Through foregrounding processes of subjectification in later chapters in the thesis, whereby technologies of power interplay with technologies of the self, I disrupt a taken for granted meaning of everyday learning as autonomous and separate from regulation. A Foucauldian lens enables the hidden curriculum of the workplace (Casey, 1995; Garrick, 1998; Gherardi, 2006) to come into view.

In the chapter that follows, taking up a more nuanced account of the shaping of subjectivities made available in a Foucauldian poststructural account, I examine the discursive construction of 'the workplace learner' subject in two mainstream organisational learning texts.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Constructing ‘the workplace learner’ subject**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter I analyse the organisational learning literature in more detail by focusing on two key texts that have been influential in shaping discussion around learning at work, *The Fifth Discipline* (Senge, 1990), and *Cultivating Communities of Practice* (Wenger et al., 2002). What is of particular interest in this chapter is the way learning theories, in providing ‘the truth’ about workplace learning, also work to construct particular modes of subjectivity as seemingly natural for workers (Weedon, 1987). It is in this sense that knowledge is never neutral. I analyse these mainstream organisational learning texts by examining the subject positions they construct for workers. I focus on these two texts rather than texts from the critical management literature for the very reason that they have become ‘mainstream’. In other words these are the ways of ‘knowing’ workplace learning, and ‘the workplace learner’ that have won the prize of authority (du Gay, 1996a) in the institutional context of the workplace in the contemporary moment (see Chapter 7).

#### **Constructing ‘the reflective practitioner’**

When I (being a ‘good’ self-developing subject) commenced a graduate diploma in organisational psychology in 1994, Senge’s *The Fifth Discipline* (1990) was a constant reference by both the lecturers and students, many of whom worked in human resource related roles across a wide range of work organisations. *The Fifth Discipline* was considered an exciting text in terms of the way it spoke about workers, and the way the workplace should be organised, based on this knowledge. It was a very persuasive text. The following excerpt from the Society of Organizational Learning (SoL) website (anonymous, 2006) provides an indication of the widespread circulation of *The Fifth Discipline*.

[\*The Fifth Discipline\*](#) hit a nerve deep within the business and education community by introducing the theory of learning organizations. Since its publication, more than 750,000 copies have been sold. In 1997, *Harvard Business Review* identified it as one of the seminal management books of the past 75 years. There have been feature articles in *Business Week*, *Fortune*, *Fast Company*, *Sloan Management Review* and other leading business periodicals regarding the work of Dr. Senge and his colleagues at MIT and SoL.

[\*The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook\*](#) (over 270,000 copies sold) was developed in response to questions from readers of [\*The Fifth Discipline\*](#) who wanted more help with tools, methods and practical experiences in developing enhanced learning capabilities within their own companies. [\*The Dance of Change\*](#) is based on more recent experiences of companies developing learning capabilities over many years, and the strategies leaders develop to deal with the many challenges this work entails. Dr. Senge has also authored many articles published in both academic journals and the business press on systems thinking in management.

*The Journal of Business Strategy* (September/October 1999) named Dr. Senge as one of the 24 people who had the greatest influence on business strategy over the last 100 years. *The Financial Times* (2000) named him as one of the world's "top management gurus." *Business Week* (October 2001) rated Peter as one of The Top (ten) Management Gurus. Accenture's *Outlook* magazine (January 2003) ranked him 6th among the top 50 leading business gurus.

Peter Senge received a B.S. in engineering from Stanford University, and M.S. in social systems modeling and Ph.D. in management from MIT. He lives with his wife and their two children in central Massachusetts.

A web search will find you a number of interesting pages devoted to Peter and his work. One of the most thoughtful analyses can be found at the website of [The Encyclopaedia of Informal Education \(Infed\)](#), which, describes him as one of the thinkers most "central to the development of the theory and practice of lifelong learning and informal education."

In *The Fifth Discipline*, Senge (1990) explains how the workplace can and should be organised as 'the Learning Organisation'. Senge proposes that this mode of organising makes workplaces more competitive as it enables workers to gain greater fulfilment and responsibility through their work, thus leading to enhanced organisational productivity. He proposes five *core disciplines* for building the Learning Organisation: *personal mastery*, *mental models*, *shared vision*, *team learning* and *systems thinking*. As an 'intellectual technology',<sup>17</sup> this way of talking about learning at work casts a grid of visibility over the world and the workplace, thereby privileging some meanings of social reality over others. I suggest that the concepts used by Senge assume that:

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<sup>17</sup> A term coined by Miller and Rose (1993) to describe the way discourses frame what we can think, say and do.



- ‘the individual’ is a conscious, unified subject, in control of *themselves*, as exemplified in the concept of ‘self-mastery’
- ‘the individual’ is a knowing, rational subject who through the application of reflective techniques is able to rationally enhance their work practice, thus contributing to organisational productivity – this is exemplified in the concept of ‘mental models’
- language merely reflects reality

Senge’s conceptual model of ‘the Learning Organisation’ can be linked to a liberal humanist notion of progress and development where a better world, society, organisation, and person can be obtained through the application of objective knowledge gained through rational learning processes. While this is an appealing idea, as it suggests that through the exercise of reason generalisable and universal laws can be established that provide the foundation for ordering the world, including the organisation of workplaces, it is a view that has been problematised by poststructural theorists (eg. Bauman, 1993; Butler, 1992; Flax, 1990; Rose, 1996; Weedon, 1987).

The very title of *The Fifth Discipline* suggests a sense of rational order and control. Through the application of ‘discipline’, both disciplinary knowledge and the use of disciplinary techniques, Senge proposes the workplace will be able to evolve into *the Learning Organisation*. He frequently cites the work of Argyris and Schön to talk about learning at work. As discussed in Chapter 3, these authors draw on a discourse of experiential learning, with its emphasis on reflective practice and rational enquiry, to theorise organisational learning. Senge also draws on a discourse of experiential learning which privileges a psychologised notion of ‘the individual’. For example, he claims early in the text that: *The most powerful learning comes from direct experience* (p. 23). While Senge provides a critique of experience, this critique is in terms of a temporal problem and the difficulty of connecting experience with consequences. For example, he says (p. 23):

*We each have a “learning horizon,” a breadth of vision in time and space within which we assess our effectiveness. When our actions*

*have consequences beyond our learning horizon, it becomes impossible to learn from direct experience.*

*Herein lies the core **learning dilemma** that confronts organizations: **we learn best from experience but we never directly experience the consequences of many of our most important decisions.** The most critical decisions made in organizations have systemwide consequences that stretch over years or decades. [Senge's emphasis]*

While it is useful to problematise the notion of experience, Senge's critique works to reinforce a causal worldview where particular actions are understood as determining particular consequences. He fails to consider the way experience is mediated by discourse and the political implications of this.

Indeed the notion of politics is abhorrent to Senge. He considers organisational politics an aberration, and something that needs to be smoothed away in order to have better functioning workplaces. For example, in a chapter titled *Openness: How can the internal politics and game playing that dominate traditional organizations be transcended?*, Senge begins the chapter with a graphic representation of the stench of organisational politics:

*"I moved into a town with a paper mill once," says Hanover's Bill O'Brien, "and when we drove into the town we almost drove right out again. Two weeks later, we had all gotten used to the smell and didn't notice it. Organizational politics is such a perversion of truth and honesty that most organizations reek with its odor..." (1990, p. 273)*

Working within a power/knowledge binary, Senge calls for the separation of politics from workplaces in order that 'the truth' can be obtained. The view that there is a transcendent place outside of politics is reinforced through advocating the use of 'objective' language and 'rational' processes as methods for the removal of sectional interest. For example, in advocating a *systems archetype*,<sup>18</sup> Senge

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<sup>18</sup> This is one of the five disciplines of the learning organisation.

proposes the use of *objective* language as a method to neutralise potentially high conflict situations:

*When the systems archetypes are used in conversations about complex and potentially conflictual management issues, reliably, they “objectify” the conversation. The conversation becomes about “the structure,” the systemic forces at play, not about personalities and leadership styles. Difficult questions can be raised in a way that does not carry innuendos of management incompetence or implied criticism... This, of course, is precisely the benefit of a language for complexity – it makes it easier to discuss complex issues objectively and dispassionately. (1990, p. 268)*

Language is understood here as objectively reflecting the reality of the workplace rather than working to constitute that reality. The privileging of unity, cohesion and shared meaning, as exemplified in the above text, has led Garrick and Rhodes (1998, p. 177) to describe organisational learning as:

*a dubiously legitimated and conceived project which focuses on control, the maintenance of orthodoxy and (although the rhetoric usually suggests otherwise) the suppression of difference.*

In advocating the use of objective methods, Senge proposes analysing taken for granted assumptions as a strategy for enhancing organisational learning:

*How do you spot leaps of abstraction? First, by asking yourself what you believe about the way the world works – the nature of business, people in general, and specific individuals. Ask, “What is the ‘data’ on which this generalization is based?” Then ask yourself, “Am I willing to consider that this generalization may be inaccurate or misleading?” It is important to ask this last question consciously, because if the answer is no, there is no point in proceeding. (1990, p. 194)*

This is somewhat ironic as Senge fails to take up his own advice. At no point does he consider the presuppositions in his own text. For Senge, learning is understood

in liberal humanist terms and he persuasively expounds this view in *The Fifth Discipline*:

*“Personal mastery” is the phrase my colleagues and I use for the discipline of personal growth and learning. People with high levels of personal mastery are continually expanding their ability to create the results in life they truly seek. From their quest for continual learning comes the spirit of the learning organization. (1990, p. 141)*

In other words, the Learning Organisation is based on the presupposition of the sovereign subject, the conscious, knowing, unified, rational subject of psychology. And in an effort to persuade the reader of this ‘truth’, Senge frequently provides quoted material from contemporary leaders (at the time the book was written) of large, successful organisations. For example, Bill O’Brien from Hanover Insurance says:

*“Another equally important reason why we encourage our people in this quest [the quest of personal mastery] is the impact which **full personal development** can have on **individual happiness**. To seek **personal fulfilment** only outside of work and to ignore the significant portion of our lives which we spend working, would be to limit our opportunities to be **happy** and **complete** human beings.” (p. 143, my emphasis)*

Senge also uses quoted text from what might be described as a zealous Kazuo Inamori from Kyocera:

*Tapping the potential of people, Inamori believes, will require new understanding of the “subconscious mind,” “willpower” and “action of the heart... sincere desire to serve the world.” He teaches Kyocera employees to look inward as they continually strive for “perfection,” guided by the corporate motto, “Respect Heaven and Love People.” In turn, he believes that his duty as a manager starts with “providing for both the material good and spiritual welfare of my employees.” (p. 140)*

Taking up the Maslowian language of neo-human relations (almost verbatim), Bill O'Brien says:

*"...When the industrial age began, people worked 6 days a week to earn enough for food and shelter. Today, most of us have these handled by Tuesday afternoon. Our traditional hierarchical organizations are not designed to provide for people's higher order needs, self-respect and self-actualization. The ferment in management will continue until organizations begin to address these needs, for all employees."* (p. 140)

If I were to use Senge's language I might say that these quotes *reek with the odour* of a human relations discourse with its liberal humanist presupposition of the self-developing subject.

While the notion of 'the Learning Organisation' has been critiqued in the critical management literature as rhetoric, with the argument that a very different reality actually occurs in the workplace (eg. Coopey, 1996; Coopey and Burgoyne, 2000; Legge, 1995), as Rose (1999b) points out, simply discounting this literature as mere management rhetoric, overlooks the material effects of discourse. The re-production of the sovereign subject in these texts, where the individual is understood as having core and essential characteristics that are universal across varying historical and cultural settings, has political effects (Butler, 1999; Foucault, 1982; Henriques *et al.*, 1998; Patton, 1994; Rose, 1996). Butler (1992, p. 10) argues that:

*...this subject is itself the **effect** of a genealogy which is erased at the moment that the subject takes itself as the single origin of its action...*  
(my emphasis)

The separation of subjectivity and power ignores the way *politics and power exist already at the level at which the subject and its agency are articulated and made possible* (Butler, 1992, p. 13).

Therefore, this literature needs to be examined in terms of the new conceptualisations of 'the worker' that it brings into effect. This text enables 'the

worker' to be imagined in a particular way – as a self-actualising, and therefore autonomous subject. And in conceiving of 'the worker' in this way, this text provides a rationalisation for a particular type of government in the workplace. In other words, in understanding all workers as self-actualising subjects, the workplace should be organised as 'the Learning Organisation'.

In examining the subject positions constructed in organisational learning texts, we can begin to trace a transformation in the meaning of work through the introduction of a language of learning in the workplace. For example, in the quoted material from CEOs that Senge uses, work is understood as providing the pathway to producing a satisfied and fulfilled 'self'. It is in this sense that organisational learning theories can be understood as having particular meanings of social reality embedded in them.

In summary, *The Learning Organisation* is both grounded in, and contributes to, a regime of truth of the centred, autonomous, rational self. This text constructs workers as unified, rational and autonomous subjects. Following poststructural theorists such as Rose (1989, 1996), rather than taking this subject for granted, the political implications of reproducing this mode of subjectivity as seemingly natural, require closer examination.

### **Constructing 'the collaborative subject'**

Move forward by a decade and we have a (new?) way of talking about learning at work offered by the communities of practice guru, Etienne Wenger. Wenger (1998) proposes that we learn through participating in *communities of practice*. While the concept of communities of practice has been criticised as *old wine in new bottles* (Gourlay, 1999), this workplace learning theory has its roots in a different theoretical tradition to the Human Relations theory that underpins Senge's work.

Communities of practice has become a powerful discourse for talking about learning at work (Contu and Willmott, 2003; Gee *et al.*, 1996). I suggest that the notion of learning at work as *legitimate* (and implicitly outside of regulation) produced by this learning discourse (see Chapter 3), and its language of unity and homogeneity, for example, where workers are described as *mutually engaged* in a

*joint enterprise* using a *shared repertoire* (Wenger, 1998, p. 73), contributes to its appeal, particularly for managers, trainers and professional developers. Using a discursive approach, the ways communities of practice texts construct a particular mode of worker subjectivity as natural can begin to be explored.

I will focus my analysis on a particular communities of practice text by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice* (2002). This text follows earlier anthropological work by Wenger, in conjunction with Jean Lave, where they developed the concept of communities of practice to theorise everyday learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In the later text, Wenger has partnered with two different authors to write a text with a managerial focus.

The inclusion of the term *cultivating* in the title of the book evokes an organic theme of growth and development, yet a development which is assisted by the gentle nurturing of 'the cultivator', and it encapsulates an underlying tension in the later work by Wenger on communities of practice. It is the ongoing tension between the desire to manage knowledge production and learning in the workplace and a less deterministic view of learning implicit in the concept of situated learning that I seek to draw attention in this chapter.

The book begins with a case study of the formation of *Tech Clubs* at Chrysler during the 1990s. The Tech Clubs were *knowledge-based groups* of engineers that, in their re-presentation in this text, formed 'naturally' around the shared practice of the production of various car platforms at Chrysler. The Tech Clubs provide an illustration of communities of practice, and particularly how informal structures such as these contribute to enhanced organisational performance. In the case study, the Chrysler engineers are represented as having an innate desire to improve their work practice and, in so doing, form communities of practice. It is an implicit assumption of this text that all workers desire greater responsibility and seek the opportunity to participate in knowledge-producing activities at work. For example:

*By assigning responsibility to the practitioners themselves to generate and share the knowledge they need, these communities provide a social forum that supports the living nature of knowledge. (p. 12)*

The communities in this case study are represented as completely autonomous groups within the workplace, with no outside intervention, thus reinforcing the notion of a 'natural' development. For example, the communities of practice are described as:

*...a natural part of organizational life. They will develop on their own and many will flourish, whether or not the organization recognizes them. (p. 12)*

The (seemingly) 'natural' formation of the community of practice provides it with its legitimacy, both to the workers within it and within the organisation. The re-presentation of the community as autonomous and self-generating, in terms of knowledge production, enables the community, and the knowledge it produces, to appear separate from institutional regulation.

Ironically, considering its 'roots' in situated learning theory where context is foregrounded (see Chapter 3), *Cultivating Communities of Practice* completely overlooks the relationship between the community and its location within the institutional context of the workplace, a site of production and labour, thus overlooking the relationship between relations of power and learning in the workplace. However, I attempt to bring power back into view in the analysis undertaken here. It is interesting to consider, for example, for whom is this text written? And of what is it trying to persuade?

I suggest that this text is unabashedly written to appeal to managers. The focus of this text is on production and the economic benefits to be gained from organising the workplace using a community of practice model. For example, the knowledge that gets to count in the Chrysler case study is knowledge that relates to enhanced production and organisational performance:

*Today there are more than one hundred officially recognized Tech Clubs, plus a few emerging ones. They are responsible for a host of knowledge-based activities such as documenting lessons learned, standardizing practices for their area, initiating newcomers, providing*



*advice to car platforms, and exploring emerging technologies with suppliers. (p. 3)*

The learning curriculum at Chrysler is framed by the institutional context of the workplace rather than separate from it. Throughout the case study the stories that feature and presumably count as learning in this workplace are those that contribute to the successful implementation of a new mode of work organisation around the production of car platforms. The learning that is privileged in this text is specifically linked to enhanced organisational productivity, with a seemingly unified view of what counts as productive. For example, there is no representation in this text of communities of practice resisting the organisational restructure. Nor is there mention of workers that were made redundant from the restructure and what they learned. Further, there is no representation of workers presenting alternative agendas in terms of how the workplace might be organised in other ways. Thus, contrary to the view of communities of practice offered by Wenger *et al.* in this text, the privileging of only some types of learning draws attention to the fact that not all learning was legitimate in the Chrysler workplace.

Fenwick (2003b, unpagged), in a critique of the exclusions of experiential learning, makes a similar point:

*In the categories typically used to study or accredit experiential learning, the strong influence of capitalist production is immediately apparent...Those who have been socially, physically, economically or politically excluded from a particular experiences may be judged as lacking social capital, remedied through expanding their access to 'rich' experiences and networks. But this approach colonises their own knowledge, reifies the normalising categories of the middle class whose values control the dominant cultural meanings, and perpetuates an acquisitive conception of experience as capital to be obtained and parlayed into credit, income or profit....Sexuality, desire and fantasy, for example, tend to be ignored in adult education discourses of experiential learning. Non-conscious and intuitive knowledge, knowledge of micro-negotiations within systems that*

*struggle in bodies and discourses, and knowledge without voice or subject that lives in collective action tend to be bracketed out of these discourses.*

This draws attention to the categorising of ‘experience’ and the way only some things get to count as experience (or everyday learning) within the institutional framework of the workplace. Poststructural learning literature points out that experience is always mediated within context rather than providing the raw data for the production of objective and universal knowledge (Fenwick, 2003b; Michelson, 1996; Usher, Bryant and Johnston, 1997).

A further example of the way this text is directed to ‘the manager’ is through its specific hailing of this subject:

*But with a community, **your** power is always mediated by the community’s own pursuit of its interest. **You** cannot violate the natural developmental processes and dynamics that make a community function as a source of knowledge and arbiter of expertise, including members’ passion about the topic, the sense of spirit and identity of the community, and its definition of what constitutes expert performance. Rather **you** must learn to work with these processes and dynamics. Cultivating communities of practice in an organizational context is an art, and the following chapters offer a guide to the subtleties of this art. (p. 14, my emphasis)*

The use of *you* and *your* by Wenger *et al.* in the above excerpt is a direct and personal call to the workplace manager. While the advice they offer here might suggest potential disruption of a managerial discourse of control, thus creating tension for managers, Wenger *et al.* finally appeal to a discourse of control by claiming that managers will be able to learn the *art* of cultivating communities of practice, thereby ensuring a productive workplace. Again, these authors use evocative language in their effort to seduce. For example, rather than naming communities of practice as a managerial technology for enhancing worker

productivity, they use the more subtle term of *art*, implying the manager is a skilled artisan rather than a mere technician.

The above excerpt also re-presents communities of practice as a site of 'naturally' aligned knowledge producing workers, for example, the reference to *natural developmental processes and dynamics* of the community. This is problematic as it ignores specificity and difference in the workplace. In taking worker alignment for granted, this text overlooks the complex processes whereby discourses become interiorised and understood as coming from within – the interplay of technologies of power with technologies of the self. Instead, alignment becomes 'the truth' around which the workplace needs to be organised.

While a communities of practice discourse comes out of a different theoretical tradition to a psychologised notion of 'the individual', I suggest that the representation of communities of practice in this text works to reproduce a notion of everyday learning at work as self/group development and outside of regulation. For example, passion is re-presented as innate, and a core characteristic possessed by workers. The workers in the Tech Clubs appear to be constantly working on themselves in order to improve their work practices, but in relation to what norms? Where did the ideal types against which these workers self-regulate come from? For example, how does 'passion' end up as a personal desire which appears to come from within? The analyses in later chapters begin to trace the ways seemingly essential attributes of workers are discursively produced rather than natural.

*Cultivating Communities of Practice*, in re-presenting the 'the workplace learner' as 'the collaborative subject', proposes that the successful government of the workplace will be achieved through harnessing worker subjectivity rather than through its suppression. For example:

*The ability to combine the needs of organizations and community members is crucial in the knowledge economy, where companies succeed by fully engaging the creativity of their employees. The multiple and complex ways in which communities of practice deliver*

*value to both members and organizations is the reason they are fast becoming a central part of the management agenda. (p. 18)*

Communities of practice are offered by Wenger *et al.* as the solution to the problem of organisational alignment. Top-down managerial techniques are no longer understood as effective strategies of government as contemporary workplaces increasingly require workers who are creative and producers of knowledge (Drucker, 1993; Garvin, 1993; Jacques, 1992; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). It is worthwhile noting that this is the same problem that Senge sought to address in *The Fifth Discipline*, suggesting that ten years later a solution is yet to be found. In communities of practice texts, workplace learners are re-presented as active and emotionally engaged knowledge-producers in the contemporary workplace and work is re-presented as the mechanism through which a creative and passionate self can be produced. The connection between the need for workplaces to have workers who understand themselves as active, self-actualising subjects and the discursive construction of this subject in contemporary management texts directs attention to the relationship between knowledge and power.

It is interesting to trace the way a communities of practice discourse, where knowledge is understood as situated, and context and difference are foregrounded, has been re-written as a management text by Wenger *et al.* For example, in an earlier text Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 98) noted that: *The social structure of this practice, its power relations, and its conditions for legitimacy define possibilities for learning (ie for legitimate peripheral participation)*, thus suggesting that learning and knowledge production are not neutral, and are interlinked with power relations in the workplace. However, a consideration of the relationship between power and everyday learning has disappeared altogether in *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, where everyday learning is re-written as the natural development of seemingly autonomous groups in the workplace and thus outside of regulation. The exercise of disciplinary power in a community of practice and the complex mechanisms whereby workers take up particular identifications in the workplace fails to be examined.

Following Fenwick's (2003b) argument, introduced previously, we only get to hear about learning in terms of how it contributes to production which, I contend, reproduces an instrumental view of learning (Gherardi, 1999, 2006). This representation of learning is problematic if it becomes the prevailing way of understanding and talking about learning at work. For example, Gee *et al.* ask what space is left for reflection and critique if we are all immersed in *the core values and communities of practice of the business* (1996, p. 68)? While a communities of practice approach that privileges everyday experience, and learning through doing, is incredibly seductive (Harman, 2003), some useful questions for interrogating the contemporary privileging of this discourse in the managerial literature might include: What gets to count as everyday learning at work in this literature? Who gets to do the counting? And how is the workplace learner constructed in these texts? As Michelson (1996, p. 638) points out, *the uses to which appeals to experience are put* need to be closely examined.

## **Summing up**

This chapter has focused on two organisational learning texts that have been widely circulated in the workplace: Senge's *Learning Organisation* and Wenger's *Communities of Practice*. I have analysed the ways 'the workplace learner' is constructed in both these texts. For example, Senge's text constructs the workplace learner as 'the reflective practitioner', an autonomous subject who is able to separate themselves from the politics of the workplace and objectively and rationally enhance workplace practices. The Wenger *et al.* text constructs the workplace learner as 'the collaborative subject', unproblematically aligned with the broader goals of the workplace and part of a shared (and seemingly unified) workplace community. The analyses undertaken in this chapter foreground the productiveness of discourse.

Rather than suppressing subjectivity, discourses construct subject positions (or ways of 'being') for workers to take up. While this is not necessarily a 'bad' thing, for example any of these subject positions might be appropriated by workers and used for their own purposes, understanding oneself in only one way, that is, with a fixed and unified subjectivity, is always at the expense of other ways of knowing. This

draws attention to the political implications of theories, for in constructing particular conceptualisations of 'the workplace learner' as seemingly natural, particular interventions for acting on this subject are enabled (Rose, 1989, 1996, 1999b).

Another theme that emerges in this chapter is translations of knowledge (Foucault, 1998). For example, this chapter exemplifies the shift in the way a communities of practice discourse has been used and the shifting purposes to which this discourse has been put. This reinforces the Foucauldian notion that discourses can be used for different and sometimes opposing purposes (1998, pp. 100-101):

*Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.*

In the above case a communities of practice discourse, which was formerly connected with a strategy for acknowledging the situated nature of knowledge production and thus connected with resistance to more traditional accounts of knowledge production such as those associated with the academy, has been appropriated by organisational theorists and is now connected with a managerial strategy for regulating worker conduct.

Both of the texts analysed in this chapter have proved particularly seductive and have been widely taken up in the workplace, including the professional developers and senior managers in the research site for this study. In Chapter 7, I discuss the take up of these learning discourses by the professional developers at PSE and what they make thinkable and practicable in the PSE workplace.

## CHAPTER 5

### **Governing the subject**

#### **Introduction**

In Chapters 3 and 4, I explored emerging workplace learning discourses, with a focus on the mainstream organisational learning literature. The purpose of this exploration has been to identify complex power-knowledge formations connected with the circulation of specific workplace learning discourses. The Uncovering Learning project, a research project with the aim of producing knowledge about everyday learning at work, provides another site for empirically exploring the relationship between power and knowledge. Rather than conceiving the project as a site for the 'objective' production of 'neutral' knowledge about workplace learning, and thus separating knowledge production and power, the project is represented as site where power, knowledge and subjectivity were interconnected rather than separate.

In the first section of this chapter I describe the ways it was in the interests of various groups and individuals involved in the Uncovering Learning project to study everyday learning and make it 'knowable'. I suggest that 'knowing' everyday learning was enmeshed with the subjective desires of various players participating on the project. Later, I examine the ways everyday learning was inscribed in various project texts and the particular modes of subjectivity these texts re-produced as seemingly natural for workers. This view of the Uncovering Learning project locates power in an account of knowledge production rather than viewing knowledge and power as separable.

#### **The context for the contemporary production of workplace learning knowledges**

For those working in the emerging field of workplace learning, including workplace trainers and professional development practitioners, it might be difficult to imagine

a workplace where there is not learning. However, before the deluge of organisational learning literature in the 1990s (see Chapter 3) learning tended to be understood as something that took place in educational institutions rather than workplaces and as something done in preparation for the world of work rather than something done at work. Or, if it was recognised as taking place at work, it was generally understood as being related to formal training courses, structured on-the-job training programs, or apprenticeship models (Boud and Garrick, 1999; Symes and McIntyre, 2000).

Indeed, training and development programs in the workplace have long been concerned with the learning of workers and there is a body of literature contributing to this knowledge domain (eg. Knowles, Holton and Swanson, 2005; Sims, 2006; Smith, 1998). In this literature workplace learning tends to be spoken of within a competency discourse (Edwards and Usher, 1994). Competency based training (CBT) has become a dominant model for organising formal programs of training and development in the workplace. A competency, as it is understood in much of the training and development literature, is a measure of *knowledge, skills and attitudes required of the individual to perform the job at the required level* (Tovey, 1997, p. 13).

While there has been an extensive literature produced around the strengths and limitations of this approach (eg. Ashworth and Saxton, 1990; Norris, 1991; Ramsay, 1993), as well as Foucauldian analyses of a competency discourse (eg. Edwards and Usher, 1994), this literature is outside the focus of my thesis. Instead, my interest is in the contemporary privileging of a discourse of everyday learning and experience, as articulated, for example, in the mainstream organisational learning and communities of practice literature. The conditions contributing to the emergence of everyday learning as a knowledge domain are explored in the following section.

## **Changing workplaces**

Broad economic and technological shifts contributing to widespread workplace change have taken place, most noticeably since the 1980s. These have been



discussed and analysed extensively in the organisational and managerial literature and include: the shift to the global production, distribution and consumption of products and services; the increased pace of technological development; shorter product life cycles; and increased competition (Legge, 1995; Makridakis, 1995; Reich, 1992; Stalk and Hout, 1990; Thompson and McHugh, 2002; Wood *et al.*, 2004). In an effort to remain competitive in increasingly turbulent conditions (Emery and Trist, 1965) many organisations have sought to enhance their flexibility (Atkinson, 1984; Drucker, 1988; Handy, 1995; Stace and Dunphy, 1994). This has contributed to the introduction of post-industrial forms of work organisation such as: flatter structures, decentralised decision making, the introduction of self-managing work teams and crossfunctional workgroups (Casey, 1995; Clegg, 1990; Linstead *et al.*, 2004; Thompson and McHugh, 2002; Wood *et al.*, 2004). These changes in the organisation of workplaces have taken place in both private and public sector organisations (Rifkin and Fulop, 1997).

## Changing workers

The (seeming) immutability of change in Australian workplaces<sup>19</sup> has provided the condition for a range of programs of government for re-forming worker conduct.<sup>20</sup> This includes programs of government by the state, an ambitious example being the implementation of national training reforms by the Keating government in the early 1990s (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1987, 1991); and programs of government in workplaces, including the introduction of a range of training and professional development programs such as mentoring, leadership programs, and more recently, communities of practice (Anderson, 1998; Mitchell, Henry and Young, no date; Mitchell and Young, 2001; Smith, 1998).

While the specific goals and objectives of the above programs of government might differ, it could be said that an overriding objective has been to increase the productivity of workers through enhancing their flexibility and capacity to adapt to

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<sup>19</sup> Some commentators question the inevitability of change and point to the way 'change' is used as a rhetorical technique to maintain existing relations of power (eg. Contu *et al.*, 2003; Edwards, Nicoll, Solomon and Usher, 2004; Legge, 1995; Rifkin and Fulop, 1997)

<sup>20</sup> These programs exemplify the Foucauldian concept of biopower: the development of government policy to govern various aspects of the body, including making workers more productive.

ongoing change in the workplace. Indeed, these programs, when implemented in the workplace, are often referred to by organisational consultants as *change management* programs (eg. Mitchell and Young, 2001).

The above can be linked with an emphasis in the organisational literature, since the 1980s, on developing 'strong' workplace cultures (Kanter, 1989; Peters and Waterman, 1982; Schein, 1985 ; Schriber and Gutek, 1987) and bringing about cultural change in the workplace. This has contributed to a managerial focus in the workplace on implementing technologies for aligning the goals of individuals with those of their work organisation, thereby creating a 'strong' (or unified) organisational culture (Legge, 1995). Du Gay (1996b, p. 151) describes the *cultural turn* in the organisational literature in the following way:

*In this literature 'culture' is accorded a privileged position because it is seen to structure the way people think, feel and act in organizations. The problem is one of changing 'norms', 'attitudes' and 'values' so that people are enabled to make the right and necessary contribution to the success of the organization for which they work. To this end, managers are encouraged to view the most effective or 'excellent' organizations as those with the appropriate 'culture' – that ensemble of norms and techniques of conduct that enables the self-actualizing capacities of individuals to become aligned with the goals and objectives of the organization for which they work.*

Thus, the focus on culture was very closely connected with questions of worker identity (or everyday learning) and producing workers who know and understand themselves in relation to particular ideal types. The provision of professional development programs in the workplace was one such strategy for aligning the goals of the individual with the goals of the organisation.

### **Changing universities**

The increasing emphasis on the ongoing skill development of the workforce by the government, what is sometimes referred to as Lifelong Learning (Chappell *et al.*,

2003; Tuschling and Engemann, 2006; Zukas, 2006; Zukas and Malcolm, 2001), has contributed to an unprecedented growth in the Higher Education sector (Boud and Solomon, 2001b; Symes and McIntyre, 2000). In Australia, universities have traditionally been funded by the government, however, the significant increase in students undertaking higher education programs has resulted in the government seeking alternative sources of funding. Increasingly, higher education institutions in Australia are being encouraged by government to operate along commercial lines (eg. Fullerton, 2005; Gallagher, 2000). The take up of a commercial model includes establishing collaborative research relationships with industry (eg. anonymous, 2004; Hon. Dr Brendan Nelson MP, 2002).<sup>21</sup> The federal government, in an effort to encourage collaborative relationships between the academy and industry have put in place various programs to fund research partnerships. The Strategic Partnerships with Industry-Research and Training, or SPIRT, is one such program.<sup>22</sup>

The aim of SPIRT (now known as Linkage Projects) is described on the ARC website (anonymous, 2005) in the following way:

*Linkage—Projects aims [sic] to:*

*-encourage and develop long-term strategic research alliances between higher education institutions and industry in order to apply advanced knowledge to problems, or to provide opportunities to obtain national economic or social benefits*

*-support collaborative research on issues of benefit to regional and rural communities*

*-foster opportunities for postdoctoral researchers to pursue internationally competitive research in collaboration with industry, targeting those who have demonstrated a clear commitment to high quality research*

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<sup>21</sup> The current shifts provide a good illustration of du Gay's thesis (1996a) that contemporary forms of work organisation are contributing to the production of the enterprising subject in the workplace.

<sup>22</sup> Such programs are symptomatic of the desire by Government to produce an alignment between work and education institutions. However, the very need for a programmatic approach implies that the alignment between these institutions may not be as smooth or as natural as suggested in the workplace learning literature (see Boud and Solomon, 2001b).

*-provide industry-oriented research training to prepare high-calibre postgraduate research students*

*-produce a national pool of world-class researchers to meet the needs of Australian industry*

*Linkage—Projects supports [sic] collaborative research projects between higher education researchers and industry and identifies an allocation to projects of benefit to regional and rural communities. Proposals must contain an industry contribution, in cash and/or in kind.*

One goal, then, of SPIRT programs is the production of applied, problem-based knowledge. And although not explicitly stated, the SPIRT program could also be read as a program that attempts to shape worker conduct in particular ways. It attempts to shape academic conduct through producing more commercial modes of operation. Perhaps this is most clearly articulated in the stated intent to train postgraduate students so that a *pool of world-class researchers* [is produced] *to meet the needs of Australian industry*. The SPIRT program also positions the industry partners who participate in the program in a particular way. In partnering with the academy to conduct research in their workplace, the industry partner (or at least their representative/s on the project) are positioned as ‘the action researcher/organisational learner’.<sup>23</sup>

The Uncovering Learning in the Workplace project was funded through the SPIRT program (see Chapter 1). The Research Centre for Workplace Learning (RCWL) at City University, as a university research centre operating within the current funding context, needed to be forging research partnerships with industry because that was how it was, in part, funded.

In summary, the production of knowledge about everyday learning in the workplace can be linked with various programs of government for re-forming worker conduct and is thus bound up with power. However, a reading of the

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<sup>23</sup> Workers who conduct research in their workplace in order to enhance organisational performance (Altrichter *et al.*, 1991; Cunningham, 1993).

alliances forged between the workplace learning academics from City University and the professional developers at PSE as the result of the top-down power of the state, overlooks the complexities of this collaboration. As I suggest below, it was in the interests of both these groups to study and 'know' workplace learning, and these interests extended beyond the purely economic.

### **The take up of the SPIRT program by the workplace learning academics**

The contemporary mobilisation of a discourse of learning in the workplace means that schools, universities and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges, the sites in Australia traditionally associated with learning, need no longer be recognised as the only domains of learning (Usher, 2000). 'Learning' has escaped from its traditional institutional boundaries and can now be cited/sited/sighted in other spaces, including those of the workplace (eg. Boud *et al.*, 2006).

The escape of learning raises important questions for the academy (and their industry partner) as both are significant players in the learning domain. If learning has moved into new terrains, then these terrains need to be explored (and presumably conquered?) by the learning 'experts'. It was therefore in the interests of the academics at City University to know and understand learning, within the institutional context of the workplace, and to make *workplace learning* their new object of knowledge.

Foucault (1991a), and actor-network theorists such as Latour (1987), point to the importance of mapping and inscribing territories in order that they might be known and governed. Drawing on actor-network concepts, Miller and Rose (1993), introduce a useful concept for analysing relationships between power and knowledge which they call *government at a distance*. Government at a distance is enabled through the inscription of far away places so that these places may be known and understood, and therefore governed. Interventions can be organised from far away places through the 'knowability' of particular sites. As Rose (1999b, p. 36) says:

*To govern, it is necessary to render visible the space over which government is to be exercised. This is not simply a matter of looking; it is a practice by which the space is re-presented in maps, charts, pictures and other inscription devices.*

The concept of government at a distance draws attention to the part played by the Uncovering Learning project in terms of inscribing everyday learning at work, and making it 'knowable' in particular ways. The inscriptions of the Uncovering Learning project are discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Using the concept of government at a distance, one reading of the Uncovering Learning project might be as academics re-staking their claim on learning and re-writing learning in their own terms. Just as learning discourses have broken the traditional boundaries of the academy, so too have learning scholars, with learning within the institutional context of the workplace their new object of knowledge. It could be said that it was in the interests of the academics to know and understand everyday learning in the workplace in order that they might 'grow' the network in which they have authority. In other words, in order to establish themselves as experts of learning in the workplace, and potentially to expand the territory they might govern, the workplace learning academics needed to 'know' this new learning domain. Through undertaking empirical research on learning at work, educational researchers can be understood as mapping this new 'learning' terrain.

Another reading re-presents the workplace learning academics in a more subversive light, again re-writing learning, but in terms that disrupt traditional knowledge hierarchies and the privileging of academic knowledge. The workplace learning academics were interested in legitimating sites other than the academy as sites of knowledge production and learning. In mapping the everyday learning that takes place in the workplace this learning begins to be counted, and perhaps it becomes legitimate within the academy.

## **The take up of the SPIRT program by the professional developers**

It is the role of professional development staff to 'manage' learning in the workplace, with an overall aim of enhancing organisational productivity (Nankervis *et al.*, 2005; Tovey, 1997). Thus, the professional developers at PSE were interested in everyday learning in relation to interventions that might be designed for enhancing worker productivity. In this sense, the professional developers wanted to produce a particular type of worker subject at PSE, 'the reflective practitioner' (see Chapter 7). This is the type of worker that has appeal in contemporary workplaces: a worker who, in rationally reflecting on their experience is able to continuously act on and improve both themselves and their work practice, thus contributing to enhanced organisational productivity (Edwards and Usher, 2000b; Farrell, 2000; Usher and Solomon, 1999). Therefore, the professional developers at PSE were interested in participating in the Uncovering Learning project in order that 'the truth' of workplace learning be revealed so that more effective learning interventions might be implemented in this workplace.

While I have referred to the contemporary mobilisation of an experiential learning discourse in workplaces, and the increasing appeal of this discourse as a way of 'knowing' learning and organising the workplace (see Chapter 3), there are still many competing models for organising workplaces and many discourses in circulation, of which learning is only one. I suggest that the collaboration with the workplace learning academics on the Uncovering Learning project provided the professional developers with the opportunity to inscribe learning at work in a way that would make it persuasive to others in this workplace, particularly senior managers, thereby attempting to get learning back on the agenda. I say *back on the agenda* as it became apparent during the project that the professional developers were a group in decline in the PSE workplace (see Chapter 7).

Similarly to the academics, it was in the interests of the professional developers to map and know the 'new' territory of learning in their workplace – even within the workplace learning has broken loose and escaped from the places where it might be understood as having been traditionally located. It has moved beyond formal

training programs, such as those offered by professional development, and into the everyday spaces of the workplace. For example, many management texts describe the devolution of HRM functions, including training and staff development, to line managers and team leaders (eg. Legge, 1995; Nankervis *et al.*, 2005). The communities of practice literature also locates learning in everyday workplace practices such as informal discussions in lunchrooms and around photocopiers and so on (eg. Brown and Duguid, 1991; Gherardi, 2006; Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger *et al.*, 2002). The re-citing/re-siting/re-sighting of learning in/through everyday work practices, however, places the function of professional development in a potentially precarious position. No longer are they the only group responsible for the organisation of learning in the workplace. Therefore, the professional developers had an interest in re-inscribing everyday learning at work in a way that suited their purposes.

The Uncovering Learning project was 'good' for the professional developers as it provided an 'authorised site' for the production of knowledge. Through aligning with 'the learning experts', the knowledge produced by the project had the stamp of the academy and the power associated with more traditional forms and traditional sites of knowledge production (Edwards and Usher, 2000a). Therefore, while learning may have broken loose from the boundary of the academy, the desire by industry to engage the expertise of the academy suggests that this institution is still recognised as a major player in the production of legitimate knowledge and is still very powerful in those terms. Following Miller and Rose (1993), I suggest that this is connected with the ongoing dominance of a power/knowledge binary, with the academy still viewed as the distanced, objective producers of neutral knowledge. The authority of the academy was attractive to the professional developers as it provided them with legitimate access to workgroups in PSE under the banner of 'research'; as well as providing the textual products of the research, which re-inscribed the PSE workplace as a site of learning, with a stamp of legitimacy. The knowledge products of the project would provide the professional developers with fresh 'ammunition' in relation to legitimating learning as a way of organising the PSE workplace.



In summary, not only was the Uncovering Learning project enmeshed in a program of government conducted by the state, with the aim of aligning work institutions with universities and producing a more productive workforce, but it was also connected with programs of government in the workplace and a managerial desire to govern worker conduct in a large public sector workplace. The aim of the project was to produce knowledge about everyday learning that would contribute to enhanced productivity in the PSE workplace (see p. 83). The project was also intimately bound up with the desires of various participants including: the desire of the workplace learning academics to legitimise everyday learning and workplace experience and have this learning 'count' in the academy; the desire of the professional developers to have learning technologies recognised as a legitimate way of organising the PSE workplace; and my desire to obtain my doctorate, as well as making the complex relationships between power, knowledge and workplace learning discourses more visible. And as I argue throughout this thesis, these desires were embedded in the discourses to which we each had access; knowledge production cannot be separated from institutional practices and 'doing'. The Uncovering Learning project, which was to provide knowledge about everyday learning in the workplace, was thus intricately connected with power.

### **Inscribing everyday learning**

Following Foucault, Miller and Rose (1993) point out that integral to the success of programs of government in the workplace is the development of a language that enables a particular conceptualisation of work and workers, and the translation of these conceptualisations into technologies or interventions. In other words, through inscribing domains in particular ways knowledges play an important part in *rendering aspects of existence thinkable and calculable, and amenable to deliberated and planful initiatives* (Miller and Rose, 1993, p. 77).

The inscriptions of everyday learning produced by the Uncovering Learning project provided a language for talking about work and workers, and making the workplace 'imaginable' in a particular way (Latour, 1987; Rose, 1999a; Weedon, 1987). Thus, the knowledges produced by the Uncovering Learning project were not mere reflections of the 'reality' of the PSE workplace, instead this workplace

was re-inscribed as a domain of learning (eg. Boud *et al.*, 2006). It is in this sense that inscriptions are never neutral as they work to produce particular objects and subjects as seemingly natural (Butler, 1992; Edwards *et al.*, 2004; Fairclough, 1992; Henriques *et al.*, 1998; Mills, 1997; Potter, 1997; Weedon, 1987). The following section of the chapter explores the processes through which the PSE workplace was translated into a site of learning through the inscriptions of the project.

### **Re-configuring the workplace as a site of learning**

The textual products of the project, both written and spoken, were multiple and varied and included an initial project proposal for the ARC, the project planning meetings of the research group, journal and conference papers, conference presentations, feedback sessions with PSE representatives, written reports to PSE, a brochure for distribution in the PSE workplace, everyday conversations of the researchers, the meetings with the four PSE workgroups, this thesis,.... the list goes on. In many of these texts the PSE workplace was re-presented as a site of learning and workers as workplace learners by the researchers on the Uncovering Learning project. While this might seem unsurprising, the aim of the project was after all to produce knowledge about workplace learning, it is the almost seamless translation that is enabled through the axiomatic nature of academic research, and the ways this is connected with power, to which I want to draw attention.

For example, the initial uptake of the SPIRT program by both the academics and the professional developers involved the construction of 'allied interests' through the development of a shared language for talking about work and workers (Miller and Rose, 1993). The theme of the productivity of learning guided the development of a shared problem space that could be explored collaboratively by the professional developers and the workplace learning academics, with an overarching concern of the project being: how might learning (of both individuals and the organisation) be enhanced in this workplace? The framing of talk about learning in terms of a managerial discourse of worker productivity was evident in the research outcomes that were proposed in the research contract between City University and their industry partner, these being:

- *Improved recognition of the learning to be found in the organisation, to the benefit of both the organisation and individual employees.*
- *Improved understanding by key personnel in the organisations of the ways in which organisational culture and procedures encourage or inhibit learning, and the issues which need to be resolved in developing the learning organisation.*
- *Improved learning systems and learning strategies in the organisation that will more effectively facilitate learning embedded in practice.*

The proposed outcomes of the project can be examined for the ways learning at work was spoken about in this text, and the social meanings that were already embedded in the research. Learning was spoken of here in programmatic terms where the development of *learning strategies* and *learning systems* would enhance both individual and organisational performance. The reference to *the learning to be found in the organisation*, where learning is used as a noun, works to reinforce the view that learning is a thing that exists, and thus has a fixed and accepted meaning. The reference to *the learning organisation* already re-writes the workplace as a natural site of learning.

I suggest that learning is implicitly offered in the above text as a solution to the managerial problem of worker alignment, for example, where learning is represented as benefiting both individuals and the organisation at one and the same time. This is a particularly persuasive text as who could possibly be *against learning* (Contu *et al.*, 2003)?<sup>24</sup> And as it turned out, the language of learning used in the research proposal proved persuasive as the funding application was successful and an alliance was forged between the workplace learning academics and the professional developers.

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<sup>24</sup> Unlike these authors, I do not necessarily propose being *against learning*. Rather, I want to draw attention to the entanglement of workplace learning knowledges and power, and in so doing open up ways of writing workplace learning that are attentive to these complexities.

The Stage 1 project texts also exemplify the re-inscription of the PSE workplace as a site of learning. At the completion of Stage 1 of the project, following what might be described as a 'typical' qualitative research methodology of the social sciences (see Chapter 1), the findings from the initial interviews were reported back to each of the workgroups. The interview texts of the researched had been translated by the researchers into a typology of learning where it was proposed (in a handout given to each of the workgroups) that we learn at work through the following processes: mastering organisational processes, negotiating relationships and dealing with atypical situations.

This broad typology of learning at work proposed by the researchers encompassed a vast range of work practices. Indeed, it is difficult to think of particular work practices that are outside the scope of this categorisation of learning. And through re-inscribing these generic work practices as 'learning', most work, and workers, were re-inscribed as workplace learners. The sense that learning at work was universal, and that being a learner was a characteristic shared by all workers, was emphasised by the use of unifying words in this document such as *we*. *We* suggested the collective and that the knowledge 'uncovered' by the researchers applied to all workers. In these texts the researchers were attempting to persuade the workgroup members that they were, in 'fact', workplace learners.

The workgroup meetings conducted during Stage 2 of the project provided another site for re-inscribing the workplace as a site of learning. Interestingly, Stage 2 of the project had initially been named as the *Intervention Stage*. This name, however, was later dropped by the researchers because of its governmental implications. The researchers wanted to distance themselves from an action research style of methodology. While the name *intervention* went out of circulation, I suggest, that the Stage 2 meetings still provided an *obligatory point of passage* (Callon, 1986) for the research subjects, where workers who participated in the project were automatically positioned as 'the workplace learner'.

For example, in Stage 2 of the project the language of learning was introduced by the researchers as a theme for exploring (particular) practices of the workgroups, practices that had been selected and named by the researchers as connected with

learning. Through this process particular work events and practices that had been described by workgroup members (but not necessarily in relation to learning, nor named as learning) were re-configured by the researchers as learning. For example, for the senior managers it was: *learning through transition* and for the trade teachers: *learning through the challenge of new students*. Although these workers had not used the language of learning to talk about their work, a learning discourse was introduced by the researchers to each of the workgroups. In naming the discussion topics in this way and organising the Stage 2 workgroup meetings as sessions where workgroup members 'reflected' on their experiences in the workplace to reveal 'the truth' about the workplace, and learning at work, a workplace learning discourse was activated by the researchers.

Using an interpretive approach associated with qualitative methods (eg. Miles and Huberman, 1994), the researchers from the Uncovering Learning project set out into the foreign, and uncharted territory of the PSE workgroups to record and 'know' everyday learning at work. Calling PSE a foreign territory might sound odd as the project was a collaborative project between PSE and City University and one of the researchers was an employee of the work organisation. However, while they were an 'insider' of the organisation, they were not an insider of the workgroups that became the object of the researchers' gaze. In an effort to avoid colonising these 'others', a frequent critique of academic research, these workers were given voice through a methodology of collaboration. However, following MacLure (2003, p. 123), I suggest that the project exemplifies *researchers obscuring the very 'voices' which it is their intention to make 'present'*. The researchers wanted to open up spaces for the voices of 'everyday learners' in the workplace to be heard, but in our eagerness to rename the workplace as a site of everyday learning, the material effects of reinscribing the workplace in this way were (at times) overlooked. There were other strategies, not necessarily aligned with those of the academics, and other discourses in circulation in this workplace.

### **The Uncovering Learning project as a site of contestation**

Rather than conceiving the Uncovering Learning project as a homogeneous space in which 'the truth' about everyday learning was 'uncovered', the production of

knowledges about workplace learning throughout the project was a site of struggle and contestation over what counted as everyday learning at work. While the shared language of the professional developers and the academics in relation to the productivity of everyday learning at work enabled the development of alliances at the project's conception, as the project 'played out' it became evident that there were different ways for talking about workplace learning, and different purposes to which a discourse of workplace learning might be put. For example, the following email exchange between members of the research team suggests that learning at work was not understood in the same way by all the researchers:

Email 1 (from myself to the rest of the research team):

*Here are the notes taken from our workshop on Tuesday on discursive shifts. Also, I've been thinking about one of the concepts we were discussing - learning rich and learning poor environments. Do these work environments actually provide more or less opportunity for learning? Is the experience of working in the [senior managers] unit richer than the experience of working in the [payroll administration] unit? I can see how working in strategic planning might provide more opportunity for solving work-related problems but does this make the learning richer? And if so, how? If we're thinking about learning from a situated perspective, where learning is thought of as participating in the practice, does the notion of learning rich and learning poor suggest that some workgroups will provide more or less opportunity to participate in the practice?*

Email 2 (from one of the research team in response to the above email):

*I too have been thinking about learning rich and learning poor environments and when I did a search on the net the only things I could find were e-learning environments (computers take things so literally and so miss the subtleties!) however the way that I see learning rich environments is more to do with the maximisation of learning opportunities so for example if you are working in the [senior*

managers] *unit as a manager you would have more exposure to acting opportunities in other positions, you would also have exposure to a wide range of literature associated not only with your position but college wide, you would also be given opportunities to attend a range of conferences and workshops which would expand your field of knowledge and of course you would also come into contact with a wide range of persons at all levels not only within your college and institute but across other institutes and other tertiary and public and private sector bodies and institutions, so again its about the opportunities that emerge as a result of this environment and not the value judgement of the experience of working in one position or place against the other. After all it is up to the individual to make the most of their experience and we must not also make our own judgements about one type of position over another. I hope I have somehow made my point clear and yes I think that some workplaces and situations may well provide more learning opportunities for people over others to participate in the practice.*

The professional developers used a discourse of workplace learning for programmatic purposes, where learning was understood as a thing that could be managed and controlled in the workplace and interventions designed to enhance learning at work (the talk of the professional developers is examined further in Chapter 7). And to some extent the academics were also drawn into a programmatic approach through their positioning as 'partners' in the Uncovering Learning project. The academics had, after all, promised *improved learning systems and learning strategies in the organisation that will effectively facilitate learning embedded in practice* in the project proposal, thereby reinforcing a programmatic view. However, the academics also spoke about workplace learning in terms of identity, where learning at work was understood as 'becoming'. In this sense, the academics used a discourse of workplace learning to validate existing knowledge and learning in the workplace. They were not necessarily interested in using learning as a technology for bringing about workplace change and sought to disrupt a programmatic approach with a focus on interventions.

The circulation of an economic discourse in their workplace, however, which positioned them as enterprising subjects, meant that they needed a language of learning that would appeal to the professional developers and other senior management groups in the workplace. These were, after all, their customers and as indicated previously, the ongoing survival of RCWL in the shifting research context in Australia depended on the academics becoming entrepreneurial and developing and maintaining relationships with industry. This entailed providing knowledge to the industry partner that might be deemed useful. However, rather than thinking about the subject positions made available through the project as singular and cohesive, I suggest they were multiple, and at times this created tension.

For example, negotiating the multiple positions of the project was a tricky business for the academics. On the one hand, drawing on poststructural approaches to theorise learning at work, they were trying to draw attention to the indeterminacy of learning interventions and programmatic approaches while at the same time trying to remain credible to their industry partner as ‘the learning experts’ and therefore explaining something. And all this while trying to avoid being *space invaders* in their relationships with ‘the researched’ during the project (Solomon, Boud and Rooney, 2004, p. 63). A paradox that arose for the researchers was that in the naming of the *in-between* spaces of the workplace as learning spaces, they potentially became spaces to be known and governed (Boud *et al.*, 2006, p. 3). One of the dilemmas of knowledge production foregrounded in a discursive approach is that researchers can never determine how the knowledge they produce will be taken up and used, and in the case of the Uncovering Learning project, the purposes to which a discourse of everyday learning (and experience) might be put.

Indeed, a reflexive approach by the researchers itself became a point of contestation. The gaze of the researchers on the Uncovering Learning project was to be firmly directed on the ‘other’ workers in the workplace and this, I suggest, was connected with the desire by the professional developers to know ‘the workplace learner’ in order that they might be governed. While there were reflexive papers produced by members of the research group (eg. Harman, Boud, Rooney, Solomon and Leontios, 2003; Rooney *et al.*, 2003; Solomon, Boud, Leontios and Staron,



2001) this was a site of struggle and considered by some not to be the point of the project. In other words, for some, the purpose of the project was not to produce texts about 'us' (the researchers), but texts about 'them' (the researched). This was what counted as knowledge about workplace learning for PSE and this was the type of knowledge outcome that the professional developers and other groups in the organisation expected from the project. The professional developers were interested in 'knowing' workplace learning in ways that would enable the development of learning interventions for the purposes of bringing about workplace change at PSE.

While the professional developers pushed throughout the project to develop technologies for enhancing learning at work the academics had been circumspect in the development of learning interventions. However, in a final attempt to achieve an outcome that suited their purposes (and thereby fixing what counted as learning in the PSE workplace), the professional developers insisted on the production of a brochure. And in line with the desired enterprising conduct that SPIRT programs aim to produce, the academics produced such a document. They did after all need to keep the customer happy.

The struggle over the meaning of everyday learning became manifest in the co-production of the brochure. The brochure was to be a document that could be used by multiple groups in the organisation with the aim of enhancing everyday learning in the workplace. As such it was a document that needed to appeal to professional developers, workgroup managers and workgroup members. But the production of this text on everyday learning at work was not a seamless and cohesive recording of the seemingly transparent 'findings' of the research project. Rather, the production of the brochure involved a protracted struggle between the academics and the professional developers over the way everyday learning might be re-presented.

Thus, rather than understanding the power relations of the project as top-down, and one-way, with the academics only producing knowledge that suited the purposes of their industry partner, or the industry partners as subservient to the power of the academy, I suggest there was an ongoing negotiation of relations of power between the academics and the professional developers where each attempted to shape 'the token' in ways that suited their own purposes (Latour, 1986). The production of the

brochure was a long, drawn out exercise where the text was passed backwards and forwards, with each group working on it in a way that suited their own interests. For example, the professional developers insisted on the inclusion of text that re-presented them as active players in learning at PSE and so sections such as: *Structured professional development plays a vital role in skilling the organisation* were included. The academics, in wanting to avoid an overly programmatic approach wrote of multiplicity and *the different languages of learning* in the PSE workplace.

In the final textual product, the re-presentation of everyday learning was not dissimilar to the later communities of practice literature (see Chapter 4), and similarly to this literature, the brochure drew on a managerial discourse of productivity in an effort to persuade. Everyday learners were re-presented as productive workers who contribute to enhancing organisational performance. For example, in an attempt to persuade workers as to *Why everyday learning matters* [for them], one of the section headings used in the brochure, the following argument was presented:

*There are several reasons why everyday learning matters for workers. For example everyday learning enables workers to master organisational processes, negotiate particular aspects of their work and deal with atypical situations (both individually and collectively).*

*In other words, everyday learning is critical in the day-to-day jobs of workers and is significant because it helps them address local issues, do their jobs more effectively, and to respond more quickly to the problems that arise at the coalface.*

Thus, what was able to count as everyday learning in the above text was framed within a discourse of productivity. Everyday learning was represented as a means of enabling workers at PSE to be more effective and efficient through solving workplace problems. There was little in the brochure to disrupt an instrumental view of learning provided in much of the mainstream organisational learning literature, where workplace learning is understood as contributing to enhanced

organisational performance and development, and little to disrupt a taken for granted view of workers as unified and cohesive subjects.

However, the language of the productivity of everyday learning shared by the academics and the professional developers had little appeal within the workgroups in this workplace. And this proved problematic as the success of the project depended on the alignment of workers and them taking up the position of 'the workplace learner' in the project. How, after all, was everyday learning to be inscribed if no-one participated in the 'collaborative' workgroup meetings (Stage 2 of the project) or understood or spoke of themselves as workplace learners? The re-inscription of the workplace as a site of learning by 'the learning experts' was often challenged by workgroup members and there was contestation around the positioning of the researched as 'the workplace learner' throughout the project (see Chapters 6 and 8).

### **Re-writing the Uncovering Learning project as enmeshed in relations of power**

The messiness of knowledge production tends to be overlooked in many research accounts, including those using qualitative methods of the social sciences (Bauman, 1993; Garrick, 2000; Law, 1994; MacLure, 2003), with research findings re-presented as descriptive accounts of workplace 'reality', and as part of a rational and linear process contributing to progress and development. Indeed the very name of the Uncovering Learning project reinforces this view, suggesting that learning (as an object) was lying concealed in this workplace, waiting to be 'uncovered' and described by the researchers. However, this account of the research process ignores the imbrication of power and knowledge, and the discursive construction of objects and subjects.

Rather than reproducing this view, the account of the Uncovering Learning project provided in this chapter directs attention to some of the complex links between the production of knowledge, relations of power and the emergence of workplace learning discourses. The Uncovering Learning project was a site for knowing learning at work, and theorising everyday learning, with these theories having

specific meanings of social reality embedded in them. I have argued that the inscriptions of the project enabled the workplace to be 'known' as a site of seemingly 'natural' learning, workers as learners, and 'the workplace learner' subject as an effective and efficient problem solver in the workplace thereby enhancing organisational productivity. And in casting this particular *grid of visibility* over the workplace, particular interventions and ways of acting on workers become thinkable (Rose, 1999a, p. 270).

However, as well as providing a site for alignment and unification, the Uncovering Learning project also provided a site for contestation and resistance. There were different discourses of workplace learning in circulation suggesting that the meaning of workplace learning might not be as self-evident as the prevailing view re-presented in much of the organisational learning literature. There was an ongoing struggle between the workplace learning academics and the professional developers throughout the project around the meaning of workplace learning and the purposes to which workplace learning discourses might be put. It could be said that a discourse of workplace learning served different tactical functions for the professional developers and the workplace learning academics. As Foucault (1998) points out, the same discourse may be used for contrary objectives, and conversely, different discourses may be used for the same strategies (see Chapter 4, p. 70).

What follows is a brief interlude that introduces Chapters 6, 7 and 8. These chapters explore the tactical function of discourse in more detail by examining the intersection of workplace learning discourses, as introduced by the researchers on the Uncovering Learning project, with discourses in circulation in three workgroups in the PSE workplace. The analyses undertaken in the following chapters enable me to explore a field of force relations around the discourses of workplace learning through examining when a discourse of workplace learning was taken up in the PSE workplace, by whom, and for what purposes, as well as examining resistance to the circulation of workplace learning discourses at PSE.

## INTERLUDE

### **Exploring a field of mobile force relations**

The following chapters examine alignments and contestations when discourses of workplace learning were introduced in the PSE workplace during the Uncovering Learning project. I have discussed in previous chapters the subject positions that various organisational learning texts construct for workers. However, an organisational learning discourse is not the only discourse in circulation in the workplace, and indeed, there is more than one way of theorising workplace learning in organisational learning texts (see Chapter 3). The different discourses available to workers form part of an ongoing discursive struggle to determine the day to day practices of the workplace and the ways the workplace is organised. Weedon (1987, p. 24) points out that:

*Once language is understood in terms of competing discourses, competing ways of giving meaning to the world, which imply differences in the organization of social power, then language becomes an important site of political struggle.*

A more nuanced account of subjectivity and power provided in the poststructural literature suggests that there are multiple discourses in circulation in the workplace that position workers in different ways, and that these different positionings often create tension. Here, the individual is understood as *the site of conflicting forms of subjectivity* (Weedon, 1987, p. 33). This view of subjectivity is not available in an experiential learning discourse where subjectivity is understood as essential and separate from power.

A Foucauldian conceptualisation of processes of subjectification, whereby technologies of power interplay with technologies of the self, enables me to examine both the take up and the failure to take up subject positions by workers in the PSE workplace and the complex processes through which social meanings

become interiorised and understood as coming from within. This view directs attention to the exercise of disciplinary power in the workplace as well as subjectivity as a site of resistance and the renegotiation of power (Foucault, 1998; Ransom, 1997). Foucault (1998, p. 96) describes the distribution of power and the distribution of resistance in the following way:

*Resistances do not derive from a few heterogeneous principles; but neither are they are lure or a promise that is of necessity betrayed. They are the odd term in relations of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite. Hence they too are distributed in irregular fashion: the points, knots or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities, at times mobilizing groups or individuals in a definitive way, inflaming certain points of the body, certain moments in life, certain type of behavior. Are there no great radical ruptures, massive binary divisions, then? Occasionally, yes. But more often one is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in societies that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds. Just as the network of power relations ends by forming a dense web that passes through apparatuses and institutions, without being exactly localised in them, so too the swarm of points of resistance traverses social stratifications and individual unities.*

This suggests that the position of 'the workplace learner', constructed through the circulation of workplace learning discourses in the workplace, will not always be a position that appeals to all workers, and it may be a position that sometimes has appeal, and sometimes not, to the same worker.

## CHAPTER 6

### **‘The intelligentsia’**

#### **Introduction**

My focus in this chapter is on Beryl, a senior manager at Metropolitan College (a pseudonym). PSE consists of a number of colleges that are located in different geographic areas throughout the state of NSW. Each of the colleges has a number of campuses within its geographic area. Beryl was a member of a group of senior managers responsible for planning the programs and courses on offer at the various campuses at Metropolitan College.

In this chapter, I examine the discourses that Beryl drew on to talk about work and Beryl’s discursive construction of herself. I use interview data from the Uncovering Learning project to undertake this analysis. My interest is in Beryl’s embodiment and activation of a bureaucratic discourse and the intersection of this discourse with workplace learning discourses introduced by the researchers during the Uncovering Learning project. As well as Beryl’s embodiment and activation of a bureaucratic discourse, I also explore other subject positions that Beryl took up when talking about work.

In undertaking this analysis, I open to question the unified, rational and autonomous subject pre-supposed in an experiential learning discourse. Beryl’s subjectivity was discursively constituted and thus intricately connected to the social through language rather than essential and autonomous.

#### **Writing about Beryl**

I feel like a bit of a spy – an outsider looking in – in telling this story. But I am not trying to pretend that I am the objective onlooker. I am constructing this story through reading written transcripts from interviews and meetings that were conducted with Beryl, sometimes individually, and sometimes with other members

of her workgroup, as part of the Uncovering Learning project. Occasionally, I was also present at meetings conducted with the senior managers.

At these interviews and meetings Beryl and other workgroup members spoke about their work and changes that had taken place in their workgroup. In other words, they spoke about their experience in the workplace. Transcripts of these interviews and meetings were produced for analysis by the researchers. However, rather than undertaking an interpretive analysis of the interview texts, where Beryl's talk is understood as reflecting a pre-existing organisational reality (du Gay, 1996a; Garrick, 2000), these texts have been analysed for the discourses in circulation in her workplace and Beryl's discursive construction of herself and the world. This enables me to explore Beryl's identifications, or who Beryl learnt to 'be' at work (eg. Farrell, 2000).

Edwards and Usher (2000b, pp. 40-41) describe the way identities are constructed through language in the following way:

*Through narratives, selves and worlds are simultaneously and interactively made. The narrator is positioned in relation to events and other selves, and an identity conferred through this. Positioning oneself and being positioned in certain discourses, telling stories and being 'told' by stories, becomes the basis for personal identity...For instance an employee may tell their own individual stories, but the narrative is itself sedimented in the narrative practices of the workplace and, beyond that, in the narratives of the wider culture and practices in which these are located. Individuals live these stories; through them they construct others and are interactively constructed by them, as active, meaningful, knowable subjects acting in meaningful and knowable ways.*

A focus on discourse also enables an analysis of the intersection of workplace learning discourses introduced by the researchers on the Uncovering Learning project with the discourses in circulation in the senior managers' workgroup.



In the first part of the chapter I examine the circulation of a bureaucratic discourse in the senior managers' workgroup and Beryl's embodiment and activation of this discourse. The privileging of a bureaucratic discourse worked to produce a seemingly natural identity for the senior managers as 'the intelligentsia' in this workplace. However, there were multiple discourses in circulation in the senior managers' workgroup, and at times these discourses intersected. For example, I explore the circulation of a political discourse and the take up of the position of 'the political strategist' by Beryl. Then, I describe the introduction of a workplace learning discourse by the researchers on the Uncovering Learning project, where learning was understood as taking place in/through everyday practices, and the tensions this produced for the senior managers. Following this, I discuss the circulation of a managerial discourse of worker empowerment and the take up of a position of 'the liberator' by Beryl. The implications of the re-presentation of Beryl's identity as discursively produced rather than essential and coming from within are discussed. Beryl can no longer be understood as the sovereign subject, transcendent from power. Also, rather than understanding power as monolithic and top-down, the circulation of different managerial discourses in the workplace suggests different authorities competing for ways of giving meaning to the world and the ways the workplace should be organised, and provides a view of power as distributed.

### **The circulation of a bureaucratic discourse in the senior managers' workgroup**

Beryl started working fulltime as a teacher at PSE thirteen years ago. Now she is a senior manager in the organisation. John, the current director of the senior managers' workgroup, is retiring next year. John's departure and the appointment of the new director 'played out' during the time the researchers from the Uncovering Learning project were undertaking their research with this workgroup. The drama, entailing the ongoing performing or activation of a bureaucratic discourse in this workplace (see Butler, 1999; Law, 1994), is described below (see Act 1 – Beryl's anointment). Weedon (1987, p. 34) explains the embodiment and activation of discourse in the following way:

*language, in the form of socially and historically specific discourses, cannot have any social and political effectivity except in and through the actions of the individuals who become its bearers by taking up the forms of subjectivity and the meanings and values it proposes and acting upon them.*

A bureaucratic discourse is understood here as a way of thinking about and organising the workplace (and the world) based on a belief in rational rules, procedure and objective methods.<sup>25</sup>

### **‘The Queen’**

Beryl conveyed an air of superiority and control over her domain, which is why I’ve called her ‘the queen’. It is in this sense that Beryl could be understood as ‘the sovereign subject’ – a unified, rational and autonomous subject – who in knowing and understanding herself, and her workplace, was in a position to govern her domain. However, rather than taking Beryl’s seemingly unified and rational self for granted, a Foucauldian reading enables me to re-present Beryl as less unified, and with a more precarious subjectivity.

### **Act 1 – Beryl’s anointment**

The symbolic anointment of the new director is about to take place, but in order to get to the performance, we need to pass along the tradition-steeped path that Beryl and the senior managers travel each day. First, an impressive wooden-railed staircase which grandly sweeps up to the first floor must be scaled. Part way up, on the spiral turn of the staircase, a view down onto the college grounds is available through an ornate, leadlight window. Here, the plumbers, electricians, and mechanics, the apprentices of the present, are gloriously framed by the apprentices of past, gazing back at the viewer in their leadlight splendour. A long corridor, lined with solemn, sepia-toned photographs of ‘old’ institute directors, leads to the meeting room of the senior managers.

A suitably solid oak boardroom table fills the room. The director of this workgroup, John, sits at the head of the table with ten staff strategically positioned around him.

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<sup>25</sup> See Kafka (1930) and Perrow (1972) for descriptions of bureaucratic organisations.

Beryl and the rest of the senior managers are here. A meeting is taking place between the researchers from the Uncovering Learning project and the senior managers to discuss the findings from Stage 1 of the project as well as to negotiate a potential direction for the Stage 2 research. John and his staff are talking to the researchers about the ongoing changes in their work:

John. ...*There's not a lot of time for reflection, there's not a lot of time for 'what if', you just make the decision and run with it* [pause].

*There's more complexity. **What do you think Beryl?***

Beryl. *It's shifting ground all the time...In this unit in particular, we got on top of what we thought were some of our key goals, but there's more coming in with the tide and it's driven by external factors...It's creating complexity in the job ...and not quite knowing which way to go. Whether we jump in and become a leader with some of the new initiatives or sit back and watch what's happening. And over all is that we're supposed to be making sure that there aren't any waves made between now and the election.<sup>26</sup> **Is that right John?*** [my emphasis]

John and Beryl continued to confer with each other in this way throughout the entire meeting, with John frequently looking to Beryl for confirmation and Beryl unfailingly providing support for the director. A more detailed analysis of the language used in this exchange is undertaken later, but for the moment, I want to point to the positioning work that was able to be carried out by John as the current director. At the time this meeting was conducted the researchers, as well as the senior managers, were aware that John was planning to retire. The meeting was used by John to position Beryl as the heir apparent.

Beryl's anointment as heir apparent could be described as the enactment of a bureaucratic discourse within the senior managers' workgroup, a discourse which privileges hierarchy, administrative regulations and rational order (Weber, 1947).

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<sup>26</sup> A state government election was pending. Government, both the big 'G' variety associated with the state and the small 'g' government of the workplace was a central concern of this group.

John, as 'the director', was able to position Beryl, 'the subordinate', as ascendant to the throne. The obsequious performance by both Beryl and the other senior managers throughout the meeting, where they actively took up the position of 'the subordinate', worked to reproduce John as 'the director' and in control of his domain. This scene might have come out of any episode of *Yes Minister*, the popular British parody of senior bureaucrats and politicians screened on Australian television during the 1980s.

The circulation of a bureaucratic discourse worked to make the hierarchical relations within the senior managers' workgroup appear natural, with John's positioning as 'the director' (seemingly) uncontested. While a Foucauldian reading might trouble a top-down account of John's (seemingly) uncontested authority or power, during the initial meetings with this group while John was still the director, top-down mechanisms of power seemed to prevail. John sat at the head of the table. John 'wore the pants'.

For example, at a meeting with the senior managers conducted at City University, I was surprised by an angry outburst where John gave one of the senior managers in his workgroup a vicious verbal 'dressing down'. It was similar to being in a classroom watching an angry schoolmaster disciplining a disobedient student with the cane, and the same sense of overt hierarchy prevailed. While I was shocked, the senior managers seemed neither surprised nor concerned, suggesting that it was normal for 'the director' to use such disciplinary tactics.

### **Taking up the position of 'the rational manager'**

Weedon (1987, p. 34) points out that in identifying with a particular subject position we momentarily understand ourselves from that position at that point in time:

*The individual is both the site for a range of possible forms of subjectivity and, at any particular moment of thought or speech, a subject, subjected to the regime of meaning of a particular discourse and enabled to act accordingly.*

In other words, taking up a subject position is at the expense of other ways of knowing our selves.

The circulation of a bureaucratic discourse in the senior managers' workgroup, which is linked with the notion of order and control to be achieved through the implementation of rational managerial techniques (Morgan, 1997), made the subject position of 'the rational manager' available to the senior managers. And in taking up this position, and the meanings and values associated with it, a rational mode of subjectivity was re-produced as seemingly 'natural' for the PSE senior managers. This was one way that Beryl knew and understood herself.

Beryl's work involved collecting and analysing labour market data, as well as gathering political and industry 'intelligence', and using this information to organise the programs and courses on offer at this particular PSE college. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, for someone engaged in the workplace practices of forecasting and planning, Beryl conveyed an impression of certainty and control. This was reinforced by the language she used to talk about work, which often re-echoed a determinist and linear worldview. When Beryl was asked in an initial interview *what does your job entail* she replied that her role was:

*...to **determine** the level of activity across the [college] that would be appropriate.* [my emphasis]

Beryl's managerial world was one where objectivity reigned. For example, she often spoke of herself as an objective manager using scientific methods in order to perform her work:

*...Some of the disagreement isn't there any longer in relation to the shifting profiles<sup>27</sup> because it is dependant on us agreeing with ourselves and not taking a position of ownership over our own faculties because the profile only works if you're quite **hardheaded** about the **appropriate** profile directions to move in **based on research**, rather than trying to protect territory. I think there were*

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<sup>27</sup> The profiles are the projected programs, courses etc that will be run by the college.

*quite a lot of disputations over that and **its sorted itself out.*** [my emphasis]

Here, Beryl describes the way the (seemingly) unambiguous goals of the profile directions enabled her to perform as the *hardheaded* (objective) manager, making tough decisions that involved going beyond personal interest. Beryl claimed that these goals were able to be (rationally) determined through the (scientific) methods of research. In calling on the neutrality of science to legitimate decisions, in terms of the profile directions of the college, it appeared that politics and sectional interests had been removed with the senior managers *agreeing with ourselves and not taking a position of ownership over our own faculties.*

Beryl's interviews were replete with the language of objectivity. For example, when talking about her work Beryl referred to achieving *project definition*, developing *business plans*, undertaking *analysis*, defining *measurables*, thus enabling *verification*; words associated with the use of rational methods and techniques. This language worked to construct the senior managers as unified and rational subjects able to separate themselves from political interest.

### **Beryl's language**

After an initial reading of the transcripts from Beryl's interviews, something that stood out was her carefully constructed language. Spoken language is often messy and erratic, with incomplete sentences, abbreviations, colloquialisms and ummmms and errrs (Burns and Joyce, 1997). However, reading Beryl's first interview was very similar to reading written text from a management journal. Beryl spoke very carefully, formulating well-structured sentences with ideas presented in a cohesive and ordered manner. For example when talking about her own learning at work, Beryl said:

*...I think for them to be a learning experience it's got to be, you've got to be able to stand back and reflect on what you got out of that experience or what you did learn, what's different from having that experience. It's not a very good definition. A set of experiences that on reflection change your view and move you forward in some way*

*so that your experience touches reflection issuing some kind of change that you could define as learning.*

This section of text suggests a high level of consideration and self-regulation by Beryl in terms of what she was saying and the way that she said it. She begins tentatively, qualifying her first attempt at a definition of learning with *I think*. She then self-evaluates and says *It's not a very good definition*. She then proceeds to correct herself and provides another definition. This final sentence reads as a textbook definition of experiential learning.<sup>28</sup>

I suggest that Beryl's carefully constructed talk exemplifies her embodiment and activation of a bureaucratic discourse in the PSE workplace. Her language choices enabled her to enact 'authority' and 'control' in the workplace.

### **The discursive practices of the senior managers**

The senior managers used various tools, or technologies, in their everyday work practices that contributed to producing an understanding of themselves as rational, objective managers, and in control of their domain. For example, much of the senior managers' time was spent reading and researching and gathering *the facts*. Research tools such as the internet were used frequently for sourcing documents such as government reports and material produced by the Bureau of Statistics. Numbers and scientific methods had authority in this group and were used in the production of reports. They also used a planning package called LOGFRAME, a planning framework designed to develop *project definition*. Beryl said:

*...quite a few of us did a course called LOGFRAME which is a project definition program as we all found we were all having quite a bit of trouble. We would do a project which we thought was, we would do a project that we thought we'd been asked to do and get to the end of it and find that the outcomes we'd come out with weren't necessarily what the Board of Management had been expecting so the logical framework or LOGFRAME gets you to work in quite a lot*

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<sup>28</sup> Here, Beryl talks about her learning using the language of reflective practice. While an analysis of the ways Beryl could and could not speak about workplace learning is not the focus of this chapter, it draws attention to the way an experiential learning discourse frames Beryl's talk.

*of detail on project definition at the beginning and aligning the project you're doing to goals, business plans or whatever but it also does quite a lot of stakeholder analysis and you do quite a bit of looking at who are the people you need to bring into the project and who are the sections that can derail the project.*

While Beryl talked about these tools in a way that suggested that they would automatically produce consensus and alignment between the operations of the senior managers and goals of the Board of Management, the very need for these tools and techniques suggests that creating alignment might not have been quite as straightforward as Beryl proposed.

Through an appeal to: rational methods, scientific analysis and decision making based on *the facts*, Beryl was able to construct her 'self' as one immune from the infection of irrationality and emotion. For example, in an earlier quote (see p. 101) Beryl referred to the way previous *disputations* amongst the senior managers had *sorted itself out* through the application of (seemingly objective) knowledge obtained through their research. The language of objectivity, and the associated notion of accessing 'the truth' through the use of objective techniques, enabled the power of the senior managers to be taken for granted. This links with a general trend in government, including the government of workplaces, where:

*Governing in a liberal democratic way depends upon the availability of such techniques that will shape, channel, organize and direct the personal capacities and selves of individuals under the aegis of a claim to objectivity, neutrality and technical efficacy rather than one of political partiality.* Rose (1996, p. 155)

The privileging of a bureaucratic discourse, with its appeal to scientific rationality and objective knowledge, made the subject position of 'the rational manager' available to Beryl and the senior managers, and as exemplified above, this was a position she actively took up when talking about work. In the following section I further explore Beryl's embodiment and activation of a bureaucratic discourse through her identification as a member of 'the intelligentsia'.



## 'The intelligentsia'

Beryl and the other senior managers in this workgroup identified as an elite group of knowledge workers within the organisation:

*Beryl. ...it's quite an exciting group to work with because people are very talented. We call ourselves the intelligentsia of the organisation, the brains trust of the organisation.*

The senior managers understood themselves as knowledge producers in the PSE workplace. They were the *brains trust* – the collectors and the repository of organisational knowledge. And just as a body cannot function without a brain, this group could not imagine the organisation functioning without them. For Beryl, organisational hierarchy seemed natural, with the senior managers as the knowledge producers in the organisation 'naturally' fitting at the top of that hierarchy. In this sense the senior managers can be understood as the embodiment of an Enlightenment worldview that works to reproduce a seemingly natural separation between the mind and the body.

In the meetings that were conducted with the senior managers during the Uncovering Learning project this group frequently spoke about the rest of the organisation, but rarely about themselves. Just as the senior managers were the objects of the researchers' gaze, the lower levels of the organisation were the objects of the senior managers' gaze. It seemed the problem parts of the organisation (at least for the senior managers) were the lower levels, and implicitly the section of the organisation where learning interventions might best be implemented.

*Beryl. ... I think that [PSE] is just very slow in terms of accepting change really – down at the bottom level*

Beryl painted a picture of the rest of the organisation as a plodding dinosaur, in contrast to the senior managers, whom she described as *exciting, innovative, and the agents of change*. This language works to construct the senior managers as the authors of meaning and the origin of change in this workplace. In other words, it

would be via the organisational interventions developed by the senior managers that change would come about in this workplace.

At one meeting the senior managers took up an anthropological position to analyse their subjects and were talking about the other sections of the institute as tribes and clans.<sup>29</sup> When the interviewer asked them where they fitted into this description, that is, what tribe they belonged to, Beryl replied:

*Beryl. We've left those behind – we've left our past*

This points to the distancing work performed by Beryl in relation to other parts of the organisation, which was evident in both what she said and what she did not say at the interviews. Beryl spoke little about her past in the organisation. She had commenced work in the organisation as a teacher, but there was no reference by her to the disciplinary area in which she taught or her life as a teacher. In reconstructing herself as a member of 'the intelligentsia' and part of the ruling class in the organisation, and in order to maintain a cohesive and unified sense of this self, it appeared Beryl had disconnected from other identities and other ways of knowing herself. This was evident in the way she spoke about the teachers as a distinct group separate from, and different from, who she 'is'. Teachers were 'the other' and she no longer identified with this group. For example:

*Beryl. I do like to deal directly with people but what I found was that the stories, particularly from the teaching section were already so clouded and overlaid with stories that may not even be pertinent to what the issue is, I'd then come back and try to seek more objective advice if that's possible.*

Beryl positioned herself in relation to 'the teacher' rather than as 'the teacher', suggesting that teaching had little authority in her current work as a manager. This is given voice in the above quote in her description of the teachers' stories as *clouded* compared with the more *objective advice* available from the senior

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<sup>29</sup> This is interesting in terms of the ongoing re-negotiation of the positions of 'the researcher' and 'the researched' discussed later in this chapter. Beryl could be 'the social scientist' too. In this conversation the senior managers took up a sociological discourse and used it for their purposes.

managers. Beryl constructed the teachers as irrational in comparison with the (rational) senior managers.

It could be said that the seemingly cohesive and unified identity of 'the intelligentsia' was produced through a politics of exclusion. Hall (1996, p. 5) describes the way unification is achieved through discounting other positions in the following way:

*So the 'unities' which identities proclaim are, in fact, constructed within the play of power and exclusion, and are the result, not of a natural and inevitable or primordial totality but of the naturalized, overdetermined process of 'closure'.*

Beryl and the senior managers were at times almost scathing about 'the Others' in the PSE workplace. For example, after reading an article about the everyday learning in the PSE workgroups, produced as part of the Uncovering Learning project, the following conversation ensued about the trade teachers (who came from a college under the jurisdiction of the senior managers):

Beryl. *The [trade teachers] say, they talk about how they haven't learnt much, how they rely on one of the other blokes to show them how to use the computers. And they said 'he showed me everything I know about computers' [laughing], and that's not much...*

*...that's what was scary reading [about the trade teachers] – one of those sections that don't go out anywhere. They just do what they've always been doing and they send their head teacher to do their recon. The head teacher is the one that deals with the college directors. The teachers say they don't have anything to do with, apart from*

Mary. *Is this in our [college]?*

Beryl. *Yes. [laughing]*

While the article had discussed the everyday learning of all the workgroups participating in the project, interestingly, the senior managers' talk focused on the

trade teachers rather than themselves. Indeed, when the talk did turn to themselves, it was in relation to their representation in the article and the work that needed to be performed by the researchers in terms of de-identifying the senior managers in this text.

In summary, it was in the interests of the senior managers to maintain a separation between themselves, 'the intelligentsia', and the rest of the organisation. The circulation of a bureaucratic discourse at PSE enabled the hierarchy of the organisation, and the position of the senior managers at the top of this hierarchy as the 'knowers' and the 'objective' producers of knowledge, to appear legitimate. Thus, knowledge was not separate from power in this workplace.

### **Self-regulating in relation to an ideal type of 'the rational manager'**

It could be said that 'the rational manager', a subject position in part constructed in management science texts, was an ideal type to which Beryl self-regulated. Associated with this position was a norm of 'objectivity' and a value of legitimate authority. One way this norm manifested was in an ongoing struggle that was played out between the senior managers and the researchers during the Uncovering Learning project. For example, when the first round of interviews with the senior managers were organised (Stage 1 of the project) Beryl was constantly unavailable for an interview. This can be read as a symbolic rebuff of the project by Beryl, conveying the message that the Uncovering Learning project did not count for Beryl. Eventually, however, she consented to be interviewed, but on her terms.

These 'difficult' relations continued throughout the project with Beryl frequently protesting in relation to the work of the Uncovering Learning project. For example, Beryl questioned: the self-evident nature of the project findings; the relevance of the research to the work in which the senior managers were engaged; the methods of the project; and the (lack of) ethical conduct by the researchers. In telling these tales, I am not suggesting that Beryl was wrong and 'bad' and that we researchers were right and 'good', but rather seek to draw attention to the dispersal of power and the renegotiation of positionings between Beryl and the researchers – from the outset of the project Beryl renegotiated the 'usual' researcher-researched

relationships associated with academic research and resisted being positioned as 'the workplace learner'. This is explored in more detail below.

### **Intersecting discourses**

The privileging of objectivity and scientific methods as a way of producing knowledge by the senior managers contributed to an ongoing contestation between this group and the researchers in terms of the way the Uncovering Learning project should be conducted. While the legitimacy and authority of the academics as knowledge producers came out of a similar appeal to 'expertise' called on by the senior managers, it was a different ideal type to which the senior managers self-regulated. Many of the senior managers came from a technical or scientific background and understood research in quantitative terms. And it was to statistics and the methods of science that this group appealed when attempting to persuade in their own workplace. This is what counted as knowledge for the senior managers. However, the researchers from the Uncovering Learning project were using more exploratory techniques and had no hypotheses and measuring tools and this troubled the senior managers. They were often critical of the practices of the researchers and the products of the project, thus challenging the authority of the academics. The workplace learning academics, however, were not to be swayed by an ethic of objectivity, and the prevailing bureaucratic discourse in circulation in the senior managers' workgroup. Instead, they attempted to persuade Beryl and the senior managers of the value of other ways of knowing. An attempt that, as I suggest in the following section, was not particularly successful.

### **Tensions around being positioned as 'the workplace learner'**

One reading of the ongoing renegotiation of positionings between the researchers and the senior managers during the Uncovering Learning project is that a discourse of workplace learning that the researchers were attempting to put into circulation in this workplace intersected with the prevailing bureaucratic discourse in circulation in the senior managers' workgroup, thus creating tension. The senior managers had little time for the project and they were difficult to 'enrol' (see Callon, 1986). In other words, it was difficult to persuade them that the project might be of value and

that they should know and understand themselves as everyday learners at work – a discourse of everyday learning held little sway with this group.

While the senior managers (at times) drew on a contemporary managerial discourse of organisational learning, which I have argued in Chapter 3 has been taken up by managers as a way of organising the workplace, rather than understanding themselves as learners, they drew on this discourse as a way of positioning themselves as superior to other groups in the college, thereby re-presenting themselves as the ‘natural’ rulers. It is in this sense that they can be said to have appropriated an organisational learning discourse for their own purposes. For example, John said:

*...From an organization culture perspective [the senior managers] would be more advanced down the line of organizational learning than other sections. I think there are different levels of development across the institute and this whole notion of organisational learning, organisational sustainability all of that sort of stuff, we're fairly down the track. But that tends to be in this room mainly, or in our offices when we're talking together. When we then go and present to the broader institute domain, we then become the teachers.*

*Interviewer. So things like confidence and certainty are important things you're wanting to engender.*

*John. The term I use quite a lot is 'maintaining the ascendance'. I use ascendance as a metaphor because we just simply cannot afford, if we get knocked off, then the institute, the whole structure, there's questions on the whole way of the organisation structure and its development. So we can't afford in a more public forum to be seen to be small 'L' players, capital 'L' players.<sup>30</sup>*

John's comments draw attention to the tensions for the senior managers in being positioned as ‘the learner’. Being ‘the learner’ created tension in terms of maintaining their position of *ascendance* in the organisation. For the senior

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<sup>30</sup> ‘L’ is a reference to ‘L’ plates and to being a learner or probationary driver.

managers, 'the learner' is a novice and this position had little appeal. The senior managers talked about workplace learning and being a learner within a knower/learner binary where 'the learner' is always in an inferior and less powerful relation to 'the knower'. This draws attention to chains of signification and 'learning' as a plural signifier with no fixed meaning (Weedon, 1987). Meanings are made in relation to context, and one way this group knew and understood themselves was as 'the intelligentsia' (or in other words as 'the knower'), a position made available through the circulation of a bureaucratic discourse. In this discourse a knower/learner binary seems natural, and it was in the interests of the senior managers to maintain this separation. This points to a less than seamless union between a discourse of workplace learning (as articulated by the researchers) and some managerial discourses in circulation in the workplace. For example, when Beryl was asked if she thought of herself as a learner, she replied:

*Well I do but I wouldn't present myself as a learner because that would suggest that you didn't know what you were doing. You've always got to present with some kind of approach that's got a professionalism about it. So there's that tension between learner driver that doesn't quite know what they're doing and the old hand.*

Interviewer. *So it's ok to be a learner, but in particular situations?*

Beryl. *... you do that in comfortable situations, like you do that amongst yourselves, but if you go outside that loop, you define the boundaries about where you're going to present yourself in that way. That's quite different culturally for different forums that you might be in.*

Beryl's talk suggests that there is a tension around being both 'the learner' and 'the professional'. Learning, then, is not always understood as empowering within the context of the workplace, and not all workers understand themselves as workplace learners, the impression conveyed in the organisational learning literature. There are other ways for talking about learning at work, even amongst a group of senior managers, a group with whom a learning discourse might be expected to have appeal. The contemporary linking of a discourse of workplace learning with a

managerial discourse of worker productivity (see Chapters 3, 4 and 5) suggests that a workplace learning discourse would have appeal with a group of managers. However, there were multiple managerial discourses in circulation in this workgroup, and a bureaucratic discourse intersected with a discourse of workplace learning introduced by the researchers. A strong and (seemingly) unified identification as 'the knower' and a member of 'the intelligentsia' often prevented Beryl from understanding herself as a learner at work.

The researchers failed to translate everyday learning into a concept that had appeal to this workgroup. This was evident in the ongoing questioning by the senior managers as to the relevance of the research and what it might possibly contribute to their workgroup. While the regulation of worker conduct and enhanced worker productivity was not necessarily an area of interest for the academics, it was 'what counted' for the senior managers. Again, this draws attention to the different strategies and purposes to which a discourse of workplace learning might be put and to the (at times) problematic intersection of the discourses of the workplace with those of the academy. A discourse of everyday learning and the associated notion of knowing in and through practice is not necessarily aligned with managerial discourses in circulation in contemporary workplaces.

The senior managers flexed their managerial muscle in relation to being positioned as workplace learners in the Uncovering Learning project. While the authority of the researchers can be understood as being challenged by other workgroups too, other strategies of resistance were employed by these groups, thus drawing attention to different discourses in circulation and multiple objectives in the PSE workplace. For example, while the trade teachers also resisted being positioned as workplace learners (see Chapter 8), it was not expressed in terms of the knowledge products of the research, nor did they question the ethics of the researchers (at least out loud). The trade teachers resisted instead by calling on a discourse of 'tradesmanship' to position themselves as 'the master tradesman' rather than as workplace learners.

In summary, I have argued that the circulation of a bureaucratic discourse worked to produce a seemingly natural and unified identity for Beryl and the senior



managers as 'the intelligentsia', thus enabling the existing hierarchical power relations of the workplace to be maintained. Using the language of objectivity, and scientific methods, Beryl constructed herself as transcendent, a subject able to be separated from the contagion of power and organisational politics. In a bureaucratic discourse 'the self' and power appear to be able to be separated. Beryl as 'the rational manager' was not seen to be playing a power game within the workgroup or the organisation, although as Foucault (1980) points out, truth claims are always an exercise of power. In taking-up the position of 'the rational manager' and identifying as a member of 'the intelligentsia' Beryl was in a much stronger position to govern as politics and power had essentially been erased.

### **The circulation of a political discourse**

While the senior managers identified as 'the intelligentsia', as rational knowers and therefore legitimate managers of the PSE workplace, I suggest that a discourse of bureaucratic management with its embedded meaning of impartial, rational management through objective techniques was not the only discourse in circulation in the senior managers' workgroup. A Foucauldian reading of the senior managers' workgroup, where subjectivity is understood as discursively produced and thus never completely determined, suggests that Beryl's subjectivity was much more precarious than the unified view represented in much of the organisational learning literature. For example, when John's retirement became imminent various members of the workgroup began talking about the potential disruption this might create – some even spoke of the possible dissolution of the group. This talk signalled the circulation of another discourse in the senior managers' workgroup which incorporated the language of power and politics.

The circulation of a political discourse in the workplace provided another position for Beryl and the senior managers to take up, that of 'the political strategist'. Although Beryl identified as a member of 'the intelligentsia', suggesting a privileging of an autonomous and rational mode of subjectivity, the language of politics often slipped into her talk about work. For example, she discussed the way social activities like having lunch were organised around what needed to be achieved and who needed to be lobbied. Her interviews were strewn with the

language of politics including the use of terms such as: *negotiation, influencing, alignment, and lobbying*. Beryl considered that skills in lobbying were a way of demonstrating competence in her position and that a senior manager needed to be able to *work via influence rather than direction*. Beryl even occasionally used political metaphors to describe the way the senior managers operated:

*There are lots of situations where we work it out before what we're going to do and then go in with a line, and we all toe the party line, even though we don't agree or mightn't be sure, but we're going to take a hard line about something in the face of opposition.*

Here, there is talk about disagreement and uncertainty among the senior managers, providing a much messier representation of the workplace than the rational, objective workplace constructed through the circulation of a discourse of bureaucracy.

Beryl seemed to take up contradictory positions as earlier she had constructed herself as 'the rational manager' and outside of organisational politics. At times a political discourse intersected with the circulation of bureaucratic discourse. For example, in the scene I described at the beginning of the chapter where Beryl and John performed a bureaucratic discourse with Beryl's anointment as 'the director', their language incorporated the language of complexity and uncertainty rather than certainty and control:

*John. ...There's not a lot of time for reflection, there's not a lot of time for 'what if', you just make the decision and run with it [pause]. There's more complexity. What do you think Beryl?*

*Beryl. It's shifting ground all the time...In this unit in particular, we got on top of what we thought were some of our key goals, but there's more coming in with the tide and it's driven by external factors...It's creating complexity in the job ...and not quite knowing which way to go. Whether we jump in and become a leader with some of the new initiatives or sit back and watch what's happening. And over all is that we're supposed to be making sure that there*

*aren't any waves made between now and the election. Is that right John?*

In the above text, there appears to be little time for the reflective, rational practices that Beryl had gone to great lengths to construct in an earlier interview. Instead we hear of *complexity, shifting ground* and *not quite knowing which way to go*. At the same time, however, John and Beryl position themselves as the decision makers and leaders in the organisation.

The circulation of a political discourse in this workgroup raises a number of questions in relation to Beryl's identification as a member of 'the intelligentsia': What are the norms against which Beryl self-regulates when she takes up the position of 'the political strategist'? Are there any tensions around the shift from a bureaucratic discourse, with its underlying assumption of autonomous subjectivity and an associated ethic of legitimate authority, to a political discourse? How does Beryl manage being both 'the rational manager' ('the objective knower'), who is supposedly outside of politics, with the position of 'the political strategist' who is embroiled in political processes?

While this different managerial position might be understood as creating tension for Beryl, I suggest that Beryl maintained an understanding of herself as cohesive, unified and rational through linking her talk of organisational politics with the notion of control and mastery. Beryl conveyed the impression that she was in control of the political element in the organisation, as well as in control of her self. For example:

*Beryl. ... another thing that came out is that the work isn't routine and the work does have a political element. And I guess John plays quite a role in that and he's quite a good tutor in terms of how we manage the political. The job that we do is usually more than just research and the presentation of the findings of the research. It really is how you **manage** that through the politics of the organisation itself, or further out through the organisation. [my emphasis]*

While acknowledging a political element within this workplace, for Beryl, this is yet another element of organisational life to be known and controlled. And in strategically referring to John as her *tutor* (John was sitting next to Beryl at the time), Beryl appears to have learned how to negotiate the political in this workplace. In the above text, Beryl's comment that: *It really is how you manage that through the politics of the organisation itself, or further out through the organisation*, enables her to construct herself as the sovereign subject, one who is the author of meaning and in control change.

While I suggested earlier in the chapter that Beryl's language evoked the notion of self-management and self-control, suggesting a relation with her self as a sovereign subject, sometimes her highly regulated speech slipped into a less certain, and at times tentative, way of talking. For example:

Beryl. ... *Particularly, I don't like conflict much and I find it, I can easily feel **quite** negative if something goes wrong so I've had to do **quite** a lot of self talk, I'm **quite** aware of what I'm like as a person. I **quite** like going out and getting groups of people together but I've just got to learn **quite** a bit about myself and what I need to do to make myself able to be competent in this job, so actually going and lobbying people. I wouldn't find that, I'd actually rather not do that so I have to make myself – it's been **quite** an interesting learning experience from that.* [my emphasis]

There is an underlying tension in Beryl's talk about herself here. Beryl says that she is *quite aware of what I'm like as a person*, suggesting a unified self that can be known. But at the same time there is uncertainty in her talk. The coherent and 'slick' managerialese she had used previously in the interview has disappeared. For example, she says that she is *quite aware* of who she 'is' but in the next sentence declares that still has *quite* a lot to learn about her *self*. Her extensive use of the qualifier 'quite' suggests a more tentative and perhaps less certain self.

Through calling on 'the facts', purportedly available through the implementation of rational techniques, Beryl was able to separate herself from politics, at times.

However, I suggest Beryl's understanding of herself as a rational and knowledgeable manager of change was precarious and constantly challenged through its juxtaposition with a political discourse. In summary, while Beryl might know and understand herself as unified and cohesive, with a core and essential subjectivity, my reading of Beryl is that her subjectivity is much more precarious than she might care to imagine. There are multiple discourses in circulation in this workplace that position Beryl in different ways.

## **Act 2 – the king is dead, long live the queen!**

Fast forward by six months. John had retired and Beryl had ascended the throne. The Uncovering Learning project had moved into its second stage with the theme of *learning through transition* negotiated with the senior managers for these meetings. According to some of the senior managers, the same managers who in retrospect could be viewed as unsuccessful contenders for the throne, John's retirement had the potential to split this workgroup. This concern (or threat?) had been expressed at an earlier meeting conducted with the researchers at City University and had been couched in terms of a deficit in leadership capacity. They implied, when it was clear that Beryl had been selected as the heir apparent, that there was no-one within the ranks with the necessary capacity to lead the group, thereby throwing out a direct challenge to the legitimate authority of 'the director', one of the values associated with a bureaucratic discourse. It seemed that a bureaucratic discourse that had seemed so entrenched in this workgroup was not as fixed and secure as it had appeared. And no one seemed more aware of this than Beryl who used the Stage 2 meetings to strategically re-construct the position of 'the director'. The following section can be read as Beryl learning how to renegotiate the power relations within the senior managers workgroup.

### **The circulation of a discourse of empowerment**

Beryl's first move was to make sure that 'the king' was really dead. In a transcript from the first of the Stage 2 meetings, Beryl spoke about John's retirement in the following way:

*It was really like someone who had terminal cancer and he [John] was making sure that everyone in the family knew how to do the accounting. He was actually very honourable. It was important to him that he left the place with us. He was perfectly **empowering** [to] those under him. Like he was giving you this because it's important that you have a go at this because I won't be around. So I think he did that to **all** the staff deliberately and it was important to him that he left **us all** feeling strong and he was shoving people on committees and pushing people forward – trying to do different things [my emphasis]*

In her analogy of John as a dying cancer patient, appositely told in the past tense, Beryl metaphorically kills the king, thus creating space for 'the queen' to commence her reign. However, after making sure that the king was dead, Beryl occasionally resurrected him in an effort to reassure the group that this was to be a more egalitarian and 'empowered' workplace under her rule.

At the Stage 2 meetings Beryl frequently drew on a discourse of worker empowerment. This discourse is replete in the 'new' managerial texts in circulation in workplaces (Gee *et al.*, 1996), including much of the organisational learning literature. These managerial texts propose that workplaces should be organised in ways that take into account the social and relational aspects of work in an effort to harness worker commitment, and focus on the development of self-managing work teams or more recently communities of practice, thereby positioning workers as part of a unified workplace community (see Chapters 3 and 4).

In the above text Beryl uses the language of the collective, with reference to *all* and *us*, thus creating a sense of cohesion and unity. A governmental strategy used by Beryl at these meetings, then, was to reign (and rein in) this group through encouraging alignment, rather than using top-down mechanisms. The circulation of a discourse of empowerment in the managerial literature made the position of 'the liberator' available to Beryl, and when Beryl took up this position she became the Queen of Hearts – the people's queen.

## Re-negotiating relations of power

But there were some in the group who were determined that Beryl would not be their leader. In the Stage 2 meetings the senior managers were no longer on their best behaviour and an ethic of legitimate authority that had prevailed during John's reign seemed to have been buried along with him. These meetings were used by the senior managers to forge alliances and to renegotiate and redistribute the power relations in the group.

However, resistance to Beryl's rule was not voiced outright, at least not at the meetings of the senior managers that the researchers attended as part of the Uncovering Learning project, suggesting that a bureaucratic discourse with an ethic of legitimate authority had not been completely toppled. This ethical code still regulated what the other senior managers as 'the subordinates' could and could not say about Beryl in a public forum and resistance to Beryl's rule manifested in other symbolic ways. For example, it is worthwhile considering who did and who did not turn up to the rest of the *learning through transition* meetings. The number of senior managers attending the Stage 2 meetings declined rapidly after the first meeting suggesting that allegiance to 'the queen' was in decline. For instance, at the second meeting the researchers found out that Graham, a senior manager who had seemed discontent with the new leadership, had temporarily left the workgroup and moved into another position at another college. Graham, in a very literal sense had repositioned himself. By the third meeting it was just Beryl and three other (as opposed to eight at the first meeting), presumably aligned, senior managers.

## Tensions with taking up the position of 'the liberator'

While Beryl actively constructed herself as 'the liberator' at these meetings, a position made available through the circulation of a managerial discourse of empowerment, the intersection of this discourse with a bureaucratic discourse sometimes created tension. This tension was explicitly expressed by Beryl:

*...we had individual learning and development plans, articulating really early on that the issue was how to manage stakeholders. And doing a lot of research, talk that was about stakeholder involvement,*

*actually consciously focusing on that because it was so difficult. From being someone in charge of people, because that was something I'd always done, all my working life, I've always been a line manager, and suddenly to be put in this position where you have to work in a completely different way.*

Not only is tension expressed outright here by Beryl where she describes the difficulty she experienced when moving into a position that was outside a direct chain of command, it is voiced in the learning issue raised by the senior managers of: *how to manage stakeholders* [my emphasis]. The underlying assumption is that multiple stakeholders (and difference) can be managed and controlled, and that this is something that can be learned.

Tension was also expressed in the way she spoke about the senior managers' workgroup. At a Stage 2 meeting Beryl spoke about the senior managers' workgroup with a work colleague in the following way:

*Beryl. Its not a social, different people have different groups, but its not a social group is it?*

*Mary. My team is – we have morning*

*Beryl. You have morning tea every morning but I can't go in there.*

*Mary. No, you can go in there.*

*Beryl. No I cannot go in there – I can't stand the tea room. It just reminds me of my first job in [name of town] library where we all would stop at the same time for morning tea, and they would all be drinking tea, and they would all be reading the Women's Weekly. I would think what have I done to myself? And I would think this is not for me, and I would go off and do something by myself.*

Here Beryl makes it clear that she is not the same as the other senior managers, thereby opening to question the seemingly unified identity of the senior managers that on other occasions she had gone to great lengths to construct.



In summary, the transcripts from the Stage 2 meetings can be read as Beryl using this forum as an opportunity to establish herself in her new position within the workgroup as 'the director'. However, power was not automatically transferred to Beryl by the rest of the workgroup and a redistribution of the power relations between 'the director' and 'the directed' was played out at these meetings.

### **Summing up**

This story about Beryl has foregrounded relationships between power, knowledge, language and subjectivity rather than understanding them as separable. The discursive analysis of the interview texts has drawn attention to processes through which social meanings become interiorised and understood as coming from within and Beryl's discursive construction of herself. Thus, Beryl's subjectivity was intricately connected to the social through language rather than essential and autonomous.

It is through the embodiment of a particular discourse, in other words through actively taking up a particular speaking position and the meanings and values that are attached, that existing power relations are able to be re-produced (Weedon, 1987). When one takes up a position, this excludes other position taking possibilities. For example, at the moment that Beryl took up the subject position of 'the rational manager' made available through the circulation of a bureaucratic discourse in the workplace, she was regulated by that discourse in what she was able to think, say and do – there was no space available for other ways of being 'the manager'. Thus, the assumption of a particular mode of subjectivity is at the expense of other competing forms. It is in this sense that discourse is an instrument of power.

However, the analysis also draws attention to the circulation of multiple discourses in the senior managers' workgroup. For example, Beryl moved in and out of a bureaucratic discourse, a political discourse, and a discourse of empowerment when she was talking about work and these discourses provided multiple positions and ways of 'being' for Beryl. Beryl's subjectivity was less cohesive than the unified account of subjectivity provided in much of the organisational learning literature.

This chapter also points to the different strategies of the senior managers and the workplace learning academics in terms of workplace learning discourses, and a mobile field of force relations connected with workplace learning discourses. The introduction of a discourse of everyday learning by the researchers, one way of talking about workplace learning, potentially disrupts existing relations of power in the PSE workplace. Indeed, Beryl often drew on a bureaucratic discourse in order to resist being positioned as a workplace learner. Thus, the circulation of workplace learning discourses might not always be in the interests of management, the view implied in the critical management literature. The tensions produced when a discourse of everyday learning was introduced in the senior managers' workgroup foregrounds differences and the manifold objectives connected with workplace learning.

### **A more complicated subject**

This story about Beryl provides a more complex re-presentation of subjectivity and experience than available through the circulation of an experiential learning discourse. In rewriting Beryl's subjectivity (Beryl's relation to herself and to the world) as discursively constituted, subjectivity is represented as intimately bound up with power rather than separable from it. This chapter directs attention to the contingency of Beryl's experience – she is only able to take up subject positions that are available through the circulation of historically, socially and culturally specific discourses. She is not able to know and understand herself outside of these socially available meanings. And, as Weedon (1987, p. 26) points out, some discourses have more institutional power than others:

*How we live our lives as conscious thinking subjects, and how we give meaning to the material social relations under which we live and which structure our everyday lives, depends on the range and social power of existing discourses, our access to them and the political strength of the interests which they represent.*

This chapter, in dethroning the sovereign subject, a subject who is *the true author of her thoughts, speech and writing* (Weedon, 1987, p. 105), problematises the very premise upon which a discourse of experiential learning is based: a unified subject

who is able to separate themselves from their context and in so doing rationally enhance work practices and organisational performance. Beryl's subjectivity is represented here as multiple, and therefore *precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak* (Weedon, 1987, p. 33). There was no fixed and transcendent position from which Beryl might know herself or the world.

## CHAPTER 7

### **The discursive practices of professional development**

#### **Introduction**

Using a Foucauldian conceptualisation of the discursive construction of subjectivity, this chapter explores the discourses in circulation among the professional development workgroup, and their effects. This analysis is undertaken focusing on Eva, a professional developer at PSE and the industry partner representative on the Uncovering Learning project. My interest in this chapter is examining the ways the mainstream organisational learning literature discursively framed what Eva was able to think, say and do, both to herself and to others, during the Uncovering Learning project. This enables an exploration of the material effects of the contemporary privileging of an experiential learning discourse in the organisational learning literature in terms of how workers might be 'known' and governed.

As introduced in Chapter 1, the professional development unit is a centrally organised group and is thus linked (in organisational terms) with Head Office. This unit acts as a broker [*sic*] of professional development knowledge and services to the colleges, including Metropolitan College, where Beryl is a senior manager.

#### **Eva's alignments**

Eva was a member of the research team on the Uncovering Learning project. Her boss, Margot, was called in at key stages for advice and confirmation regarding the direction of the project, but on the whole it was Eva with whom we, the university based researchers, worked closely on the project.

Eva was a registered psychologist and prior to an organisational restructure in 1997 had worked as a counsellor at PSE. After the 1997 restructure she had moved into the Professional Development Unit to take up a position as a professional developer. She had two children – a son who was attending university and a young

daughter – and had renegotiated a part-time work contract with PSE when her daughter was born. At the time of the Uncovering Learning project she was working two days a week in the professional development office and one day a week from home. On the days that Eva was not working for PSE she conducted her own part-time business, a counselling service, where she practised her profession as a psychologist. I suggest that what Eva was able to think, say and do throughout the Uncovering Learning project was intimately linked with her identity as a psychologist and her uptake of an experiential learning discourse as a way of knowing workplace learning.

Eva was in many ways, what might be described as a 'designer employee' (Casey, 1995)<sup>31</sup>, that is, she appeared to identify completely with her work organisation and her occupational role within the workplace as a professional developer. As a professional developer in PSE, a job whose broad function could be described as aligning the goals of individual workers with those of the organisation (Garrick, 1998; Townley, 1993), Eva had access to mainstream organisational learning discourses (see Chapter 3). In the section that follows I describe Eva's embodiment of an experiential learning discourse and the ways this discourse was activated by Eva during the Uncovering Learning project.

### **Re-directing the gaze - gazing at the professional developers**

The Professional Development Unit at PSE was the industry partner on the Uncovering Learning project. However, after working with Eva for almost two years on the project I still knew little about this group and what they actually did in PSE. While our project planning meetings were filled with talk about the practices of the trade teachers, senior managers, HR administrators and work-based learning trainers; as well as talk of our own research practices, we rarely spoke about the Professional Development Unit and their practice/s. However, as the project progressed, the Professional Development Unit increasingly became the object of my gaze. Typical of the knowledge producing practices legitimated within the social sciences, everybody involved in the project was gazing at some other body!

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<sup>31</sup> Casey proposes that 'the pedagogical devices of the new designed cultures are significantly altering the old industrial work culture and shaping post-industrial employees' (1995, p. 91).

I was interested in how the professional developers spoke about workplaces, workers and learning at work. My interest in the professional developers was triggered by writers such as Townley (1993, 1994) who draws attention to the disciplinary work performed by various human resource functions, including training and development, in work organisations. I was interested in the technologies<sup>32</sup> used by the professional developers for acting on worker conduct and the modes of worker subjectivity constituted through the practices of professional development (eg. Deetz, 1992, 1998; Edwards *et al.*, 2004; Rose, 1989; Usher and Solomon, 1999). So I organised to visit Eva at her workplace.

The professional developers were modestly accommodated on the ground floor of a building in a PSE college. Even though the professional developers performed a centralised function in the organisation (see Chapter 1), they were not located in the Head Office, a site generally associated with institutional power. I walked to their office through the college grounds, past students on their way to class, and classes in progress in demountable classrooms – the buildings that are erected temporarily until more permanent structures are built, but remain twenty or thirty years later. There was security access to the professional development office, so I ‘buzzed’ to be let in. My first impression on entering this workplace was that there were more people working here than I expected. There was a labyrinth of partially partitioned work areas and right in the middle was Margot, the team leader, in her glass bubble. Margot was both the observer and the observed.

Eva explained my arrival at the Professional Development office to Margot and told her that I was investigating the learning discourses in circulation in the PSE workplace. This seemed to satisfy Margot. However, I did get the impression that she thought my visit strange. Why, after all, might the researchers be interested in the practices of the professional developers when the object of knowledge was everyday learning in the four workgroups participating in the project? Similarly to many of the other groups and individuals participating in the project, learning

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<sup>32</sup> The term technologies is used here as the tools and techniques used by the professional developers in their work practices.

tended to be spoken about by the professional developers as something other people did rather than themselves.

Eva's work area was in one corner of the office. It was framed with family photographs, mainly of her young daughter. On one side of this enclosure was shelving which held an array of books and training manuals. I did my usual scan of the titles and noticed *The Dance of Change* (Senge, 1999) and the *Fifth Discipline Field Book* (Senge, 1995). Senge had authority within this workgroup. Later in the day I browsed the training manuals and organisational development publications produced by the Professional Development Unit. These texts all drew on a mainstream managerial discourse to talk about the workplace with the goals of individual workers understood as being unproblematically aligned with those of the work organisation. It could be said that Eva was entrenched, both physically and intellectually, in a neo-human relations view of the world. However, this came as little surprise as during the time I had worked with Eva on the project she had frequently spoken in this way. Her vocabulary was filled with the language of neo-human relations. For Eva, like the authorities on which she drew to talk about learning at work, workplaces were sites of *shared practice*, filled with *empowered* and *passionate* workers.

### **'The reflective practitioner'**

As introduced in Chapter 4, the circulation of an experiential learning discourse constructs 'the workplace learner' as 'the reflective practitioner', and this was one way that Eva knew and understood herself. For example:

*Ideally, as [professional development] practitioners, we need to reflect on our own professional practice. In doing this kind of work and looking at our own professional development – being up to date, if we're looking at innovations – because part of our work is looking at what's cutting edge and what's new.*

The circulation of an experiential learning discourse in her workplace provided Eva with a way of 'knowing' and a language for talking about the workplace and workers, including herself. As introduced in Chapter 3, embedded in an

experiential learning discourse are assumptions about knowledge production, subjectivity, power and learning. An ethic of autonomy prevails and learning is understood as self-development, and thus outside of regulation.

### **The circulation of an experiential learning discourse through the texts of professional development**

Eva organised a computer for me to work on so that I could look at the *'Zine*, an online magazine/newsletter produced by the Professional Development Unit and published on the PSE intranet for PSE employees. The concept of workplace learning was not new to the professional developers and there were a number of ways of talking about workplace learning on their website including: *organisational learning, action learning, collaborative learning, cooperative learning* and *communities of practice*. However, as I suggest below, none of the languages of learning taken up by the professional developers disrupted a prevailing view of 'the worker' as the autonomous, self-developing subject and indeed, the texts produced by the professional developers often worked to re-construct the worker in this way.

The preferred genre for the *'Zine* was that of the 'inspirational tale' where accounts of 'successful' projects and programs within PSE were re-presented by the professional development staff. Popular themes on the *'Zine* (and presumably those that counted for the professional developers) drew on a contemporary managerial discourse of change management and included topics such as: *innovation, developing team capability, assessment, collaboration* and *communities of practice*. The virtual spaces of the *'Zine* were filled with representations of workers as passionate, self-actualising subjects – the same subjects Eva spoke about at our meetings.

#### **A 'lifelong learning' story**

The following story is an example of a *'Zine* text. As well as articles written by the professional developers (texts that provided normative representations of the way workers should 'be' at PSE), the *'Zine* was also interspersed with stories written by 'real' workers at PSE. These personal accounts from employees worked to provide 'authenticity' to the voice of professional development articulated on the *'Zine*, and



as such were (potentially) quite persuasive. As to whether workers were seduced by these accounts and, indeed, whether they ever visited the virtual space of the *'Zine* is open to speculation.

Photograph  
of Bonnie

(happy and  
smiling)

## My journey to opportunity

*'There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the way in which you yourself have altered'*

Nelson Mandela – A Long Walk To Freedom

In the eight years I've lived in Australia, I've never referred to it as home. Home was always the States and Australia was where I currently lived. My security was in knowing I would go home and re-start my life. But last month, during my long-anticipated trip home, I felt out of sync. Something was definitely different. I finally realised that home hadn't changed ... I had! I know that, in my heart, America will always be home because it's where I grew up, married, raised my family, made wonderful life-long friends and have so many great memories. I'll always remain American, but Australia can also be my home. I realised I needed to quit living in the past, quit waiting for the future and begin to act today. I wasn't sure what I was going to do, but I returned 'home' to Australia to begin my new journey. Arriving at work, I found PSE in the midst of restructure. Not being a permanent employee, I don't have the luxury shared by many PSE and [department name] employees – being guaranteed a position somewhere in the system.

I almost felt overwhelmed. Not only had I 'outgrown' home and faced the reality that personally I need to move on, but now I am faced with the prospect of being jobless as well. In addition, my resume is out of date, the job market isn't booming, I hate job hunting and I really don't know what I want to do. What horrible, horrible timing!!

I was chatting with a colleague about all the changes occurring, wondering what had happened to the permanent, lifelong job and if the 'norm' was a constant change. She told me that the Buddhists believe change is never ending, that nothing is permanent in life – except change. Does that make it less scary? Not really...but, as she pointed out, if you agree with that philosophy, a way to take some control is to plan your life anticipating change, becoming fluid and responsive to it.

### HThe challenge is to get past the fear and insecurity.

OK, I have a different perspective from the one I had when I left home eight years ago. It doesn't mean I can't still go home for visits or that my friends would cease to stay in contact. And of course, someone else is driving PSEs' restructure. That doesn't mean that I can't take some control in what I want to do.

But how do I take control? I asked friends and colleagues, I surfed change management and career websites and I checked out numerous books.

Apparently it's as easy as looking at my options, identifying what I want and consider changing as an opportunity to do what I really want. Easier said than done!

Along the way I discovered a book written by Laurence G Boldt, entitled '**Zen and the Art of Making a Living: A Practical Guide to Creative Career Design**'. One of the things he wrote hit home ... 'Discovering your life's work is not a mechanical process of assembling facts; it is more a matter of trusting'. And the simple truth for me? I'm definitely not getting younger. How can I trust this next decision will be the right one?

Honestly? Getting past my fear and confusion and trying to figure out what I want is easier said than done. Putting down a wish list was relatively simple – and so was determining how realistic and achievable it was. It was painless checking out how long it would take and even deciding if I was prepared to make the necessary sacrifices was easy. But the most important steps are always the hardest.

***H**The most important steps are the hardest. I have to trust my decisions and I have to act!!*

I am making every effort to take my life off hold, to see all the changes of the last couple of months as opportunities instead of threats and to trust that my decisions are good. The final step ... **ACT** ... I've applied for admission to study for a BA in Humanities at university, I'm updating my resume, checking out various employment websites and will begin my job search in a positive frame of mind.

This hasn't been a particularly easy time for me and I don't promise that I won't stumble. I know I'll need to make adjustments, but I am committed. My challenge really has been to get past my fears and insecurities about all the changes happening around me and to see them as a second chance to pursue my dreams.

After all, how often do we get a second chance?

*We all have big changes in our lives that are more or less a second chance.*

*Harrison Ford*

This inspirational tale about lifelong learning appeared on the 'Zine at the same time a Lifelong Learning restructure was announced in the organisation (this restructure is discussed later in the chapter), thus providing a normative model for PSE workers if they were made redundant. The solution offered by Bonnie to the prospect of imminent redundancy is to accept the situation and to take control of one's self.

Bonnie is a representation of the self-actualising subject who is at the centre of agency and change. This is a self who is able to take control. Bonnie, in taking up the position of the lifelong learner, represents the very subject that the professional developers are seeking to produce. With the desire to improve her personal situation Bonnie has decided to act on her self through re-education and further training. This is a particularly persuasive text as it appeals to the contemporary social values of self improvement and self fulfilment (Rose, 1999b).

While this story could have been told in a number of ways, for example Bonnie might have been represented as a politicised subject questioning: why after eight years as an employee in this organisation don't I have a permanent position? Bonnie, however, does not ask these questions. Bonnie is active, but her agency (seemingly) comes from within. For example, she is now *in control* and on a *journey to freedom* through taking charge of her self. This is an individualising text which ignores the social, cultural and political factors that have contributed to her situation. Bonnie does not set out to join a union or use collective mechanisms to protest the unfairness and inequity of her current situation. Instead, she decides to act on her self by enrolling at university in a degree. Bonnie is the autonomous, self-actualising subject desired in the contemporary workplace.

This text exemplifies the way the professional developers know and understand workplace learning, that is, as a process of self-development, and embedded in this conceptualisation is a humanist understanding of 'the individual' with an autonomous subjectivity. The workplace learner is constituted in this text as the autonomous, self-actualising subject.

### **The appeal of communities of practice**

However, an experiential learning discourse was not the only discourse in circulation for talking about workplace learning. The professional developers had become enamoured of a communities of practice discourse and the 'Zine was filled with texts about communities of practice. Eva was a disciple of communities of practice and had published articles on the 'Zine about the benefits, to both individuals and the organisation, of organising the workplace in this way.

A communities of practice discourse reconfigures the workplace as a legitimate site of learning. In putting learning on the agenda, in terms of the way the workplace should be organised, and thereby (potentially) validating the work of the professional developers as 'the learning experts' within the workplace, this was a learning discourse that had appeal with this group. Eva spoke about the appeal of communities of practice in the following way:

*It's not just an outcomes based approach. It really is both, not only the knowledge but it looks at people's **passion** and it's also beyond looking at what is a network. I guess it's about people **sharing a passion**, people **sharing a practice**. Out of that you've got that thing where there's a history, where there's artefacts that are produced. It's not just about wishy washy loose group interaction. It's taking in the people aspect and people's **passion** and people's learning. I guess it legitimises, anything that legitimises learning at that level has a lot of merit, a lot of credit.*

While communities of practice had great appeal, the above text re-echoes tensions around cohesively combining a communities of practice discourse with a discourse of experiential learning in circulation in this workgroup. It appears that a communities of practice discourse has been subsumed within an overarching way of knowing workers and learning, framed by an experiential learning discourse. For example, in describing the appeal of communities of practice, Eva spoke of workers as possessing a (seemingly essential and universal) *passion* for work, a notion not dissimilar to the psychological concept of motivation where change is understood as coming from within an essential core. A communities of practice discourse has been taken up and used by the professional developers, but in a way that pre-supposes autonomous subjectivity. This conception of worker subjectivity reproduces a view of everyday learning as 'informal' and outside of regulation.

Although a communities of practice discourse provides a social explanation of learning, thereby offering a very different view of 'the learner', knowledge production and subjectivity to a psychologised notion held by Eva, I suggest that is able to 'fit' with (or at least not disrupt) a humanist discourse of self-development

and progress that underpins much professional development practice. The professional developers view learning (uncritically) as always empowering and always outside of regulation, and change is understood as being directed by the individual and generated from within. A communities of practice discourse, in representing the workplace as a site of everyday learning, the very use of the term 'everyday' suggesting an authenticity and naturalness to this learning, in other words that it is outside of regulation, makes the complex processes of subjectification, whereby technologies of power interplay with technologies of the self, less visible.

A communities of practice discourse enabled the professional developers to know and understand themselves as 'the learning facilitator' and 'the learning broker' rather than 'the trainer' and 'the teacher', and the take up of this model was evident in the current organisation of professional development practices in this workplace. For example, rather than the Professional Development Unit providing staff training and development themselves, this group advocated a more situated and local approach to learning and staff development in the PSE workplace. This shift implies an empowered position for those in 'the learning community', in comparison to the position of 'trainee' previously available in 'formal' training courses, thus enabling the professional developers to speak of workplace learning as empowering.

In a communities of practice discourse the 'problem' of power appears to be removed as the community takes responsibility for their own learning. In representing everyday learning, and being a learner at work, as natural the disciplinary power associated with the pedagogical practices of the workplace, including those of professional development, is made less visible (Contu and Willmott, 2003; Fox, 2000). Rather than being instructed by trainers, the members of the community become their own teachers implying a self-directed, 'natural' learning. But as Edwards, Nicoll, Solomon and Usher (2004) point out, an emphasis on 'learning' shifts attention away from the relationship between pedagogy and power and the exercise of disciplinary power in the workplace. A communities of practice approach to staff development shifts the disciplining work from the external trainers to those within the community. In this sense communities of

practice can be thought of as extending the net of discipline in the workplace through providing and encouraging particular subjectivities for workers to take up on an 'everyday' basis, rather than removing discipline and power from the workplace (Patton, 1994). As communities of practice are increasingly taken up as a professional development tool, different sites of discipline become instituted in the workplace.

Ironically (because of their insistence on the separation of power and learning), the emphasis in a community of practice approach (as it has been taken up by the professional developers at PSE) was on change management and using communities of practice as a technology for regulating worker conduct in the PSE workplace (eg. Mitchell, 2003). For example, the professional developers did not want just any type of learner in the PSE workplace, such as workers who have learned to be disruptive/resistant to managerial objectives or learners who transgress organisational boundaries. They want compliant learners who learn the curriculum provided by the organisation. They want learners like Bonnie who know and understand themselves as autonomous subjects, and as such, in control of their life and career trajectory. They want the *new VET practitioner*, a worker identity promised in the texts produced by the change management consultants (Mitchell *et al.*, no date, unpagged).

And it is in the texts of the change management consultants, contracted by the Australian government to advise on the successful implementation of change in the VET sector, that a particularly seductive account of communities of practice is conveyed. For example Mitchell (2003, p. 5) describes communities of practice as *groups of people bound together by common interests and a passion for a cause, and who continually interact*. The 'new' worker is one who places an emphasis on relationships, for example, VET practitioners need to be *more client-focused by establishing improved relationships with both enterprise clients and individual students* (p 8). Workers are to become knowledge producers where: *The development of practice involves a balance between exploring ideas together and producing documents and tools* (p 6). The members of the community of practice, as described by Mitchell, *communicate regularly and continuously in an*

*atmosphere of trust, enabling collective enquiry about issues of importance to the members* (p 6). The communities in this change management text have great appeal. And perhaps the most appealing aspect of this document (at least to the professional developers) was that the communities of practice described were all unproblematically aligned with the broader organisational goal, which was the successful implementation of the new VET training system. Not surprisingly, these change management texts have been widely taken up by the professional developers at PSE.

In summary, in knowing and understanding workers as self-actualising subjects, the conceptualisation of workers made available in the neo-human relations literature, the professional developers acted on and attempted to govern this subject through the organisation of the workplace as communities of practice. The professional developers used communities of practice as an intervention or technology for bringing about workplace change and developing the new VET practitioner. Thus, the take up of a communities of practice discourse by the professional developers was intricately entangled with a managerial desire to govern the conduct of workers at PSE and to produce particular types of workers in the PSE workplace. In knowing and understanding themselves as facilitators of learning at work, a position made available through the circulation of mainstream organisational learning discourses, the professional developers were able to imagine workplace learning as outside of regulation and 'empowering'.

### **Activating mainstream organisational learning discourses**

Weedon points out that discourses, to be effective, *require activation through the agency of the individuals whom they constitute and govern, in particular ways, as embodied subjects* (1987, p. 112). In the following section I explore Eva's activation of mainstream organisational learning discourses by examining what she was able, and not able to think, say and do in relation to workers and workplace learning throughout the Uncovering Learning project.



## Attempts to produce alignment

The Uncovering Learning project provided yet another site for the professional developers to spread the communities of practice gospel, both to the academics and the workgroups participating in the project. As previously introduced, communities of practice, in its privileging of workplace knowledges and experience, is a particularly seductive text (Harman, 2003). It is seductive for senior managers as it legitimates the devolution of a training and development role into workgroups, thereby enabling cuts in training and development budgets. It is seductive for professional developers as an emphasis on learning in/through practice makes the complex relationships between power and learning less visible. And it is seductive for workplace learning academics interested in assessing and acknowledging everyday learning and workplace experience as it provides a language for talking about the productivity of everyday learning in the workplace. This is a discourse that enables alignment between the goals of senior managers, professional developers and workplace learning academics, and thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that a communities of practice model was initially taken up by the researchers as a framework for conceptualising everyday learning in the PSE workgroups.

And while a communities of practice discourse may have had initial appeal, the project planning meetings, where the researchers met regularly to discuss the progress of the project and plan each of the research stages, provided a site for the intersection of various disciplinary and institutional discourses that we each brought to project. The meetings can be understood as providing a space for the discursive construction of the workplace learning subject where we each tried to persuade the others of our particular take on workplace learning. This was not a unified and cohesive space but one of contestation and differing claims to authority (see Chapter 5). For example, I tried to persuade the group of the top-down power in play in the workplace and the subjugation of workers through the circulation of a workplace learning discourse, Associate Professor N. tried to persuade us of active subjects, and Professor D. tried to persuade us of a typology of everyday learning. We all peddled our institutional and disciplinary takes on learning with Eva introducing the language of communities of practice to the group.

There were ongoing attempts at these meetings to produce alignment, yet they also provided a site for resistance to existing relations of power. The very location of these meetings can be read as a power play by the academics in terms of the ongoing struggle between the professional developers and the academics over the meaning of learning at work, as these meetings were always conducted on the academic's 'turf' at the university. However, Eva was complicit in this arrangement as it also suited her to escape from her workplace (this is discussed in a later section in this chapter).

Not only were we trying to align other members of the research group with our particular takes on learning but we were also forging allies. For example it suited my purposes to have Eva as an ally so that I could get closer to the professional developers to explore the ways this group spoke about learning and learners at work, and it suited Eva to have me as an ally in her bid to gain entry to the academy (this is discussed later in the chapter). We had what might be described as a reciprocally mutual exploitation.

### **Pulling the plug on power**

Just as Eva's desk in her workplace was framed by mainstream organisational learning texts, Eva's talk about workplace learning was framed or regulated by these managerial knowledges. These texts provided Eva with a way of conceptualising and talking about work, workers and learning. Similarly to these managerial authorities, power also invoked a sense of abhorrence and disgust for Eva. In her view, power was dysfunctional and something that could be, and needed to be, eradicated from the workplace. For example, at the commencement of the Uncovering Learning project the research group had co-authored a paper where the researchers explored themselves as learners (Solomon *et al.*, 2001). The theme of the paper was around doing research on workplace learning and also being workplace learners. But this venture into cross-institutional writing was fraught with tension – a significant tension being the introduction of talk about the power relations in the research group.<sup>33</sup> While the academics were interested in exploring

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<sup>33</sup> This is a project tale told to me by one of the researchers on the project. I had not commenced work on the project at the time this paper was written.

the theme of power and analysing the cross-institutional relationships of the project, the professional developers were not. The topic of power became such a point of contention that Eva threatened to disengage from the project. Ironically, this was a significant power play in itself, but as there was to be no discussion of the power relations in play between the academy and the industry partner, or more specifically, between the workplace learning academics and the professional developers, this was left unsaid (at least in that particular paper).

But this very act can be read as Eva doing her own levelling work within the hierarchical relations of the research group. By declaring 'sameness', Eva was attempting to renegotiate the hierarchies of the project on her terms. Eva was not going to be intimidated by the academic heavy weights of the research group. This is an example of the passing backwards and forwards of 'the token' in terms of the ongoing negotiation between the professional developers and the workplace learning academics around what counted as learning at work (see Chapters 2 and 5). Power was off the discursive agenda (at least as far as the professional developers were concerned).

### Erasing difference

A privileging of 'sameness' was evident in the texts Eva produced for the project. In her written analyses of the everyday learning of the workgroups in Stage 1 of the project, the workgroups were represented as cohesive sites of shared practice. There was no space for difference, nor reference to contestation in these texts. Similarly, in the feedback sessions that were conducted with the workgroups at the end of Stage 1, Eva provided detailed feedback in relation to the ways they operated as *communities of shared practice*.

I suggest that a privileging of unity and sameness through an appeal to 'shared practice' in a communities of practice discourse contributed to its appeal for the professional developers. In Eva's accounts of the workgroups, workers were represented as reflective practitioners, working cohesively and productively to achieve organisational goals.

During the project some of the researchers, including me, worked with Eva on a jointly authored paper for a conference in her field. This paper was led by Eva and discussed the practices of the workgroups in the project from a communities of practice perspective (Leontios, Boud, Harman and Rooney, 2003).<sup>34</sup> Again, this cross-institutional writing was fraught with tension. No matter what tactics we, the university-based researchers employed, Eva could not be persuaded to write critically about professional development practices and disrupt mainstream organisational learning knowledges. For example, she was not able to talk about the disciplinary practices of professional development and the relationship between workplace learning discourses and power. This resulted in the reproduction of a mainstream organisational learning discourse in the paper where the learning in the workgroups was represented in terms of an overriding ethic of shared practice, alignment and enhanced organisational performance. The silencing of difference by Eva, for example, in her textual representations of workplace learners in the project worked to construct 'shared practice' and 'community' as natural characteristics of the workplace, with the workplace learner re-presented as 'naturally' productive in relation to managerial norms.

Similarly, Eva did not want to draw attention to the differences between the professional developers and the academics. For Eva, as the representative of the professional developers and PSE, this was to be a project of collaboration through consensus where sameness and unification were to be privileged, thus overlooking difference. While this was a view the academics attempted to disrupt, the circulation of an economic discourse in their workplace also regulated what they could and could not say about the conjunction of workplace learning discourses with relations of power (see Chapter 5).

In summary, Eva and the professional developers talked about workers in a way that re-echoed Maslow's self-actualising subject – the motivated worker who in possessing core and essential characteristics is driven from within. Eva understood and spoke about workers in neo-human relation terms. As discussed in Chapter 3,

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<sup>34</sup> At different stages of the project different members of the research group developed conference papers in areas in which they were interested. While other members of the group could (usually) contribute to the paper (there were boundaries here too), the production of the paper was led by one person.

this particular take on social reality is associated with specific values and meanings including an understanding of subjectivity as autonomous. Eva's take up of an experiential learning discourse enabled her to speak about workplaces as sites of empowerment and a community of shared practice, and workers as 'passionate' selves.

I suggest that Eva's occupational identification as a psychologist was significant in terms of her alignment with an experiential learning discourse. As outlined in Chapter 3, this discourse is underpinned by a psychologised notion of 'the individual' as the author of meaning and centre of change. As Weedon (1987, p. 112) points out:

*Subjectivity works most efficiently for the established hierarchy of power relations in a society when the subject position, which the individual assumes within a particular discourse, is fully identified by the individual with her interests.*

The psychologised notion of 'the individual' articulated by Eva worked to reproduce a taken for granted view of everyday learning as outside of regulation, and the workplace learner as autonomous and self-actualising. In talking about learning at work using terms such as *passion* and *empowerment*, the complex interplay of technologies of power and technologies of self remained out of sight.

### **Unanticipated outcomes**

There is another turn in the story I tell about the take up of a communities of practice discourse by the professional developers at PSE. This is a story that draws attention to unintended outcomes and the multiple strategies connected with workplace learning discourses. While I suggested previously that communities of practice is a discourse that legitimates the workplace as a site of learning, it is also a discourse that potentially makes the professional developer redundant. It is a model of learning that emphasises local and situated knowledges and learning as a social rather than an individual practice. While there are teachers in the learning relationships re-presented in the communities of practice literature, 'the teacher' comes from within the community of shared practice rather than from outside. This

is a discourse, then, that re-positions workgroup members as ‘the professional developer’ and re-positions the professional developers as ‘the facilitators’ or ‘brokers’ of learning in the workplace. This is a precarious position for the professional developers and perhaps one that has not been in their best interest in terms of growing their own workgroup and making the Professional Development Unit more powerful in the organisation. These ideas are explored below.

### Another ‘lifelong learning’ story

In April 2003, part way through the three year timeframe of the Uncovering Learning project, a new restructure of PSE was announced. Organisational restructures had become a common occurrence in this workplace in recent times and this particular restructure was being packaged and ‘rolled-out’ under the rhetoric of *Lifelong Learning*. In an information package released at the time the restructure was announced it was proposed that public education in NSW be reformed:

*to create a “whole of life” education provider that is more responsive to community needs. It is proposed that schools and [PSE colleges] would continue to provide precisely the same high quality education services as at present, but would further improve those services through the better sharing of expertise and resources. (anonymous, 2003, p. 3).*

The Professional Development Unit, along with most other sections in PSE, was being ‘downsized’ yet again and many employees in PSE were sceptical and cynical about the restructure, including Eva. The irony of using the language of learning in order to bring about organisational efficiencies had not gone unnoticed in this workplace, at least not in this instance.<sup>35</sup> Even a ‘good employee’ like Eva, and one seemingly aligned with organisational goals and objectives, spoke about the restructure as a cost-cutting exercise. However some, usually more senior managers, continued to draw on a discourse of empowerment to talk about the

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<sup>35</sup> Arguably, communities of practice is also a language of learning that works to bring about organisational efficiencies, but this is a less visible exercise of power than the top-down method of a restructure.

proposed changes and to frame the restructure as an opportunity for growth, personal development and lifelong learning.

The *Lifelong Learning* restructure resulted in a significant reduction in staff in the Professional Development Unit with only the five most senior positions retained. The rest, including Eva, were offered the option of *redeployment* or a redundancy package. Ironically, at the same time as a workplace learning discourse was being articulated by senior government bureaucrats to rationalise organisational change in public sector workplaces, the professional development unit, the group that had been responsible for managing learning and change in this workplace, were facing extinction.

### **The shrinking Professional Development Unit**

According to Eva, at one stage there were forty eight staff working in the Professional Development Unit, but following a series of restructures and the devolution of staff development and training to the colleges, the group had been *downsized*. When I visited Eva at her workplace there were only thirteen permanent employees, with additional contracted staff working on one-off projects. In this sense the unit reflected the shift that has taken place in many contemporary workplaces to a casualised and contracted workforce (Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training, 1999).

And with each restructure, the professional development unit had reconstructed itself. The section was originally called *the Computer Training Unit*, then it became the *Staff Training and Development Section*, then the *Staff Training and Development Bureau*, the *Learning Initiatives Group*, and more recently the *Professional Development Network*. The name changes suggest the changing functions of the group as well as the changing identities of professional development and professional developers (see Edwards *et al.*, 2004). This was not a static and unchanging group but one that was frequently re-shaping and re-forming, as well as re-shaping and re-forming others.

Did Eva, as a member of a workgroup experiencing ongoing flux and change, understand herself (and others) in fluid and multiple ways? Since joining this

workgroup Eva had re-constructed her 'self' from counsellor/psychologist, to professional developer/workplace trainer, to facilitator/learning broker. While technologies of power may be constituting new ideal types against which workers might self regulate, for example du Gay (1996a) writes of the contemporary shaping of enterprising subjects, are the rapid shifts taking place in the workplace and multiple positionings disrupting a notion of a cohesive and unified self? One might expect this to be a workplace where the notion of a fixed identity had been increasingly disrupted. However, in contrast to a more fluid and changing notion of subjectivity, where identity is understood as being in process, the professional developers drew on a psychologised model of 'the individual', with seemingly fixed and essential characteristics. And at times, the disjuncture between the language the professional developers used to talk about work, workers and learning and their experience of flux and change in the workplace appeared to create little tension.

For example, even toward the conclusion of the project when Eva knew that her own job was about to be terminated, she was still tirelessly peddling a mainstream organisational discourse of empowerment and self-development amongst the workgroups. There was little change in her neo-human relations' vocabulary (although, there is yet another turn in this story). For Eva, the conception of the worker as the autonomous, self-developing subject was 'the truth'. Foucault (1980, p. 133) points out:

*'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A 'regime' of truth.*

Eva's alignment with a human relations discourse, underpinned by a psychologised notion of 'the individual' with an autonomous subjectivity, illustrates the power of this regime of truth.

### **Multiple selves**

While wanting to draw attention to Eva as the embodiment of an experiential learning discourse and the ways this discourse structured what she was able, and not able, to say, think and do in relation to work, workers and everyday learning, I



also want to avoid re-presenting her as having a fixed and unified identity, for example as 'the people developer'. Eva's seemingly cohesive identity was more fragmented and multiple than the story in the first part of this chapter suggests.

While I have re-presented Eva as a 'good' employee and one seemingly unproblematically aligned with broader managerial goals, and the positions produced through the circulation of managerial knowledges, a Foucauldian reading further complicates the subject. In a Foucauldian sighting the individual is the site of conflicting forms of subjectivity and it is here that the struggle for power is played out (Weedon, 1987). There are many discourses in circulation in the workplace that position Eva in multiple ways.

For example, while Eva, being a 'good' self-developing subject and taking up the position of 'the workplace learner' was eager to join the Uncovering Learning project and become an organisational researcher, her participation in the project provided her with access to other learning discourses and this sometimes created tension. I indicated previously that power was a topic on which Eva was unable to speak. However, during the project Eva participated in the production of a paper titled: 'Co-producing knowledge: negotiating the political' (Harman *et al.*, 2003). This was a paper that foregrounded relations of power in the Uncovering Learning project. While power had been off the agenda for Eva, it was apparently no longer quite so problematic as she collaborated on this paper, as well as my project to gaze at the professional developers.

One day, when Eva and I met at City University to start writing this paper, she told me about the demands that were being placed on her by her manager. This included having pressure put on her to resume fulltime work and to scale back her level of involvement in the Uncovering Learning project. Eva was also disenchanted with changes that had taken place in her workgroup such as amalgamating the celebration of birthdays to one set day a month, and an email requesting that office 'chit-chat' be stopped. The telling of these 'tales' was significant as Eva was usually very 'good' and tended to be uncritical in the way she spoke of her workplace and the work of the professional developers. It seemed ironic to both Eva and myself that the very spaces that were being 'uncovered' as

contributing to everyday learning at work, such as the productive spaces provided through relationship building (Boud *et al.*, 2006), were being closed-off in the Professional Development Unit workgroup. This was a group, after all, that was meant to be aligned with a discourse of everyday learning and the opening up of learning spaces in the workplace. But as previously suggested, it was a particular view of everyday learning, where learning is understood as creating alignment between workers and broader organisational goals, that was able to count with the professional developers.

Eva's tales suggest an increasing alignment with the academics, thus exemplifying the indeterminacy of power. When Eva joined the project she began spending most of her work hours on the Uncovering Learning project. Her eager take up of the position of 'the researcher', working on the interviews and interview transcripts to a level that might be unexpected of the industry partner, became a matter of concern for her manager and she was asked to reduce the hours she was spending on the project.

Eva's take up of the position of 'the researcher', exemplified by her participation on the Uncovering Learning project, can be read in number of ways. It provided her with access to workgroups in PSE participating in the project, thus enabling her to be a 'good' employee through spreading the communities of practice gospel. At the same time, however, Eva was able to escape her workplace and the direct gaze of her manager by participating in the project. It is in this sense that Eva might also be re-presented as a transgressive subject (Fenwick, 2001b) – a worker that takes up discourses in circulation in the workplace and uses them for her own purposes. In other words, Eva's purposes were not always necessarily aligned with those of her workplace.

Following her symbolic defection from her place of employment through her eager embrace of the Uncovering Learning project, Eva made an explicit bid to enter the academy. During the project a lecturing position became available at the university in the field of organisational learning, and Eva decided to apply. She was unsuccessful in this bid, thus drawing attention to institutional boundaries and the differences between City University and PSE in terms of what counted as learning.

Eva's workplace learning did not count (enough) in the academy. Nevertheless, her use of the project as a mechanism for transgressing her own organisational boundaries exemplifies the way a discourse that has been circulated in the workplace in an effort to regulate worker conduct can also be used by workers to resist corporate subjugation. This directs attention to the tactical function of discourse and the spaces where relations of power might begin to be renegotiated in workplaces.

There were other instances of Eva's transgression of organisational goals. For example, I mentioned previously that Eva had a young daughter and during the project this child commenced attending preschool. On the occasions that I visited Eva at her workplace she spent most of her time on the telephone with childcare workers from her daughter's pre-school discussing the difficulty her daughter was experiencing at pre-school and her associated illnesses. Having embraced an ethic of autonomy, made available through the circulation of an experiential learning discourse in her workplace, Eva organised her time at work in ways that suited her, and this was not always in alignment with organisational goals and objectives. Perhaps the circulation of learning discourses in the workplace is less deterministic than Casey's account of designer employees (1995, 1999) suggests?

### **A more complicated story**

This is a more complicated story about workplace learning than provided in much of the organisational learning literature. Using Foucauldian concepts I have interwoven a story about an institutionally disciplined and disciplining professional developer with stories of the ways Eva transgressed institutionally prescribed positions such as 'the workplace learner' and used this position for her own purposes.

The analysis undertaken in this chapter has drawn attention to complex processes of subjectification whereby particular meanings given to social reality become interiorised and understood as our own. A Foucauldian sighting has enabled me to re-write Eva's subjectivity as discursively produced rather than essential and coming from within, thus opening to question the certainty of the autonomous, self-

developing subject. In directing attention to Eva's embodiment of an experiential learning discourse, Eva's subjectivity is re-presented as a complex interplay of technologies of power and technologies of the self (Flax, 1990; Rose, 1999a; Weedon, 1987). There is no transcendent position outside of discourse from which to speak, thus opening to question the construct of 'the reflective practitioner', the unified, rational and autonomous subject reproduced through the circulation of an experiential learning discourse.

Rather than Eva being able to rationally transcend the institutional context of the workplace and the discourses in circulation in the workplace, the view of knowledge production presented in the mainstream organisational learning literature, the way she could speak about learning and workers was bounded by the discourses in circulation in her workplace. Therefore, rather than starting from the assumption that experience provides direct access to the 'truth', an assumption in the experiential learning literature, I have pointed to the way Eva's experience was produced through *grids of visualisation, vocabularies, norms and systems of judgement* (Rose, 2000, p. 312). In other words, the texts of organisational learning to which Eva had access made the world thinkable and practicable rather than simply describing it (Rose, 1999a).

A Foucauldian conceptualisation of the discursive construction of subjectivity enables the material effects of the circulation of a mainstream organisational learning discourse to be examined. In this view institutional practices, including the practices of professional development, work to reproduce particular meanings of social reality as 'the truth'. I have suggested in this chapter that the practices of professional development provide material support for maintaining an understanding of everyday learning as outside of regulation and workers as autonomous subjects. For example in the texts produced during the Uncovering Learning project, at least those written for, or with, the professional developers, there was no discussion of learning and the learner in terms of the exercise of disciplinary power in the workplace. There was no space for this subject. Thus, in silencing a discussion of the relationship between power and everyday learning, a

meaning of social reality where subjectivity is understood as autonomous was reproduced by the professional developers.

I suggest that it was not in the interests of the professional developers to discuss the pedagogical practices of the workplace and the exercise of disciplinary power, in part, because the 'truth' of the self-developing subject – the autonomous subject that is transcendent from power – is the very premise which underpins their workplace practice. Indeed, it was in their interest to construct 'the workplace learner' as an autonomous, self-actualising subject and it was this subject that was reproduced in many of the texts produced by the professional developers.

The censoring by the professional developers of discussion around the relationship between power and the pedagogical practices of the workplace draws attention to the institutional and identity boundaries of the professional developers, and the academics, and their material effects in terms of the production of knowledge on the project. Eva is my 'other', so it is safer to write about her. However, in drawing attention to Eva as a bounded subject and the ways organisational learning discourses regulate what can and cannot be said in relation to learning at work, I also (hopefully) draw attention to myself as bounded in and through discourse. Therefore the knowledges that Eva and the other researchers working on the Uncovering Learning project produced (including myself and this text) can only ever be partial, and are always situated within particular historical, cultural and social contexts.

However, in directing attention to the discursive practices of professional development and their interventions in the workplace which aim to regulate worker conduct, I do not want to suggest the inevitable exercise of power by this group. While it is important to make visible the part played by professional development in networks of power which work to reproduce autonomous and seemingly natural subjects in the workplace, Eva was more than simply an agent of power (Rose, 1999a). This is the view of professional development, and learning at work, however, that tends to be provided in the critical literature on organisational learning (eg. Casey, 1995; Contu *et al.*, 2003; Coopey, 1996). It is also a theme that is re-echoed in some of the organisational literature using a Foucauldian

conceptualisation of disciplinary power. For example, Deetz (1998) writes about strategised subordination in work organisations where workers, in taking up a subordinate position for their own strategic purposes, for example for career progression or an increase in pay, are complicit in their own regulation. While Deetz, importantly, foregrounds the regulating aspects of discourse and the complex relationships with authority that we enter into in order to understand ourselves as autonomous, his analysis does not pay sufficient attention to the ways subject positions (produced by discourses) also provide positions of resistance, and the spaces for play within structure. After reading Deetz (1998) one is left with an almost monolithic sense of power possessed by management and it is difficult to imagine how managerial discourses might be resisted or contested. The indeterminacy of power and the ways it is open to renegotiation is an important theme in this thesis and is explored in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 8

### **Subjectivity as a site of resistance**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter I examine the intersection of discourses of workplace learning with the discourses in circulation in the trade teachers' workgroup at PSE. I explore when discourses of workplace learning were used, and by whom, and the purposes to which discourses of workplace learning were put. In the first part of the chapter I analyse interview texts from the Uncovering Learning project, where the trade teachers talked about work, to examine their identifications. This enables processes of subjectification and the exercise of disciplinary power within the trade teachers workgroup to be made visible. I suggest that a discourse of tradesmanship was embodied and activated by the trade teachers in their everyday work practices. However, rather than thinking of the trade teachers' subjectivity as fixed and unified, for example as 'the master tradesman', I suggest that there were a plurality of forces that positioned the trade teachers in multiple ways, thus preventing any fixed constitution of subjectivity. This analysis directs attention to the circulation of multiple and often intersecting discourses and subjectivity as a site of both alignment and resistance.

The trade teachers work at the trade teacher's school, a teaching department at what I refer to in this study as Green Campus. Green Campus is one of the campuses that forms Metropolitan College, and thus falls under the jurisdiction of the senior managers' workgroup (see Chapter 6). Also, while professional development activities for college staff are generally organised by training and development staff at the college level, the professional development unit (see Chapter 7) provide services to staff training and development units at each of the colleges.

## **Introducing the trade teachers**

It was Melbourne Cup<sup>36</sup> day when I first met the trade teachers. I remember there were crowds of hatted people on the bus making their way to the racetrack. But I was not going to the races. I was going to interview the head teacher from one of the workgroups that had agreed to participate in the Uncovering Learning project. After months of working with the other researchers on developing the interview schedule and finetuning the research design I was at last going to do some 'real' research work and interview someone. I entered the gates of Green Campus and followed the signs to the trade school, one of various schools and departments at the campus. Toward the back of the building apprentices were working in separate workbays, rendering walls and applying tiles. I went upstairs to Jim's office. He was not here yet, but I was early, so I sat down outside his office and waited.

The place where I was sitting looked like a classroom. I waited and watched the clock as the minutes ticked by. It was now about five or so minutes after the time that I had arranged to meet with Jim, the head teacher, and there was no sign of life. I waited for another ten minutes and then decided that I had better try and find someone to see what was happening. There should be other teachers in the building somewhere, even though there was no one in any of the upstairs offices. I could hear voices, and tracking down the source I came into a small room where two men were sitting at a kitchen-style table and chairs, drinking cups of tea, dunking biscuits and reading a newspaper. I was in the staff lunchroom, a room we researchers were later to 'uncover' as a significant learning space for the trade teachers. The two men were looking at the form guide and discussing which horses they had backed in the Melbourne Cup. Each was dressed in shorts and short sleeves, one wearing knee-hi socks. Do any of you know where Jim is? I asked. I was supposed to be interviewing him this morning for a project I'm working on. Neither knew where he was but both were surprised that he had not arrived for the interview. Bruce claimed: It is not like Jim to not turn up for appointments. We chatted for a while and I described the project to Bruce and Tom, who were both teachers in the trade school. Bruce suggested that I might like to interview him

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<sup>36</sup> The Melbourne Cup is a nationally celebrated horse race in Australia. Many people attend Melbourne Cup parties and most people stop work to watch the race on television.



instead. I had been feeling disappointed, and a bit annoyed that I was going back to City University empty handed, so I took up the offer. Bruce, however, needed to go back to the class he had been teaching before his tea break, so if I was happy to interview him while he overlooked as his students carried on with their tasks, we could do the interview. So into the grey cavern we trekked, where the apprentices were constructing walls, then pulling them down, constructing, and pulling down, and with the constant 'tink', 'tink', 'tinking' of trowels against tiles, I interviewed Bruce (see Bruce's story below).

### **The discursive construction of identity**

In the following section I explore processes of subjectification in the workplace and the subject positions Bruce constructs when talking about work. Similar to the analyses undertaken in Chapters 6 and 7, the interview texts from the trade teachers have been analysed in terms of the ways language works to constitute reality, and the trade teacher's discursive construction of themselves and the world. It is in this sense that Bruce's reflections are not neutral. Rather than assuming a pre-existing organisational reality and positioning, this analysis draws attention to the ongoing renegotiation of identity through language and the way identity is never fixed.

#### **Bruce's story**<sup>37</sup>

*I started working here in 1992, teaching students wall and floor tiling. My wife saw an advertisement for a tiling teacher in the paper. And I wasn't all that keen but I came in, applied, took a test and was accepted. I wasn't particularly excited about it and I'd never done anything like that before. I'd actually retired as a tiler and I'd taken on the position as manager of a plumbing department at [a hardware company]. And that was a sixty hour a week type job. And the teaching was thirty hours a week. Although that's a bit of a con because when I started to teach, and I had to do teacher training, I was so busy that I didn't get to play golf for two years.*

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<sup>37</sup> This title is deceptive as it is not really Bruce's story. It is a story that has been constructed by myself using excerpts from Bruce's interview. I draw attention to this construction as the use of quoted material, such as in the text below, is a powerful technique frequently used by researchers to convey the authenticity (and 'truthfulness') of their findings (MacLure, 2003).

*For the first couple of years I used to feel like a, not an impostor, but now I feel more like a teacher than I felt initially. I didn't know if I even wanted to stay here. It was that strenuous, stressful. It's only the fact that most of the teachers were very supportive and the students were fine and I get along fine with them. It wouldn't have taken much for me to say 'oh, this is really not me, I'm out.' But I stuck by it, and I'm quite happy I did. I had to learn a new skill. And it is a lot harder than it looks. Now that I've kind of learned a few tricks I can see how that's made me more effective as a teacher. Rather than what I tried to do initially [pause] trying to structure. Now I know a lot more now about eliciting responses that might seem accidental but have an underlying ulterior motive [pause] getting them to learn something painlessly...*

[‘tink’, ‘tink’ – sound of a trowel tapping on a tile in the background]

*There's not a lot of time to talk with other teachers at work because you're either teaching, or they're teaching if you're not teaching. It's very difficult to spend any significant amount of time with fellow teachers in the section. I think there should be probably more thought given to having a mentoring type system with new teachers where an experienced teacher could be on hand, you know, give them a bit of guidance, a bit of help, a bit of feedback. I think I got more feedback and help from teachers in teacher training. We became quite a close-knit group and whenever we had free time at university we'd discuss views on what we were doing and what problems we were having and the difficulties...*

[scraping noise of shovel mixing concrete]

*I was an apprentice over forty years ago. In those days we often worked for a different firm, we didn't always have the same job. There were two firms in Sydney that employed something like about 40 apprentices. A lot of their tradesmen worked for wages and they always had at least one apprentice with them and they were big*

*companies. They employed thirty or forty tradesmen and as I said, a large number of apprentices. It was a different culture then. It was actually a cultural thing. A bit of encouragement. There was a strong sense of unity and comradery. It was a way of life. And it's all gone. Those people now are sub-contractors and they only employ one or two apprentices.*

*When I got out of my time, there was a large influx of Italian migrants came in and they kind of, they were prepared to work for less than Australians, they'd work harder. And now it's the Koreans, the Korean tilers. They're actually working for less than [pause] the Italian's forty years ago came out and worked hard for nothing, for a lot less than the Australians were prepared to work for. And they're now at the top of their trade if you like. They're well established. Twenty or thirty years and see how the Koreans assimilate into Australian society. They've become less inclined to work for peanuts and start becoming fully Australian. Whether they'll want to work so hard and they'll want to get paid more for it. See what happens then. It's an interesting cultural change. It says something about Australian society that you can change people's perceptions and outlooks. When you come, I can imagine if somebody was a migrant and I saw work practices that I thought, if I came from a country where I worked twelve hours a day and got paid ten hours for it, and then come to Australia where working conditions are a lot better. The payments probably are higher than they're used to. I mean a lot of Iraqi's, we get a lot of Iraqi's here. I'd say between ten and twenty years time they'll be totally Australianised. They'll have a lot different perceptions than they have now. I don't see there anything racist about me saying that, because it's fact. They come from a country where living conditions are a lot harder than they are in Australia. And it's interesting to see how people change, their outlook changes. And I think it's great. It's a great commentary on our society, that it can change people like that...*

[high pitched scratching noise of a tile cutter]

*People ask me what I do and I say 'I'm a tiler'. Really, I haven't been a tiler for about fifteen years. Because I've retired from it. I shattered my left knee in a motorcycle accident in 1980. Because my knee was so bad, tiling was really difficult and that's one of the reasons why I got an office job. But I still tend to think of myself as a tiler. I started tiling when I was fourteen. It's been a very good trade to me. I'm quite comfortable financially. Yeah, actually, I bought a house up at Hawks Nest a couple of years ago and I got different tradesmen in to do renovations and they'd say 'what do you do for a living?' and I'd say 'tiler'. It didn't occur to me to say 'I teach tiling'. I still think of myself as a tiler. Even though I teach tiling...*

['tink', 'tink', 'tink']

*Things have changed since I started here. There used to be eight teachers here and four technical assistants. Now there's six teachers and three techies. And one's a part-time techie. One teacher just transferred to another section, voluntarily, and another teacher took a redundancy and they haven't been replaced. One of the technical assistants retired. Another one was given a medical retirement, so we're down to two. And we have a temporary and two permanents. So cost cutting is making a bad, not a bad situation, but the situation could be better...*

[sound of a wooden trowel smoothing concrete]

*As well as the downsizing there's the changes to the curriculum. The curriculum's been changed to accommodate the competency based training which is supposed to incorporate a lot of generic skills, which is all bullshit. In the new curriculum we're supposed to spend lots and lots of time teaching them working on scaffolds and workplace communications and a lot of other stuff that I haven't even looked at but I know the amount of time we're actually supposed to be teaching them tiling is, kind of been halved. Whereas most of the stuff*

*in the first year is all about the cross-generic type stuff, using explosive powered tools, using antiquated levering devices, that are supposed to be generic with plastering and bricklaying and gyprock fixing. It's getting to the stage where if I was employing an apprentice, I wouldn't send them to [PSE]. Because it's rubbish. They're not being taught what they need to be confident early on in the trade. Spending hours teaching them or expecting them to achieve competence in things that are either antiquated or irrelevant...*

[noise of concrete being tumbled in a concrete mixer]

*There have been staff development meetings where we were told what had been decided upon as curriculum content. But we said 'this is bullshit, it's rubbish. It's not relevant' and they said 'well that's what you have to teach'. That's it. End of story. There's a whole bureaucracy out there that comes up with this stuff and they all have a vested interest in making it as complicated as possible and generating as much paperwork and as many [pause]. Yeah, they're very busy, and they create a lot of paper with a lot of writing on it but it's all pretty useless. We spend more time finding ways around it than actually performing with it. As long as we can give them a tick in whatever stupid skill they're supposed to allegedly need, we'll find ways of doing that, quickly, and spending more time on what does matter. But it's 'why should we have to do that?' and entering it all into a system, back into the system, it's time consuming. I haven't spent a lot of time, in fact I haven't spent any time looking at the new curriculum because I'm teaching third year, and have been for the last couple of years. They'll be the last people to get affected. And I'm fifty six now and certainly by the time I'm sixty I'll have retired.*

In the above text Bruce constructs different subject positions, or ways of being, including the positions of 'the master tradesman' , 'the manager' and 'the teacher' as well as re-producing a number of taken-for-granted themes such as hard work

reaps financial rewards and the separation of theory and practice. These are discussed below.

### *The master tradesman*

Bruce's story can be read as a story of becoming 'the master tradesman'. Drawing on a traditional discourse of tradesmanship, which privileges experience, and knowing through doing, Bruce constructs 'the master tradesman' as a highly competent 'doer', with expertise and authority gained in and through many years of practising a trade. This is linked with an underlying theme, read as an ethical stance in the story, that hard work contributes to success. For example, he mentions that: *I started tiling when I was fourteen. It's been a very good trade to me. I'm quite comfortable financially.* This re-echoes his earlier comments about Italian migrants having made it to the top of the tiling trade through hard work.

Bruce constructs himself as an authority (and a master) by confidently presenting views on tiling and changes within the tiling profession, as well as providing the *fact[s]* on cultural change and *Australianised* Korean and Iraqi tilers. He also comments on the introduction of new, generic curricula in the Training Packages,<sup>38</sup> which he succinctly describes as *bullshit*.

Doing tiling (rather than theory) is what counts for Bruce and this is what one needs to do to become 'the master tradesman'. For example, when discussing the current curriculum for the apprentice tilers Bruce says:

*In the new curriculum we're supposed to spend lots and lots of time teaching them working on scaffolds and workplace communications and a lot of other stuff that I haven't even looked at but I know the amount of time we're actually supposed to be teaching them tiling is, kind of been halved.*

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<sup>38</sup> The Training Packages form a component of the National Training Framework. The National Training Framework is a set of principles and guidelines formulated at a national level with the aim of creating a nationally recognised, competency based training system. The Training Packages outline the skills and knowledge needed to perform effectively in the workplace in particular industries with the aim of making vocational training relevant to the needs of industry. Although, as laid out in Bruce's story, this is open to question.

Tiling is what is important in the curriculum with the *other stuff that I haven't even looked at* viewed as *rubbish*. Students are: *not being taught what they need to be confident early on in the trade. Spending hours teaching them or expecting them to achieve competence in things that are either antiquated or irrelevant...*

Bruce constructs a cohesive community of shared practice around tiling. For example, he talks of a *strong sense of unity and comradeship* during his apprenticeship, tiling was a *way of life*. Indeed, Bruce still identifies as a tiler, even though he has not worked as a tiler in over fifteen years: *People ask me what I do and I say 'I'm a tiler'*.

### ***The manager***

In contrast to 'the master tradesman' are 'the managers', which Bruce constructs as bureaucrats: *There's a whole bureaucracy out there that comes up with this stuff and they all have a vested interest in making it as complicated as possible and generating as much paperwork. And while they (the managers) may all be very busy creating documentation, in relation to Bruce's hierarchy of what counts: it's all pretty useless. The managers create a lot of paper with a lot of writing on it, but writing (and implicitly theory) do not count for Bruce:*

*We spend more time finding ways around it than actually performing with it. As long as we can give them a tick in whatever stupid skill they're supposed to allegedly need, we'll find ways of doing that, quickly, and spending more time on what does matter. But it's 'why should we have to do that?'*

The new ways of organising learning in the PSE workplace simply do not make sense to Bruce. His embodiment of a discourse of learning in and through doing prevents him from taking up the position of 'the bureaucrat' and teaching what he understands as unnecessary skills.

### ***The teacher***

Another subject position constructed by Bruce in the interview is that of 'the teacher'. Bruce constructs this subject drawing on a traditional teaching discourse,

not disconnected from a discourse of tradesmanship, where the teacher is 'the master' and the shaper of 'the apprentice':

*Now that I've kind of learned a few tricks I can see how that's made me more effective as a teacher. Rather than what I tried to do initially [pause] trying to structure. Now I know a lot more now about eliciting responses that might seem accidental but have an underlying ulterior motive [pause] getting them to learn something painlessly...*

Bruce constructs a traditional knower/learner binary, with 'the master tradesman' as 'the knower' and the students as 'the learner'. Although, this separation is disrupted in the above text with Bruce also taking up the position of 'the learner': *Now that I've kind of learned a few tricks I can see how that's made me more effective as a teacher.*

The value of learning in and through doing is re-echoed in his comments about the shared community of practice established with other teachers during his teacher training. It was in their free time outside of classes that problems in relation to teaching were discussed. This implies that Bruce identified as 'the teacher' yet his earlier comments suggest that this was not a position that always appealed. For example: *I wasn't all that keen but I came in, applied, took a test and was accepted. I wasn't particularly excited about it...;* and later he claims that: *It wouldn't have taken much for me to say 'oh, this is really not me, I'm out.'*

I suggest that the subject positions Bruce constructs, both for himself and others, exemplify the embodiment and activation of a discourse of tradesmanship. Many of the other trade teachers also identified as 'the master tradesman'. For example, in the interview with Bruce's colleague, Frank:

*Researcher. Do you think there has been a shift in how you think of yourself since you first started here?*

*Frank. Not really I always see myself as a tiler – mind you others at home have said I had changed but I don't think so?*



Here, Frank refuses the positioning by his family (many of whom also happen to be tilers), and positions himself, *I always see myself as a tiler.*

For Bruce, and the other trade teachers, learning was connected with doing, with action, and with directly relevant on-the-job skills. The trade teachers measured themselves, and others, in terms of how many metres of tiles they have laid in their careers. This is what counted:

Vince. *Brad's a good tiler, he's laid a lot of metres over the years. I've learnt a lot from working with him.*

and

Tom. *Brad's pissweak. I've laid more metres than him.*

In contrast, Jennifer, a part-time female teacher in the school did not have what counted (for most of the trade teachers). According to Jim, the head teacher, many of the trade teachers had complained that: *...she shouldn't be here because she hasn't laid as many tiles as we did.* Perhaps unsurprisingly Jennifer remained, for the most part, invisible throughout the project.

'The master tradesman' provided a powerful position for the trade teachers in relation to the position of 'the apprentice' made available to students through the circulation of a traditional teaching discourse at PSE. The master tradesman were 'the knowers' and authorities, the students were 'the learners'. Also, the position of 'the master tradesman', at times, provided a position to resist top-down power. For example the trade teachers tactically drew on a discourse of tradesmanship and knowing through doing to resist the implementation of the Training Packages. Bruce had spoken in this way, as did many of his colleagues:

Frank. *We used to teach the tiling course to students before and now students are expected to know all these generic things that have nothing to do with their course and they're not happy about it because it doesn't prepare them to go out there and be tilers. I used to be very proud of the fact that I had been a tiler and I was teaching tiling, now I am teaching students a whole lot of other generic*

*subjects in the course. Students tell us that their bosses tell them that what we're teaching here is not the right stuff – you see at work they do it differently and we have to teach them all these additional subjects and employers are not happy.*

This text re-echoes themes in Bruce's story with Frank constructing a shared and unified community around the practice of tiling made up of trade teachers, employers and students. The notion of unity and homogeneity was a recurring theme:

*Vince. We all like each other...we go through a trade together, we do the same things, we talk about the same things, we think in the same [way] [my emphasis]*

Using a communities of practice discourse, the trade teachers talk about learning in terms of practice-based knowing and learning through doing, for example, laying tiles. However, unlike the re-presentations of communities of shared practice in managerial texts where workers are unproblematically aligned with the goals of management (see Chapters 4 and 7), the trade teachers construct their practice as separate from and different to other sections of the organisation (particularly management) and other worker identities.

For example, rather than unproblematically aligning with the broader goals of big 'G' government<sup>39</sup> and implementing the Training Packages, the trade teachers have learnt how to tick the appropriate boxes which enables them, as Bruce says, to spend *more time on what does matter*. In other words, the construction of themselves as a cohesive community of practice around the shared identity of 'the master tradesman' provided a position to resist management and the top-down implementation of the training packages.

### ***Us and them***

Just as there might be a division between the 'tradies' and 'management' on a construction site, there was a similar divide between the trade teachers and more

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<sup>39</sup> I use the term big 'G' government to talk about government by the state.

senior sections of the organisation at PSE. For example, in referring to senior management, Vince said: *It's like us and them...I've had no support from them.* Jim spoke metaphorically about a *suit of armour* that he kept at the front door of the building in which he needed to dress each time he went out to do battle with *them* (the senior managers in the college). Management was viewed as an obstacle to be sidestepped rather than a group with which to align:

Frank. *We are all over fifty, and we're doing the job that we're supposed to be doing fairly well. We're disillusioned with the system. We're not really looking beyond that...*

*...I do whatever I can for our section. As far as [PSE], it's just depositing on us. Our section is what's important...That's where it starts and ends for me.*

Doing (and a discourse of tradesmanship) was privileged by the trade teachers and thinking (and a bureaucratic discourse) was privileged by the senior managers (see Chapter 6). The privileging of particular discourses in their respective workplaces worked to keep a seemingly natural separation of theory and practice in the PSE workplace.

The position of 'the master tradesman' also provided a position of resistance to a traditional academic discourse and the privileging of disciplinary knowledge.<sup>40</sup> At times, Bruce and the other trade teachers positioned themselves in relation to the position of 'the teacher' rather than as 'the teacher'. For example Bruce's comment that: *It didn't occur to me to say 'I teach tiling'. I still think of myself as a tiler.* Many of the trade teachers used a metaphor of 'the impostor' to talking about teaching. For example:

John. *Well, I still think I'm the impostor as far as a teacher's concerned you know.*

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<sup>40</sup> Perhaps not coincidentally, many of the senior managers had completed a university degree in a disciplinary field, for example, Science or English or Geography, and thus might be understood as the embodiment of an academic discourse.

The metaphor of 'the impostor' enabled the trade teachers to construct themselves as different from 'real' teachers, although this was often difficult as some of them had been teaching at PSE for more than twenty years. 'Real' teachers were constructed by the trade teachers as disconnected from the 'real' world and thus out of touch. This is discussed further in the following section.

In summary, a discourse of tradesmanship, with an emphasis on knowing through doing, was embodied and activated by the trade teachers. The circulation of this discourse produced a seemingly natural identity for the trade teachers as 'the master tradesman'. A discursive frame of tradesmanship structured the way the trade teachers spoke about work and learning and reproduced a traditional separation of practice and theory in the PSE workplace. Theory/ professors/ managers were disconnected from the 'real' world in their view. Thus, rather than understanding the language the trade teachers used to talk about work as neutral, and simply reflecting a pre-existing organisational reality, I suggest that the talk of the trade teachers worked to constitute a particular reality of the PSE workplace, with the following binaries reproduced as seemingly 'natural' in their talk: practice/theory, workers/management, master/apprentice, and tradesperson/teacher.

### **The individual as a site of intersecting discourses**

As introduced in Chapter 1, I entered the project with an understanding of power as top-down and only taking the form of oppression. At times, the stories from the trade teachers reinforced this view. I desired simplicity and the trade teachers frequently obliged by constructing themselves and the world in this way. The trade teachers were complicit in conveying the impression that there was no pretentiousness in their group – no artifice – and that they were 'authentic' worker subjects. For example:

*Jim. We're tradies, we tend to call a shovel a bloody shovel. Speak our minds, and very clear and plain, whereas some of our colleagues in management that you've been looking at might be more inclined to have a more academic approach to their interpersonal relationships.*

But neither I, nor the trade teachers, nor *colleagues in management* were essential and unified subjects, transcendent from power and politics.

While the analysis in the previous section might suggest a unified subjectivity as 'the master tradesman', Bruce's story can be read for different positionings produced through the circulation of multiple discourses. For example, the story exemplifies the interplay of the dual positionings as 'the master tradesman' and 'the teacher' and the tensions this created for Bruce:

*For the first couple of years I used to feel like a, not an impostor, but now I feel more like a teacher than I felt initially. I didn't know if I even wanted to stay here. It was that strenuous, stressful.*

While the above quote might suggest that Bruce reconciled these tensions, with the implication that he now has a unified and cohesive identity as 'the teacher', Bruce's ongoing struggle with multiple tradesman/teacher positionings and the tensions these create is re-echoed throughout the text. For example, at one point he claims emphatically that: *I still think of myself as a tiler*. Although he quickly qualifies this statement with: *Even though I teach tiling*. Another exemplification is the current struggle over the implementation of the Training Packages and Bruce's resistance to the new curriculum. This particular curriculum does not count for 'the master tradesman'.

Bruce was not the only trade teacher who struggled with a multiple teacher/tradesperson positioning and, at times, being a teacher appeared to have little appeal. For example:

*John. I think teachers are very, haven't got a lot of common sense, most teachers, mainly because they haven't been in the workforce...  
... because they've talked to professors, they're fantastic about what they're talking about. But you give them a hammer and they can't even put a nail into butter.*

Taking up the position of 'the teacher' appeared to produce tension – a tension that was sometimes reconciled by constructing 'the other teachers' as different from who they were. For example:

*Frank. Most people consider that teachers live in a different world, because they never leave school. Whereas a [PSE] teacher, or a person in a technical situation has been, quite often a large experience in the workforce, and then becomes a teacher as well and has the opportunity to see both sides of it. But teachers, I think they do have an unrealistic view of work and you can understand why they're all government employees and they have a different outlook as far as where the money should come from, and things like that.*

In the above quote Frank differentiates between technical teachers and 'the others' – technical teachers were acceptable, while 'the others' had: *an unrealistic view of work*. The trade teachers, it seemed, had an ambivalent relationship with the position of 'the teacher'. At times it was a position that was actively taken up (see the feedback meeting section below) and at times it was a position that failed to appeal.

While it was convenient to think of the trade teachers as part of a community of shared practice for the purposes of the project, with a seemingly shared and unified organisational identity (see Leontios *et al.*, 2003), the suppression of difference in this re-presentation is problematic. For example, in understanding workers as having a fixed and unified identity from which to know the world overlooks the circulation of multiple discourses in the workplace and the different subject positions these discourses construct such as: 'the master tradesmen', 'the manager', 'the teacher', 'the workplace learner', and so on. As Sarup (1996, p. 57) reminds us: *Individuals occupy diverse, heterogeneous and contradictory positions in their actual lives*. This is a view of subjectivity, however, that receives little attention in the organisational learning literature.

## **Re-negotiating relations of power**

In Chapter 5, I discussed the re-configuration of the workplace as a site of learning in the texts of the Uncovering Learning project. In the following section I re-visit this theme by focusing on the researcher-researched relations with the trade teachers during the project. An analysis of the interview texts with the trade teachers enables me to examine the positioning and position taking, both of 'the researched' and 'the researchers', and the tensions produced when discourses of workplace learning, introduced by the researchers, intersected with discourses in circulation in the trade teachers' workgroup. Using the Foucauldian concept of the individual as a site for the intersection of multiple discourses (Hall, 1996; Rose, 1996; Sarup, 1996; Weedon, 1987), I explore the take up and failure to take up the subject position of 'the workplace learner' by the trade teachers and the purposes to which discourses of workplace learning might be put.

### **The feedback meeting**

My next meeting with the trade teachers was at a feedback session at the completion of Stage 1 of the Uncovering Learning project. At this meeting, following what might be called a 'typical' qualitative research methodology,<sup>41</sup> the findings from the initial individual interviews were 'fed' back to the workgroup for discussion and comment.

This meeting was conducted in one of the college classrooms near the trade teachers' school. It was an uncomfortable re-union, with 'the researchers' on one side of the room and 'the researched' on the other. We were 'the academics' – the trade teachers occasionally referred to the chief investigator of the project as 'the professor' – they were 'the trade teachers', and the one or two metres that separated us might have been as wide as the Pacific Ocean. Theory/ professors/ managers /other teachers did not count for the trade teachers. One of the trade teachers drew attention to our difference during the session when he (jokingly) pointed out that he had no idea what one of the research team was talking about. He could not understand the language she was using.

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<sup>41</sup> An assumption of much qualitative research is that language reflects reality and that 'the truth' of the workplace can be gained by giving voice to those on the inside (MacLure, 2003).

I felt uncomfortable at this meeting and this was connected with my 'contaminated' past. I had been married to tiler for a number of years and the ghost of this unsuccessful union haunted my relations with the tilers. I was not the objective, transcendent knower able to separate myself from experience. Instead I was a much 'messier', embodied subject.

Frank casually strolled into the meeting about ten or fifteen minutes after it had started (another instance of the ongoing renegotiation of the power relations of the project by the trade teachers). One of the researchers had just asked the group: *Did the interviews trigger any thoughts about learning – just by doing the interview itself?* There were some polite responses, with Jim (the head teacher) commandeering the airspace. When Frank arrived one researcher asked him: *Did the interviews trigger any thoughts about learning, for you?* and he replied bluntly: *No.* In a conversation later in the session he said:

*I'm sort of fairly routine and I've been doing this for twenty years. And our courses, apart from a few aspects, haven't changed dramatically. Basically we're doing pretty much the same sort of thing...I don't think about learning at all...*

This is a quite different story about the courses to the one told earlier by Frank where he emphasised how the courses had changed (on page 161). Later, Frank was probed further in relation to the above comment and he replied:

*...all I mean is that it all happens and I take on board wherever I can whatever I can, without thinking about it as learning...I don't see myself as being a learner. I'm happy with what I know at the moment and whatever comes along and I'll use it if its appropriate....I want to know what I need to do my job. What I need to teach my students and give them the best knowledge as well.*

In the above text, Frank positions himself as a workplace learner, for example when he says: *I want to know what I need to do my job*, yet also quite emphatically states that: *I don't see myself as being a learner. I'm happy with what I know at the moment.* The ambiguity in Frank's language makes it difficult to 'pin him down'.



Also, Frank takes up the position of the teacher here, a position he had earlier resisted (see p. 160). While others in the group were happy enough to be positioned as learners, and indeed spoke of themselves as learners at this meeting, Frank was not prepared to be positioned in this way, at least not by the researchers.

Similarly, Vince also failed to take up the position of the workplace learner. Vince was much younger than the rest of the trade teachers and was employed part-time at PSE. When he was not teaching he was doing what 'counted' in this group, that is, he was still *mixing mud* and *laying metres* (of tiles).

Vince. *When I've got students around me, I don't seem like I'm learning now, I'm the one doing the teaching. As far as I'm concerned I'm the one in control. I'm the one with the knowledge that's being passed over. I've got the experience. But when I'm in the presence of someone like Jim or Bruce or Mick or Frank, where they've got background information and skills, say the computer... I'm on the other side of the situation where I'm the learner. But when the students have got me and I'm in control, OK there might be things that are passed onto to me that I don't know, so I suppose I do a little bit of learning, but in my frame of mind I don't think of it as 'I am the learner'.*

At times Vince was able to take up the position of 'the learner', but not in the classroom, in the classroom he was *in control*. Again, the circulation of a traditional teaching discourse, with the seemingly natural separation of 'the teacher' and 'the student', enabled Vince to take up the position of 'the knower' and resist being positioned as 'the workplace learner'. Being positioned as 'the workplace learner', at times, had little appeal for (some of) the trade teachers. Vince was able, however, to take up the position of 'the workplace learner' in relation to the other trade teachers in the workgroup – the knowledge and experience of 'the master tradesman' is what counted for Vince.

It became apparent during the feedback session that the collaborative relationship that we researchers wanted to foster with the trade teachers was going to be more

difficult to establish than we had anticipated. For example, toward the close of the feedback meeting, one of the researchers asked:

*What can we build upon that there is consensus about amongst the staff group that they agree that this is a problem that we can get our heads together and work on and fix? So it's driven by something that people want to fix, [rather] than some external solution. Are there some of those things sitting there at the moment?*

Here the researcher coopts the trade teachers' discourse of doing/ building/ fixing /working on in an attempt to seduce. The response from the trade teachers was.....

SILENCE

The above quote exemplifies the multiple learning discourses in circulation in the Uncovering Learning project and the way 'the researchers' were not a unified and cohesive group either. At times an experiential learning discourse was privileged and there was an emphasis on problem solving and enhancing workplace practices. For example, in the above quote the trade teachers were positioned as having a problem that we might collaboratively fix. At other times, a problem-based focus had little appeal for the researchers with an action research approach actively discounted.

While there was no attempt by the trade teachers to take up the offer of a collaborative project, Jim, the head teacher, was interested. Jim was eager to change existing teaching practices in the trade teachers' workgroup and at the feedback meeting took up the position of 'the workplace manager', thereby disrupting the notion of 'the master tradesman' as a cohesive and necessarily aligned community. For example:

*Jim. So we've gone for quality and reliability in delivery, by everybody teaching the same lesson notes and we've got it all down, and no student misses out on anything. We've done that at the expense of the flexible, innovative, having small group work, have the*

*students' solve the problem, those new and innovative teaching styles. We haven't got those. And that's where I'd like to see change come through.*

Although Jim frequently appealed to the collective we throughout the feedback meeting, he, also, failed to align the rest of the trade teachers.

For most of the trade teachers, a collaborative model of research about everyday learning at work had little appeal, even though a discourse of tradesmanship and the associated notion of learning in and through doing was in circulation in this group. A separate meeting was later conducted with Jim with the researchers suggesting that the trade teachers might look at *learning through the challenge of working with new students*. The plan was that the research team would work with the trade teachers in exploring this topic over a period of three or four months in a series of group meetings. But, again, this was to be a problematic union. The way this played out and the complicated relations of the project are described in the sections that follow.

## **The Stage 2 meetings**

My next contact with the trade teachers was as one of the researchers who would work 'collaboratively' with them to explore *learning through the challenge of working with new students*. Having established through analyses conducted during Stage 1 of the project that the lunchroom was a significant space for the trade teachers in terms of everyday learning, we researchers decided to invade this space and have the meetings with the trade teachers at lunchtime. The assumption underlying this strategy being that the trade teachers needed to eat lunch somewhere, therefore we would have ready (if not willing) recruits for the Stage 2 meetings.

However this crude attempt at infiltration was met with varying degrees of participation by the trade teachers. Jim, the head teacher, had been complicit in organising this meeting time and while Jim was enthusiastic, the rest of the group were largely apathetic. At the Stage 2 meetings Jim often took up the position of 'the researcher', asking the other trade teachers questions about their learning. Jim was

eager to position the other trade teachers as workplace learners, but not necessarily himself :

*Jim. So Bob, Bruce, Mick and Frank, cause you've all been on the RPL [Recognition of Prior Learning] course, you've had to use different approaches and be in some ways kind of lenient with these guys to get to the objective of do they know what they're on about. Has it changed the way you do your other lessons? Have you learnt anything in that class that you're now moving backwards and applying with the apprentices.*

*Mick. I can't say I am.*

As Mick's response indicates, not all the trade teachers were necessarily interested in being 'the reflective practitioner'.

At the first of the Stage 2 meetings the researchers tried time and again to get the trade teachers to 'buy into' the project and to suggest ideas on how this stage of the project might be conducted. For example:

*Researcher. How do you think we might do this then?*

*[jokes and lots of laughing]*

*Researcher. I mean us proceeding with the project. What will work for you? We don't want to impose. We're really mindful that it needs to be useful for you. Would you agree that's an area that*

*Vince. Improves teaching, for sure.*

While the researchers desperately tried to get the trade teachers to identify challenges and problems in their workplace that could be 'co-researched', the trade teachers playfully renegotiated their frequent positioning as 'the reflective practitioner' by the researchers. This positioning was often met with jokes and tactics of resistance.

Also, what the researchers considered useful was not necessarily in alignment with the trade teachers. For example, during the Stage 2 meetings a concept that the

researchers became interested in developing was the notion of 'learning spaces'. The researchers were interested in re-naming spaces not usually associated with learning as sites of learning (Boud *et al.*, 2006). One such space was the lunchroom. This idea, however, was frequently contested:

Bob. *You've lost me in all this.*

Researcher. *Have I?*

Bob. *I thought we just sat where we sat.*

Researcher. *Do you think we're reading too much into this?*

Bob. *I think you're reading way too much into it.*

While the researchers tried hard to persuade the trade teachers of the legitimacy of naming the lunchroom as a learning space, this concept often failed to appeal. For example:

Researcher. *...What I'm wondering, it's not so much that that seat necessarily signifies that you're powerful. It's more about, you know how we were talking about informal learning spaces and how the lunchroom is a good example of that. And there's a lot of everyday talk that goes on there and a lot of learning as well.*

Mick. *I don't think we think about the learning. I don't walk out of there thinking I learned something today. To me it's not a learning environment. The classroom's a learning environment for me, to the students. The lunchroom, sitting around here, it's not a learning environment at all. Even though I've learnt something.*

The contradictions and ambiguities in Mick's language suggest that the naming of learning spaces was less straight forward than the researchers might have anticipated. For example, Mick was quick to point out that the lunchroom was not a site of learning, which he then contradicted by saying: *Even though I've learnt something*. The researchers doggedly pursued the concept of learning spaces, and the researched continued to artfully dodge the naming of these spaces. For example:

Researcher. *What about spaces outside of the workplace and this building for instance? Are there spaces that you might think of as learning spaces? It might be way outside the workplace?*

Frank. *Aren't you getting a little broad? What are you after from that? It could be anywhere? Everywhere you go you're learning all the time.*

Here Frank takes up the position of the lifelong learner in his claim that: *everywhere you go you're learning all the time*, a position he had earlier resisted, while refusing to acknowledge the concept of learning spaces.

The trade teachers often showed irreverence for the project and frequently seemed to be 'pulling the leg' of the researchers. And perhaps worse still, in terms of the researchers dream for 'authentic' subjects, telling us exactly what they thought we wanted to hear. For example, at our final meeting with the trade teachers Mick 'revealed' that:

Mick. *I think the hardest part of the whole process was the one on one interview? I found that uncomfortable.*

Researcher. *Yeah? Did I come across as a real bully.*

Mick. *No, I just thought, am I saying the right thing? Am I saying the wrong thing?*

The Stage 2 intervention meetings could be read as sites of struggle and contestation over what counts as knowledge with the traditional power associated with the academy (and senior management?)<sup>42</sup> constantly being renegotiated by the trade teachers. Hence the language of 'strategy' introduced in the opening paragraph of this section and Eva and I resorting to weapons of mass seduction: Plan A – food; Plan B – lipstick.<sup>43</sup> OK, I admit it was a limited methodology but one we considered robust nonetheless (at least for straight, middle aged, cake-eating

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<sup>42</sup> Eva was one of 'the researchers' too and the trade teachers viewed professional development as aligned with the exercise of top-down power. For example, Bruce had commented that: *there have been staff development meetings where we were told what had been decided upon as curriculum content.*

<sup>43</sup> This is a story which puts a new, and slightly disturbing, twist on MacLure's (2003) notion of pimping for poststructuralism!

men – more positionings). In homage to the recourse to food by the researchers at various points in the project (see Rooney and Solomon, 2006) I have named the meetings: ‘operation mudcake’, ‘operation fruitslice’ and ‘operation spongecake’. Plan A (our methodology of mastication?) however was unsuccessful. These ‘guys’ weren’t cheap and it was going to take more than a \$20 mudcake from Michel’s Patisserie to infiltrate this group. At our first meeting we proudly arrived with our token of friendship and offered cake to the trade teachers. The mudcake sat provocatively in the cardboard box in the middle of the table in the lunchroom during the entire meeting. Symbolically, it was left untouched. The trade teachers were far more complicated, and they were complicating the notion of a unified and essential subjectivity. (Hurrah!!! or maybe they just didn’t like mudcake?) And neither were ‘the researchers’ unified and essential.

Plan B: *Pass over that wild vixen<sup>44</sup> lipstick Eva*. We were frequently referred to as *the ladies* by the trade teachers. For example, when we were initially negotiating with them how we might explore *learning through the challenge of new students* in their workgroup, one of the trade teachers suggested that we might come and observe a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) class that was currently being taught in the School. The plug was hastily pulled on this suggestion, however, by one of the teachers of this class who thought that a group of *attractive ladies* (referring to Eva, Debbie and myself) might be far too disruptive for his group of lads. If we were going to be positioned as ‘the ladies’ then perhaps we should take up that position and use it for our own purposes, which in this case was to align the trade teachers with the aims of the Uncovering Learning project. But whose aims? Mine for gathering interview data for the completion of my doctorate? Eva’s for producing ‘the reflective practitioner’? The workplace learning academics’ for re-writing the spaces of the workplace as sites of learning? A complicated story that becomes even more complex when our multiple positionings within the project are woven into the picture (see Chapter 1).

While the trade teachers were, at times, polite and tolerated our invasion of their workplace – apart from the day Frank sat throughout the entire meeting, saying few

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<sup>44</sup> ©Rimmel-2001.

words, and menacingly fondling a 12 inch steel bladed knife (for cutting the cake of course – another cake, needless to say, which he did not eat) – they can also be understood as resistant subjects, not necessarily aligned with the (multiple) goals of the Uncovering Learning project and not necessarily aligned with the goals of management, and troubled by multiple tradesman/teacher positions.

I have spoken about Stage 2 of the project with the trade teachers in a somewhat frivolous tone – a frivolity I hope that conveys an impression of researcher/researched relationships as a bit of a game (MacLure, 2003). Rather than thinking of ‘the researchers’ as all-powerful and the researcher/researched relationships of the project as a top-down relation of power, a view re-echoed in the language of invasion used earlier, perhaps the metaphor of a game more usefully illustrates the ongoing positioning, position taking and failure to take up positions, with both ‘the researchers’ and ‘the researched’ attempting to shape ‘the token’ in ways that suited their particular interests. For instance, while we researchers positioned the trade teachers as ‘the reflective practitioner’, ‘the collaborative subject’ and even ‘the seductee’, these positions were, at times, contested. Also, the trade teachers were not just acted on by the researchers, they did their own positioning during the project. As discussed, the trade teachers constantly referred to us as *the ladies*, and we sometimes took up this position and provided an occasional bit of ‘girly’ relief in the day-in, day-out hum-drum of work. And even when we did take up this position, for example providing cake for ‘the master tradesman’, it was met with resistance. We were also positioned as ‘the academics’ – as different from the trade teachers and having an unrealistic view of work. This was a position, however, that proved less homogeneous than ‘the trade teachers’ might have anticipated.

The ongoing ‘play’ of the project is exemplified in a seemingly innocuous comment by one of the trade teachers at our last meeting. During the summing up and reflection that is ‘typical’ of a collaborative research project, one of the trade teachers observed that:



Johnny. *At the beginning I thought it [the project] was invasive. But as I got to know you people, I thought 'it's not invasive, it's just part of learning.'*

This wonderfully ambiguous remark evokes the complexity of the researcher/researched relations of the project as well as the exercise of disciplinary power in pedagogical relationships and the complexity of workplace learning. But maybe I'm just 'reading too much into it'?

### **Subjectivity as a site of resistance**

One aim of this chapter has been to re-present 'the researchers' and 'the researched' as embodied subjects rather than reproducing a view of transcendent selves, separable from experience. There is no fixed and unified position from which 'the researchers' and 'the researched' might 'know' or 'be'. As the stories from this chapter illustrate, the trade teachers were slippery subjects, often shifting their position(s). Sometimes they talked about being learners at work and the workplace as a site of learning and at other times they resisted being positioned in this way. Sometimes they resisted the position of 'the teacher', yet at other times this position had appeal. And 'the researchers' were slippery too!

The chapter draws attention to the tactical use of discourse and the different purposes to which workplace learning discourses might be put. For example, the tactical take up of a discourse of tradesmanship (knowing through doing) by the trade teachers to resist the positionings of management and the senior manager's separation of 'the knower' and 'the doer' through the privileging of a bureaucratic discourse. The trade teachers have taken up the position of 'the doer' and re-constructed this subject into 'the expert'. Further, the subject position of 'the master tradesman' made available through the circulation of a discourse of tradesmanship, provided a powerful position for the trade teachers in relation to their apprentice students.

While a discourse of tradesmanship and knowing through doing might be understood as a workplace learning discourse, the trade teachers often resisted being positioned as 'the workplace learner' by 'the researchers'. The trade teachers

often took up a traditional teaching discourse and the position of 'the teacher', a position that at other times had failed to appeal, to resist being positioned as 'the workplace learner' by the researchers. The researchers' failure to align the trade teachers could be read as an attempt by the trade teachers to renegotiate the power relations of the project and traditional knowledge hierarchies. Even though the researchers were trying to give voice to 'the workplace learner' subject and to recognise and name sites other than the university as sites of knowledge production and learning, the ongoing positioning of the researchers as 'the academic' by the trade teachers and their understanding of this subject in a fixed and unified way, created tension.

This chapter foregrounds some of the difficulties with implementing 'collaborative learning' projects in the workplace and assuming alignment and unification around what counts. The stories exemplify differences between: 'the researchers' and 'the researched', the trade teachers and the senior managers, the academics and the professional developers, the workgroup manager and the trade teachers, as well as differences among 'the academics' in 'what counts' as learning. In addition, neither 'the researchers' nor 'the researched' were cohesive and unified selves. However, in the communities of practice literature these often disparate groups and selves tend to be represented as a unified and cohesive community of practice. The project was a site for the circulation of multiple learning discourses, multiple positionings and multiple objectives.

In summary, the analyses undertaken in this chapter direct attention to multiple discourses in circulation that position the trade teachers in different ways. Subject positions provide positions of alignment but also positions of resistance (in relation to other competing discourses). Thus, rather than locating power in a single source, there was a plurality of forces in play with the subjectivity of the trade teachers never approaching a fixed constitution. This is a view of subjectivity not available in much of the mainstream organisational learning literature where subjectivity is pre-supposed as unified and essential. The mainstream texts of organisational learning, and the technologies of professional development that are connected with them, overlook difference and multiplicity and pre-suppose a unified and essential

workplace learner subject: a subject that can be 'known' and for whom generalisable laws can be made, and a subject that is able to know the reality of the workplace from a fixed and unified position. A different representation of subjectivity has been provided in this chapter where subjectivity is understood as always in process and never wholly determined.

## CHAPTER 9

### **A Connecting Story**

#### **Introduction**

Stories of various workers and workgroups in a large, public service organisation in Australia have been told in this thesis – stories that are connected with the Uncovering Learning in the Workplace project, a site for the production, distribution and consumption of knowledge about workplace learning. In this chapter, I construct a connecting tale that weaves together various threads of the thesis. This is my ordering tale (Law, 1994), although it is not necessarily a tale of ‘order’. Instead, it is a tale that draws attention to different strategies connected with the emergence of workplace learning discourses and unanticipated outcomes associated with the circulation of workplace learning discourses in the workplace.

Before commencing a connecting story, I will briefly summarise various threads that I have introduced throughout the thesis. In Chapter 2, I discussed a number of Foucauldian themes that provided both a conceptual and an analytic frame for the thesis. These themes were largely concerned with the analysis of power and included power as multiformed, power as relational, the distribution of power, multiple subjectivities, and subjectivity as a site of resistance.

In Chapter 3, I explored learning discourses in circulation in the organisational learning literature. These discourses provide ways of conceptualising workers, and ways of thinking, talking about and doing workplace learning. My interest was in examining the meanings of social reality embedded in the organisational learning literature and making these explicit. I focused on an analysis of organisational learning discourses as these were the learning discourses in circulation at the research site.

The discourses of learning in circulation in the organisational learning literature can be linked to quite different theoretical traditions. For example, an experiential

learning discourse is linked with a psychologised notion of the individual that reproduces a seemingly natural separation of mind/body and knowing/doing, whereas a communities of practice discourse is linked with a social view of learning and knowing in and through practice. However, both these traditions remain within an individual-society dualism of the social sciences where the complex interplay between 'the individual' and 'the social' fails to be adequately theorised.

In Chapter 4, I analysed the discursive construction of 'the workplace learner' subject in two key organisational learning texts: *The Fifth Discipline* (Senge, 1990) and *Cultivating Communities of Practice* (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). These texts provide different constructions of 'the workplace learner'. Senge's text draws on an experiential learning discourse and constructs 'the workplace learner' as a rational, autonomous, self-actualising subject. The text from Wenger *et al.* draws on a communities of practice discourse and constructs 'the workplace learner' as a collaborative subject and part of a unified organisational community. I focused on these particular texts as they contribute to the languages of learning used by professional developers in the PSE workplace.

In Chapter 5, using the Uncovering Learning project as a site for exploring various relations of power connected with the circulation of workplace learning discourses, I began an exploration of the alignments and contestations of the project. My focus in this chapter was on the alignments between workplace learning academics at City University and a group of professional developers from PSE, and the ways it was in the interests of both these groups (at times) to re-inscribe the workplace as a site of learning. I argued that the production of knowledge about workplace learning was intricately entwined with the desire by the professional developers at PSE to develop learning interventions in the workplace and to produce 'the reflective practitioner', a subject desired in the contemporary workplace. Also, the production of knowledge about workplace learning was intricately entwined with the desires of the workplace learning academics to reinscribe the workplace as a site of everyday learning. I suggested that the professional developers and the

workplace learning academics, while both drawing on discourses of workplace learning, used these discourses for very different purposes.

In Chapters 6, 7 and 8, I further explored the circulation of workplace learning discourses in the workplace by examining the introduction of a discourse of everyday learning in three workgroups in the PSE workplace by the researchers from the Uncovering Learning project.

In Chapter 6, I examined the intersection of workplace learning discourses with a bureaucratic discourse in circulation in a group of senior managers in the PSE workplace. I argued that a discourse of everyday learning, where learning is understood as intricately connected with everyday work practices, produced tension for the senior managers as it positioned them as 'learners', thus conflicting with their identity as 'the intelligentsia' and authorised 'knowers' in this workplace.

A parallel theme developed in this chapter was the discursive construction of subjectivity. In re-writing Beryl's subjectivity as discursively constructed rather than essential, I questioned the certainty of the autonomous, self-developing subject – the subject that is both pre-supposed and reproduced through the circulation of an experiential learning discourse in the workplace.

Chapter 7 was perhaps the most complicated story in the thesis as there were a number of theoretical threads interwoven in this chapter. The story about Eva could be read as an abridged version of the thesis as it explored the material effects of the circulation of an experiential learning discourse in the workplace. I examined what Eva, a professional developer at PSE, was able to think, say and do in relation to learning, workers and the workplace. In other words what the circulation of an experiential learning discourse made imaginable and practicable for Eva (Rose, 1999a). I argued that the discursive practices of professional development were based on the 'truth' of the worker as a rational, unified and autonomous subject, and that their practices worked to reproduce this subject as seemingly natural in the PSE workplace. The language used by the professional developers for talking about workplace learning enabled workers to be conceptualised as autonomous subjects, and subjectivity as separate from relations of power in the workplace. This,

citing/siting/sighting of 'the workplace learner' means that the exercise of disciplinary power in and through the pedagogical practices of the workplace, including the practices of professional development, fails to be examined.

In Chapter 8, I explored the intersection of workplace learning discourses introduced by the researchers on the Uncovering Learning project and discourses in circulation in a group of trade teachers at PSE. I examined the positioning of the trade teachers as 'the workplace learner' by the researchers, and the position taking and failure to take up this position by the trade teachers. Subject positions provide positions of alignment but also positions of resistance (in relation to other competing discourses). Rather than understanding workplace learning academics, or senior managers, or professional developers, or organisational change managers as all-powerful, this chapter foregrounds a view of power as distributed and subjectivity as never completely determined but always in process.

## **Discourse as an instrument of power**

### **(A complex web of interconnecting technologies)**

One aim of this thesis has been to make processes of subjectification in the workplace visible, and highlight the complex interplay of technologies of power with technologies of the self. For example, a thread can begin to be traced through the chapters of this thesis that connects broader political and economic objectives for more productive workers, the emergence of organisational learning discourses, the institutional practices of professional development, and the contemporary construction of 'the workplace learner' subject as a natural way of 'being' at work. In other words, a general line of force can be traced that connects the macro and the micro (Foucault, 1998; Miller and Rose, 1993). This points to the entanglement of: the state; organisational learning 'experts', including organisational learning theorists and organisational consultants; professional developers; and workplace managers in a heterogeneous network that reproduces a 'regime of truth' of autonomous subjectivity in the workplace.

Further, workplace learning researchers are not disconnected from networks of power. The production of knowledge is never a neutral activity. For example, the

knowledge products of the Uncovering Learning project can be understood as part of a network of power that contributed to re-producing 'the workplace learner' as a seemingly durable and 'natural' subject in the workplace. Through re-inscribing work as learning, and workers as learners, the subject position of 'the workplace learner' was constructed and workers became thinkable and knowable in this way.

While this is not necessarily a problem, as this subject can be constructed in multiple ways, I have demonstrated in this thesis that the contemporary privileging of an experiential learning discourse in the organisational learning literature as the only way of knowing and talking about learning from experience is problematic. This literature provides a discursive frame for thinking and talking about workplace learning for the professional developers at PSE and contributes to reproducing 'a regime of truth' of autonomous subjectivity in this workplace. In 'knowing' and understanding worker subjectivity in this way, the exercise of disciplinary power in the workplace and the complex mechanisms whereby technologies of power interplay with technologies of the self remain out of sight.

The circulation of an experiential learning discourse in the PSE workplace made particular types of interventions imaginable for governing the conduct of workers (Rose, 1999a). For example, in 'knowing' workers as rational, autonomous, self-developing subjects (the subject pre-supposed in an experiential learning discourse), the workplace was able to be organised based on a rationale of *government at a distance* (Miller and Rose, 1993). This rationality of government was evident in the practices of professional development at PSE. The technologies used by the professional developers at PSE are changing with formal programs of training and development being replaced by a community of practice model (see Chapter 7). This learning model emphasises learning embedded in workplace practices. I discuss some of the implications for professional development of pre-supposing an autonomous and unified subject later in the chapter.

Another example of the complex interplay of technologies of power with technologies of the self is the contemporary shaping of academic identities. The Strategic Partnerships with Industry – Research and Training (SPIRT) program that funded the Uncovering Learning project can be understood as an articulation of a



workplace learning discourse by big 'G' government for the purposes of producing a more productive and competitive workforce and nation (see Chapter 5). And the project, as an example of programmatic government with the aim of producing university-industry collaboration, might at first glance be declared a success. It produced the type of worker conduct desired by government with academics actively taking up an enterprising mode of conduct and the industry partner actively taking up the position of co-researcher and knowledge producer in their own workplace (Boud and Solomon, 2001b; Farrell, 2000; Gallagher, 2000; Garrick and Rhodes, 2000; Symes and McIntyre, 2000; Zukas and Malcolm, 2001). The academics and the industry partners were not just acted on by top down forces of power but actively took up these subject positions and, indeed, this is the success of governmentality.

*If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression. (Foucault, 1980, p. 119)*

The alignments of the Uncovering Learning project exemplify the productiveness of power. Discourses produce seemingly essential ways of 'being' and thus act as an instrument of power.

This thesis contributes to poststructural adult education literature that draws attention to the connection between ostensibly 'empowering' pedagogical relationships, including those of the workplace, and the exercise of disciplinary power (Edwards *et al.*, 2004; Farrell, 2003; Fenwick, 2001b, 2003b, 2001c; Garrick, 1998; MacLure, 2003; McWilliam, 2002; Michelson, 1996, 1999; Scheeres, 2004a; Usher *et al.*, 1997; Zukas, 2006). Through an exploration of processes of subjectification in the PSE workplace I have illustrated that everyday

learning in and through workplace practices (or learning to 'be') is not outside of regulation. Instead, everyday learning can be understood as a complex interplay of technologies of power and technologies of the self.

## **Discourse as a point of resistance**

### **(Unanticipated outcomes)**

The connecting story provides an empirical account of governmentality and the complex interplay between technologies of power and technologies of the self, however, this is not a story of top-down power residing, for example, in the state, or with senior management, or the academy. As Rose (1999a, p. xxi) reminds us, power involves a whole array of authorities and:

*These authorities do not merely 'serve power' – they actively shape and transform the objects, techniques and ends of power. And they are not merely 'instruments' of power: they exercise their authority through a whole variety of technical innovations and practical mechanisms, within a diversity of novel human technologies that they themselves help to invent.*

Thus, the Uncovering Learning project and the PSE workplace should not be thought of only as sites for the exercise of top-down power by a single authority. As exemplified in this thesis, there were different discourses in circulation during the Uncovering Learning project and different positionings, enabling resistance as well as alignment. In the previous section I described the take up of an enterprising mode of subjectivity by the academics, however, this was less determinate than a programmatic approach to governing workers might anticipate. The academics were positioned in multiple ways throughout the project, as were the industry partners, and at times these different positionings created tension.

For example, the academics in their position as 'critical scholars', produced through the circulation of an academic discourse in their workplace, tried to persuade the professional developers, and the other workgroups participating in the project, to abandon the comforts of certainty and introduced the language of paradox to problematise the notion of managing everyday learning (see Stronach and MacLure,

1997). They drew attention to the paradox of formalising the informal through the development of structured learning interventions. But the language of paradox and uncertainty had little appeal for the professional developers, and still less for the workgroups (Harman *et al.*, 2003). And not always do academics enjoy uncertainty! Indeed, it has traditionally been the role of the academic to remove uncertainty and to provide explanation. To suggest that there was a broad divide between the academy and industry in terms of troubling scientific method, and a linear notion of progress and development implicit in this way of knowing, would be problematic. In many respects it was in the academics' interests to maintain their authority as 'the learning experts', both within the PSE workplace and within the academy, through an appeal to (some kind of) scientific method.

As alluded to above, in some respects the Uncovering Learning project might be read as a failed program of government as it did not necessarily 'play out' in the way it was intended, and there were multiple sites where seemingly durable relations of power were renegotiated throughout the project. While actions *may be prescribed by a discursive system, there is always room for reinterpretation and manoeuvre* (Linstead, no date). For example, the researchers failed to produce the workplace learning interventions (or technologies for governing worker conduct) that were promised in the research contract. Instead, the academics often transgressed the criteria specified in the research contract and produced reflexive texts that shifted the gaze from 'the other', the researched, to 'us', the researchers. The big 'G' governmental ambitions of SPIRT programs for the production of applied knowledge in the workplace, as well as small 'g' governmental ambitions of the industry partner for producing learning interventions in the workplace (read here as technologies of power) were thereby disrupted.

Also, the production of this thesis can be read as transgressive. I actively took up the position of the SPIRT apprentice (see p. 76), but used this position for my own purposes. I renegotiated my thesis topic and examined the imbrication of power and knowledge using the Uncovering Learning project as a site for undertaking this analysis. This is not to suggest, however, that this text is not regulated by institutional discourses. As the 'apprentice' of the workplace learning academics,

this text is regulated by the practices and norms of the academy and what counts as learning in this space.

I have discussed in this thesis how the academics were responsible for writing many of the project texts during the Uncovering Learning project including: reports for PSE, the brochure, ARC reports and journal and conference publications; and how this was a powerful position. However, the partnership model of the project meant that this was never a one-way process and the production of project texts was a site of struggle and open to ongoing renegotiation. The academics were not all-powerful in their position as 'the learning experts' in the project and, at times, the knowledge produced by the academics was contested. For example, the professional developers renegotiated the traditional power held by the academy as autonomous knowledge producers by insisting on the production of particular documents, for example the brochure, and requesting particular inclusions or exclusions from documents produced during the project.

Conversely, the industry partners were not all-powerful in determining the textual products of the project, this thesis being one example. There was an ongoing renegotiation of power throughout the project between the academics and the industry partner, as well as between 'the researchers' and 'the researched', with each of the players acting on 'the token' and transforming it in ways to suit their own purposes.

The multiplicity of knowledge products from the Uncovering Learning project was another, perhaps unanticipated, outcome of programmatic government. While the goal of SPIRT is to produce a unified and cohesive knowledge that can be used to develop interventions for enhancing workplace productivity, the intersection of different learning discourses in the project, with different meanings of social reality embedded in these different views, contributed to the production of hybrid and multiple knowledges. The multiplicity of texts produced during the project drew attention to relativism, difference and a plurality of forces connected with the circulation of workplace learning discourses. This points to the importance of having multiple and divergent sites where knowledge is produced and the

productive intersections between the institutions of the workplace and the academy.

This view of knowledge-producing activities makes a substantial contribution to knowledge in the fields of both organisational learning and workplace learning. While a recognition that processes of knowledge production are neither linear nor rational is not new (Bauman, 1993; Foucault, 1980; Gherardi, 2006; Henriques *et al.*, 1998; Latour, 1987; Law, 1986; MacLure, 2003), and neither is the view that knowledge production is a highly contested activity (Farrell, 2001, 2003; Michelson, 1996; Scheeres and Solomon, 2000; Weedon, 1987), these ideas are yet to become mainstream in much of the organisational learning literature. As I have argued in this thesis, much of this literature is based on the dual premise that knowledge production is a linear process enabling progress and development for all and that knowledge is produced by unified, rational and autonomous subjects. Further, this thesis contributes to literature in the field of workplace learning by describing specific complexities associated with developing knowledges in the (sometimes) overlapping fields of workplace learning and organisational learning. It also contributes to *tidying the territory* (Fenwick, 2006, p. 265) in terms of analysing the social meanings embedded in learning discourses used across both these knowledge domains. In addition, it points to the paradox of academics producing knowledge about workplace learning. Some of the implications of this knowledge are discussed later in the chapter.

This thesis also makes a contribution to discourse studies, particularly those exploring discourses of the workplace (eg. Boje, 1994; Deetz, 1994, 1998, 2003; Fairclough, 1992; Farrell, 2000, 2001, 2003; Oswick, Anthony, Keenoy, Mangham and Grant, 2000; Zukas, 2006). The stories from the Uncovering Learning project exemplify the distributed nature of power, and its indeterminacy. Discourses can be taken up and used for purposes other than which they were intended (de Certeau, 1984; Foucault, 1998; Lloyd, 2005; Ransom, 1997; Weedon, 1987). For example, Eva's tactical take up of an experiential learning discourse and using this discourse for her own purposes (see Chapter 7). Thus, discourses in circulation in the workplace with the aim of regulating worker conduct might also be used to resist

organisational control and corporate subjugation. In addition, the workers participating in the Uncovering Learning project also often failed to take up 'the token' in the way the researchers had anticipated. While the researchers positioned workers at PSE as 'the workplace learner', as this suited their purposes and strategies, many of the PSE workers resisted being positioned in this way, and at times, used discourses of workplace learning (and knowing in and through doing) for their own purposes.

This is not a story, then, about the seemingly inevitable production of designer employees in post-bureaucratic organisations (Casey, 1995), but one that foregrounds indeterminacy and the unanticipated outcomes of government. Indeed, if the operation of power were as deterministic as proposed in much of the critical literature on workplace learning it is unlikely that the professional developers and senior management at PSE would have enlisted the expertise of the workplace learning academics in the first place as they would have already successfully produced 'the workplace learner' in the PSE workplace. The use of learning as a technology of power was not new in this workplace.

This thesis makes an important contribution to much of the critical management literature by providing a more complex account of the exercise of power in the workplace. The focus on processes of subjectification problematises a view of subjectivity as wholly determined by a pre-existing social structure. The circulation of multiple and often competing discourses enables discourse to operate as an instrument of power but also as a point of resistance.

This view of power, as multiformed and distributed, is not to suggest, however, that oppression and domination are no longer present in contemporary workplaces. There were numerous examples of the exercise of top-down power in the PSE workplace: John's schoolmaster style of disciplining his subordinates, Margot requesting Eva spend less time on the Uncovering Learning project, the top down implementation of the Training Packages, and PSE workers getting retrenched or re-deployed after the 'lifelong learning' restructure. However, Foucault (1982, p. 213) argues that in only paying attention to a top-down mode of power, the ongoing

operation of power which reaches into the capillaries of our everyday lives is overlooked:

*It is certain that mechanisms of subjection cannot be studied outside their relation to the mechanisms of exploitation and domination. But they do not merely constitute the "terminal" of more fundamental mechanisms. They entertain complex and circular relations with other forms.*

### **Another view of subjectivity and another view of everyday learning**

In summary, a very different view of subjectivity is provided in this thesis to that available in much of the organisational learning literature, both mainstream and critical, where subjectivity is understood as either unified and essential (and thus separate from the social and relations of power), or determined by pre-existing social structures. I contend that both these constructions of subjectivity are problematic as they make the complex mechanisms whereby technologies of power interplay with technologies of the self (and the exercise of disciplinary power in the workplace) less visible.

A more nuanced view of the shaping of worker subjectivity/ies provided in this thesis has considerable implications for the 'management' of workers in general, and the organisation of professional development practices in particular, as well as implications for undertaking workplace learning research. These are discussed later in the chapter.

### **The tactical function of discourse**

Another significant contribution of this thesis has been making different strategies connected with the circulation of various workplace learning discourses more explicit. This draws attention to differences, both in concepts and purposes, between the often conflated fields of organisational learning and workplace learning (Fenwick, 2006). Through exploring the multiple and mobile field of force relations connected with the emergence of workplace learning discourses in a local site: what was able to be said about workplace learning, where, and by whom?, I

have illustrated that there was no unified, all encompassing strategy connected with the circulation of various workplace learning discourses in the PSE workplace. Workplace learning discourses were taken up at different times by different groups and used for different purposes. Thus, workplace learning discourses need to be understood as tactical elements in a field of force relations (Foucault, 1998) rather than only as instruments of power.

For example, the workplace learning academics were interested in legitimating sites other than the academy as sites of knowledge production and learning (and associated with this calling into question the privileging of particular knowledges and the institutionalisation of these within the academy). And ironically, one way of legitimating learning that takes place in the workplace (at least within the academy) is through conducting empirical research on learning in the workplace. However, as discussed previously, this is not without effects, one being the contemporary re-inscription of the workplace as a site of learning.

Another example of the tactical uptake of discourse is the contemporary embrace of a communities of practice discourse by the professional developers at PSE. This discourse is serving a quite different tactical function to that connected with its emergence in the educational literature in the early 1990s and its links with situated theories of learning (Chaiklin and Lave, 1993; Lave and Wenger, 1991). The professional developers at PSE have taken up a communities of practice discourse in an effort to bring about workplace change and to impose a new learning curriculum set by the organisation rather than as a tool for recognising the work performed on the self in the workplace and getting this learning to count.

A focus on uncovering the battles during the Uncovering Learning project opens the meaning of workplace learning up to question, thereby refusing the certainty of the rational and linear view of learning made available through the contemporary privileging of an experiential learning discourse in the organisational learning literature. This is not the only way of knowing and talking about learning at work (and experience).



Further, rather than understanding workplace learning as either all empowering or all disempowering – the views available in much of the organisational literature (see Chapter 3) – a Foucauldian conceptualisation of power-knowledge has provided me with the theoretical and analytical tools to re-write workplace learning as a *dense transfer point* for different relations of power (Foucault, 1998 p. 103). The stories of the Uncovering Learning project point to the contemporary intersections between the traditional knowledge hierarchies of the academy and traditional hierarchical relations of power in the workplace and the ways these disrupt/reproduce various relations of power.

While renaming the workplace as a site of learning might (at times) be in the interests of workplace learning theorists, professional developers, workplace managers, organisational consultants and workers, it may not always be in the interests of all these groups, even though this unified impression of workplace learning as all-empowering is conveyed in the mainstream organisational learning literature. The ongoing contestations during the project in relation to who could, and who could not, be named a learner and who could, and who could not, do this naming (see Boud and Solomon, 2003), suggest that ‘workplace learning’ is anything but a neutral term. Therefore, the naming of learning at work and the uncovering of its ‘truth’ is perhaps more complex than many organisational learning (and workplace learning) researchers might care to imagine. The implications for researchers are discussed later in the chapter.

### **Implications for the ‘management’ of learning**

This thesis draws attention to an assumption by the professional developers at PSE of alignment between workers and the goals of management (or at least that alignment could be produced through the implementation of learning technologies in the workplace). This is unsurprising as it is taken for granted in much of the mainstream organisational learning literature that through organising the workplace as the Learning Organisation, or more recently as a shared community of practice, workers will more easily become aligned with broader organisational goals (see Chapter 4). However, through pointing to multiple discourses in circulation in the

PSE workplace that positioned workers in multiple ways, this thesis disrupts an assumption of a unified subjectivity determined by pre-existing social structures.

Thus, rather than conceiving communities of practice and the pedagogical practices of the professional developers as one more nail in the coffin of the 'freedom' and the essential 'autonomy' of the worker, and as working toward the inevitable production of designer employees (Casey, 1995; Contu *et al.*, 2003; Coopey, 1995), I suggest the circulation of a communities of practice discourse also opens up space for play (Usher, 2000). As Rose points out (1999a, p. xxiii):

*'government through freedom' multiplies the points at which the citizen has to play his or her part in the games that govern him. And, in doing so, it also multiplies the points at which citizens are able to refuse, contest, challenge those demands that are placed on them.*

In other words workers may not necessarily take up 'the token', in this case a discourse of shared practice, in the way it was intended by senior bureaucrats, change consultants and the professional developers, and instead translate it for their own purposes.

A poststructural account of the complex interplay of technologies of power with technologies of the self may assist professional developers in recognising why change management programs often do not achieve the anticipated outcomes of management and to speak of these failed programs in ways other than individual learning problems/worker recalcitrance. For example, the trade teachers at PSE were resistant to the new norms being introduced by the change managers and professional developers, but this was in relation to the circulation of a discourse of tradesmanship in their workgroup – this is what 'counts' for the trade teachers.

The current emphasis on the organisation of workplaces in ways that take subjectivity as its focus (Miller and Rose, 1993; Rose, 1996, 1999a, 1999b), including the contemporary shift to the organisation of the workplace as a shared community of practice, provides a potentially rich site for exploring processes of subjectification in the workplace. For example, Fenwick (2001b) has explored the transgressive possibilities in post-corporate enterprise culture where workers have

appropriated 'new management' discourses for their own purposes. Similarly, communities of practice might be explored as sites of resistance and transgression and a space where existing relations of power in the workplace might be made visible and contested. While the managerial literature on communities of practice constitutes workplace learners as productive subjects and unproblematically aligned with broader organisational objectives (eg. Brown and Duguid, 1991; Wenger *et al.*, 2002), this thesis has foregrounded that there are other ways for 'the workplace learner' to 'be'.

### **Implications for a rational and linear way of 'knowing'**

This thesis opens to question the liberal humanist assumptions that underpin much of the organisational learning literature. It problematises a notion of unified, transcendent subjects, separable from politics and sectional interest, who are able to rationally know 'the truth' of the workplace. There was no unified and transcendent position from which the workplace learning academics, the professional developers, the trade teachers, the senior managers, or I might know 'the reality' of the PSE workplace. This disrupts a taken for granted view in much of the organisational learning literature that through a process of rational reflection on experience that 'the reality' of the workplace can be directly accessed (see Michelson, 1996; Weedon, 1987). Instead, this thesis foregrounds the ways experience and knowledge were mutually determined.

As laid out in the thesis, learning (and the PSE workplace) could only be understood and spoken about by the researchers and the researched using the intellectual technologies (or discursive frames) to which we each had access. I described in Chapter 7 the way relations of power became unspeakable in the textual products of the project, at least those produced with the professional developers. These stories, however, should not be read as a critique of the methods of the Uncovering Learning project with the idea that a 'truer' and more accurate knowledge about workplace learning could have been produced using better methods (Latour, 1988). Rather, it draws attention to the ways that discourses frame what we are able to think, say and do. There is no transcendent position outside of discourse from which to 'know' or 'be'.

## **Implications for 'doing' workplace learning research**

### **Re-thinking power - tools and tactics for researchers**

In focusing on processes of subjectification in this thesis, the pervasiveness of power has been foregrounded, but so too has its fragility. The multiple nodes that work to hold networks of power in place and reproduce seemingly durable objects and subjects are also potential sites of resistance to power. This view of subjectivity and power makes visible *the unrealized freedoms* remaining in workplaces (Deetz, 1998, p. 152).

An exploration of the relationships between power, knowledge and subjectivity opens up a rich space for researchers working in the fields of organisational and workplace learning by enabling us to 'think again' about the knowledges we produce and how we theorise everyday learning and experience (Foucault, 1980; Rose, 1996; Weedon, 1987). As exemplified in Chapters 3 and 4, different theories of workplace learning work to construct particular modes of worker subjectivity as seemingly natural, therefore we need to be attentive to the effects of our research texts (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000; Cunliffe, 2003; Fenwick, 2006; Henriques *et al.*, 1998; Linstead, no date; MacLure, 2003; Rhodes and Brown, 2004).

The contemporary re-writing of the workplace as a site of learning, in both workplace learning and organisational learning texts, points to the urgency of re-writing everyday learning and experience in ways that foreground the complex mechanisms through which subjectivity is shaped, thereby making the exercise of disciplinary power in the workplace visible rather than working to conceal these processes. However, as exemplified in the stories from the Uncovering Learning project, the 'truth' of autonomous subjectivity is difficult to disrupt.

In better understanding the complex relationships between power, knowledge and subjectivity and the different strategies connected with the circulation of workplace learning discourses, workplace learning researchers can begin to develop tactics whereby the 'truth' of the sovereign subject is opened to question and existing relations of power in the workplace might begin to be renegotiated. One such tactic is pointing to the work that is performed on the self in the contemporary workplace.

While (some) workplace and organisational learning theorists have played an important part in making learning in and through everyday workplace practices visible (eg. Abma, 2000; Billett, Smith and Barker, 2005; Boud *et al.*, 2006; Farrell, 2001; Fenwick, 2001c; Gherardi, 2006; Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000; Scheeres, 2004a; Wenger, 1998; Zukas, 2006), there is still a prevailing view in much of the workplace and organisational learning literature that the production of knowledge is separate from power, and that everyday learning is autonomous and therefore separate from regulation (eg. Cheetham and Chivers, 2006; Cross, 2006, 2007; Doornbos, Bolhuis and Simons, 2004; Leslie *et al.*, 1997; Lohman, 2006; Reardon, 2004; Sloman and Philpott, 2006). This is reinforced by the frequent use of the term 'informal learning' in the workplace learning literature (Malcolm, Hodgkinson and Colley, 2003). This contributes to constructing a seemingly natural separation between learning that is 'formal' and regulated, and learning that is 'informal' and outside of regulation. Unlike the name suggests, however, informal (or everyday) learning does not happen naturally but involves self-regulation in relation to ideal types.

A focus on processes of subjectification enables the work performed on the self in the workplace, and the relationships with authority that we enter into in order to understand ourselves as autonomous (Rose, 1999b), to come into view. In better understanding these complex processes workers can begin to actively participate in their own self-creation in the workplace (Ransom, 1997).

### **Ending the thesis**

This thesis has been difficult to 'end'. While Latour (2002, unpagged) provides pragmatic advice to the doctoral student that: *you stop when you have written your 50,000 words*, it has not been easy to neatly 'wrap-up' this thesis. One reason being that rather than providing a fixed and satisfying account of workplace learning – an explanation, 'the truth' – I have been attempting to provide openings and other ways of thinking and talking about workplace learning, and doing workplace learning research.

The work of this thesis has been to make visible the current privileging of an experiential learning discourse in the mainstream organisational learning literature, and the effects of fixing the meaning of workplace learning in this way. Through disrupting this discourse of 'truth', the certainty of the rational, self-actualising, autonomous subject is opened to question once more.

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