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READING WORK

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Dedicated to the sparkling memory of Ruth Farrell,
who took part in our research, read our drafts,
encouraged us to tell our stories
and left us too soon

Contents

Preface

This book is about understanding the meanings of literacies at work. Reading without a search for meanings is a contradiction in terms. So, too, is doing workplace literacy education without focusing on how people make sense of texts at work.

Yet often, that is exactly what workplace educators are asked to do. We are hired to teach the use of workplace documents and charts with a narrow focus on skills, rather than to educate for understanding and inclusion in the meanings of workplace life. In *Reading Work* we try to explore what might be missing from the familiar skills approach to literacy and workplace education. We think there is a better way. And we believe we are not alone.

For all these reasons, this book is also about bridging the divide between theory and practice in the field of workplace education. It attempts to strengthen the ties between recent social practice theories of literacy and the everyday events and dilemmas of education in the workplace. We argue that literacies at work can only be understood like threads in a tapestry. To see what they are, what they do and what they mean, we need to explore the patterns in the whole cloth, to discover the big picture. Ethnographic research is the tool that lets us do this, and stories are our principal means to share what we have learned.

We are a group of five workplace educators and academics who call ourselves the In-Sites Research Group. Our collaborative work process throughout the research and writing of this book is reflected in the listing of our names alphabetically as co-authors. We have worked together for nearly 5 years, learning many more, and sometimes different, things than we anticipated when we began. We have learned about

the nuances of theory, about the complexity of workplaces, about the discipline and isolation of research, and about the stresses of collaborating across our own differences. We have stretched our own understandings, from the familiar terrain of "literacy" to the newer frontier of "literacies." We have transformed our own understandings of how literacies fit into everyday working life. Most challenging of all, we have tried to face the unsettling questions about what we do next, now that we see workplace education through a somewhat different lens.

Although the book is partly about theory, it is not written primarily for academics. Indeed, we do hope some academics will find it interesting and useful, particularly for teaching. But it is written mostly with workplace educators in mind, especially those who want to push the edges of their thinking and their praxis. For people with years of experience as educators, our workplace stories will likely recall familiar professional dilemmas. We hope they will also shed some new light, and encourage practitioners to reflect on their own toolkits of favorite solutions.

But even serious reflection involves risk, as we discovered in doing this research. It asks us to abandon our comfort zones; even aspects of our professional identities. So the book is about that, too. It is about how literacy workers can use some basic tools of research to investigate new questions and open new horizons in their own work. Doing research helps us learn how much we still have to learn; it makes us more reflective practitioners.

Reading Work has several distinct parts, offering different kinds of reading for a varied audience.

In the introduction, we offer the general reader a glimpse of the changing ideas about literacy/cies that have given rise to this book. We also review recent thinking about the emerging "new workplace" and its implications for workplace education. All these ideas have informed our research and also point to the significance of our findings for a wide range of workplaces, educators and learners.

Part I is made up of four chapters that primarily tell stories of working life from our research sites. The narratives are told directly by the researcher in each setting and aim to shed light on the texture of work processes and the nature of "literacies-in-use" in these settings. These workplaces include a food processing plant, a textile factory, an urban tourist hotel and a high-tech metal parts manufacturer. They are diverse in their products, their levels of technological innovation, their degrees of conformity to the "new workplace" and the cultural profiles of their workforce. Nevertheless, they show a great deal of similarity in the dynamics and dilemmas surrounding the changing practice of workplace literacies.

Part II consists of four chapters that reflect in different ways on what can be learned from this research. Chapter 5 explores key moments of teaching and learning in our research sites that illustrate barriers to

both learning and using literacies in the classroom and on the job. Chapter 6 explores how a social practice view of literacies can pose new challenges, as well as offer new horizons, in the practice of workplace education. Chapter 7 offers a more in-depth discussion of social practice theories, illustrating how they shape our research stories. It also invites readers to think about ways that these theories relate to their own everyday practice as educators. Chapter 8 offers a brief conversation among the five of us on the joys and pitfalls of collaborative research.

Finally, the appendix offers a glimpse behind the scenes into how we did the research and a few suggested readings for those who want to know more about research methods.

Altogether, we have tried not just to build, but also to walk, a bridge from theory to practice and back. It has been a challenging trip, and only our readers can judge how successful we have been.

We hope a variety of readers will be interested in taking this journey: academics or practitioners who teach workplace educators; practicing workplace educators, trainers and instructors; administrators and planners of workplace programs; human resource managers, supervisors or quality coordinators who believe education can make a difference; unionists advocating for better education programs for their members; and policy-makers interested in satisfying all these other stakeholders and seeing maximum results from workplace learning.

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Our gratitude goes as well to the many colleagues in workplace education who helped us examine how our research findings could be communicated to educators, and how we could build that bridge between theory and practice. We met you privately and publicly, in small conversations and in conference presentations and workshops. We thank Judith Bond, Karen Geraci and Lynette Plett, for meeting and challenging us when we were just developing our ideas on research and practice, and the late Ruth Farrell for her comments on early drafts. We acknowledge the assistance of ABC CANADA and Tara Goldstein in preparing early drafts of a proposal for this project. Thank you for starting us out on this learning journey.

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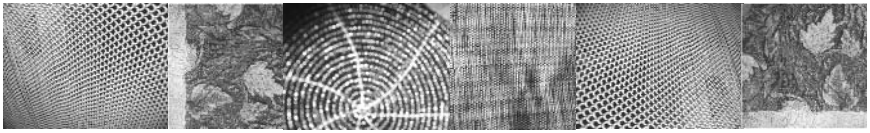
Finally we thank our families and friends who have been supportive of our preoccupation with this project over several years. Thank you for enduring absences and isolation at the computer, listening and quelling anxieties and celebrating completion.

—In-Sites Research Group
Toronto, Canada
2003



Introduction: Reading Work

Nancy Jackson

Adult literacy is a powerful idea that ignites hope around the world. Over many decades it has mobilized the efforts of national governments, international organizations, humanitarian agencies, scores of educators and volunteers and, most recently, the business community. As business interest grows, so does the focus on workplaces as the site of both "the literacy problem" and its hoped-for solutions.

Today literacy advocates, educators, policymakers, researchers and theorists are all grappling with new and changing understandings of problems and priorities. First and most importantly, the word "literacy" itself has come to have many meanings, suggesting diverse —and sometimes conflicting—priorities for action. In common usage, the term "literacy" still most often refers to the basic, functional elements of reading and writing. But as the world changes, more and more voices are adopting the broader and more inclusive concept of "literacies" or even "multi-literacies." These expanded terms signal the growing range of media (print, film, video, computer) and domains of know-how that have become integral to participation in contemporary life. They also recognize the many educational challenges associated with the growing cultural and linguistic diversity of societies around the globe. Finally, they point to the many kinds of specialized knowledge (such as media literacy and environmental literacy)

that shape identity and membership in social groups, including workplaces.

Second, many people are arguing that, across all these forms and modes of literacies, what enables people to participate is more than "functional skills." Effective literacy in any domain happens only when skills are learned and used in a manner that is integrated with understanding and action. It follows that the most successful approaches to teaching or promoting literacies—for young or old, in school, work, family or community—might not be to treat them as isolated generic, functional and transferable skills. The alternative is to rethink the nature of literacy or literacies themselves, to see them not as discrete skills separate from or prerequisite to participation in social life, but as integral parts of everyday cultural knowledge and action. In this view, the meanings of literacy practices are not fixed or constant. They derive their meanings from the local situations and actions in which they occur.

Throughout this book, we try to emphasize this way of thinking by using phrases like "literacy-in-use" or "meanings-in-use." They remind us that being literate means not just performing tasks, but understanding and participating as a member of a social group. We have also found the metaphor of a tapestry very helpful. We see the workplace as a tapestry and literacies as multiple threads woven into the whole. The threads are many and densely interwoven to make a whole cloth. Without the threads, there is no cloth, no pattern, no tapestry. And conversely, when we take one strand out of the tapestry to examine it, it becomes "just" a thread. It loses the meaning and beauty it has as part of the weave.

Perhaps a similar thing happens with literacy in the workplace. To have a whole working environment, we need many threads, including literacy threads. But if we take individual literacy threads out of their place in the weave of everyday working life, extracting them from situations in which they are lived, we lose the meaning they derive from being part of the whole. This idea is both remarkably simple and yet complicated, especially when it comes to learning. When the lived meanings are stripped away from literacy practices, so are the many conditions needed for effective learning. We will illustrate this point many times in our stories in later chapters.

These ideas are not new. Indeed, they have been generating international discussion and debate in the fields of both school and adult literacies for as long as two decades (e.g., see Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Street, 1984). Similar debates are increasingly taking place about approaching second-language learning from more social and cultural perspectives, and we have seen much relevance of these ideas to our work on literacies and workplaces (see Goldstein, 1997; Mawer, 1999).

In the process of writing this book, we have read, listened, reflected, discussed, debated and experimented with many of these ideas, individually and as a group. Sometimes we agreed, sometimes we disagreed

and sometimes we just felt overwhelmed. Throughout the chapters that follow, we share some of these deliberations and identify some of these ideas and their authors, for those who want to read more.

In deciding to put the word "literacies" in the title of this book, we have committed ourselves to the path of greater complexity. We have also sometimes written "language and literacies" as a couplet, without really exploring all the nuances of this pairing. We have not yet fully mastered all the implications of these shifts in language and ways of thinking, and we are inconsistent in our usage. But we are committed to getting started, to learning as we go and inviting others to learn along with us.

FROM LITERACY TO LITERACIES AT WORK

This book looks specifically at the nature of literacies in contemporary workplace settings. This focus on work adds its own complexities to our topic. For the past two decades, workplaces have been under enormous pressure for change to survive in conditions of increasing international competitiveness. As work changes, so do the nature and meanings of the literacies-in-use in all kinds of working environments. New electronic technologies and new management methods have brought an avalanche of new "texts" into workplace life. Examples include computerized manuals and records of Standard Operating Procedures; software programs providing a script for employees interacting with the public; and intensified use of visuals like charts, tables, graphs, symbols and photos, all in addition to greater use of traditional modes of communication like bulletin boards and chalk boards.

All these forms of literacy have an increasingly central role, not only in getting work done, but also in crafting distinctive workplace cultures in which people have a sense of identity and belonging. We have come to see that understanding the nature of workplace literacies also means learning something about these changing technologies, meanings and cultures of work. This has challenged us to become more "workplace literate" as well. We will try to share some of these discoveries, both in this introduction and in the chapters that follow.

The case studies in this book, Chapters 1 to 4, are based on ethnographic research in four quite different sites. The firm we call "Triple Z" (Chapter 1) is a food processing plant that grew up from a family farm to a supplier for the international fast food industry. "Texco" (Chapter 2) is a rapidly expanding textile factory that makes specialty products for international markets. "The Urban Hotel" (Chapter 3) is a state-of-the-art tourist hotel that is part of a multinational chain. And "Metalco" (Chapter 4) is a high-technology metals manufacturing company that already counts itself as world class.

Each researcher in our group spent from 6 to 8 months in one of these workplaces, got to know people and their work and listened to

their stories. Our goal was to look systematically at what people actually do and what they understand when they participate in various literacies in these workplaces. We also wanted to know what is happening when people do not engage with these literacies, even though they are expected to do so. Through this kind of close-up exploration of front-line experience at work, we have tried to understand the nature of literacies at work and what they mean from the point of view of people actually doing them.

Significantly, we discovered that there is not one answer to these questions. There are diverse and sometimes conflicting answers, depending on where people are located in the culture and power relationships of the workplace. A picture of multiple and contrasting meanings of literacies-in-use has gradually emerged as the common thread guiding our research and our writing. But also and importantly, we have come to see it as the principal challenge we face as workplace educators trying to reflect on and revise our practice (see Chapter 6).

In the remainder of this Introduction, we provide just a glimpse of the main ideas that have shaped our thinking on this journey. This includes various strands of literacy theory and research associated with social practice, sociocultural or "the new literacy studies" approaches to defining literacies. It also includes recent research and debates about how workplaces are changing, and what those changes have to do with literacies and learners. Finally, we provide a brief synopsis of the chapters to follow, as an aid and invitation to the many readers who do not like to read books from front to back.

A "SOCIAL PRACTICE" VIEW

> I believe that, in order to understand literacy at work, one must situate one's study of literacy not only within the immediate work environment, but also within the larger cultural, social, and historical milieu. It's not sufficient, I would argue, to simply go into a workplace and collect the documents people are required to read and build a curriculum around those. One needs, rather, to take into account how work is organized and how that organization affects who is required, allowed, expected to read and write what and why .... (Hull, 1995, p. 7)

We have been guided in this work by many teachers, researchers and theorists around the world who have been talking for nearly two decades about a paradigm shift in thinking about the nature of literacy itself. This shift means a turn away from thinking about literacy as simply the isolated skills of reading and writing. Attention is shifting to how children and adults alike understand and use many forms of text and images as part of their identities and their membership in schools, families and communities; as employees in workplaces; and as citizens in public life. This view treats literacies as plural and as complex,

multifaceted social and cultural practices (see Barton, 1994a; Cope & Kalantzis, 1999; Gee, 1990; Hamilton, 2000).

These newer views involve shifting away from treating all forms of literacy as a discrete set of "skills" to be mastered by individuals. They even involve more than putting skills in "context" in the manner familiar to second-language teachers. They call for a change in how we define literacy itself, stretching its fundamental meaning to include the ways that reading and writing are intimately interwoven with knowledge, activities, intentions, social relationships and cultural meanings.

Various labels are associated with this broader way of thinking. "Sociocultural," "socially situated," "social relational" or even an "ecological" view of literacy are all terms reflecting subtle differences in emphasis and interpretation. But according to Mary Hamilton (2000),

> the essence of this approach is that literacy competence and need cannot be understood in terms of absolute levels of skill, but are relational concepts, defined by the social and communicative practices with which individuals engage in the various domains of their life world. (p. 1)

It involves looking "beyond texts themselves to what people do with literacy, with whom, where and how." For some, it includes focusing attention "… on the cultural practices within which the written word is embedded—the ways in which texts are socially regulated and used" (Hamilton, 2000, p. 1).

British theorist Brian Street (1993) and his colleagues have called this approach "the new literacy studies," and described it as "an understanding of literacy which places it in its wider context of institutional purposes and power relationships" (Prinsloo & Breier, 1996; Street, 1993). This broad social focus has opened up new perspectives on studies of literacies in many settings, schools, communities and families. Only recently has the subfield of workplace literacy begun to respond to this challenge. (See Chapter 7 for more detailed discussions of relevant theories of language and literacy.)

One of the earliest North American workplace researchers to take such a broad social approach in a workplace context was Sheryl Gowen, in her 1992 study of a literacy program for African American workers in a southern U.S. hospital. Gowen's ethnographic research reveals that what managers interpreted as poor literacy skills were sometimes acts of resistance. One story shows how workers, using their local knowledge of their working environment, purposely did not follow directions outlined in the official text. They did this to protect themselves from infected needles in an area of the hospital with AIDS patients. This need for defensive action arose because doctors and nurses also did not follow written procedures. The real problem in this situation could not be resolved through more or better teaching of "literacy skills."

In a similar study of workplace English as a Second Language (ESL) programs in Canada, Goldstein (1994) argues that, paradoxically, English classes in the workplace can create liabilities rather than benefits for some immigrant workers. In her study of female factory workers where Portuguese is their language at work, Goldstein shows us how ESL classes can contribute to breaking down existing social relations and communities of practice by encouraging workers to use English with one another. This problem could not be solved by more or better teaching of language skills.

Since the early 1990s, Glynda Hull at the University of California, Berkeley, has been leading the call in North America to "amend, qualify and fundamentally change the popular discourse on literacy and work" (Hull, 1993, p. 44). She argues that dominant approaches to understanding literacy do not make visible how "literacy is made" in the every day lives of workers. Instead, literacy is defined as a series of tasks that are limited in scope, underestimate the capacities of workers and serve to maintain managers' control over work processes. According to Hull, we need to rethink these traditional conceptions of literacy and the approaches to workplace training that follow right across the industrialized world.

In a similar vein, American workplace researcher Charles Darrah (1990, 1997) argues against relying too heavily on prevailing views of "skill requirements" as the starting point for understanding what it means to be literate in the workplace. According to Darrah (1997), starting with this notion "abstracts" people's actions from the situation in which they take place, making workers appear as "isolated actors" and skills appear as strictly individual traits. He and others direct us to broaden our attention to the study of work itself, and how it is organized as a social and cultural activity:

> the concept of skill requirements abstracts people from the specific concrete context in which they work by treating the workplace as a mere backdrop to their actions.... All this directs attention to whether a particular worker "possesses particular skills," rather than to how jobs are shaped and organized and how that shaping provides incentives and disincentives for individuals in learning and performing at work. (p. 252)

When we follow the lead of these researchers and shift our gaze, different things come into focus. For instance, most workplace observers report that individuals sometimes resist doing even the simplest forms of literacy work, such as recording figures, filling out checklists and signing their names. Managers and supervisors commonly attribute such failure to lack of skills and abilities, or lack of confidence among front-line workers, and often propose training solutions. At the same time, the literature is also full of observations that the very same workers who appear "unable" or "hesitant" to deal with even simple text in

one setting may get along very well with the texts they encounter in another. This supports the idea that literacy/cies may not be best understood as a matter of abstract, transportable skills. It may be more useful to see literacies as forms of understanding that are embedded in particular relationships and occasions.

RETHINKING THE "LITERACY CRISIS"

Recognizing the broader meaning of literacies, and the socially constructed nature of competing meanings, has brought many familiar issues into a new focus in international debates. Even the popular notion of "literacy crisis" itself has come under scrutiny. Critics argue that it has been used as a political weapon at various times in history to make inflated claims that blame workers' alleged "skill deficits" for such broad and complex social problems as poverty, unemployment, workplace accidents and disease; even lagging productivity (Graff, 1979, 1997; Holland, Frank, & Cooke, 1998; Turk & Unda, 1991).

Castleton's (1999) analysis of policy texts in Australia illustrates this stance of implicit blame. Her research finds that institutional texts portray workers as having inadequate literacy skills, and that key stakeholders such as government, labor and workplace literacy practitioners, as well as business managers, support these views as "common sense." She calls this a "virtual and virtuous" reality that covers up important silences, stories that are not being told about the experience, skills and abilities and daily working conditions of workers. Hull (1997) also highlights examples from government texts and other articles that report on worker deficiencies and illiteracy as a threat to economic prosperity for all. Like other critics, she questions this position, saying, "I will argue that the popular discourse of workplace literacy tends to underestimate and devalue human potential and mischaracterize literacy as a curative for problems that literacy alone cannot solve" (p. 11; see also Turk & Unda, 1991).

The growing chorus of voices calling for fundamental change in public thinking and action about literacy and literacy learning is both compelling and somewhat daunting. If traditional ways of thinking are as "pervasive and unquestioned" (Hull, 1997, p. 7) as Hull suggests, change will not be easy. There is much invested in the current policy discourse, and the tools to implement its vision. How is it possible to row against this powerful current, and who stands to gain by efforts to do so?

We have often discussed this question in our research group. Some days we have felt isolated by our efforts to pull against the tide; on better days, we have regained our courage. Over time, we have come to believe that all parties stand to gain from a more complex and comprehensive view of how literacies are lived at work. This includes managers and human resource officers who are under enormous pressure to

be more effective in making change happen in a brutally competitive environment. It includes educators and trainers for whom juggling competing interests and conflicting realities is a basic survival skill, although little acknowledged and explored. Surely the benefits of the approach extend to workers themselves, who tell us they feel "damned if you do and damned if you don't" participate in the forms of literacy learning and use that are currently being expected of them. It includes unionists who have long been calling for more worker-centered approaches to education and training. Finally, we believe there is much to be gained by policy-makers as well, faced with the perennial challenge of trying to show results that will please all these other masters.

BEING LITERATE IN THE NEW WORKPLACE

> To be literate in a workplace means being a master of a complex set of rules and strategies which govern who uses texts, and how, and for what purposes. [To be literate is to know] … when to speak, when to be quiet, when to write, when to reveal what was written, and when and whether and how to respond to texts already written.… (Hull, 1995, p. 19)

Volumes have been written in the last two decades about workplace culture, the majority of it part of a sea change in the philosophy of management for workplaces of all kinds, both private- and public-sector. This management literature (see Boyett & Conn, 1992; Story, 1994) argues, in brief, that the "high-performance" workplace creates a culture of "empowerment" where workers take ownership of their work by participating in problem solving and decision making through teamwork.

A more skeptical body of literature written from a cultural studies perspective argues that this new work culture tries (not always successfully) to create "new kinds of people" who align their goals with those of the team, the company and the market. According to Gee et al. (1996), these "new capitalist" businesses seek quite overtly to create "core values" and "distinctive social identities," and to mold employees who share "ways of thinking, interacting, valuing, and so forth" (pp. 20–21). Regardless of their success in shaping individual identities, these aims are intimately tied up with the uses of literacies, including language and literacy instruction, in the workplace.

While cultural critics debate the power and significance of this new workplace "Discourse" (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996), managers face more pragmatic pressures. Many of these ideas have become a new orthodoxy, accepted as a measure of management competence and as the terms of survival in the new competitive marketplace. Among managers, terms like "high-performance" (or "lean," or, a few years ago, "flexible") refer to a workplace that aims to achieve more with less. It operates in a highly competitive market, changes quickly in response to its customers and "competes on quality" as well as cost (see Womack, Jones, &

Roos, 1990). Human resource managers in such an environment focus on building "shared vision," "high commitment" and some degree of decision-making in work teams. All this promises higher productivity as well as greater employee satisfaction in their work. It is also widely reported to increase and intensify literacy requirements for the workforce (for further discussion, see Castleton, 2000; Hull & Grubb, 1999; Lankshear, 1997).

Central to understanding high-performance management and the special emphasis it places on literacies are two highly intertwined concepts: Continuous Improvement and Quality Assurance. The basic principle of Continuous Improvement is the systematic use of an ongoing cycle of planning, executing, checking and refining operations to improve efficiencies and eliminate waste in all aspects of the production process. All this depends on intensive record-keeping, referred to in management jargon as "speaking with data." Data comes from many sources, including the most routine use of charts and checklists, sometimes computerized, as part of the daily work tasks of employees in all kinds of workplaces. Whether by hand or by computer, "speaking with data" depends on the literacy practices of front-line workers. This connection is at the center of the widespread concern about "rising skill requirements" at work (Jackson, 2000).

Quality Assurance and related safety initiatives also depend fundamentally on literacies, including a wide range of print, graphs, charts and symbols. They require an organization to specify, implement, monitor and record their compliance with Standard Operating Procedures in all areas of the work process. Compliance with all these steps is enforced through an on-site inspection called an "audit," leading to official certification by various national or international bodies, like ISO (International Organization for Standards) or HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point), a food safety certification program. Such certifications are increasingly essential to doing business in the international marketplace.

Some of the "meanings-in-use" of ISO documentation practices are illustrated in the workplace stories found in later chapters of this book, particularly Texco (Chapter 2) and Metalco (Chapter 4). For instance, among other requirements, ISO imposes methods for "product identification and traceability" during all stages of production or service delivery. This includes being able to identify specific personnel involved in each phase of the operation, often achieved through signatures on checklists and charts. Individual adherence to certified procedures is also monitored through the use of "Non-Conformance Reports," through which all employees are encouraged to file a written record of trouble spots that come to their attention. But actually doing so turns out to be a complex cultural act that even experienced and skilled workers can hesitate to participate in, as we show in the chapter about Texco.

Quality systems like ISO also require a highly formal system to control all documents relating to the requirements of the certification. All operational texts must be from a controlled source, and all other documents must be excluded from controlled areas to prevent their unintended use. "Nonconforming" use of paperwork of any kind becomes a violation of quality regulations. All this has considerable implications for the meanings-in-use of literacies, as our stories from Metalco illustrate.

There is much debate internationally about whether this picture of high-performance workplaces is more mythical than real (Cappelli et al., 1997; Legge, 1995; Pollert, 1991). In our research, we have not taken sides in that debate, but attempted to investigate the high-performance workplace as a work in progress—an incremental movement, in theory and in practice, toward a particular way of doing business. In theory, these ideas have clearly made their way into the management literature across the industrialized world and become a standard by which success is measured (see Hodgetts, 1998). As such, they are having a broad influence on thinking and talking in an increasingly international culture of management. In practice, we indeed found many of these ideas in use in all four sites of our research, although with great variation in the degree and style of implementation from site to site.

For instance, Metalco had a long track record of keeping abreast of high-performance manufacturing methods and a well-established reputation in the league of "world class manufacturing." By contrast, Triple Z was scrambling to get certified for the first time under the international food safety certification system HACCP, amid threats of plant closure. But wherever they were located along the high-performance grid or on the "Quality Journey" (as in The Urban Hotel), we found in these workplaces many common activities and dynamics that are recognizable as part of this change process. This included the growing reliance on multiple literacies, including print, graphics and other visuals, electronic texts and an emphasis on building a literate workplace culture. This universe of multiple texts, as well as multiple understandings of their meanings-in-use, became the focus of our attention.

CHANGING WORK, CHANGING MEANINGS

It is conventional to interpret many of these workplace developments as evidence of higher skill requirements across the workplace; much current literacy programming follows from this assumption (for a critique, see Holland et al., 1998; Hull, 1997). Our research, like those in whose footsteps we follow, is precisely about questioning and investigating more closely the exact nature of these changes and their implications for literacies and learning. We try to show how significant changes in the roles and functions of texts at work lead not simply to higher skill requirements, but to important changes in the meanings of these literate practices. Changing meanings, in turn, have powerful implications that

complicate the picture of learning across the workplace. Not only does the rationale for learning change, but so does the experience of participating in the many kinds of formal and informal instruction that are on offer (see Chapter 1 on Triple Z and Chapter 5 on Workplace Learning).

Meanings of literacies also differ significantly according to one's location in the work process. Managers and others at the top of the workplace hierarchy know very well how to use print and visual text as the basis of their decision making and as a means of giving directions for others to follow. For them, literacies are an essential vehicle to get things done and exercise their power. That power involves getting other people to comply: to read and understand instructions, to follow procedures and to keep records of having done so. All this is part of working in a literate environment.

At The Urban Hotel (Chapter 3) posters and photos on the wall remind employees to smile, and computer scripts remind them to say not "Hi," but "Good Morning, Mrs. Jones." These reminders are part of multiple literacies-in-use. However, for the workers on the front line, in the hotel as elsewhere, participation in these literacies is not about exercising power, but about complying with the power of others. Meanings are different for them than for managers, and they have their own ways of negotiating these relationships of power. Sometimes it involves resisting the script.

Similarly, in the manufacturing sector, front-line work has traditionally involved relatively little paper or other forms of textual communication. Work has been done mostly through an oral culture, relying on a personal chain of command in which supervisors were key. In this context, paperwork has either had very little presence, or has been associated primarily with disciplinary procedures. In that case, its meaning for front-line workers has been negative, or even threatening, as reflected in the way workers talk about being "written up" by their supervisors. In these environments, some other paperwork may have been in use, but often in ways that were under the control of the workers themselves, like keeping private notebooks in their pockets or beside their workstation. In these situations, literacy has had very different meanings, like the sense of autonomy and pride associated with scribbling little notes "to help me remember" (see Chapter 1 on Triple Z and Chapter 2 on Texco).

Today, employees in the middle of these workplace hierarchies—the traditional place of supervisors or inspectors—are often caught in a transition between cultures. Individuals of the "old school" tend to focus directly on delivering a service or getting a product "out the door" as their understanding of keeping the customers happy. They often see paperwork as an "add-on" and a second priority. By contrast, middle-level employees trained in the new management methods will know that documenting work has become nearly tantamount to doing it in the new data-driven business environment. The workplace environ-

ment can be a maze of divergent and sometimes conflicting understandings about the value and the meanings of texts.

In the chapters that follow, we try to illustrate these divergent views and perspectives of employees from a variety of levels and locations within the four workplaces where we did research. We paint a highly textured picture of workplaces as complex social, cultural and communicative environments full of agreements and disagreements, satisfactions and dissatisfactions, participation and resistance, confidence and apprehension and risk and opportunity related to changing work requirements.

We certainly do not touch on all the issues that contribute to this web of workplace understandings. Though we worked in highly multicultural and multilingual environments, we did not try to make these differences pivotal to our analysis. We did try to make visible these aspects of individual identity and social interaction in our descriptions of workplace life. But we decided to stop there, because we were not working with a coherent theoretical framework to guide us in making an informed analysis based on language, ethnicity or race. These same workplaces would be rich sites for such an investigation, and we encourage others to pursue this path.

In this complex tapestry, the process of workplace change is never smooth and seamless. It is bumpy, full of knots and marked by differing experiences, views (even different realities) and understandings about the value and the benefits of change in general, and of literacies in particular. According to social practice views, it is precisely these multiple meanings that will govern the success or failure of teaching, learning and participating in literacies at work. This point is important not only for managers trying to implement workplace change. It is also central for educators who are trying to promote and support literacy development in the workplace. Acting on this view involves a shift that complicates the operational definition of literacies and literacy learning. And we have learned that making this shift turns out to be an "incremental journey" for educators, including ourselves, as surely as for managers.

So the road ahead is a challenge, but an exciting and hopeful one. We firmly believe in workplace education, and think it can only become more important—for businesses, for unions and for individuals—as time goes by. It is important for businesses because they want to survive in a competitive world, and for unions because they want to build workplaces where all workers are valued. But success for either of these depends on finding approaches to workplace education that actually work for individual learners. We dedicate our efforts in this book to them.

THE BOOK AT A GLANCE

The remainder of this book is in two parts, and speaks with several different voices. Part I presents stories of literacies-in-use in the four

worksites where we did research. We tell these stories through the eyes and the voice of our own experience doing ethnographic fieldwork, and through our attempts to use social practice theories to understand what we saw.

In Chapter 1, Mary Ellen Belfiore introduces Triple Z, a food processing plant that is trying to stay in business by achieving certification in international standards for food safety. This will require a quantum leap for this aging plant, which has an older, immigrant workforce whose own hard work has built the good reputation of the company. Workers, staff, supervisors and managers interpret new demands for data and documentation in different ways. Most workers consider the paperwork peripheral to production, and to their own understanding of their jobs. Yet they clearly feel the pressure and potency of managers' drive for documentation. Mary Ellen shows how the demand for paperwork has created a climate often charged with stress and contradictory local meanings of literacies-in-use. She illustrates this in stories such as a meeting about a production error where problem solving turns into a disciplinary session. The research reveals how managers' aspirations for worker participation in this food safety system are inextricably woven into a tapestry of pride and fear.

In Chapter 2, Sue Folinsbee takes us to the production line at Texco, a small textile manufacturing plant competing in the global market. There we see how the documentary processes required by the quality systems of ISO (International Organization for Standards) cause dilemmas for both workers and managers. She uses the factory's two entrances as a metaphor for understanding the chasm between managers' vision for a literate workforce and the daily experience of workers. Sue's research shows how for managers, paperwork is the lifeblood of quality systems that will keep the company in business. But for individual workers, participation in literacy practices is about social relationships involving power, risk and blame. So workers get contradictory messages. Stories to illustrate this point are drawn from managers' and workers' different understandings of the Non-Conformance Report (NCR) and other documents common to ISO procedures in many workplaces.

In Chapter 3, Judy Hunter offers a glimpse of working life at The Urban Hotel. She shows that quality service is a central business strategy in the hotel, just like quality production in the manufacturing sites. Literacies figure centrally in its implementation. Hotel managers see the challenge as bringing workers into the hotel's Quality Journey through effective top-down communication about what is expected of them on the job. Many kinds of print, visual and computer texts are used to represent, teach and regulate a standard corporate image and identity of the ideal hotelier. But as Judy shows, employees do not always engage with these texts or their intended messages. Housekeeping staff tend to ignore texts that conflict with their own knowledge and

experience of the work culture behind the scenes in the hotel. But they engage willingly in literacy practices that serve as practical memory aids for their everyday work tasks, thus enhancing their sense of power, autonomy and value as workers. As in the other sites, the research shows that it is not so much skill levels or even clear communications that make the difference to participation in hotel literacies, but the social meanings attached to them.

In Chapter 4, Tracy Defoe opens the doors to Metalco, a high-tech metal parts manufacturer. Here managers aim to achieve a culture of worker participation within a no-blame atmosphere of data-driven decision making. In this environment, the research shows the different meanings of production process documents for Machine Operators, Quality Assurance workers and managers. Working through these layers of understanding, Tracy discovers a skills paradox. In one part of the plant, workers with low literacy skills are keeping perfect process charts, whereas in another, workers with higher literacy skills are keeping incomplete ones. This challenges the logic of a strictly skills-based approach to workplace education. Another incident illustrates the potential inflexibility of participation in such a workplace when a homemade checklist is found in violation of the rules in an internal ISO audit. Metalco's stories show the continuum of contradictions on the Quality Journey and the influence of managers on participation in literacies.

In Part II of the book, we put back on our familiar hats as workplace educators and academics and try to share some reflections on what we have learned, and what we hope others may learn, from these workplaces.

In Chapter 5, Mary Ellen Belfiore and Sue Folinsbee look more closely at how literacies figure in formal job training. Drawing on the tapestry metaphor, they identify the "literacy thread" in two formal job training sessions in their research sites, and follow where it leads onto the plant floor. They examine the connection between how literacies are learned and used in the training room and how they are enacted on the job. By following this link, they highlight the importance of the meanings-in-use of literacy practices. These different and often contradictory meanings determine how and whether people will use their literacies and their learning. The two sessions observed here share common facilitation and teaching methods: reading aloud with a group of employees, and/or stand-up presentations with dense, jargon-filled text. Both of these techniques impede rather than enhance the kind of communication that would lead to better compliance with paperwork requirements. But the training sessions differ in how they deal with the issue of use. One trainer pushes literacy and documentation practices beyond the training room to get answers about barriers to compliance in the real practice on the floor. In the second training session, it is the researcher who uncovers the contradictions between the ideal promoted

in the training and the actual use of documentation in work practices. Both scenarios offer insights for workplace educators.

In Chapter 6, the three workplace educators on the research team, Tracy Defoe, Sue Folinsbee and Mary Ellen Belfiore, come together to reflect on the implications of these research findings for the practice of workplace education. They explore challenging but practical questions about translating insights from a social practice perspective back into everyday life. They ask, what does or should "practice" mean for workplace educators? Should and can we expand the scope of our vision and action? How do we "read" a workplace? What can we do about multiple or contradictory meanings of workplace texts? What can we learn when we encounter resistance? What about our own risks as educators? They share their own struggles to integrate these complexities into their practice as workplace educators. Finally, they invite others who believe in the power of workplace education to meet real learning needs, and even to be transformative, to join them in getting these issues on the agenda for broader dialogue.

In Chapter 7, Judy Hunter takes a closer look at theory, this time with the aim of demystifying social practice theories of literacies. She debunks the popular belief that theory belongs only in the domain of experts, arguing that practical theories are a routine part of how we answer our own questions and make sense of things every day. This is in keeping with social practice theories that focus not on what words or texts mean, but on how people create meaning in the context of using them. Judy contrasts this approach with cognitive theories that have been the staple of language and literacy educators since the 1970s. She examines selected social theories of literacy and language to show how they can provide frameworks for deepening our practical understanding of literacies-in-use. Stories from other chapters in the book provide concrete illustrations. Finally, Judy urges practitioners to bring their own knowledge to the field, to take an active part in critical analysis and development of theories and inform themselves to enrich their practice.

In Chapter 8 we draw to a close with excerpts from our own conversations about the experience of doing collaborative research. This exchange actually took place on e-mail over a period of several months. We have chosen "snapshots" of this correspondence that we hope will be relevant to other researchers. We try here to share our excitement, discoveries and delights along the research journey. We also try to make visible some of the dilemmas involved in our encounters with theory, with workplace life, with the stresses of fieldwork and writing and with learning to work together across our differences throughout the life of the project.

Finally, the Appendix offers a narrative account of the various stages of the research process, how we handled common dilemmas of collecting data and some of what we learned about ethnography as an art rather than a science.

Photo by Vincenzo Pietropaolo

PART I

"Literacies in Use" in Workplace Settings

These first four chapters primarily tell stories of working life from each of our four research sites. The narratives are told directly by the individual researcher who worked in each setting for 6 to 8 months. They focus on the texture of work processes and the nature of literacies-in-use in these settings. These workplaces include a food processing plant (chap. 1), a textile factory (chap. 2), an urban tourist hotel (chap. 3), and a high-tech metal parts manufacturer (chap. 4). They are diverse in their products, their levels of technological innovation, their degrees of conformity to the "new workplace" and the social profiles of their workforce. Nevertheless, they show a great deal of similarity in the dynamics and dilemmas surrounding the changing practice of literacy/cies.